Waging War on Nature: Ecospaces, Ethnoecologies and Chicana/o Writings

Sophia Emmanouilidou

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece.

Abstract

Since the rise of El Movimiento in the 1960s, Chicanas/os have negotiated space (urban, rural and the wilderness) as central to la raza’s struggles for legitimate citizenship in the U.S. Chicana/o ecowritings reach beyond attempts at self-definition, and construe the natural world as a battleground for the enactment of a relentless war that western civilizations have waged on both nature and indigenous cultures. The aim of this paper is to pinpoint the interrelated themes of trauma and disenfranchisement in contexts of environmental exigency and colloquy (i.e. ecodestruction and environmental racism). If greening societies is an ethical reassessment of human praxis (classified among the so-called practices de la liberación), environmental writings take the ecophilosophical angle as an essential tactic for the democratization of world affairs. Accordingly, this paper discusses Chicana/o thinkers and writers who tackle the spatio-temporal hermeneutics not in the traditional channels of collective awareness, but in the composition of ecowritings as an expression of political insurgence or as a defensive strategy in the war on nature.

Keywords: Ecocide, Ethnoecology, Ecocriticism, Chicana/o Literature.

Introduction: From Anthropocentrism to Transcultural Ecoawareness

The history of life on earth has been a history of interaction between living things and their surroundings. To a large extent, the physical form and the habits of the earth's vegetation and its animal life have been molded by the environment. Considering the whole span of earthly time, the opposite effect, in which life actually modifies its surroundings, has been relatively slight. Only within the moment of time represented by the present century has one species—man—acquired significant power to alter the nature of this world.

(Rachel Carson, Silent Spring 23)

Paul J. Crutzen’s groundbreaking findings on the detrimental impact that human activity has had on the ecosphere established the geological chronology of the Anthropocene Epoch. An atmospheric chemist and the 1995 Nobel Prize winner in Chemistry, Crutzen affirmed humanity’s interference with the climatic, biological and
inorganic composition of Earth.\textsuperscript{1} Crutzen’s thesis of a human-dominated environment has given rise to numerous scientific measurements and field analyses of ecocide. For example, Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin define the Anthropocene as an era marked by profound changes in the physical world, changes that alter all spheres of Earth (i.e., the biosphere, the hydrosphere, the atmosphere and the lithosphere). For Lewis and Maslin, the global environment has been transformed despite the fact that:

\begin{quote}
[h]uman activity has been geologically recent […]. The magnitude, variety and longevity of human-induced changes, including land surface transformation and changing the composition of the atmosphere, has led to the suggestion that we should refer to the present, not as within the Holocene Epoch […] as within the Anthropocene Epoch. (171)\textsuperscript{2}
\end{quote}

But apart from pointing out extensive ecological destruction, the Anthropocene Epoch has influenced numerous philosophical, cultural and political accounts of existence. This paper explores the theme of historical trauma in connection with natural spaces, ecological damage and environmental racism. Taking as a point of departure the Western world’s ecodestructive practices, this paper emphasizes the importance of environmentalism in academic curricula and discusses cultural identity in conjunction with the materiality of nature. Finally, this paper puts forward the transcultural possibilities of Chicana/o ecothinking and claims that Chicana/o environmental writings supersede the limitations of ethnoracial identity politics.\textsuperscript{3}

---

\textsuperscript{1} For a concise introduction to Paul J. Crutzen’s life accomplishments and contribution to Environmental Studies, see Crutzen and Brauch’s \textit{A Pioneer on Atmospheric Chemistry and Climate Change in the Anthropocene}.

\textsuperscript{2} Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin review “the historical genesis” of anthropogenic interventions in the physical world (171). The novelty of their work is that they reject industrialization as the onset of the Anthropocene. Instead, they retrace the beginnings of ecocide in the colonization of the Americas. Lewis and Maslin claim that “[t]he arrival of Europeans in the Caribbean in 1492, and subsequent annexing of the Americas, led to the largest human population replacement in the past 13,000 years, the first global trade networks linking Europe, China, Africa and the Americas, and the resultant mixing of previously separate biotas, known as the Colombian Exchange. One biological result of the exchange was the globalization of human foodstuffs. The New World crops maize/corn, potatoes and the tropical staple manioc/cassava were subsequently grown across Europe, Asia and Africa. Meanwhile, Old World crops such as sugarcane and wheat were planted in the New World. The cross-continental movement of dozens of other food species (such as the common bean, to the New World), domesticated animals (such as the horse, cow, goat and pig, all to the Americas) and human commensals (the black rat, to the Americas), plus accidental transfers (many species of earth worms, to North America; American mink to Europe) contributed to a swift, ongoing, radical reorganization of life on Earth without geological precedent” (174).

