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Walden Pond in Aztlán?:
A Literary History of Chicana/o Environmental Writing
Since 1848

by

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation responds to a lacuna in both ecocriticism and Chicana/o literary history. The former lacks input from ethnic American literatures, while the latter offers very little commentary on environmental aspects of Chicana/o writing. Why have these two fields remained separate despite often overlapping institutional histories? My study points to their common roots in activist movements, and how this early period critically preconditioned a disengagement with Chicanas/os as environmentalists. I engage these two fields to get at a literary history that is only weakly understood at the moment. What emerges is a greater understanding of the ways that the social construction of nature has operated to reinforce the oppression of people of color, as well as the ways that Chicana/o writing has transcended this subjugation.

Environmental literary study has privileged introspective nature writing and individual exploration of nature. While this perspective is understood in certain Anglo American contexts, it is becoming increasingly obvious that it is insufficient as a paradigm for the study of other environmental literatures. More particularly, it cannot account for non-Anglo American mediations of nature. Chicana and
Chicano writers, with their concern for social justice and community, nonetheless take up their pens to reflect on the natural environment, albeit differently than conventional ecocriticism expects. Curiously, Chicana/o literary study has been complicit with overlooking Chicana/o writers’ environmental insights, largely because the environment has been perceived to be a lesser priority than the seemingly more immediate needs of social equity. However, broadening the category of nature writing to environmental writing, and considering the close ties between social justice and environmental issues reveals the ways that Chicana/o writers demonstrate how human interaction with the environment differs along lines of ethnicity and class. This study investigates what’s behind these differences. Specifically, I explore the writings of four Chicana/o environmental writers: María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, Jovita González, Jimmy Santiago Baca, and Cherríe Moraga. Their environmental writing provides valuable insights about how Chicanas/os maintain a sustainable relationship with the environment.
Acknowledgements

The seeds of this project first started to germinate during my undergraduate years at the University of North Texas, when I was discovering both environmental studies and Chicana/o literature. Now, I look back at the decade or so that I have taken to put this all together. First, I see a lot of work that remains to be done. I take full responsibility for the project’s shortcomings, and I look forward to taking this project to the next level. But more than anything, I see the many relationships that have shaped this study, both directly and indirectly, and I would like to acknowledge them.

My dissertation director, José Aranda, gave me unequivocal, but not uncritical, support from the day we first met, and he continues to challenge my thinking to this day. Both his exemplary scholarship and the generous amount of time he spent in thoughtful conversation with me directly shape this project. I only hope that I can begin to approximate his grace and generosity as a mentor and friend. Krista Comer consistently offered sharp criticism, and I am thankful for that as well as for her friendship. Walter Isle willingly gave his time to my work even as he served as an administrator. I am grateful for that, as well as for his mentorship in the world of ecocriticism. Alex Lichtenstein graciously agreed to join this project when I invited him at the eleventh hour, and I am thankful for his helpful commentary from the history side of my literary history.

I worked on this project at three different institutions, but Rice University and its Department of English has been my real home base. I am grateful for its generosity and flexibility to accommodate such an interdisciplinary study as well as the financial support to present my work at national and international
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I am lucky to have very understanding friends. They understand my unpredictable fluctuations—when I disappear into my work, when I need to take a break, and when I need to talk about my work ad infinitum. Thank you, in particular: Irene Klaver, Willem Versluis, Rosario Daza, and Sarah Oglesby.
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Preface:

Walden Pond in Aztlan?

*Walden Pond in Aztlan?* is a literary history of Chicana and Chicano environmental writing from 1848 to the present. As such, it establishes Chicana/o environmental writing as a genre heretofore unrecognized, with a deep literary history. This project has been brewing since the 1990s when I was an undergraduate researcher with the McNair Program at the University of North Texas. At UNT I discovered both environmental studies and Chicana/o literature, but not at the same time nor in the same contexts. So, ever since, I have dedicated my research to bringing these two areas together.

This study marks the first literary history of Chicana/o environmental writing, but it is not the only work that considers environmental issues in Chicana/o writing. However, the research that, up to now, has considered environmental aspects of Chicana/o literature concerns late twentieth century writings. I, too, was initially drawn to the connections between contemporary Chicana/o literature and environmental issues—especially environmental justice. I was captivated by the lyrical images of nature in *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *Y no se lo tragó la tierra*, but I also detected a reluctant alienation from the natural environment, especially in these novels about the lives of migrant farmworkers. I wondered if the alienation from the natural environment that I detected in contemporary Chicana/o literature resulted only from current dynamics of class and ethnicity, or if something more was at play.
At the same time, I was steeped in the nineteenth century foundations of American nature writing, especially Henry David Thoreau and John Muir. When I found out, through the work of José Aranda and the Recovery Project, that Mexican Americans were writing and publishing at the same time as Thoreau and Muir, I felt I had a new way to study Chicana/o writing about the environment. Looking at nineteenth and early twentieth century writings, I could gain access to Mexican American writing about nature that was taking place at the same time that transcendental nature writing developed. In a way, I took Walden Pond out of Concord to see how it would look in the Chicana/o homeland of Aztlan.

More than anything, this study develops a way to talk about early Mexican American environmental writing in order to provide a base for exploring more recent Chicana/o environmental writing—always with an eye for deeper historical context. The nineteenth century, when half of Mexico became part of the United States and Americans were establishing their identity in relationship with nature, proves key to this study. However, with the last chapter, I bring this study up to date with more recent literature in order to demonstrate the continuity of themes established over century ago in Mexican American writing. There is still a long way to go, but the voice of Chicana/o environmental writing will always resonate.
INTRODUCTION

Inhabiting Aztlán:

Chicana/o Environmental Writing’s

Challenges to American Environmental Studies

Chicana/o Studies ask questions from the perspective of a more and more visible “minority.” We represent a growing population throughout all regions of the United States. Political candidates learn phrases in Spanish to court our votes, our rhythms permeate popular music, and a Chicano Democrat from Houston is on his way to the White House as President-Elect on the (albeit now discontinued) television series The West Wing. Yet, regardless of these trends, Latina/o viewpoints still remain hidden within various research areas, including environmental studies. And though Chicana/o studies must no doubt continue our emphases in areas such as education, law, and social policy—areas that are so vital to the continuation and prosperity of our communities—we must also begin to articulate clear visions in the realm of environmental issues. We must take into account environmental dynamics such as water use and allocation, the acquisition and redistribution of lands, and the cultural lens through which we all view natural surroundings. By doing so, Chicana/o studies will gain important new ways to defend our diverse cultural legacies and work toward social justice. Likewise, Chicana/o studies will lend vital new perspectives to environmental studies.
However, the path that brings Chicana/o studies and environmental studies together is not yet clearly marked. Chicana/o studies do not yet relate the natural environment to their priorities in social justice and cultural heritage. Additionally, the pervasive images that inform American environmentalism tend to alienate Chicana/o sympathies. For instance, the ideas of national parks and wilderness areas—both powerful images that still inspire American environmental activism—do not hold the same unequivocal appeal in the context of Chicana/o studies. Rather, they invoke the era of Manifest Destiny and U.S. imperialism.

The first national parks were established in the formerly Mexican territories, only a few decades after the U.S.-Mexican War. Indeed, environmental historians agree that “the national park idea evolved to fulfill cultural rather than environmental needs,” and the cultural need fulfilled was that of a national identity.¹ However, the evolving national identity, especially at the time, did not make space for the long-time inhabitants of these territories: indigenous peoples and Mexican Americans. The segregation of nature into pure and defiled, virgin and corrupted became more entrenched as time passed. It started out with separating a domain of nature into a “park” in the late nineteenth century, but this idea evolved over time in the American imaginary. By 1964 the notion of a “national park” became absorbed into a more romanticized status as “wilderness,” and Congress officially protected it under U.S. law. As defined when enacted as a public law,

Wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.²

The wilderness ideal reinforces a dualistic separation of humans from nature. This separation far from inspires people of color to participate in the environmental movement. Indeed, the wilderness ideal erases the ongoing relationship with nature that people of color maintained for centuries before the establishment of the United States and its westward expansion. Chicana/o writings consistently reveal the ways that they integrated, and still integrate, a relationship with the natural environment on an everyday basis, nurturing continuous contact.

My study accesses these contributions by bringing to light Chicana/o writings that have not, until now, been read for their environmental insights. These insights are vitally important in times of mounting environmental crisis. Chicana/o writings offer environmental wisdom from the past. These writings offer a cultural lens that expresses its relationship with the natural environment in a way that honestly engages the affects brought about by the experiences of colonialism and hybrid identity. We cannot continue to ignore the effects of both of these significant historical processes on the human relationship with the natural environment, especially in the ways that colonialism and hybrid identity impacts a culture of sustainability or exploitation. This requires an examination of

cultural constructions of nature—and not just scientific inquiries into environmental challenges.

Indeed, we cannot simply rely on science to find technological fixes for looming environmental crises like climate change, water shortages, and toxic contaminations. Even if scientists develop strategies, it still remains for humans to put them into practice. Everyday human culture must play its role and establish practices that sustain a healthy and livable environment. Sometimes this means participating in new practices, like the passive harnessing of energy by means of solar panels on rooftops. But we can also look to the past in order to access sustainable environmental cultures. In the past we can find, for example, adobe homes that were built with existing materials that blend into the local landscape and work to keep indoor temperatures cool in the summer and warm in the winter.³ By looking to the past, we can access intuitive practices that are already part of an established culture—so that it is less of a challenge to integrate into everyday lives. In reality, it will take a combination of new and old practices to meet environmental challenges—a landscape of adobe homes topped with solar-paneled roofs.

However, as yet, American environmentalism has mainly looked to an Anglo American past for environmental wisdom. Neither environmental studies nor Chicana/o studies have sought out those vital adobe bricks: Chicana/o

³Miguel Angel Porta-Gandara, Eduardo Rubio, and Jose Luis Fernandez, "Economic feasibility of passive ambient comfort in Baja California dwellings," Building and Environment 37 (2002): 993. "The results indicate that, in cases as those analyzed, the use of vernacular passive techniques [adobe homes] is more comfortable and economic than present light buildings by a very wide margin."
environmental writings. As a hybrid culture—blending Spanish customs, Amerindian traditions, and the American way of life—Chicana/o environmental writing indicates creative new directions for past, present, and future human interaction with the natural environment. Chicana/o environmental writing exhibits a steady consciousness of colonization as well as a continuous awareness of an ever-evolving ethnic identity. This makes Chicana/o environmental writings key sources, especially for the ways colonization and ethnic identity have affected the development of American environmentalism. In this context, my study proposes that foundational categories of American environmentalism must be revised in order to accommodate the more and more diverse US population.

This introduction has now set the stage for a much needed intervention with the way that American environmentalism, in its past and present articulations, alienates Chicana/o contributions to its discourses. In the remainder of the introduction I outline four fundamental questions that shape this study’s examination of Chicana/o environmental writing. Each of the final three chapters of this study elaborates a particular category identified by these questions. The Introduction concludes with a discussion of the key concept of Aztlan. In Chapter One, I review the few existing Chicana/o environmental studies that are in conversation with this project. In the rest of the first chapter, I examine a fundamental dialectic between Chicana/o studies and American environmentalism—freedom vs. constraint—that establishes an overall context for each ensuing chapter.
Four Fundamental Environmental Questions

I contend that an eco-historical study of Chicana/o writing can fundamentally alter how we conceive of U.S. ecocriticism. Specifically, Chicana/o writing shifts the terms of four fundamental inquiries of environmental studies:

1) What are the strategies that humans have used to mediate their relationship with nature? (Chapter Two)

2) How do we define “nature writing” and what impact does this make on environmental thought? (Chapter Three)

3) When does American environmental literary history begin? (Chapter Four)

4) How do we successfully challenge Americans to limit their current rates of consumption? (Chapter Four)

I engage the final two questions both in Chapter Four because the central texts I there examine—by Jimmy Santiago Baca and Cherrie Moraga—each, in very different ways, deal with both these questions.

Using Mexican American novels and essays from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as Chicana/o fiction from the middle and late twentieth century, these questions find revealing responses. Chicana/o environmental writing challenges environmental studies to set out in new directions by noting the ways that people of color have long mediated the relationship of Europeans and Anglo Americans with nature. Whereas
environmental studies in the past have explored ways that humans mediate their relationship with nature by examining a dominating Western worldview that creates a false dichotomy between humans and nature, few have looked into the ways that people of color factor into this equation, especially in the development and acquisition of the Western United States. María Amparo Ruiz de Burton's novel, The Squatter and the Don, extensively responds to this dynamic (Chapter Two). This relationship has also been hidden in the long tradition of “nature writing” in the U.S., but consideration of Jovita González's folklore collections from the U.S.-Mexico borderlands unmask this relation and reinvents this genre (Chapter Three). Nature writing's current standing within ecocriticism implies that the author was inspired to write his or her musings while isolated from human contact in communion with the natural environment. One will not find many Mexican American writings along this vein. However, the writings of Jovita González can still inform and challenge this genre—bringing with her an infusion of Chicana/o community narrative and portraits of South Texas natural history. Moreover, a reconsideration of nature writing leads to a reconsideration of the beginning of American environmental literary history—taking it back to colonial times. Whereas American environmental literary history is conventionally considered to begin in the nineteenth century with Thoreau, Jimmy Santiago Baca's eloquent poetry and prose show how Chicana/o writing persistently invokes our colonial past (Chapter Four). More abstractly and more deeply, temporally speaking, Cherrie Moraga discusses the phenomenon of dispossession and a forced alienation from the "la tierra," the land, the earth,
going back to the Spanish conquest of the indigenous peoples of what is now the American southwest. The challenge to limit American consumerism—largely invoked in 1960s-era “back to the land” movements and contemporary recommendations for a return to “simplicity”—can learn lessons from the ways that Chicanas/os have creatively nurtured their resources in the face of poverty. Cherrie Moraga showcases these lessons in the active sense of wonder and bittersweet desire before the natural environment that she portrays in her works (Chapter Four). And Jimmy Santiago Baca exposes the false economy of tourism and gentrification in New Mexico. The writings of María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, Jovita González, Jimmy Santiago Baca, and Cherrie Moraga featured here range in time period, region, and class; but they all consistently consider the development of Chicana/o identity in conjunction with the natural environment to offer environmental studies dynamic new ways of thinking.
CHAPTER ONE

Theoretical Overview:

Current Contexts, Freedom, and Constraint

This study, although it stands alone as the first to establish a long literary history of Chicana/o environmental writing, is part of a small but growing corpus of works that begin to bring Chicana/o culture and environmentalism together. One familiar area in particular brings Chicana/o studies and environmentalism into step together. Environmental justice—a study of how racial, social, political, and economic dynamics combine to impose most of the planet’s toxicity and scarcity of resources on the poor and people of color—brings Latina/o and environmental studies into cooperation.¹ This is a very significant and important overlap.² The first published article that brings together environmental concerns and Chicana/o literature, in 1998, emphasizes this overlap. Prolific Chicana literary critic Maria Herrera-Sobek put her discussion of various Chicana writers in terms of social justice and toxicity:

For Chicana poets and prose writers alike environmental contamination becomes linked to the oppression of the Chicano people. Thus the search

¹ Devon G. Peña, Mexican Americans and the Environment: Tierra Y Vida (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2005) 195. Peña defines environmental justice as "the abolition of racial discrimination in environmental laws and regulations. This includes elimination of patterns of disproportionate environmental risk and harm based on race."

² Articles published concerning Chicana/o environmental writing so far largely focus on environmental justice issues. See, for example, Grewe-Volpp, Herrera-Sobek, Lynch, Platt, and Ybarra. Notable exceptions include Blend and Flys-Junquera.
for social justice and concern for the environment become one and the same.³

Herrera-Sobek's statement about Chicana writing's clear engagement with the environment stands as the first and states the clearest connection, especially in the context of Chicana/o studies' social justice priorities. And this is a bold statement, clearly claiming that Chicana/o artists and scholars cannot ignore environmental concerns.

However, the intersection of Chicana/o studies with the environment consists of much more than the plea for environmental justice. We must, I argue throughout this project, preempt the image of Chicanas/os as only victims of environmental injustice. We can do this by asserting our long-standing regard for the environment, especially as that regard is preserved and expressed in many and varied cultural productions over a long period of time. Indeed, it is critical to recognize that Chicanas/os have been nurturing their own brand of environmental values for at least the century and a half that this study engages. A historical review of Chicana/o literature reveals these long-cultivated environmental values in a range of novels, poetry, memoirs, oral histories, and plays that describe vibrant ranch life, land-based social movements, judicious agricultural practices, and a spiritual connection to the natural world. This is not to say that Chicana/o relationships to the environment are utopic; Chicana/o communities are no strangers to overgrazing, overconsumption, and other high-

impact ecological activities. These behaviors, as well as the sustainable practices, remain to be detected, articulated, and understood within literary history.

This first chapter lays out the current critical dynamics within the framework of American environmental studies that keep Latina/o environmental writing on the margins. Indeed, this critical contextualization also closely examines the contours that connect Chicana/o writing with urgent environmental issues past and present. And while scores of Latina/o writings remain to be explored for their environmental themes, the examples in this study are limited to Chicana/o writings and their distinctive historical contexts.

Critical Contexts

While it might surprise some to know, the most prominent call to marshal out U.S. minority texts in service of environmental studies came not from ethnic studies but from the vanguard of ecocriticism itself in the late 1990s. The commentaries in the 1999 PMLA “Forum on Literatures of the Environment” indicate some ways that scholars began to interrogate ecocritical frameworks. Nine out of the fourteen contributors in one way or another lamented the lack of diversity within the ranks of ecocriticism. They call attention to the Anglo-centricity of ecocriticism, in reference both to the makeup of the ranks of ecocritics themselves as well as the writers whom ecocritics choose to study. Indeed, in her letter, Elizabeth Dodd quotes field-founder Cherryl Glotfelty's
observation that "[e]ccocriticism has been predominantly a white movement."\(^4\)
Dodd further argues that this trend is attributable to two distinct causes. First, she says, "ecocritics have dedicated much of their attention to nature writing."\(^5\) This need not be much of a problem, as such, except that what critics consider "nature writing" has been traditionally limited to primarily white American writers, most often male, such as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Edward Abbey. Dodd also notes the ecocritical tendency to favor "eco-centricity" over "ego-consciousness."\(^6\) On its surface, this is also not entirely problematic.

Ecocriticism does, after all, shift the emphasis from humans to various sorts of non-human nature and away from primarily anthropocentric concerns. However, this shift depends on a problematic dualistic distinction—the separation of humans from nature and of social issues from environmental. Dodd aptly observes that de-emphasizing human subjects "holds little appeal for writers who already feel themselves politically, economically, and socially marginalized."\(^7\) Both of the issues that Dodd cites can be seen as reasons why ecocriticism lacks diversity, and they can also be seen as ways that ethnic studies will transform ecocriticism. This transformation will become evident in the themes and literatures that are developed in the future as well as in the greater diversity of scholars who take up ecocritical perspectives. Most significantly, however, will


\(^6\)Ibid.

\(^7\)Ibid.
be an increasing understanding of environmental experience for a larger population, including those most impacted by ecological disasters—the poor and people of color.

Other scholars that contributed to the October 1999 PMLA forum note that rich American ethnic or other national literatures remain virtually ignored by ecocriticism. Two of these nine scholars, Terrell Dixon and Andrea Parra, cite specific Chicana and Chicano environmental writings. Dixon discusses the ways that the writings of South Texas borderlanders Arturo Longoria and Gloria Anzaldúa “illustrate both the environmental destruction and the cultural origins of that destruction in national borderlands created to enforce ethnic, economic, and class divisions” and explains ways that “these two texts also suggest the possibilities for effective restoration that can come with natural, instead of national, boundaries.”

Parra emphasizes what she calls ecofeminist Chicana writings, especially the works of Ana Castillo, Cherríe Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldúa. She also aptly argues that the “[r]edefinition of the environment to include both urban and rural landscapes will allow for the critical study of not only the desert flowers of Pat Mora but also the freeways of Lorna Dee Cervantes and the suburban dumps and strip malls evoked by Junot Díaz’s fiction.” Both Dixon and Parra make a clear case for the richness of contemporary Chicana/o writing’s potential for ecocritical focus, and Parra’s mention of Junot Díaz shows that Dominicans and other Latino groups have a lot to say as well.

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Generally, ecocritics who call for more studies of Chicana/o environmental literature carefully balance their bid with a resistance to probe works and genres with which they are not familiar, or specialized. The editor of ecocriticism’s flagship journal *ISLE* and another member of the circle of ecocriticism’s field founders, Scott Slovic, also contributed to the 1999 PMLA forum. In his letter, he notices the trend to “complain that ecocriticism is the limited province of American literature scholars and, furthermore, that it is concerned only with contemporary literature,” but he responds with the enthusiastic claim that “a quick survey of current ecocritical scholarship explodes these misperceptions.”10 Though I take Slovic’s point that ecocriticism is internationalizing and gaining diversity at an unprecedented rate these days, I cannot help but observe that, to date, there has not been even one book-length study published that is dedicated to either specifically Chicana/o environmental writing or even a more generalized volume on Latino/a environmental writing. I am in accord with Slovic’s claim that “ecocriticism is large and contains multitudes.”11 Yes, in theory, but to really achieve it we must undertake a reexamination of the core trends and key issues in the practice of ecocriticism and the general appeal of American environmentalism up until now. The creation of literary histories that take into account a long-standing relationship between people of color and the natural environment will go a long way in working toward this goal. At present, as indeed Slovic notes, the scholarship that lends diversity to ecocriticism emphasizes

11 Ibid., 1102.
contemporary work. While this remains important, long literary histories for people of color will offer a firm foundation and cultural identity on which to base present-day engagements with environmental issues. Moreover, such literary histories will also make evident the fact that people of color and the poor have long been narrating their relationship with the environment.

The related field of environmental history is currently undergoing a comparable reevaluation. The eminent environmental historian Carolyn Merchant notes that she and her colleagues have recently “reflected on the crisis of racial awareness for the field and collectively begun the process of writing an environmental history of race.”\textsuperscript{12} The bulk of her discussion focuses on American Indians and African Americans—leaving Latinos and Asian Americans on the sidelines, thus suggesting the true scarcity of work in this area. Indeed, she admits that “we need to do much more in integrating multicultural history and environmental justice into our courses and frameworks . . . and more research on Asian and Hispanic practices and perceptions of nature.”\textsuperscript{13} Without a doubt, integrating multicultural history and environmental justice into environmental history and ecocriticism will not only add untold stories from these heretofore marginalized voices, but it will also reinvent foundational frameworks and traditional approaches. It is on this note of reinvention that my own work takes heart because it also involves noticing the institutional reluctance of Chicana/o studies to take on the topic of the environment capiously.


