



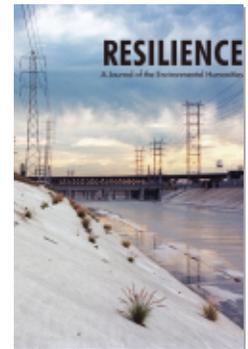
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Writing the Goodlife: Mexican American Literature and the Environment by Priscilla Solis Ybarra (review)

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New Work in Latinx Environmental Criticism

Priscilla Solis Ybarra. *Writing the Goodlife: Mexican American Literature and the Environment*. Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 2016. 216 pp. Paper, \$29.95.

Cordelia E. Barrera

Priscilla Solis Ybarra's study of what she terms "goodlife" writing establishes the means by which Mexican Americans have historically cultivated reciprocal relationships with the natural environment in terms of egalitarian values associated with simplicity, sustenance, dignity, and respect. Drawing from decolonial theory and approaches allows the author to uncover the gaps within an elitist Western history that reifies core values surrounding the split between the mind and body and between human and nature—divisions that do not factor heavily in Mexican American epistemologies. As she explores values of goodlife writing, Solis Ybarra recasts mainstream literary ecocritical traditions that often fail to account for a US legacy of colonization and racism. This results in engaging tensions of modernity, human-to-human power hierarchies, issues of decoloniality, and local ways of knowing, to introduce how literary ecocriticism may be understood via a decolonial lens. *Writing the Goodlife* begins in the second half of the nineteenth century and moves through examples from contemporary Mexican American and Chicana/o literature and popular culture.

Mexican American and Chicana/o environmental writing, argues Solis Ybarra, is marked by its relation to a history of US imperialism and colonization. The author demonstrates how the naturalization of terms like "land," "landscape," and "environment" in mainstream ecocriticism have often blinded scholars to the rich examples of communi-

ty, nonpossessiveness, and humility found in goodlife writing. To fully grasp the contributions of goodlife writing, Solis Ybarra argues, ecocritics and literary scholars must look to long-established traditions of knowing and thought with an eye toward what Walter Mignolo calls “delinking” from dominant, often bifurcating, Western epistemologies.

Broadly, *Writing the Goodlife* attempts to bring ethnic studies and environmental studies into conversation. Just as Emma Pérez, in *The Decolonial Imaginary* (1999), located the decolonial within those intangible spaces that interrupt Western, linear models of time and space, Solis Ybarra positions goodlife writing within the interstices of mainstream environmental studies, Chicana/o studies, and Mexican American literary texts that emerge out of experiences of dispossession, poverty, and racism. Solis Ybarra’s decolonial stance is defined by engaging values and processes that reject Western epistemologies in order to make space for indigenous practices that have survived colonizing structures. Viewing goodlife writing through a decolonial lens breaks down the mainstream Western dichotomy between humans and nature to “make space for indigenous narratives and practices that have survived colonization and that preserve and adapt traditional environmental knowledge” (15). In this sense, *Writing the Goodlife* proposes a more nuanced understanding of environmentalism, one invested in building bridges between ethnic studies, Chicana/o studies, and environmental studies to document Mexican American and Chicana/o strands of knowing that posit mutually beneficial relationships between humans and the natural world. Goodlife writing embeds traditions of community, nonpossessiveness, and humility that never succumbed to modernist values.

Chapter 1, “Defining Mexican American Goodlife Writing,” outlines how Mexican Americans and Chicanas/os sought to “transcend possession” by integrating goodlife values into their works. Transcending possession results in disrupting destructive patterns of modernity and coloniality that threaten traditional ways of knowing and local environmental knowledge. Four values comprise what Solis Ybarra calls “goodlife writing”: simplicity, sustenance, dignity, and respect. Mexican American environmental experiences and practices of dignity, respect, and the value of local ecological knowledge have often been sacrificed to conventional environmentalism and ecocriticism due to the United States’ history of Mexican American land dispossession,

which tends to erase the long-standing presence and contributions of Mexican Americans. In this first chapter, Solis Ybarra rereads the novels of María Amparo Ruiz de Burton—*Who Would Have Thought It?* (1872) and *The Squatter and the Don* (1885)—within a goodlife lens, illustrating how Ruiz de Burton legitimates local and environmental knowledge that can provide mainstream ecocriticism with insight into traditional methods of Mexican American land management. Such works, she argues, can impart twenty-first-century ecocriticism with a means to better understand “how racism and environmental exploitation have been intertwined for more than a century” (65).

