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**TOWARD A SYMBIOSIS OF ECOLOGY AND JUSTICE:
WATER AND LAND CONFLICTS IN
FRANK WATERS, JOHN NICHOLS,
AND JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA**

TOM LYNCH

It's spring in northern New Mexico. Water creeps through a ditch, first just a trickle sucked into the dry soil, barely dampening the ground. White foam advances before dark brown water. Then dried leaves, fallen into the ditch last autumn, begin to turn, float, drift ahead. Sticks lift on the surge. Tumbleweeds stir, start to roll with the advancing water. Sluggish worms, beetles awaken. Overhead, cottonwood trees flare new green leaves from bare branches. Tight stands of willows shimmer with red and yellow twigs. Sleek, arrogant magpies glide in, perch on the cottonwoods, peer and squawk from the branches, assessing the progress of the season. Warblers pause in migration, twitter in the bushes, search wild rose bramble for tasty bugs.

The mayordomo—the local ditch boss—strolls along the ditch-bank, rake flung over shoulder. From time to time he bends over the water, plunges in his rake, lifts a crumpled beer can, paper cup, faded plastic rose. This water he's helping along will be shunted into fields to nourish hay, to quench apricot, peach, and apple trees, to quicken seeds in family garden plots.

Watching this bucolic ritual played out under the placid blue sky of New Mexico's Sangre de Cristo Mountains, it's hard to imagine that this scene lies at the heart of a divisive conflict over land, water, culture, environmental justice, and a viable ecology. It is a conflict that has ebbed and flowed for the past 160 years and that has inspired some of the most important literature from the region, including works by Frank Waters, John Nichols, and Jimmy Santiago Baca.

The upper Rio Grande watershed of southern Colorado and northern New Mexico encompasses a distinctive bioregion. It consists of arid and semiarid plateaus and valleys surrounded by high mountains. The Sangre de Cristo Mountains rise to the east, the San Juan and Jemez

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Mountains to the west. Much of the area is steeply sloped. All waters falling within this basin drain quickly toward the Rio Grande, which slices through a faulted rift zone splitting down the heart of the bioregion. This sort of mountainous terrain in arid regions creates a wide variety of life zones, nurturing a diversity of plants and animals, but such areas are also fragile; the steep, dry land is easily eroded, and thoughtless human impact can have dire and irreparable consequences.

The upper Rio Grande bioregion is unique. Environmental historian William deBuys asserts that “no other region in all of North America so richly combines both ecological and cultural diversity” (6). Geographer Alvar Carlson suggests that this Río Arriba, or “upper river,” as it is often called, “represents America’s oldest European cultural region where a spatial behavior evolved that is manifested in the landscape in the form of certain settlement and land-use patterns that contributed to the creation of a persistent and distinctive folk environment” (203). Ernest Atencio, a native of the Río Arriba country, asserts that “a distinctive culture has developed in the region that remains a dynamic and defining presence today. And after centuries of continuity and adaptation, rural villagers have acquired a powerful sense of belonging, a rooted knowledge and reverence for their homeland that has become rare in the modern world” (1). For consideration of sustained cultural adaptation to living in arid lands, and for a glimpse of what a bioregionally defined sense of place in the American West might look like, few places in North America are more informative than this upper Rio Grande watershed.

This area was first settled by Europeans in 1598, when Don Juan de Oñate led a group of colonists northward from Zacatecas, in what was then called New Spain. For more than four hundred years, blending elements of Moorish, Roman, Spanish, Meso-American, and Pueblo cultures, a distinctive Indo-Hispano agropastoral settlement and land use pattern has evolved in the region. Of particular concern to this study are two characteristics: a community-controlled, watershed-specific pattern of low-tech irrigation, called the acequia system (from *as-saqiyya*, Arabic for “water carrier”), and a riparian long-lot settlement pattern that linked family homestead and gardening areas with what is referred to as the *ejido*, a communal grazing, hunting, and wood-gathering zone.

Under grants first from the Spanish king, and later, for a short while, from the Mexican government, settlers were provided tracts of land to be used by both family and community groups. Though local variation is common, the general pattern is for a community to develop within a given watershed. Strips of land are allotted to households

in which each has river frontage, grassy meadow, garden and orchard, and a piñon-juniper forest for gathering firewood and piñon nuts. The hills around the valley are held in common by the villagers who share in the land grant. According to vernacular rules, this area is open to all members of the community for hunting, gathering, grazing, and wood cutting. At the upper end of the valley, a small dam is usually placed across the river and an earthen ditch, often referred to as the *acequia madre*, or “mother ditch,” is dug along the edge of the valley across from the river. Water flows through this ditch and is distributed to various community members according to a locally developed, self-governing system. Excess water is returned to the river at the lower end. All water remains within the watershed. Traditionally, community members elected a commission and a mayordomo to set and enforce the rules governing water usage and to organize an annual communal cleaning of the ditch. In many small communities, this is the only form of local government. Stanley Crawford in *Mayordomo* (1993) and José Rivera in *Acequia Culture* (1998) provide a more in-depth look at this acequia system.

Since the United States took control of the area through military conquest in 1846, however, these bioregionally integrated communities have undergone a series of assaults:

- ◆ the transfer of the land grant commons, often through nefarious means, to private Anglo ownership or to the U.S. Forest Service
- ◆ the replacement of communal acequia irrigation districts by market-oriented conservancy districts that impose taxes that traditional water users are unable to pay
- ◆ the replacement of a subsistence economy by both a market economy and by a reliance on industrial tourism
- ◆ the enforcement of government regulations—including well-intended environmental regulations—that conflict with vernacular behavior
- ◆ and the arrival of a large number of Anglo “amenity migrants” whose culture is supplanting that of the Hispano community.

