



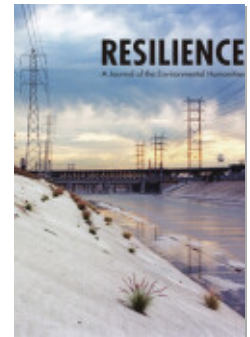
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Introduction

Environmental Justice in Chicana/o Communities

MARY PARDO, ROSA RIVERA FURUMOTO, AND STEVIE RUIZ

Three Generations of Environmental Activism

Three decades ago, *Mothers of Eastside Los Angeles (MELA)* mobilized one of the largest successful grassroots efforts to defeat dire threats to environmental well-being in a working-class Mexican American community. The political mobilization blocked the construction of the first California state prison to be constructed in a large metropolitan area, an underground oil pipeline, and the first of eighteen toxic waste incinerators proposed for the state of California. MELA no longer exists as a grassroots organization, but the legacy of the women's political efforts continues to inspire activism. Eastside Los Angeles still battles environmental threats, but new community-based organizations informed by previous struggles have emerged. Concurrently, political and scholarly discourse about environmental justice as well as the central role of women in grassroots mobilizations has gained recognition. In the new millennium, social media facilitates rapid communication of environmental justice conflicts in Eastside Los Angeles and around the world. Clearly, gains have been made, but we know that land use decisions and policies are outcomes of class struggle marked by ethnic/racial and gender intersections and environmental activists often face violent repercussions. Alongside a history of environmentally unsound projects, gentrification in Eastside Los Angeles now threatens to displace low-income residents as land developers promote the area, given its proximity to downtown Los Angeles.¹ Like ripples in a pond, the struggles and our scholarship have expanded over the years.

In Eastside Los Angeles mark! Lopez, the grandson of Juana Gutierrez, a co-founder of MELA, is now the Executive Director of East Yard for Environmental Justice in Eastside Los Angeles (EYEJ), a community-based organization established shortly after the new millennium. Lopez was instrumental in the organizing campaign that led to the shutdown of the Exide Battery Plant in 2015 after an investigation by the US Department of Justice.² For over three decades, the battery recycling plant polluted the Eastside community's air and soil with lead and arsenic, dangerous carcinogens. Exide staunchly refused to accept responsibility for the high lead contamination in nearby homes. By 2016, the grassroots community campaign using demonstrations and social media to publicize the travesty and pressure-elected officials won a state allocation of 176.6 million dollars for cleanup within 1.7 miles of the battery plant, one of the largest environmental cleanup allotments in California history.³ However, the fund fell short of fully addressing the long-term damage done to the health of the community given the many years of lead contamination on the homes and families living near the plant. Teaming up with USC's Keck School of Medicine, EYEJ assisted in the "Truth Fairy Project" that analyzed children's teeth and confirmed that lead contamination occurs before birth, not only through breathing contaminated air and touching hard surfaces.⁴ The Exide shutdown marked a victory and established EYEJ as an astute political force garnering the attention and respect of elected representatives and nearby research institutions, but ongoing community vigilance remains central for effective implementation of the cleanup. The case provides an insightful example of successful resistance to the continuing health threats in poor communities. Elsa Lopez, the daughter of Juana Gutierrez who was also a core activist in MELA, now works for the Department of Toxic Substances Control and continues to be engaged in environmental justice organizing.

While the MELA case in the 1990s provides continuing lessons about the significance of women's working-class activism in the United States, similar grassroots activism has been occurring in Latin America. For example in 1993, Berta Cáceres, daughter of a social activist mother and a member of the Indigenous Lenca people in Honduras, co-founded the National Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH) to defend the territorial and cultural rights of the Lenca Indigenous community. After the US sanctioned right-