In Chapter 2, “The Coloniality of Being and the Land,” Solis Ybarra discusses works such as Fabiola Cabeza de Baca’s *We Fed Them Cactus* (1954), Adelina Otero Warren’s *Old Spain in Our Southwest* (1936), and Jovita González’s recorded folktales of South Texas to uncover hitherto unrecognized sources of environmental scholarship. Solis Ybarra evokes Paula Moya’s definition of identity to lend a social context to the ways these writers refuse to privilege individuality over community. These writers entwine goodlife values into their work when they affirm the idea that the land they have known for generations is neither soulless nor separate from the self. Solis Ybarra’s explorations of what she calls “interior landscapes” resonate with goodlife writing and engage the ways Western critics have often discounted what they imagine to be the romanticization of Mexican culture. Many of these writers—including Rudolfo Anaya, whom Solis Ybarra discusses in chapter 3—have been accused of lacking political and social critique. Solis Ybarra upends such earlier critiques by focusing on the ways these writers affirm their shared fate with the land rather than destructive patterns of modernity and coloniality that reify a split between human and nature that continues to prioritize individualist patterns of possession.

Chapters 3 and 4 push readers to further acknowledge how Mexican American and Chicana/o writers continued to defy hierarchies associated with modernity as they coincided with 1960s land rights movements in New Mexico. Together, these two chapters provide insight to previously unrecognized environmental mediations that have continued to shape the long struggle for survival of indigenous cultures and traditions in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Solis Ybarra examines archival resources and farmworker literature, the New Mexican newspaper *El Grito del Norte* from the 1960s and 1970s,

and a collection of oral histories recorded in the 1980s to emphasize nonpossessive relationships with the land that have thus far received little critical attention. A common denominator within these goodlife texts underscores the ways Mexican Americans and Chicanas/os historicized and conceptualized issues of capital, land management, and ecology to delink from an abstract faith in modern values. Solis Ybarra illustrates how these artists engage the landscape as an active subject rather than a passive object. Indeed, Solis Ybarra skillfully illustrates how songwriters like Tish Hinojosa, migrant workers, and well-known Chicano authors Rudolfo Anaya and Tomás Rivera imbue an active subjectivity along goodlife values as decolonial strategies that challenge conventional Chicana/o cultural politics while undermining mainstream ecocritical methodologies.

The book's final chapter, titled "Ecology and Chicana/o Cultural Nationalism," is an in-depth study of Cherríe Moraga's "ecological vision trilogy": *The Last Generation* (1993), *Heroes and Saints* (1994), and *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* (2001). These works embed the familiar feminist strategy of seeking to "transcend the colonial concept of possession" (140). Moraga's works, argues Solis Ybarra, exemplify the highest standards of goodlife writing in that they consistently embrace the goodlife ethics of true communion of the body with the natural landscape. Indeed, Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, who is also discussed within the pages of *Writing the Goodlife*, serve as key figures in Chicana/o environmentalism in terms of how each recognizes the power of grassroots activism and processes that transcend possession—whether these are signified by landscapes or physical bodies.

Writing the Goodlife provides both a lens and a corrective to Mexican American and Chicana/o writing. Mexican Americans and Chicanas/os have long embedded ideas about sustainability and better living within their writings. These have, however, often been dismissed as romantic appreciations of natural beauty or cursory delineations of outmoded systems of thought. On the contrary, goodlife writing, argues Solis Ybarra, allows for nature's agency and subjectivity. In this way, goodlife writing underscores valuable contributions to ecocriticism already extant within Mexican American literary forms.

Given the increasingly pressing challenges of climate change, social and environmental injustice, and a global capitalism that continues to threaten vast swaths of the natural world, ecocritics, environmentalists,

and even lay persons would do well to embrace the interplay of ideas Solis Ybarra suggests within the pages of *Writing the Goodlife*. Good-life writing expands the reach of ecocriticism by engaging systems of knowledge that include the voices of women, migrant workers, and the poor and dispossessed to celebrate practices and local and cultural ways of knowing that are sustainable and extend a sense of dignity, respect, and sustenance to the environments in which we live, work, and learn. For all these reasons, *Writing the Goodlife* will be of great import to students and scholars of environmental studies, ecocriticism, Chicana/o and Mexican American studies, and anyone interested in understanding more sustainable means to mutually respectful relations between humans and the natural world.

Cordelia E. Barrera is an associate professor of English and a codirector of the Literature of Social Justice and the Environment (LSJE) initiative at Texas Tech University. She specializes in Latinx literatures of the borderlands and third-space feminism. Her publications have appeared in *The Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, *Western American Literature*, and *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of MALCS*. Her work concentrates on the literature of social justice and the environment, and her current book project explores utopian forms of social dreaming on the borderlands.

Lori A. Flores. ***Grounds for Dreaming: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the California Farmworker Movement***. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016. 304 pp. Cloth, \$45.00.

Mary E. Mendoza

Environmental historians and scholars of environmental studies more broadly will benefit from reading Lori A. Flores's *Grounds for Dreaming: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the California Farmworker Movement*. Although not explicitly pitched as environmental history, Flores's work demonstrates the ways in which agricultural workscapes and rural landscapes—specifically that of the Salinas Valley in California—have profoundly influenced relationships within and between racial groups. The book skillfully shows how Latinos “negotiated their relationships with other racial groups—and with each other” and how “an agriculture-centered context