\textsuperscript{3} In \textit{Trans-Americanity: Subaltern Modernities, Global Coloniality, and the Cultures of Greater Mexico}, José David Saldivar outlines his transnational approach to the borderlands which “investigates the enabling conditions of narrative by postcolonial, subaltern writers and the various ways in which their stories of global coloniality of power seek to create an epistemological ground on which coherent versions of the world may be produced” (xx). For more on geopolitics and transculturalism, see José David Saldivar’s \textit{Trans-Americanity: Subaltern Modernities, Global Coloniality, and the Cultures of Greater Mexico}.
1. Self-Identity and the Agency of the Physical Cosmos

The definitions of space introduced by Yi-Fu Tuan (1977), Victor Turner (1982), Michel Foucault (1998), Edward W. Soja (1989) and Henry Lefebvre (1991) reflect on our physical surroundings as a significant parameter of self-cognizance. The study of space elucidates the connections that humanity holds with nature, and allows the environment to emerge as a defining factor in the writing of human history. Theories of space often construe being-in-the-world through the lenses of ecocultural awareness and political ecology. It should be noted though that time or chronos is not completely dismissed in the spatial interpretations of humanity. More to the point, ecowritings shed light on the intersections of space and time. For example, in *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (2005), Lawrence Buell maintains that, although place and space are corresponding concepts, they are also distinct and their differences arise in the careful study of history. For Buell, “[p]lace entails spatial location, entails a spatial container of some sort. But space as against place connotes geometrical or topographical abstraction. […] Up to a point, world history is a history of space becoming place” (63).

The notions of place and space fully explain the connections culture holds with the environment and shed light on the political ecology that underlies our lived experiences. Buell claims that places are polysemous, multilayered, and permeable. But places are also agents of ecoawareness, or “spaces in which the human actors are still there but now inextricably entangled with the nonhuman” (Pickering 26). In fact, ecosystems compile interdependent biotic and abiotic factors (including the human species) for their composition and resilience. The environmental approach evaluates this plurality of ecological factors in the study of organic and inorganic ecosystem structure. Moreover, there are fundamental ties that attach the human to the nonhuman, which reveal a “dense network of relations” and the delicate balance of the ecological framework (Bennet 13). When judged by the current environmental crisis overtaking planet Earth, human activity certainly plays a crucial role in the modification of a biome’s spatial characteristics. The Anthropocene is an undeniable reality and a dismal omen for the future, but there is still the parameter of a landscape’s physicality *per se*, which should be analyzed as a fundamental indicator of cultural identity. And yet, we still zoom in on our anthropocentric decisions to curb pollution, maintain resources and safeguard nutrient cycles for entrepreneurial purposes and sustainable economies, instead of recognizing nature’s rights *per se* and/or the environment’s importance for the formation of indigenous ethnocultures.

Ecological writings illustrate the tactile qualities of *topos* and show that political decisions about economic growth often lead to the abuse of the physical world. Moreover, the destruction of nature for the purposes of development is a fierce attack on the environment, an attack that creates war ravaged lands. And in this context, topographies of nature pose a decentring and destabilizing way of understanding

---

4 Political ecology affirms ecoethics as a tool against anthropocentrism. Political ecologists claim that our understanding of the world should include a “conversation with those who are not ‘us.’[W]e have to strike up a coherent conversation where humans are not the measure of all things and where no one claims unmediated access to anyone else” (Haraway 174).
experience for Western frames of mind. To clarify, by decentring I mean that the ecological perspective focuses on other-than-human organisms, especially organisms threatened with extinction because of humanity’s economic progress. This method of study has the potential to destabilize the dogmas of expansion because it questions the fairness and legitimacy of developmental policies. Indeed, ecoethics draws attention to rampant industrialization, endangered flora and fauna species and ravaged landscapes, in the course of opposing the violation of nature’s rights. Similarly, indigenous populations across the planet, populations whose cultural identity is associated with specific physical surroundings, are marginalized because of a global, cultural identity that promotes consumerism and materialism. Ecoethics suggest that non-Western identities get caught up in a series of binaries, including peripheral vs. mainstream lifestyle, industrial vs. natural environs, cosmopolitan vs. local practices. From this perspective, indigenous people around the world are trapped amidst varied narratives of being, threatened by a figurative war on their traditions and run the risk of losing their cultural identity.