In many cases, these changes have had negative consequences not just for the Hispano villagers but also for the natural environment they inhabit. Gary Paul Nabhan asserts a direct linkage between colonial conquest and ecological degradation: “[W]herever empires have spread to suppress other cultures’ languages and land-tenure traditions,” he claims, “the loss of biodiversity has been dramatic” (37). Recent

scholarship explores the local details of Nabhan's theme as they are manifest in the Río Arriba, arguing that both the acequia irrigation system and the riparian long-lot cultural geography represent a sustainable, socially just, bioregionally adapted, and ecologically viable pattern of land use in the arid mountains of New Mexico and that their displacement by colonial conquest and subsequent Anglo cultural incursion damages the area's cultural and natural integrity. Devon Peña is a leading proponent of the view that the Chicano agropastoral acequia system is ecologically beneficial, notable for

(1) a renewable use of water that maintains the equilibrium of the local hydrological cycle through aquifer recharge and return to in-stream flows; (2) a renewable use of energy that relies on the force of gravity to move water; (3) a network of earthen-work ditches that increases biodiversity by creating wetlands and woodlands that serve as wildlife habitats and biological corridors; and, overall, (4) their contribution to the control of soil erosion and maintenance of water quality. The collective community management of the acequia ditches provides a cultural foundation and an institutional tradition for local self-governance and the reproduction of conservation ethics from one generation to the next. ("Cultural" 109)

Peña goes so far as to suggest that the acequia system not only protects but enhances the natural environment because "acequias are themselves innovations on the rhythms and patterns of the watershed, a type of disturbance ecology that, like beaver works, increases biodiversity by creating wildlife habitat and movement corridors" ("Cultural" 108). (Let me raise the caveat here that, despite these favorable representations by Peña, debate exists over several ecological aspects of this agropastoral economy, and Peña does not provide the sort of hard scientific data on issues such as biodiversity that would be necessary to convert skeptics. For example, Dan Flores in *Horizontal Yellow* (1999) and William deBuys in *Enchantment and Exploitation* (1985), though sympathetic to Chicano agropastoral culture, describe its effects on the land in less sanguine terms and accuse it of occasional significant overgrazing.)

As the population of the Southwest grows, and as industries and industrial-style agriculture move into the region, water becomes an increasingly precious and valuable commodity. Some critics contend that the acequia system, with its low technology and earth-lined ditches, wastes valuable water through seepage. Peña, however, argues that this leakage, which seems like a problem from a strictly economical accounting, is

actually an asset. "The acequias are criticized as wasteful and inefficient," he says, "because the earthen ditch banks are moist, and flood-irrigating creates wetlands." However, he responds,

The Chicano agropastoralists disagree; they believe that the water from acequias supports wildlife and its habitat. . . . The acequias may appear inefficient from the vantage point of individual economic rationality or water conservation, but when viewed in the holistic context of mixed plant, animal, and human communities, acequias are equal opportunity providers. They do not discriminate against wild animals and plants because these life-forms yield no obvious economic gain for human beings. ("Gold Mine" 264–65)

While Nabhan warns us of the ecological degradation that accompanies colonial conquest, he also suggests ways to halt and reverse this process, emphasizing the role of storytelling and ritual: "To restore any place," he says, "we must also begin to re-story it, to make it the lesson of our legends, festivals, and seasonal rites. Story is the way we encode deep-seated values within our culture" (319). Drawing from such a premise, I'd now like to consider works by three authors from the upper Rio Grande bioregion in terms of their portrayal of the various assaults on the Chicano agropastoral culture; in particular, I'd like to consider the degree to which the maintenance of social justice through the preservation of the traditional Chicano land and water-use patterns is symbiotic with sustainable ecological health.

The literary form that dominates writing, and thinking, in the American West is what has become known, definitively, as "the Western." The all-too-familiar narrative describes the advance of Anglo-Saxon pioneers into a primitive and untamed West, spreading the forces of civilization in their wake. A countertradition, however, is prevalent in the Southwest. What we might suitably call "the Southwestern" describes the incursion of an aggressive foreign culture into an already settled region. In this narrative, the conflict is not over how to impose culture and tame and settle the land, but how to protect the culture that already exists and how to preserve the land from the ruthless Anglo pioneers and their descendants. Frank Waters's *People of the Valley* (1941), John Nichols's *The Milagro Beanfield War* (1974), and many of the poems of Jimmy Santiago Baca epitomize this "southwestern" counter-narrative.

This "southwestern" struggle has raged for many decades over control of natural resources, especially water and grazing land, in the region.

This conflict is different from the more common concerns of environmental justice advocates, which usually involve the locating of polluting industries in the neighborhoods of poor and minority communities. As David Harvey points out, “[O]ne of the best predictors of the location of toxic waste dumps in the United States is a geographical concentration of people of low-income and color. The dumping of toxic wastes on indigenous Indian reservations or in communities of color (African-American or Hispanic) across much of the [S]outh and [W]est of the United States is now well documented” (368–69). While this is an important concern and remains the primary focus of the environmental justice movement, it is not the sole domain of environmental justice, whose concerns are really more fundamental; they are about access to power. As Atencio argues, “Public health impacts from environmental conditions or hazardous waste, or discrimination in the implementation and enforcement of environmental policies are unquestionably critical problems, but environmental justice is about more than that. It is also about widening the discourse on environmental issues to include the perspectives, values, and concerns of the usually ignored populations of people of color and the poor” (2). Environmental justice can even be seen as an issue in the lack of input from racially, culturally, or economically marginalized communities in the creation of environmental regulations and in the unequal distribution of the harmful consequences of otherwise well-intended environmental regulations.

In her exploration of environmental justice issues in the United Farm Workers movement in California and in the Ganados del Valle wool cooperative efforts in northern New Mexico, Laura Pulido expands on Atencio’s broader definition of environmental justice. “The scholarship and political activism of the environmental justice movement” she says, “have focused on documenting and remedying environmental racism largely within the context of urban land use and pollution issues” (125). Consideration of the use and control of natural resources, while an important component of Third World struggles, she argues, has not been a significant part of the environmental justice movement in the United States. However, “[i]f these issues are approached from a subaltern perspective,” Pulido claims, “it becomes vividly apparent that resource use is but another lens through which to view inequality. Moreover, investigating natural resource use illuminates the systematic way in which environmental relations are structured by various forms of power” (125).

