

Ecological Legitimacy and Cultural Essentialism: Hispano Grazing in the Southwest*

By Laura Pulido

“The Rio Grande drainage area north of El Paso offers a more complete example of regional suicide than most people ever imagined”¹

1. Introduction

Governmental and other official and quasi-official bodies commonly assume that the poor of the world are a major threat to the environment, hence lack what might be called “ecological legitimacy.” Such legitimacy attaches to a group when it is seen as a valid environmental actor, when its commitment to preserving the environment is not regarded as suspect. Ecological legitimacy is associated with environmental stewardship or the practice of caring for the land in a sustainable manner.

In particular, ecological legitimacy often eludes poor rural populations because officialdom has long assumed that landless and land poor groups do not care about protecting their environments.²

*This paper has benefitted from conversations with Bill Lynn and the comments of Melissa Gilbert, Mike Murashige, Jim O'Connor, Devon Peña, Miguel de Oliver, Margaret Villanueva, and three anonymous reviewers. I remain responsible for all interpretations and shortcomings.

¹J. Russell Smith in A. Harper, A. Cordova, and K. Oberg, *Man and Resources in the Middle Rio Grande Valley* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1943), p. 28.

²For an excellent discussion, see, K. Zimmerer, “Social Erosion and Social (Dis)courses in Cochabamba, Bolivia: Perceiving the Nature of Environmental Degradation,” *Economic Geography* 69, 1993.

However, the rise of the environmental justice movement in the North and the spread of peasant and indigenous struggles in the South have sharply challenged the ideology that the poor are incapable of caring for their own environmental conditions of life.³

Ecological legitimacy may be drawn from different sources and crafted in various ways. One source that nonwhite and indigenous communities have exploited is what might be called (for lack of a better expression) "romanticized cultural heritages."⁴ Such discourses are often predicated on cultural assumptions. This means, first, the practice of defining cultural differences as the principle determinant of inter-group conflict: and, second, the assumption that some cultures are inherently more sensitive to nature than others, whether or not this is in fact true. Romanticized cultural heritages are a form of essentialism, in that they regard the characteristics of a particular group as unitary and fixed or eternal. This kind of essentialism has been common with respect to gendered identity,⁵ and is growing among indigenous environmental discourses. Increasingly, the struggles of some U.S. minorities and "third world" peoples to assert their environmental legitimacy are cast within this kind of culturalist framework.

A number of writers — who insist that differences between various national and ethnic groups do in fact exist — have noted the dangers of

³A. Bebbington, H. Carrasco, L. Peralbo, G. Ramon, J. Trujillo, V. Torres, "Fragile Lands, Fragile Organizations: Indian Organizations and the Politics of Sustainability in Ecuador," *Transactions of British Geographers* 18, 1993; R. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990); J. Friedmann and H. Rangan, *In Defense of Livelihood* (West Hartford: Kumarian Press, 1993); A. Gedicks, *The New Resource Wars* (Boston: South End Press, 1993); R. Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya* (Berkeley: University of California, 1990); R. Peet and M. Watts, "Introduction: Development Theory and Environment in an Age of Market Triumphalism," *Economic Geography* 69, 1993; L. Pulido, *Environmentalism and Economic Justice: Two Chicano Struggles in the Southwest* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1996); V. Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (Atlantic Highlands: Zed Books, Ltd., 1989).

⁴A. Bebbington, "Modernization from Below: An Alternative Indigenous Development?" *Economic Geography* 69, 1993, pp. 274-292.

⁵For an overview of gender essentialism in nature-society relations, see, C. Nesmith and S. Radcliffe, "(Re)mapping Mother Earth: A Geographical Perspective on Environmental Feminisms," *Environment and Planning: D* 11, 1993, pp. 379-394. For specific critiques, see J. Seager, *Earth Follies* (New York: Routledge, 1993); R. Schroeder, "Shady Practice: Gender, and the Political Ecology of Resource Stabilization in Gambian Garden/Orchards," *Economic Geography* 69, 1993, pp. 349-365.

cultural essentialism. One problem is that this type of cultural explanation is typically innocent of any analysis of socio-economic (material and power) relationships, and hence serves to essentialize ethnic differences. Cultural essentialism denies or obfuscates the whole problem of social or historical agency, obscuring dominant power dynamics such as the struggles between rich and poor and landowners and tenants, thus reifying cultural differences. Instead of examining how and why various constellations of wealth and power result in different environmental practices, cultural essentialism tends to view variations in environmental practices as originating in "natural" ethnic or cultural differences.⁶

Despite these and other problems associated with cultural essentialism, a seldom-noted fact is that the grant of ecological legitimacy via one form or another of culturalism may serve at least three important purposes. First, the construction of an alternative narrative positing local peoples as capable ecological stewards is a form of resistance, as it affirms an historically denigrated ethnic or national group. At the same time it critically scrutinizes dominant modernist approaches to socio-economic development and resource use.⁷ In this sense, culturalism offers a counter-hegemonic discursive framework that is essential to the success of any oppositional struggle and alternative development path. Second, culturalism helps to consolidate the moral authority of the group in question. Moral authority, after all, is a form of power and legitimacy that arises from the belief that the relevant actors act in ethically sound or correct ways, and therefore are deserving of popular support. Examples of morally authoritative, ecologically legitimate struggles include the Chipko movement in India⁸ and the Brazilian rubber-tappers.⁹ Third, resistance by definition develops within the context of socio-economic or political oppression, and since culturalism is a readily available resource, it may be an

⁶For general critiques and examples of strategic essentialism and cultural reification, see D. Fuss *Essentially Speaking* (New York: Routledge, 1989); A. Kobayashi and L. Peake, "Unnatural Discourse: 'Race' and Gender in Geography," *Gender, Place and Culture* 1, 1994, pp. 225-244; K. Anderson, "Constructing Geographies: 'Race', Place and the Making of Sydney's Aboriginal Redfern," J. Penrose and P. Jackson, eds., *Constructions of 'Race', Place and Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1994), pp. 81-99.

