

## A Subversive Synthesis of Traditional Land-Based Wisdom and Ecology<sup>1</sup>

### Book Review and Commentary by Ernest Atencio<sup>2</sup>

*Chicano Culture, Ecology, Politics: Subversive Kin*, Edited by Devon G. Peña. The University of Arizona Press, 1998. 316 pages. Hardcover \$40, paper \$19.95.

"Occupied Mexico" is what some of my long-memoried neighbors in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado still call this region. Many people here have not forgotten that the United States violated the 150-year-old Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo by systematically dismantling and illegally seizing community *ejidos* (common lands under the historic land grant system), which today comprise a majority of the lands managed by the local U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management.

In this contested landscape, environmental issues often flare into bitter conflicts between the *norteños* of the centuries-old land-based communities and mainstream environmentalists. In recent years, locals grazing a few subsistence cows or taking a few trees out of the forest have been cast as anti-environmental "wise-users," and environmentalists in turn have been accused of racism, threatened, and hung in effigy.

As a native *norteño* who works in the world of environmental advocacy, I know these conflicts up close. Like the landscape, environmentalism itself remains contested territory. Whose environmentalism is it? Whose values and concerns does it represent?

Sociologist Devon Peña, a part-time resident of San Luis, Colorado, has assembled in *Chicano Culture, Ecology, Politics: Subversive Kin* a collection of writings that make a case for a homegrown Chicano environmental ethic rooted in four centuries of continuity and adaptation in the Rio Arriba (upper Rio Grande) bioregion. This "place-based" ecological knowledge is not a product of the modern environmental movement, he says, but no less valid. "The Spanish-Mexican people of the Rio Arriba simply did not need Thoreau, Muir, Leopold, or Nash to develop environmental ethics." Peña's ideas are not new, but articulated here in a very convincing way through an eclectic blend of scholarly essays, rambling autobiographical meditations, and even one poem.

Chicano Studies and ecology, says Peña, are both subversive intellectual traditions in their challenge of the dominant capitalistic, corporate, and political power structure which controls so much of our lives

and landscape. They "are subversive kin in a search for equity and reciprocity among all species and communities." The book explores the possibility that the kinship could create a broader movement for environmental protection and environmental justice. It also reflects the growing awareness of the relationship between biological diversity and cultural diversity.

According to philosopher Reyes Garcia, one of the book's authors, "Aldo Leopold wrote in *The Sand County Almanac* that the two most significant developments of the modern age were the disappearance of wilderness and the hybridization of cultures." No coincidence, I believe. More recently, the ethnobiologist Gary Nabhan wrote, "ultimately, 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... It is ironic how many conservationists have presumed that biodiversity can survive where indigenous cultures have been displaced."

To illustrate some of that rooted local wisdom, rancher Joseph C. Gallegos contributes a culturally rich and illuminating narrative called "Acequia Tales." *Acequias* are traditional gravity-driven irrigation systems, and the tales about *acequias* he grew up hearing from his grandmother and others are parables of morality, the ethics of caring for the land, cooperation and community, even life and death. These stories provide a clear sense of the *acequias'* contributions to community, livelihood, and biodiversity— a sort of ethnohistory of an active tradition perfectly suited to farming in this dry, mountainous environment.

Peña attacks the mainstream environmental movement for pushing a narrow agenda that ignores 400 years of indigenous stewardship and this kind of local wisdom. Environmentalists and environmental historians, he says, often extol local cultures as colorful and quaint, but rarely take their ecological knowledge seriously; traditional land and water use practices are treated as backward, inefficient, and in need of government rescue. Geographer Laura Pulido addresses this challenge of what she calls "ecological

legitimacy" in her chapter.

Peña and company also critique environmentalists for a shallow perspective that overlooks the reality of a global political-economy which, more than local circumstances, perpetuates environmental abuses, local poverty, and other socioeconomic problems we face. It's a good point. It's difficult to ignore the fact that last year New Mexico officially became the poorest state with the highest rate of child hunger in the nation, yet many environmentalists manage to do so.