In the early decades of the twentieth century, numerous writers settled in northern New Mexico. Among those whose works have been

most enduring is Frank Waters. A native of Colorado Springs, Colorado, Waters was more attuned to the cultural importance of land and water in the Southwest than most of his fellow writers, who largely came from the East, and he specifically addressed social justice issues regarding land and water control throughout his writings.

However, the predominant literary criticism on Waters seeks to rescue him from the “regional writer” pigeonhole by emphasizing the “universal” aspects of his work. “We should object to the fact that Frank Waters is constantly referred to as a ‘western’ writer,” William Eastlake has complained, suggesting instead that “[w]riting of any value is universal” (4). While it’s true enough that some of Waters’s own tendencies encourage a universal interpretation, I would suggest that insistence on the “universal” significance at the expense of local relevance whitewashes over the very details that render a work amenable to a bioregional reading and trivializes the specific issues of social justice and ecological concern that, in our present context at least, make a work meaningful.

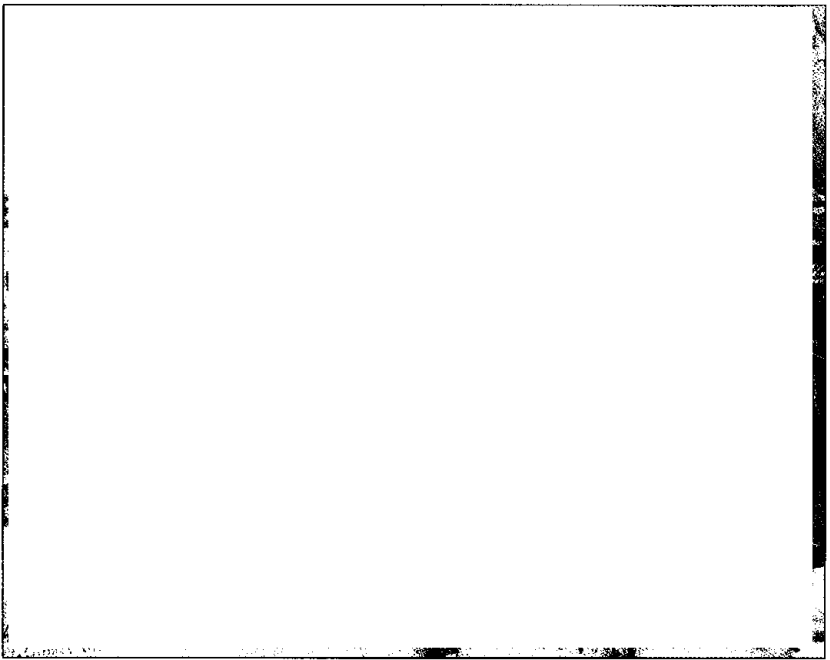
In 1936, Waters lived in the small village of Mora, New Mexico, on the eastern slopes of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Out of this experience he crafted his novel *People of the Valley*, which regards an Hispano community in the Mora Valley and its response to the construction of a dam by Anglo interlopers. The novel opens with a description of the valley, situating itself as a tale concerning a watershed-specific, agropastoral ecology. Waters then brings us down the drainage with the floodwaters in a grand gesture of watershed consciousness: “A thunder cloud snags on the western cliffs of the Sangre de Cristo, and from the converging box cañons of Luna and Lujan the water foams down along the ridge rock of Los Alamos” (3). He follows the course of the growing floodwaters down the watershed until the flood “rips through the willows, uproots cottonwoods, tears out old acequias so patiently banked by hand” (4).

These floods with which he introduces us to the locale, which in a sense define the place, and which the Hispano residents accept as God’s will, lead the Yankee newcomers to propose damming the river. To such a proposal, the community voice collectively asks: “[W]hy do they build this dam? There has never been one before; it is not the custom. The floods will come, like sunshine and the drought. They are all God’s will” (5). This comment encapsulates the tension in the book—to live in accordance with custom, following the will of God and nature, even if that means suffering an occasional flood, or to accept innovations that will reduce flooding but that also seem to deny faith and hinder the will of God.

This dichotomy symbolizes one of the themes Waters seeks to

illustrate, an archetypal clash between primal faith and modern faithlessness, or, if one prefers a Jungian formulation, between the anima and the animus, but it also has the unfortunate outcome of reinforcing the cliché that the Hispano community is fatalistic, trapped in passive customs before the onslaught of energetic Anglo power. As a means of justifying the colonial process, many writers have labeled the Hispanos of northern New Mexico as “indolent,” and a reductive universal approach to *People of the Valley*, unfortunately, plays into this formulation. On the other hand, the novel’s main character mounts an energetic and shrewd resistance to the dam. Maria del Valle, as her name suggests, personifies the valley as well as the inherent wisdom and endurance of her people. She makes her living from the land and collects its produce for sale in the markets. She gathers and knows the uses of herbs and plants for medicine and dyes.

Waters is familiar with the natural and cultural history of the valley. He effusively catalogues the biological treasures of the landscape, with long passages lovingly listing plants and their uses. In this way, he signals his delight in the richness of nature and suggests the abundance



Maynard Dixon. *DAD WALKER'S HOUSE*. 1933. Oil. 16" x 20".
Courtesy of Brigham Young University Museum of Art. All rights reserved.

of the natural world as being more than sufficient for the people who reside in the valley. Their tenancy, it would seem, has not diminished the wealth of nature. Waters also incorporates into his narrative the history of the valley, describing its indigenous inhabitants, the incursion of French fur trappers, the arrival of Spanish settlers and their endowment with land grants, the transfer of control to the new Yankee government following the conquest of 1846, and the subsequent difficulties and injustices involved with measuring and confirming the land grants. Finally, he itemizes the gradual incursion of Anglo-style industrialism, epitomized by the dam. This is all useful knowledge for enhancing a sense of storied residence in the region, and it further serves to highlight the elements of injustice that provide a historical context for the struggle over the dam.