\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., 381.
The extensive history of Chicana/o intimacy with the land and well-established practices of adaptability when faced with limited resources represent just two examples for consideration in environmental thought. Even so, Chicana/o literary scholarship has had little to say on environment. The two scholars who have published book-length studies on Mexican Americans and the environment are both social scientists. Laura Pulido led the way with her analysis of two distinct case studies of Chicana/o environmental activism.¹⁴ Devon Peña’s far-ranging collection of interdisciplinary essays showed just how diversely Chicanas/os engage the environment.¹⁵ Now, with his most recent study, Peña establishes a firm foundation for Chicana/o environmental studies by surveying the history of Chicana/o environmental engagement and practices in a systematic and well-researched way, complete with a glossary of terms and questions for discussion.¹⁶ Theirs is necessary work of excellent quality, but the environment remains an area under-explored and undervalued by experts in Chicana/o literature.

New links between Chicana/o literary studies and ecocriticism can be drawn from a variety of Mexican American and Chicana/o fiction, poetry, and essays. Early Chicana/o literary history, from the last half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, offers a window onto traditional


agricultural and ranching methods as well as, importantly, cultural practices that endeavored to keep human impact on local environments in check. These early Mexican American writers include María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, Jovita González, Americo Paredes, Eva Wilbur Cruce, Fabiola Cabeza de Baca, and collections of oral histories edited by Patricia Preciado Martin and Tey Diana Rebolledo. Writers of the dynamic Chicano literary renaissance and Civil Rights era of the 1960s as well as the writers publishing up until the present day offer politically incisive perspectives on Chicana/o experience with the environment by covering topics ranging from pesticide contamination, migrant farmworker abuse, alienation from traditional lands, segregation into toxic urban barrios, and even futuristic portraits of environmental dystopia. Alejandro Morales, Helena Maria Viramontes, Gloria Anzaldúa, Ray González, Arturo Islas, Pat Mora, Reies Lopez Tijerina, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Ana Castillo, Luis Valdez, Sandra Cisneros, Tomas Rivera, and Cherríe Moraga are examples of authors that bring new meaning to environmental literature. From the earliest to the most recently published, these are all place-based literatures. These are also literatures that depict the universal themes of community, a yearning for closeness, the evolution of mutual respect, and an endurance of hardship with the environment. Yet, these literatures document a specific, and oftentimes threatened, way of life in an attempt to make it last, even as it adapts to challenges. Eminent literary critic Lawrence Buell speculated that

[i]f, as W.E.B. DuBois famously remarked, the key problem of the twentieth century has been the problem of the color line, it is not at all
unlikely that the twenty-first century's most pressing problem will be the sustainability of earth's environment.\textsuperscript{17}

But I say that the twenty-first century must engage both issues at once, and Mexican American literature can show how racism and the challenge of environmental sustainability have been intertwined for more than a century. Chicana/o writing rewrites the fundamental terms of environmental thought by emerging out of need and limitation rather than the perspective of unlimited resources and Manifest Destiny. Moreover, Chicana/o writing reveals centuries' worth of environmental care carried forward through channels of cultural hybridity and mestizaje. This is not to say that other literatures do not emerge from a comparable circumstance. Yet, current ecocriticism tends to focus primarily on writings that draw on experiences of racial and ethnic privilege and economic plenty rather than need and culturally self-imposed limitation.

U.S. Environmentalism and Chicana/o Environmental Writing:

Freedom v. Constraint

One key dialectic between U.S. environmentalism and Chicana/o environmental writing involves the tension between "freedom" and "constraint." In a general context, and especially in the realms of philosophy and political theory, freedom exists to the extent that actions or abilities are not limited, or, subject to constraint. In this discussion, I am using these terms to refer to the ways that an individual or a community determines its way of relating to,

specifically, non-human nature. A relationship with non-human nature that assumes the ability to determine the character of the interaction is what I mean by "freedom," whereas a relationship with non-human nature that takes limitations into account is what I mean by "constraint." When considered in the context of non-human nature, the usually positive associations of self-determination and freedom become suspect. Unrestrained human domination over non-human nature results in destruction of the very environment that sustains human existence. At the same time, the usually negative associations of constraint gain a more positive valence when considered in the context of non-human nature. Exercising control over one's relationship with non-human nature—in a prudent use of resources, in recognizing cycles of growth and renewal—cultivates an enduring human-sustaining environment. The opposition between freedom and constraint helps to clarify diverse ways of engaging the environment and especially in contrasting mainstream U.S. environmentalism to the values found in Chicana/o environmental writing.

Mainstream U.S. environmentalism celebrates the vision of individuals exercising freedom in their interactions with nature. Consider for example Henry David Thoreau, recognized as the "patron saint of American environmental writing." His name alone conjures images of a stubborn individualist eschewing the company of others, preferring to seek the solace of nature, free to indulge in his own company. Despite the trouble that Thoreau went through to make clear

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for his readers that his removal to Walden Pond related more to figuring out mid-nineteenth century society than to an obstinate isolation, and despite the close proximity of Walden Pond to Concord, Massachusetts and Thoreau's frequent trips to town, his book *Walden*\(^\text{19}\) continues to stand for ultimate communion with nature, necessarily involving distance from everyday social contexts and concerns. However, I see Thoreau's famous work—perhaps more as he himself saw it—as a scathing critique of nineteenth-century culture's fast-paced technological and economic developments, as well as an indulgence in valuing the local in a time of increasing imperial U.S. military initiatives. He concerned himself with the way that contemporary technologies and practices distanced one from the environment, and how this distance impacted the human spirit. Indeed, he even critiqued the impulse of Manifest Destiny. He built his cabin retreat at Walden Pond when the U.S. was on the brink of waging war against Mexico, and his famous act of civil disobedience was, in part, to protest this war:

> Witness the present Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure.\(^\text{20}\)

He recognized the United States' invasion of Mexico as an act of aggression, and it would eventually lead to the imperial takeover of half of Mexico's territories.

Despite, perhaps, Thoreau's intentions, *Walden* establishes the genre of "nature writing" and many writers follow his example by retreating to an isolated

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location in order to more fully establish a personal relationship with nature.\textsuperscript{21}

Why is it that American literary history places so much emphasis on Thoreau's removal from society rather than his vital engagement with the issues of his day? There is certainly something very attractive in the idea that one can, by seeking a secluded nature retreat, gain insight and wisdom paralleling that of famous American thinkers. This is how Americans imagine environmental engagement. Inherent in this view is the act of withdrawal and the freedom to make this choice to retreat from society into nature. This interpretation has made environmental consciousness an occasional exercise rather than an everyday practice. After all, Thoreau's retreat to Walden lasted only two years. To make an impact, environmentalism must encompass both of these temporal aspects—the occasional and the everyday.

Like Thoreau, John Muir greatly influenced the development of American environmentalism. And the image of the "rugged individualist" who communes with non-human nature has been the much-emphasized aspect of both their works over the years. John Muir was born in Dunbar, Scotland in 1838, and his family moved to Wisconsin when he was still a boy.\textsuperscript{22} Muir's famous thousand-mile solo walk across the southeastern U.S. and his extended treks to the heights of dramatic mountains in California fill the imaginations of many a Sierra Club member, a club he helped to establish in 1892, as they make lengthy hikes


in search of picturesque vistas. Indeed, Muir's explorations of and admiring narratives describing the mountains and valleys of California directly inspired the creation of the first national parks. He was a leader in opposing the plans to dam the Hetch Hetchy Valley in order to build a reservoir for San Francisco. And even though Muir and the preservationists failed to prevent the reservoir "[t]he passage of the 1913 Raker Act authorizing San Francisco to dam Hetch Hetchy temporarily defeated Muir and the preservationists but ultimately led to the passage of the National Parks Act of 1916."\textsuperscript{23} In fact, Muir was a prosperous California landowner and fruit-farm manager, husband, and father.\textsuperscript{24} And yet again, despite these organizing, domestic, and economic activities, this prolific writer and activist for a national park system stands for isolation and removal.

Both Thoreau and Muir worked within vital social networks. Thoreau was part of a group of transcendentalists in New England. Muir persuaded many friends and acquaintances, including President Theodore Roosevelt, to accompany him on hikes into the California mountains and to work with him to preserve scenic areas. And yet, American literary history and the environmental movement reduce their significance to the way their isolated retreats and solitary peregrinations inspired their famous writings. However, they do get credit for inspiring the dominant metaphors of American environmentalism. Indeed, the


\textsuperscript{24}Frederick Turner, \textit{Rediscovering America: John Muir in His Time and Ours} (New York: Viking, 1985).
correlation between environmental writing and the environmental movement finds a very interesting treatment in a recent study by ecocritic Daniel J. Phillipon:

The more closely I looked at the dynamics of this relationship between nature writers and the environmental movement, the more clearly a pattern emerged. In at least five separate cases, a nature writer was prominently involved in the formation and development of an environmental organization.\(^{25}\)

This includes, of course, John Muir’s inspiration of the Sierra Club and his influence in shaping the idea of setting aside national “parks” to protect the environment. Still, in the cases of Thoreau and Muir, a big part of their influence remains a perception of their inclination and freedom to isolate themselves from society in favor of nature’s company. And in Muir’s case, his works inspired a movement to isolate nature from human impact.

In the latest of many endeavors to narrate Muir’s life, Donald Worster, a well-respected environmental historian, goes so far as to establish parallels between Muir’s development as an individual, the love of nature, and the unfolding of the United States as a democratic nation:

Through knowing John Muir better, we can see how the modern love of nature began as an integral part of the great modern movement toward democracy and social equality, which has led to

the pulling down of so many oppressive hierarchies that once plagued the world.²⁶

Worster argues that Muir’s instinct to wander into the wilderness in his youth was part and parcel with the intuitions of a new nation’s freedom and democracy, observing that the 29-year-old Muir, on his thousand-mile walk across the southeastern United States, kept a journal “that vibrates on every scrawled page with feelings of personal liberation . . . freed . . . from all career anxieties, all family obligations, and all questions about his national loyalties that plagued him during the American Civil War.”²⁷ This is the Muir that Worster and so many other environmentalists and scholars laud as the father of American environmentalism. However, the kind of environmentalism that Mexican Americans and Chicanas/os have practiced over the years does not correspond to Worster’s idea of freedom—especially as framed as a freedom from livelihood, family, and national identity.

Chicana/o environmental writers narrate experiences within constraints, or limits. These constraints, or limits, mirror their social, racial, economic, and national standing over the decades. In other words, the parameters for their experiences with the environment have been historically, socially, economically, politically, and environmentally constrained by outside forces (e.g. the federal government, employers, city planners, workdays, seasonal shifts) as well as a far-reaching personal commitment to family and community. Chicana/o


²⁷Ibid. Muir emigrated to Canada during the Civil War.
environmental writing narrates everyday spaces of home and work to the exclusion of transcendental retreats. Consider, for example, the title character in Luis Valdez’s 1970 play Bernabé, who must convince his parents and friends that his newfound romance—love for the earth, “La Tierra”—results from genuine emotions rather than just a bout of insanity.²⁸ Far from retreating to isolation, Bernabé takes seriously his task of demonstrating the depth of his new love. Significantly, the place where Bernabé connects with La Tierra is not in a remote and isolated location, but in an empty, abandoned city lot adjacent to his family’s home. This emphasis on local and urban spaces can also be seen in the organizing efforts of the Mothers of East Los Angeles (MELA). Limited circumstances prompted MELA’s organization of over 400 families in 1985 to protect their community from “the first state prison planned for an urban setting” and later “stopped the construction of a toxic waste incinerator.”²⁹ They also eventually convinced the city to clean-up their local park. In an inversion of conventional environmental activism, protection of their local greenspace was not their primary concern, although they did ultimately gain a nice park.

When novelists, playwrights, poets, memoirists, and essayists narrate these kinds of Chicana/o experiences, they seem so different from mainstream American environmental writing that they are rarely recognized as such. Instead, Chicana/o environmental writing is narrowly read as social justice literature,


concerned with labor and critiques of capital, or as concerned with family and the
deconstruction of traditional gender roles and sexual orientations. However, just
as easily, and only with a slight shift, can these literatures be contextualized as
rich veins of information regarding sustainable everyday practices and beautiful
narrations of a people's sense of wonder before their everyday companion, and
sometime foe, nature. More than anything, Chicana/o environmental writing can
help break down this false dichotomy between freedom and constraint.
Ultimately, we are all subject to the limits of nature's carrying capacity.
According to Devon G. Peña's definition, "carrying capacity" quite simply and
elegantly refers to the "capacity of the land to sustain human life without loss of
biodiversity or ecosystem integrity." More than a simple scientific descriptor,
carrying capacity grants agency to the land itself, invoking an image of the earth
struggling under our weight—not unlike Valdez's personification of the land in
Bernabé—and perhaps inspiring us to tread more lightly.

The attunement to carrying capacity in Chicana/o culture and practices
comes to the fore in many works—not as a result of an essential characteristic
but in response to long experience and preservation of such experiences through
literature and other cultural productions. Moreover, the beauty and intimacy
found in Chicana/o environmental writing shows the creativity that the limits of
nature inspire. We no longer live in the nineteenth century of Thoreau and Muir.
Today's reality demands we end our romance with a false sense of freedom in

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30 Devon G. Peña, Mexican Americans and the Environment: Tierra Y Vida (Tucson: University of
our engagements with nature. But even in the nineteenth century, freedom was incomplete and illusory. Muir did, after all, depend on his family to finance his thousand mile walk. He spent several anxious days in Savannah, Georgia waiting for his brother to send him funds to complete his trip. During his retreat to Walden Pond, Thoreau would regularly "[stroll] to the village to hear some of the gossip which [was] incessantly going on there, . . . and which, taken in homeopathic doses, was really as refreshing in its way as the rustle of leaves and the peeping of frogs." This chapter is not an attempt to deconstruct the paragons of American environmentalism. Rather, it is an endeavor to see them in their complexity and derive lessons from their experiences as a whole, not limited only to the parts we consider most charismatic. Comparison with Chicana/o literature helps cast them in a new, more complex light. Because in the end, no one is free to select the moments when we will engage the environment; we constantly negotiate a relationship with nature. Chicana/o environmental writing makes this clear.

Concluding Remarks

There is, it must be said, a darker aspect of the dialectical relationship of freedom and constraint. The freedom that the contemporary affluent American imagines nature to offer comes at the cost of a constraint born by others. The "others" are, more often than not, people of color. Ironically, freedom to sojourn

in nature is possible only because the typical contemporary environmentalist, walking reverently in the footsteps of the Muir of his imagination, is, in the course of his everyday life, free from close association with nature. Someone else laboriously plows the earth, harvests the crops, butchers the animals to produce his food and clothing. Someone else logs the forests to build his house and make the paper for his Sierra Club magazine. Someone else quarries the iron and the coal to make his car. He can take only pictures and leave only footprints because even while in nature, he is insulated from it by his state-of-the-art camping equipment and freeze-dried rations. Environmental philosopher Mary Mellor points out that to be free is to transcend nature's constraints; but because we are all biological as well as cultural beings, the inescapable biological relationship with nature of those who are free from it must be mediated by someone.\footnote{Mary Mellor, "Ecofeminism and Environmental Ethics: A Materialist Perspective," Ethics and the Environment 5.1 (2000): 107-123.} What is the environmental consciousness of those mediators who are close to nature, because they are constrained, not because they are free? Surely their cultural productions too should be a part of the canon of environmental literature and the object of careful, loving study by ecocritics.

Still, the questions that environmental studies ask about society at large remain questions of freedom. After all, in a democracy we strive to balance freedom without violating the rights of citizens. How can we sustain individual freedoms in a way that protects the natural systems that support everyone's existence without making a minority pay our collective environmental costs?
How do we develop daily practices that maintain a healthy and human-sustaining environment for everyone? Chicana/o studies can fit into this context by taking these questions back to our communities. This is slowly starting to happen, with Chicana/o and Latino/a communities forming environmental justice groups and forging positive change for quality of life in their neighborhoods. However, a more fundamental shift remains. Chicana/o thought can vitally change the terms of the environmental problematic in ways that make them more relevant and immediate to our world in the new millennium.
CHAPTER TWO

How Do Humans Mediate Their Relationship with Nature?:

Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton’s The Squatter and the Don
and the Development of the West

The publication dates of the two novels by María Amparo Ruiz de Burton coincide with two watershed moments in the early development of the United States national park system. Her first, Who Would Have Thought It?, was published in 1872, the same year that Yellowstone National Park was established in Wyoming—the first national park in U.S. history. Her second, The Squatter and the Don, was published in 1885, the same year that the state of New York finally saw fit to protect Niagara Falls (which had been extremely commercialized early in the century) and to establish the Adirondack Forest Preserve, both firsts for east coast conservation. Indeed, besides inspiring the first Mexican American novelist—and a masterly one, at that—the events of the late nineteenth century spurred the evolution of a movement to protect important natural monuments. Historians agree that this movement had more to do with fortifying a national identity than it had to do with nurturing the natural

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¹Ruiz de Burton, and María Amparo, Who Would Have Thought It? (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1995 [1872]).


⁴Ibid., 57.
environment. Americans felt they had lived too long in the shadow of ancient European civilizations, and they looked to the newly acquired West and its monumental scenery to compete; "[t]he agelessness of monumental scenery instead of the past accomplishments of Western Civilization was to become the visible symbol of continuity and stability in the new nation."\(^5\) It was in this cultural moment of natural parks as national symbols that Ruiz de Burton penned her two volumes, and this chapter will demonstrate the ways that one of them—The Squatter and the Don—engages with the natural environment, establishing the pattern of Mexican American and Chicana/o environmental writing's concern with land sovereignty, land use, and land management.

The natural environment does not dominate her novels, nor is it readily apparent as an ongoing protagonist. However, once taken into account, the environmental themes make their own unique, and significant, contributions to the plot lines of each novel. Her first novel, Who Would Have Thought It?, concerns the rescue of a young upper-class Mexican girl, Lola Medina, from Indian captivity in the years leading up to the U.S. Civil War. Both Lola and her mother had been taken captive. A Boston doctor and amateur geologist traveling in the western U.S., Dr. Norval, discovers their predicament when he is asked to tend to the illness of the tribe's chief. Lola's mother, who had been waiting for someone like Norval to come along and rescue her daughter, pleads with him to take her away from the tribe. Mrs. Medina stays behind, resigned to her fate, and feeling too tainted by her forced relations with the chief to return to her

\(^5\text{Ibid.}, 12.\)
family. She eventually dies, presumably of a broken spirit, as well as relief at the sight of her daughter's escape. Before she dies, she convinces Norval to take Lola away, and confides to him the location of a stash of raw jewels and unrefined precious metal that she had been hoarding, unbeknownst to the Indians, to finance Lola's care once she managed to find an escape. When he leaves the tribe, he steals Lola away with him back home to Boston, and takes the rough jewels and metals with him in his collection cases. The addition of Lola to Norval's Yankee abolitionist household creates a multitude of ripple affects, and gives readers insight into the workings of the Norval's domestic life and their extended social network. As a novel set during the U.S. Civil War, *Who Would Have Thought It?* also engages a political reading of the U.S. of that era, often in scathingly satirical terms, especially critical of northerners. However, the significance of the West for the U.S., in this period following the U.S.-Mexican War, does not escape notice in this novel. Lola Medina, as a displaced representative of the West and of Mexico, serves as an ongoing irritant to the normalcy of the Norval family life. By the end of the novel, Lola's "diamonds in the rough" end up exposing a great deal of Eastern hypocrisy, as other scholars have indicated.⁶

Ruiz de Burton's awareness of the East's infatuation with the West, and the treasures it offered, exposes an exploitation of the West, its lands and its peoples, that too often goes uncritically romanticized. Ruiz de Burton implicitly

engages this critique in her first novel, when sovereignty in the West was still being hotly contested. And by the time she writes her second novel, she sees fit to set it in the year 1872, knowing well how the 1870s were a transitional period in the history of the West, and especially of California. This chapter focuses mainly on that second novel, *The Squatter and the Don*, because a central theme of that novel is the contested relationship of californios and Anglo-Americans to nature.

Specifically, *The Squatter and the Don*, largely set in California, concerns the Alamar family and the crisis it enters when American squatters threaten to takeover its extensive lands and render them incapable of continuing the cattle-raising business that had been in the family for centuries. Its 1872 setting puts it 21 years into the work that the Land Commission was established to complete in 1851. The Land Commission was meant to settle disputes between ranchers' and squatters' land claims. However, the commission's work often dragged on over long years, and in the meantime squatters remained unpaying tenants on ranchers' lands. Ruiz de Burton's novel dramatizes the Alamar rancho's difficulties in this regard, and she is careful to include the way that the Alamar family's greater knowledge of the local ecology plays into the tensions between the ranchers and the squatter farmers. Also, significantly, a relationship that develops between the beautiful young Alamar daughter, Mercedes, and the strikingly handsome and honorable squatter's son Clarence Darrell plays out in a way representative of eastern desire for western territories.
Nineteenth century U.S. infatuation with the West, especially with monuments such as the Yosemite Valley that filled the perceived void of a historic civilization in order to compete with European society, did not go unnoticed by a keen cultural observer like Ruiz de Burton. Moreover, the West, for her, was more real than symbolic. She was born in Baja California and married a captain of the U.S. Army, Henry S. Burton, in Alta California in 1849. Both her children were born in California—her first, Nellie, just two months before California was admitted to the Union, and the second, Henry, two years later in 1852. By the time she moved away in 1859 when the Captain was ordered back east, she had been an active citizen and young family matriarch for 10 years in the state of California. The Burtons had purchased a considerable chunk of land outside San Diego—about 9,000 acres of the Rancho Jamul.\(^7\) Ruiz de Burton had also written plays for the local Mission Theater.\(^8\) In other words, her understanding of the West was intimate and personal. How strange romanticized travel narratives about her home must have sounded to her ear: “California, the seat of a new empire, the promised creator of a new race.”\(^9\) Widely circulated travel writer Samuel Bowles described California in that way, and he was also one of the first writers to make Yosemite Valley famous.\(^10\) Whereas most

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8 José F. Aranda Jr., When We Arrive: A New Literary History of Mexican America (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003) 93.


