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Source: *Social Problems*, Vol. 40, No. 1, Special Issue on Environmental Justice (Feb., 1993), pp. 108-124

Published by: University of California Press on behalf of the Society for the Study of Social Problems

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3097029>

Accessed: 09/10/2008 14:57

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# The Garden and the Sea: U.S. Latino Environmental Discourses and Mainstream Environmentalism\*

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*The "environment" is a cultural construct which is shaped by shared life experiences and which differs with ethnicity. Environmental justice requires attention to divergent environmental constructions. U.S. Latino environmental discourse differs from mainstream discourses, but is rarely heard. This paper sheds light on U.S. Latino environmental discourses by examining ideal landscapes, explanations for decline, and the relationship of the environment to ethnic identity. Latino discourses suggest the need to reexamine the environment/technology relationship, the importance of social class in shaping environmental consciousness, and the limits of impact assessment as a tool for achieving social justice. Sociological tools for retrieving Latino environmental discourse include literary criticism and analysis of Latino environmental social movements. The former helps to identify the cultural content of different environmentalisms and to clarify relationships between culture and environment; the latter indicates the political potency of different elements of Latino environmental discourse.*

Dominican immigrant Daniel Perez recently brought joy to New York City by planting corn.<sup>1</sup> He thought he might get into trouble for his act; in fact, a parks employee did object, but the general sentiment was favorable. On no-man's-land, a median strip on Broadway at 153rd Street, Perez had sown a useful and, in his eyes, beautiful crop. It was part of his individual beautification project.

All I saw was bottles, old newspapers, garbage and weeds. I took a large garbage bag and cleared the land. I planted with the idea that this is my own little contribution, my own little Cibao [the verdant agricultural heartland of the Dominican Republic] (Myers 1991:B5).

Remarkably, while a few ears disappeared, the crop was treated with respect by neighbors and passers by. Corn was not Perez' first or only crop. In 1990, he cultivated garlic and tomatoes with the corn; the year before he grew black beans and shared the harvest with neighbors. But these crops were neither as visible nor as fraught with symbolic significance as corn—the crop of America's indigenous civilizations.

Perez' act constitutes one of numerous steps, however tentative, taken by Latinos to reconquer New York City's hostile environment. There have been other steps as well, some

\* This research was supported by a grant from the Cornell University Center for the Environment and a postdoctoral fellowship at the Cornell University Society for the Humanities. It builds upon the collective insights of an interdisciplinary reading group at Cornell on this topic; of the students in my seminar on Landscapes of Domination, Landscapes of Imagination; and of the participants in a 1992 conference on Environment and Latino Imaginations sponsored by the Hispanic American Studies Program at Cornell. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the support of co-conspirator Debra Castillo, Romance Studies, Cornell University. Elizabeth Davey, Marisabel Rodriguez, and Ana Echevarria helped to inform this essay by keeping me in touch with the movement. An earlier version of this paper was presented in the Special Session on Environment and the Grassroots: The Dynamics of Race, Class, and Gender, at the 86th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Cincinnati, Ohio, August 23-27, 1991. The views expressed in this article are the author's alone and do not necessarily reflect Ford Foundation policy. Correspondence to: Barbara Deutsch Lynch, Latin American and Caribbean Programs, The Ford Foundation, 320 East 43rd Street, New York, NY 10017.

1. Accounts of Perez' achievement appeared in the New York Times (Myers 1991a, 1991b). National Public Radio's News Program, All Things Considered, covered the story 14 August, 1991.

acknowledged and even supported by city government. The Crotona Community Coalition, under the leadership of Dominican Astin Jacobo, has created new spaces in the South Bronx by reclaiming redlined housing, by turning empty lots into community gardens, and by constructing lighted playing fields. Puerto Rican *casitas*, family or neighborhood clubs, are reconstructions of rural dwellings and landscapes replete with chickens and vegetable gardens on empty lots in the South Bronx and other Hispanic neighborhoods. Undergirding this environmental reclamation is a nostalgic association with the “*jibaro*,” the small, independent peasant from the hills of Puerto Rico (Vázquez 1992). New York City’s Operation Green Thumb and the New York Botanical Garden’s Bronx Green-Up have supported Latino gardening efforts with cheap land leases and elephant dung (Raver 1991:C4). The benefits that New York’s Latinos<sup>2</sup> claim to derive from these activities shed some light on their particular environmental values. Puerto Rican cultivator José García learned about tomatillos from his Mexican neighbor. “Every night,” he says, “I come home and work in the garden, breathe the fresh air. Sometimes I fall asleep out here. My wife doesn’t even know where I am.” He uses no chemicals on his crop.

Chemicals can kill the flavor. I work in the market at Hunt’s Point. You see these tomatoes, so nice, but not natural. They use gas to make them red. You grow it yourself, you get something fresh.

García’s brief commentary suggests that the garden is a special space where his personal freedom is augmented. The *jibaro* yearning for a garden can be traced to the Puerto Rican immigrant community of the 1930s and 1940s, as attested to in the memoirs of the thoroughly urban nationalist and labor activist Bernardo Vega (Iglesias 1964).