Maria understands that the dam means people will lose their land, both from submergence beneath the reservoir and from their inability to pay the new taxes levied for the water district, so she rallies her neighbors against it. Her strategy is indirect, "not opposing it with any reason, but calling forth the feeling for the land it would supplant" (141). For example, Maria revives the custom of blessing the fields on San Isidro Day. San Isidro is the patron saint of farmers, and it is a custom in the Hispano Southwest for his image to be carried in a procession through the community's fields on May 15. As portrayed in *People of the Valley*, this custom has not been followed for some time, but Maria revives it as an act of cultural resistance. One old farmer tells Maria that "it has not been a good thing to forget this old custom of late, and that it is a good thing to continue it again. . . . Madre!" he exclaims, "I had forgotten how beautiful the fresh black earth looks from here on high" (140). This scene nicely illustrates Nabhan's suggestion that seasonal rites can enhance people's "storied residence" in their place, an awareness that will lead them to defend and restore it.

Maria battles the dam on many fronts. However, as construction begins and people are evicted from their homes, Maria relents, admitting oracularly, "I see now that nothing will stop this Máquina. So this I know, it is for each man and all peoples to become one with their defeat, and so rise above it. This dam has defeated me. I give in to it wholly. Thus I am free of it; it cannot touch me" (184). She has, perhaps, expressed a wise paradox to live by, a transcendent philosophy that engages the world (she did resist the dam, after all) but that seeks to rise above circumstances. Yet to readers concerned with social injustice or environmental degradation, her response is ungratifying. It suggests that a retreat from social and political engagement is sometimes the course

of wisdom. To the considerable degree that the novel portrays Anglo-style “progress” as inevitable, to the degree that it makes the forces of domestic colonization seem unstoppable, it figures resistance, however heroic, as futile.

Yet I don’t wish to overstate the case. For reading against the grain of most of the criticism of Waters, and against the grain of some of his own inclinations, I still hear the plea, however muted, that Anglo-style progress is not always a good thing, that people have a right to the integrity of their culture, and that our loss of faith in the natural processes of the land deprives us of a fulfilling relationship to our place.



No novelist has engaged the issues of social justice and environmentalism in northern New Mexico more directly, more sympathetically, or with more surprising twists than has John Nichols. Like Waters, Nichols eschews being labeled as a “regional” writer, but his reasons differ. Where Waters and his critics often aspire to universal significance through the explication of abstract meaning (often Jungian archetypes of the collective unconscious), Nichols aspires to universal significance through his Marxist portrayal of the global class struggle. Nichols explains that when he published *The Milagro Beanfield War* in 1974, he “was disappointed when critics called it a ‘regional novel.’ I thought my characters and my community and my plot were as universal as anything written by Faulkner or Carson McCullers or Émile Zola.” And, he concludes, “[l]ocal Taoseños asked me how I could know so much about their culture after living in New Mexico only a short while. I replied that ninety percent of it was universal” (*Dancing* 244).

Perhaps. But the claim that his portrayal of Chicano villages is mostly universal is also a tad evasive, for when his neighbors ask him how he manages to know so much about them, they politely hint at a complaint stated decades earlier by Cleofas Jaramillo, a native of nearby Arroyo Hondo. Jaramillo expressed annoyance at “these smart Americans” who make money portraying Hispano culture, while members of that culture “sit back and listen” (173). More recently, Juan Estevan Arellano has lamented that “[a]s nuevomexicanos, today we have had almost nothing to say about our region’s character and identity, yet we are the ones who have defined that character and identity. Since the 1940s, the region’s ‘pseudo identity’ as exemplified by Taos and Santa Fe, has come from tourists and immigrants—the so-called arts community” (35).

Paula Gunn Allen, who grew up in Cubero, New Mexico, has complained about Nichols specifically, asking, “[H]ow come it’s the writer with the New England literary perspective who gets to define northern

New Mexico rather than the northern New Mexico writer?" (in Dunaway). Allen raises a reasonable question, one that signals distress at the process by which colonialism is played out in the publishing world. In choosing to write about the largely Chicano towns of New Mexico, Nichols has taken on an ethical burden that cannot be evaded simply by claiming to have written a work that is "ninety percent . . . universal." Viewed skeptically, Nichols's works of social protest on behalf of Chicano agropastoral culture can be interpreted as themselves appropriations of voice, as further incursions of the very colonialism they seek to decry (see Dasenbrock).

Several scholars of Chicano literature, however, have considered and sought to allay such concerns. Francisco A. Lomelí and Donald W. Urioste, for example, suggest that Nichols's portrayal of Chicano culture is just. Lomelí and Urioste use the term *literatura chicanesca* to distinguish Chicano literature—that is, literature by and about Chicanos—from literature that is about Chicanos but is written by Anglos. In their consideration, Nichols fares well. Lomelí and Urioste conclude that *The Milagro Beanfield War* is "[p]erhaps the most convincing chicanesca novel. Written after Nichols studied his subject matter extensively, thus capturing local color, customs, legends, beliefs and geographical particularities with the insight of a keen eye." It is, they conclude, "a good example for non-Chicanos to follow" (qtd. in Bus 215).

John Nichols settled in Taos in 1969. He headed for New Mexico, he says, not as an escape to a bucolic land of enchantment, but, on the contrary, because "New Mexico seemed to resemble a colonial country where political struggle could be as clearly focused as it was in four-fifths of the rest of the world" (*Fragile* 5). He soon immersed himself in reading about the history and culture of the area and became involved with the Tres Rios Association, a coalition of acequias organized to prevent the construction of the Indian Camp Dam, a project that would trigger socio-economic changes threatening the local Chicano farmers. Nichols also wrote for *The New Mexico Review*, a leftist publication covering the political conflicts in the region. Furthermore, he conducted research for Legal Aid lawyers, in the process of which, he says, he "learned more about land and water rights history than [he] could ever have dreamed possible" (*Fragile* 11). All of this, combined with his friendships and conversations with local Chicano farmers and activists, and his outings to fish the rivers and hike the mesas, contributed to an outstanding bioregional education.

