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Mexican and Chicana/o Environmental Writing: Unearthing and Inhabiting

Both Mexican and Chicana/o literatures offer significant insights and challenges for environmental thought, especially for the ways that ecocriticism has understood environmental writing up until now. Each emerges from a distinct vantage point on either side of the United States–Mexico border, but they remain linked by common bioregions, immigration exchanges, and some shared narrative traditions. At this preliminary moment in the study of environmental themes in Mexican and Chicana/o literatures, any concise summary will fall far short of the abundant potential in both sets of writings. Even so, certain thematic elements emerge to make them both indispensable and easily applicable in any course concerned with environmental literature. This essay showcases the way both these literatures engage a social-justice agenda, the legacy of the Mexican Revolution, and the political ecology of dispossession. And yet each literature exists in, and pushes the limitations of, a particular critical context.

Mexican Environmental Literature: Nature, Political Ecology, and the Literary Imagination

Environmental literature is not an established term in studies of literature in Spanish. Consequently, there is no corpus in Mexican literature already

recognized as environmental literature.¹ Plenty of environmental literature of course exists, if we follow Scott Slovic's definition, which he developed when facing the same problem in Tokyo more than a decade ago: "Do you have any traditional writing that deals with seasonal change, fishing, walking, farming, or hunting? Are animals ever mentioned in Japanese literature? Butterflies or stars? . . . You see, all of that is what we mean by environmental literature" ("Love" 17). For the purpose of this introductory essay, however, this definition is too broad. Lawrence Buell's definition of an "environmental text" as one characterized by the implication of human and natural histories, environmental ethics, and the environment as a process rather than as a constant (*Environmental Imagination* 7-8) helps us better narrow the selection of authors and titles concerned with the impact of environmental crises and influenced by environmental perspectives. We, however, tweak this definition in at least two important ways. We include some figures in the Mexican environmental imagination despite their limited affinity with current environmental ethics and visions of the human and the nonhuman. Additionally, we approach Mexican environmental literature as a process marked by three characteristics: its imbrications with nonenvironmental problems, its shaking of certain conceptions about the relation of literary creation and tradition to the world, and its renewal of the recurrent Mexican literary tradition of appropriating or engaging in dialogue with indigenous and pre-Columbian traditions.

The most significant environmental issues that have marked literary and artistic production in Mexico are soil erosion, deforestation, flooding, water pollution, destruction of biodiversity, demographic pressure, and the issues of political ecology in which all the above are involved. By *political ecology* we mean the question of how the access, use, and control of environmental resources are decided by and shared among different social actors. Accordingly, a central force in Mexican environmental literature responds to ideas of modernization and of development understood in particular as large-scale industrialization, urbanization, and centralization—a model that was consolidated in the period from 1940 to 1970. The overwhelming growth of Mexico City is particularly important for understanding the Mexican environmental imagination because it not only became the object of ecological concerns since the 1970s but also was the center of a media that since then has reported on environmental crises and contributed to environmental awareness (the term *ecocide* was coined in those years and in that context). Paradoxically, then, it was Mexico City that triggered

several environmentalisms that attracted the attention and involvement of literary authors since the mid-1980s. An exception to this statement would be the region of Chiapas, in southern Mexico, where local awareness responded to the region's environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity and engaged with the idea of sustainable development, a political ecology developed on behalf of indigenous and peasant groups and aimed at the reappropriation of traditional knowledge and identity.

Pre-Columbian Mexican Literature

These texts are in fact not pre-Columbian but postconquest literature. Of the almost five hundred codices, or painted books, known to exist, only fourteen are considered pre-Hispanic. A few of the surviving pre-Hispanic texts were first collected in codices and studied during the sixteenth century by missionaries or by indigenous intellectuals themselves (O'Connell 9). Their cosmology has been invoked recurrently in modern Mexican literature, such as the dual nature of a supreme creator, the four or five successive ages of creation, and the important figure of Quetzalcoatl as both god and culture hero (O'Connell 13). Titles to keep in mind from the Mayas are the *Popol Vuh* (the text of which was set down by indigenous authors in the 1550s; see Tedlock); the Books of Chilam Balam, a group of seventeen books of which the best known is *The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*; and the *Annals of the Cakchiquels*, also called "Memorial de Sololá." Regarding Nahuatl culture, in his *Literaturas de Mesoamérica*, the scholar Miguel León-Portilla recovers a number of *cuícatl* (song, hymn, poem) with themes such as the joy of spring and of being alive, songs of flowers and friendship, the speculation on death, and the transitory nature of life. Other sources, translated into English, are León-Portilla's *Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico*, John Bierhorst's *Cantares Mexicanos: Songs of the Aztecs*, Gordon Brotherston's *Image of the New World: The American Continent Portrayed in Native Texts*, J. H. Cornyn's *The Song of Quetzalcoatl*, and Edward Kissam and Michael Schmidt's *Power and Song: Poems of the Aztec People*.