A substantial fraction of Puerto Rico’s fishing population views fishing as a “therapeutic alternative to incorporation into the Puerto Rican economy as a wage worker” (Griffith, Valdés, and Johnson 1992). Alfredo López’ informant Doña Licha describes her feeling for fish as she spells out the links between declining fish populations and the pollution of coastal waters associated with Operation Bootstrap: “For us, fish are life. I can feel when they are biting. My heart beats faster. It’s like some communication with them” (López 1987:1). In New York, the social and psychological value of fishing is revealed in the large number of Latinos who board party boats in Sheepshead Bay and sail in search of bluefish. Party boat fishing is recreation for the poor, which fishermen justify by catching enough bluefish to share with family and friends. Recent New York State restrictions on the recreational catch have met with opposition by Latino fishermen (Lyll 1991:A23). While they support marine conservation, these fishermen argue that recreational catch restrictions will deprive them of an opportunity for contact with nature by restricting their ability to use the catch as an occasion for generosity to family, friends, and neighbors. Unless they can share their catches, they cannot justify the costs associated with their enjoyment of the sea.

These vignettes of Caribbean Latino life remind us that the environment is a social construction: a product of cultural responses to specific historical circumstances which give rise to shared sets of imagined landscapes. The garden and the sea are not only traditional sources of livelihood for the Spanish-speaking peoples of the Caribbean and real places where poor people could construct their lives at some remove from the brutal discipline of the sugar plantations, they have become symbols of resistance to the physical manifestations of political and economic power.<sup>3</sup> Just as the emotional charge of the frontier, wild rivers, and redwoods in the Anglo-American imagination comes from the political content of these symbols, so the

2. I use the term Latino or U.S. Latino to refer to both Spanish-speaking and English-speaking peoples of Latin American and Puerto Rican descent living in the United States as well as the descendants of Mexican residents of those parts of the United States ceded from Mexico. I use the word Anglo as it is used by Latinos—as a descriptor for U.S. residents of European extraction.

3. For a discussion of the Caribbean garden as a form of resistance see Price (1979), Pulsipher (1992), and Lynch (1992). Griffith, Valdés, and Johnson (1992) suggest an element of political resistance to the dominant economy in the decisions of some Puerto Ricans to become fishers.

force of the garden and the sea for Caribbean Latinos is related to their political significance. But, as with the frontier, the political meaning of the garden and the sea may shift. It varies even within the U.S. Latino population and its component ethnic groups. It is around such powerful, but ambiguous symbols that environmental discourses are built.

If environmental discourses are culturally grounded, they will differ in content along class and ethnic lines. Where power in society is unequally distributed, not all environmental discourses will be heard equally. Thus, questions of environmental justice must address not only the effects of particular land uses or environmental policies on diverse groups in society, but the likelihood that alternative environmental discourses will be heard and valued. As Wilson concludes, "the culture of nature—the ways we think, teach, talk about, and construct the natural world—is as important a terrain for struggle as the land itself" (1992:87). In this essay, I sketch some outlines of distinctly Latino discourses on the environment; I suggest why, if these discourses are to be heard, they will need their own history; and I outline a program for constructing that history with the aid of U.S. Latino literary works. When coupled with analysis of U.S. Latino environmental social movements, literary criticism can help shed new light on the cultural content of different constructions of environmentalism and thus clarify the relationship between nature and culture. At a more practical level, it provides the researcher with appropriate cultural tools to ask questions that will be meaningful in different Latino contexts.

### **Discovering Latino Environmental Discourses**

Despite the general clamor about the environment in the United States, and despite continuing Latino mobilization around environmental issues, the voices of diverse Latino populations are rarely audible. This silence not only prevents recognition of Latino environmental concerns on the part of activists and policymakers, but, perhaps more importantly, it deprives mainstream environmental discourse of concepts and perspectives that could make it more globally relevant. An understanding of the environmental perspective and values of a people within a particular resource-poor environment may help clarify the environmental concerns of other peoples from similar environments. At a more practical level, the continuing absence of Latino perspectives in environmental curricula is likely to ensure the continuing scarcity of Latinos in resource stewardship positions.

The apparent absence of U.S. Latinos from broader environmental debates is surprising given the importance of the environment in Latin American societies and cultures. Their absence is often attributed to the fact that concern with the environment is an unaffordable luxury for groups preoccupied with livelihood and basic equity issues.<sup>4</sup> Bullard (1990) gives ample evidence of the inadequacy of this explanation in his analysis of grass-roots environmental mobilization in the South. It has also been argued that, owing to their poverty, minority group members are likely to react only to immediate threats. Indeed, U.S. Latino mobilization around environmental issues often involves resistance to the siting of polluting or otherwise undesirable facilities in Latino communities. But while class, wealth, and forms of environmental activity are probably correlated, it is unlikely that socioeconomic status determines the presence or absence of environmental perspectives.

It is more plausible to suggest that because the content of environmental consciousness varies radically with cultural background, Anglo-Americans' and U.S. Latinos' concerns will be different, and the expression of even common concerns will vary. The environmental

4. Attributing short-term economic survival motives to the poor can be used to justify subversion of environmental programs as in the 1992 Department of the Interior decision to convene a special commission or "god squad" to pit the fate of the spotted owl and the California forests against short-term survival of the logging industry.

discourses of Caribbean immigrants diverge substantially from those of Chicanos and Mexican-Americans in the Southwest. The environmentalism of migrant farm workers and their descendents may be very different from that of Southwestern residents whose history has been one of a progressive loss of rights in their homeland. To borrow Scott's (1990) terms, the apparent discordance of peripheral voices only reflects the plurality of hidden transcripts and the forced homogeneity of the official.<sup>5</sup> But U.S. Latino environmental thought has several common elements that constitute the building blocks of the discourse; these include: (1) an ideal landscape against which environmental degradation can be measured, (2) an understanding of the relationship of the landscape to nation and ethnicity, (3) explanations for environmental decline, and (4) the environmental significance of the pre-Columbian past and of the American Indians as its inheritors and transmitters. Not surprisingly, these themes are tightly intermeshed.