wing coup in 2009, the Honduran government approved dam projects to facilitate cheap power for huge internationally funded mining interests; the dams would destroy the water, land, and livelihoods of Indigenous people as well as violate international treaties.⁵ Cáceres's organizing efforts were marked by inclusivity—of workers, women, campesinos, and the LGBTQ community. In 2013, she was instrumental in organizing successful grassroots opposition to the Agua Zarca Dam, rallying a human blockade to the construction site for over a year, and drawing international attention leading to the suspension of the contract. The dam project was to be constructed along the sacred Lenca River. Her activism garnered violent repression. The assassination of Berta Cáceres in 2016 has been traced to Honduran government representatives, many trained in the US.⁶ While her death is a great loss to the environmental justice movement in Honduras, Cáceres is an inspiration to environmental justice campaigns around the world. Environmental activists now chant, “Berta didn’t die, she multiplied!”⁷ Cáceres’s daughters, Laura Zuniga Cáceres and Bertha Zuniga Cáceres, carry on their mother’s work; they are human rights activists and leaders in COPINH.⁸ Critical to note, the worldview of the Lenca people challenges the rationale for extractive corporate industries and asserts the role of the Lencas as defenders of land, water, and other living beings. Those who support corporate projects often accuse them of being “backward” and opposed to progress, but alternate worldviews of our relationship to nature are gaining support as well as exposing colonial legacies.

In the new millennium, environmental justice activists including EYEJ and COPINH imagine a just world without the domination and ultimate destruction of nature for corporate profit. The more we critically reflect on environmental movements around the world, the more we question Western notions of progress and modernity. Creative resistance strategies, including social media, disrupt “business as usual” and inform political action. Inspired by the successful organizing efforts of women like Berta Cáceres and grassroots groups like MELA and EYEJ, the struggle reaches wider audiences and advances day by day.

Three generations of Chicana/o and Central American activists demonstrated why identifying the origins embedded in environmental racism is critical in rebuilding a world that centers care. MELA activists were women who made bold political moves to hold politicians

accountable about the basic needs of the most vulnerable in the Chicana/o community. Like MELA, EYEJ holds elected officials and corporations accountable to Chicana/o communities who still continue to face some of the highest pollution burdens in the United States. Berta Cáceres taught us about the importance of centering Indigenous struggles to protect water, while also remaining in solidarity to bring down instruments of state sponsored terrorism, like prisons and the assassination of Indigenous leaders. Environmental justice in Chicana/o and Central American communities emerges from a long tradition of solidarity and a willingness among Chicanas and Native women to take up leadership in efforts that help to advance community well-being.

If social inequities exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and George Floyd's murder have taught environmentalists anything, it is the interconnected nature between social vulnerability and state sponsored racism. As Rose Braz and Craig Gilmore so outstandingly examined in their study of California's prison boom in the 1990s, Black communities nationally face higher pollution burden indexes while also enduring the highest incarceration rates of any other racial group.⁹ Likewise, Chicana/o residents in Los Angeles County share some of the worst air quality, soil contamination, and lack of access to fresh food sources, and face the highest deportation rates of any other group. Both communities experience vulnerability to environmental racism in their neighborhoods at the same rate that they experience oppression at work, at school, and at the places that hold them in human confinement. As David Pellow argues, given the types of environmental hazards that prisons and detention create, it would only make sense for environmental scholars to embrace a more expansive definition of environmentalism that adapts to the lived experiences of poor working class people of color.¹⁰

This special issue is about environmental justice struggles in Chicana/o communities that are too frequently ignored by environmentalists. Contributors tackle a diverse range of topics that include educational equity, collaborative research, labor, and art as tools to express the ways in which environmental justice functions in Chicana/o communities. We rely upon three areas of environmental justice in Chicana/o communities: (1) traditional ecological knowledge, (2) labor exploitation, and (3) educating and cultivating environmental justice leaders. Each contributor brings a diverse range of historical,

geographical, and sociological perspectives to tackle the question of environment, justice, and the Chicana/o community. The range of articles and art pieces illustrate the complexity of environmental activism and diversity that exists in Chicana/o communities.

Chicana/o Epistemology and Environmentalism

Digging down into the core of Chicana/o epistemology and environmentalism, we find metaphorically the coolness of the soil rich with organisms, life, networks, and complexity. Soil holds many things including our roots, our seeds, our ancestors, our relationships, and our future. In reflecting on Chicana/o environmentalism, the key aspect to highlight is relationships—the relationships built over time and effort that allow us to dream and imagine together, as well as to confront the many issues facing our communities. At the core of Chicana/o environmental work and organizing are the relationships we cultivate with each other; with students; with our communities; and to the land, animals, water, air, and nature. In grasping the concept of relationships, it means that to conduct environmental work in Chicana/o communities is to lay deep roots and to prepare for the long haul.