⁷Shiva, *op cit.*

⁸Guha, *op cit.*; H. Rangan, "Romancing the Environment: Popular Environmental Action in the Garhwal Himalayas," in Friedmann and Rangan, *op cit.*

⁹A. Cockburn and S. Hecht, *The Fate of the Forest* (New York: Verso, 1989).

effective or even indispensable strategy in the struggle for ecological legitimacy.

In this article, these general observations are applied to the process whereby a Hispano community development group in northern New Mexico, Ganados del Valle (Livestock of the Valley), sought to establish ecological legitimacy.¹⁰ I examine the context in which romanticized, culturalist nature-society narratives emerged, and explore some of the advantages and drawbacks of their use. My thesis is that culturalism has served Ganados del Valle well, despite some serious theoretical and political problems. Ganados is a good example of the use of culturalism because it has been struggling to gain access to grazing land using various tactics, while being opposed by mainstream environmentalists and state resource managers who have denied Ganados' ecological legitimacy by claiming that Hispanos are poor resource managers.¹¹ To counter this opposition and to challenge the historical vilification of Hispano resource practices, Ganados has often relied on culturalist arguments in its claim to ecological legitimacy. At the same time supporters of Hispano grazing rights have employed both structural and culturalist arguments to account for the phenomena of overgrazing, emphasizing in particular the harmonious ecological relations of indigenous peoples in general.

I first situate this case study by presenting a brief overview of northern New Mexico, and then explore the ways that scholars have characterized the links between Hispano resource use, poverty, and culture. In particular, I focus on those commentators who blame Hispanos for local poverty and environmental problems, and those who try to explain this poverty and soil erosion in structural terms. Both "blame the victim" and "blame the structure" approaches suggest why Ganados has employed romanticized culturalist arguments in its efforts to establish ecological legitimacy. I then describe Ganados del Valle's struggles to win grazing rights. Finally, I explore how culturalism has in fact been used by Ganados to assert its ecological legitimacy, and I also consider some of the larger political and theoretical issues associated with this strategy of "discourse of struggle."

¹⁰ Hispanos refer to the Spanish-speaking population of northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. They are a subset of the larger Chicano population.

¹¹ For a detailed analysis of this struggle, see D. Peña, "The Brown and the Green: Chicano and Environmental Politics in the Upper Rio Grande," *CNS* 3, 1992; Pulido, *op cit*.

2. Ecological Legitimacy: Hispano Resource Use, Poverty and Culture

Northern New Mexico: The Chama Valley, the site of Ganados del Valle, is located in the northern Rio Grande watershed. It was inhabited by Pueblo Indians until the late 1600s when Spanish explorers and mestizo settlers began permanent settlement of the region.¹² Hispanos initially settled the region through a system of land grants (*mercedes*) and developed an agropastoral system based on vertical transhumance grazing and subsistence agriculture.¹³ Communities were organized to include private land for the home, garden and feed production, and collective ownership of the highlands for grazing, timber, and other resources. Water was furnished by *acequias*, a gravity-based irrigation system well-suited to arid environments.

Established as frontier outposts, Hispano villages were always oriented to subsistence, but their economic and social marginality escalated when the U.S. acquired New Mexico through the Treaty of the Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848).¹⁴ Anglo control led to the loss of Hispano land and water rights through a variety of mechanisms, including the U.S. government's inability to recognize communal land ownership, high legal fees, Hispanos swindling one another, and, last but not least, outright fraud by Anglos. Regardless of the means, the end result was the commodification of land and Anglo encroachment, which brought more intense patterns of grazing, hunting, logging, and other forms of resource extraction.¹⁵

¹²R. Dunbar-Ortiz, *Roots of Resistance: Land Tenure in New Mexico, 1680-1980* (Los Angeles: University of California, Chicano Studies and American Indian Centers Publication, 1980).

¹³Transhumance grazing is an extensive grazing system which takes advantages of changes in temperature and grasses by grazing over a range of environments over the seasons. See, D. Gomez Ibañez, "Energy, Economics and the Decline of Transhumance," *Geographical Review* 67, 1977. For a complete discussion of Hispano cultural ecology in the region, see J. Van Ness, "Hispanic Land Grants: Ecology and Subsistence in the Uplands of Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado," C. Briggs and J. Van Ness, eds., *Land, Water and Culture: New Perspectives on Hispanic Land Grants* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1987).

¹⁴N. Gonzalez, *The Spanish Americans of New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1969); G. Sanchez, *The Forgotten People* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1940).

¹⁵D. Peña, 1991, "An American Wilderness in a Mexican Homeland," Paper presented at the Western Social Science Association, Reno, 1991; Harper, Cordova, and Oberg, *op cit.*

As Hispanos' ability to make a living was eroded through the loss of grantlands, the villages slid into deep poverty. Faced with declining economic opportunities, Hispanos pursued seasonal work strategies, outmigrated, and occasionally rebelled.¹⁶ Although the region has been the site of numerous studies and development projects, such efforts rarely addressed the fundamental problem of the loss of land. Instead, development agents sought to build a crafts economy, teach job skills, or promote the Americanization of villagers — all focused on changing the individual while ignoring the fact that a thriving rural economy is impossible without an adequate land base.

Poverty is highly racialized in the region. As retirees, telecommuters, and tourists (most of whom are Anglo) flock to "the land of enchantment," the resulting land speculation destroys Hispanos' dreams of a viable rural economy. The newcomers drive up the cost of land, and as ex-urbanites they have values and goals different from that of low-income rural people, which further erodes Hispanos' efforts at community autonomy. In the face of seasonal unemployment of 18.9 percent in the Chama Valley,¹⁷ the state has pushed tourism, based on wealthy outsiders' desire to consume the landscape, the cultural diversity, and the natural resources of the area.¹⁸ The result has been

¹⁶S. Forrest, *The Preservation of the Village* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1989); S. Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); R. Rosenbaum, *Mexicano Resistance in the Southwest* (Austin: University of Texas, 1986); P. Bell Blawis, *Tijerina and the Land Grants* (New York: International Publishers, 1971); R. Gardner, *Grito! Reies Tijerina and the New Mexico Land Grant War of 1967* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970).