### *The Ideal Landscape*

The ideal or utopian natural landscapes of Latino writers—whether Eden or Aztlán—are peopled and productive. Consider, for example, Fray Diego Durán's sixteenth century interpretation of the Aztec Aztlán:

Our forebears dwelt in that blissful, happy place called Aztlán. . . . On its slopes were caves or grottos where our fathers and grandfathers lived for many years. There they lived in leisure, when they were called Mexitin and Azteca. There they had at their disposal great flocks of ducks of different kinds, herons, water fowl, and cranes. . . . They also possessed many kinds of large beautiful fish. They had the freshness of groves of trees along the edge of the waters. They had springs surrounded by willows, evergreens and alders, all of them tall and comely. Our ancestors went about in canoes and made floating gardens upon which they sowed maize, chili, tomatoes, amaranth, beans and all kinds of seeds which we now eat and which were brought here from there (Durán [1581] 1964:134).

Aztlán supplied the necessities of life, but more than this, it was the fount of life beyond its bounds. Its wetland (chinampa) agriculture produced the seeds of Mexican civilization. Aztlán's profound economic significance is matched by its aesthetic qualities—the fish are beautiful, the trees tall and comely. Because Aztlán has become a central symbol of Chicano political identity in the Southwest, analysis of Mexican-American or Chicano environmentalism will require careful attention to the history of the idea of Aztlán and its influence on the construction of subsequent utopias and dystopias.<sup>6</sup> But Aztlán is only one of several ideal landscapes, some based on real places and some totally imaginary, that serve as standards against which environmental reality can be judged.

In *The Road to Tamazunchale*, Chicano writer Ron Arias constructs a very different Arcadia—the puna, a high-altitude Andean pastoral paradise which served as the geographic reference point for the novels of José María Arguedas and the Andean Marxism of José Carlos Mariátegui. Arias also delineates regions of refuge in Los Angeles, the Promised Land.<sup>7</sup> One such region is a contested landscape—the park to which his Peruvian herder Marcelino Huanca's llamas repair after a brush with freeway traffic. A second is the arroyo, a meeting place and safe haven for the neighborhood and backdrop for magical events—a freak snowfall and the temporary resurrection of a drowned wetback.

Puerto Rican novelist Rosario Ferré chooses the garden as her Arcadia. In *Sweet Diamond*

5. Scott uses the term "official transcripts" to refer to hegemonic discourse in its many forms; "hidden transcripts"—resistant discourses—surface in folk art and culture and in social movement form and ideology.

6. For an excellent series of essays on the role of the myth of Aztlán in the formation of Chicano identity in the Southwest, see Anaya and Lomeli (1989).

7. Aguirre Beltran (1979) uses the term "region of refuge" to describe the last redoubts of peoples driven from their ancestral lands—places which are often forbidding, difficult, and perhaps contested, but which offer the refugee at least some chance of maintaining his or her culture and lifestyle.

*Dust*, the garden is a landscape of nostalgia for a declining Hispanic aristocracy. Here indigenous and African elements in Puerto Rican culture merge and blossom to produce a diverse array of pleasures for the self-made landed elite of the Spanish colony:

the claret-red yautía as well as the paled, sherried golden one, the velvety kind that grew in Vieques, and the bristly, bearded one, which resembled a conquistador's pugnacious jaw and whose glories of the palate were sung by Gonzalo Fernández Oviedo . . .

the tumultuous tom tom taro roots, brought by African slaves on the wailing ships of death, which they named Nāñigo and Farafanga, Mussumba and Tombuctú, in honor of their towering raven kings . . . and which we innocently reaped from our gardens as one digs out a snow-filled mammoth's foot . . .

the poisonous treacherous cassava streaked with purple orchid's veins, which the Tainos and the African slaves used to drink when they were about to be tortured by the Spanish (1988:4-6).

Ferré's baroque description captures in a detached and ironic way the garden's productivity, its sheer biodiversity, and the cultural diversity that went into its creation. In the North American city, the garden is a multipurpose Arcadian construction. Like Arias' arroyo, it offers respite from the pressures of urban life, produces food to share with family and neighbors, offers its cultivators ties to the rural landscapes of other times and places, and is an act of rebellion against the North American definition of urban space with its clearly defined zones and segregated land uses. In short, it transforms an alienated and alienating environment into a nurturing one.

But Latino Arcadian utopias and regions of refuge—whether garden, puna, or arroyo—stand in contrast to another glittery utopia: America the “growth machine” and consumer's paradise. Silvio Martínez Palau debunks this utopia in his short story “El Reino de este mundo II” or “Kingdom Come” (1986), a fictional chronicle of Harrisburg's (and the nation's) giddy obsession with the results of a radiation leak from an employment-generating factory which produces an ever-shifting set of marginally useful gadgets. The growth machine run amok appears in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*, in the guise of the Yankee Doodle Bakery, both a product of emigré Lourdes' blind infatuation with American culture and a producer of the unending streams of sweet rolls which feed her obesity. Raymond Barrio also addresses the underside of plenty in *The Plum Plum Pickers*. His migrant pickers are alternately seduced and repelled by the perfect rows of fruit trees and suburban houses and the promises that they hold.

There is a danger of concluding that Latino ideal landscapes are less real than those that serve as references for Anglo environmental discourse. The pristine wilderness, the English Arcadian landscape, and the unpeopled frontier are also cultural constructions. Yet, differently imagined ideal landscapes offer differing definitions of environmental good and evil to be used as measures of decay and standards for achievement. In the case of U.S. Latinos, these landscapes work in ambiguous ways. Although the garden's perfection is marred by the apple and the serpent, North American dystopias still hold the promise of a better life. But, even if their content is ambiguous, these ideal landscapes constitute focal points around which nationality and ethnicity are defined.