With the information he gained from his research and activism, and influenced by the "raucous, comic style" of the Teatro Campesino, Nichols composed *The Milagro Beanfield War* in a burst of manic energy

(*Fragile* 8). *Milagro*, along with the subsequent volumes of his New Mexico Trilogy, *The Magic Journey* (1978) and *Nirvana Blues* (1981), explores the various nuances of the struggle for social justice in northern New Mexico. In *Milagro*, Joe Mondragón decides to let irrigation water into a field that he has inherited from his late father even though he has lost the water rights for the field to Ladd Devine III, a local development mogul. Describing the basis of Joe's decision, Nichols educates us on the historical background necessary to appreciate the social justice dimension of Joe's defiant gesture. As Laura Pulido has pointed out, knowledge of historical context is essential to understanding contemporary acts of injustice and the nature of resistance to them. "[W]hen we speak of environmental inequalities or environmental racism," she proposes, "much more is at issue than simply current policies and decisions. There is an entire history that has accumulated behind any given moment" (180). Nichols details this accumulated history in a litany of the abuses Mondragón and his community have suffered at the hands of the Forest Service, the state government, and, most recently, "the local malevolent despot, Ladd Devine the Third" (20). Specifically relating to water matters, Nichols further explains that

Milagro itself was half a ghost town, and all the old west side beanfields were barren, because over thirty-five years ago, during some complicated legal and political maneuverings known as the 1935 Interstate Water Compact, much of Milagro's Indian Creek water had been reallocated to big-time farmers down in the southeast portion of the state or in Texas, leaving folks like Joe Mondragón high and much too dry. (21)

Nichols makes it clear that Joe Mondragón's simple gesture of defiance—opening a small headgate so water could flow into his muddy field—is motivated by a long history of oppression and rich with complex political implications.

While underscoring the social justice dimension of Joe Mondragón's act of resistance, Nichols delights in undermining our simple notions of what is good for the environment, challenging what he sees as a superficial middle-class environmentalism. Nowhere does he do this better than with the character of Kyril Montana, the undercover cop who's assigned to derail Joe Mondragón's revolt. Montana is an environmentalist and an ethical hunter who belongs to all the right groups. He "thoroughly enjoyed the outdoors with or without a gun. He was a member of the Isaac Walton League, the Sierra Club, and Ducks Unlimited" (95). Nichols makes it clear that Montana is not a clichéd, brutal,

thuggish cop. He and his wife, we're told, "were a clean-cut couple with clean-cut kids, a suburban house with a water sprinkler on the manicured front lawn and a small pool in back" (41). Here, though, we begin to sense Nichols's critique of middle-class environmentalism, for the water sprinkler and the family pool suggest a squandering of water, a misguided desire for class status and respectability at the expense of the environment. Immediately upon returning from a meeting on how to sabotage Joe Mondragón's efforts, Montana goes for a swim. In the pool, he and his wife "kissed once more and flicked a little water at each other and rubbed noses, chuckling together, standing in about five feet of softly lapping water, enjoying the peaceful evening" (103). This seemingly innocent and endearing scene shimmers in a more sinister light when we contrast it with Joe Mondragón's plight and with Montana's participation in the efforts to deprive him of his historically sanctioned water. Indeed, throughout *Milagro* and the other works in the New Mexico Trilogy, swimming pools symbolize and serve as scenes of bourgeois corruption, seduction, and decadence.

Another scene dramatizes even more overtly just how complicated matters of environmental protection can be. Toward the novel's end, Montana is leading a posse of reluctant local Chicanos up into the mountains in search of Joe Mondragón. They pause for lunch, then Montana sends the inept posse home and plans to continue the search alone.

Suddenly the agent noticed all the refuse that had been left behind, pieces of waxed paper and tinfoil, discarded Baggies, a few aluminum bean dip cans, empty cigarette packages, and some crushed coffee cups. And it angered him, the way people mistreated wilderness. So before shoving off, cursing softly under his breath, he canvassed the area, collecting the garbage, which he crushed and buried in his pack. (379)

Montana is self-righteous in his indignation at the way people mistreat wilderness, but he's oblivious to the fact that, by depleting a scarce life-giving resource, his own green yard and swimming pool are more harmful to the environment than superficial litter. The irony is further compounded by the fact that Montana is working as an agent for those who seek to injure the land in a far more egregious manner than littering. Nichols's point is not to condone littering but to grant us a sense of proportion.

Peña laments that "[i]n Taos . . . environmentally correct members of the white middle class are now among the forces displacing natives" ("Animalitos" 32). Nichols illustrates the details of this process throughout the New Mexico Trilogy. For example, in *The Magic Journey*, he

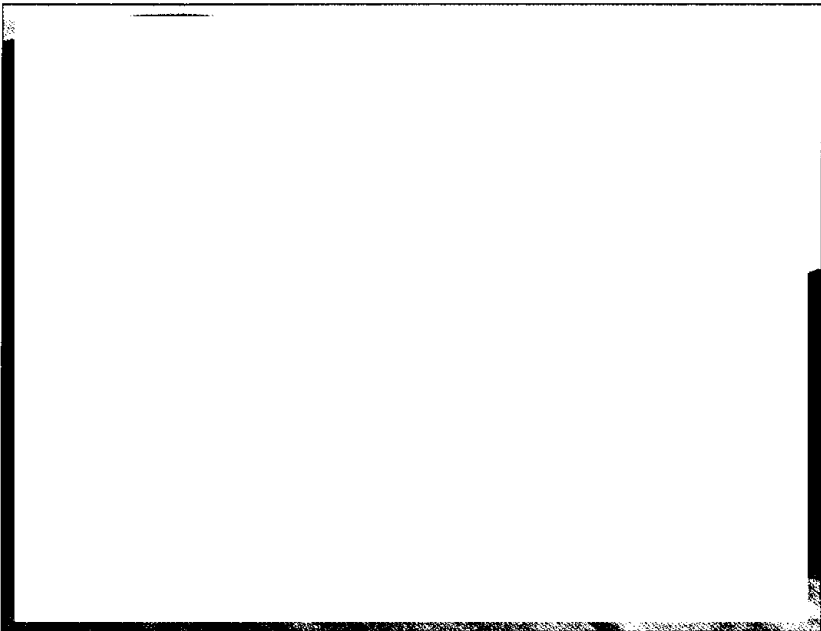
explains how “[p]ressured by a well-meaning but politically naïve ecology-oriented group of middle-class Anglo citizens known as the Amigos of Chamisa Valley, the town council had recently passed an ordinance barring outhouses within Chamisaville limits” (355). While it may be true that the outhouses are polluting the river and that the problem needs to be ameliorated, the consequence of the ordinance, passed without input from the affected community, is that “approximately one hundred impoverished families, unable to afford indoor toilets and a sewer hookup, would either have to sell out or mortgage their homes in order to make improvements, incurring debts impossible to meet and only forestalling for a year or two the ultimate loss of their homes” (355). A similar issue arises regarding junked cars in yards, affronts to middle-class aesthetics, bad for a tourist industry marketing the “Land of Enchantment,” but not really harmful to the environment. “Then the well-meaning Amigos of Chamisa Valley,” Nichols writes, “had decided all junk cars desecrating every indigenous family’s front and backyards were a tremendous aesthetic eyesore necessitating immediate correction” (356). An ordinance is passed, poor people are fined, the junked cars, a valuable source of spare parts, are hauled away, and the net result is the transfer of more land away from Chicano agropastoralists and into the hands of Anglo real estate developers. In these cases, what seem like gains for the environment at the perhaps lamentable but justifiable expense of social justice are, in the end, revealed to be injurious both to social justice and to the environment on whose behalf they are implemented.

