

Edited by

SARAH D. WALD, DAVID J. VÁZQUEZ,
PRISCILLA SOLIS YBARRA, AND SARAH JAQUETTE RAY

Latinx Environmentalisms

PLACE, JUSTICE, AND THE DECOLONIAL

With a Foreword by LAURA PULIDO and
an Afterword by STACY ALAIMO

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*This book is dedicated to all the unsung Latinx
environmental activists and thinkers.*

Foreword

LAURA PULIDO

Allow me to begin with a confession: I have not always been a big fan of ecocriticism, especially as it relates to environmental justice. I recall clearly the first time I was introduced to Latinx ecocriticism. It was in the early 1990s, and I was attending a small conference that examined the intersections between environmentalism, environmental justice, Latin America, and U.S. Latinx populations. There were several sessions focused on literary criticism, and I admit to being baffled as to why such presentations were included in the event: Wasn't this supposed to be about the *actual* environment? I could not grasp how cultural analysis could be useful to the larger project of building an antiracist movement to smash capitalism (my preoccupation at the time). I recall, in particular, a discussion of Raymond Barrio's *The Plum Plum Pickers*. How could a piece of fiction, let alone an analysis of it, be of consequence when people were dying? Yes, the novel focused on farmworkers, and I certainly enjoyed reading fiction, but because the scholarship was not based on empirical methods, such as the archive or ethnography, I could not appreciate its value. Though I cringe as I share this memory, I can now say that I "get it." It is all too apparent to me today the importance of questions of representation, futurity, imagination, and memory and the need to examine complexities that exceed social science tools. Although I still very much identify and work as a social scientist, I am convinced that whatever impact my work has had is due to my propensity to borrow concepts and tools from any intellectual tradition, including the humanities. Thus, while I am honored to be invited to write the foreword to *Latinx Environmentalisms*, I cannot help but note the irony. I share this anecdote not only in the interest

of full disclosure but also because my long engagement in the field gives me a certain vantage point—one that I hope is useful in terms of historically contextualizing *Latinx Environmentalisms*.

The publication of *Latinx Environmentalisms* marks a milestone. To date, there is one other comparable volume that I am aware of that focuses exclusively on the environmental histories, experiences, and imaginations of the Latinx population or a subset of it, and that is *Subversive Kin: Chicana/o Studies and Ecology*, edited by Devon Peña. *Latinx Environmentalisms* is distinct in several ways. First, despite being heavily weighted toward the Chicana experience, *Latinx Environmentalisms* includes other groups as well, such as Nuyoricans and Haitians. Indeed, the concept of “Latina/o studies” was just emerging in the late nineties, whereas today it is increasingly the norm. Second, while *Subversive Kin* was very much an interdisciplinary text, it was predominantly social science in orientation. In contrast, *Latinx Environmentalisms* focuses on literary and cultural analysis. Seen in this light, as the editors note, it is indeed overdue and most welcome. Third, *Subversive Kin* was published relatively early on in the development of environmental justice, whereas the present book is twenty years later. Consequently, the two texts are intervening in two different intellectual landscapes. Whereas *Subversive Kin* was part of a nascent challenge to mainstream environmentalism, *Latinx Environmentalisms* is contributing to a more established body of work. Consequently, *Latinx Environmentalisms* goes beyond environmental justice and explores what Latinx studies can contribute to our understanding of the environment, while at the same time critiquing environmentalism itself. This brings me to the last distinction of the text, the emphasis on a (de)colonial framework. Arguably, most studies of Latinx environmentalisms are rooted in race, reflecting a U.S. framework, which typically privileges racism over other processes of domination. But foregrounding the decolonial also reflects a particular moment in the evolution of critical ethnic studies, which have been heavily influenced by both indigenous and Latin American studies.