¹⁷ United States Census Bureau, *Income in 1989 of Households, Families, and Persons by Race and Hispanic Origin, New Mexico. Summary of Social, Economic and Housing Characteristics*; United States Census Bureau, *Income and Poverty Status in 1989, New Mexico. Summary of Social, Economic and Housing Characteristics*; Varela has calculated that 50 percent of the households in the Tierra Amarilla census district made less than \$10,000 in 1990. M. Varela, *Testimony of Maria Varela, Co-Director of Ganados del Valle before the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and National Resources on Proposed Rangeland Reforms, May 14, 1994, Albuquerque, New Mexico.*

¹⁸A. Richardson, *State of New Mexico Economic Development and Tourism Department, interview with author, Santa Fe, July, 1990.* For historical perspectives, see M. Weigle, *Hispanic Villages of Northern New Mexico: A Reprint of Volume II of the 1935 Tewa Basin Study with Supplementary Materials* (Santa Fe: The Lightening Tree, 1975) and M. Works, "A Place for Things: Material Culture and Socio-Spatial Processes in Northern New

the creation of tourist towns (Santa Fe and Taos), exclusive game ranches, luxury ski-resorts, and a booming secondary home market. Such a strategy ensures the continued poverty of Hispanos as it is predicated on seasonal, low-wage tourist jobs.¹⁹ The 1990 per capita income in Rio Arriba county was \$11,979 for whites as compared to \$7,496 for Hispanics. The result is a highly polarized economy geared towards wildlife and wilderness production for the enjoyment of urban middle-class residents.

Economic polarization partly rests upon Anglo romanticization of the nonwhite population. This continues a long tradition of Anglos desiring the landscape, artifacts, and sense of place associated with northern New Mexico Indians and more recently, Hispanics. Because Anglos have such contradictory ideological and material relationships with Hispanics, a rich and conflictual set of narratives has developed to explain persistent Hispano poverty. Poor resource management — in particular, overgrazing — has been central to explanations of poverty. Not only do such narratives deny the ecological legitimacy of Hispanics, but they exonerate Anglos and capitalism for the region's deep poverty.

3. Culture, Resource Use, and Moral Authority

Although a large body of literature seeks to explain the "decline" of northern New Mexico, few scholars have critically examined the political subtext of the dominant arguments. Studies focusing on resource management typically posit Hispanics as poor resource managers.²⁰ This literature has significantly shaped dominant

Mexico," Paper presented at the Annual Meetings of the American Association of Geographers, San Diego, April 1992.

¹⁹For the early roots of this pattern, see J. Bodine, "A Tri-Ethnic Trap: The Spanish-Americans in Taos," in *Spanish-Speaking People in the United States, Proceedings of the 1968 Spring Meetings of the American Ethnological Society* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1968); S. Rodriguez, "Art, Tourism, and Race Relations in Taos: Towards a Sociology of the Art Colony," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 45, 1989.

²⁰ Archdiocesan Rural Life Conference on Rural Problems of New Mexico (1947) Bioregions Archive, Hulbert Center for Southwest Studies, Colorado College, "Agricultural Studies and Agroecology File;" W. Denevan, "Livestock Numbers in Nineteenth-Century New Mexico, and the Problem of Gullying in the Southwest," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 57, 1967; W. deBuys, *Enchantment and Exploitation* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1989); Division of Research, Department of Government, University of New Mexico, *The Soil Conservation Problem in New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1946); Archdiocese of Santa Fe, Proceedings;

perceptions of Hispano ecological relations. Certainly, whether Hispano resource management is considered environmentally sound or damaging has enormous implications for establishing the legitimacy of current Hispano grazing claims for and efforts toward local control. Two perspectives are presented here: one which seeks to deny the ecological legitimacy of Hispanos, attributing persistent Hispano poverty to overgrazing; and one which seeks to affirm the ecological legitimacy of Hispanos, and as a result, locates overgrazing and poverty within the context of Anglo and capitalist domination.

The first perspective, which attributes Hispano "decline" to overpopulation and over-grazing,²¹ is largely Malthusian in nature and clearly results in the denial of Hispanos' ecological legitimacy. In particular, it identifies a number of specific causes to regional poverty, including general ignorance, partible inheritance (resulting in small farms), high birth-rates, and a generally poor environmental ethic.

Production per acre in much of New Mexico is less than half of what it formerly was. The difference is due to loss of soil fertility through erosion and the *practice of taking all from the land and returning nothing to it...The smallness of farms* in northern New Mexico and the practice of subdividing land into strips perpendicular to rivers or irrigation ditches make conservation practices difficult to apply....²²

Continued overstocking and overgrazing have resulted in the deterioration of the land. *Agricultural productivity is low because of poor farming*

Oberg, Harper and Cordova, *op cit.*; Soil Conservation Service, Division of Regional Planning, Southwest region, *The Sociological Survey of the Rio Grande Watershed* (1936). Bioregions Archive, Hulbert Center for Southwestern Studies, Colorado College, "Environmental History File"; M. Weigle, *op cit.*

²¹K. Weber, "Necessary but Insufficient: Land, Water, and Economic Development in Hispanic Southern Colorado," *The Journal of Ethnic Studies* 19, 1991. Torres, *op cit.*; Richardson, *op cit.* G. Libecap and G. Alter, "Agricultural Productivity, Partible Inheritance and the Demographic Response to Rural Poverty: An Examination of the Spanish Southwest," *Explorations in Economic History* 19, 1982; W. Scott, "Spanish Land-Grant Problems Were Here Before the Anglos," *New Mexico Business* 20, 1967.