What appears truly alarming is that even though the idea of selfhood is linked with the environment, the Humanities are still slow at incorporating the ecological lens in academic syllabi. Without ruling out principal explanations of self-identity, explanations that focus on the abstract facets of selfhood, scholarly theories often eschew the realities of our current environmental predicament. For example, history obstinately produces human-centred elucidations of citizenship or focuses on our conflicts, interactions and coalitions in order to interpret the socio-political musings occurring across the globe. As a result, academic work props up our estrangement from the materiality of space, whether it is rural, urban, industrial or natural. Unfortunately, theoretical fascination with humanity’s past histories has resulted in our disengagement from the natural world, and the formation of “ecophobic cultures, namely, cultures that posit and practice a radical contempt for every form of otherness” (Iovino and Opperman 87). For example, the bulk of historical landmark texts make reference to specific locales, but they do so in the course of assessing humanity’s presence on Earth, instead of attributing value-markers to the non-human concreteness of nature.

Val Plumwood explores the historicity of cultural binaries and disjunctions through the notion of “hyper-separation.” For Plumwood “[th]e function of hyper-separation is to mark out the Other for separate and inferior treatment. […] Colonizers exaggerate differences—for example, through emphasizing exaggerated cleanliness, ‘civilized’ or ‘refined’ manners, body covering, or alleged physiological differences between what are defined as separate races. They may ignore or deny relationship, conceiving the colonized as less than human. The colonized are described as ‘stone age,’ ‘primitive’ or as ‘beasts of the forest,’ and this is contrasted with the qualities of civilization and reason that are attributed to the colonizer” (54).

An emergent trend in Ecocriticism is material ecocriticism, which examines nature as influential agency in the creation of our world order. Material ecocriticism “open[s] up textual possibilities of the materiality created in art, culture, and literature. In its transversal analysis of materiality and of material ‘ongoing stories,’ it considers the cultural and literary potentials emerging from a natural environment in which the human agents co-exist and co-act with biological organisms that exhibit agentic capacities. But not only that: going beyond the domain of the ‘biological,’ it relocates the human species in broader natural-cultural environments of inorganic material forces such as electricity, electro-magnetic fields, metals, stones, plastic, and garbage” (Iovino and Opperman 84).
In the article “Environmental Justice and the Future of Chicana/o Studies,” ecotheorist Devon G. Peña underscores an “emerging issue [that] has to do with efforts by environmental justice groups to challenge the ‘cult of expertise’ and the ‘quantitative fetishism’ that influence most environmental impact studies and related assessments of risk” (154). Peña holds that the environmental lens is perplexing at times because research is in an “epistemological stasis,” full of “academic declarations in ever more sophisticated (and often co-opted) theoretical language” (151). Peña claims that although we encounter an unprecedented ecological emergency, academia insists on articulating it with a plethora of scientific, technological and economic data. In other words, numerous quantitative treatises define the interconnections between nature and humanity, but they do so through narratives of cataclysmic knowledge, which is quite incomprehensible to the average reader. Furthermore, Peña discusses conventional models of citizenship as part of a political scheme to eradicate communal solidarity and locally based agro-economies. He contends that decision makers for environmental sustainability do not solicit “community-based spaces for the purposes of ecosystem resilience [while] human activity continues to be represented through the ideals of consumerism, neoliberal market and global commodity chains” (152).