The Magic Journey follows the machinations of a local cabal, the Committee for the Betterment of Chamisaville, tracing the rise of industrial tourism in Chamisaville and its displacement of the local people. Rodey McQueen, a local developer, explains the long-term scheme to his cohorts: “with the industry and people we’ve already brought in . . . , property taxes are going to zoom.” The local farmers, living on subsistence agriculture, will be forced to sell out, and, he exalts, “half the county [will be] on the auction block inside ten years.” In twenty years, he brags, he’ll “have all land out of agricultural production and onto the market” (28).

In *The Milagro Beanfield War* and *The Magic Journey*, both Anglo and Chicano members of the local community organize to resist the forces that assault them. Political struggle, however comic, disorganized, and confused, still seems a viable response. In the third novel of the trilogy, *The Nirvana Blues*, however, evil has triumphed. The plot of this novel, a jocose satire of the “hippie era” in Taos, is launched by the main character, Joe Miniver, who wants to purchase the last remaining farm in Chicano hands in the valley. By the end of the 1970s, we’re told,

“[o]nly Eloy Irribarren, a stubborn old man, hung on to his tiny farm, which everybody but *everybody* wished to wrest from his grasp” (19). Miniver, a character who resembles Nichols, and perhaps a self-parody, decides he’ll buy Eloy’s farm, transferring it to Anglo hands but at least protecting it from development. To do so, he needs to raise cash and decides to engage in a cocaine deal. The travails of trying to pull this off, and the response of others in town who want the land for themselves, initiate the crazy shenanigans of most of the novel.

Nichols understands the importance of the acequia system to the vitality of the traditional communities. In a very real sense, the irrigation ditches both embody and enable the culture’s survival. Near the end of *Nirvana Blues*, Eloy Irribarren has been shot in a bank heist gone wrong and goes home to die. Bleeding, he goes with Joe to clear out the irrigation ditch one last time. In this scene, Nichols illustrates the destruction of acequia agriculture and its replacement by a middle-class suburban culture indifferent to its significance: “The acequia wandered through backyards, it almost touched the foundations of newly built homes.” And, he continues, “some newcomers occasionally used the acequia water for their lawns and gardens. But basically, the agri-



Maynard Dixon. *NO PLACE TO GO*. 1935. Oil. 25" x 30".
 Courtesy of Brigham Young University Museum of Art. All rights reserved.

cultural area the ditch had once served was extinct." The newcomers are using the ditch as a dumping ground, and Joe and Eloy remove "smashed tricycles, overturned doghouses, and bald car-tires"; ironically, they also move aside "a dozen fifty-five-gallon oil drums, the refuse of a home builder who was into solar collectors" (508). As Eloy and Joe finish cleaning out the ditch and coax water through it, we see that nature, too, is restored: "Birds gathered in nearby trees, their sharp eyes hunting worms and bugs carried to the surface. A sparrow hawk landed on a dead cottonwood branch: head cocked, it searched the field for fleeing mice. Magpies swooped from the sky and waddled through inch-deep puddles, spearing tidbits. Redwing blackbirds, grackles, and starlings alighted in the water and began to gobble" (514). As the old and bleeding Eloy nears death, his last act is to splash ditch water on his face, a sacramental gesture, a last rite of sorts. This scene illustrates both the literal and symbolic importance of the acequias and especially of *la limpia*, the spring ditch cleaning. This cleansing becomes the archetypal symbol of belonging, a ritual of renewal that binds a person, a family, and a community to one another and to the land. Though he is dying, Eloy Iribarren must clean the ditch one last time, engaging in a gesture of faith that hardly seems warranted by circumstances.

A defender of the natural world as well as a proponent of social justice, Nichols has been dismayed by the conflicts between environmentalists and the small Chicano communities of northern New Mexico. After the Sierra Club opposed efforts of Ganados del Valle, a sheep raising and weaving cooperative in Río Arriba County, to open up land for sheep grazing, Nichols lectured the Santa Fe Sierra Club chapter (see Pulido). He explained how much of the old-time Chicano culture in the area "has been working class and economically deprived," but, he continued, "[i]t has had a strong sense of community and a tradition of responsible land management." By contrast, he explained, "[e]nvironmentalists tend to be relative newcomers and middle class" (*Dancing* 92). In conclusion, he warned that "a critical class struggle is taking place and the environmental movement is in danger of being on the wrong side" (*Dancing* 93).

Nichols supports a strong environmentalism, but he recognizes that it must be informed by a well-developed class consciousness and an appreciation for how ethnic diversity alters perceptions of ecological integrity. He is aware that environmentalism and movements for social justice could be, but are not always, symbiotic, especially when environmentalism is overly dependent on middle-class Anglo perceptions and fails to accommodate the perspectives of working-class people and Chicanos.