The Colonial Period

The chronicles of the discovery and conquest of Mexico, or New Spain, written mainly by Spaniards, articulated debates analogous to current

debates on modernization and development and in fact still inform these debates (Dowling 31–41). One of the first chronicles is the *Cartas de relación* (1519–26), by Hernán Cortés (1485–1547), which marks a curious beginning. These five letters, addressed to the emperor Charles I, manifest a utilitarian appreciation of nature that contrasts with the sense of wonder in the face of the New World that characterized earlier accounts, such as Christopher Columbus's. When America, a land radically different from what was known to the Europeans, was discovered, Cortés portrays it for the first time as a land similar to Europe and Spain. Challenging visions such as Cortés's, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (1478–1557) devoted his *Historia general y natural de las Indias* ("General and Natural History of the Indies") to American geology, flora, fauna, and depiction of the Amerindian. Although only a part of this multivolume work deals specifically with Mexico, it is peculiar, among many other reasons, for bringing together human and natural history under two different visions: pessimism of history, optimism of nature (Gerbi 358–59).

Other important sources of Amerindian cultures were produced in this period (Dowling 38–39). Bernardino de Sahagún's (1499–1591) *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (*General History of the Things of New Spain*) recorded explications of certain native codices, cultural practices, and religious beliefs and transcribed more or less verbatim what the Native "informants" actually said. Diego Durán (1537–88) emphasized analogies between Indian and European society and religion in his *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España y Islas de Tierra Firme* ("History of the Indians of New Spain and the Islands of Terra Firme"). The *Historia* is a series of three books available in English as *Book of the Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar* (the first two books), and *The Aztecs: The History of the Indies of New Spain* (third book).

Mexico City makes its first appearance with Bernardo de Balbuena's (1561?–1627) *Grandeza mexicana*, a poem on the origins and topography of the city, its buildings, arts, and festivities. Although it presents the city as an Arcadian paradise, it does so by erasing the Amerindian (Dowling 47–48). Almost two centuries later, Francisco Javier Clavijero's (1731–87) *Historia Antigua de México* ("Ancient History of Mexico") illustrates a significant moment in history when the pre-Columbian past; the mixing of races, or *mestizaje*; and the land, animals, and inhabitants of Mexico are becoming part of an identity that would soon become a catalyst for the process of political independence from Spain (Dowling 71).

The First Wave of Modernization: Realism and Modernismo

The literary movements of realism and naturalism in Mexico were framed by the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1909). Under Díaz, Mexico went through an intense process of modernization, including the industrialization of Mexican agriculture initiated when the doors to foreign investors and colonists were opened (Martín-Flores 113–14). At this time, seventy-five percent of all Mexicans lived in rural farming and ranching areas. The minority was composed of small landowners; the majority was made up of sharecroppers or contract laborers exploited by wealthy landowners who, by the closing years of the Díaz regime, controlled eighty percent of the national territory. José López Portillo y Rojas (1850–1923) describes the conflicts over the possession of land in his *La parcela* (“The Piece of Property”). However, the literature is usually focused on the feudal landowner who administers people’s lives and honor. Despite this criticism, racial prejudices; rejection of the city and praise of the countryside; and the erasing or masking of the specific traces of contemporary economic, political, and social events are common, as in Rafael Delgado’s (1853–1914) *Angelina* and *Los parientes ricos* (“The Wealthy Relatives” [Martín-Flores 116–17, 120]).

Modernismo is a name and chronology for a style of writing, mainly poetic, that is generally agreed to have prevailed from the 1880s to the 1920s, which “purified romanticism and absorbed prevailing French influences” (B. Lewis 139). A group of lesser-known *modernista* poets revived a classical environment of greenery, quiet, and balance. The initial desire in *modernismo*, however, was to build an alternate reality through art in response to the dysfunctions that scientific positivism and capitalism fostered in society (B. Lewis 140–41, 144). Agustín Cuenca (1850–84), in poems found in *Las cien mejores poesías mexicanas modernas* (Castro Leal) and in *La lira mexicana* (1967), blended the human and the environmental in the *modernista* ethos: the detachment of the artist from society leads to the poet’s yearning for an integration into nature’s forgetfulness. In María Enriqueta Camarillo’s (1872–1968) *El secreto* (“The Secret”) and *Álbum sentimental*, the garden, the wood, the grove, and the path are retreats as much as passageways to a dark knowledge. Laura Méndez de Cuenca (1853–1928), in *Mariposas fugitivas* (“Fugitive Butterflies”) and *Simplezas* (“Nonsense”), shares with other modernists a high regard for the landscape, “where the beloved