### *Nature, Homeland, and Ethnicity*

Whether in Europe, India, or the Western Hemisphere, environmental thought is almost always tightly connected to the closely related concepts of homeland and landscape. Bramwell (1989), for example, locates “ecologism” within a context of Northern European nationalism and nativism. Environmental concern within the homeland rises as old landscapes are despoiled or appropriated, but for those in a strange land it may focus on the desire to alter an alien landscape to make it conform more closely to the imagined homeland.

Thus, U.S. Latino environmental perspectives are the products of the juxtaposition of landscapes of memory with the concrete landscapes of immigrant life. This juxtaposition lies at the core of much of Martín Espada's poetry,<sup>8</sup> Aurora Levins Morales' essay "Puertoricaness" (1991), Vector Hernández Cruz' poem "Snaps of Immigration" from *Red Beans* (1991), García's novel *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), and, from an earlier experience, Ernesto Galarza's *Barrio Boy* (1971). These perspectives, defined and redefined in a context of migration, reflect the circumstances of the diaspora. Contrast, for example, García's reaction to the Cuban landscape:

There's a magic here working its way through my veins. There's something about the vegetation, too, that I respond to instinctively—the stunning bougainvillea, the flamboyants and jacarandas, the orchids growing from the trunks of the mysterious ceiba trees (1992:235)

with her description of trees growing in Brooklyn:

Down the street the trees are imprisoned equidistantly in square plots of dirt. Everything else is now concrete. Lourdes remembers reading somewhere about how Dutch elm disease wiped out the entire species on the East Coast except for a lone tree in Manhattan surrounded by concrete. Is this, she wonders, how we'll all survive (1992:129)?

Aurora Levins Morales makes a similar comparison:

The mulberry trees of Chicago, that first summer, had looked so utterly pitiful beside her memory of flamboyant and banana and . . . No, not even the individual trees and bushes but the mass of them, the overwhelming profusion of green life that was the home of her comfort and the nest of her dreams (1991:12).

Migration may be associated with an emphasis on "happier" rural environments of times past coupled with a heightened consciousness of particular patterns of environmental degradation that have impelled exodus. It may also provoke contemplation about the root causes of those changes and of the differences between the landscapes in which migrants find themselves, those which they had expected to find, and those left behind. New York's casitas are built manifestations of this consciousness.<sup>9</sup> Vázquez (1992) finds that by evoking a landscape of nostalgia, the casita provides a commentary on the economic processes that impelled the diaspora as well as the inadequacies of the built environment in the new land.

Where migrants were drawn to the promise and glitter of the U.S. economy, the ideal landscape may have little to do with that which was left behind. For example, Arias's depiction of the Mexico from which his Quixotic hero Fausto emigrated is bleak, dry, harsh, and strewn with natural obstacles. This depiction is a powerful reminder of Durán's account of the lands encountered by the Aztecs after traveling south from Aztlán:

The weeds began to bite, the stones became sharp, the fields were filled with thistles and spines. They encountered brambles and thorns that were difficult to pass through. There was no place to sit, there was no place to rest; everything became filled with vipers, snakes, poisonous little animals, jaguars and wildcats and other ferocious beasts. And this is what our ancestors forsook. I have found it painted in our ancient books ([1581] 1964:134).

Whether a product of necessity, force, or part of a process of self-realization, of gaining knowledge of the broader world, of becoming a man or a woman, migration is often the context in which ethnicity is expressed. And, central to migrant definitions of ethnicity are the

8. See especially "Puerto Rican Autopsy" from *Immigrant Iceboy's Bolero* (1986), "Justo the Painter and the Conquest of Lawrence" from *Rebellion in the Circle of a Lover's Hands* (1990).

9. Casitas, literally little houses, tucked away in corners of Spanish Harlem and the Bronx, are nostalgic recreations of jibaro dwellings used as refuges from street life and as cultural centers dedicated to the maintenance of Puerto Rican identity.

imagined landscapes of the past, the forces that have changed them and impelled migration, and the concrete landscapes in which cultural adjustments are constantly made.

Not all U.S. Latinos are migrants. Some are colonized peoples subject to a political and economic order imposed as a result of the Mexican-American and Spanish-American Wars. In Puerto Rico and in what is now called the American Southwest, environmental agendas may be tied to movements for independence and the restoration of prior rights in or control over lands and water. López (1987) found in the 1980s that the leading environmentalists in Puerto Rico linked environmental destruction and North American colonization and aligned themselves with the movement to declare independence from the United States. Ferré makes the same connection in *Sweet Diamond Dust*, but she presents a more complex picture, associating environmental nationalism with aristocrats who lament the disappearance of the garden with the advance of industrial sugar production and their own marginalization as a class. The lives of the poor, in contrast, improved measurably as a result of the political changes that produced this degradation. In this colonial society, those whose power derived from exploitation of people and the landscape eventually became spokesmen for the environmental status quo. The ambiguous relationship between colonial domination and environmental protection pervades Puerto Rican attitudes toward El Yunque, the island's highest mountain and largest rain forest (Latoni, Valdés, and Rodríguez 1992) and may be permitting the growth of a nonaligned Green movement on the island. For example, chemist Nefalí García, a supporter of independence in the 1980s, sought to build a broad environmental coalition by running as an independent candidate in the 1992 Puerto Rican Senate race.