Jimmy Santiago Baca, from Albuquerque, lives at the southern fringe of the Upper Rio Grande bioregion. Baca is best known as a poet who discovered his art while in prison, but his work extends far beyond those confines. In his celebration of natural cycles, in his use of rich metaphors derived from local imagery, and in his awareness of how personal identity emerges from a sense of place, Baca is one of North America's great bioregional poets.

Baca's semi-autobiographical epic poem "Martín" shows how closely his identity is derived from his homeland and how his mythic consciousness emerges from the history of his place. When Baca/Martín (the author and his character are almost, but not quite, equivalent) is only two years old, his destitute and dissolute parents abandon him, first to his grandmother and then to an orphanage. With this abandonment, he says, "the corn seedling of my heart / withered—like an earth worm out of earth" (5). He repeatedly portrays this abandonment as an uprooting: "Your departure uprooted me mother," he exclaims at one point (13). In this imagery, we sense that land and family are synonymous.

Later, in young adulthood, Baca/Martín departs for the West Coast but feels that in doing so he has betrayed his homeland, his personal Mother Earth. He declares his remorse in a sequence abundant with imagery blending language, self, and land.

I have been lost from you Mother Earth.
 No longer
 does your language of rain wear away my thoughts,
 nor your language of fresh morning air
 wear away my face,
 nor your language of roots and blossoms
 wear away my bones.
 But when I return, I will become your child again,
 let your green alfalfa hands take me,
 let your maize roots plunge into me
 and give myself to you again,
 with the crane, the elm tree and the sun. (7–8)

A psychological need for a sense of home, for a mother, and for stability leads him to claim the Mother Earth of his New Mexico landscape as his homeland. He will give to it the allegiance due a mother.

His geomythic wanderings take Baca/Martín to the Quarai Ruins in

the Manzano Mountains south of Albuquerque. Abandoned in the 1670s, these ruins are from a Pueblo community appropriated by the Spanish, a place where Pueblos and captured Apaches lived for several decades with their Spanish conquerors before Apache raids caused the settlers to flee. It is a site of intense *mestizaje*, a crucible where cultural blending created a proto-Chicano identity. Here, Baca/Martín has an epiphany, a powerful mythic and literal identification with the soil of his Chicano homeland. After riding his motorcycle up to the ruins, he says,

I step into the open rock-pit
 hollowed in earth
 with flat rock door facing east,
 pinch red clay and chew
 my teeth black with earth prayer,
 then speak with QUARAI—

O QUARAI! Shape
 the grit and sediment I am,
 mineral de Nuevo Mejico. (39)

Here, Baca/Martín establishes a literal communion with the land. He consumes it, he speaks through teeth black with soil, and he arises from the pit at Quarai reborn as a son of Mother Earth, offspring of the land, recognizing that he is quite literally composed of the “mineral de Nuevo Mejico.”

Baca has numerous poems that celebrate the acequia culture and suggest its importance in his community and to the natural world. In “Spring,” he notes how the beginning of irrigation marks the start of that season. We see how both the human and natural communities are enriched by the irrigation ditches. Each spring, headgates are opened and snowmelt waters “gush, lunge, and hurl down Río Abajo to community fields, / fill the dry ditches and canals” (*Black Mesa* 38). The water, he demonstrates, nurtures “[p]lants, bushes, weeds,” and the poet witnesses tadpoles and catfish in the murky flow. He describes blue-gray doves, geese, crawdads, spiders, snakes, frogs, lilac leaves, and cranes—a rich biodiversity brought to life by the swell of ditch water (38). In “Too Much of a Good Thing,” he worries that an early spring thaw is causing the high mountain snow to melt too soon and too quickly—an effect that can be exacerbated by clear-cut logging. “What happens / when I need to irrigate pastures / in summer / and there is no water?” he worries. He contrasts this concern with “two suntanned ladies” he overhears in a shopping mall who, disconnected from the bioregion’s

rhythms, “prais[e] our wonderful weather.” These recent arrivals, divorced from the land, don’t realize the consequences of the weather they praise. He wonders what “a farmer’s wife would tell them” (27).

In addition to sustaining natural biodiversity, the ditches also nurture and connect the community. In many of Baca’s poems, we see how the paths along the ditchbanks serve as an informal network where neighbors meet. For example, in “Custom,” Baca jogs along the ditchbanks and meets an old neighbor, Juan, astride his horse. Baca admires the man’s ease on horseback, a true caballero. Juan, he realizes, isn’t just on a “relaxing ride on the *acequia*,” rather, he is responding to “an ancient custom ingrained in his blood” (87). The ditchbank paths bind the community together in a more intimate way than the busy roads and highways can.

These celebrations of the acequia culture, however, are tempered by Baca’s awareness that he lives in a conquered homeland and that, in spite of their storied identity with it, his people’s hold on the place is tenuous and constantly threatened. His poem “Invasions” succinctly captures both the historical and contemporary conflicts. The poem begins as the narrator leaves early in the morning for a fishing trip to the Jemez River. Along the way, he imagines that “Coronado rode / through this light, dark / green brush” (70). His excursion calls to mind the history of the area, of Esteban and mythic Cíbola, of Jemez and Pecos Pueblos and the revolt of 1680. While standing in the very waters of time, tossing his baited hook for trout and contemplating a history as rich as that anywhere in the United States, the narrator links himself with the complex tales of this place and realizes,

I am the end result
of Conquistadores,
Black Moors,
American Indians,
and Europeans,
bloods rainbowing
and scintillating
in me[.] (71)

Later, he climbs a hill and peers out, “as [his] ancestors did,” but now he sees not advancing conquistadors or cavalry troops but “vacation houses” and “sun decks and travel trailers,” all of which constitute, he declares, a “new invasion” (72). The vacation homes and trailers suggest the arrival of amenity migrants, a seemingly innocuous contingent compared with armed and armored conquistadors, but one with as much

if not more potential to alter and injure the prevailing land and cultures. To a great extent, the children of the conquistadors have assimilated to the contingencies of the bioregion; whether the owners of vacation houses and travel trailers will likewise assimilate remains much in doubt.

