

BOOK REVIEW

Writing the Goodlife: Mexican American Literature and the Environment

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Writing the Goodlife: Mexican American Literature and the Environment. By Priscilla Solis Ybarra. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016. Pp. 240. \$29.95 (paper).

In *Writing the Goodlife: Mexican American Literature and the Environment*, Priscilla Solis Ybarra creates a genealogy of what she terms “goodlife writing,” working from the mid-nineteenth to the end of the twenty-first century. Borrowing from New Mexican writer Fabiola Cabeza de Baca’s work, *The Good Life: New Mexico Traditions and Food*, Solis Ybarra defines goodlife writing as an environmental strategy utilized by Chicanas/os that looks specifically at the trajectory of Chicana/o literature in developing and promoting dignified and respectful relationships between humans and the natural environment.

Solis Ybarra begins her analysis of Chicana/o literature in the years following the Mexican-American War (1846–1848) and encourages us to think about the historical, cultural, and political connections to land that Chicanas/os have demonstrated through the literature even before the advent of environmental studies. For Solis Ybarra, concern for the environment extends to a realm of survival for communities that have suffered at the hands of colonialism and the modern period that renders Chicana/o environmental knowledge production invalid. However, Solis Ybarra argues that environmentalism and ecocriticism has much to learn from Chicanas/os and the decolonial approaches they employ to tackle environmental justice issues.

Through goodlife writing, Solis Ybarra demonstrates the necessity to act with dignity and respect within environmental studies, concepts that Chicana/o literature has sustained over time.

Solis Ybarra's text begins with an overview of goodlife literature, placing the reader within the context of the colonial relationship forged by the Mexican-American War. Chicana writers of this period responded to the changes brought on by United States imperial powers that resulted in the dispossession of lands in favor of the development of a new identity in the West centering the national park system and the modernization of newly conquered territories. Texts written during this period demonstrated a disdain for the shifting of colonial powers and the concomitant refusal by the United States to look to this population for its knowledge of the land, especially in regard to farming and ranching efforts.

In addressing the early twentieth century, Solis Ybarra moves from an external view of landscape to an internal one as she carefully traces the decolonial politics of Chicana/o literature. Concepts of coloniality, spirituality, and the forging of identity become important conversations surrounding Chicana/o writers who focus on reaffirming the relationship with land via goodlife practices. Solis Ybarra's coining of the term "transcending possession" invokes the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge during the Chicana/o Movement and posits that this period of human relationships with nature is informed not by the nationalist practices of the Chicana/o Movement but, rather, a need to create dignity and respect for the environment that does not revolve around possession.

The book closes with a contemporary analysis of farmworker's environmental justice issues, engaging active subjectivity and more current immigration politics and ethnic studies bans. Solis Ybarra notes that farmworkers have

the capacity to “see the land despite capital’s attempt to render it abstract and alienating” (122). A decolonial approach to environmental studies allows Chicanas/os to see the ways in which colonialism has dispossessed them of their land, to see the faults inherent in nationalist politics, and to evaluate the ongoing violence to the body and land that coloniality has produced.

Solis Ybarra’s text contributes to ongoing conversations of the role of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature in the formation of Mexican American identity. It does not shy away from the controversies of this period but, rather, acknowledges the problematics produced by the hierarchical structures in the works of writers like María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, Jovita González, and Nina Otero-Warren, to name a few, as they navigate their own social positions in prior colonial relationships. An affirmation of Indigenous knowledge production and the formation of a mestiza/o identity help to solidify goodlife practices in spaces that work toward social justice within nature, all while rejecting the notion of possession so closely tied to capitalist structures of power. Of particular note is Solis Ybarra’s incorporation of Chicana feminist writers (Fabiola Cabeza de Baca, Jovita González, Enriqueta Vásquez, Helena María Viramontes, and Cherrié Moraga, among others) and the ways that it consistently advocates, over time, for the ideals associated with goodlife writing.

Writing the Goodlife: Mexican American Literature and the Environment brings important discussions about environmental justice to the growing field, crediting Chicana/o communities as early producers of knowledge. This text would serve undergraduate and graduate students interested in environmental studies, women and gender studies, Chicana/o studies (specifically Chicana/o literature), and ethnic studies. They will find useful the concepts of decolonial theory, Chicana feminism, and environmental justice that advance Solis

Ybarra's work in goodlife writing. The book will incite new conversations among scholars about nineteenth and early twentieth century Chicana/o literature and the ways in which Chicana/o communities continue to engage in goodlife practices via activism and literary and cultural production.