Americans, especially on the eastern seaboard, understood California as a new frontier with great promise for the future of the nation, Ruiz de Burton knew California as her homeland, well-settled by pioneering *californios*, families of Spanish and Mexican descent. As the treasure of California for Americans was in its newness—displayed in all the rhetoric and admiration surrounding the new state—despite the ubiquity of Spanish place names, little was said of the old *californio* culture that could make valuable contributions to the United States. This omission was doubtless obvious to a native daughter of the place.

This chapter will demonstrate the way that Ruiz de Burton’s work dialogues with the evolution of awareness about nature preservation and acquisition of territories in the nineteenth century. This will establish, for my study, a firm foundation for moving on to later eras of the Mexican American and Chicana/o imaginary’s engagement with the natural environment. Mexican American and Chicana/o environmental writing continuously references an early and traumatic alienation from the natural environment. Ruiz de Burton’s work serves to demonstrate what comprised this early alienation: dispossession of territories and discontinued engagement with the management of the natural environment. Moreover, the way that Ruiz de Burton critiques the development of the West also reveals the U.S. pattern of mediating the human relationship with the environment through an exploitation of people of color, including Mexican Americans. In the case of California, specifically, Americans sought to idealize the natural environment and its useful resources to the exclusion of
Mexican Americans, especially where Mexican Americans had been stewards of the land for centuries.

The Writer

In the grim aftermath of the U.S.-Mexican War and the U.S. Civil War, a 40 year-old Mexican American widow opted to try her luck as a novelist. This impulse was in part due to her known skill as a writer—she had produced plays and was a tireless letter writer—but it was also in part an effort to make money to alleviate her family’s financial distress. She had witnessed a great deal of change from an intimate vantage point, and she knew she could write about it in ways that few others might. For one, she was a Mexican citizen born in Baja California whose family moved to Alta California after the U.S. takeover of half of Mexico’s territory in 1848. Only sixteen years old when the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed, she must have experienced firsthand the hopes that some of the new Mexican Americans held for a democratic U.S. government in contrast to the disappointments they had endured under remote and authoritarian Mexican rule. She was also uniquely positioned as an aristocratic young woman who was romanced by a U.S. soldier whom she eventually married. This soldier, Captain Henry S. Burton, went on to serve as an officer in the Civil War, and his young bride traveled with him across the country and all around the East Coast. As a result, she moved in circles of high society in both the Mexican American and the Anglo-American communities.
In many ways, her experiences evoke a romance. However, her life betrayed a starker reality. Reading the work of *california* María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, we gain insight into the views of one who doubtless nurtured high expectations of a fresh life in her new nation. Indeed, she was a young woman who matured as her community found its way under a new national rule. However, she lived to experience great disappointments. Rather than thrive under U.S. democracy, her family found its wealth diminished. The influx of American settlers to California created mounting competition over lands—many of which were owned by old *californio* families. Her family’s friends and acquaintances, including Mariano Vajello, found themselves battling in court over lands they had held in their families for decades if not centuries, and she was herself embroiled in a long court case over land at the end of her life. Her husband died young, and left her with two children and scarce resources. These challenges might have silenced her, but she didn’t let them stifle her inspiration to write. And whereas many of her contemporaries wrote about land dispossession and the dissolution of *californio* culture in newspapers and letters, comprising the roots of resistance in Mexican American cultural production,11 she chose to deliver her insights through novels. She spoke from her experience—to express the bitterness, to record the disappointments that she knew would scarcely make it into the history books. Such frustration is given voice with the final words of a

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defeated and widowed Doña Josefa, the matriarch of the Alamar family in *The Squatter and the Don*:

> Oh, very well, let it be so. Let the guilty rejoice and go unpunished, and the innocent suffer ruin and desolation. I slander no one, but shall speak the truth.\(^{12}\)

As did her character, Ruiz de Burton sought to speak the truth she lived. Notably, she drafted her novels with a tone inoffensive enough to gain publication and circulation during her lifetime. Moreover, she accomplished all of this in an adopted nation in a second language, with views that subverted attempts to romanticize the development of the West.

Savvy enough to predict a tempered critical reception for a woman writer in the late nineteenth century, and hoping to divert attention from the fact that English was her second language, Ruiz de Burton chose not to reveal her name as the author of her first novel *Who Would Have Thought It?*. She wrote under the guise of “anonymous.” And even though her identity had been revealed by the time her second novel, *The Squatter and the Don*, was published, instead of putting her name on the title page, she chose to use the gender- and ethnicity-ambiguous pen name of “C. Loyal.” Her pen name, however, revealed as much as it concealed. As she attempted to conceal her gender and ethnicity, Ruiz de Burton revealed an all-important aspect of her writing persona: that she was a loyal citizen, as that is what “C. Loyal” signified—and it was “a common letter-

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closing practice used in official government correspondence in Mexico during the nineteenth century” (Cuidada Leal; Loyal Citizen).\textsuperscript{13} She was a loyal citizen—but of the United States—and she considered critical engagement with the controversies of her era a serious responsibility.

No one can question her continued loyalty to a particularly Mexican American critique of U.S. culture, albeit from an elite perspective as a landowner and officer’s wife. Indeed, her work importantly invokes a diversity little explored in Mexican American background—that Mexican Americans were at one time elite, and elitist. Readers of Ruiz de Burton’s work value her social commentary as well as the way she skillfully captured the manners and mores of the late nineteenth century. Critics have especially appreciated her representation of land dispossession in California as depicted in her second novel The Squatter and the Don. Her first novel, \textit{Who Would Have Thought It?}, challenges present-day readers with the way it satirizes Abolitionist hypocrisy and even seems to sympathize with Southern plantation owners.\textsuperscript{14} Both novels offer considerable intricacies with their various narrative lines as well as in their sly political commentaries.


The Environment in Ruiz de Burton’s Novels

Up to now, analysis of Ruiz de Burton’s novels has given scant exploration of their environmental themes. Ruiz de Burton, however, offers an important commentary on the development of lands in the West, especially California, in the late nineteenth century. This is a significant step towards understanding the foundations of Mexican American environmental writing. By depicting the period immediately following the U.S.-Mexican War and the Mexican American experiences of that era, Ruiz de Burton gets to the heart of the concerns that construct the Mexican American engagement with environment, especially in regard to two issues.

One, Mexican American land use struck a compromise between the two schools of thought regarding nature conservation in the nineteenth century. Mexican American land use was neither preservationist nor utilitarian. Over the centuries of Spanish and Mexican cultivation of the land in California, the missions and rancheros had evolved an approach that was decidedly different from the prevailing preservationist and utilitarian orientations. The rancheros sought to integrate the natural environment into their everyday lives, and to pay attention to the limits of nature and accordingly limit their demands on the land. They developed a social culture that integrated a reciprocal relationship with the natural environment. In the face of American development after the U.S.-Mexican War, Mexican American ranchers sought to keep intact their culture and livelihood, including their established relationship to the local ecology.
Two, Mexican American relationship to the environment in the nineteenth century blended both Spanish (European) and Amerindian (indigenous) approaches to land use—mestizo land management, as it were. The influences still resulted in a proprietary approach (land is owned by specific individuals and families), and was decidedly to the benefit of the Spanish-identified Mexican Americans. Still, the land was managed in a low-intensity kind of way, with a healthy regard for its biological capacities, doubtless influenced by long-standing Amerindian knowledge of local ecology, especially as the Amerindians served as the laborers closest to the land. We see evidence of both of these Mexican American environmental engagements when Don Alamar attempts to negotiate with the squatters on his rancho in The Squatter and the Don, a scene that will be discussed in detail in following pages.

The U.S. takeover of Mexican territory and the accompanying dispossession of Mexican American lands resulted in the loss of important perspectives on the natural environment in the nineteenth century. In The Squatter and the Don, Ruiz de Burton laments the lack of regard for Mexican American culture and values, including the inhabitation of the natural environment; indeed The Squatter and the Don mourns the passing of californio culture, which includes an immersion into the local natural environment. Upon the occasion of the double wedding where his son Gabriel and daughter Elvira were each to marry Lizzie Mechlin and George Mechlin, respectively, Don Mariano hoped to celebrate with the usual “three days of good eating, drinking, and dancing” with which he celebrated his own wedding. The days of celebration
also included “boat racing . . . a day’s sailing on the bay, and a day’s picnic in the woods.”\textsuperscript{15} However, the family feels self-conscious about these traditional celebrations, with Doña Josefa saying “we are too closely surrounded by Americans for us to indulge in our old-fashioned rejoicing.”\textsuperscript{16} Without those traditions, however, Don Mariano feels disappointed at another compromised cultural practice, saying “they will have a wedding that will look like a funeral.”\textsuperscript{17} Without an extensive fiesta—celebrated in the outdoors—Don Mariano feels as if he hasn’t honored the weddings at all. However, his family surrenders a traditional celebration under the influence of new American practices.

Preserving and communicating the Mexican American perspective on the environment is not Ruiz de Burton’s primary concern in \textit{The Squatter and the Don} certainly, but she weaves this concern into the complex tapestry of other incisive social critiques. And, important for this study, she also lays bare the groundwork that will continue to support the evolving Mexican American views on the environment.

\textbf{The National Parks Movement and Mexican Americans in the West}

In order to understand the cultural moment, especially in regard to the natural environment, in which Ruiz de Burton wrote, a brief review of the conservation debates during this general era is appropriate. Two schools of

\textsuperscript{15}Ruiz de Burton, and Marla Amparo, \textit{The Squatter and the Don} (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1992 [1885]) 115.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid.
thought regarding the conservation of nature in the U.S. famously competed for dominance in the late nineteenth century. Preservationists were inspired by the wonders of nature, such as Yosemite Valley, and the potential for such monumental locales to provide a national pride that could outshine the monuments of Europe. Accordingly, they worked to protect these areas from human development, inhabitance, or any other possible impact. Their emphasis was on keeping the areas pristine, and from the outset, this meant keeping humans strictly separate from nature. These natural preserves were meant to be used for resort or recreation, but not as a resource for profit. The Yosemite Valley of California stands as an important benchmark for this school of thought. As the first widely regarded natural wonder in the western United States, including the great Sequoia redwood trees, Yosemite Valley can be credited with initiating the national park preserve idea. Its beauty was famous, with paintings of its wonders by Albert Bierstadt earning record prices in 1864 and again in 1867. When the transcontinental railroad was finally completed in 1869, Yosemite was a main attraction for visitors to the west.

The utilitarians stood in direct opposition to the preservationists in their attitudes toward the natural environment of the West. The utilitarians sought to protect the rights of business and development to use the natural resources of these areas. The main proponent of utilitarian ideas, Gifford Pinchot, was also eventually the first director of the U.S. Forest Service, appointed by Theodore Roosevelt in 1905, bureaucratically located, not accidentally, in the Department of Agriculture, not the Department of the Interior. Not only did his ideals run in
opposition to the preservationists, he was also in a position of power to implement his values. Accordingly, when a controversy over whether or not to sacrifice the Hetch Hetchy Valley—known as a smaller version of the Yosemite Valley—for the sake of providing San Francisco with a reservoir to bolster its water supply, Pinchot played a large role in defeating the preservationists. Hetch Hetchy was dammed in 1913.

These competing schools of thought regarding management of lands in the west served to initiate a discourse of conservation that alienated Mexican American contributions to environmental thought. On the one hand, the preservationist perspective does not recognize the ongoing presence and cultivation of the land by Mexican Americans. Moreover, the preservationists' notion of separating humans from the natural environment did not accord with the Mexican American practice of treasuring the environment by taking special care in its cultivation and, as a result, its protection as an ongoing resource as well as a source of family pride and symbol of cultural continuity. On the other hand, the utilitarian perspective imposed an oversized scale of geography and profit-seeking on Mexican American agricultural and ranching pursuits. Although the Californio ranchers were interested in making a profit, their financial pursuits paled in comparison to the grand schemes of nineteenth century profit barons. In a nation that grows in diversity every day, these two foundational ways of regarding the protection and interaction with the natural environment no longer serve a sustainable movement. Indeed, we must cultivate an everyday environmentalism. As a first step, especially in regard to Mexican American and
Chicana/o environmentalism, we need to recognize the human relationship with the environment in the context of the U.S.'s nineteenth-century imperialism.

Recognizing the legacy of imperialism's influence on present-day views of the natural environment will help make environmentalism a more urgent issue to various groups to whom it has heretofore seemed a middle-class and white American concern. Awareness of environmental injustices is already working in this direction. However, far more work can be done in showing how Mexican Americans have been contributing to positive environmentalism all along. In other words, Chicana/o studies needs to add the environment as another factor in their analyses of class- and race-based exploitation. One measure of privilege is the degree to which and the quality with which one's relationship with nature is mediated by those less privileged. This was clear to Thoreau when he stated "The luxury of one class is counterbalanced by the indigence of another."18 And class distinction has too often formed along lines of race and ethnicity, with Chicanas/os (and African Americans, American Indians, Asian Americans) on the bottom of the scale. Inevitably, the lower classes mediate the relationship of the upper classes with nature by means of all kinds of manual labor, agricultural work, or by inhabiting the least environmentally appealing spaces in urban and rural locales. All the while, the ethnicity of the lower classes finds itself idealized by the upper classes for its proximity to nature (the notion of the "noble savage")—therefore implicitly naturalizing the structure of exploitation. This essentialization of exploitation often involves the erasure of presence, or

historical revision, of the lives of some Mexican Americans in US history.

Erasing Mexican American presence in the western states served the imperial agenda of the nineteenth century; and xenophobic immigration policies serve its legacy stretching into the twenty-first century. Moreover, such erasure also limits access to the positive environmental practices of Mexican Americans in the nineteenth century.

Take, for example, history's manipulation of an encounter between John Muir and a young man whom he stumbles upon during the early days of his avid hiking in the San Gabriel Mountains of California. Muir directly comments on his ethnicity: "his father was Irish and his mother Spanish." But Muir never establishes for certain a distinct nationality for the young man—American or Mexican. Indeed, his inquiries seem stumped by the, to him, unfamiliar combination. In any case, it seems that Muir's curiosity goes in the direction of heritage, culture, ethnicity; indeed, a far more interesting direction than simple Mexican versus American nationality. For the sake of argument, let us say that the young man is possibly a Mexican American, perhaps a Mexican. He could have been born in Mexico, in Spain, or in California, to name a few likely possibilities. Based on what Muir wrote, no one can really know. On the whole, Muir discusses the encounter with interest, if somewhat incompletely, for present-day readers.

A manipulation of this encounter occurs in a recent interpretation, related in an article by the environmental historian Donald Worster. Worster paints a

picture of friendly exchange across deep cultural divides between the two men, who find common cause in their “passion for nature.” Yet in his narration of the encounter, Worster also deems it necessary to exaggerate the young man’s foreignness, failing to recognize the centuries of Spanish and Mexican presence in California, and momentarily overlooking that Muir himself was an immigrant to the United States from Scotland. Muir was the most eloquent and persuasive advocate of preservation. But preservation of what?—pristine landscapes unsullied by human habitation, use, and management. So, perpetuating what Arturo Gomez-Pompa and Andrea Kaus call “the wilderness myth,” Worster makes the man an “immigrant,” a recent sojourner in virgin California.

Unfortunately, an interpretation of such an encounter by historians like Worster serves the purpose of erasing californio cultural history. The encounter, taking place in 1877, is redacted by Worster:

Along the way [Muir] came upon an immigrant from Mexico camped on the banks of Eaton Creek; predictably, Muir struck up a conversation with the dark stranger that lasted well into the night. In halting English his campfire host told about his dream of settling there amidst the oaks and chaparral, irrigating a vineyard and harvesting honey. Since leaving his native land, he had rambled a great deal—hunting, prospecting, and mining throughout...

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the Southwest—but was now ready to make his home in this canyon
paradise, to "make money and marry a Spanish woman."\textsuperscript{22}

By 1877, California had been part of the US for almost thirty years. This young
man could very well have been born an American citizen, or, in any case,
obtained US citizenship by the mere act of staying in California after the 1848
Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. There is reason to assume that he could not
speak English very well; for many californios, Spanish was their primary
language. On the other hand, the detail of the information that the young man
conveys to Muir suggests that he has a pretty good command of English.
Worster takes a lot of liberty in his description of this encounter. Worster's
license also, unfortunately, makes invisible the long historical presence of
Mexicans and Mexican Americans—nationality notwithstanding—in California
and our diversity of experiences and appearances.

Worster indicates the specific passage on which he bases his own
account—from Muir's \textit{Steep Trails}. I quote it here, at length, to expose some of
the significant inconsistencies, as well as to support my contention that Mexican
American experiences and practices are oftentimes sacrificed to the image of
conventional environmentalism:

On the first day of my excursion I [Muir] went only as far as the mouth of
Eaton Canyon, because the heat was oppressive, and a pair of new shoes
were chafing my feet to such an extent that walking began to be painful.

While looking for a camping ground among the boulder beds of the canyon, I came upon a strange, dark man of doubtful parentage. He kindly invited me to camp with him, and led me to his little hut. All my conjectures as to his nationality failed, and no wonder, since his father was Irish and mother Spanish, a mixture not often met even in California. He happened to be out of candles, so we sat in the dark while he gave me a sketch of his life, which was exceedingly picturesque. Then he showed me his plans for the future. He was going to settle among these canyon boulders, and make money, and marry a Spanish woman. People mine for irrigating water along the foothills as for gold. He is now driving a prospecting tunnel into a spur of the mountains back of his cabin. “My prospect is good,” he said, “and if I strike a strong flow, I shall soon be worth five or ten thousand dollars. That flat out there,” he continued, referring to a small, irregular patch of gravelly detritus that had been sorted out and deposited by Eaton Creek during some flood season, “is large enough for a nice orange grove, and, after watering my own trees, I can sell water down the valley; and then the hillside back of the cabin will do for vines, and I can keep bees, for the white sage and black sage up the mountains is full of honey. You see, I’ve got a good thing.” All this prospective affluence in the sunken, boulder-choked flood-bed of Eaton Creek! Most home-seekers would as soon think of settling on the summit of San Antonio.\textsuperscript{23}

Here, Muir does indeed describe an encounter with a young Spanish-Irish man with whom he feels some commonality, just as Worster describes. However, Muir does not ever call the man an immigrant, nor does he intimate that the man could not speak English very well. Quite the contrary, Muir reveals that most of their conversation occurred in the dark, as the man was out of candles. How could they have exchanged so much information with “halting English” and without seeing one another? Muir also indicates that he could not readily guess the man’s nationality and eventually learns that his “father was Irish and mother Spanish.” This combination was more common than Muir realized at the time, and certainly occurred not infrequently in California, to be sure. A young California woman, daughter of a Scottish father and an Indian mother, and foster child to a Spanish mother, figures as the title character in Helen Hunt Jackson’s Ramona.²⁴ Even so, we can excuse Muir’s ignorance. He was, after all, born in Scotland, raised in Wisconsin, and only beginning his travels around California. Yet his unfamiliarity with the peoples of California does not prevent him from admiringly observing the persistence of this young man, his hospitable campfire companion. The most significant observation in Muir’s description of the encounter occurs at the very end. Muir comments on the young man’s extensive plans to settle an area that most people would find completely uninviting—comparing it to the nearby highest summit of 6,000 feet, San Antonio! Muir does not go on to describe the young man’s adaptability, but he clearly notes the depth

²⁴Helen Hunt Jackson, Ramona, a story (Boston: Robert Brothers, 1884).
of knowledge the man maintains about the local flora and fauna, and admires his vision to make the most of an area that seems so uninviting.

**Ecological Awareness in The Squatter and the Don**

Likewise, the Alamar family in Marfa Amparo Ruiz de Burton’s 1885 novel The Squatter and the Don makes clear their knowledge of California ecology. Historical interpretations and portrayals of the West, such as Worster’s, erase the long history of Mexican Americans in California, but writers such as Ruiz de Burton adamantly portray their presence. In The Squatter and the Don the proud california Ruiz de Burton, who was born into a family who owned lands in Baja California in 1832, depicts the experiences of her compatriots, which she witnessed first hand, providing examples of California families and their intimate knowledge of their lands. California was a land deeply impacted by Spanish and Mexican colonization; “the colonial period introduced a whole new set of peoples, attitudes, organisms, and technologies.”

However, the Spanish and Mexicans had been a significant presence in California for at least a century by the time the territory changed hands to the U.S. government. Ruiz de Burton contrasts the Mexican (newly-created “Mexican American”) hacendados’ land use to that of a new population: Anglo-American squatters. By depicting the debates between her protagonist Don Mariano Alamar and the squatters on his land, Ruiz de Burton vividly portrays the extensive experience californios shared with the land.

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The point is not to argue for an essentialized *californio* ecological knowledge; history clearly reveals Spanish introduction of invasive species and manipulative technologies. However, the *californios* nurtured certain knowledge for the land they had worked with and shaped for at least a century, and they could not help but object to unwise practices of the newly arrived Americans. For example, *californios* took rainfall patterns into account, and imposed grazing limitations on themselves. They even predicted the future success of vineyards for which California is now famous. As “the first published narrative written in English from the perspective of the conquered Mexican population,” consideration of this novel’s environmental engagement is critical.\(^\text{26}\)

**The Squatter and the Don** depicts the transformation of a *californio* family, the Alamares, and the loss of its lands, its financial security, and its social status in the years following the U.S. takeover of California. The Alamares ranched a large area nearby the village of San Diego for generations, and until the arrival of U.S. squatters and the ensuing legislations seemingly designed to subsidize squatter practices, they were destined to continue their efforts into future generations. The two sons, with their elegant horsemanship and charming ways, fully expected to become great rancheros like their father. However, Don Mariano Alamar and Doña Josefa Alamar see their children adjust to a new world, and a future very different from the one they hoped to see them inherit.

Four out of their six children, Gabriel, Victoriano, Elvira, and Mercedes, make his or her way into a new post-*californio* era by the end of the novel, with differing degrees of success. The young women fare better than the young men, primarily due to the fact that both daughters marry successful Anglo Americans. These marriages reflect historical trends. However, the pattern of Mexican American women’s marriages to Anglo American men has been overemphasized by some California historiographers, as Chicana historian Antonia Castañeda observes, “the chaste, industrious Spanish beauty who forsook her inferior man and nation in favor of the superior Euro-American became embedded in the literature.”

While at the same time staying true to some trends, Ruiz de Burton also offsets this portrayal of a stereotypical “Spanish beauty” alliance with an Anglo American man by marrying the Alamar sons to Anglo American women. However, since the Alamar sons fully expect to inherit their father’s ranch, they find themselves with no real skills or means of earning a living for their respective young families in the new social order post-U.S. conquest. These young men end up depending upon the goodwill of their sisters’ husbands.