Environmental struggles in what is now the Southwestern United States are largely centered on competing Anglo and Hispanic land and water uses, on the abrogation of the land grants to Mexican settlers and the aboriginal land rights of Spanish-speaking indigenous populations, fencing of the range by Anglo settlers, appropriation of range lands by Anglo farmers and later by the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management, and exclusion of Hispanics from lands to which they had customary rights (Knowlton 1972; Peña 1992; West 1982). The Chicano movement's reconceptualization of the Southwest as Aztlán, the Mexican homeland to be reconquered, can be seen as a product of this history of environmental struggle (see Chávez 1984). A second product, an outgrowth of the first, is the Ganado del Valle's challenge of Forest Service grazing policy and the environmental logic that undergirds it (Peña 1992; Pulido 1992).

Literary responses to the imposition of Anglo social institutions on the Southwest reveal the links between environmental change and threatened identity. Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) contrasts two natural economies—the small Mexican farming community and the open-range pastoralism of the vaquero—with the environmental destruction that followed the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. In *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987:9), poet and essayist Gloria Anzaldúa encapsulates this process in telling her family's history:

In the 1930s, after Anglo agribusiness corporations cheated the small Chicano landowners of their land, the corporations hired gangs of *mexicanos* to pull out the brush, chaparral and cactus and to irrigate the desert. The land they toiled over had once belonged to many of them, or had been used communally by them. Later the Anglos brought in huge machines and root plows and had the Mexicans scrape the land clean of natural vegetation. In my childhood I saw the end of dryland farming. I witnessed the land cleared; saw the huge pipes connected to underwater sources sticking up in the air.

Just as landscape has played a key role in the definition of nationalism and ethnicity, conversely, ethnicity has been a major factor in the evolution of Latino environmental thought. Ideas of nature have been central to definitions of the state and to the delineation of its powers and obligations and those of its subjects or citizens. Creation of Spanish colonial societies in America was surrounded by lively debate over the natural rights of indigenous peoples over their lands and the conditions under which these rights might be abridged

(Pagden 1990). Central to that debate was a discussion of which kinds of property might be appropriated for individual use and which must be reserved for the commonweal. Inherent in the Spanish political theory of the colonial era was the Thomist conception of moral economy—that the right to satisfy necessities takes precedence over rights to private property. This vision of the moral economy appears in common property arrangements and in Spanish water law which grants priority to domestic water needs and to production of limited quantities of corn. Even where land grants have been ignored and the commons privatized, irrigator associations (*acequias*) have succeeded in strengthening ethnic identification through participation in water management and in using the combined resources of identity and an institutional base to push forward environmental programs (Peña and Gallegos forthcoming).

### *Causal Explanations of Environmental Degradation*

In Latino writings, the forces behind environmental degradation may be as subtle as the serpent in the garden, urging Latinos to taste progress—to achieve, to get ahead, to poison themselves amid plenty. Or they may be quite simply, if not simplistically, seen as the legacy of conquest and, later, North American domination. The deepest roots of Latin American environmentalism then, come from resistance to conquest. This resistance developed in the early twentieth century within the broader framework of political and philosophical indigenism; its contemporary manifestations are to be found in rural and urban “new social movements.” Understanding land use history, patterns of competition over natural resources, and political economy in Latin America are keys to understanding U.S. Latino environmental perspectives. The quincentenary has drawn our attention to the relationship between conquest and environmental degradation. Yet, if the ecological consequences of the European “discovery” of this hemisphere are clearly outlined by Crosby (1972) and others, the identification of European civilization as the source of decline gets fuzzy. A fundamentally reactionary fraction of the environmental movement in Latin America looks back not to the pre-Columbian community, but to the self-sufficient hacienda as Eden as it identifies North American economic imperialism as the culprit. It is not clear to what extent this vision of utopia finds its way to the North. A more radical stream of Latin American environmental thought shares the reactionary’s view of degradation, but looks for reversal of the process in a reforging of national and ethnic identities and the creation of locally appropriate technologies and environmental management practices.

### *Indians as Environmental Guardians*

Indigenism remains a salient feature of environmentalism in mainland Meso- and South America. The biodiversity of the Maya household garden and the Andean potato patch have been carefully catalogued. Latin American social and agricultural scientists are resurrecting pre-Columbian agricultural technologies and reintroducing native species to restore highland agroecosystems (e.g., the Maya Sustainability Project in Yucatán; Centro Maya in Guatemala, the Community Land Use Management Project in Ecuador). The Kayapó, the Yanomami, the Cuna, and the Shuar—not to mention caboclo rubber tappers—are portrayed in the North and South as guardians of the rain forest. The environment is a potent political resource in the hands of these groups, and conversely, Indian identity is a resource that can be mobilized in defense of the environment (Fisher 1991; Hecht and Cockburn 1989; Stocks 1991). Anzaldúa (1987) and Jaimes (1991) seek to mobilize resources in defense of the disempowered and the environment through recognition of the indigenous in the borderlands mestizo(a), and Puerto Ricans are using symbols of Taino (pre-Columbian Indian) past to bolster their environmental claims (Ferré 1988; Latoni, Valdés, and Rodríguez 1992) But, it is easier to make environmental claims based on ethnicity as an aboriginal than it is as a mestizo or as the inheritor of Taino

symbols and artifacts, so claims based on aboriginal rights may be less useful for U.S. Latinos than for Native Americans.

### **Mainstream and Latino Environmentalism: Points of Divergence**

The building blocks of Latino environmentalism are not in themselves very different from those upon which Anglo environmentalism rests. But it is the content of those blocks that shapes environmental thought. Thus, a key question is the degree to which U.S. Latino environmental perspectives diverge from Anglo or mainstream discourse, which also shows considerable variability.<sup>10</sup> Below I discuss some of the major points of divergence between the two broad types of environmentalism.