However, agrarian societies across the globe are all the more disillusioned by the promises of laissez-faire economy, urban development, and material comfort. In fact, this disenchantment with progress is a logical reaction to the “structural violence” that Western mentality inflicts on peripheral communities. In “Structural Violence, Historical Trauma, and Public Health: The Environmental Justice Critique of Contemporary Risk Science and Practice,” Peña defines structural violence as a blunt exercise of power, a resourceful way to implement the control of people’s lives. Peña states that structural violence is part of extended warfare for dominance, and in this context it is a tactic for the eradication of difference. According to Peña:

7 Devon G. Peña attacks postmodernism, generic criticism and generally theoretical analyses that disengage scholarly work from physical surroundings. Peña maintains that our intellectual efforts are often disoriented or distanced from the world. In his own words: “One might be right to ask: How many times do we deconstruct texts and performances before we can state that this is more an exercise in intellectual navel-gazing than a socially and politically useful way to produce knowledge — knowledge that advances the struggles of predominantly working-class and indigenous diaspora communities that are often the ‘subjects’ of popular culture students? How does deconstructing texts for the umpteenth time help us wage a concerted campaign against, to cite just one example, sexual violence suffered by Maya and Zapotec women in Juárez, Seattle, Vancouver, Chicago, or New York sweatshops, where their bodies are exploited and traumatized in a relentless assault that somehow remains below our ‘hermeneutic radar screen’?” (“Environmental Justice” 150).

8 Peña does not object to formal education and advancement, but he is deeply apprehensive of individualism. Peña states that “[he is] not against persons becoming empowered through education and economic opportunities to become independently capable of caring for themselves. There is nothing wrong with self-reliance. However, what we have in our society today is not self-reliance but the myth of the individual as a fully self-serving entity in times and under conditions that block people at every step of the way from being able to care for themselves. What I see is not self-reliance and rugged individualism but isolation and alienation from community and families. One recent study of hunger found that people, especially the working poor, are more likely to struggle on their own to find food rather than engage in a collective response to the cause of hunger, which is of course poverty” (“Structural Violence” 209).
[Structural violence] denotes a form of violence which corresponds with the systematic ways in which a given social structure or social institution kills people slowly by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. Institutionalized elitism, ethnocentrism, classism, racism, sexism, adultism, nationalism, heterosexism, and ageism are just some examples of structural violence. Life spans are reduced when people are socially dominated, politically oppressed, or economically exploited. [...] Structural violence inevitably produces conflict and, often, direct violence including family violence, intimate partner violence, racial violence and hate crimes, terrorism, genocide, and war. (207)

Peña focuses on the institutional decisions that have historically deprived grassroots populations of their ethno-ecological knowledge, and claims that materialism has turned ethnic communities into exotic pariahs or romanticized remnants of a bygone lifestyle. According to Peña, structural violence is part of a carefully planned strategy to create another binary axiom, one that distinguishes between the wealthy and the underprivileged. And what lies in the background of such social distinctions is always a set political agenda that sanctions the prosperous elite and creates hordes of maltreated non-Western communities. Peña proposes that the study of nature can withstand international politics and global markets, and suggests that environmentalism is a disciplinary precondition in the fight against injustice. He also claims that ecology offers the opportunity to understand the evils of free enterprise, with the purpose of creating a social movement that respects indigenous cultures and preserves nature. For Peña, the study of ecology enhances the democratic ethos in all academic fields by redirecting our theoretical attention to the natural aspects of life. The Chicano ecothinker holds that ecology facilitates a social movement that can resist the onslaught of neoliberalism, and “can easily be read as an antireductionist and anticapitalist discourse. [Ecology’s] texts are grounded in the opposition of civil society to environmental destruction, and they provide a radical scientific basis from which to challenge the legitimacy of the fundamental economic laws of global capitalism. Ecology as a subversive science begets environmentalism as a new social movement” (Chicano Culture 6).

2. Ecocriticism, Ethnoecology and Transnationalism

At this critical juncture of the twenty-first century, ecophilosophy, environmental justice, multicultural environmentalism and green literacy are just few of the research interests that embrace the interdisciplinary study of nature and culture. Attentive to the reality of a global scale ecodestruction, literary criticism is steadily transforming from a speculative discipline of textual analysis into the examination of the connections between culture and the physical cosmos. Thus, over the past three decades, ecocritics have been analyzing literary narratives from the perspective of green ethics, while at the same time they have been doing away with the separation of nature from culture. In fact, ecocriticism underscores the reciprocity between self-identity and the environment. And although the early orientation of ecoreading
fostered the views of Deep Ecology, recent publications and presentations in international conferences interpret ecojustice, agroecology and green literacy as informative ways to approach humanity’s affairs. Along these lines, ecocriticism construes Earth as a cultural space per se, and a compelling factor of socio-political enactment. In fact, ecocritics discuss literary narratives “in a synthesis of environmental and social concerns” (Garrard 4).