This is certainly not the future envisioned for the family by the senior Alamares, and by the end of the novel, Don Alamar dies of a broken heart, still not witnessing the worst of his family’s downward spiral. His dying breaths include an oath against his enemies: “The sins of our legislators have brought us

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to this."28 This final accusation lays the fall of californio culture at the feet of legislators—new American legislators. Rather than the expected eponymous enmity between the squatter and the don, the novel's ultimate tension plays out between the settlers of California, whether they be established or newly arrived, and the legislators who pass erroneous laws intended to encourage development. The novel demonstrates that legislators' plans for rapid development in California ultimately had a negative impact on the land. Faulty U.S. legislation prevents a true flourishing in California. Its lands and its inhabitants—the squatters and the dons—miss their opportunity to work together because U.S. legislation functions to keep their interests divided.

A novel that is critical of individualistic and profiteering development, especially one set in an agricultural era, cannot avoid environmental themes. This novel develops two narrative lines that lend particularly interesting insights to an environmental reading. The first, of course, has to do with the land itself, how it changes hands, and how it is cared for (or not) by the new possessors. The key scene regarding this point occurs when the Don attempts to negotiate with the squatters on his land. He proposes a compromise that would allow the squatters to keep the territory they have developed, but to cultivate the land in such a way that would not compromise the Don's own industry of cattle ranching. The discussion between the Don and the group of squatters on the Alamar rancho offers a realistic view of the ways the landscape was affected by the

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arrival of American agriculturalists to the California territories. Recent scholarship isolates this scene as key, but sets it in the context of Ruiz de Burton’s portrayal of a culture clash—and less an ecological clash—between the farmers and ranchers: “the threat posed by the squatters represents that of a contrasting conception of culture and community as much as it does the threat of an opposing nation, race, or class.”29 This culture clash certainly figures prominently in the novel, but ignoring the ecological knowledge portrayed in this scene impoverishes the depth of Ruiz de Burton’s critique of big business and U.S. legislators’ interference with the relationship between squatters and californios.

The second, more subtle, environmental statement has to do with the fate of Mercedes, the youngest daughter of the Alamán family. In Spanish, the name Mercedes means “grace” or “mercy.” The name, however, is also the word used to speak about “land grants” in Spanish.30 Mercedes’ romance with the squatter Darrell’s son, Clarence, indicates the possible alliance between californios and the recently arrived Americans, duly depicting the challenges that make such a union difficult. Indeed, this marriage plot comprises one of the most dramatic narrative lines of the novel—the love-at-first-sight of Clarence and Mercedes meets countless challenges due to perceived class difference. Interestingly, their racial and ethnic difference is underplayed, and they ultimately figure out that


they are part of the same class as well. However, geographic separations makes an undeniably negative impact on their romance, and during these separations, Mercedes' beauty and humility proves very attractive to countless suitors, especially when she travels to the east coast. As a beautiful sixteen-year-old blond-haired and blue-eyed California named Mercedes, this young woman seems a perfect embodiment of the West coast's allure in the nineteenth century. Golden-hued beaches and bright blue skies adorned the fertile lands of the imagined California in the minds of America. More than anything else, the romance of Clarence and Mercedes has to do with the courting of California by savvy and honorable Americans. With this romance, Ruiz de Burton can indicate an ideal that failed to materialize in the development of California after the U.S. takeover. Against all odds, Ruiz de Burton allows this slight glimmer of hope, while at the same time showing how the Don's struggle for his land proves hopeless. Indeed, this novel is more than just an indictment of U.S. imperialism, maldevelopment of the West, and robber baron profiteers. The Squatter and the Don attempts to keep open the possibility for loyal citizens to work together against these macroeconomic and political forces that too often threaten the survival of cultures and ecosystems.

"So I say, plant vineyards, plant olives, figs, oranges"

After 1848, the survival of californio culture, including the management of vast territories, was at the mercy of the waves of American migrants, as well as subject to the legislation passed down from the new government. Indeed, these new laws impacted the power relations between the established and the newly arrived. The Land Act of 1851, in particular, “called all land titles into question” by establishing “a Land Commission to determine the validity of large Spanish-Mexican grants.” So, even though the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo specifically states that land titles be honored, the “burden of proof fell not on the government, nor even on the squatters who ‘located’ on the land, but on the Californio landowners.” The extensive cattle ranches that prospered under Spanish and Mexican rule appeared, to Anglo American settlers, to be poor use of the land—because they were not planted with rows of grain—and seemed too vast for single-family ownership. The struggles between squatters and californios over land has been widely researched and discussed, with the process of title confirmation or rejection receiving particular attention.

However, the ecological changes initiated in this era are less explored. The Squatter and the Don demonstrates the way that differing ecological knowledge influenced the relations between squatters and californios. The new arrivals and the already settled californios approached the land very differently—

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33 Ibid., 19.

not just in regard to how much land was owned by whom, but specifically relating to how the land was managed, especially taking into consideration rainfall and selection of agricultural activities. The migrants expected to establish the same kinds of farms as they had back home, while the californios knew that California soil and climate could not adequately support some of the crops squatters sought to sow. This, however, did not stop the new settlers. Neither did the fact that they did not own the lands they settled and worked. The squatters’ resistance to learning from the californio’s environmental knowledge is indicative of an overall reluctance of the Anglo American settlers to appreciate californio culture overall. But more importantly, it signals a failed alliance between the new settlers and the well-established californios against the more formidable allegiance of U.S. legislators with monopoly capitalists.

The primary narrative line in The Squatter and the Don, as the title indicates, involves the encroachment of squatters on large California ranches. However, the novel develops a complex and nuanced relationship between these two groups, and ultimately shows how they could see themselves as allies in opposition to their real foes: U.S. legislators in league with big business. Recent scholarship reveals that early interpretation of The Squatter and the Don tends to “underestimate the alliances the novel forges between elite Californios and civic-minded Anglo American settlers.”35 However, in accordance with history, the events in the novel do not lead to an underclass triumph over government

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corruption and exploitative business practices. The novel accomplishes a portrayal of these Reconstruction-era power shifts in the West, giving voice to little-known perspectives of the californios and the more-recognized settler classes. Indeed, as José Aranda argues, the novel works to conjure a "political future where the civic ethos of an evolving, educated Californian citizenry takes as its founding mythos a nostalgic embrace of Californio ranch culture." Ruiz de Burton was careful to include a discussion of the environmental factors that played into her attempt to establish nostalgia for California ranch culture, and in the process demonstrate californio authority regarding the land.

One scene in particular stands out. Early in the novel, Don Mariano Alamar proposes a compromise to the squatters who are encroaching on his land and killing his cattle. A couple of factors contributed to the encroachment of farmers on California ranches. They settled on ranches that they erroneously believed available for new American settlers on the strength of the recent U.S. takeover. They killed cattle because they claimed the cattle ruined their newly-planted crops by wandering among the plants and eating the green shoots. However, killing cattle to protect crops—an activity sanctioned by the "no-fence law"—was not only an act of crop defense. The practice also reduced ranch capital and made ranch owners less and less financially capable of defending their lands in the courts.

The above scenario plays out on the Alamar ranch in The Squatter and the Don. In response, Don Mariano calls a meeting to present a compromise to

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36 Ibid.
the squatters. Although he could justifiably consider the squatters inconsiderate invaders, the novel clearly shows him attempting to find common ground by invoking the enterprise in which they are all engaged. He says: "The reason why you have taken up land here is because you want homes. You want to make money. Isn't that the reason? Money! money!"\textsuperscript{37} The squatters reply in the affirmative to this proclamation, some of them even laughing. Then the Don presents a plan to them in which they can stay on the rancho without paying for the lands they have settled, make more money, and (in his interest) protect the Alamar cattle.

In summary, the plan involves an agricultural shift for the farmers from the hopeless cultivation of wheat and other grains to the growth of fruit trees, vineyards, and a period of raising cattle and the associated products—"plant vineyards, olives, figs oranges; make wines and oil and raisins; export olives and dried and canned fruits" he says.\textsuperscript{38} This agricultural shift would enable two key changes for the Don that would also benefit the farmers. First, the farmers would use less land—as orchards and vineyards require less territory than grain production requires—and therefore it would be feasible for them to build fences to keep out the cattle. If the cattle were no longer threatening the farmers' harvests, they no longer had any right or need to kill the cattle. They would have one less chore on a busy farm. Second, the Don would gain allies in business rather than legal foes, and the farmers would benefit from the Don's local

\textsuperscript{37} Ruiz de Burton, and María Amparo, \textit{The Squatter and the Don} (Houston: Arte Púlico Press, 1992 [1885]) 86.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 88.
environmental knowledge in order to work towards successful enterprise in the greater San Diego region. In short, the farmers would continue the activity for which they moved west: the cultivation of produce. They would simply change from one kind of cultivation to another more sustainable one, and they would shed the task of shooting dumb, helpless cows every night.

However, several details, left unattended, would surely impede the plan. First of all, the cultivation of successful fruit orchards and vineyards takes years. The farmers would have to find another money-making enterprise to keep them in the black until the orchards and vineyards could produce. The Don answers this query with a practical proposal: he would give each farmer a number of cattle, and give them each five years or so to repay him, at no interest. This meant, basically, that as long as they bred the cattle adequately, the reproduction of the cattle themselves would generate enough animals to repay the Don. This question of repayment, of course, suggests that the Don may want the farmers to pay for the lands they were currently squatting. However, the Don assures them that they will all retain their homesteads, at no cost. He promises to quit fighting their claims in the courts and present each of them with a quit-claim deed.

Still, in the face of all these advantages, the squatters reject Don Mariano's proposal. They scorn his plan on the basis of cultural difference, saying "perhaps you understand vaquering; we don't," at the same time mocking the Spanish language. Yet, this is more than simply a "contrasting conception of culture and community" as noted in Vincent Pérez's discussion of this key
scene. Certainly, Don Mariano did not consider the squatters true equals, and the squatters considered the Don and his sons dandies. There is no pretension at bridging this particular cultural divide in the novel. However, by invoking their common enterprise, agriculture, and environmental knowledge that can help them work toward their economic goals, Don Mariano hopes to strike a working compromise with the squatters. And this compromise, this bridging of cultures, just may have been possible, if it were not for the existence of a “higher law” which the squatters could invoke in their favor. The law they invoke is not of any environmental or moral origin, but the “no-fence law” handed down to them from legislators who sought to promote a particular kind of familiar American economic development. Rejecting the Don’s proposal that they become ranchers, the squatters also reject the one standard that the Don would hold them to if they insisted on planting wheat: to fence their crops. Squatter Mathews explains: “I am not so big a fool as to spend money in fences. The ‘no-fence law’ is better than all the best fences.” More than just protecting crops, the “no-fence law” protects an imperial agenda, giving American enterprise an upper hand at the cost of californio culture and environmental knowledge. Again, the true culprits in the novel are legislators and large-scale business.

Further reflection on the Don’s proposal reveals ways that the squatters and the californios could have found common ground. Indeed, the Don’s plan

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40 Ruiz de Burton, and Maria Amparo, The Squatter and the Don (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1992 [1885]) 90.
begs the question: why would Don Mariano propose a plan to the squatters that would enable their takeover of land that was originally granted to his family by Spain and Mexico? One would imagine that he would be doing everything within his power to run the squatters from his lands. However, the impulse to acquire and settle new territories resonates with him. His ancestors, who originally acquired the Alamar rancho, were pioneers in “unsettled” territory, just as the squatters on the rancho were the most recent wave of pioneers in territory they considered “unsettled,” or at least underdeveloped, as well. In his meeting with the squatters, Don Mariano addresses them as equals, and invokes their common ground. Later, he even says to Clarence, a squatter’s son and his daughter’s suitor, “I don’t find it in my heart to blame those people for taking my land as much as I blame the legislators who turned them loose upon me.”

However, the span of time that separates the colonial wave of settlement to California from the imperial wave of settlement to California also represents differences in approach to settlement and cultural traditions. The californios and the squatters do not readily recognize their commonalities as outsiders in California. The Spanish and Mexican pioneers who arrived in California in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries sought to establish outposts, missions, and eventually a nation-state, in territories already settled by Amerindians. Perhaps the opportunity for cooperation between Spanish settlers and Amerindian settlements existed in early encounters. Yet, the pattern of violent engagements, land takeovers, and religious conversions in the Spanish

\[41\] Ibid., 161.
settlement of the Americas is well-known. And the Spanish invoked the same reasoning that the Americans intoned in later years about the californios: the previous inhabitants did not adequately cultivate the land.

The colonization of the Americas by the Spanish initiated an ecological revolution from lower-impact Amerindian agriculture to European-style agriculture, including the introduction of new species. As environmental historian William Preston, in his article about environmental change in colonial California, observes about the Amerindians in California:

These peoples for the most part were not farmers so much as domesticators, and in a number of important respects all had domesticated portions of their habitat in order to induce greater subsistence. Instead of relying on the axe, rake, or plow, they skilfully learned to prune, till, coppice, transplant, and burn California's vegetation in order to encourage a greater abundance of plant and animal foods and materials. The land yielded its bounty to the ingenuity of native intervention and was substantially transformed in the process.

That the colonial Spanish and Mexicans were blind to the Indian domestication of California is clear. In the same way, east coast Americans underestimated the Spanish and Mexican knowledge and influence over the land. One of the more significant changes was the way that American imperial settlement of California initiated an ecological revolution from a land grant system to a land tenure system. In an article detailing the challenges of patenting private land in California, historian David Horneck notes,
Although there were marked differences between Hispanic and American institutions, the difference in their land-tenure systems and the distributions and ownership of land became the primary points of contention and the centers of controversy... the new sovereignty faced the task of introducing its land system and creating order out of hundreds of large, private land grants (ranchos) held under Mexican title.42 This is a significant shift, in scale, from large landholdings managed by a limited class, to smaller parcels of land managed by many more individuals and families of varying class status. This makes an ecological impact, to be sure, but this transition was bound to occur sooner or later.

The real bit of wisdom to gather from this novel’s depiction of this historical moment is the fact that californios, and Mexican Americans in general, and their environmental knowledge were factored-out of the land-management equation at a key moment of transition. And they felt a great deal of betrayal about this process at the initial moment of their participation in U.S. citizenship and democracy, that is, immediately following the U.S.-Mexican War. That this all occurred at the same time that transcendental American philosophers (including Muir, who was heavily influenced by Emerson and Thoreau) were writing foundational environmental texts and the U.S. was initiating a new era of environmental protection for the world is not an irony lost on Mexican Americans—in the nineteenth century and up until today.

This encounter between the squatters and the Don, located as it is early in the novel, shows that these two groups could potentially have worked together, if an imperial agenda had not overshadowed their efforts. The novel clearly attempts to establish that the squatters and the californios are not necessarily, nor inherently, enemies. The Don reasons with the squatters that, since they all inhabit a contiguous territory and share environmental conditions, they can work with common interests and toward similar goals. In short, he offers his knowledge and experience, as well as financial support, for them to take up profitable agricultural ventures on the rancho in a way that would also protect his cattle and his culture. In this manner, he could also protect his right to make an impact on land management in California and continue his family's reciprocal and intimate relationship with the environment. Unfortunately, his plan does not work.

"All the world loves a lover"

Another intimate relationship drives this novel. Of the romance between Mercedes and Clarence, the narrator quotes Emerson: "All the world loves a lover." The actual quote, from Emerson, is "All mankind love a lover," but the sentiment remains the same. The narrator implies that the true love between Mercedes and Clarence ought to receive unconditional support, and Emerson's essay on "Love" goes out of its way to demonstrate two things about love: its

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wide appeal, and everyone's investment in its success. Emerson asks, "What books in the circulating libraries circulate?" So, too, Ruiz de Burton must have mused when she made the love story between Mercedes and Clarence so central a theme of The Squatter and the Don. This difficult romance drives much of the novel's action. But it is more than just a way to lure readers. It also provides an opportunity for readers to deeply empathize with a cross-cultural relationship. In the same passage where one finds Emerson's quote about the world's fascination with love, one also finds him arguing that "we understand" lovers "and take the warmest interest in the development of the romance." Emerson argues for the universality of love in his 1841 essay, and Ruiz de Burton harnesses the power of this universal sentiment in service of her novel's social and political statements, quoting the famous transcendentalist in the process. However, the love affair between Mercedes and Clarence meets all sorts of difficulties. Invoking Emerson's essay on love cannot be anything but a tongue-in-cheek reference to a naïve ideal.

The key to detecting the deeper implications of the relationship between Mercedes and Clarence is reading the multiple meanings of Mercedes' name. As mentioned previously, "Mercedes" means "mercy." But it is also the word used to indicate land grants. Young Mercedes clearly represents more than herself, or her culture, but the California territories themselves, especially the

\[45\text{Ibid.}\]

\[46\text{Ibid.}\]

\[47\text{Victor Westphall, }\textit{Mercedes Reales: Hispanic Land Grants of the Upper Rio Grande Region (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983).}\]
land grants made to the Spanish and Mexican inhabitants. The parallel between the land and the women in the novel is established early. When the squatter William Darrell first arrives at Alamar, he surveys the land, the home, and the females therein with equal regard:

In a few hours Darrell was driving by Don Mariano Alamar's house, a one-story mansion on a low hill, with a broad piazza in front, and in the interior a court formed by two wings, and a row of rooms variously occupied at its back. That the house was commodious, Darrell could see. There was a flower garden in front. At the back there were several 'corrales' for cattle and horses. At the foot of the hill, on the left, there was an orchard, and some grain fields enclosed with good fences... Darrell took notice of all these particulars. He also noticed that there were females on the front piazza. He was taken to see the best unoccupied lands to make his selection. He ran his practiced eye over the valley from the highest point on the hill.48

Darrell surveys the “females” as just another aspect of the landscape—calling them “females” rather than ladies or women. This collapsing of woman and landscape is a familiar colonial perspective put into practice from the earliest attempts to draw settlers to the Americas. As Annette Kolodny notes, “[t]he human, and decidedly feminine, impact of landscape became a staple of the early promotional tracts, inviting prospective settlers to inhabit ‘valleys and

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plaines streaming with sweete Springs, like veynes in naturall bodies.”

Ruiz de Burton documents the way this perspective prevails into the nineteenth century, describing all aspects of Darrell’s well-trained surveying eyes. Doubtless, the young Mercedes was one amongst the women on the piazza that Darrell surveys, and her inclusion in Darrell’s sweeping gaze anticipates her function as a representative of the land and her culture. He also takes note of the fenced grain fields, anticipating the controversy with the Don concerning the “no-fence law.” The orchard, the flower garden growing nearby the house, and the mansion’s architecture also showcases the hybrid culture of the rancho—blending Spanish, Italian, and Moorish qualities with New World cultivations. Darrell, however, does not linger on these qualities for long, and the narrative quickly moves to his making a selection of “unoccupied lands.”

Darrell’s decision to settle on the Alamar rancho puts into motion a series of events he could have never predicted, including his eldest son Clarence’s romance with a California, Mercedes. But each man experiences a very different initial encounter with Mercedes. While William Darrell surveys her as part of a landscape from which to choose and settle upon, Clarence literally runs across Mercedes, hearing music at her approach, “he heard a tinkling of little bells and rushing of feet, as if somebody was running, then a laughing voice, the timbre of which was sweetly pleasing.”

The bearer of the bells and sweet voice is none


other than Mercedes, pursuing her little dog who had stolen "a skein of bright-colored silk."\textsuperscript{51} The next moment brings their first encounter:

a girl rushed out, coming against him before she could check herself. In her effort to do so she turned her foot and staggered forward, but before she realized she was in anyone's presence, she felt two strong arms holding her.\textsuperscript{52}

This brief encounter establishes a great deal about the relationship that eventually develops between these two. As representatives of two different cultures, their union is unexpected. Yet, they come together in a clash of cultures that startles them both, and that initially causes pain to them and their families in its unexpectedness. They both eventually make choices contrary to wishes expressed by their parents, and in so doing lead the way to a new cultural blend that recent political developments of their era compel. By the end of the novel, Clarence's strong arms will hold not only Mercedes, but he will also help to secure the future of what is left of the Alamar family.

But before they get to their happy ending, Mercedes and Clarence must endure roadblocks to their relationship, most significantly posed by Mercedes' mother Doña Josefa's objection to her daughter's interest in a squatter. Doña Josefa and Mercedes' sister Carlota exclaim, "But a squatter! The idea of an Alamar marrying a squatter!" at the very mention of Mercedes' interest in

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
Clarence. His good looks and excellent manners do not obviate their objections at all. They cannot get beyond Clarence’s status as a squatter, and object even more because they understand him to be a squatter on their own rancho. Unfortunately for the young couple, Doña Josefa is not privy to a vital piece of information: Clarence is actually not a squatter.

Indeed, Clarence opposes the practice of squatting, telling Don Mariano that he “feel[s] a sort of impatience to think that in our country could exist such a law which is so outrageously unjust” referring to the “no-fence law” and other legislations that supported squatters’ practices. The whole purpose for Clarence’s first visit to the Alamar mansion is to purchase the land that his father has claimed. In other words, the reason behind Clarence’s visit is the Darrells’ possession of Alamar land without permission. And although he claims to unwillingly participate in acts of improper possession, he very willingly violates terms of propriety in his initial encounter with Mercedes. He realizes his forwardness, and begs her forgiveness only after his violation, just as he does with the land his father takes. He says to Mercedes, after taking the liberty of carrying her to a chair at the end of the piazza:

Forgive my lifting you without your permission. I knew you would not give it, and I knew also that you were suffering. Will you forgive me?

Clarence’s encounter with Mercedes signals possession without permission. After his initial impropriety, he immediately makes a claim on her, resolving to

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54 Ibid., 97.
“love her to the last instant of his life.”\textsuperscript{55} This all occurs in the short time in which Mercedes' brother Victoriano is bringing Don Mariano to speak with Clarence about buying the Darrells’ claim. And when the gentlemen arrive, they far underestimate the impact Clarence and Mercedes have made on one another, signaling the way the \textit{californios} underestimated the deep impact the Americans would have on the future of the Alamar ranch. When Don Mariano arrives and agrees to sell the Darrells’ claim, Clarence asks Don Mariano to keep their transaction a secret in order to protect his father’s pride. This agreement of secrecy becomes the root of a great deal of strain on the new love between Clarence and Mercedes.