is sought and the first steps toward cosmic transcendence are taken" (Lewis 156). Carlos Pellicer (1899–1977), who was not a *modernista* in a strict sense and who was under the influence of the avant-garde movements, deserves a special mention for his *Material poético* ("Poetic Material") and especially for his early poetry, since while rejecting the materialistic-technological age he resorts to its language for describing nature with sensuality and joy.

The Mexican Revolution and Its Aftermath

The novel of the Mexican Revolution can be reread from the point of view of postrevolutionary political ecology, or the process of land use and control that followed the revolution of 1910. The period was marked by a devastating process of soil erosion and deforestation, and the tension between large-scale and small-scale development of natural resources. The genre started with Mariano Azuela (1873–1952) and *Los de abajo* (*The Underdogs*). The larger frame of postrevolutionary corruption is well represented in the work of Gregorio López y Fuentes (1897–1966). In *Tierra* ("The Land") he helped fashion the image of Emiliano Zapata in postrevolutionary Mexico. *El indio* (*El Indio*) tells a story of dispossession as outsiders force the indigenous community to work as guides in the search for exploitable resources and move to possess the Indians' ancestral land. Agustín Yañez (1904–80) published another classic much later that also revealed renewed tensions with modernization, coming from Mexico City or the United States, in a small town in *Al filo del agua* (*The Edge of the Storm*). Juan Bustillo Oro (1904–89) offers us an unusual contribution from theater with his *San Miguel de las Espinas: Trilogía dramática de un pedazo de tierra mexicana* ("San Miguel of the Thorns: A Dramatic Trilogy about a Parcel of Mexican Land"). Set in the 1920s and 1930s, the drama is about a dam that is supposed to bring relief and prosperity to the peasants of San Miguel, a dry and hot desert ranch in northern Mexico. It brings, instead, violent death and bloodshed (Nigro 220–23). During the postrevolutionary years, the connection between nature, indigenous cultures, and national identity was elaborated by essayists such as Alfonso Reyes (1889–1959). His "Visión de Anáhuac" (1917) uses the valley of Anahuac, or Mexico, as the emblematic essence of a Mexican identity based on the synthesis of the peculiarities of Mexican geography and history (Stabb 319–20). He suggests not that there is a rigid geographic determinism in Mexican identity but that a link exists between the Mexican of today and the pre-Columbian

Indian because both peoples had contended with the same natural environment. In his "Discurso por Virgilio" ("Speech in Honor of Vergil"), Reyes surprisingly argues that the Western tradition, and the classics in particular, is not "foreign" to the American scene but is in fact a tool for revealing what is genuinely autochthonous (Stabb 320).

The genre of the novel of the Mexican Revolution continued even as development became entrenched in the country. Several fictions are set in the 1930s and 1940s, when efforts were made to implement the reforms of the revolution but landowners struggled to block and evade change. Juan Rulfo (1918–86) added to the corruption a serious dose of skepticism in the first decade of modern "development" with *El llano en llamas* ("The Burning Plain") and *Pedro Páramo*. The endemic soil erosion and flooding of the postrevolutionary period are well illustrated in both books. In *Los recuerdos del porvenir* ("Memories of the Future"), Elena Garro (1920–98) displays a lyric style for describing the natural world of Ixtepec, a small rural Mexican community, while at the same time tells the familiar story of dispossession. The confluence of political ecology and conflictive ethnicities and views of nature is at the center of the early literary career of Rosario Castellanos (1925–1974). *Balún-Canán* (*The Nine Guardians*) and *Oficio de tinieblas* (*The Book of Lamentations*) are the two novels of her Chiapas cycle. Carlos Fuentes (1928–) arguably closed the cycle of the novel of the Mexican Revolution with *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (*The Death of Artemio Cruz*), which illustrates the accumulation of large holdings of land by using the laws, bureaucracy, and rhetoric of the revolution's land reform. The dramatic genre also has a presence with the work of Felipe Santander (1935–2001). In his *El extensionista* (*The Government Man*) a newly graduated agronomist is sent by the federal government to teach the *campesinos* of Tenochtlén how they really should be doing their farming. He witnessed and took a stance against the corruption and abuse of the local officials with the blessing of their counterparts in Mexico City (Nigro 223–24).