All discussions about the environment ought to engage colonialism, or risk being colonialist by ignoring this ongoing legacy. Inversely, decolonial efforts must address the environment, and failing to do so simply because of the environmental movement’s apparent investment in whiteness runs the risk of perpetuating the notion that land, geography, and spatial sovereignty are separate from ecosystemic conditions and their dynamic . . . relationship to cultural identities. (Chapter 1, this volume)

This, to me, is one of the most exciting aspects of this project, one, I might add, that is largely absent from most social science scholarship. Moreover, I appreciate the extent to which such a framework is drawn from the Latin

American context and therefore reflects a transnational or hemispheric perspective. I firmly believe that *all* environmental analyses must be grounded in larger materialist processes, and all social processes must be connected to the transformation of nature. While most environmental justice scholarship is rooted in an antiracist framework, with the exception of indigenous experiences, rarely is (de)colonization given equal treatment.

Reading *Latinx Environmentalisms* raises several additional provocative questions for me—questions that I have been thinking about more generally in regard to environmental justice, Latinx studies, and critical race theory. Engaging this volume signaled for me their urgency as we consider how to move the field forward. My comments seek to amplify the generative nature of *Latinx Environmentalisms*. Three specific political-intellectual questions arise: What are the boundaries of environmentalism and environmental justice? How might we envision the full range of Latinx populations' environmental positions and roles? And finally, how do we conceptualize Latinx peoples, especially ethnic Mexicans, in terms of settler colonization?

The Boundaries of Environmentalism and Environmental Justice

The editors begin the introduction to *Latinx Environmentalisms* by foregrounding crucial questions that many of those invested in environmentalism grapple with: What constitutes the environment? Who is an environmentalist? What are the implications of labeling issues and people as “environmental” when they may not see themselves that way? What is gained? What is lost? Wald, Vázquez, Ybarra, and Ray (Chapter 1, this volume) explain the relative lateness of this volume as resulting from the fact that numerous Latinx writers have been slow to identify themselves or their work as environmentally related. They provide a compelling set of reasons as to why they have chosen to identify various artists and texts as environmental. Besides pushing against the whiteness of environmentalism, they argue that Latinx cultures can broaden and enhance what counts as environmentalism by linking it to larger issues, including racism, colonization, and economic exploitation. Yet there are also some drawbacks to such a strategy. My desire to “pause” has less to do with this text and is more a commentary on the larger ideological and political trajectory of the environmental justice movement, which the current volume also scrutinizes. Since the emergence of environmental justice in the 1980s, there has been a continual call to broaden the conception of the environment, with scant attention to the costs.

Some of the works analyzed in this volume are easily identifiable as environmentally related; others can be read as environmental, although that was not necessarily their primary purpose; and others push the bounds of what

constitutes the environment. These multiple positions are, of course, deliberate and intended to reframe the relationship between Latinx cultural production and the environment. When this practice of broadening the conception of the environment began in the 1980s, environmental justice activists *needed* to challenge the terrain and authority of mainstream environmentalism in order to assert themselves and their concerns. That could happen only through redefining the environment, what became known as “where we live, work, and play.” Though there has been significant progress on this front, as seen by funders and numerous mainstream organizations, there is still significant work to be done, as the editors note. Indeed, the absence of such a discussion reflects the limited degree to which diversity has been embraced and analyzed by both mainstream and environmental justice activists.

While a broadened conception of the environment is still foundational to environmental justice, this assumption has not been interrogated: What are the consequences, if any, of consistently advocating for a broadened conception of the environment? There are at least three possible points to consider. First is the loss of ambiguity. Often, political and moral clarity requires cutting through ambiguity in order to identify a clear path forward. But other times ambiguity can provide important insights regarding ourselves and our relationships to the larger world. I would suggest that it is worth lingering, however briefly, in the ambiguity of what constitutes the environment. It could be that after such reflection one may emerge convinced of the merits of such a position. This, in itself, would be worthwhile, because presumably one would have carefully analyzed the merits and drawbacks of such a strategy instead of taking it for granted. Conversely, one might emerge more cautious about such a strategy, advocate for a refinement, or perhaps seek to create something altogether distinct from “environmentalism.” I am not wedded to any particular outcome, but I do know that the places we tend to avoid, what might be called spaces of “surplus ambiguity,” are often potentially rich sites for close inspection.