To begin with, on the strength of her disapproval of Clarence, Doña Josefa decides to send Mercedes to the east coast with her sister Elvira, who would be traveling east to meet her new husband’s family in New York. When Clarence learns of this plan, he despairs at his hopes to eventually marry Mercedes. He knows that he cannot be the only man whom Mercedes' beauty enthralleds:

He was certain that dozens, yes hundreds, would fall in love with her as soon as they saw her. Would she not love someone? It would be natural to prefer to him, some of those elegant New Yorkers, or some fascinating foreigner whom she might meet in Washington. This thought made him wretched.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 94.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 125.
Although Clarence's despair seems exaggerated, with his certainty that “hundreds would fall in love with her as soon as they saw her,” his concern does not stray far from the truth. Mercedes does indeed attract many suitors in the east, prompting her hostess, her brother-in-law George's Aunt Mechlin, to inquire with admiration, “where did such beauties grow?”

Uncle Mechlin later observes that the number of broken hearts that Mercedes leaves in her path "is like an epidemic." This excess of allure that Mercedes possesses carries two functions—to showcase the beauty of California women, and to symbolize the allure of California itself. Was there not a similar epidemic going on at this time in regard to the allure of California gold and land for the young men of east coast families? Were there not fascinating stories of powerful beauties that grew in California—not just women, but mountains, sequoias, waterfalls, and fertile fields?

Significantly, Mercedes rejects all suitors but Clarence. The attention that she draws from other young men becomes a hardship to her. When her friend Miss Selden admiringly observes that Mercedes has “made two new conquests” during her visit to Washington D.C., Mercedes retorts, "Why should I be proud? I should be annoyed, that's all." She goes on to argue, "Why should I wish men to fall in love with me, when I cannot return their love?" She has no wish to

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57 Ibid., 175.
58 Ibid., 181.
59 Ibid., 195.
60 Ibid.
exceed the number of suitors whose hopes she can duly satisfy; she limits herself to Clarence only. In this simple exchange with Miss Selden, Mercedes gives voice to the voiceless land of California—a land that was undergoing rapid development as a result of romanticized American regard for its wonders and capacity to fulfill easterners' dreams of success and wealth. Mercedes is able to enact agency in her own choice of husband and therefore in the quality of her future in a way that the passive landscape cannot.

However, the narrative makes clear the way that both Mercedes and the land must endure indignity and abuse as a result of U.S. structural and institutional support for squatters. Mercedes' romance would have been unspoiled were it not for William Darrell's stubbornness to uphold the pretense of squatters' rights. Clarence observes, disdainfully, "my father holds the accepted but very erroneous popular opinions about 'squatter's rights.'" Still, William Darrell's impulse to settle at Alamar brings Clarence and Mercedes together in the first place. So, with the eventual success of the relationship between Clarence and Mercedes, The Squatter and the Don condones the impulse to acquire and settle California land. After all, it is attractive country. But the practice of squatting, and moreover, the U.S. government's support of squatting and other legislation designed to compel American-style settlement of California to the detriment of established californio families, is severely condemned. Only the power of love between Clarence and Mercedes, and their willingness to stray

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61 Ibid., 131.
from their parents' wishes, protects the Alamares from certain poverty and destruction in the end.

But even with the perseverance of love between Clarence and Mercedes, the novel does not end in the expected happy scene of their marriage celebration. Their ceremony takes up only one short paragraph, and the scene is marred with sadness and decrepitude:

As everything was ready, the marriage ceremony took place as soon as the priest arrived. Victoriano was brought to the parlor in an armchair, and managed to stand up, held by Everett and Webster. Doña Josefa wept all the time and so did her daughters, but everybody understood that memories of the sad past, but no fears for the future, caused those tears to flow.

This marriage that brings the now father-less Alamar family into legal union with the twelve-million dollar man, Clarence Darrell, is anything but a celebration. Victoriano, who has suffered ill health ever since he attempted to save some of the Alamar cattle from a harsh winter, cannot even stand on his own power and must be supported by Clarence's younger brothers. And Doña Josefa only recalls the "sad past." This is certainly still a family in mourning—not only for Don Mariano, but also for a lost culture, and lost form of existence and, significantly, self-sustainability. The family cannot celebrate their certain and soon-to-come dependence on Clarence's generosity.

This nostalgic ethos is indicated early in the novel, with the significantly under-narrated visit to Yosemite. A discussion of environmental awareness in
The Squatter and the Don cannot be complete without a close look at the visit that Mercedes, Clarence, Elvira, and George make to Yosemite during chapter fifteen of the thirty-seven chapter novel. The group's entire experience at Yosemite is characterized in terms of the experience of the lovers, and it is all narrated in the past tense. No scene is set at the actual park. The whole scene is narrated retrospectively, as an "evanescent" experience:

The crashing and thundering of Yosemite's falls plunging from dizzy heights, in splendor of furious avalanches, had been left behind... George and his three companions had given the last lingering look towards the glorious rainbows and myriads of dazzling gems glittering in the sun's rays, which pierced the vertical streams and played through the spray and mist enveloping them... The memory of the mirror lakes, with their gorgeous borders of green, their rich bouquets of fragrant azaleas and pond lilies, as well as the towering cliffs, the overpowering heights of that wonderful valley, all made a picture to remain forevermore a cherished souvenir... But alas, for the fatality of human joys, all is evanescent in this world of ours; the moment of parting at last came for the lovers.⁶²

One might expect that a visit to the popular natural attraction might merit an extended scene. Yosemite was famous for its inspiring vistas and its capacity to transfix its visitors. At about the same time that our fictional party visited the park, Ralph Waldo Emerson was convinced by John Muir to spend a few days there. In his 1871 letter to Emerson, Muir pleaded,

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⁶² Ibid., 153.
in the name of Mts Dana & Gabb—of the grand glacial hieroglyphics of Tuolumne meadows & Bloody Canon,—in the name of a hundred glacial lakes—of a hundred glacial-daisy-gentian meadows, in the name of a hundred cascades that barbarous visitors never see, in the name of the grand upper forests of Picea amabilis & P. grandis, & in the name of all the spirit creatures of these rocks & of this whole spiritual atmosphere Do not leave us now.  

The fervor of Muir's letter shows just how enticing the park was to visitors. Clearly, the park's significance was well-known to Ruiz de Burton, and she makes sure to include it in her novel. Yosemite still stands as a significant landmark in the development of the national park concept in the U.S. It was not the first national park—that honor went to Yellowstone in 1872—but Yosemite was protected by a unique national decree, the 1864 Yosemite Act.  

And even though "[m]onumentalism, not environmentalism, was the driving impetus behind the 1864 Yosemite Act," it still functioned to clear the way for future protection of natural wonders. Why does our party of lovers visit it only in such an abbreviated way? They were knowledgeable and fashionable young people who had to have been quite aware of Yosemite's special status.

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65 Ibid.
The visit to Yosemite comes at a crucial turning point in the novel. It comprises the final moments of companionship between Clarence and Mercedes before she travels east with George and Elvira, where she encounters such widespread appreciation by all the rich young men of the East. At the end of the Yosemite passage, the narrator comments that “the moment of parting at last came for the lovers.” It is understood that “the parting” refers to the reluctant Clarence and Mercedes. And this separation of Mercedes from Clarence starts her along a path where she realizes, and contemns, the great deal of allure she possesses. She loses a degree of innocence during her separation from Clarence, which she never attempts to regain. Yet, “the parting” also suggests the party's leave-taking of the Yosemite monument itself. So, too, this passage indicates, that the grandeur of a place like Yosemite will disappear, along with the grandeur of californio culture and its environmental knowledge. Yosemite, in this narrative, is ultimately a place that stands more for the “fatality of human joys” than for the proud monumentalism it was intended to signify for imperial America in the nineteenth century.

As stated above, what pulls the party away from Yosemite is their pending trip to the east, where Clarence will not be joining them again for months. That this is a train trip is significant in a couple of different ways. First of all, it is a relatively new way to travel. That this young party travels in the newest fashion places them firmly in an upper-class status and this was definitely a class distinction that Ruiz de Burton sought to accomplish for californios. Second, the entrepreneurs of the railroad upon which they traveled, the Northern Pacific,
were a consortium of big businessmen including Leland Stanford. This consortium used every means at their disposal to prevent the development of a southern California competitor. Their competitor would have been the Texas Pacific, terminating in San Diego. The Alamar family had invested a great deal in San Diego real estate, anticipating the Texas Pacific's impact on the local economy. With the new real estate and railroad-generated economy, the Alameres could have more easily adjusted to the changes in the land and their cultural practices. However, with the monopoly-minded Northern Pacific entrepreneurs' inducement, the Texas Pacific failed, and the hopes of many californio families also disappeared. This successful monopoly of the railroad comprises one of the primary indictments in The Squatter and the Don.

Interestingly, the condemnation of the railroad monopoly also presents a conundrum as to the environmental awareness portrayed in this novel. Were the californios prepared to concede the environmental impact of the railroad in favor of the economic advantages? The economic boom that accompanies a railroad would also certainly propel swifter development, at a cost to the environment. Could the californios have anticipated this effect, and been willing to compromise their environmental values for the sake of economic survival? Perhaps; in retrospect, this moment in California history reveals the overall complexity that comes with addressing environmental concerns alongside economic interest, with cultural survival not far behind. Ruiz de Burton reveals the process of an early confrontation with these difficult choices in the Mexican American community. Indeed, the novel can be read not only as it has been read in the
past: as a nostalgic invocation of extinct *californio* culture, and as a scathing political critique. It can also be read as a lamentation at the *californio*’s loss of influence over the natural environment; ultimately, they are not in the position of making a choice over the environmental impact of the railroad versus the economic influences it would bring to San Diego.

This alienation from the land, and the natural environment, is captured in an enigmatic scene that closely follows the trip to Yosemite and the parting of Mercedes from Clarence. As she rides east on the train, she seeks a bit of solitude to indulge her melancholy:

Mercedes took her hat and gloves and cloak off, and sat at the window to enjoy her misery in a thorough womanly fashion. She fixed her eyes on the far-off, flying wall of verdure, seeing nothing, not even the tall trees which, close by, indulged in such grotesque antics, as if forgetting their stately dignity only to amuse her—making dancing dervishes of themselves, and converting that portion of the Pacific slope into a flying gymnasium to perform athletic exercises, rushing on madly, or even turning somersaults for her recreation.\(^{66}\)

The “stately” trees described in this passage generously display themselves for Mercedes’ pleasure, yet she is blind to their performance. Up until this moment, the novel portrays Mercedes as a young woman who is sensitive to nature’s wonder, describing how, a few days earlier, she had “pronounced the Pacific

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Ocean to be grand and the wild surf dashing madly against the impassive rocks very impressive" during their visit to San Francisco's Cliff House. Yet, in this scene, she fails to notice such wildly performing trees. This scene seems to echo the prostrations that Muir described nature putting itself through in order to entice Emerson to visit Yosemite. In the same 1871 letter quoted above, Muir describes the rocks and the waters to be summoning Emerson to them: "Do not thus drift away with the mob while the spirits of these rocks & waters hail you after long waiting as their kinsman & persuade you to closer communion." Emerson responds by visiting Yosemite with Muir, and thoroughly relishing the experience. But Mercedes, traveling in the enclosed train, and leaving behind her childhood home and her new love, ignores the trees' performance—almost as if she is giving up her sensitivity and care for the natural environment.

In the same novel in which she condemns the failure of the Texas Pacific Railroad, Ruiz de Burton also depicts the Mexican American alienation from the natural environment. It is almost as if, with Mercedes' obliviousness to the performing trees, Ruiz de Burton concedes the Mexican American community's relationship with the natural environment. Yet, throughout the novel, she also clearly establishes the ways that Mexican Americans integrated the natural environment into their everyday lives in a reciprocally advantageous way, when allowed. Ultimately, this novel renders a complex portrait of the Mexican

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American community’s relationship with the natural environment, drawing particular attention to contested terrains resulting from the U.S.-Mexican War. A complex portrait of different period and geography is rendered by the corpus of another early Mexican American environmental writer, Jovita González, whose work will be the focus of the next chapter. González hailed from South Texas, where in the year of her birth, 1904, the railroad arrived and made a significant impact on the Texas Mexican culture, community, and landscape.
CHAPTER THREE

How Do We Define Nature Writing?:

Jovita González and the Transformation of South Texas

Standing under a mesquite tree, outside St. Mary's Hall in San Antonio, Texas, Jovita González sings with her students, perhaps a song in Spanish, or they recite a favorite poem. A microphone stands before them, but if they were recording their session, or if they were just trying to amplify their voices above the hill country winds for an outside-the-frame audience, remains a mystery. This photograph from 1934, kept in a portfolio at the Library of Congress, shows the eminent teacher and folklorist in a confident stance, with her legs set a little
wide in an authoritative pose, but also tenderly turned toward her students, singing or reciting alongside them.¹

The photo captures her during a transitional year in her life. At this point, she had already attained her bachelor's and master's degrees—hard-earned in those days for a young Mexican American woman—and was about to marry E.E. Mireles, with whom she would continue her distinguished teaching career into the 1960s in Corpus Christi. This moment was also toward the end of her writing career, in which she contributed some of the most valuable documentation and interpretation of stories circulated in South Texas, and in which she communicates a vision of history and culture deeply invested in preserving Mexican American values and experiences. In her work, we find a wealth of information about Mexican American engagement with the natural environment in South Texas, yet she has never been read as an environmental or nature writer. But the nature writing shines through in her texts, nonetheless, just as subtly and steadily as the mesquite tree shades her and her students on this spring day in 1934.

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On the other hand, the most famous American nature writer, Henry David Thoreau, has received plenty of critical attention for his reflections on the natural environment. His work stands as a landmark against which other nature writers are measured, and even evaluate themselves. Writing in different eras, different

regions, and different cultural backgrounds, the works of González and Thoreau
do not share a lot. However, contemplation of the railroads in their region
happens to make up one important commonality.

Thoreau shared his ruminations about the railroad that passed close by
the environs of his retreat at Walden Pond. In the chapter titled “Sounds” in
Walden, Thoreau comments that “the whistle of the locomotive penetrates my
woods summer and winter,” and that the reliability of the trains rivaled the sun’s:
“I watch the passage of the morning cars with the same feeling that I do the rising
of the sun, which is hardly more regular.” As such a regular presence, Thoreau
experienced the railroad as a kind of companion in his isolation, and he even
used the tracks to guide him when he walked to the village, in search of fellow
human companionship. This section of his landmark work is certainly not the
most famous. Yet, a book such as Walden, written about the state of American
culture and its relationship to the natural environment in the mid-nineteenth
century, could hardly avoid a discussion of the technology that was reshaping the
American landscape with its lines of tracks and its generation of new economy,
especially in the West. Indeed, Thoreau’s discussion of the railroad becomes an
exposition on progress itself, and the way that the railroad sets a new standard
for commerce, particularly in the increased rate of the exchange of goods:

Here come your groceries, country; your rations, countrymen! . . . With
such huge and lumbering civility the country hands a chair to the city. All

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3 Ibid., 110.
the Indian huckleberry hills are stripped, all the cranberry meadows are raked into the city. Up come the cotton, down goes the woven cloth; up comes the silk, down goes the woolen; up come the books, but down goes the wit that writes them.\(^4\)

In his admiration for the efficiency and effect of the railroad, Thoreau can’t help but also observe the rapid rate of destruction that it facilitates in the countryside for the sake of supplying the city. In the same breath, he can’t help but also critique the dilution in quality of contemporary writing. He draws a parallel between environmental degradation and cultural deterioration—both impacted by the rapidity of change and commerce that the railroad made possible. His reflections on the pace of contemporary life are consistent with the way that *Walden* dealt with the industrialization that was increasingly impeding human appreciation for everyday and simple experiences in the natural environment. Even though, in his overall discussion, Thoreau does not entirely condemn the railroad’s existence, he also does not resist criticizing the way it increasingly commodifies the countryside.

Jovita González, a writer not yet currently recognized as a nature writer, also wrote about the impact of the railroad on her local community, the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. The folktales that she documented and preserved told of a passing way of life where humans had paid closer attention to the natural environment and worked within the local climate’s dictates. Like Thoreau, the railroad was not the central concern of her writings. She was

\(^4\) Ibid., 109-10.
primarily concerned with preserving the oral narratives and folklore of her community, the Mexican Americans of South Texas, as well as their historical experiences that were seldom reflected in textbooks. However, the changes that she describes in her writings were brought about by three related and powerful forces: the growing American influence after the U.S.-Mexican War, the arrival of the railroad, and the resulting change in the region from ranching to farming. The writings of this South Texas native daughter document the transformation of the greater Rio Grande Valley in the late nineteenth century through the early part of the twentieth century, paying close attention to the way these changes affected the human relationship with the natural environment. The shift that she witnessed meant more than a change in land use. It also meant a power shift in which her community went from land-owning Mexican American ranchers to landless laborers.

She documents this ecological revolution in her earliest writings. She contributed to the publications of the Texas Folklore Society in the 1920s and 1930s, and her little-studied folktales are the focus of this chapter. Although at first glance these tales may seem simple and lighthearted, they prove very interesting in the way they can be arguably read as a response to the large-scale cultural and agricultural changes that González witnessed in the early twentieth century in South Texas. Later, her novel *Dew on the Thorn* brought together many of the folktales that she gathered from the South Texas region, putting them together to create the story of one ranch, its owners, and its workers—known as “patrones” and “peones” in the semi-feudal system of the early
nineteenth century. Her co-authored novel, with Eve Raleigh, Caballero also tells the story of a ranch family, but it is set in the tumultuous time of the U.S.-Mexican War (1846-1848), and as a result shows the impact that the war had on a family and a traditional community.

The way these changes affected the Mexican American community was of special concern to her. Like her California counterpart and precursor in writing, María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, González carefully documented the impact of social, political, economic, and agricultural shifts on her Mexican American community. However, unlike Ruiz de Burton’s defense of the landed aristocracy, González focused her attentions on a humbler class of Mexican Americans. She honored them by rooting her writings in the folktales they shared with her. By the time González was an adult, the halcyon days of grand Mexican American ranchos in South Texas were mostly a memory. Her own ancestors had once been ranch patrones, numbering among the border aristocracy. And although she did not inherit a grand ranch, she took very seriously the legacy that was available to her: stories of her ancestors and culture.

All along, she was careful to include stories that narrated the Mexican American relationship with the natural environment. Especially significant in this regard are her first published stories—folktales collected in the 1927 edition of the Publications of the Texas Folklore Society, edited by J. Frank Dobie. These stories, each with its explanation of a plant or animal trait—like the dove’s coo, the Texas sage’s ashy color, the mockingbird’s white wing feathers, the thornless thistle, and the guadalupana vine’s medicinal value—challenge ecocriticism to
accept a new genre of nature writing in order to accommodate the Mexican American imaginary. This chapter offers an analysis of González’s first-published folktales, paying special attention to environmental awareness found therein, and places them alongside well-known American environmental writers, including González’s contemporary Aldo Leopold, and in continuity with a Mexican American tradition of environmental writing starting with Ruiz de Burton in the 1880s.

**A Girl Born Among Railroads, Ranches, and Tales**

The failure of the Texas Pacific Railroad to arrive in the greater San Diego area was the final blow to an already weakening *californio* culture in the Southern California of María Amparo Ruiz de Burton’s era. She plainly demonstrates this dynamic in *The Squatter and the Don*, most dramatically in the death of Don Mariano after he finds out the railroad enterprise has failed. In the work of Jovita González, however, the arrival of the railroad signals the downfall of South Texas Mexican culture. And, interestingly, the railroad arrived in South Texas in the year of her birth, 1904. Historian David Montejano explains that a band of Anglo American ranchers and businessmen, and one Mexican American banker, collectively financed a railroad for South Texas. "Completed on July 4, 1904, the St. Louis, Brownsville, and Mexico Railway . . . connected Brownsville with the Corpus Christi terminal of the Missouri-Pacific railroad system."\(^5\) This railroad

was the first to reach into Texas south of Laredo, and brought with it the dramatic economic development and cultural shifts that the rest of Texas had been experiencing already for several decades.

Born in Roma, Texas in 1904, Jovita González's parents could not have predicted the changes that were to come to their small town on the Rio Grande following the birth of their middle child. Her father, Jacobo González Rodríguez, of Cadereyta, Nuevo León, and her mother Severina Guerra Barrera of Mier, Tamaulipas, were already busy raising a set of three children much older than the baby Jovita, and they were yet to raise three younger ones after Jovita. Altogether, the González children were seven, with Jovita right in the middle. She was closest to her younger sister Tula, with whom she says she “did everything together” including “went horseback riding to the pastures with [their] grandfather, took long walks with [their] father, and visited the homes of the cowboys and ranch hands,” \(^6\) the latter which she claimed they enjoyed the most. Jovita González rightfully claimed deep roots in the Northern Mexico and South Texas region, with ancestors who settled there in the earliest Spanish colonial settlements, such as El Nuevo Santander.\(^7\)

Even though her writings work to depict the downfall of rancho culture in South Texas, she experienced, first-hand, ranch life until she was ten years old. She lived on an ancestral ranch called Las Viboras, which her father used as a headquarters to set up his teaching practice. Her father was a man well-

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\(^7\) Ibid, ix.
educated in Mexico, and when he went to Texas he supported his family by educating the sons of ranchers in South Texas. In that era, according to an autobiography written by Jovita González near the end of her life, the daughters of ranchers received a more informal education. Jovita and her sister Tula learned the conventional women's trades of sewing and crocheting, but they also benefited from the storytelling skill of their paternal grandmother, Mamá Tulitas, and their strong-willed aunt, Tía Lola, who encouraged the girls to take pride in their Mexican heritage. The stories of South Texas were part of Jovita's life from an early age, and proved to make a lasting impression as she became their chief preservationist and promoter.

When Jovita was ten years old, the family moved to San Antonio so that the girls could receive a better education than was available to them at the ranch. This instance of the González's prioritizing of education set into motion a longstanding pattern in their daughter's life. Jovita went on to get a B.A. from Our Lady of the Lake University, in San Antonio in 1927, working as a secondary-level Spanish teacher to support herself throughout. A Lapham Scholarship in 1929 enabled her to pursue an M.A. from the University of Texas in history, and she completed the degree in 1930. She even considered pursuing a Ph.D., exploring possibilities in programs at Stanford, the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of New Mexico during the years 1938-

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39. However, rather than pursue a doctorate, for reasons which remain unclear, she chose to continue her career as a teacher.