The Capitalization of Mexico City

Between 1950 and 1990, Mexico City went from two to twenty million inhabitants. Fuentes recorded that process in *La región más transparente* (*Where the Air Is Clear*). The nation stopped being imagined in terms of the rural environment and started to be mediated by Mexico City, which was receiving emigrants from every corner of the territory, including the

vast majority of the authors that will be included in this and the next sections, even as migration to the United States intensified. With a growth of such magnitude and speed, the ideal of the urban collapsed. No longer the privileged space of the domination of nature and social exchange, Mexico City became the saddest possible symbol of the disaster hiding behind the myth of unlimited growth. The concept of development itself went under scrutiny (Stabb 328–29). The collapse of the urban also progressively represented the demise of the novel as the genre for representing the new totality of the city. The shorter and less prestigious genre of the chronicle would be the one to bring a solution to a city already perceived as fragmented, disseminated, and incomprehensible (Muñoz, ch. 1). Along with ecological concerns, the chronicle focused on new lifestyles and subcultures. The tragic events on the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, on 2 October 1968, marked the end of any optimism about a developed and democratic Mexico City. Elena Poniatowska (b. Paris; 1932–), in *La noche de Tlatelolco* (*Masacre in Mexico*), records the repression of tens of thousands of protesting students, workers, and intellectuals by the army on that infamous night. Poniatowska chronicles other crises of Mexico City in *Fuerte es el silencio* (“Silence Is Strong”), and *Nada, nadie. Las voces del temblor* (“Nothing, Nobody: The Voices of the Earthquake”). The emblematic representation of the contemporary chronicle is Carlos Monsiváis (b. Mexico City; 1938–). In Monsiváis, the end of expectations of the city coincides with the fantasy of technology, the consolidation of mass media as an institution of social mediation, and the surge of the “ecology of fear,” or “*imaginación del desastre*,” the final and total ecological collapse of Mexico City. Monsiváis’s most important collections are *Días de guardar* (“Days of Obligation”), *Amor perdido* (“Lost Love”), *Entrada libre; crónicas de una sociedad que se organiza* (“Free Entrance: Chronicles of a Society Organizing Itself”), *Escenas de pudor y liviandad* (“Scenes of Decency and Frivolity”), and *Los rituales del caos* (“Rituals of Chaos”). A collection of his chronicles and essays translated into English is available in *Mexican Postcards*. Other voices have followed Monsiváis’s example, but they have produced perspectives of their own regarding the impact of development and globalization. Gabriel Zaid (b. Monterrey; 1934–), in fact, in his *El progreso improductivo* (“Unproductive Progress”) displays his perspective on and portrays the humor of the worship of *desarrollismo* and proposes unusual alternatives for the needs of a Third World country (Stabb 333–34). In José Joaquín Blanco (b. Mexico City; 1951–), the city is the collapse of modernity, the indifference in face of colonialism by means of the

neoliberal free market, and the disintegration of the national in the hands of the transnational mass media. In *Función de medianoche* ("Midnight Show"), *Cuando todas las chamacas se pusieron medias de nylon* ("When All the Girls Wore Panty Hose"), and *Un chavo bien helado. Crónicas de los años '80* ("A Cool Kid: Chronicles of the 1980s") Blanco's approach to representing the city recalls the nineteenth-century flâneur that goes around the city discovering it sensually, against the logic of efficiency and velocity and without embracing a particular image of the totality. Finally, Juan Villoro (b. Mexico City; 1956–), who, in *Los once de la tribu* ("A Tribe of Eleven"), unmasks the complicity of nationalist discourses and the discourses for the integration of Mexico into the global world. "Fictions," rather than effective proposals for overcoming the conflict between tradition and modernity in Mexico, in fact reveal that this conflict will take a new form, or start a new chapter.

Ecocide and Unearthing

Octavio Paz (1914–98) published, by the time he became the 1990 Nobel Laureate, two books in which he evaluated the legacy of the twentieth century, the end of the cold war, and the implications of the world's ecological crises. Those titles are *Árbol adentro* (*A Tree Within*) and *La otra voz. Poesía y fin de siglo* (*The Other Voice: Essays on Modern Poetry*). At the dawn of a new era, or at the return to practicing forgotten or repressed traditions, Paz dares to propose the idea that poetry has a role in figuring out our times. "Almost 90 percent of his poetic production," concludes Adriana García, "reflects an obsessive need to re-create the cosmos; to find the Word; the expression that will capture the ever-changing yet permanent face of nature; to understand why the essence of the universe can only be achieved by translating the intangible that lies within the context of opposites" (199).