This invasion becomes more personal, and the connection between social justice and environmental harm becomes clearer, in his poem "Roots." Baca begins this poem, as so many others, by connecting the narrator to his place. After describing a battered, old cottonwood tree, an apt symbol of his Chicano culture's endurance, he says, "I come back to myself / near this tree, and think of my roots / in this land—" (11). The narrator then recounts working with his grandfather in the fields when an agent of the government arrives to tell his grandfather he must move, as the land is no longer his. This poem takes our abstract awareness of land grant injustice and rivets our attention on its tragic particulars in the lives of real people. The narrator's grandfather responds by lifting "a handful of earth" and replying to the agent in Spanish that this dust "carries the way of his life." The grandfather underscores his bond to the place by asserting, "[F]amily blood ran through this land" and "My heart is a root in this earth!" (12). The government agent, of course, does not understand Spanish, further signaling the invasive and alien character of his power over the grandfather. Even if the agent did speak Spanish, however, they would not understand each other, for, both literally and figuratively, they speak different languages.

In their resistance to this sort of displacement, some Chicano activists have lost their lives. Baca memorializes his uncle, Antonio Ce De Baca, in the poem "*Mi Tío Baca el Poeta de Socorro*." This "Poet de Socorro," Baca tells us, "whose poems roused *la gente* / to demand their land rights back," was murdered in the dark of night by masked intruders (73).

In "Black Mesa," Baca recalls the destruction when Interstate 25 was built through the area in 1968. Like the dam in Waters's *People of the Valley*, the highway is an apt symbol for the intrusion of an alien, mechanistic culture that lacks respect for the land and for the traditional people who live on it. The highway cuts through Black Mesa, near Baca's farmstead in Albuquerque's South Valley. On a hike through the area, Baca recalls how Rito, a "brown beret Chicano activist" who "tried to stop / them blasting Black Mesa," was "murdered here / by sheriffs." During his hike across the mesa many years later, Baca muses, "Under my hiking boots his blood / crossbeds minerals / and forms into red crystals" (119). As Baca/Martín is reborn with the discovery that he is "mineral de Nuevo Mejico," so the red crystals of Rito's mineralizing blood return reciprocally to the earth. We sense that while title to the

land may be wrested from the Chicano community, the blood they've spilled to defend it grants a more enduring bond than that conferred by mere title of ownership.

As Baca hikes across the mesa, he recalls the destruction the highway project caused:

Sky showered stones
 at children playing
 on ditchbanks,
 dynamite blasts cracked porches,
 foundations, and walls
 with shuddering volts. (118–19)

This literal and immediate damage to homes and irrigation ditches suggests an attack on the community, but the highway, with its indifference to place, suggestively implies a much more ominous assault, an assault on the very idea of community itself.

Baca's dismay at destruction, violation, and death, however, is tempered when he encounters a series of petroglyphs: "Etched on slabs, / wolf and coyote wear / skins of stone" (119). Admiring them, touching them, he senses their meaning; they are, he declares, "a narrative of love / for animals and earth" (120). And, in spite of dynamite blasts and highways, they endure. Later, he remarks, how "the old man who lives / in stone / offers me a different view / of life and death" (120). Rejuvenated by his glimpse of the petroglyphs, gratified by the deep historical perspective they provide, and inspired by those ancestors who inscribed "a narrative of love / for animals and earth" into the very rocks, Baca pledges "to speak the heart's language. / To write the story of my soul / I trace in the silence and stone / of Black Mesa" (120, 121).

Whether hiking across Black Mesa, strolling an acequia ditchbank, or rising from the ruins at Quarai, Jimmy Santiago Baca calls us to witness the injustice he and his people have suffered but also to share his delight in the natural and cultural richness of the land they continue to inhabit and defend.



In his talk to the Santa Fe Sierra Club chapter, Nichols argued for the urgent need to merge concern for social justice with environmental organizing: "If the environmental movement can develop an understanding of and a sympathy with social, economic, and cultural issues, wildness—and community—stand a much better chance. I hope we can learn to base our future struggles on this social ecology, where con-

ervation and human equality go hand in hand" (*Dancing* 95). Nabhan suggests that this effort to synthesize justice and environmentalism is not simply good politics, but good ecology as well. "Ultimately," he explains, "the most potent way of conserving biological diversity may be to protect the diversity of the cultures that have stewarded the plant and animal communities on which our agriculture is based" (223). In a similar vein, Ernest Atencio has responded to efforts by some environmentalists to stop all public lands grazing in the Río Arriba country. If such proposals are implemented, Atencio argues, they will have a devastating effect on the economies of many small Chicano villages. "It is clear that economic survival and cultural survival must go hand in hand," he continues. "And a strong argument can be made that survival of local communities, well-adapted land use practices, and the traditional land ethic of northern New Mexico Indo-Hispano culture can actually enhance, rather than threaten, potentials for ecological health and restoration" (31). While it is important, indeed essential, for environmentalists to push for sound and sustainable grazing practices, and for sound and sustainable irrigation techniques, it is also important for them to include the voices of minority and other marginalized communities in the development and implementation of these policies and to recognize the economic and cultural complexities involved.

Literary works such as those considered here by Waters, Nichols, and Baca simultaneously expand our notions of justice, enrich our sense of belonging in the more-than-human world, and, not insignificantly, alter our ideas of the function and the power of literature. For far too long, the appreciation and assessment of literary works has followed a path of growing abstraction. The virtues of a literary work, and the merits of a literary scholar, have grown to depend upon the ability of the scholar to subject the work to increasingly abstract and abstruse levels of analysis. One ought to ask whose interests are served by such a process. Not, I think, the interests of poor, minority, and working-class peoples, nor, I dare say, the interests of the increasingly debilitated natural communities with which we share our world. I hope that these bioregionally informed considerations of the ecological and social justice dimensions of selected literary works from the upper Rio Grande watershed suggest the potential for literature and scholarship to move in a different, more fruitful direction, toward an engagement with the real work to be done to promote both justice in our social relations and generosity and restraint in our relations with the natural matrix that surrounds and sustains us.

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