In 1935, she married Edmundo E. Mireles, whom she had met as a student at the University of Texas. E.E. Mireles pursued a secondary school career as well, and the pair ended up as teachers for many years at Corpus Christi's W.B. Ray High School. Together, they wrote two sets of elementary school textbooks which were adopted by the State of Texas for classroom use. The first set was called Mi libro español and the second series was called El español elemental. These books pioneered bilingual education techniques in the educational system of Texas, and as such are landmark works in their own right. That she achieved distinction in her teaching career is no surprise. What remains unexplained is the way the writing career she started as a precocious undergraduate spanned less than ten years of her life. Perhaps the lack of encouragement from the publishing world was outweighed by the rewarding daily experiences with her Corpus Christi students. Although the time Jovita González spent writing folklore and novels was all too short, the work proves invaluable today as a portrait of Texas Mexican culture placed into a well-crafted frame of history and tradition by a woman who was clearly passionate about her work.

Her career as folklorist and writer began when she was still an undergraduate at Our Lady of the Lake. In the summer of 1925, she happened to be introduced to the famed Texas folklorist J. Frank Dobie. When he heard of

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her love for Mexican American storytelling, he encouraged her to document the tales. His encouragement proved key for her ongoing interest in writing. In her short autobiography she says that “the legends and stories of the border were interesting, so I thought, just to me,” yet after speaking with Dobie she said that “he made me see their importance and encouraged me to write them, which I did.”

She needed only this small spark to fuel a fire that had already smoldered for a long time in her, starting back at rancho Las Víboras among her storytelling grandmother and aunt, and the ranch hands and cowboys that also regaled Jovita and her sister Tula with tales.

It did not take her long to publish her first article. Dobie, a University of Texas professor, introduced her to the public on the occasion of her first published article, written when she was still an undergraduate, titled “Folk-lore of the Texas-Mexican Vaquero,” in 1927. Dobie’s editorial narrative about her in the “Contributors” section of the collection reads:

Jovita Gonzalez, whose article on the Texas-Mexican vaquero is perhaps the freshest thing that the members of the [Texas Folklore] Society have been treated to in some time, was born at Roma on the Texas border and has spent a great deal of time on the ranch of her ancestors. Grants of border land to her forefathers run back as far as 1745, when her great-great-grandfather, who lived to be 125 years old, was by the king of Spain patented a large body of land along the Rio Grande. Her great-

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grandfather was the richest landowner of the Texas border. Thus she has an unusual heritage of intimacy with her subject. At present she is teaching Spanish in St. Mary's Hall, San Antonio.\textsuperscript{11}

As María Cotera has observed in her recent biography of Gonzalez, Dobie “played up Jovita Gonzalez's personal history, somewhat hyperbolically.”\textsuperscript{12} And of course, he leaves out the fact that the González family had lost most of their rich landholdings and social position by the time Jovita was born. This elision is evidence of an ongoing tension between González and her mentor. Though Gonzalez recognized that Dobie offered her significant encouragement to gather and publish Mexican American folklore, she still refused to take any of his courses while she studied at the University of Texas. In an interview from the 1980s, she explained that she and Dobie had mutually agreed that their differing views would prove antagonistic in the classroom where “[h]e would take the Anglo-Saxon side, naturally,” and she “would take the Spanish and Mexican side.”\textsuperscript{13} Instead, she chose to earn her master's degree in history under the reluctant direction of Eugene C. Barker, who gave her thesis only a lukewarm approval upon her degree's completion. Although she did not find an enthusiastic advisor for her academic work, she succeeded in keeping intact her


professional association, and friendship, with Dobie. He continued to support her work, writing letters of recommendation for her applications to various scholarships and grants.

She gathered folklore from the Texas border region from 1929-1930, which she then interpreted and preserved in her M.A. thesis titled "Social Life in Cameron, Starr, and Zapata Counties." Eventually, she also used elements of her thesis as part of the written narratives of various articles published by the Texas Folklore Society and her novel _Dew on the Thorn_. In 1934, in part due to a recommendation from Dobie, she received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation that she used to work on _Dew on the Thorn_, her first novel. Later, she also worked together with Margaret Eimer (pen name Eve Raleigh) to write _Caballero_. Unfortunately, both novels never found publishers during her lifetime. The novels were published posthumously, in the 1990s, through the recovery work of José Limón and María Cotera. Fortunately, she did get to see some of her work published in the annual collections distributed by the Texas Folklore Society, for whom she was elected president for the years 1930-1932. "Folk-lore of the Texas-Mexican Vaquero," was her first published article with which she began her folklore writing career. It is closely examined below.

"Folk-lore of the Texas-Mexican Vaquero"

In her introductory comments to her article in the publications of the Texas Folklore Society, González compares the "folk-lore of the Mexican vaquero" to the "charm of the Andalusian lore as told by Fernán Caballero," a nineteenth
century Spanish folklorist of stories from the southern region of Spain. Interestingly, Caballero was the pen name for a woman writer, Cecilia Böhl de Faber, whose contribution to documenting Andalusian folklore was significant, and her work was well-acclaimed in her day. One can speculate as to which of Böhl de Faber's works González came across, but the most likely candidate would appear to be Cuentos Andaluces (Andalusian Tales). One can also speculate as to how González first encountered Böhl de Faber's work—perhaps a dusty copy of the 1859 edition was kept on the family bookshelves, perhaps she accessed it in oral tradition from her grandmother and aunt's storytelling sessions, or maybe it was introduced to her in her formal education at the University of Texas. That González was aware of her folklorist predecessor is certain, and it seems appropriate that she invokes Böhl de Faber's work in her first publication, since she too was a woman pioneering work in what had largely been a man's world.

Interestingly, González invokes Andalusian folklore in the same sentence where she also gives credit to "the quaintness and simplicity of the Indian myth." This may ring condescending to contemporary ears, but it is important to note the frankness with which González declares the mixed-race heritage of

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15Fernan Caballero, Cuentos Andaluces, ed. Andrés Soria (Madrid: Ediciones Alcalá, 1966 [1859]).

Mexican Americans and their cultural productions. Describing the heritage of her subject, the Texas-Mexican vaquero she says,

On one side, he descends from the first Americans, the Indians; on the other, his ancestry can be traced to the Spanish adventurer and conquistador. From the mingling of these two races a unique type has resulted, possessing not only salient racial characteristics of both but also certain peculiar traits created by the natural environment and surroundings in which he lives.¹⁷

The very fact that González, as one of the few if not certainly the only Mexican American woman members of the Texas Folklore Society at the time, dared to make absolutely clear the Indian as well as the Spanish background of Mexican Americans proves a bold move in times when pseudo-identifiers designed to excise Indian heritage, such Spanish, Spanish-American, Latin, and Latin American, were the norm. Of note for an environmental reading of this entry, González also foregrounds the role that nature played in shaping the "traits" of a Texas Mexican.

González's introduction establishes from the outset two themes that she sustains in the tales that follow: cultural hybridity and environmental awareness. As her first publication, it is critical to take a closer look at these tales, although few scholars have considered them in depth, and the above-considered introduction appears only in the 1927 edition. Sergio Reyna, in 2000, edited a collection of González's folklore that had been previously published across

¹⁷ Ibid.
various issues of the Texas Folklore Society proceedings and a few more regional publications. Reyna’s collection, titled *The Woman Who Lost Her Soul and Other Stories*, proves very valuable in facilitating a side-by-side comparison of these tales.\(^{18}\) He also offers a useful introduction, putting González’s folklore in historical and literary context, noting that González shows how “the cowboy maintained a series of myths that found meaning in nature.”\(^{19}\) Reyna’s analysis of González’s stories largely remains at the editorial level, making further observations about where each set of stories was published. He makes a lasting impact on González criticism in his recognition of these stories’ value and determining that they deserved a collection in their own right.

The scholars most responsible for recovering González’s novels, José Limón and María Cotera, also give some attention to her folklore in their studies. Limón relied upon González’s research to document some of his claims in the study of border culture, *Dancing with the Devil*.\(^{20}\) In a recent article about González’s M.A. thesis, Cotera recalls Limón’s investigation of the folklorist’s early work, where he was “looking for the vestiges of her political unconscious during the early period of her collaboration with J. Frank Dobie and the Texas Folklore Society.”\(^{21}\) Chicano literary studies, on the whole, have had an ongoing


\(^{19}\) Ibid., "Introduction," 21.


conflicted relationship with early Mexican American writings, particularly because the sense of political oppositionality and subversiveness is not always as clear-cut as it has been in post-1960s era Chicano writings. Compare the strident tone in Corky Gonzales’s 1965 poem “I Am Joaquín (Yo soy Joaquín)” to González’s folklore and the later writer’s work reads much more radically: “I must choose / between / the paradox of / victory of the spirit, / despite physical hunger, / or / to exist in the grasp / of American social neurosis, / sterilization of the soul / and a full stomach.”22 The poignant and artful 1965 poem inspired a generation of Mexican Americans to radical political action, and even toward a new political identity as “Chicanos.” It is in this resonant field of literature that works like González’s struggle to sound their own oppositionality, just as scholars like Limón investigate them for traces of their “political unconscious.”

As with any body of cultural production, there remains space for different kinds of voices, oppositional and otherwise. This acknowledgement of the complexity of Latina/o literary history in the United States moved a group of scholars and publishers in the 1990s to create the Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Project, led by literary scholar Nicolás Kanellos. The stated mission of this project is to find and critically engage Hispanic literary production during the years before the 1960s. Headquartered, on the campus of the University of Houston, at Arte Público Press, which publishes many of the previously unpublished or out-of-print early Latina/o writings, the Recovery

Project hosts conferences, produces edited scholarly volumes, and otherwise supports a critical engagement with these early works. Indeed, González’s first novel, *Dew on the Thorn*, was published under the auspices of the Recovery Project by Arte Público Press and edited by José Limón. The Recovery Project has made great strides in introducing and critically engaging early Mexican American writings. Even so, González’s earliest folklore work has not often been read for its oppositional content. It might even be considered somewhat suspect by some scholars, in that it was produced with the encouragement of a mainstream organization such as the Texas Folklore Society.

However, Cotera corrects the trend of underestimating González’s early work. In her 2000 article “Refiguring ‘The American Congo,’” Cotera shows how González’s M.A. thesis was almost a point-for-point rebuttal of early twentieth century anthropologist (and former soldier on the Mexican border) John G. Bourke’s caricature of South Texas as “The American Congo.” Cotera characterizes “Social Life in Cameron, Starr, and Zapata Counties” as “an extended rhetorical shoot-out with Captain Bourke” and cites repeated instances where González directly, if not explicitly, corrects some of Bourke’s mistaken assumptions and observations about Texas Mexican culture. Yet, in an oversight that is indicative of the need for environmental readings of Mexican American writing, neither Limón nor Cotera allow for the oppositional potential of the 1927 article. Cotera quotes Limón’s poetic license, in which I too have indulged, where he paints the scene of the 1927 Texas Folklore Society meeting where González reads her article on the vaquero. How must it have felt to her, when,
as Limón asks, “at this academic meeting, ... her delightfully accented words flow like soothing balm to the gathered company of mostly white men—some of them rich, powerful men?” Limón also asks, “Dare we hope that as she read her paper, she at least thought to herself of the ‘fatalistic’ Catarino Garza who shot it out with Captain Bourke?” Here, Limón refers to the Mexican revolutionary Garza who staged his revolt against oppressive Mexican president Porfirio Díaz’s regime from his outposts in South Texas. John G. Bourke, the same who later would write of South Texas as “The American Congo,” was a Captain in the U.S. Army stationed at Fort Ringgold in Rio Grande City in 1891 and was charged with clearing out the Garzista rebels from U.S. soil. As Cotera demonstrates, Jovita González may not have been thinking of Garza and Bourke as she read her vaquero article, but she was certainly engaging Bourke’s later ethnography in her 1934 thesis, as Cotera expertly shows. As for the 1927 article, Limón answers his own question, saying

We dare hope, but it is only hope. She continues with little in this paper of 1927 to sustain hope as she reports on an assortment of benign folklore—birdcalls, love songs, plant knowledge—of the vaqueros rendered, of course, in a pastoralized and pasteurized literary English.

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23 José E. Limón, Dancing with the Devil: Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican-American South Texas (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994) 64.

24 Ibid.


26 Ibid.
I will show how there is more to these “birdcalls” and “plant knowledge” than may first meet the ear and eye. That this reading was not possible until recently makes sense, considering that it is feasible only when one allows for a new, environmental reading of Mexican American writing.

The valuable contextualization offered by her introduction to the tales, as well as a study of the tales as a collective article prove vital to understanding the significance of González’s 1927 article—both aspects available only in the original publication. The cultural hybridity and environmental awareness that González foregrounds in her introductory comments play key roles in the tales, especially in the story of how the mockingbird got its white wing feathers. Each tale appears under subheadings, more or less independently of one another: El Cenizo, The Mocking Bird, El Cardo Santo (The Thistle), The Guadalupana Vine, and then Legends of Ghosts and Treasures. The Mocking Bird story comes second in the series, and recounts the tale of how the Mocking Bird learned humility after a nasty run-in with a hawk and the ensuing rescue of a dove. The dove patches the Mocking Bird’s wings with her own white feathers and the Mocking Bird concludes that all things happen by the grace of God. His white feathers always remind him of this episode. I include the story here, as it is short.

THE MOCKING BIRD

An equally interesting story tells how the mocking bird [sic] got the white feathers of its wings. There was a time when all the creatures of Nature talked a common language. The language was Spanish. El zenzontle,
the mocking bird, had the sweetest voice of all. The other birds stopped their flight to listen to him; the Indian lover ceased his words of love; even the talkative arroyo hushed. He foretold the spring, and when the days grew short and his song was no longer heard, the north winds came. Although he was not a foolish bird, *el zenzontle* was getting conceited.

"I am great, indeed," he said to his mate. "All Nature obeys me. When I sing, the blossoms hid in the trees come forth; the prairie flowers put on their gayest garments at my call and the birds begin to mate; even man, the all wise, heeds my voice and dances with joy, for the happy season draws near."

"Hush, you are foolish and conceited like all men," replied his wife. "They listen and wait for the voice of God, and when He calls, even you sing."

He did not answer his wife, for you must remember he was not so foolish after all, but in his heart he knew that he was right.

That night after kissing his wife goodnight, he said to her, "Tomorrow I will give a concert to the flowers, and you shall see them sway and dance when they hear me."

"*Con el favor de Dios,*" she replied. ("If God wills it.")

"Whether God wills it or not I shall sing," he replied angrily. "Have I not told you that the flowers obey me and not God?"

Early next morning *el zenzontle* could be seen perched on the highest limb of a huisache. He cleared his throat, coughed, and opened
his bill to sing, but no sound came. For down with the force of a cyclone swooped a hawk and grabbed with his steel-like claws the slender body of the singer.

"Con el favor de Dios, con el favor de Dios," he cried in distress, while he thought of his wise little wife. As he was being carried up in the air, he realized his foolishness and repented of it, and said, "O God, it is you who make the flowers bloom and the birds sing, not I." As he thought thus, he felt himself slipping and falling, falling, falling. He fell on a ploughed field, and what a fall it was. A white dove who had her nest near by picked him up and comforted him.

"My wings," he mourned, looking at them, "how tattered and torn they look! Whatever shall I tell my wife?"

The dove took pity on him, and plucking three of her white feathers, mended his wings.

As a reminder of his foolish pride, the mocking bird to this day has the white feathers of the dove. And it is said by those who know that he never begins to sing without saying, "con el favor de Dios."

This story not only appears in this article, but also in the context of the novel Dew on the Thorn, where it appears much the same way as in the 1927 article. Charming as this story is, it is more than just a quaint tale. Despite his initial evaluation, Limón has argued that, in Dew on the Thorn, the redacted folktales "are artistically implicated in a running political commentary on ethnic, gender,
and class relations."27 The stories are woven into the narrative and move the plot forward. And Cotera has commented that “her writings, from the start to the end, provided arguments against scientific and popular discourses, which had sought to describe, contain, and dispossess her people."28 This tale proves especially interesting in its original context.

It is upon these points that I would like to build: both on Limón’s observation that the folktales figure into ethnic, gender, and class critiques, and Cotera’s idea that González’s work “provided arguments against scientific and popular discourses” that oppressed Mexican Americans historically and during her time. Of course, on the surface, this is a plain and simple morality tale, where a hubristic bird learns humility. It is also gently feminist, with the patient wife emerging as the hero at the end, possessing more wisdom than does the brash husband by providing him with the “magic” line that would save his life, “Con el favor de Dios.” But there is more here too. Take, for example, an early line in the mockingbird story. “There was a time when all the creatures of Nature talked a common language. This language was Spanish.” Here, she makes a claim for the ubiquitous-ness of Spanish, in an exaggeration characteristic of this genre. One can see how she includes this to show how Spanish was the language of Texas before the American takeovers of 1836 and 1848 as well as before the agricultural transformation of the land in the early twentieth century.


Indeed, Article VIII of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo guarantees Mexicans residing in territories acquired after 1848 a protection of all their rights as citizens, including the preservation of Spanish as their primary language, but González must have seen the decline of this right during Jim Crow-era Texas. Also, with the use of the Spanish name for mockingbird, el zenzontle, she clearly juxtaposes a melodic word, zenzontle, which in its original Nahuatl means “four hundred voices,” along with a significantly clunkier word, mockingbird.

At this point González’s already established themes of cultural hybridity and environmental awareness gain momentum. “Zenzontle” was not only a word from Spanish, but it was originally a Nahuatl word that was then integrated by the Spanish. By repeatedly using this “original” name for the mockingbird, González not only venerates the Spanish language, but she also calls attention to linguistic hybridity. Moreover, in addition to the magic phrase “Con el favor de Dios,” she includes two more words that English has borrowed from the Spanish language, both denoting aspects of the natural environment. “Arroyo,” a word well-integrated to English conversation, comes from the Spanish language, and names a small, running stream. “Huisache” was also originally a Nahuatl word that Mexicans borrowed, and Anglo Americans followed suit, to name a shrubby acacia tree with fragrant bulbs that grows in Texas, especially in the Rio Grande Valley.

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These early notes of Mexican hybridity resonate with the story's resolution. For what else is the dove's blending of white feathers with the mockingbird's decidedly darker tones but an instance of hybrid creation? One could even say that she is also signaling misogyny that appears in her later works, such as the marriages—one of convenience, the other of love—between young Mexican women and young Anglo American men in *Caballero*. Moreover, she also demonstrates a blend between two worldviews, a strategy that is all too familiar for mestizos, via the narrative structure found in this tale. Native American tales often involve the communication of a lesson for humans told with animal stand-ins. Concerning Ojibwe tales, scholars J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson observe, "animals in these stories are always personified and assumed to be endowed with such capacities as volition, reason, speech, and social interaction." But the recognition of God's power over human fate—"el favor de Dios"—also signals the deep impression that Spanish missionaries left in the Americas. The story's style and characters echo the narrative structure of Native American tales, while its message of humility before "Dios" is decidedly inspired by Christianity. With these repeated references to hybridity and mestizaje, González lays a decidedly Mexican, and Mexican American, claim to the mockingbird. It must also be noted that this story was published, and read aloud at a meeting of the Texas Folklore Society, during the selfsame year that Texas adopted the mockingbird as the state bird, 1927. How did the

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mockingbird's mestizo background sound to the ears of a largely Anglo American and staunchly Texan audience? Although the mockingbird's habitat includes Texas, this bird also takes up residence in Mexico and as far as the West Indies, and González's rendering of this tale recalls the bird's wide circulation, not to mention its multilinguality—not just bilingual, but of four-hundred different voices!

More than anything else, however, González seems to position this story as a response to the ecological revolution of her lifetime in the Rio Grande Valley. "Ecological revolutions," as defined by environmental historian Carolyn Merchant,

are major transformations in human relations with nonhuman nature. They arise from changes, tensions, and contradictions that develop between society's mode of production and its ecology, and between its modes of production and reproduction. These dynamics in turn support the acceptance of new forms of consciousness, ideas, images, and worldviews.31

In some of her stories and in her novels, Gonzalez responds to the ecological revolution in her homeland by seeking to preserve a way of life, and the environmental knowledge that accompanied it, that she witnessed die out. Cotera details this shift by citing the arrival of the railroad to South Texas in 1904 and the ensuing impact:

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Within fifteen years of the construction of the railway system, the Texas Mexican people of the border region, with a few exceptions, had lost the world that Jovita González knew, "the world of cattle hacendados and vaqueros," and would come to live in "a world of commercial farmers and migrant laborers."  

Gonzalez clearly witnessed an ecological revolution. The framework of ecological revolution offers us yet another way of making sense of these folktales—especially in the context of the Texas Folklore Society. Largely considered an apolitical association, the folklorists appreciated Gonzalez’s work as a collection of quaint tales that did not threaten their understanding of history on the border. However, Gonzalez subverted their apolitical agenda simply in the act of documenting and redacting these stories. She was preserving the traditional environmental knowledge of the South Texas ranchers’ way of life, with its attention to the seasonal changes, drought cycles, and behavior of the plants and animals.

How, exactly, does this story specifically respond to this ecological revolution in South Texas? The mockingbird learns to not truly believe that he can make the spring arrive, the flowers bloom, the birds sing. His early insistence on this power draws his wife’s caution, and almost ends in fatal disaster for him. But he manages to recover, acknowledging a higher and wiser power, and acquires some hybrid elements along the way. In South Texas of the

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early twentieth century, droves of farmers were arriving, answering the call of advertisements spread across the Midwest and the South. The ads told them that a fertile oasis awaited them in the Rio Grande Valley. All they had to do was find some unused land, usually part of a ranch, and take advantage of the many consecutive days of sunshine and balmy weather. However, in a landscape that had heretofore been ranching territory, lines of irrigation were not well-established. The newly arrived farmers, largely attracted by cheap land, sunshine, and the new railroad that could deliver their crops to the world, found a way to irrigate their crops. They used the waters of the Rio Grande, and so initiated the process of making spring arrive, just as the mockingbird vainly claims he can do. In a 1933 article, Southern Methodist University geography professor Edwin J. Foscue, notes that "[i]rrigation on the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas has assumed importance only in the last thirty years." He also notes the disorganized manner in which Rio Grande irrigation developed: "A distinguishing feature of the system . . . is the number of individual irrigation projects and the haphazard manner in which they have developed." The early irrigation system on the Rio Grande consisted basically of a series of canals and pumps:

These [irrigation districts] either have their own small pumping plants or buy their water from the larger units. The 11 larger units are entirely

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34 Ibid.,
independent. Each has its own pumping plant on the river and possibly one or two 'lift' pumping plants to raise the water to the bench lands.\textsuperscript{35} Foscue's article recommends the creation of a centralized irrigation system and the development of a dam and reservoir in the region in order to cut down on the waste of water.