Paz summarizes some trends in Mexican poetry since the 1940s, including the pervasive impact of environmental crises and the contexts to which they belong for the relation between poetry and the world. It started as early as Efraín Huerta (b. Guanajuato; 1914–82), another influential figure in Mexican poetry. Since he wrote *Los hombres del alba* ("Men from Dawn") and *El Tajín*—evident also in his *Poesía completa* ("Complete Poetry")—Huerta has been concerned with the pollution of Mexico City and other elements contributing to its destruction: inequality in the distribution of wealth and the exploitation of the masses (García 194). Other

topics in Huerta reappear in later poets, such as the preoccupation with universal destruction, represented by Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and with the coincidence between the fate of modern-day Mexico and the fate of destruction faced in the indigenous past. José Emilio Pacheco (b. Mexico City; 1939–) further addresses the connection between the ecological crisis and poetry raised by Paz. Progressively in Pacheco's work, his faith in the eternal cycles of nature and in the poetic tradition that speaks to it disappears (Binns, "Landscapes" [2002] 113). Key titles are *Los trabajos del mar* ("The Labors of the Sea"), *Tarde o temprano* ("Sooner or Later"), *Ciudad de la memoria. Poemas 1986–1989* (*City of Memory and Other Poems*), *Album de zoología*, and *El silencio de la luna* ("Silence of the Moon").

Homero Aridjis (b. Contepec, Michoacán; 1940–), like Pacheco, demonstrated in his works a shift in interest from the cosmic, and the awareness of a holistic interconnection between the human and the nonhuman world, to the dilemma of poetry after the loss of such connection caused by environmental crisis. Polluted rivers, sick trees, species in danger, apocalyptic warnings, and nightmare images of Mexico's future characterized his latest poetry: *Imágenes para el fin del milenio and Nueva Expulsión del Paraíso* ("Images for the End of the World and New Expulsion from Paradise"), *Tiempo de ángeles* ("Time of Angels"), *Ojos de otro mirar* ("Eyes Belonging to Another Gaze"), and *La montaña de las mariposas* ("The Mountain of the Butterflies"). Aridjis's novels *La leyenda de los soles* ("The Legend of the Suns") and *¿En quién piensas cuando haces el amor?* ("Who Do You Think of When You Make Love?") are set in Mexico City, in the year 2027, a year that coincides with the end of the Era of the Fifth Sun in the Aztec calendar. In both novels the city is on the verge of ecological disaster, and corruption, crime, drug trafficking, kidnapping, rape, and prostitution are rampant. And yet there is room for redemption in the forthcoming Era of the Sixth Sun (Binns, *Callejón* 144–48).

Dystopia and the crisis of the literary tradition are present too in other writers. In *La gota de agua* ("A Drop of Water"), by the novelist and playwright Vicente Leñero (b. Guadalajara; 1933–), water shortages and other changes in the urban ecology of Mexico City are juxtaposed with criticism of a host of other problems: an ineffectual bureaucratic system that seems to be set up not to function, inept technological solutions, and creative writing done completely removed from the surrounding reality. Fuentes's insistence on the persistent underlying pre-Columbian cosmologies in modern Mexico is made explicit with Mexico City's ecocide in his novel *Cristóbal nonato* (*Christopher Unborn*). The plot is set in 1992, after

a fictional environmental disaster that would have taken place in 1990, although the establishment of corruption and political stagnation has managed to survive the catastrophe.

Carlos Montemayor (Parral, Chihuahua; 1947–) has journeyed from the countryside back to the indigenous peoples of Mexico through the experience of the city. *Abril y otras estaciones (1977–1989)* (“April and Other Seasons”) collects three already published books of Montemayor’s poetry and adds a new, previously unpublished collection, *El cuerpo que la tierra ha sido* (“The Body That the Land Has Been”), made up of poems that explore “land” as a way of being, a forgotten sensation in the body for those living in a state of alienation in the city. In recent years, he has been dedicated to the publication of indigenous literatures. A novelist, too, his novels tackle issues of political ecology in northern Mexico as well the relation between labor and nature. *Mal de piedra (Blood Relations)* and *Minas del retorno (Gambusino)* focus on the life and death of miners in northern Mexico.