#### ***Technological Approaches to Environmental Problem-Solving***

The writings of López, Ferré, Barrio, Anzaldúa, and Martínez Palau reflect a general Latin American understanding that environmental problems are inseparable from the social and political systems in which they are embedded. The dominant society makes rhetorically justified technological choices with environmental implications. Because Anglo society is fundamentally extractive, its technologies will also be extractive. The problem of pesticide abuse, for example, cannot be solved through education or improved technologies, but only through massive changes in the international structure of agriculture. The poisoning of farm workers in California is as much a part of the Central Valley scene as the relentlessly ripening fruit—so perfect, so abundant, and so demanding. Nowhere is the irrelevance of “education” to Latino lives better portrayed than in *The Plum Plum Pickers*, where the sterile and plastic language of extension bulletins is juxtaposed with the agonized thoughts of Chicano pickers:

At

HERE are some suggestions to increase your income:

\*

USUALLY you will pick from two rows, called a claim. Carry 4 to 6 empty boxes to your claim and scatter them along the rows. When you have filled all your boxes, carry a full box to the end of your claim and bring back more empties.

times, Alberto did find himself wondering what, if anything, was wrong with picking wild fruit. Or feeding you family. Or even living off the world. Was there something wrong with that? Fruit grows free and wild, bananas, mangos, coconuts (Barrio [1969]1984:148).

The bland language of instruction and advice is designed to legitimate the technologies and conceal the system which gives rise to them. By means of the bulletin, the state as agent for

10. I use the term mainstream environmental discourse to cover the writings and public statements of interlocking although often conflicting institutions. This group includes large and well-established environmental advocacy groups like the World Wildlife Federation, the Nature Conservancy, the Sierra Club, the Environmental Defense Fund, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and the Audubon Society; university programs and departments of environmental studies, ecology, natural resources, and environmental toxicology; local, national, and international governmental agencies charged with environmental protection or mitigation—for example, the U.S. Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Agency for International Development, United Nations Environmental Programme, the Food and Agricultural Organization, the World Bank and the independent and semi-independent contractors who serve them. These entities certainly do not speak with one voice, but they tend to speak with an authority on environmental matters that derives from the center rather than from representation of the decentered perspectives of U.S. Latinos. However, some groups work closely with Latino environmentalists. Earth Island Institute's Urban Habitat Program includes Latina staff and works closely with Bay Area Latinos. Greenpeace has supported El Pueblo para el Aire y Agua Limpio in its campaign against Chemwaste. Finally, federal minority hiring practices have meant at least the occasional voicing of Latino perspectives in government agencies.

the growers, relieves itself of the burden of environmental mitigation by assigning responsibility for proper use of a potentially degrading technology to those who had little to do with its creation. Barrio's pickers never completely buy in to this logic.

Environmental protection efforts embedded in an Anglo context often suffer from overreliance on technical criteria in decision making, coupled with an ignorance of the social dynamics that surround the process. This approach can backfire in other cultural settings as in the misguided efforts of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to save the endangered Puerto Rican parrot by shipping the remnant population to Houston (Latoni, Valdés, and Rodríguez 1992). In a climate of scientific uncertainty, a group called Friends of the Parrot (Amigos de las Cotorras) used the language of colonialism and nationalism to mobilize support for the Forest Service's position that the parrot remain in an island aviary. "As a response to the historical appropriation of resources, science, ideology, objective discourse . . . and minds . . . by the U.S. in Puerto Rico, the group Amigos de las Cotorras proposed to appropriate the parrots through political action and symbols" (Latoni, Valdés, and Rodríguez 1992:12).

### *Wilderness or Garden*

Anglo-American environmentalists tend to dichotomize man and nature. Nature is that which has not been touched by the hand of man.<sup>11</sup> The wilderness is pristine; it is empty. In the Anglo-American vision, protecting nature means protecting it from predation by humans. The 1964 Wilderness Act describes wilderness as a place where "man is a visitor, but does not remain." The wilderness celebrated by Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Edward Abbey is so different from Arias' pastoral landscape, from Ferré's lush garden, and Durán's productive and peopled Aztlán. Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* can be read as a protest against Anglo dichotomization of man and nature; it provides an understanding of this dichotomization as product of the destruction of the natural economy caused in large measure by Anglo occupation of the Southwest (Saldívar 1990). These differing views of wilderness have divergent implications for managing protected lands; implications which appear to be better understood in Latin American contexts than they are in the United States.

### *Environment and Livelihood*

Chambers (1987) distinguishes environmental movements in the First and Third Worlds by identifying the latter as livelihood centered. Similarly, Martínez Alier argues that the "ecological movements of the poor have emerged from struggles for survival" (1991:101). Too often, however, the livelihood approach to environmental problems degenerates into a Maslovian ordering of basic needs that ignores the aspirations and values of the populations at risk and trivializes the debate.

Livelihood issues are important to U.S. Latino populations. Concern about limitations on the recreational bluefish catch in Atlantic coastal waters is one such example. Yet even this debate shows that the distinction between "recreation" and "livelihood" is a slippery one. The joy of going out onto the ocean to wrestle with the feisty bluefish comes from contact with nature, but seeking that joy may be justifiable only when it can bring benefit to the collective. Giving fish to family and neighbors may be legitimate as well as intensify the natural experience. How different this is from the Anglo ideal, where the ultimate destination of the fish is unimportant compared to the contest itself.

