"The oil was made from their bones":
Environmental (In)Justice in Helena Maria Viramontes's _Under the Feet of Jesus_

American environmentalist groups have for a long time focused on extraurban, pristine nonhuman environments in their fight against pollution and resource depletion. Ecocriticism as well as the genre _nature writing_ and other ecologically sensitive texts have just like environmentalists concentrated on the “essentials” of nonhuman nature which are often perceived as moral guidelines for human behavior, as a spiritual haven for the human soul, or, from an ecocentric perspective, as containing intrinsic values free of human interests and needs. Since the 1980s, but especially the 1990s, this focus on nonhuman nature has caused fundamental criticism, mostly from Americans of color who do not see their particular social and economic situation adequately represented. Poor, mostly urban communities of color are disproportionately subjected to pollution, toxic waste dumps, and unsafe working conditions. Following a report sponsored by the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice (UCC-CRJ), published in 1987, the Reverend Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr. coined the term "environmental racism" which he defined as follows:

Environmental racism is a racial discrimination in environmental policy making. It is racial discrimination in the enforcement of regulations and laws. It is racial discrimination in the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste disposal and the siting of polluting industries. It is racial discrimination in the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in communities of color. And it is racial discrimination in the history of excluding people of color from the mainstream environmental groups, decision making boards, commissions, and regulatory bodies. (3)
A second term, “environmental justice,” is often used synonymously with environmental racism, emphasizing the category of class beside that of race. It has named a whole environmental movement since the late 1980s whose members—minority people, mostly nonelites and more often than not women—ask explicitly whose environment is protected or neglected. They ask for the reasons of the unequal distribution of environmental hazards not only in the USA, but worldwide. It is their goal to reconcile anthropocentric with ecocentric values by “bringing together the struggles for ecological diversity, ecological democracy, and social equity” (“Environmental Justice” 161). They do not see human culture as opposed to wild, untouched nature, but understand “the human environment as being intricately linked to the physical environment, and they believe that the health of one depends on the health of the other” (Taylor 42). Cole and Foster define the environment aptly as “where we live, where we work, where we play, and where we learn” (Cole and Foster 16).

The environmental justice movement is decidedly political, supporting grassroots organizations and the development of alternative social structures which enable social justice and sustainability (see “Environmental Justice” 166). Women as leaders, organizers and educators are more strongly represented than in other environmental groups (Taylor 58). This is not surprising: women became activists fighting against pollution in their neighborhoods because female reproductive organs and children are especially vulnerable to toxic pollutants and because women often have to bear the brunt of economically poor living conditions. By emphasizing the categories of race, gender, and class, the environmental justice movement shows strong parallels to the politically oriented ecofeminist movement which has identified disturbing connections between the domination of women and the domination of nature and which calls for an end to all oppression. Both movements have pointed out the capitalist system as one of the main sources of environmental destruction; both see a connection between the exploitation of the natural environment and the suppression of Others, for both human beings are an integral part of the ecosystem. And, last but not least, both want to work towards social change. The main difference between the two movements consists in their focus. The members of the environmental justice movement are more directly involved in political actions, whereas the aspect of gender, central to ecofeminism, is not of primary concern. They are motivated by anthropocentric concerns without, however, neglecting ecocentric ideals. Their main contribution to the environmental discourse is a radical expansion of the term environment which comprises human beings and their social communities, including cities. By pointing out the ubiquity of toxic elements in the environment, they sharpen an awareness for the need of coalitions beyond race and class boundaries. However, the environmental justice movement as well as the ecofeminist movement must not be understood as monolithic. Neither has a single solution to urgent environmental problems; both are part of a contemporary mosaic of environmentally sensitive reform movements whose motivations and goals are often imbricated and not to be separated along clearly demarcated lines.2

In the early Chicano Studies of the 1960s and 1970s, environmental problems did not play a significant role. Prominent were questions of ethnic identity, class consciousness, historical and cultural roots and the encouragement of ethnic pride, the establishment of publishing houses, radio stations, and Chicano studies departments, finally the development of Chicanismo feminism. Environmental debates were then dominated by middle-class white environmentalists protecting the wilderness. As in the 1970s about eighty-five percent of the Chicanos with an income about sixty-five percent lower than that of the white population lived in cities (Daniels 318); they did not see themselves represented by mainstream environmentalists. It was the environmental justice movement that put environmental concerns into Chicanismo discourse and action, mostly in rural areas in southern Colorado and northern New Mexico and Texas as well as in the urban centers of the Southwest and of California. Environmentally aware Chicano Studies have a strong sense of place and support traditional agricultural methods to help marginalized ethnic groups survive because, as Devon Peña writes: “Ecocide and ethnocide go hand in hand, and people of color are also ‘endangered species’” (Peña 14). Therefore “Chicanismo environmentalism is not so much about the preservation of nature and wilderness as it is about struggles to confront daily hazards and threats to health and well-being in environments where we live and work” (Peña 15).