The second question that arises stems from including people, places, and struggles under the environmental umbrella when they do not identify as such. I feel a general unease when employing this practice. I say this as someone who has done this myself. Conversely, I have also been categorized in a multitude of ways that did not reflect my own sense of self. Undoubtedly this happens to everyone at some point, but the practice is especially weighted and complex for people who have routinely had names and categories imposed on them through larger processes of domination, dispossession, and violence. In short, however well intended, there is a politics to this practice that we must be cognizant of.

And finally, there are multiple issues related to political strategy and organizing. At the heart of advocating for a broadened conception of the environment is a belief in the moral value of environmentalism and the desire not only to make it available to all people but also to reconceptualize it so that it can

better capture the lived experiences and realities of those who are not white and from the Global North. Sarah Jaquette Ray, in her chapter on Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* (Chapter 6), highlights a whole set of power dynamics that compel colonized people, people of color, immigrants, and others relegated to the margins to adopt an environmental framing. Though a complex calculus, the bottom line is that this framing offers such people the possibility of enhanced support and political leverage. These are powerful assets that do not come easily to subordinated communities.

As the bounds of the environment expand, what does this mean for strategy and for building a broad-based movement? Might such diffuseness lead to political fragmentation? On one hand, one could argue that such diffuseness gives environmentalism its strength; on the other, one could also argue that it may lead to splintering and balkanization. Conventional thinking maintains there is great power in creating as broad a movement as possible, but recent history from U.S. conservatives suggests that adhering to a coherent political line can also lead to real change. As the world faces new and unprecedented ecological crises, in terms of both global warming and the massive political opposition to addressing this crisis, it is unclear what conception of the environment will be most helpful. Should the environment be divided by topic or power geometries (Massey), as some of us believe that global warming is fundamentally a crisis of capitalism (Klein)? Do we need a short-term and a long-term strategy? Once again, I do not know the answers, but these are important questions we need to be asking.

The Environmental Positionality of Latinx Peoples

How do we conceptualize the subjectivity of Latinx people in terms of the environment? The editors situate this volume as part of the “third wave” of environmental literature, which focuses on historically silenced voices. As such, the book contributes to a much larger literature that challenges the erasure of Latinx people (and others) as responsible environmental actors, or depicts them as agents of environmental destruction devoid of a larger structural analysis. In response to this, many writers have articulated two alternative positions for Chicanx people: either as victims of environmental degradation, capitalist exploitation, and colonization, or as overlooked sources of environmental values and knowledge. Such efforts to ecologically salvage Latinx peoples permeate the environmental justice literature. They have most recently been articulated by Ybarra in her important book *Writing the Goodlife*. She writes, “We never needed to become environmentalists in the first place, and we therefore have an array of strategies at our disposal for how to live well with Earth” (28). While it may be true that Mexican American writers do convey such an environmental ethic in their writing (and we do possess a range of strategies), we must also exercise caution around such claims. I say this as

someone who actively participated in this repositioning in my dissertation (Pulido, *Environmentalism and Economic Justice*).

We first need to historicize such claims. Drawing on the editors' framing of *Latinx Environmentalisms* as a "recovery model," such claims can be seen as part of a "first wave" of Latinx or people of color environmentalism, in which such arguments were necessary to challenge mainstream environmentalism and to reconceive the subject position of those deemed peripheral or hostile to the environment. The initial task was to excavate, document, and assert the legitimacy of diverse Latinx environmental heritages and experiences. This included close attention to the uneven power dynamics associated with the materiality of the global economy, as well as reframing denigrated cultural practices, such as *curanderas*, as valuable assets in our collective struggle to create more ecologically and culturally sustainable lifeways. This is essential work, and *Latinx Environmentalisms* takes us far along that road—but it is not complete.