Although the term “ecocriticism” can be traced back to William Rueckert’s 1978 essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism,” the discipline did not fully attract academic interest until twenty years later. In the introduction to the seminal collection of essays The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology, Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm state that “[e]cocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of its texts, ecocriticism takes an earth centered approach to literary studies” (xviii). Drawing from this initial definition, ecocritics established the first wave of a promising school of literary criticism. For the first ecocritics, the exemplary texts for analysis depicted pristine nature (i.e., biomes, ecosystems, landscapes) as realistically as possible. The preferred critical approach focused on detailed accounts of nature in literature, and ecospaces rose to prominence. In short, the environment became a mediator of meaning in its own right, and in ways that outweighed character, subject matter or theme.

However, the first wave of ecocriticism was soon to be revised. In “Ecocriticism, Literary Theory, and the Truth of Ecology,” Dana Phillips claims that:

[i]f ecocriticism limits itself to reading realistic texts realistically, its practitioners may be reduced to an umpire’s role, squinting to see if a given description of a painted trillium or a live oak tree is itself well-painted and lively [...] Literary realism privileges description, and even the sharpest description can seem inert if it does not occur in a narrative context heightened by philosophical or psychological or political or scientific interests, which need not themselves be ‘realistic’ to have some real urgency. (586)

The obsession with realistic depictions of the natural world became a debated issue for ecocritics as they were often accused of being representatives of a white, middle-class status quo, generally worried about the environmental threats to their bourgeois lifestyle. So, under the fear of classism and/or racism, a second wave of ecocritical work emerged which considered the ramifications of technological progress for nature and indigenous populations alike. The second wave of ecocriticism looked into the

---

9 The platform principles of the Deep Ecology Movement introduce the intrinsic value of all nonhuman life, the ecocentric attitude to inorganic formations (e.g., rivers, lakes, and woods) and humanity’s commitment to curb ecodestruction. For an insightful discussion of ecosophy and green virtues, see Arne Naess’s “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary,” and George Sessions’s Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century.
unfair treatment of local communities (most often non-white), and drew from the principles of the Environmental Justice Movement. The intention of the second wave of ecocritics was to address the political schemes underlying the relationships between the natural world and human agency, and to stress the fact that ethno-racial identities are disproportionately exposed to hazardous, toxic and lethal chemicals. In short, second wave ecocritics focused on the insidious ways in which people of color were victimized by corporate interests both in residential areas and work environments. Second-wave ecocriticism pinpointed how nature (i.e., biological communities and non-living ecosystem factors) can be overexploited, used and abused in the grip of plutocracy, and asserted that the environmental discourse fully accommodates explanations of cultural identity. Accordingly, in “Some Principles of Ecocriticism,” William Howarth implies that it is only natural that nature and culture convene, and states that “[s]ince ecology studies the relations between species and habitats, ecocriticism must see its complicity in what it attacks. All writers and critics are stuck with language, and although we cast nature and culture as opposites, in fact they constantly mingle, like water and soil in a flowing stream” (69). In short, the aim of the second-wave ecocritics was to enter “cultural spaces [and] to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis” (Kerridge 5).

Shortly after the millennium, ecothinkers laid the foundations of the third wave of ecocriticism, the aim of which is to bridge the gaps between national identities, international politics, ethnicity and the material world. In a sense, the third wave of ecocriticism looks into the connections between different sets of local-based knowledge across the globe. In the seminal article “The Third Wave of Ecocriticism: North American Reflections on the Current Phase of the Discipline,” Scott Slovic imparts the new tenets of ecocriticism as “global concepts of place […] being explored in fruitful tension with neo-bioregionalist attachments to specific locales, producing such neologisms as ‘eco-cosmopolitanism,’ ‘rooted cosmopolitanism,’ ‘the global soul,’ and ‘translocality’” (7). Along the lines that Slovic draws, the popular image of the healing woman (i.e., the curandera who combats ailments with herbs in Hispanic Americas), toxic poisoning suffered by the working classes in numerous rural or urban locales, unhealthy spaces, the depletion of natural resources and environmental migration are some examples that shed light on the histories of different ethno-cultures and agro-economies around the world.¹⁰ Third-wave ecoscholars attempt to draw “the analysis of global indigenous literature away from debates about biologically based concepts of indigenous authenticity and toward alternatives to identity politics that favor coalition politics” (Adamson 3). For third-wave ecocritics, the future of environmental awareness is based on “building coalitional capacity among transnational indigenous groups” (Adamson 3). In short, their task is to chart the links between different peripheral communities on a global scale.