And yet, from its very beginning Chicano Studies have been aware of environmental justice concerns. When in 1965 César Chávez and his National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) supported the strike of Filipino grape pickers in Delano, California, they succeeded in achieving a national boycott on grapes. They demanded first of all better working conditions and more labor rights, but they also indicted and fought against the reckless use of pesticides which the pickers were—and sometimes still are—subjected to without protection. Chávez’s labor disputes were not only directed against the political and economic structures of agribusiness, but against its cynical, unhealthy practices. His campaigns have helped ban DDT, and although health hazards are still high among agricultural laborers, they now can’t be ignored.
anywhere, says Chavez: “I think we’ve played a major role in the awareness of the issue all over the country, all over the world” (Ingram 588). Reports on the effects of pesticides and boycotts of table grapes have pushed growers to agree to contracts protecting the health of laborers not only in California, but all over the Southwest (Kirk 185).

This growing awareness of environmental hazards and environmental injustice has begun to surface in Chicano/a literature. Ana Castillo’s _So Far from God_ (1993), Lucha Corpi’s _Cactus Blood_ (1995) or Helena Maria Viramontes’s _Under the Feet of Jesus_ (1995) are just three prominent novels among a growing corpus of texts that protest pollution as an integral part of a political and social system which exploits nature just as ruthlessly as it does ethnic minorities. In the following essay I will read one of them, _Under the Feet of Jesus_, as a representative example of a literature concerned with principles of environmental justice, Chicana feminism, and the Chicano concept of the _homeland_.

It is a novel about a Mexican American migrant family in California: thirty-seven-year-old Petra with her five children and seventy-three-year-old Perfecto Flores, the substitute father, who are joined by another migrant worker, sixteen-year-old Allejo from Texas. Most of the action takes place on a fruit farm in the summer of 1990 (the only plausible date, as Perfecto Flores dreams of his birth year 1917), told from various points of view demanding active reader participation. The fragmented structure of the episodes, including memories and much of the inner life of the protagonists, mirror the consciousness of twelve-year-old Estrella, the eldest daughter of the family, who must learn to find meaning in her chaotic, unstable environment and who must finally define her own place in society. _Under the Feet of Jesus_ can thus be read as a novel of development in which Estrella, contrasted with her overworked mother, embodies the future generation of Chicanas. It is also a novel that realistically depicts the poor living conditions and the monotonous, hard field work of the migrant pickers, their exploitation and their poisoning, a novel that sympathetically sides with marginalized people who some, according to Viramontes, whose parents had been migrant workers themselves, have complete stereotypes about or who are completely invisible (Heredia and Pellarolo 178). My reading of the novel is grounded in the following questions: how does Viramontes treat environmental justice issues, the causes and the effects of living and working conditions? How does she define the environment, and what role do human beings play in it? What relationship can migrant workers have towards a natural environment which is only part of the production process? How can the homeless develop a sense of place? Does an analysis of gender aspects reveal imbricated mechanisms of suppression and domination?

In the Euroamerican imagination California is the land of agrarian abundance, a kind of garden of Eden, the goal of a real as well as a mythic journey West. Many laborers, however, must go through the disillusioning experience that the Promised Land will never be theirs, that the fertility of the land does not represent a preindustrial, Edenic wealth anybody can indulge in, but that it is part of an economic and social system in which they are underprivileged. The agrarian abundance itself is the result of political decisions. In the 19th century, after the railroad was built, California had a surplus of cheap, mostly Chinese, labor which animated businessmen to grow labor intensive products. According to Chavez, “It was in that system the labor contractor system started” (Ingram 592). In the twentieth century it is most of all Mexican Americans who work for minimal wages or less, many of them illegal immigrants who cannot rely on labor rights. In _Under the Feet of Jesus_ the protagonists are illegal U.S. citizens of Mexican descent migrating from farm to farm in search of work. How do they perceive the natural environment of fertile California?