²²L. Redman, "Soil Conservation and its Relation to the Community and the Family," in Archdiocese of Santa Fe, *op cit.*, pp. 17-18. *Italic added.*

practices; the quality of product is frequently poor, resulting in low prices.²³

For Spanish-Americans to blame their deficient economy upon the many rejected land-grant claims and loss of communal lands is an effort to divert attention from the many other problems that stem from the region's physical incompatibility with agriculture, as well as with its settlement and demographic patterns.²⁴

Because overgrazing leads to poverty, and because Hispanos are charged with overgrazing, they are viewed as responsible for their own poverty and also as bereft of ecological credibility. Such a perspective is held by a wide variety of New Mexicans and has real consequences. For example, one member of the Audubon Society who resisted Ganados' grazing efforts explained, "The population here [Hispanos] overdid it [overgrazed]. And to a large extent have been saved by outfits like Los Alamos who come in and hire 12,000 people."²⁵ Clearly for this "conservationist," Hispanos have no ecological legitimacy.

Other important elements in this argument pertain to history and culture. Emphasizing both the long *duration* of these problematic environmental practices, as well as associating these practices with an amorphous "Hispano culture," the perceived lack of Hispano stewardship is portrayed as natural and inevitable.

Many of the...ranges are yielding less than 20 percent of their potential. Undesirable plants have either increased or invaded most ranges. Accelerated erosion has occurred on many depleted ranges particularly on sandy and steeply sloping areas....The problem is further complicated because the numerous small operators have had too few acres to support their livestock. *Constant heavy grazing for over 100 years* has greatly depleted the grazing resources on lands owned by small operators....The problem is further complicated because producers commonly graze seasonal ranges at the wrong time, thereby

²³P.W. Cockerill, "Rural Economic Problems in Low Income Areas in New Mexico," in *ibid.*, pp. 5-6. *Italic added.*

²⁴A. Carlson, *The Spanish-American Homeland: Four Centuries in New Mexico's Rio Arriba* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1990), p. 110.

²⁵T. Jervis, Audubon Society, Interview with author (Los Alamos: July, 1990).

critically overusing the plants during the growing season...²⁶

If there is a flaw in the relationship of the villagers to their environment, it is that they, like the people of pioneer and subsistence cultures everywhere, have consistently underestimated their capacity for injuring the land. The mesas and mountains may indeed be the *alma*, the soul of the village culture, but their elevated status has not protected them from abuse.²⁷

Clearly, considerable energy has been spent on debating the grazing practices of Hispanos. Because this literature blames Hispanos for environmental degradation, they are "delegitimized" as successful resource managers. This delegitimization is based on specific grazing practices (overgrazing, grazing at the wrong time, too small farm size), as well as a general moral shortcoming, as evidenced by the failure to practice an appropriate environmental ethic. Delegitimization occurs because of the political need to clarify responsibility and to impose accountability on the agents of environmental degradation. Great weight is attached to environmental degradation/stewardship because it provides a necessary, but rarely articulated, moral subtext to environmental/ development initiatives. Accordingly, those who are linked to ecological stewardship garner moral authority (whether the International Monetary Fund or the Moskito Indians). In the case of Hispanos, because they are not considered environmentally valid actors, their claims can be dismissed on the basis of their "proven track record" and their general moral shortcomings. Thus Hispanos are denied "standing," as it were, in a discursive arena controlled by mainstream environmentalists, scientists, and resource professionals.²⁸

In response to such interpretations, others have developed critiques far more sympathetic to Hispanos, and rooted in structural analyses. Many of these arguments are drawn from political ecology, which suggests that colonialism, capitalism, and modernization outweigh

²⁶Northern Rio Grande Resource Conservation and Development Project, "Amendment of the Northern Rio Grande Resource Conservation and Development Project Action Plan," 1969, p. 10. Bioregions Archive, Hulbert Center for Southwest Studies, Colorado College, "Environmental History File." *Italic added.*

²⁷deBuys, *op cit.*, p. 297.

²⁸I do not mean to imply that this is the *intention* of such actors, but I do argue that this is one *result*.

individual agency, culture, or even sheer population numbers, in accounting for environmental change.²⁹ Recognizing the consequences of conservative analyses, left scholars have depicted the economic problems of Hispanos as emanating from structural shifts, thereby leaving intact their ecological legitimacy, as "traditional" practices are associated with ecological stewardship.³⁰ Bobrow both characterizes and illustrates this practice:

Some academics and policy-makers...have criticized the practice of grazing on open common land...as they were carried out by both Native Americans and Hispano pastoralists in northern New Mexico....These critics point to the scenario of land degradation laid out in biologist Garrett Hardin's 'tragedy of the commons' — open commons frequently become severely eroded, there is a decline in the quality and quantity of forage and there is serious long term ecological damage and accompanying economic decline.

In the case of New Mexico's Hispano land grants, the tragedy of the commons was not a result of the absence of a vested interest (the vested interest was individual and community survival), it was the tragedy of the foreign land tenure system which treats land as a commodity *inflicted* on a culture which views land as a common resource.³¹

²⁹ L. Thrupp, "Political Ecology of Sustainable Rural Development: Dynamics of Social and Natural Resource Degradation," in P. Allen, ed., *Food for the Future: Conditions and Contradictions of Sustainability* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1993); M. Watts, *Silent Violence* (Berkeley: University of California, 1983); A. Wright, *The Death of Ramon Gonzalez* (Austin: University of Texas, 1992).