The year of 2004 witnessed another environmental struggle in Huatulco, Oaxaca, where Leonardo da Jandra (b. Pichucalco, Chiapas; 1951–) and his wife, the painter Agar García, have lived since 1979. Both artists joined local communities in defending the land from a megaproject that would transform a natural reserve into a tourist resort. Jungle and literature have mingled too in Da Jandra’s own fiction, which includes *Entrecruzamientos* (“Crisscrossings”), *Huatulqueños* (“People from Huatuko”), *Arousiada* (“The Saga at Arousa”), *Los caprichos de la piel* (“Whims of the Skin”), and *Samahua*. The connection among Chiapas, where Da Jandra was born; environmentalism; and the Zapatista uprising of 1994 is crucial in Efraín Bartolomé’s work (b. Ocosingo, Chiapas; 1950–). An environmental activist, Bartolomé too was born in Chiapas and has written on the Zapatista uprising. *Ojos de jaguar* (“The Eyes of the Jaguar”) includes poetry on reading the signs of the jungle, but mostly the poems are on the river; the humidity of the forest; and, above all, light. *Ciudad bajo el relámpago* (“City under Lightning”) and *Cuadernos contra el ángel* (“Logbooks against the Angel”) articulate the encounter with the city after leaving Chiapas. His poetry up to 1997, always related to the nonhuman, is gathered in *Oficio: Arder* (“Profession: Burning”).

Following the other migration, Alberto Blanco (b. Mexico City; 1951–) has taken residence in El Paso, Texas. Poet and author of short stories, and children’s books, most of his poetry between 1973 and 1993 has been collected in *Amanecer de los sentidos (Dawn of the Senses)*. Two basic themes in his poetry are the continuity of all living beings and of their survival and

the notion that the senses are indispensable for reaching the awareness of the interconnectedness with the nonhuman, both abilities that urban life has atrophied (Forns-Broggi 216–17). Most recent titles include *También los insectos son perfectos* (“Insects Are Perfect Too”), *El corazón del instante* (“The Heart of the Moment”), and a few bilingual editions: *The Desert Mermaid / La sirena del desierto* and *El origen y la huella / The Origin and the Trace*.

Chicana/o Environmental Literature: Contestation and Inhabitation

Some Chicana/o writers affirm generations of ancestors in the United States, some even tracing their heritage back to sixteenth-century explorers and colonials, while others have roots in families who have only recently immigrated to the United States from Mexico. Marked by its relation to dual nations and a history of colonization and imperialism, Chicana/o environmental writing narrates an ongoing contestation of lands as well as a steadfast connection to place. Chicana/o writers often articulate this vision in lines rich with imagery of lands they long to fully inhabit, ranging from fertile river valleys and expansive ranch lands to urban barrios. However, very few Chicana/o or environmental scholars have taken note. Mexican American and Chicana/o writings present views from the population that inhabited the Southwest before the United States took over in 1848, as well as from their descendants and the countless immigrants arriving in different waves of migration throughout the twentieth century. Likewise, the writers represent a wide range of experience regarding the environment: from the perspective of a landed aristocrat to the bitter intimacy of a field-worker and the reluctant alienation of the urban barrio dweller. Some of this literature is familiar to many readers, though its environmental aspects have been underestimated until now. Still other selections are just now enjoying new readerships through recent efforts in recovery and republication of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century works.²

This brief outline emphasizes four literary-historical eras, each concerned with a particularly dynamic period in Mexican American and Chicana/o literature written since 1848; the outline contextualizes one or two examples from each era.³ These eras and genres include mid-nineteenth-century treatises and novels regarding land possession and dispossession, early-twentieth-

century nature writing, mid- to late-twentieth-century civil rights treatises and poetry, and environmental justice writing up to the present day.

1848 and Its Aftermath

The first literary-historical era follows many important events on the North American continent: New Spain's violent colonization, Mexico's independence, and the United States' takeover of half of Mexico's territory. The middle of the nineteenth century brings the Texas Revolution (1836) and the United States–Mexican War ending with the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Some of the Spanish and Mexican land grants protected under the Mexican government were challenged in the southwest territories by the new United States order.

The nineteenth-century writer and aristocrat María Amparo Ruiz de Burton (b. Baja California; 1832–95) depicts these events, which she experienced firsthand, in her novel *The Squatter and the Don*, providing apt examples of privileged California families valuing land as a resource, much to the detriment of its indigenous inhabitants, who never rise above servant status on the large ranchos. Yet she contrasts the Mexican (newly created “Mexican American”) hacendados' land use to that of the new population: Anglo-American squatters. By depicting the debates between her protagonist Mariano Alamar and the squatters on his land Ruiz de Burton vividly portrays the extensive experience *Californios* shared with the land and how they took rainfall patterns into account, imposed grazing limitations on themselves, and even predicted the future success of wine vineyards. Ruiz de Burton offers a voice from an upper-class *Californiana* perspective, and her novels confront issues of land use and human impact on environment in very sophisticated, and sometimes enigmatic, terms.⁴

Ruiz de Burton is just one among many Mexican Americans of this era writing about the struggle to keep lands, though she appears to be the only one who channeled her protests into a novel.⁵ Still, to understand the Mexican American relation to the environment, one must grasp this era's concern with land possession and dispossession, as well as the way these transitions in ownership severed the intimacy that local populations had long established with the environment. These insights can be, in part, gathered from Ruiz de Burton's novel and the countless letters and political statements written at the time. Good sources for these documents

include David J. Weber's excellent collection *Foreigners in Their Native Land* and Nicolás Kanellos's recent volume *Herencia*.