Indeed, the diversion of the Rio Grande initiated by the new farming practices started a process of water depletion in the river such that, up to the present-day, the river struggles to make its way to the Gulf of Mexico, sometimes even trickling to a standstill before reaching its goal. In one simple tale, González laments the practices of the newly-arrived farmers and critiques the way they participated in the decline of traditional Texas Mexican ranch culture by hubristically instituting their never-ending "spring" of irrigation fed by the Rio Grande. Her story ends with the mockingbird falling "on a ploughed field," indicating the already transforming land, but she also indicates his acknowledgement of a higher power's control over the seasons: "O God, it is you who make the flowers bloom and the birds sing, not I."\textsuperscript{36} However, the transition to farming continued in the valley, and, as David Montejano documents in Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, the acquisition of ranch land for farming purposes was not always through honorable means:

The impact of the farm developments on the Texas Mexican people was profound... Taxes, mortgage debts, legal battles, the effects of the erratic

\textsuperscript{35}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{36}Jovita González, ""Folklore of the Texas-Mexican Vaquero"," trans. J. Frank Dobie, Texas and Southwestern Lore (Austin: Texas Folk-lore Society, 1927) 11.
cattle and sheep market, outright coercion and fraud, as well as the cash
offer of land speculators, all combined once more to reduce the number of
Mexican landowners. . .the primary sources leave little doubt on this
point—the dispossession of landed Mexicans was a sweeping one.\textsuperscript{37}

However, public opinion in the early twentieth century argued that simple market
forces compelled the shift. In another 1932 article on "Land Utilization in the

Lands that are today in [sic] irrigated farms were once the widespread
pastures of the Texas-Mexican rancheros, who held clear title to the land,
and refused to sell, until modern development caused the land to become
so valuable that they felt forced to sell.\textsuperscript{38}

In the face of the half truths that dominated academic circles in her day,
González takes heart by documenting the longstanding presence of Mexican
Americans in Texas by communicating the environmental knowledge in the tales
of the "Texas-Mexican vaquero," even as she was witnessing "one of the most
phenomenal land movements in the history of the United States."\textsuperscript{39}

Another tale in her 1927 article also provides an artfully delivered critique
of the newly arrived farmers' takeover of Texas Mexican land, as well as further
contextualizes the centerpiece mockingbird tale. The story about the origin of "El

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 113.

\textsuperscript{38} Edwin J. Foscue, ""Land Utilization in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas," Economic

\textsuperscript{39} David Montejano, Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986 (Austin: University
Cenizo," or the Texas Sage tree, tells how this native Texas bush was a "gift of the Virgin" to the "cowmen" who had "gathered together and reverently knelt on the plain to beg for help" after a long drought.40 The day after the people had prayed, they awoke not only to rainfall, but also "as far as the eye could see, the plain was covered with silvery shrubs, sparkling with raindrops and covered with flowers, pink, lavender, and white."41 They named the bush "cenizo" (ashy) because the day was Ash Wednesday. Considered alongside the tale of the mockingbird's "foolish pride," this example of a Texas Mexican rancher tale's recognition of a higher order's influence over rainfall shows the contradistinction between the farmers and the ranchers. Moreover, as a native plant, the Texas Mexican rancher's integration of the cenizo into a treasured cultural tale further indicates their intimacy with the land and its ecological rhythms, even if sometimes they found themselves in desperate situations. The 1930s Texas geographers documented the transitions for the ranchers in South Texas:

Cattle ranching which had been supreme in the area for more than 150 years was suddenly dislodged from its monopoly upon river lands, and driven into the back country, or out on the coastal prairie that was too wet to cultivate.42


41 Ibid., 10.

At the same time, these geographers also documented the ranchers' coexistence with native species, here described as the last remnants of the once dominant ranching culture:

Areas unsuited to [farming] uses have been avoided by agricultural settlers and are chiefly useful for cattle raising. Extensive areas in the northern part of the region, coastal flats bordering the Gulf of Mexico, and marshy depressions between intermittent distributaries of the Rio Grande are of this sort. Much of this land will be cleared and drained ultimately for use in farming; but at present it is occupied by native grasses and thorny shrubs, and is suitable only for use as pasture.\(^43\)

The transformation of the land continued and dominated most of the valley, and in a 1930 article, geographer William T. Chambers recommends enterprise in South Texas due to its booming agricultural growth, its temperate weather, its "picturesque Spanish architecture" and its population:

The population consists of prosperous Americans and many Mexicans, the latter constituting a cheap and efficient labor supply.\(^44\)

With such rhetoric circulating about her native South Texas, one cannot deny the skill and passion with which González documents her community's experience. Indeed, a recent study of her novel Caballero calls attention to the fact that González and co-author Raleigh "anachronistically project a process—delayed on the Rio Grande corridor until the early twentieth century—back into the mid-


\(^{44}\)Ibid., 373.
nineteenth century past."\textsuperscript{45} Literary scholar Monika Kaup continues, "After 1900, (but no earlier) the old Mexican hacienda order... was replaced by farm society and its new social and capitalist structures."\textsuperscript{46} And as early as 1927, González was making sure that this transition was documented by the vaquero folktales; one can hardly blame her for integrating it into her finely crafted novel Caballero as well, albeit anachronistically.

Redefining Conventional Nature Writing

But what is the use of considering this work nature writing? The 1930s-1950s era of Mexican American writing takes on a different aspect than conventionally expected in "nature writing." In the context of Mexican American literature, the category "nature writing" undergoes a rigorous revision, uncovering complicity with colonial and imperial projects that threatened traditional environmental knowledge. A specific example would be the work of this premier chronicler of Mexican American "place," Jovita Gonzalez. Hailing from the southern tip of Texas, a bioregion that challenges the idea of national boundaries even as its population remains starkly aware of the borderline marked by the river called the Rio Grande in the U.S. and el Río Bravo in México, her distinctive style and method recounts the human relationship with the land in this fertile valley. And she implements the experiences of those closest to it: cowboys and peones (ranch-hands).


\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
Considering her work “nature writing” facilitates a revision of this category that is necessary to integrate more diverse voices in environmental studies.

The category of “nature writing” is currently being revisited and revised by literary scholars with different critiques in mind, including challenging its conventional chronology and geography. Is the heart of nature writing found in the mid-nineteenth century? Is it somehow a particularly “American” genre? Ecocritic Michael Branch offers a baseline definition:

In critical practice, . . . the term “nature writing” has often been reserved for a type of nature representation that is deemed literary, written in the speculative personal voice, and presented in the form of the nonfiction essay. Such nature writing is often pastoral or Romantic in its philosophical assumptions, tends to be modern or even ecological in its sensibility, and is often in service to an implicit or explicit preservationist agenda. It is to this sort of nature writing that ecocritics—that is, scholars who study representations of the natural environment in literary and cultural texts—have devoted most of their attention thus far.  

Branch continues by detailing the way that American environmental literature has marked its beginnings with the work of Henry David Thoreau in the mid-nineteenth century. This, however is the chronology that Branch seeks to challenge in his recent collection titled Reading the Roots: American Nature

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Writing Before Thoreau. His critical introduction argues that, by limiting our idea of nature writing, we have missed out on a vast array of writing from an earlier era in America. Moreover, he makes the important claim that ecocriticism must distinguish itself by being the “scholarly study of place—rather than nation” and his expansion of nature writing’s chronology to the era preceding the United States begins this process. He collects nature writing that is “American” as it relates to the North American continent rather than the nation.

Likewise, ecocritic Jean Arnold challenges the idea of nature writing as a particularly “American” genre. Her recent article, concerning Charles Darwin’s literary contributions, claims that The Origin of Species (1859) could arguably be credited with kicking off this style of writing. This would give the genre a British beginning rather than an American genesis. Yet, of these two significant attempts to challenge nature writing in new directions, Branch offers the most radical departure with his inclusion of travel narratives from all sorts of explorers, government documents, sermons, and even writings that are not in accord with preservationist goals. Even so, neither one of their challenges takes into account the ways that Mexican Americans engage with, and write about, the natural environment.

Jovita González, however, offers a compelling example of nature writing, Mexican American style. First of all, she exhibits attentiveness to animal behavior and traits by explaining a natural phenomenon, as the story is about

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48 Ibid., xx.

"how the mocking bird got the white feathers of its wings." So far, this aspect is in accord with conventional nature writing. Also, consistent with the works of other nature writers, González tells the story from an animal's perspective; in this case, through the mockingbird's eyes. The renowned nature writer Aldo Leopold, whose "A Sand County Almanac is often called the bible of the contemporary environmental movement," also uses the animal vantage point to communicate his evolutionary-ecological land ethic. Take, for example, his exposition on the mouse:

The mouse is a sober citizen who knows that grass grows in order that mice may store it as underground haystacks, and that snow falls in order that mice may build subways from stack to stack: supply, demand, and transport all neatly organized.

Leopold writes toward a different end than González, but the impulse to consider the animal's point of view remains a common element. This example also shows how the nature writer can express an animal's viewpoint while still integrating elements of human understanding—mice know nothing of subways just as mockingbirds know nothing of ploughed fields and conceit.

González's brand of nature writing also makes important innovations for a Mexican American point of view. While most conventional nature writing takes

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place during an isolated “solitaire” remove to a cabin—on Walden Pond, or
Tinker Creek, or in the Sand Counties of Wisconsin—González’s work emerges
from a collective narration of Mexican American experience on the land in South
Texas. This, in turn, offers a dispersed authority to experiences with nature.
Rather than imagining that environmentalism occurs in an isolated or remote
locale, Mexican American nature writing brings it home to a local and familiar
place where the experience is available to everyone.

Conclusion: Accommodating a Different Kind of Nature Writing

Gonzalez’s writings exhibit a rich tradition of natural history and “nature
writing,” as it occurs in oral and community form within Mexican American culture
of the time, and before. Her work makes clear that Mexican American oral
narratives survived alongside centuries’ worth of epistemological assault, in the
process preserving a great deal of traditional environmental knowledge (TEK).
During the long history of colonization, conquered peoples have been nurturing
their threatened relationship with their environment by preserving and protecting
traditional environmental knowledge. Devon Peña, a cultural anthropologist and
pioneer of Chicana/o environmental studies, defines TEK: “a particular form of
place-based knowledge of the diversity and interactions among plant and animal
species, landforms, watercourses, and other qualities of the biophysical
environment in a given place. Traditional environmental knowledge values environmental practices that involve both humans and non-human nature, and reveals the way that they impact one another. The stories that Gonzalez collected preserve traditional environmental knowledge that is not necessarily explicitly engaged in the project of nature preservation—as is most conventional nature writing. Instead, these stories are far from that goal. Mexican American nature writing depicts the way that, in a Mexican American context, humans and the natural environment are inextricably linked and therefore responsible, and responsive, to one another. This is an active engagement with the environment, far from participating in distancing humans from nature. Mexican American nature writing is about living in and with nature, in a very active way.

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CHAPTER FOUR
Limiting Consumption, Remembering Colonization:
Jimmy Santiago Baca and Cherrie Moraga's
Contemporary Chicana/o Environmental Writing

Among the biggest challenges for present-day environmentalism is the challenge of how to reduce high levels of consumption in "developed" nations. In accordance with the pattern sustained throughout this study, each chapter investigates fundamental environmental issues. This chapter explores the ways that Chicana/o writing informs new perspectives on questions of consumerism. In discussing consumerism, this chapter also argues for environmentalism to seriously consider its colonial past.

In regard to consumption, Chicana/o writing lends a voice to a population that has had limited access to consumer goods in the past. This limitation has spurred conserving habits, such as recycling materials and limiting water-use. These habits are born out of necessity (constraint) as well as ethics communicated through stories and traditions that in some cases survived colonization and in other cases were born out of colonial experiences. Familiar sights in the barrios of US cities and towns include yards with modest gardens—old tires reused as herb-garden enclosures, native cacti and sparse grass rather than thirsty carpets of St. Augustine lawns. Still, Chicanas/os comprise a growing target for advertising and are becoming a bigger economic force. A population that has been kept from consumer independence too long can choose
to bask in a lavish lifestyle and justify it as an "arrival," of sorts, at the American Dream.

Yet, twenty-first century Chicanas/os descend from a conserving culture that takes pride in living close to the land—as previous chapters demonstrate. Moreover, Chicana/o culture remains close to its other home in the Americas, Mexico, whose border remains "una herida abierta where the third world grates against the first and bleeds" as Gloria Anzaldúa eloquently puts it in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Contemporary Chicana/o writing works to keep these lineages in view, and in an environmental context, this culture of conservation and connection to greater Latin America can function to inspire less environmental exploitation.

Of course, the Chicana/o cultural history is not entirely free of environmental exploitation. Jimmy Santiago Baca’s poetry demonstrates the way that Chicana/o writing firmly plants environmental concerns in a colonial context, or "invasions" as he puts it, past and present. Spanish colonization is part of the Chicana/o past, and Baca shows how this colonization leads to the desire to consume more and better resources, rather than a concession to adapt to one’s local ecosystem. However, after recognizing this dark influence, Baca rejects exploitation in favor of living close to the land, allying himself with the natural environment. Writer Ray Gonzalez also recognizes a dual legacy in the opening lines of his debut memoir, *Memory Fever*, locating it in his hometown of El Paso.

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In these lines, he shows that he is well aware of El Paso’s surrounding desert and the history that rises from its hot sands:

the place where the earth accepted its fate at the hands of the pueblo people who fought to save their civilization, and of the Spanish explorers who came to cut open the earth for its riches and burn the pueblos down.\(^2\)

Gonzalez acknowledges the Spanish greed, but he also invokes the Pueblo Indians’ agreement with the earth, and recognizes the way that agreement was brutally disrupted by sixteenth century invasions. This and other more recent Chicana/o cultural productions of the late 1980s and 1990s dialogue, directly as well as figuratively, with the dual legacy of Chicana/o relationship to the environment.

But before this generation of writers such as Ray González and Jimmy Santiago Baca came the boom of the Chicano literary renaissance in the 1960s, following on the heels of writers such as Jovita González’s discussed in the previous chapter. The writer whose work often figures as the launch of Chicano Studies and the militant writings of the Chicano literary renaissance is Américo Paredes. Like Jovita González, America Paredes also contributed to an alternative mapping of Chicano narrative with his landmark study *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero*.\(^3\) Paredes earned his prominent place


within Chicana/o cultural studies with his incisive scholarly studies, dense short stories, and compelling novels. However, his place-based writings, such as his short novel *The Shadow*, remain little explored for their environmental relevance. Only recently are his works being studied from an environmental perspective. Paredes wrote *The Shadow* in the 1950s, but it was not published until 1998. The novel portrays the embattled period that followed the idealistic 1910 Mexican Revolution. The ideals of the revolution come through in the literature, and the novel form allows rich reflection on these ideals while at the same time communicating key environmental values and perspectives. Though by this time, the agricultural social order is idealized, it is also shown to be in jeopardy by an oncoming industrialization, just as the advent of agriculture in South Texas jeopardized the ranchero social order. *The Shadow* anticipates this transition and the nascent social and environmental justice movements of the mid- to late-twentieth century.

Though Gonzales’s and Paredes’s styles of writing and methodologies of practice differ a great deal, they both establish a firm tradition of place-based writing in Mexican American literature. Yet, they do so without giving up a social justice agenda. Indeed, their works begin to anticipate the traits of a nascent Civil Rights movement. They were writing in the years leading up to the era of more explicit social justice writing, and their works hint at this pending shift—Gonzalez with her critique of Anglo incursion into South Texas—well-cloaked behind her animal fables—and Paredes with his critique of a failed agricultural
revolution communicated through the psychological trauma of the ejido foreman. Their brand of “nature writing” challenges a conventional understanding of this genre as a stubborn removal from society and instead infuses the genre with the practicality and beauty of the everyday and an engagement with social justice.

Works from the most recent generation of Chicana feminist writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Cherrie Moraga’s *Heroes and Saints* and *The Last Generation*, Ana Castillo’s *So Far From God*, and Helena María Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus* do not shy away from environmental issues. Indeed, they work to make sense of the dual Spanish and American Indian legacies, more often than not creating hybrid visions that work toward social justice as they recognize violent pasts. Key to these recent writings, largely Chicana feminist in nature, is a consideration of the global economy’s impact on individual women’s lives. When considering environmental justice and levels of consumption these interrogations are vitally important. And these writers tell these necessary stories with eloquence and a fearless will to confront difficult issues. Anzaldúa relates her personal experiences of reluctant alienation from her environment along the U.S.-Mexico border as well as her work to recover intimacy. Moraga considers the ways that oppression imposes violence upon the Chicana/o relation to the land. Castillo features a woman who

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8Ana Castillo, *So Far From God* (New York: Plume, 1994).
becomes contaminated from factory work, develops cancer, and inspires a community response. Víramontes tells the tragic story of a boy who suffers from pesticide contamination, and the girl who comes of age when she faces the barriers that keep her from helping him survive. These writers are plainly honest about the injustices happening every day, yet they refuse to despair. Instead, their writings reveal their hope, full of passionate and lyrical prose.

These various contemporary Chicana/o writers address consumerism and the environment, consistently weaving an engagement with a violent colonial past into their works. This chapter will take a closer look at two particularly striking poets: Jimmy Santiago Baca and Cherrie Moraga. Baca's work is emblematic of Chicana/o cultural production from the middle of the twentieth century when Mexican Americans claimed a new political identity as Chicanos, even though his work was published in the 1980s and 1990s. Moraga's work hails from a later period in which Chicana feminist writings gained greater prominence. Moraga's ecological vision offers a particularly intriguing engagement with these issues. Her writing honors a Chicana/o history of humility before the natural environment and links this past to the present challenge to limit consumerism, especially as it affects a global economy. She achieves this vision by reinventing Chicana/o nationalism as a call to nurture the earth and its resources.
Colonial Contexts: Jimmy Santiago Baca

American environmentalism is first and foremost about the study of the colonial and imperial impact on natural areas as inhabited by peoples of the Americas. This is not a largely acknowledged foundation, but a very accurate description nonetheless. Furthermore, U.S. environmental literature as we know it would not have been possible without the U.S.-Mexican War and the consequent acquisition of "the West." Mexico's invisible "otherness" fueled Manifest Destiny and hence, with the writings of Thoreau and Muir, American literary history firmly plants the birth of American environmental writing in the nineteenth century. Only recently have ecocritics begun to question this genealogy by delving into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as well. Even so, there has been little effort to place American environmental literary history in the context of colonization. Ecocritics might take note of a different trend in environmental history. Prominent environmental historians have made significant breakthroughs with their studies concerning the environmental impact of English colonization in New England,\(^{10}\) and the environmental factors, especially microorganisms and non-native species, that aided European invasion of North America and the conquest of its peoples.\(^{11}\) Literary history,

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unfortunately, seems more invested in emphasizing a charismatic period of transcendental writings.

Chicana/o writers, however, firmly plant their environmental literature in a colonial context. One of the most evocative poets in this vein is Jimmy Santiago Baca. Baca's collections invite environmental readings in characteristically Chicano and colonial terms and context. In his poem titled "Invasions" from his Black Mesa Poems, Baca writes:

I am the end result
of Conquistadores,
Black Moors,
American Indians,
and Europeans,
bloods rainbowing
and scintillating
in me
like the trout's flurrying
flank scales
shimmering a fight
as I reel in.  

These lines reveal a man reflecting upon his hybrid ancestry during an unlikely moment: as he struggles with a rainbow trout in the Jemez River of northern New Mexico. His ethnic recitation succinctly lists a history of settlement and conquest

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in North America. Yet, instead of following up on these intricate narratives, the poet chooses to articulate his kinship with the trout. He shares with the trout "bloods rainbowing / and scintillating." They also share a courageous spirit, "shimmering a fight," when faced with death. The fisherman reels in, catching the fish, and seemingly breaking his identification with it. Yet the trout continues with the poet. He carries it "dangling from scabbard stringer / tied to my belt" and it accompanies him as he surveys "the new invasion": "peer at vacation houses / built on rock shelves, / sun decks and travel trailers." The poet and the trout start out as kin, then become foes on either side of a fishing hook, and finally end up together again, peering at the middle and upper-class invasion of consumer values and land abuse. What might at first seem violence against nature—catching the fish—becomes an act of communion in comparison with the detachment of vacation homes and RVs.

Baca’s experiences stand in contrast to what Devon G. Peña elaborates as the way that tourism affects sustainable agricultural practices in northern New Mexico:

Tourism increases the demand for development of acequia landscapes to build resorts, condominium clusters, shopping centers, roads, and other facilities. A real estate market for second homes emerges. Eventually, acequia-irrigated orchards and pastures become overvalued in a globalized real estate market that ruthlessly commodifies ancestral landscapes at $100,000 an acre.

13Ibid., 72.
The pressure to sell increases, as do property taxes. Land rich but cash-strapped locals are slowly displaced by newcomers and gawking tourists.\textsuperscript{14}

Thus, these two twentieth-century writers make connections across the centuries, from colonization to present-day land developments. Baca and Peña show the ways that contemporary environmental concerns benefit from colonial history’s perspectives and contexts. This appeals to those with interests in Latina/o culture and heritage as well as those with interests in the environment.

Other writings of this era, such as the manifesto “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán,” the evocative poetry of Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales\textsuperscript{15} and Lorna Dee Cervantes;\textsuperscript{16} and Tomás Rivera’s novel \textit{Y no se lo tragó la tierra/And the earth did not part} \textsuperscript{17} begin to depict more explicit views of nature and environment in terms of justice, for Chicanas/os as well as for the land itself. Indeed, the Chicano nationalist movement makes political claims for the geographic territory of the U.S. southwest. The landmark manifesto of the movement, “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán,” was drafted at the First Chicano National Conference in Denver in 1969 and boldly states that


\textsuperscript{16}Lorna Dee Cervantes, \textit{Emplumada} (San Antonio, Tex.: Wings Press, 2006 [1981]). This is just one example of her work.

\textsuperscript{17}Tomás Rivera, \textit{And the earth did not part} (Berkeley, Calif.: Quinto Sol Publications, 1971).
Aztlan belongs to those who plant the seeds, water the fields, and gather the crops and not to the foreign Europeans. . . With our heart in our hands and our hands in the soil, we declare the independence of our mestizo nation.\(^1\)

The passionate language betrays the frustrations of oppression, alienation, and dispossession; and seeks enfranchisement in the form of reconnection to the environment—as property but also as partner. They sought to regain control of geographic space, not as a result of first-hand experience as hacendados, but after years of discrimination and economic injustices and in an effort to equitably distribute resources.