¹⁰ For an introduction to the transnational purport of ecocriticism, see Ursula K. Heise’s “Ecocriticism and the Transnational Turn in American Studies.”
scale and to record these communities’ common experiences with pollution, contamination and habitat loss.

3. An Ecocritical Reading of Chicana/o Writings

The Chicana/o literary canon comprises powerful testimonios of migrant farmworkers (documented and undocumented) in the agricultural industries of the USA. In particular, literary writings of El Movimiento reveal the gruesome life of Mexicanas/os and Chicanas/os as low-paid drifters in rural settings of the borderlands. The campesinas/os’ livelihood generally depended on agricultural work, so the canon’s most celebrated early writings undertake to expose the farm workers struggle for survival north and south of the border between Mexico and the USA. The politically engagé Chicana/o writings of the 1960s reveal the victimization of rural laborers by neoliberal administrators and herald some of the problematic issues that current ecodiscourse deals with. In fact, Peña advocates the transnational quality of Mexicanas/os’ demands for environmental justice with the claim that labor struggles for ecorights date back to the early 1900s in the mineworker’s strike at Cananea, Mexico. In 1906, the Mexican strikers at Cananea resumed the power to defend their rights against the American-owned Cananea Consolidated Copper Company, which promoted inequality and discrimination. Among their numerous demands, the miners called for the right to unionize, exacted their protection from hazardous working conditions and underscored the need to protect their community from toxic contamination. For Peña, the Cananea strike is “an iconic example of the deep precursor roots of the modern Environmental Justice Movement,” and the first North American social uprising that brought together the political, cultural, racial and environmental dimensions of being-in-the-world (“Structural Violence” 203). The Cananea riots is a case study that effectuates the transnational approach to labor and environmental rights, especially if we consider that the uprising in Mexico was put down with the aid of an American posse led by Arizona Rangers. The Mexican rioters led a fight for ecological democracy, but what is most compelling is the way the Cananea miners’ struggle connects with international politics. The Cananea workers faced ecological threats that ignited their reaction, but these risks were created by American entrepreneurial interests, represented an assault on nature, and gave rise to a new political identity in the borderlands of Cananea, where the South clashed with the North.

In Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, Gloria Anzaldúa defines the borderlands as a living organism, a space where different worldviews intersect and create a cultural transition. Anzaldúa claims that the borderlands between Mexico and the USA form a space of friction,

\textit{una herida abierta} [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood

\footnote{For more on class struggle in the borderlands between Mexico and the USA, see Beatriz E. De la Garza’s \textit{From the Republic of the Rio Grande: A Personal History of the Place and the People}.}
of two worlds merging together to form a third country—a border culture [...].

A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. (3)

For the Chicana thinker, the borderline is “an unnatural boundary” that ignites the mechanics of opposition between two nations. However, the liminal space between the two countries creates a powerful political ecology, one that has sustained the presence of texanos, mejicanos and los indios in the American Southwest for centuries. In the poem “A Flower,” Tomás Rivera alludes to the formation of identity in-between cultures with the poetic use of a delicate flower that is “twitching/between lives” (2-3). The flower is a colorful, vibrant organism, “sure of itself” (12), a “thinking/flower/having captured time” (9-11). Through the image of a blooming flower, Rivera creates a symbol of natural beauty that intensifies Chicana/o cultural identity in the borderlands. The conflict in the poem occurs when an “onlooker” disturbs the natural tranquility of the flower (15). Shuddering at the possibility that the onlooker “will [...] kill” it (16), the speaker introduces a hegemonic villain and the risk of extinction. The poem “Flower” masterfully transposes the merits of in-betweenness in a fragile flora species, but instead of creating a utopia for the flower, Rivera introduces the antagonistic force of the onlooker, who will readily sacrifice the flower to appease his/her despotic inclinations. In a sense, Rivera equates ecological destruction with cultural imperialism, and in this short poem he calls attention to all the flowers that have “captured the warm sun [...]and the many waves of/heat and sound” (18-20). Quite similarly, Gloria Anzaldúa’s poem “horse,” lays bare the unfair death of an animal by “tempered steel” (1.6). The “knives in the hidden hands” (1.5) are juxtaposed with the heavenly image of a “[g]reat horse running in the fields/come thundering toward/the outstretched hands” (2.5-7). Although the Mexicans of the pueblo sleep during the attack, soon the news spread that the culprits were “kids aged sixteen/but they’re gringos/and the sheriff won’t do a thing” (2.7-8). The “Chicanos shake their heads” (4.4) at the sight of the “red /pools dripping” (4.8-9) from the horse’s ears, testicles and head, but in the end they just “shuffle their feet/shut their faces stare at the ground” (4.17-18). Anzaldúa creates a powerful parallel between ecocide and racism. The great horse of the poem is unjustifiably tortured because, as the sheriff openly declares, “boys will be boys/just following their instincts” (2.8-9).