Of course, not all locals are benevolent environmental stewards, and Peña cautions against romanticizing land-based Chicano culture. Nor are all environmentalists narrow-minded fanatics, though Peña's picture of mainstream environmentalism as a predominantly white, middle-class movement is a stereotype that sadly still holds true.

Working for a Taos, New Mexico-based environmental organization, in a county where the Anglo population is still a minority, I often found myself the only ethnic representative in huge meetings. Once you start paying attention, the narrow range of ethnic and class perspectives becomes embarrassingly obvious in local and national environmental discourse. Unfortunately, I think Peña ends up widening the gap between *norteño* activists and environmentalists by painting the environmental movement with a very broad brush. He points to the issue he's most familiar with in his own San Luis backyard as "an important exception to this pattern of divisiveness." However, he either doesn't know about or neglects to mention several other environmental struggles in the region that exemplify the broader, more inclusive, holistic approach he advocates.

Despite these few efforts, the divisiveness Peña laments is alive and well. I can attest to the challenges of trying to bridge the gap between social justice and environmental advocacy. It straddles and obscures many of our comfortable categories, and a lot of people just don't get it. Collaborate with community activists, and the more strident will accuse you of "talking to the enemy." I have been accused by an environmental activist of caring too much about community issues, for instance, even while being threatened by a member of one of those communities for being an environmentalist. For lack of a handy category, this confusing hybrid activism is even occasionally confused with the "wise use" movement.

So how can homegrown Chicano environmental ethics be integrated into a broader environmental movement? Peña argues for a bioregional approach, blending modern landscape ecology with the historic *ejido* tradition of communal resource management in "watershed commonwealths." Ideally, he says, this approach sets us "within a complex mosaic of mutual relationships among all living beings inhabiting a shared space."

One of the biggest challenges to this and other progressive approaches is what Peña calls a crisis of a lack of 'ecological democracy.' An institutionalized "cult of expertise," which corporations, governments, and environmentalists all buy into, privileges the viewpoint of scientists and "experts," but excludes local citizens and important cultural knowledge. For me, an irritating sarcastic edge to Peña's writing distracts from the rich and interesting ideas in the book. Cloaked in scholarly jargon, he still has a bias, maybe even a chip on his shoulder. I understand chips- I grew up with one too, but it looks suspicious when so thinly veiled in the guise of scholarship. Particularly mystifying is the way Peña lambastes environmental historian and writer William deBuys, selectively quoting his work out of context and stopping just short of accusing him of racism. DeBuys' excellent book, *Enchantment and Exploitation: The Lift and Hard Times of a New Mexico Mountain Range*, is a widely-respected standard reference in local environmental history. And I know him to be an exceptional scholar, an innovative conservationist working collaboratively with local community interests against the tide of more strident environmentalism, and an individual with great respect for local culture and land-use traditions. He's a friend, not a foe.

Leaning heavily on dense academic prose also makes *Subversive Kin* less accessible to the very audience who should read it. It is a book rich with local knowledge and folk wisdom that would resonate with my father's life experience, for instance, but I doubt he would want to plow through it. More disappointing is the fact that the environmental activists and policy makers I know who could most do with some perspective-expanding probably won't read it. And it's not a book you're likely to find at your local coffee shop bookstore. But at least it is sure to stir debate about these important issues among a generation of college students. Social scientists researching this region, or practicing anthropologists like myself in the middle of some of these issues, will surely profit from it as well.

Peña writes with passion and eloquence in the final chapter about the struggle to create "a new social movement for social, economic, and environmental justice.... Justice, common sense, and scientific prudence dictate that we protect these communities, for they are cradles of ecological democracy and sustainable livelihood." Despite its problems, that is the real value of this book.

If the environmental movement is to become broader in its concerns and more inclusive of minority voices, as I think it has to, *Subversive Kin* is a good place to start.

### Notes

1. A shorter version of this review first appeared under a different title in the April 24, 2000 issue of *High Country News*.
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