Raices (roots) has a double meaning that works for understanding Chicana/o epistemology related to the environment. *Raices* include our ancestors, how we remember them, embody them, and acknowledge them as contributing to our survival and providing us with the tools to navigate the world. However, it is critical to understand that when we address environmental concerns, these are not separate from our concerns for our families, communities, health, and general well-being. One of the markers of Chicana/o environmentalism is how deeply interwoven our environmentalism is with family and community well-being. We understand that we did not arrive in the world on our own, but instead on the backs of our ancestors. This is the antithesis of Western rugged individualism, and instead is part of the Chicana/o epistemology that constantly asks, “How do I give back to my family, my community?” As professors in Chicana/o Studies, with large majorities of Chicana/o students, it is clear that we do not need to teach our students about giving back to their community, as they already come with this deeply ingrained in their psyche. In delving deeper into this Indigenous concept of giving back, Bonfil Batalla’s classic, *Mexico*

Profundo, comes to mind in which he describes how each member of a Mexican town or pueblo is socialized to work communally and to give back to their pueblo for the common good.¹¹ This idea of giving back runs very deep in Chicana/o communities and is central to understanding Chicana/o environmentalism.

It is time to shift from the narrow campaigns of the moment to a larger, holistic view of our communities and our world. This is where Chicana/o epistemology and Eurocentric views diverge. The mainstream environmental movement is built on the idea of excluding people from nature in order to preserve it (people are bad), whereas a Chicana/o view sees people as an important part of the environment that requires our support, love, and nurturing. We see people as part of the solution to the vexing environmental and social justice issues we are presently facing. Nancy Pérez, in her article “Red Dust: Migration and Labor as Seismic Fractures to the Anthropocene,” employs the Simons Brickyard laborers’ and families’ memories, feelings, and experiences to convey the deep and layered history of segregation, violence, exploitation, and racism, as well as the people’s resistance. Pérez’s research honors her ancestors and recognizes how these deep roots are part of the foundation of present day Los Angeles. Using a poetic voice, she notes the families’ powerful relationships to each other and to the land—the men extracting the red soil and pulverizing it to make bricks while the mothers and grandmothers built a domestic economy through tended vegetables and fruit trees. In moving through these multiple scales of time and space, she brings to the fore the deeper values within these historic Mexican communities of family, community, and connections to the land.

In reflecting on the knowledge coming from our elders, parents, and grandparents we recognize that many immigrants bring their traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) from their villages and pueblos to their new settings in the United States. This knowledge is deep rooted and extensive and includes knowledge about plants, animals, seasons, growing, and harvesting food, as well as harvesting native plants for medicine and food.¹² In “Padres Pioneros en la Lucha por un Mundo Sostenible/Parent Pioneers in the Struggle for a Sustainable Planet,” contributors Rosa RiVera Furumoto, Azeneth Martinez, and Alonso Garcia examine how Padres Pioneros, an environmental group of Mexican American immigrant mothers and grandmothers,

have harnessed TEK and values of collectivism and family to engage children and their families in addressing environmental issues in their homes and communities. Using popular education methods such as critical dialogue, Chicana/o children's literature, and hands-on STEAM activities, *Padres Pioneros* asserts the power of the families' cultures, traditions, and knowledge to change the world.

As human-caused climate change has accelerated the depth and damage from hurricanes and other forces of nature, author Daniel Olmos provides a critical and layered analysis of the role of Latino migrant day laborers in Houston after Hurricane Harvey as both exploited and essential bodies in the rebuilding efforts of the state. In "Unsung Heroes or Exploited Workers?: Latino Migrant Day Laborers in Post-Harvey Houston and Critical Environmental Justice," Olmos lays out how the workers and a variety of groups have organized to address the exploitation of stolen wages and unsafe working conditions, as well as the realization on the part of the Latino laborers that they are absolutely essential to the cleanup and rebuilding of their cities. Continuing the theme of Chicana/o labor is the painting *Raza Inolvidable* (Unforgettable People) by artist Gabriel Cárdenas. The painting depicts farmworkers toiling in the fields while the 2017–2018 Thomas Fire rages in the background. The Latina/o worker is seen as a dispensable commodity by market forces, while the deeper analysis reveals that their labor, rooted in the land, is indispensable to human survival. Remembering the many workers that continued to toil during the fires, we are reminded of the depth of the workers' plight as so many noted that they had to keep working in order to pay their rent, feed their families, and to survive to the next day.