Communal life, labor rights and the politics of identity are predominant themes of the Chicana/o literary canon, especially in the texts published during El Movimiento. Barrio Boy (1971) is Ernesto Galarza’s memoir as a young child in Mexico, a border crosser and finally an American citizen of Mexican descent. Forced to abandon his village, Jalcocotán, because of the tumultuous Mexican Revolution, Ernie ventures his spatial relocation into the North. His border crossing is a rite of passage from the haven of a collective, agrarian lifestyle to an industrial cityscape. Jalcocotán, is “too high up the mountain, the connecting trails were too steep and narrow to allow ox carts and wagons to reach it. Like the forest, our only street belonged to everybody—a place to sort out your friends and your bearings if you were going anywhere” (8). But when Ernie enters the USA, he becomes acquainted with the self-reliant ways of
Americanization and is tempted to eliminate the “community-based care ethic that values collaboration, participation, and collective action” (Peña, “Structural Violence” 210). The autobiography is divided into two sections: the first is a detailed account of Galarza’s rural experience in Mexico, while the second section presents the acculturation challenge Ernie is faced with. The second section is a bombardment of images and reflections associated with Western civilization, quite opposed to the narrator’s experiences in Jalcocotán, and a mapping of the value judgments that Ernie and his family have to make in the USA. The striking difference between the Mexican village, where Galarza was born and spent the first seven years of his life, and Sacramento, where he relocates, shows opposite lifestyles. At the same time, the conditions of a border crosser pose a twofold ethical dilemma: Ernie has to decipher the binary between progress and tradition, but also choose between Jalcocotán’s communal principles and the North’s promises of individual success.

Tomas Rivera’s ... y no so lo tragó la tierra ... And the Earth Did not Devour Him (1987) is probably the most widely read Chicano narrative, and maybe the one that truly defines the canon. The text is a shocking exposition of the injustices inflicted on migrant campesinas/os. Rivera wrote a collection of vignettes and anecdotes with the purpose of revealing the structural and physical violence perpetrated on Chicanas/os and mexicanas/os in rural and urban locales of the USA. Child labor, the violation of human rights, the conditions of toiling the llanos (the plains) for agricultural industries, and the shocking absence of social services safeguarding the rights of wage-workers are some of the themes that the text explores. Apart from the precursory connections that Tierra holds with the Environmental Justice Movement, the text reinforces the socio-political stand that concerned the second-wave of ecocriticism. More precisely, Tierra develops meaningful linkages between natural landscapes and Chicana/o ethno-culture. But the most salient element of Tierra’s vignettes and anecdotes is that they unfold in the milieu of a ruthless capitalist plan that abuses the grassroots populations in order to accumulate wealth.