Focusing on the livelihood aspects of environmental questions may do the same injustice to Latino perspectives as an exclusive focus on aesthetic or spiritual aspects. Shifts in the logic of production, such as those described by Anaya, Galarza, and Anzaldúa in the Southwest and

11. I use the word man consciously here. In the Northern environmental tradition, there is also a tendency to associate nature with the feminine. For a brief history of this idea, see Bramwell (1989).

by Ferré and López in the Caribbean, are as much spiritual and aesthetic assaults as economic upheavals. The aesthetic perversions required by the economics of environmental degradation, nowhere better rendered than in the savagely funny "El reino de este mundo II," are nothing less than cultural assaults (Martínez Palau 1986). As Peña and Gallegos (forthcoming) argue, U.S. Latino efforts to protect the environment are also efforts to preserve Latino culture and political institutions.

### *Environmental Justice and the Limits of Impact Assessment*

In the United States, the place of diverse groups in the framing of environmental debates should be central to the notion of environmental justice. To the extent that Anglo-American environmentalists have begun to consider the place of minority issues in the broader environmental agenda, it has been largely to emphasize the deleterious impacts that certain programs, policies, and practices—e.g., siting of toxic waste facilities—have had on poor, minority populations. And indeed, minority groups throughout the United States have in the past decade begun to apply skills acquired in civil rights movements, the labor movement, and in the management of poverty programs to redressing imbalances in the distribution of environmental hazards (Bullard 1990; Suman 1992). But looking at the impact of environmental ills or mitigation programs on U.S. Latinos solely in terms of end points determined by Anglo environmental agendas only perpetuates the silence of Latino voices on the environment and postpones fundamental changes in the U.S. environmental discourse.

Where mainstream and U.S. Latino environmental discourses diverge, the former tend to prevail. As students of the Chipko Movement to preserve forests for water, fuel, and fodder and its Indian antecedents have discovered, the environmental and livelihood concerns of the dominated are often ignored if not undermined by the conservation and environmental programs of the dominant (Guha 1989; Sharma, Pandey, and Nautiyal 1983). So too, the prevalence of Anglo environmental discourse in the United States keeps other environmental goals, priorities, and issues off the agenda. This happens where science is contested, as, for example, in the ecological debates pitting the Ganados del Valle cooperative and Savory's (1988) holistic range management strategy against the Nature Conservancy's attempts to keep the sheep from the Sargent Wildlife Area "common" (Peña 1992). It also happens during impact assessment proceedings: a major complaint lodged by El Pueblo para Aire y Agua Limpia, a grass-roots environmental organization formed in Kettleman City, California to protest an incinerator installation, was that community hearings were structured to prevent comments from the Spanish-speaking participants. Spanish translation was provided only in the back of the meeting hall, where participants would be unable to make their questions heard (Davey 1991).

In sum, U.S. Latino environmental perspectives are sometimes informed by the political and economic conditions that provoked diaspora and by a desire to recapture landscapes of memory and myth. Others are forged out of the will to maintain cultural and social institutions in the face of economic marginalization and political conquest. What differentiates U.S. Latino environmental perspectives from those of the Anglo-American mainstream is an unwillingness to sever people from the landscape, the technological from the political, or the environment from cultural identity. Environmental justice requires that environmental changes be assessed from multiple perspectives and that alternative discourses on the environment be heard.

### **A Research Agenda**

A necessary first step in ensuring that divergent environmental discourses are audible is to construct their histories. While the history of environmental thought in the United States

and Western Europe is amply documented, the contributions of Latin American and U.S. Latino writers to its development are largely ignored. For example, Bramwell's (1989) and Worster's (1977) histories of the growth of ecological thought in the West deal with totally distinct sets of scientists and philosophers, however, neither includes a single Latin American or U.S. Latino scientist, economist, or philosopher. The role of Western European and Anglo-American literature in shaping environmental consciousness in the United States is ably documented by Nash (1973; 1990) and by Burch (1964). The latter examines the synthesis of opposing vocabularies of nature, one of which stresses domination and the other appreciation and symbolic importance. Again, references to Latino or Hispanic understandings of nature and ideal landscapes are absent. A notable exception to this pattern of exclusion in the environmental canon is Catalan Martínez Alier's *Ecological Economics* (1987), a study which includes North American and Latin American discussions of Andean land management practices.

One approach to the history of ideas is to sift through literature in search of statements that form a coherent progression of thought on a given subject. Patterns of opposition and synthesis similar to that outlined by Burch are present in U.S. Latino literature and history. But here the opposition may well be between the imaginary landscapes of memory, nostalgia, and hope and the more sordid landscapes of reality—wasted forests; fenced ranges; fields of cotton, fruit, and vegetables reeking of pesticides; the armed border with its maquiladoras, brothels, and shantytowns; squatter settlements nestled in San Diego County gulches which lack water and sewers; crowded inner city slums. Or, increasingly, the opposition may reflect dualisms created by migrants as they arrange their lives on both sides of an overdefined border (Rouse 1991). What is needed then is systematic analysis of these and other oppositions and their syntheses in ethnicity and social movements; an analysis designed to make U.S. Latino environmental perspectives and concerns accessible to a predominantly non-Latino, non-Spanish-speaking audience of social and environmental scientists.

For most U.S. Latinos, Walden Pond and Glen Canyon are less crucial as referents than the fruit and vegetable farms of California's Central Valley, the grazing lands of the arid Southwest, the hillside farms of Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, and Caribbean fisheries. Equally foreign to U.S. Latinos are the Costa Rican and Amazonian rain forests around which northern environmental efforts in Latin America are centered. Latin American literature is full of environmental commentary, but it may be as questionable to reconstruct U.S. Latino environmental perspectives from Latin American writings as it would be to assume shared Anglo and Latino environmental epistemologies. Unlike those of their Latin American counterparts, U.S. Latino environmental perspectives are the product of a tension between remembrances of places lost and the reality of an alien but often promising landscape.