³⁰ Van Ness, *op cit.*; Eastman, Carruthers, and Liefer, *op cit.*; Harper, Cordova and Oberg, *op cit.* This practice is common throughout the political ecology literature. Ashish Kothari notes, "...poverty or the lack of adequate economic opportunities often force people to degrade their own environment: for instance, firewood collection is a serious threat to forests in some places. What needs to be understood, however, is the genesis of this situation: more often than not, it lies in state policies which deprive the poor of their meager resources, and do not provide adequate alternative avenues for economic and social security" (J. Martínez Alier, "Ecological Struggles in India: Interview with Ashish Kothari," *CNS* 4, 1993, p. 113).

³¹ S. Bobrow, *The Community Land Trust: A Strategy for Ganados del Valle to Acquire and Secure Land for Agro-Pastoral Development*. Masters for

Peña, in a critique of deBuy's cultural ecology analysis also suggests that if Hispanos in fact contributed to environmental degradation, it was because of economic pressures:

....land degradation in Chicano community grants was the result of the partitioning and contraction of land holdings combined with the industrialization and commercialization of former common property resources. Evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that environmental degradation in New Mexico was initiated in the 1870s after the arrival of the railroad, land speculators, and capitalist ranching, mining and lumber interests.³²

This position clearly seeks to refute the "blame the victim" approach of previous analysts. In his detailed study of Hispano cultural ecology, Van Ness argues that, "...from an ecological perspective the superiority of the Hispanic land tenure for a subsistence economy is clear."³³ In a similar vein, Stoller suggests, "This pattern of vertical transhumance for livestock raising is common among pastoral peoples in mountainous, high altitude areas around the world; it was well adapted to the topography of northern New Mexico and southern Colorado....The Culebra river valley and its settlers are excellent examples of a group of people who developed a culture that was environmentally sound, sane and satisfying."³⁴ Here, both authors seek not only to challenge dominant stereotypes, but to vindicate Hispano resource use patterns by emphasizing their sustainability.³⁵

Similar to conservative analyses, political projects and moral positions underlie these arguments. But unlike the former, these are

Community and Regional Planning Rural Development Concentration. University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, 1992. *Italic added.* See also, C. Eastman and J. Gray, *Community Grazing: Practice and Potential in New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1987).

³²Peña, 1991, *op cit.*, p. 3.

³³Van Ness, *op cit.*, p. 194.

³⁴M. Stoller, "La Tierra y la Merced," R. Teeuwen, ed., *La Cultura Constante de San Luis* (San Luis, CO: The San Luis Museum Cultural and Commercial Center, 1985), p. 13.

³⁵For a more nuanced discussion of the complexities and transgressions of Hispano resource management, see D. Peña, "Pasture Poachers, Water Hogs, and Ridge Runners: Archetypes in the Site Ethnography of Local Environmental Conflicts," Paper presented at the 36th Annual Conference of the Western Social Science Association, Albuquerque, New Mexico, April 1994.

used for oppositional purposes, with several consequences. First and foremost, these scholars seek to validate the ecological practices of an historically marginalized and dispossessed population by positing them as able and conscious ecological stewards. This validates both their grazing practices as well as Hispano culture in general, as this culture is associated with good morals and ecological knowledge. A second consequence is to enhance Hispano moral authority by reintroducing the notion of victimization. Stressing Hispano dispossession (as opposed to blaming the victim) casts them in a light conducive to public support. Victimization coupled with ecological legitimacy is a powerful combination in achieving moral authority. Finally, this scholarship sets the stage for activists to develop romanticized discourses and culturalist arguments. It provides the necessary intervention to create a new political space.

Thus, it should not surprise us when members of Ganados make conscious links between Hispano culture and sound resource management. As one local activist asserted, "We've been here for hundred of years and the land is still here. We know how to take care of it, that's why they [environmentalists] want it so much."³⁶ I will now turn to Ganados itself and its efforts to assert ecological legitimacy.

4. Romancing the Land: Ganados del Valle and Oppositional Environmental Discourses

Ganados del Valle was formed in the early 1980s when a few Hispanos decided to cooperatively manage their flocks.³⁷ Recognizing the need for meaningful economic development that was culturally and environmentally appropriate, activists created vertically-integrated businesses based on grazing, lamb, and high-quality woven products. Although many Hispanos still owned a few head of sheep or cattle in the 1980s, these were not economically viable operations due to the small livestock numbers and limited range availability.³⁸ Both land enclosure and land speculation have made the cost of land prohibitive.³⁹

³⁶S. Martinez, Ganados del Valle, Interview with author (Los Ojos: August 1991).

³⁷For the full history of Ganados and its connection to previous resistance struggles, see Peña, 1992, *op cit.*; Pulido, 1996, Chapter 4, *op cit.*

³⁸P. Torres, Rio Arriba County Extension. Interview with author (Española, August 1990); P. Kutsche and J. Van Ness, *Cañones: Values, Crisis and Survival in a Northern New Mexico Village* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1981), p. 45.

³⁹Only 28 percent of the county is privately owned. Over 50 percent is held by the U.S. Forest Service in the Carson and Santa Fe National Forests, both of

Accordingly, it was hoped that what one could not do independently — run a viable operation — could be done collectively. By 1995, Ganados had five businesses, including weaving, sheep and grazing cooperatives, several community projects, and was grossing over \$300,000 annually.

Ganados is considered to be an economic success, as it has increased the income of over forty rural households. It is also considered to be environmentally responsible in that it promotes sustainable development. Despite severe regional poverty, for example, Ganados has consistently opposed polluting manufacturing activities and environmentally-damaging resource extraction, such as mining and luxury ski-resorts. Moreover, Ganados has worked to develop land-use and zoning regulations to protect the county's environmental quality. This environmental consciousness is also apparent in Ganados' businesses. In addition to a recycling business, Ganados uses guard-dogs instead of poison to protect its flock against predators, produces organically-grown lamb, and practices sustainable grazing.