Both El Plan and Baca's poem, along with other writings during this period, make clear the Chicana/o longing to fully inhabit their particular places, all the while making clear the ways they have nurtured these connections over long periods of time. One people's enactment of freedom to invade a faraway land or take over a neighboring nation's territory imposes very real burdens on the inhabitants of these invaded territories—a burden that has been hidden behind the myth of the visionary colonial who brings civilization to new worlds. But the roots of colonization are more connected to the pursuit of natural resources, and the resulting devastation, than previously considered. As Peña observes:

Places like India, Mexico, Brazil, and Indonesia attracted colonial powers

precisely because of their "coveted natural resources." These places were colonized and plundered to support the expansion of the global consumer mass cultures of modern Western nations.\(^{19}\)

And during the long history of colonization, conquered peoples have been nurturing their threatened relationship with their environment by preserving and protecting traditional environmental knowledge (TEK). Traditional environmental knowledge values environmental practices that function within the constraints of a localized carrying capacity. By extension, there is a lot of TEK stored in the untapped volumes of Chicano environmental writing.

**Cherríe Moraga’s Ecological Vision: The Last Generation**

In stark poetry and stirring theater, Cherrie Moraga has forged a brand of environmentalism in which sexuality, gender, race, and class are as relevant as rivers, rocks, trees, and animals. Surviving as a Chicana lesbian poet, playwright, and essayist, Moraga’s work often narrates her pain and isolation, yet she unabashedly claims strength and courage from her life experiences. Her powerfully intimate stories about herself, her family, and her lovers line her path toward a radical politics. And it is a radical politics with a critical edge. As co-editor, with Gloria Anzaldúa, of the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*, she led the way in demanding that mainstream feminists listen to the voices of

women of color.\textsuperscript{20} Her first collection of prose and poetry, \textit{Loving in the War Years}, challenged the Chicana and Chicano community to confront sexism, homophobia, and heteronormativity.\textsuperscript{21} In the same spirit of intra-cultural critique, she takes up environmental issues, with some of her most striking work especially condemning the parallel exploitation of the land and the oppressions endured by the queer, female, and dark-skinned body. In the process, she conjures an ecological vision of the homeland that she has longed for, a territory to which she can finally belong, and a place that she can inhabit well-attuned to its environmental limits.

Foregrounding the way that her sexuality, her gender, and her Chicana identity have informed her understanding of the relationship between humans and nature, Moraga produces an expanded definition of nature, or “land”:

\begin{quote}
Land remains the common ground for all radical action. But land is more than the rocks and trees, the animal and plant life that make up the territory of Aztlán or Navajo Nation or Maya Mesoamerica. For immigrant and native alike, land is also the factories where we work, the water our children drink, and the housing project where we live. For women, lesbians, and gay men, land is that physical mass called our bodies.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{20}Cherrie Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., \textit{This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color} (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983).

\textsuperscript{21}Cherrie Moraga, \textit{Loving in the War Years} (Boston: South End Press, 1983).

\textsuperscript{22}Cherrie Moraga, \textit{The Last Generation: Prose and Poetry} (Boston: South End Press, 1993) 173.
She uses the word “land” to describe what might otherwise be called contested “nature” or “environment”—a choice that signals her concern with two of the historic shifts in the relationship between the peoples and environment of North America. One of the most paradigmatically challenging shifts occurred as European forces began the takeover of American Indian lands; she mentions the Aztec, Navajo, and Maya. Her use of the word “land” also calls attention to the takeover of Mexican lands by the United States—an appropriation that suddenly transformed a Mexican into a Mexican American but not necessarily into a citizen with full legal rights to the ownership of his or her rancho. By referring to the broadly defined “rocks and trees” and “animal and plant life” as “land,” Moraga infuses nature with the political history of possession and dispossession. By referring specifically to the bodies of women, lesbians, and gay men as also “land,” she connects the environmental sense of the term with any contested biological site, historically subjected to violence, external control, colonization, and exploitation. This politicized context informs the way that she considers “land” to be a reason for radical action. The negotiations over borders for respective “lands” are often matters that generate conflict, even wars. But Moraga also notes that “land” is the physical location for those conflicts; “land” materially suffers the violence of exploitation, even as it is an extension of ourselves. And “land” suffers these oppressions not only during times of war, but every day.

Who would think of “land” as a factory, a glass of water, or even one’s own body? Someone who connects “land” to the quotidian notions of job, home, and
health is also someone who has likely been alienated from such basic elements of life—whether because of gender, class, ethnicity, queer desire, or any other marginalizing identifier found in the very body she or he also comes to consider as “land.” Moraga explains, “As a Chicana lesbian, I know that the struggle I share with all Chicanos and Indigenous peoples is truly one of sovereignty, the sovereign right to wholly inhabit oneself (cuerpo y alma) and one’s territory (pan y tierra).” Land signifies not only the area associated with a nation-state, but anything from which an individual can become alienated or dispossessed on the mere basis of one’s gendered or ethnic appearance to the world, or even the self one has chosen to fashion. She puts physical territory in the same context as elements that are vital to everyday life, such as job, home, and health. Indeed, she puts the right to defining one’s relationship to nature in the hands of the individual rather than the state—a move that de-emphasizes the significance of the nation-state as it enables an individual’s interest in the natural environment. One has the same right to one’s body and soul as to bread and soil (cuerpo y alma and pan y tierra). And it is the alienation of this right that Moraga notes, especially in regard to gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. In short, be your queer self and lose your job; be your female self and get paid less for your work; be your brown self and get a low-paying and physically labor-intensive job. Be your brown self and drink contaminated water, work and live with insecticide poisons; be your female self, drink contaminated water, and get breast cancer or have a miscarriage. Be your brown queer female self and lose your home, your family,

23 Ibid., 173-4.
your security. One’s very sense of one’s “sovereign right” stems from the daily knowledge of how difficult it is to “wholly inhabit oneself (cuerpo y alma).”

Yet, in a characteristic move, Moraga does not simply lament the alienation of the right to the body and the land. She recuperates the sense of an alienated right by recognizing the connections it forges. Though the linking of oppressed bodies with the natural environment is the product of a parallel exploitation, Moraga’s poetry testifies to an intuitive yearning for kinship that such an alignment awakens. Moraga’s poetry evokes her sense of loss and her longing for sovereignty as they exist with her demand for a land and a community to which she can feel she belongs. Especially moving is her poem “War Cry,” collected in The Last Generation (1993):

War Cry
lo que quiero es
tierra
si no tierra, pueblo
si no pueblo, amante
si no amante, niño
soledad
tranquilidad
muerte
tierra.\(^{24}\)

My translation:

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\(^{24}\) Ibid., 42.
War Cry

what i want/love is
territory/land
if not territory/land, community
if not community, lover
if not lover, child
solitude
tranquility
death
territory/land.

"Lo que quiero es tierra," can be translated as both: "What I want is territory" and "What I love is land." This line's double meaning thus demands social justice at the same time that it expresses environmental kinship. With its reference to territory, this poem sounds a political plea for the land that was taken from the indigenous peoples of North America, and for the land that was subsequently taken in 1848 and 1853 with the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo and the Gadsen Purchase, "what I want is / territory," but its stark lines also give voice to the complex emotions that are internal to this claim for justice, "what I love is land." The desire for kinship—the longing to belong—drives this poem through a series of intimacies. The first desire articulated is for the land. When the land is denied, the desire remains, though redirected, "if not land, community." The speaker longs for different kinds of relationships—to a community, to a lover, to a
child—in succession, with one following when the other is withheld. The desire
for kinship remains as consistent as the land—the land that eventually becomes
the only companion along the inevitable trek toward "soledad / tranquilidad /
muerte" (solitude / tranquility / death). The succession of relationships
demonstrates not only the unwavering desire for connection, but also a firm
commitment to resistance. Even when a people is denied territory, it will forge a
community, "si no tierra, pueblo" (if not territory, community). Once the
community is dispersed, one might still maintain a family of two, "si no pueblo,
amante" (if not community, lover). And when the lover is also denied, one can at
least raise the child with a memory of the community and the lover, "si no
amante, niño" (if not lover, child). And always the land is the companion along
this journey of resistance. Kinship with the land is never separated from the
significance of a community, a lover, and a child. Indeed, tierra completes the
circle—for upon death, we are enterred and eventually become one with the
earth. Tierra frames and defines the terms of the poem; tierra remains a
consistent comfort that initiates the longing and survives to the end.

In "Ni for El Salvador," a work of mixed genre—both poem and journal
entry—also collected in The Last Generation, Moraga again contemplates the
four elements (land, community, lover, child):

"Ni for El Salvador"

I am a woman nearing forty without children.

I am an artist nearing forty without community.

I am a lesbian nearing forty without partner.
I am a Chicana nearing forty without country.

And if it were safe, I’d spread open my thighs
and let the whole world in
and birth and birth and birth life.
The dissolution of self, the dissolution of borders.

But it is not safe.
Ni for me.
Ni for El Salvador.²⁵

She goes on to state, in the paragraph immediately below these lines, her goals as an artist. Her ultimate vision is to reach the point at which it is “safe” as described in the lines—safe enough to “spread open my thighs” and to dissolve borders of all sorts. The act of spreading “open [her] thighs” signals all at once an act of trust, love, motherhood, sexuality, eroticism. It is a deeply intimate act. This comprehensive, and inspirational, ambition creates such a vision that she offers its analogue, as a cultural critic. She wants to be an artist

who can create a theatre, a poetry, a song that dares to expose that very human weakness where we betray ourselves, our loved ones, even our own revolution.²⁶

²⁵ Ibid., 41.
²⁶ Ibid., 41.
Both statements reveal a very sensitive and deeply personal commitment to working toward a culture that will consistently examine its values and practices to eliminate exploitation of peoples and lands, even when that means possibly betraying the cohesion of a movement.

Indeed, in "Ni for El Salvador" Moraga, running the risk of denouncing her U.S.-based audience, broadens the scale of environmental justice from the domestic to a global level when she contemplates a Central American nation. This is a courageous act, since she exposes her own complicity in the environmental injustice that sustains first-world consumption. Yet, she still claims that "[n]o sustainable development is possible in the Americas if the United States continues to demand hamburgers, Chrysler automobiles, and refrigerators from hungry, barefoot, and energy-starved nations."27 She suggests that Chicanas and Chicanos, who (after all) live in the U.S., realize the role our nation plays in the global socio-political arena. Indeed,

[g]lobal capitalism . . . has been dependent on the free labor of domestically confined women and of men and women who were slaves and indentured servants—to those outside their own families and usually their own races—but the global economic framework has also depended on much of that labor to be unacknowledged and economically unawarded.28

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27 Ibid., 172.

And the U.S. (plus that of other first world nations) rates of consumption disregard the limits of nature in favor of convenience and comfort, and these privileges are often at the expense of peoples and environments in other nations, particularly nations located in the global South. The concept of the "ecological footprint" quantifiably describes this inequity. An area's ecological footprint is calculated using several interdependent factors including consumption rates, biological carrying capacity, and population. These factors combine to estimate the area of natural resources that a nation or a region requires to maintain its current rates of consumption for its population. Some areas consume more than their local resources can provide, and no other nation is a larger culprit on this front than the United States—a nation whose ecological footprint exceeds that of the whole of Latin America alone by at least six times. Thus, a revolution in the material demands of the United States and other overprivileged nations must occur before anyone, North or South, can enjoy a genuinely sustainable way of life. For Moraga, this sustainability includes ethical human relations on a global scale along with ecologically sensitive uses of nature—a connection nurtured by developing a culture that intertwines the human and the natural.

For example, Chicano filmmaker Gregory Nava's film *El Norte* aptly demonstrates the dramatic differences between the negligible environmental impact of Guatemala and the overwhelming environmental exploitation in the United States. *El Norte* shows the impact of these macrocosmic flows on a family level. Enrique and Rosa, the pair whose migration north (to "el norte") is

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dramatized in the film, as well as their murdered father and disappeared mother, suffer the consequences of the violent Guatemalan civil war. Many issues were in contention in this war, but the film specifically emphasizes the struggle over land-use rights, labor exploitation, and environmental degradation. These all work in combination to provide generous profit margins for owners or stockholders, largely based in the First World, as well as agricultural resources for the far-reaching U.S. ecological footprint. Moraga's frustrations with such exploitations fuel her demand for a Chicano homeland, often referred to as "Aztlán" by advocates of Chicano Nation. In Moraga's own words:

A term Náhuatl in root, Aztlán was that historical/mythical land where one set of Indian forbears, the Aztecs, were said to have resided 1,000 years ago. Located in the U.S. Southwest, Aztlán fueled a nationalist struggle twenty years ago, which encompassed much of the pueblo Chicano from Chicago to the borders of Chihuahua.\(^{30}\)

Geographically, Aztlán would encompass the lands in the U.S. Southwest once owned by Mexico but acquired by the United States through various means—events described comprehensively by Moraga as "the theft of what was once our México and before that and still Tierra Tarahumara, Yaqui, Seri, Pima, O'odham."\(^{31}\) Bioregionally, Aztlán would include the Chihuahuan and Sonoran deserts as well as the fertile Rio Grande valley, the peaks of the Sierra Nevadas, the lower Gulf's wetlands, and the beaches along the Pacific. These claims for a


\(^{31}\)Cherrie Moraga, *Loving in the War Years: Lo Que Nunca Pasó Por Sus Labios* (Boston: South End Press Classics, 2000) 180.
Chicano homeland can be interpreted as a cry for a separate nation that would seem to conflict with her pursuit of social justice, especially for queer Chicanas who have hardly figured into the Chicano vision of Aztlan. To use Alicia Gaspar de Alba's paraphrase of Animal Farm, in the beginnings of the Chicano struggle for justice in the 1960s and 1970s, "some members of the Movement were more equal than others." There was no room for queers in this formula. In addition to sexuality, Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano notes that Moraga's "emphasis on indigenous ecological concerns . . . within Chicano nationalist discourse allows the textual conflation of Indian land and female brown bodies, a move that creates space for women within the ideal national subject." However, even though Moraga attempts to make a place for women in Aztlan, history still testifies to the oppression that women and queers suffer under any such "nationalist" regime.

Yet, her demands persist, and what at first seems a contradiction actually demonstrates the way that Moraga longs for a homeland more than she actually claims to establish a new nation. Indeed, she revises the conventional understanding of "nation" to accommodate her vision of a homeland that would include justice for its peoples as well as its lands. Moraga's "project . . . of recuperating or revisiting nationalism from a queer perspective expands the notion of social or revolutionary change to include the politics of sexuality, a

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dimension of liberatory politics often lost in the search for nation." Hardt and Negri also testify to the progressive, revolutionary potential for what they call "subaltern nationalism"—nationalism deployed by the colonized within an existing nation:

In some respects, in fact, one might even say that the function of the concept of nation is inverted when deployed among subordinated rather than dominant groups. Stated most boldly, it appears that whereas the concept of nation promotes stasis and restoration in the hands of the dominant, it is a weapon for change and revolution in the hands of the subordinated.\(^{35}\)

Moraga's revision of Chicano nationalism is a case in point. The conventional understanding of national identity relies on "a continuity of blood relations, a spatial continuity of territory, and linguistic commonality." Moraga alters all three. She shifts the terms of kinship from blood (descent) relations to not-necessarily-blood (consent) relations in a move that validates queer families and others who challenge traditional ties:

Coming to terms with [my lesbianism] meant the radical re-structuring of everything I thought I held sacred. It meant acting on my woman-centered desire and against anything that stood in its way, including my Church, my

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 108.


\(^{36}\) Ibid., 95.
family, and my 'country.' . . . [A]ct I did, because not acting would have meant my death by despair.  

She often encourages the creative invention of identity and relationships, not so much in the postmodern sense of “play” as much as a means for survival in a social context that sometimes tries to violently deny and suppress the existence of certain differences within the pursuit of a homogenous national identity—especially queerness and ethnicity. Her writings also work against any kind of linguistic purity in the way that her work blends at least two languages at a time (usually Spanish and English), and she repeatedly displays the novel ideas resulting from linguistic juxtapositions.

Most relevant to her ecological vision, Moraga challenges the aspect of national identity that pertains to the “spatial continuity of territory.” She recognizes the “dangers of nationalism as a strategy for political change” and considers ways that it might undermine her effort to bring about environmental justice.  

For example, concerning the physical territory of her proposed nation, she considers the changing political boundaries over the years and wonders: “Is our land the México of today or the México of a century and a half ago, covering thousands of miles of what is now the Southwestern United States?”

Superficially, this line presents the conundrum of temporal scale—the question arises as to what time period this revolution speaks against. But this also offers

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38 Ibid., 149.

39 Ibid., 152-3.
a glimpse at the intriguing contradictions in Moraga's work regarding physical territory. She begins to question the validity of engaging with nation on the terms of the colonizers; "Aztlán at times seems more metaphysical than physical territory." Conventionally, a citizen belongs to a nation and identifies with a politically and physically defined territory. In Moraga's projections, a citizen and a homeland belong to one another and maintain responsibilities to one another. Or, as Mary Pat Brady puts it in her outstanding study on the dynamics of space in Chicana literature,

Moraga actively suggests an anticartography—one that does not conceive of space as a thing to be possessed or a set of rationalized relations to be mapped. Moraga offers a different concept of spatiality, in which land and bodies blend in both metaphysical and real senses, in which perception and living cannot be distinguished so easily. The ideal citizens of the imaginary homeland Aztlán refuse the appropriative attitude that nation historically engenders, and instead they enact a reciprocal relationship with nature in a way that sustains a broadly defined group: "Simply, we must give back to the earth what we take from it. We must submit to a higher 'natural' authority, as we invent new ways of making culture, making tribe, to survive and flourish as members of the world community in the next millennium."

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40 Ibid., 153.
Of course, Moraga's homeland includes a conventional notion of "land" as nature—the actual soil and grass and hills and streams. But her "land" also includes one's body and the relations that go with it—social and environmental. And she recognizes the activists that already work within this environmental justice paradigm:

[T]here are examples of the Mothers of East Los Angeles and the women of Kettleman City who have organized against the toxic contamination proposed for their communities. In the process, the Mexicana becomes a Chicana . . . ; that is, she becomes a citizen of this country, not by virtue of green card, but by virtue of the collective voice she assumes in staking her claim to this land and its resources.⁴³ Moraga remains significantly committed to emphasizing a necessary relationship with the actual, physical land. And she emphasizes a grassroots definition of citizenship, not as nation-state recognition, but as the responsibility that humans and nature maintain with one another.

Conclusion

Such is the challenge that Moraga keeps confronting and demanding her readers confront as well: only a developing relationship to identity; once a definition coheres it also begins to oppress. Moraga's work "brings 'difference'

⁴³ Ibid., 156.
into the concept of nation”⁴⁴ and defies the “flip side of the structure that resists foreign powers [that] is itself a dominating power that exerts an equal and opposite internal oppression, repressing internal difference and opposition in the name of national identity, unity, and security.”⁴⁵ The simple, two-word title for the poem “War Cry” alone indicates the complexity and process-oriented nature of this writer’s challenging reflections. She titles in English a poem that otherwise uses only Spanish to sound its lament, suggesting that only English can name the multiple valences that intermingle and emerge in her mother’s tongue, Spanish. “War Cry” also points to the ironic way that Moraga proposes physical territory for Aztlan. To most contemporary citizens of the United States, such a demand for Chicano Nation doubtless sounds farfetched. However, Moraga simply follows the logic of colonizers, “[calling] attention to the naturalizing work of the geopolitical narrative of the United States.”⁴⁶ Moraga’s cry is not so much to sound a call for military battle over physical territory as it is an epistemological challenge to move beyond paradigms of appropriation. And all along, some part of her longs for relief from the pain and losses suffered as the battle over her homeland continues, and she warns her sympathizers and fellow revolutionaries: we must not reproduce the same structures of power that we fight against.


In “There Must Be Something in the Rain,” singer-songwriter Tish Hinojosa tells the story of a little girl’s death (the result of pesticide contamination) from the naïve perspective of her young brother.¹ His initial impression that the rain poisoned his sister slowly shifts as the verses eventually reveal a different culprit. He finally realizes that he was mistaken to hold faith in the fact that “those airplanes cure the plants so things can grow.”² He ends with a pledge to “break the killing chains” even though “I’m afraid but I believe / That we can change these hurting fields.”³ The hope for environmental change still exists out there in the fields, in the acequia collectives, in the neighborhood curandera’s garden, in the urban farm, and in our rich literary history. Hinojosa’s song—with its attention to family ties, its intimate tone, and its call to action—continues a literary tradition established in early Mexican American cultural production about the natural environment.

Other contemporary Chicana/o cultural productions continue these traditions and integrate the environment into their work more and more. Los Angeles, in particular, seems to be a significant place for the development of

²Ibid.
³Ibid.
Chicana/o environmental art. One of Cherrie Moraga’s early plays, Shadow of a Man, is set in Los Angeles and encounters environmental themes—albeit in an indirect manner. This play takes on the theme of a family who harbors a secret from the distant past that begins to haunt their everyday lives more and more. Rather than a rural setting, this play occurs in the heart of Los Angeles, where the tía tends an urban garden, and the children retreat to a nearby mountain cañon to reflect on their lives. Shadow of a Man displays the ways that Chicano families maintain links with the natural world on an everyday basis in an urban setting.

Not far from the setting of Moraga’s play, a group of Mexican American and Mexican immigrant farmers struggled to protect a 14-acre farm from destruction by a Los Angeles real estate developer. The South Central Farm was the largest urban community garden in the United States. Guerilla filmmakers in South Central produced documentaries about the ongoing battle to keep the largest urban community garden intact, and they posted these films on the web for supporters and opponents alike to view and take a side in the debate. The videos tell the story that, for over 10 years, families planted and tended this garden of vast proportions, considering the urban density of South Central LA. The videos also describe how, in 2003, real estate developer Ralph Horowitz bought the land from the City of Los Angeles in a deal that did not seek the input of the farmers. Horowitz bought the farm for a sum that far undercut the land’s value, especially after all the work put into it by the South Central Farmers. Tragically, the farm was ordered destroyed by the developer, Ralph Horowitz, in
the summer of 2006. But the community continues its creation—not only of a vibrant natural resource, but the alliance of the farmers themselves as they look for a new location for their farm.

The disregard with which the city of Los Angeles and real estate developers treated this vital urban resource shows how necessary it has become to understand Mexican American environmental values. This study begins a process that has been a long time in coming, and still requires a lot more development in the coming years. I hope we can advance this project on the physical grounds of the South Central Farm as well as around the world.
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