It is conspicuous that there are no landscape descriptions in the novel. In the very beginning Estrella watches the land through the windshield of a car. Her mediated view takes in clouds, “brittle bush and opuntia cactus” (3), but most of all fruit trees: “the orange and avocado and peach trees which rolled and tumbled as far back as the etched horizon of the mountain range” (3). It is cultivated nature which dominates, the beauty of which stops abruptly when the family turns into a side road, its entrance marked by “a cluster of amputated trees” (3) indicating the road to their temporary abode, an ugly, two-room bungalow without sanitary facilities, dirty and full of “the stink of despair” (4). The fruit which the family will harvest is not a product of untouched nature “out there” nor simply cultivated nature, but clearly a signifier of a social and economic system. The Chicano migrant workers must not eat them, “firm and solid,” in the fields, but buy them in a store where “only the relics remained: squished old tomatoes spilled over onto the bruised apples and the jalapenos mixed with soft tomatoes and cucumbers peeked from between blotchy oranges” (110). They are not even allowed to gather the fruit rotting on the ground, a rule which must be interpreted as cementing power relations. Petra’s and others’ “illegal” consumption of the fruit, then, becomes a small act of resistance against an unjust system.

The weather, wind, clouds, and the sun, not subjected to property interests, seem free of socially polarising definitions. Estrella can perceive them in aesthetically pleasing images: “Sunlight weaved in and out of the clouds. Wisps of wind ruffled the orange and avocado
and peach trees” (3). But very soon it becomes obvious that it is the weather which determines the work rhythm of the laborers and thus their very existence—“which meant they could depend on nothing” (4). The sun, depicted on a Sun Maid raisin box as a flat disk in warm orange, is experienced as a blinding white light in the fields which turns the pickers into “a patch quilt of people charred by the sun” (57). Rain promises deliverance from the unrelenting heat, but at the same time threatens with an interruption of work and thus a loss of wages. This means that the experience of the weather is fundamentally determined by social circumstances. Nature as such, primordial, ahistorical and prediscursive, does not occur in the life of the migrant workers. Natural processes, indifferent to human needs, serve economic interests. At the same time they have a decisive influence on the material existence and the perception of the Chicano protagonists.

How thoroughly this perception is shaped by their immediate environment can be demonstrated with just a few examples: Estrella sees clouds “ready to burst like cotton plants” (3), her mother’s varicose veins remind her of “vines choking the movement of her legs” (61). When Perfecto Flores dreams of illness, his veins appear to him “like irrigation canals clogged with dying insects, twitching on their backs, their little twig legs jerking” (100). And Petra thinks of the growing fetus as “the lima bean in her, the bean floating in the night of her belly, bursting a root with each breath” (125). Estrella’s early childhood memories of a father who has abandoned the family is associated with an orange so big the little girl had to carry it with both hands and which he peeled with his thumbnail (12), thus imbuing her memories of him with feelings of strength and power and, in this case, with security. The protagonists’ visual perception is shaped by a very concrete earthiness, an earthiness that is nevertheless inseparable from their immediate social circumstances. It has nothing to do with the sublime or a pristine, untouched nature.

There are, however, two natural phenomena in the novel that are not part of production processes and that are developed in the portrayal of the female protagonists: the moon and the stars. Estrella’s name means star in English, her budding sexuality is associated with the moon. Alejo once saw her swimming at night: “What he saw was the woman who swam in the magnetic presence of the full moon, a woman named Star” (46). Viramontes does not develop the theme of romantic moonshine love; instead, she evokes the dangers of sexuality when Petra scolds her daughter:

The mother had yelled No and Estrella should have been safely tucked away like the other women of the camp because the moon and the earth and the sun’s alignment was a powerful thing. Unborn children lurking in their bodies were in danger of having their lips bitten just like the hare on the moon if nothing was done to protect them. Is that what you want, the mother yelled, a child born sin labios? Without a mouth? (69)

The association of woman with the moon and the hare is linked to female biological processes and to aspects of cultural imagination. In many cultures the moon is a symbol of female fertility, just as the hare, ducking in furrows, is connected to a female earth. The hare is also a moon animal as it sleeps during the day and is awake at night. In an old Mexican image from the Codex Borgia, for example, the crescent of the moon is depicted as a bowl in which a rabbit sits. Viramontes not only uses these traditional images, she also alludes to the culturally pervasive image of Mother Earth. “Tell them [La Migra] que tienes una madre aqui,” she instructs her daughter. “You are not an orphan, and she pointed a red finger to the earth, Aqui” (63).