In the late 1980s, Ganados was attempting to expand but was limited by a lack of grazing land. Given the shortage of grazing opportunities, Ganados asked the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (NMDGF) to graze on Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) in Rio Arriba county. The WMAs were initially acquired by the NMDGF to increase elk habitat and hunting opportunities.⁴⁰ Ganados proposed a project that would allow the cooperative to graze while conducting research in conjunction with New Mexico State University. Ganados argued that the WMAs had a dense mat-covering preventing further plant growth and that use of a short-term grazing system could improve the grasses.⁴¹ However, Ganados' plan was opposed by both

which have been reducing their stocking rates. It is important to realize that, in order to qualify for a USFS permit, "base land" is required, which Ganados does not own. Another 17 percent of the county is owned by the Jicarilla Apache, who have in the past entered into leases with Ganados. Although the WMAs constitute only 2 percent of the county, this obscures the fact that they comprise 20 percent of the rangeland in the Chama area.

⁴⁰New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, *Bill Humphries Wildlife Management Plan* (Santa Fe: NMDGF, 1984); *Rio Chama Fish and Wildlife Area Management Plan* (Santa Fe: NMDGF, 1984); *Edward Sargent Fish and Wildlife Area Management Plan* (Santa Fe: NMDGF, 1980).

⁴¹Ganados drew heavily on Savory's *Holistic Resource Management* in formulating their proposal (A. Savory, *Holistic Resource Management* [Covelo, CA: Island Press, 1988]).

the NMDGF and local environmental groups.⁴² Along with hunters, these groups constitute the agency's primary constituencies.⁴³ Throughout the struggle, Ganados' ecological legitimacy was questioned, both in terms of its ability to conduct sustainable grazing, and the sincerity of its environmental commitment. Ganados struggled for access to the land by participating in research projects, mediation, civil disobedience, and lobbying. At one point, in order to dramatize its plight, members of Ganados, along with 2000 sheep, trespassed onto one of the WMAs. Despite attracting significant attention, the NMDGF eventually prohibited grazing on WMAs throughout the state.

The right to graze was fought in other arenas as well, including a lawsuit against the Sierra Club Legal Foundation filed decades after an aborted collaborative project. In the 1960s, prompted by renewed Hispano land grant struggles, the Sierra Club Legal Foundation embarked on a joint project to buy land with *La Cooperativa Agricola del Pueblo de Tierra Amarilla*.⁴⁴ "The preservation of land and the perpetuation of the economic and social values of an ethnic minority: [are] goals which are central to the philosophies of the Sierra Club Foundation and La Cooperativa..."⁴⁵ The Foundation asked Albuquerque businessman Ray Graham to contribute \$100,000 towards the project, but despite these efforts, no land was ever purchased.

In 1989, Graham learned of Ganados' struggle with the NMDGF, and, seeing the connection between his gift and Ganados' need for grazing land, inquired how his donation had been spent. When the Foundation did not respond to Graham's inquiries, he sued. Meanwhile, Ganados persuaded the New Mexico Attorney General to investigate the matter. After several years of investigation, audits, and legal wrangling, a settlement was reached requiring the Foundation to make \$800,000 available to Ganados. Ganados then set-up a nonprofit land trust to purchase grazing land for its members to use.

The WMA struggle, and to a lesser extent, the lawsuit, represent two discrete episodes in a much larger grazing conflict, one that goes

⁴² The Nature Conservancy, Audubon Society, National Wildlife Federation, and Sierra Club individual members.

⁴³W. Evans, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, interview with author (Santa Fe: July 1990).

⁴⁴This was an initiative associated with Reies Lopez Tijerina and *la alianza*. See Blawis, *op cit.*; and Gardner, *op cit.*

⁴⁵La Frontera proposal in M. Varela, "Ganados Wins Sierra Club Foundation Settlement," *Noticias Nuevas de Ganados del Valle* Spring and Summer, 1995, p. 1.

back over a century and demonstrates how ecological relations are the site of both material and discursive power struggles. The land grant struggles of the 1960s were crucial not only because they inspired collaborative projects, but because they, along with left scholars, set the stage for contemporary oppositional discourses. Sylvia Rodriguez has shown, for example, how recent struggles in the Taos area have led to a rearticulation of land and Hispano identity.⁴⁶ Thus, Ganados' oppositional discourse, specifically its use of culturalism to promote ecological legitimacy, is but one example of many ongoing romanticized resistant discourses.

5. Culturalism and Ecological Legitimacy

Ganados challenged the entrenched belief that Hispanos were responsible for regional soil erosion and poverty in many ways, using scientific, economic, legal, and of course, culturalist arguments. The basis of Ganados' ecological legitimacy was the cooperative's self-definition as an ecological steward. From stewardship would flow both standing as a valid environmental actor, as well as authenticity in terms of its environmental commitment. Culturalism proved a useful way of establishing ecological stewardship because of the general exoticization of Hispanos by the dominant society, the regional reification of cultural differences, and the larger swirl of Hispano oppositional discourses.

Culturalist arguments served not only to validate Hispano resource practices, but by extension, Hispano culture. Specifically, it was argued that because Hispano culture was associated with ecological stewardship, any grazing program involving Hispanos would be a success. As a consequence, cultural preservation, in addition to grazing rights, emerged as a goal. According to Ganados' narrative, Hispano culture should be preserved because it is rich, associated with stewardship, and threatened. This last point was important not only to Hispanos, but also potentially to other development interests, since the region is built on cultural tourism. Recognizing the extent to which the current fascination with Hispano culture is a function of tourism, one local explained, "You know, they are trying to make us into a colonial Williamsburg of the Southwest....Tourism is so altered by...gas prices, tourist preferences, etc. It's cool to be Hispano now, but it may not be in ten years. Coyotes are in now, where are they going to be in ten

⁴⁶S. Rodriguez, "Land, Water, and Ethnic Identity in Taos," in Briggs and Van Ness, eds., *op cit.*

years, or furniture making?"⁴⁷ Aside from arguing that Hispano culture should be preserved because it is distinct, Ganados drew on other moral concerns, in particular the theme of dispossession/ victimization first raised by left scholars. The subtext to the argument was that because Hispano culture had been victimized by the loss of grantlands, this was all the more reason to support the project. Thus, access to grazing land would preserve an "endangered culture" and was morally desirable.