A Revolution's Influence

Mexican-Americans writing in the early twentieth century worked to make sense of the 1910 Mexican Revolution and its impact on both sides of the border. Their reflection on the revolution often emphasize land, which continued the nineteenth-century Mexican American writers' focus on possession and dispossession of territories. Yet twentieth-century writers add considerations of social justice and distributive access. Interestingly, this leads them to chronicle the relation between humans and nature, resulting in a distinctive style of nature writing. The era of Mexican American writing from the 1930s to the 1950s 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 projects that threaten traditional environmental knowledge. Specific examples would include the work of two premier chroniclers of Mexican American "place": Jovita González (b. Roma, Texas; 1903–83) and Américo Paredes (b. Brownsville, Texas; 1915–99). Both these writers hail 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 United States and el Río Bravo in Mexico. In distinctive style and method, these writers recount the human relation with the land in this fertile valley, recording the experiences of those closest to it: farmers and *peones* (ranch hands). And just as postrevolutionary Mexican environmental writings depict tensions between large- and small-scale development, so do the Mexican American writers.

Jovita González's research as an anthropology graduate student at the University of Texas during the 1920s involved gathering folklore from the Texas border region, which informed the thesis she wrote for her master's degree in 1930. Then she infused these stories into various short stories and two novels, *Dew on the Thorn* and *Caballero*. 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. Her writings exhibit a rich tradition of natural history and nature writing as it occurs in oral form in Mexican American culture of the time. Her novel *Dew on the Thorn* includes scenes in which

conventional class divisions of the rancho are ignored as all persons living and working on the rancho gather around the traveling storyteller, as well as poignant moments when the local shepherd passes his wisdom along to his young companion. Paredes also contributes to an alternative mapping of Chicano narrative with his landmark study *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero*. 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. Paredes wrote *The Shadow* in the 1950s, but it did not reach publication until 1998. The novel portrays the embattled period that followed the idealistic 1910 revolution. The ideals of the revolution come through in the literature, and the novel form allows rich reflection on these ideals while communicating key environmental values and perspectives. Though the agricultural social order is idealized at this time, it is also shown to be in jeopardy because of an oncoming industrialization. *The Shadow* anticipates this transition and the nascent social- and environmental justice movements of the mid- to late-twentieth century.

Civil Rights Voices: Third Era

The middle to late years of the twentieth century see another major shift in Chicana/o literary history with the production of a civil rights movement and a new identity. The writings produced in this period, such as the poetry of Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzalez (b. Denver; 1929–2005), Lorna Dee Cervantes (b. San Francisco; 1954–), and Jimmy Santiago Baca (b. Santa Fe; 1952–) and the novel by Tomás Rivera (b. Crystal City, Texas; 1935–84) *Y no se lo tragó la tierra / And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, 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 United States 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

Aztlán 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. (Anaya and Lomelí 1)

Chicana/o youth from across the nation went to the convention in Denver, and they drafted "El Plan." The passionate language in "El Plan" betrays the Chicana/o frustrations of oppression, alienation, and dispossession and shows how the convention attendees desired enfranchisement in the form of reconnection to the environment—as property and as partner. They sought to regain control of geographic space, as a result not of firsthand experience as *hacendados* but of years of discrimination and economic injustices, to equitably distribute resources.

Baca is one of the most evocative poets from this era. His collections invite environmental readings in characteristically Chicano terms and context, invoking hybrid identity and a history of colonization as well as a dedicated pursuit of justice. 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. (71)

These lines reveal a man reflecting on 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 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" (72). 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 recreational vehicles. Both “El Plan” and Baca’s poem, along with other writings during this period, make clear that Chicanas/os long to fully inhabit their particular places, all the while making clear the ways they have nurtured these connections over long periods of time.