What is missing is a more complex reading of Latinx environmental subjectivity. This collection brings us closer to that goal by providing a launchpad to reconsider this question. By focusing on either victim or ecological innovator, other possibilities are obscured—namely, Latinx peoples as perpetrators of environmental harms. While this may be an unpopular idea, we cannot ignore environmentally problematic practices and values—especially in a place like the United States. Given that the United States consumes almost 25 percent of the world's energy, it is difficult *not* to see U.S. Latinx peoples as consumers at the very least—albeit at lower levels than other groups. Indeed, Wald's chapter on the American Latino Expedition (Chapter 3, this volume) clearly shows consumption as one of the key pathways to an expanded environmental consciousness and practice on the part of Latinx people (mostly women). This is a crucial insight that must not be glossed over. A similar theme can be seen in the concept of Latino Urbanism (Irazabal), which has argued that Latinx peoples live more environmentally friendly lifestyles, including using mass transit, high-density living, and recycling. These are all true—but what about lowriders?

A further complication stems from the term *Latinx*, which erases the multiplicity of environmental experiences that are located under a single heading. Specifically, the intraclass politics and racial differentiation in this category are silenced. Because of a lack of attention to intra-Latinx distinctions, only a certain set of practices tend to be offered as new additions or improvements to our conception of "the environment." For example, what are the environmental traditions of agricultural labor subcontractors—the vast majority of whom are Latinx? How are these experiences distinct from those of the farmworkers they manage and often exploit? While I fully support the effort to more accurately understand and depict the diverse environmental consciousness of Latinx peoples, we must not overlook the contradictions.

Latinx People and Settler Colonization

The final question I wish to raise is regarding Latinx people, especially ethnic Mexicans, as settler colonizers. The editors write, “Latinxs share an uneasy relationship with settler colonialism as both perpetrators of colonial violence and objects of settler colonial dispossession” (Chapter 1, this volume). This statement builds on important work by scholars such as Guidotti-Hernandez and Saldaña-Portillo, who have begun excavating this complex terrain. Despite the fact that the editors offer a detailed analysis of the subjectivity of Latinx people in the introduction, there are no chapters that explore the role of Latinx people as colonizers, although several of the interviews hint at it. This should not be surprising, as it reflects a much larger lacuna within Chicana and Latinx studies, as well as within the larger environmental justice literature. In both fields of study, Latinx people and especially ethnic Mexicans are regularly depicted as the colonized, not the colonizer (Pulido, “Geographies of Race and Ethnicity”). Of course, the vast majority of Latinx peoples live and labor under conditions not of their own making, and I do not wish to assert an agency or power that may not exist. Yet we cannot overlook the fact that in many places in the southwestern United States, especially in California, New Mexico, and Arizona, ethnic Mexicans actively participated in the conquest and dispossession of Native peoples. This is thorny, as not only are Mexicans partly indigenous themselves, but such questions go to the heart of some of the most basic assumptions of Chicana studies (Pulido, “Geographies of Race and Ethnicity”). The very term *Latinx* is challenging in this regard. Though it offers us something valuable, foregrounding the colonization of *las Américas*, it also costs us something. We risk losing the intrapower dynamics within the “Latinx” umbrella, especially the multiple subjectivities of Mexicans as colonizers and the colonized.

In this particular historical moment when indigeneity is exploding in critical ethnic studies, it is especially incumbent on those of us who identify as Mexican American and Chicana to take the lead in broaching this difficult conversation. As the field of Latinx environmentalisms develops, we will hopefully reach the point where we will be able to offer nuanced analyses of Latinx people as indigenous, brown, black, and white; as colonized and colonizer; as *trabajador y jefe*; as land based, urban, and immigrant. This is the full complexity of Latinx life *en las Américas*. We have a long way to go, but we will get there only through the kind of painstaking and collective work that *Latinx Environmentalisms* represents.

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