Elk and deer are not endangered in northern New Mexico. But the survival of New Mexico's Hispanic pastoral culture is endangered. Ganados del Valle's proposal to graze the wildlife refugees is an opportunity to strengthen one of the United States' richest cultures, improve the wildlife habitat and raise the standard of living in one of the nation's poorest rural counties.⁴⁸

Having established a moral and economic basis to support its grazing claims, Ganados emphasized that Hispano culture is one of ecological stewardship. "Our fathers knew how to take care of the land. You get out of the land what you put into it."⁴⁹ This local resident, like many activists, firmly believed that Hispano culture was inherently more careful with natural resources than Anglo culture. "Respect for water and land...is transmitted from generation to generation and has become a cultural characteristic of Indians and Indo-Hispanic people."⁵⁰ Building on general romanticized images of Hispano history, landscape, folklore, and material culture suggest an environmental relationship that is, "sound, sane and satisfying."⁵¹ This has enabled Ganados to argue that their proposed grazing effort would be a success precisely because it was rooted in Hispano history and culture:

We are a pastoral people. Our pastoral history goes back thousands of years spanning from the Iberian

⁴⁷M. Valdez, interview with D. Peña (San Luis, CO: September 1990). Bioregions Archive, Hulbert Center for Southwestern Studies, Colorado College, "Oral Histories Collection."

⁴⁸Ganados del Valle, "The Grazing Proposal and the Issues," Mimeo (Los Ojos: Ganados del Valle, nd).

⁴⁹M. Morales, Canjilon resident. Interview with author (Canjilon: August, 1990).

⁵⁰T. Atencio, "Cultural Philosophy: A Common Sense Perspective," *Upper Rio Grande Waters: Strategies*. A Conference on Traditional Water Use, The Upper Rio Grande Working Group (Santa Fe, October, 1987), p. 11.

⁵¹M. Stoller, *op cit.*,

Peninsula to this continent. This pastoralism is reflected in the way the Spanish and then Mexican governments organized land use....The common lands were used for moving large herds and flocks of livestock around the ecosystem which revitalized rangeland with each season. Under this system there was ample forage for domestic livestock and wildlife.⁵²

There is no doubt that culturalist arguments helped Ganados achieve ecological legitimacy. Moreover, ecological legitimacy, in addition to the moral authority cultivated on other fronts, contributed to very real gains. For one, culturalist arguments provided a means for Hispanos to challenge certain institutions and practices that were otherwise unassailable, such as private property. In effect, one subtext to Ganados' claims was an affirmation of communal land ownership. Besides linking communal land ownership to sound environmental management, Ganados offered an alternative to the dominant capitalist market ideology and private property relations which subsume our lives and which resonated with some Anglo supporters.⁵³

Perhaps more importantly, the use of culturalist arguments has led to real changes in the social formation. The cultivation of ecological legitimacy coupled with cultural distinctiveness have been crucial in attracting public awareness and support. It was partly because of Ganados' compelling image that Graham and Ganados connected in the 1990s, eventually resulting in the beginnings of a community land trust. This is a clear example of how social practices are engaged in a dialectic with structures of inequality and are able to transform the prevailing material relations.

Nevertheless, using culturalism to establish ecological legitimacy, as a general matter, is of great concern as the culture, morals, and everyday practices of poor and nonwhite people are under attack. This does not mean that such strategies should not be used, only that as academics and activists we should be conscious of their implications. One problem with romanticized ecological discourses is that they are often predicated on a unitary view of culture, one in which all Hispanos are thought to share the same culture, values, and practices. Though there is strong evidence that Hispanos did, in fact, produce far less

⁵²M. Varela, Testimony of Maria Varela Before U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources on Proposed Rangelands Reforms, Albuquerque, May 14, 1994.

⁵³K. Cassutt, Sierra Club member. Interview with author (Santa Fe: July, 1990).

environmental degradation than Anglos, emphasizing this position overlooks not only the considerable variation which exists within any social group, but also the complexity of cultural evolution.⁵⁴

Another consequence of culturalism is the reification of cultural differences between Anglos and Hispanos without paying sufficient attention to the social relations in which each group is embedded and the social practices that arise from those relations. Both Anglos and Hispanos suggested that cultural differences were an important source of the conflict, as different cultures (in this case, Anglo and Hispano) approached land in entirely different ways. For instance, it was routinely argued that Hispano culture recognizes neither "nature" nor "wilderness/wild."⁵⁵ In contrast, the Anglo land-use tradition embodies a nature-human dualism which sees humans as conceptually separate from nonhuman nature. A New Mexican environmentalist has cogently summarized the perceived distinctions:

In the eyes of land-based people, the environment is an ecosystem in which the people exist as one part of a harmonious whole, deriving food and materials, as needed, for their continued social, cultural, and economic existence. In the eyes of environmentalists, the same land may represent an area that should be protected for its own sake, for its beauty and pristine qualities, for wildlife habitat, or for recreation.⁵⁶

Cultural explanations such as these often account for a range of differences that more likely arise from racism, imperialism, or class exploitation. Cultural essentialist arguments have important political consequences. For one, it compels us to forfeit the opportunity to make explicit the economic relationships between various groups. Overlooked is the fact that "culture" is partially constituted by a group's location within the historical trajectory of capitalism and their particular position within a geographically specific set of social relations. Even though Anglos and Hispanos may indeed conceptualize land differently, this practice is at least partially due to the fact that

⁵⁴Peña, 1994, *op cit.*; Peña, 1991, *op cit.*; R. MacCameron, "Environmental Change in Colonial New Mexico," *Environmental History Review* 18, 1994.