Environmental Justice and Aesthetics

Chicana/o writing firmly plants environmental concerns in a colonial context, past and present. For Chicana/o literature, the colonial era began when the Spanish invaded the Aztec Empire, and the legacy of occupation endures to this day, appearing now in the form of environmental injustices. The writer Ray Gonzalez strikes this note in the opening lines of *Memory Fever*, locating his memoir of El Paso and the desert in

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. (Gonzales 3)

This and other more recent Chicana/o cultural productions of the late 1980s and 1990s dialogue, directly as well as figuratively, with the environmental justice movement in works such as Ana Castillo’s (b. Chicago, 1953–) *So Far from God*, Cherríe Moraga’s (b. Whittier; 1952–) *The Last Generation*, Gloria Anzaldúa’s (b. Jesus Maria of the Valley, Texas; 1942–2004) *Borderlands / La frontera*, and Helena María Viramontes’s (b. Los Angeles; 1954–) *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Key to these recent writings, largely Chicana-feminist in nature, is a questioning of national borders and consideration of global economy’s impact on individual women’s lives. These are vital issues when considering environmental justice, and these writers tell these necessary stories with beautiful style that is not afraid to confront difficult issues. Castillo tells of a woman who becomes contaminated from factory work, develops cancer, and inspires a community response; Moraga considers the ways that oppression imposes violence on the Chicana/o relation to the land; Anzaldúa relates her personal experiences of reluctant alienation from her environment along the United States–Mexico border as well as her work to recover intimacy; and Viramontes tells the tragic

story of a boy who suffers from pesticide contamination and of the girl who comes of age when she faces the barriers that keep her from helping him survive. These writings are plainly honest about the injustices happening every day, yet these authors refuse to give up struggling and attest to their hope with passionate and lyrical portrayals. In "There Must Be Something in the Rain," the singer-songwriter Tish Hinojosa tells the story of a little girl's death (the result of pesticide contamination) from the naive perspective of her young brother. His initial impression that the rain poisoned his sister shifts as the verses slowly 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." 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." So too remains the commitment of Chicana/o writers.

Concluding Remarks: Just a Beginning

Alienation in the city, or on the United States-Mexico border; the embracing of or the resistance to living without national boundaries; the common need to address the local in the global; the claim of a hybrid ancestry and identity, accompanied by the painful game of memory and oblivion—all these themes speak to a shared but overlooked environmentalism in both traditions and a shared legacy of underlying currents for contemporary Mexican and Chicana/o literatures. They speak, too, of joint themes with other North American environmental writing, such as the overlooked resonance with Henry David Thoreau. He built his log-cabin retreat at Walden Pond when the United States 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" (Walden [ed. Rossi] 226). Nevertheless, *Walden* appears to be a lost volume in the Latin American library of American literature. Jorge Luis Borges, in his accomplished capacity as a librarian, had very little to say about Thoreau. Other than quoting Emerson's remarks about Thoreau, Borges could only add:

In 1845 he retired to a cabin on the shores of the solitary Walden Pond. His days were spent in reading the classics, in literary composi-

tion, and in the precise observation of nature. He was fond of solitude. On one of his pages we read: "I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude." (27)

This is all Borges has to say, as if Thoreau's insistence, in the first chapter of *Walden*, "Economy," on the alienation of work and division of labor in capitalist society, on the absurdity and cruelty of the economy of growth, on colonialism and world commerce as worthy of condemnation, and his scathing criticisms of the "lettered man" and of the educational system were something alien to other literatures of the Americas. Opening up the literatures of the Americas for environmental study, each in its respective context as well as together for its shared themes, not only contributes vibrant voices from Latinas/os and Latin America but also offers a dynamic new context for *Walden* and other landmarks of environmental writing. Fresh sounds of resonance, and dissonance, remain to be heard from environmental writings across the Americas, past, present, and future.

Notes

1. We are grateful to Brian Gollnick, from the University of Iowa; Danny Anderson, from Kansas University; and Jeremy Larochelle, at Rutgers University, for providing us with interesting suggestions included here.

2. The Recovering the United States Hispanic Literary Heritage project recovers, indexes, and publishes lost Latino writings from the colonial era through 1960. More information is available online at www.arte.uh.edu/recovery.

3. One may find in-depth analysis of select texts in the articles by Blend; Flys-Junquera; Herrera-Sobek; Lynch; Platt; and Ybarra.

4. For further studies on Ruiz de Burton's rich and challenging texts, see Aranda ("Contradictory"; *When*) Bost; and Montes and Goldman's recent collection of critical and pedagogical essays.

5. Ruiz de Burton's letters are also a rich source of information about land-grant disputes. See Ruiz de Burton, *Conflicts*.

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Edited by

**Laird Christensen,
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and Fred Waage**

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