Alejandro Morales’s The Rag Doll Plagues (1992) is a multilayered interpretation of the borderlands, an experimental narrative that sets the environmental lens on the theme of inequality. An insightful explanation of human despair and misery, The Rag Doll Plagues lays bare the repercussions of imperialism, despotism and pollution. The narrative comprises three separate books, which create a thematic palimpsest of colonialism, spirituality, the merits and pitfalls of techno-scientific advances, deterioration of health and organic pollution. “Book One: Mexico City” explores the onslaught of the Spaniards into Mexico City in the eighteenth century. Portraying the perils caused by the European invasion of the cultural and natural ecologies of the Amerindians, “Book One: Mexico City” reveals “the physical and mental wounds [of] a diseased, infested population: the prostitutes, the lepers, the abandoned children, the demented homeless people, the disenfranchised who survived in the filthy streets, the dung heaps and the garbage dumps of the city” (29). The colonial forces deform the landscape, marginalize the Indians and besiege cultural traditions. Through Doctor Gregorio Revueltas’s first-person narration, “Book One: Mexico City” exposes the horrors of imperialism. Appointed by the King of Spain to contain the epidemic that
weakens the *conquistadores* and depopulates the Spanish *colonias* in the New World, Doctor Gregorio Revueltas has to come to terms with the fallout of colonialism. In fact, Doctor Gregorio Revueltas is appalled at the reality of a decaying New World and soon undergoes a personal transformation: the narrator refutes his European identity, abolishes the differentiation between the captors and the subjugated masses, and finally embraces *mestizaje*. “Book Two: Delhi” confirms the HIV virus as a threat to humanitarian values, and projects non-scientific knowledge as the panacea or antidote to medical expertise. In this section of *The Rag Doll Plagues*, Morales delves into the theme of the borderlands and uses the emblematic figure of a *curandera* to appease human fear of contagious diseases. In “Book Two: Delhi,” a lethal virus does not signify demise, but a rite into a different dimension of being, “a modification (...) a transmutation [...] that someday all humanity will be privileged to pass” (119). “Book Three: Lamex” takes on the generic quality of science fiction. In this section, Morales envisages the space between Mexico and the USA as a borderless zone. The setting sketches out the powers of the technocratic confederation of Lamex, which is the international coalition between Mexico and the USA. But Lamex is a grotesque landscape, shockingly ravaged by pollution, refuse and waste. The contamination of the ecosphere spawns viruses that annihilate the human population, and the spontaneous plagues could appear anywhere. Produced by humanity’s harvest of waste, they travelled through the air, land and sea and penetrated populated areas, sometimes killing thousands. Scientists throughout the world had identified thousands of these living cancers of earth. They were of all sizes, colors and smells. Some were invisible. From our pollution we had created masses that destroyed or deformed everything in their path. (138-39)

Morales depicts a post-apocalyptic scenery of contamination, microbial malady and robotic implants attached on the human body. Yet, pure-blooded Mexicans mutate to adjust to the threats of bodily decay, and ultimately defeat death. The denouement presents readers with a plot twist as *The Rag Doll Plagues* heightens the *mestiza/o* inhabitants of Mexico City because their blood is the only countermeasure to humanity’s doomsday.

**Conclusion**

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 activated processes of a national and/or communal selfhood for communities of Mexican descent in the American Southwest.\(^\text{12}\) The complexities of migration and cultural identity became most salient during the 1960s upheaval of *El Movimiento* and allowed Chicana/o thinkers to reflect

\(^{12}\) The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo between Mexico and the United States ended the Mexican-American War (1846-1848). By the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the United States annexed the present day American Southwest (Arizona, California, New Mexico, Texas, Colorado, Nevada, and Utah) from Mexico. For more on American expansionism and *Chicanas/os*, see Acuña (1981).
on the significance of space. Chicanas/os negotiate space (urban, agricultural, rural, the wilderness and so on) as central to la raza’s struggles for justice and equality. Yet, Chicana/o writings often transcend the rhetoric of identity politics, and depict the environment as the battlefield of a relentless war that Western monopolies have waged on local cultures and nature. Chicana/o writings display a valuable repository for in-depth ecodiscourse, since they reveal a profound concern for environmental themes. And along the lines of transculturalism, Chicana/o writings offer ample material for environmental thinking, the kind that imparts a global apprehension about ecocide. Chicana/o ecothinkers generate perceptive contemplations of human experience across borders, and consider the environment paramount in any fruitful self-identity discourse. In fact, Chicana/o ecowritings form a liminal space in the disciplinary war between exact and abstract considerations of nature, and introduce the study of environmental literature and/or criticism as a potent means for the advancement of ecoawareness, equality and ultimately democracy.

Works Cited


Rivera, Tomás. ... y no so lo tragó la tierra ... *And the Earth Did not Devour Him*. Translated by Evangelina Vigil-Piñón, Arte Publico Press, 1987.