⁵⁵Peña, 1991, *op cit.*; Atencio, 1987, *op cit.*

⁵⁶L. Taylor, "The Importance of Cross-Cultural Communication between Environmentalists and Land-Based People," *The Workbook* 13, 1988. One could also question the way "land-based people" and "environmentalists" are posed as mutually exclusive categories.

Hispanos were at one time part of a pre-capitalist empire (Spain), while contemporary Anglo land-use and environmental traditions were formed within the context of industrial capitalism.

The reification of cultural differences that seems to exist beyond or independent of economic structures also have the potential to reproduce the existing social formation. The extent to which mainstream environmental practices serve to actively *reproduce* inequalities of wealth and power is ignored by attributing conflicting land use plans to vague cultural arguments. Consequently, mainstream environmentalists and professional resource managers are encouraged to continue their project of land preservation and other environmental practices that lead to the further marginalization of oppressed groups. Arguments of cultural difference may lead to a "multicultural" initiative of some type, which do not begin to address the structural and ideological relations which initially engendered such inequalities. An example of this lack of analysis of power relations comes from one Anglo writer's depiction of local ethnic relations: "As for Chama's personality, its special character springs from a blend of strong midwest Anglo and Southwest Spanish heritages blended so well within the last quarter century that neither culture dominates or struggles to dominate."⁵⁷

Another difficulty with culturalist arguments is that they are undergirded by a static conception of cultural change. The issue of "cultural preservation" is particularly important in that it assumes that Hispano culture can or will die. By casting Hispanos as soon to be extinct people, it overlooks the fact that Hispano culture will continue to develop and evolve as long as there are people who identify as Hispano, regardless of where they live and work.

Anthony Bebbington has pointed out the complex ways in which "tradition" serves to inform the present, particularly in the quest for ecological legitimacy and cultural authenticity.⁵⁸ By pointing out how "tradition" can be used to overturn prevailing power relations, for example, we can avoid seeing minority cultures as either static and unitary (some activists' interpretation) or as embarked on unidirectional assimilation (modernist interpretation). Yet, by consistently stressing "traditional" culture, Ganados obscures both the phenomenal job it has done and also how the success of the project itself testifies to contemporary Hispano culture and its environmental ethic. Ganados is a remarkable example of cultural change within the context of

⁵⁷E. Daggett, *Chama, New Mexico: Recreation Center, Its History, Industries, Recreations* (Albuquerque: Starline Corporation, 1973), p. 42.

⁵⁸Bebbington, *op cit.*, 1993.

inequality. It blends new and old by creating a viable alternative. It has successfully reclaimed a maligned cultural heritage and identity, but its operation draws upon the latest marketing innovations and technologies, scientific resource management, and academic arguments.

The fact that Ganados' dominant discourse is rooted in a series of problematic cultural formulations illustrates the extent to which structures of inequality set the terms of resistance. However, it is also worth noting that all the critiques of this strategy are largely theoretical, with *potentially* adverse consequences. In contrast, the use of culturalist arguments has resulted in real material gains. Finally, while I believe that all of the critiques are valid to varying degrees, inherent in them is the belief that the actors are not aware or conscious of the strategies they are using. Conventional critiques of strategic essentialism almost assume that marginalized groups are defined by romanticized discourses, regardless of other practices. Perhaps it is time to reconsider strategic essentialism in light of the goals and ambitions of marginalized communities. In some instances, it is difficult to imagine a strategy of resistance which does *not* use the master's tools.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to show not only the need for poor rural populations to establish ecological legitimacy, but also the role of culturalism in developing this legitimacy. Ecological legitimacy is, I believe, a useful framework to understand romanticization, or other strategic tactics used by those fighting for environmental justice. I have pointed out that it was useful in the public relations arena, but it was absolutely essential in order to challenge the dominant interpretation of Hispano grazing. Even though Ganados was not successful in changing WMA grazing policy, it waged an important battle and challenged conventional ideas about resource use, poverty, culture and social justice — one that could not have occurred if Ganados had not established its ecological legitimacy.

The use of culturalism in the development of ecological legitimacy is situationally specific and reflects a particular form of oppression, exoticization. Culturalism is not a strategy available to those of despised and denigrated cultures, such as inner-city African Americans or recent Mexican immigrants. Other groups will develop moral authority based on other aspects of their experience. Given the material and ideological forces shaping Hispanos' lives, including their insertion into a tourist-economy, their relatively long history in the area, their attachment to a particular landscape, and the nature of Hispano poverty, it is hard to see how culturalism would *not* have emerged as an

important element in the formation of an oppositional discourse. Nevertheless, a remaining political task is to devise nonessentialist bases for moral authority when there is an option to do so.

While some instances of romanticization and strategic essentialism result in disaster,⁵⁹ Ganados is not such a case; overall, Ganados has been able to use strategic essentialism in a careful and responsible way. Moreover, it has not prevented the cooperative from working closely with other communities, such as the Navajo, in creating other rural cooperatives. Perhaps of greatest concern is the short-changing of contemporary Hispano culture. It is true that Ganados springs from a long tradition of resistance, and its vision of development draws from the past — but neither of these facts should reduce Ganados to an historical preservation project. The leadership required to undertake such an initiative, the level of commitment among cooperative members, their desire to protect a beloved landscape, and members' eagerness to build a viable economy for themselves and their children, are all striking features of contemporary Hispano culture. Yet, much of this gets lost in culturalist arguments. Conversely, perhaps this is a relatively small price to pay when, by actively reshaping their material world and relations, Ganados is building a rare example of social and environmental justice, which in turn, is creating a new Hispano culture.

⁵⁹For an interesting example, see H. Rangan, in Friedmann and Rangan, eds., *op cit.*, pp. 155-181.

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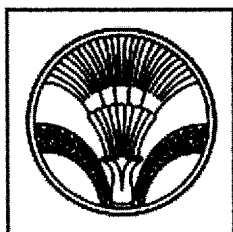
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