Finally, "Contested Cartography: Transformational Teaching and GIS Research in Chicanx Studies" by Stevie Ruiz, Quetzalli Enrique, and Tomas Figueroa Jr. critically analyzes how cartography and history have served as colonial and capitalistic tools of oppression and disenfranchisement of the land and natural resources. At the same time, they propose new directions in the digital humanities that empower students and faculty to dig deeper into historical archives and maps in order to examine the environmental and social justice struggles, as well as the history of segregation and protest, evident in these sources. The authors also examine the power of relationships built between faculty and students of color that create new and transformative possibilities

for all to grow intellectually, academically, and socially. Through their work they also show that we have always had deep roots within these lands that connect to both our ancestors and the environment.

Our Path Forward

This special of *Resilience* issue stems from the urgency to address environmental degradation in Chicana/o communities and other poor working class people of color who are at the frontlines of climate catastrophe. The magnitude of wildfires, hurricanes, floods, drought, and temperature extremities have proven that environmentalists and everyone need to do more, now. Indigenous communities continue to face assaults on traditional land use practices, as well as an annihilation of access to natural resources like clean air and fresh water. Black communities in Flint, Michigan, deal with the environmental and health risks associated with Governor Rick Snyder's decision to intentionally poison their water supply. Contamination of soil in Chicana/o communities in Los Angeles County by Exide's recycling battery plant exposes the explicit racism that is embedded in city policy to allow for the dumping of chemicals in poor neighborhoods. This form of environmental racism is responsible for comorbidities that make Chicana/os vulnerable to illnesses that otherwise are preventable like hypertension, asthma, and diabetes. Coined by Robert Bullard, the term environmental racism is the disproportionate exposure to toxins and hazardous waste that makes communities of color vulnerable to climate catastrophes that have increasingly become more frequent.¹³ The types of vulnerability that communities of color face include health disparity, financial risk, and a lack of educational access that contributes to what Ruth Wilson Gilmore sums up as premature death.¹⁴

Our collective is not surprised that communities that have been hit the hardest by COVID-19 have been predominantly poor people of color in the United States and globally. Eighty two percent of vaccinations have been distributed in predominantly white nations, while poor people of color in the global south only make up 0.3 percent of the vaccinated population.¹⁵ The rationing of vaccine supply for some of the most affluent nations gives us a glimpse into the forms of human suffering that are worthy of recognition, while others are not. Earthquakes in Haiti, hurricanes in the Dominican Republic, and tsunamis

in Southeast Asia all point to the intensity of climate catastrophe that has thrown human and non-human populations at the frontline of climate catastrophe.

Some surprising patterns we witnessed in our collection of essays include the ambiguity that exists between Chicana/os who work on environmental justice related work and their absolute lack of engagement with mainstream environmentalism. In the forward of the anthology *Latinx Environmentalisms*, Laura Pulido writes that one of the pitfalls of an overly expansive definition of the environment and environmentalism risks imposing categories onto Chicana/os.¹⁶ In Pulido's words, ambiguity can be a productive site for revealing the messiness of environmental politics in the United States and globally.

Chicana/o communities hold traditional knowledge that is transmitted intergenerationally that can serve in the struggle against climate change. Chicana/o Studies scholar Devon Peña, for example, has written about the TEK that is embedded in the cultural resiliency of Chicana/o communities. In his studies, Peña finds that Chicana/os have historically viewed their relationship to the environment as stewards of the land.¹⁷ In their piece, RiVera Furumoto, et al. expand our understanding of TEK that tackles climate change from a multigenerational approach. Rooted in their work as environmental educators, Parent Pioneers model transformative multigenerational activism that is inclusive of children, parents, and elders. With an "all hands on deck" mentality, Parent Pioneers helps to expand our understanding of TEK so that we can work to democratize environmental justice in a fashion that is accommodating to cultural practices that reside in the Chicana/o and Central American communities.