As the examples cited earlier demonstrate, U.S. Latino writers like Puerto Ricans Rosario Ferré, Martín Espada, and Alfredo López, and Colombian-American Silvio Martínez Palau, as well as frequent visitors like Uruguayan Eduardo Galeano, address the social dynamics and the symptoms of environmental decline in the United States. Even a cursory literature review reveals that the apparent silence of U.S. Latinos on environmental issues may be due more to our failure to listen and to understand the language of the debate rather than to the failure of Latinos to speak, and even a brief encounter with U.S. Latino writers enables us to revise our geographies of environmental awareness.

A more thorough survey of the U.S. Latino literature should help the non-Latino scholar to better understand the landscapes of Latino memory, the environments with which they must cope in the present, and those that inform their utopian visions. These discourses are often couched in terms of an attachment to a particular landscape—e.g., El Yunque, the Dominican coffee plot, the Cuban coast, the Andean puna. Such landscapes, so often idealized as memory, subvert reality and stand in contrast to the dirty but vibrant urban environments where the migrant is always a stranger. To interpret these Latino environmental discourses

and make them comprehensible to others requires familiarity with the theoretical and methodological tools of the humanities.

A second task in the construction of a history of Latino environmental discourse is to relate the opposition of imagined landscapes and real physical environments to individual behaviors and social movements among Latinos in the United States. Major social movements in Latin America have had at their core a concept of landscape, and in that sense nearly all movements have been environmental. Colonial reorganization of rural landscapes incited individual acts of resistance and rebellion (Spalding 1984; Stern 1987). Nineteenth century reorganization of landscapes into henequen and sugar plantations in Yucatán and Morelos produced both redefinitions of ethnicity and violent social upheaval (Galarza 1971; Knight 1986; Reed 1964; Warman 1980; Womack 1968). Industrial development, road building, and land clearing in Brazil (Fisher 1991; Hecht and Cockburn 1989; Mendes 1989) and Guatemala (Arias 1990; Menchú 1984) have produced significant social movements associated with reassertions of ethnicity.

Similarly, in the United States, 1960s social movement leaders Reies Lopez Tijerina and Cesar Chávez used Latino consciousness of environmental injustice in their attempts to forge ethnic solidarity (Nabokov 1969). Chávez has broadened United Farmworker campaigns to address toxic risks faced by farm worker communities as well as agricultural workers. More recent Latino environmental activities, like new social movements elsewhere, are also multi-purpose—grounded in community and informed by the politics of everyday life. Ganados del Valle's sheep raising activities are part of a larger program of land claims, generation of employment, and community development. The Mothers of East L.A., which initially organized around a prison siting issue, defines its mandate as improving the community's quality of life (Suman 1992). In its successful opposition to the Vernon Incinerator, which pitted it against the California Department of Health Services and the Environmental Protection Agency, the Mothers of East L.A. defined the siting of socially or environmentally undesirable facilities in Latino neighborhoods as environmental racism. A similar perspective has informed the campaign undertaken by the Albuquerque neighborhood of Sawmill, supported by the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP), against pollution from a local particle-board plant; the El Pueblo para el Aire y Agua Limpio's objections to siting a Chemwaste incinerator in Kettleman City, California; and formation of the El Puente Toxic Avengers in opposition to a proposed incinerator in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn (Davey 1991; Suman 1992).

While Latino environmental activities are firmly rooted in community, they are more than NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) movements. Latino activists have been able to forge grass-roots links with other Latino communities. The Mothers of East LA worked with El Pueblo para el Aire y Agua Limpio in its battle against Chemwaste. Despite its fortifications, the U.S.-Mexican border is permeable, and El Pueblo is working with Mexicans who are also mobilizing against proposed Chemwaste installations. Latinos are also making common cause with other ethnic groups over environmental issues. Central to the El Puente Toxic Avengers' challenge to siting an incinerator in Williamsburg has been opening a dialogue with the Williamsburg Hassidic population, despite continuing tensions between Latino and Hassidic residents (Luis Garden Acosta, personal communication, 1 May 1992). Astin Jacobo, leader of the Crotona Community Coalition in the South Bronx, insists upon transcending ethnic difference in environmental transformation projects (Astin Jacobo, personal communication, 2 May 1992).

Latino environmental activism also reflects the discourse emerging from Latino literature. Latino writing is generally overtly political; links between writing and activism are frequently strong. *Barrio Boy* and *The Plum Plum Pickers* were in many respects products of the farm worker movement and reflect its early concerns. These novels have in turn have been widely anthologized and have become part of an alternative canon. Their impact upon subsequent

generations of U.S. Latino activists may be considerable. Poet Martín Espada is a tenant lawyer, whose poetry reflects his activist experience as it captures with brutal economy the real and imaginary environments of the Latino poor in northern cities, in the fields, and in the war zones of Central America. But these works not only comment on activist experiences, they are part of a program for continuing environmental action.

Finally, environmental discourse is discernable in the built environment. The casitas and garden plots in the city are individual statements which add up to broader social movements. They are critiques of Anglo spatial organization of the urban environment which continue to inform municipal programs and policies in New York City. The complex political symbolism of these constructions, however, can be much more easily understood by the outsider in the context of the rich literary imagery surrounding the garden and the jibaro.

Thus, much can be gained by examining the interaction between environmental consciousness, as expressed in literature and ethnic and class-based social movements. The research agenda outlined above addresses the articulation of environment and ethnic identity. In bringing literature to bear on the sociological analysis of environmental issues, this kind of research would also make a methodological contribution to the field of environmental sociology.

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