In seeking collaboration as a site for advancing environmental research and future leaders, Ruiz et al. shift the conversation from elementary-level education towards building equitable environmental justice research-related opportunities for low-income Chicana/o students in the college setting. Education studies specialists Denise Pacheco and Veronica Velez, for example, write about the ways in which GIS provides low income Chicana/o elementary age students with visual assessments that they can use in their respective communities in order to engage with issues like environmental justice.¹⁸ In their piece, Ruiz et al. contribute to the conversation by highlighting the experiences of Chicana/o college students in a higher education setting.

The contributors found that when given opportunities to collaborate on research, Chicana/o students are receptive to engaging in research that speaks to their heritage of caring for the environment. This same research helps to propel historically underserved students into career and professional advancement by supplying them with technological skills like GIS that otherwise are not made available in Chicana/o Studies classrooms. Likewise, this research is significant in helping to provide more robust interdisciplinary opportunities for Chicana/o Studies students. We view research opportunities as integral to the advancement of environmental justice, especially for students who come from communities that are the hardest hit and most pressed to help build future leaders that will help stop climate injustice.

Our collection includes overlapping social movements that draw upon intersections between environmental justice and labor equity by focusing on exploitative economic sectors. However, we acknowledge that there are many other environmental justice struggles in Chicana/o and Latina/o communities that are not included in this special issue, for example, disproportionate pollution burdens, water and land rights, and environmental degradation caused by prisons. Elsewhere, Chicana/o Studies scholar Laura Pulido has examined the ways in which Chicana/o communities have faced economic exploitation with regard to restricted access to public land grazing and pesticide use in agricultural fields.¹⁹ Both Daniel Olmos and Gabriel Cárdenas write about the invisible labor that goes into combating climate catastrophes. Olmos examines the role immigrant labor plays in rebuilding efforts after Hurricane Harvey in Houston, Texas. In Olmos's words, "unsung heroes" are immigrants who are propelled into dangerous working conditions and whose labor is very often unrecognized by mainstream environmentalists as agents of environmentalism. In his artwork, Cárdenas illustrates the dangerous environmental conditions that are bestowed upon Mexican, Central American, and Indigenous migrants who live in Ventura County. He does so by documenting the experiences of migrant field workers who were ordered by their employers to continue working despite dangerous air quality and wildfires nearby. In her essay about the Simons Brickyard, Nancy Pérez frames her argument around extractive zones where she analyzes the types of exploitative economies that were used to extract red soil

from Montebello, California. Like Pulido, Pérez contributes to our understanding about the extractive labor and commodification of soil and energy to exploit the reproduction of economic exploitation/private assets.

Mary Pardo, PhD, is Professor Emerita of Chicana/o Studies at California State University, Northridge. She is the author of articles and a book on Mexican American women and grassroots activism in East Los Angeles titled *Mexican American Women Activists: Identity and Resistance in Two Los Angeles Communities* (Temple University Press, 1998). The book received the American Sociological Association Latino Section Award for outstanding scholarly contribution and an honorable mention from the Gustavus Myers Program for the Study of Bigotry and Human Rights in North America. She continues to center her research on women and grassroots activism.

Rosa RiVera Furumoto, EdD, is Professor and Chair of Chicana/o Studies at California State University, Northridge. She is a longtime community activist focused on environmental justice, education, and immigrant rights, as well as the ongoing struggle for ethnic studies K–16. She has worked for the last twenty-eight years with Padres Pioneros/Parent Pioneers, a group of Latinx mothers and grandmothers to address social justice and environmental justice issues in Latinx communities. She is the author of the “Mexican-American Parents Using Critical Literacy to Address Climate Change” chapter of the 2018 book *Social Justice and Parent Partnerships in Multicultural Education Contexts*, edited by Katherine E. L. Norris and Shartriya Collier.

Stevie Ruiz, PhD, is an associate professor of Chicana/o Studies at California State University, Northridge. His current book manuscript, “Stewards of the Land: Race, Space, and Environmental Justice” (under contract with the University of North Carolina Press), is a study about the racial origins of the Environmental Justice Movement prior to the 1960s in the US Southwest. His publications have appeared in *Kalfou: A Journal of Comparative and Relational Ethnic Studies*, *Latino Studies*, *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social*, and *Ethnic Studies Review*.

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