The association of female sexuality and fertility with the moon, the hare and Mother Earth refers to the symbolism and values of cultural ecofeminism which romanticizes the association as a source of an essentialized female strength and power. Viramontes’ use of this symbolism, however, operates more strategically. It does not perpetuate idealized notions of motherhood. On the contrary, it helps her point out the highly problematic role of mothers in a patriarchal, economically deprived Chicano society. Petra’s pregnancy is a burden she might not be able to bear, and Estrella’s budding sexuality might lead the young girl into a dead end situation. Under the given circumstances female fertility is a danger and not necessarily a cause for celebration. Viramontes’ use of the moon in connection with female sexuality can also be interpreted as a return to the indigenous cultural past of Chicanas/as, in this case to the Mesoamerican fertility and Earth goddess Coatlalopeuh, mother of the celestial deities, who was driven underground by the Aztec culture (Anzaldúa 27-31). It can be seen as part of an effort of Chicana writers to reclaim a female heritage as opposed to that of their Chicano colleagues who prefer to refer to a male Aztec culture associated with the sun.

The natural environment in Under the Feet of Jesus is thus not a prediscursive entity nor a place of refuge for spiritual or physical regeneration. It is rather a socially, economically and culturally determined realm into which human beings are embedded. Their material and their psychological existence, even their visual perceptions, are shaped by their work in the fields, by the fruit that they harvest, and by culturally inherited values. How deeply the migrant workers are embedded into the manipulated, instrumentalized natural processes, how strongly ostensibly independent natural phenomena like female fertility achieve
meaning only in a specific social context, becomes clear when criteria of environmental justice are taken into consideration.

One of the principles formulated by the members of the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in October 1991 “affirms the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment, without being forced to choose between unsafe livelihoods and unemployment” (Taylor 43). The protagonists in Under the Feet of Jesus, however, are denied this right—with dire consequences for their mental and physical health. They move from one temporary job to another, without a fixed abode, without a continuous education for their children, without the self-assurance of an intact, strong, autonomous community, and they are exposed to pesticides, all of which results in the frustrating feeling of powerlessness. This surfaces, for example, in their fear of La Migra who can send workers back to Mexico assuming they are illegal immigrants even if they are legal U.S. citizens. Identification papers are therefore documents necessary for survival. Petra keeps them under her Jesus statue believing in its power to protect her family. She gives her daughter important instructions in case La Migra should try to doubt her citizenship:

Don’t run scared. You stay there and look them in the eye. Don’t let them make you feel you did a crime for picking the vegetables they’ll be eating for dinner. If they stop you, if they try to pull you into the green vans, you tell them the birth certificates are under the feet of Jesus, just tell them. (63)

This feeling of powerlessness is to a large degree a consequence of the migrants’ working conditions which Víramontes depicts in starkly realistic details. Like many other Chicana/o authors, she, too, emphasizes three aspects of field work: its monotony, the hardship of physical labor, and the heat. “Morning, noon, or night, four or fourteen or forty it was all the same. She stepped forward, her body never knowing how tired it was until she moved once again” (53). The pickers suffer from the heat of the sun which makes Estrella’s eyes sting like an onion, which makes some people faint, which shrivels them up like raisins. None of the protagonists is fit for this kind of hard labor; Perfecto Flores because he is too old, Petra because she is pregnant and has to take care of four small children, Estrella because she herself, not yet thirteen, is still a child. Estrella remembers how her mother took her with her to the fields when she was only four years old: “She remembered crying just as the small girl was wailing now. The mother showed pregnant and wore large man’s pants with the zipper down and a shirt to cover her drumtight belly. Even then, the mother seemed old to Estrella.

Yet, she hauled pounds and pounds of cotton by the pull of her back” (51). They all can’t afford to do without their minimal wages though, knowing they are being exploited, but seeing no alternative.

When the environment “where we work” and “where we live” is determined by socioeconomic circumstances that deny basic human rights, the result is not only a feeling of powerlessness, but also the fear of a loss of identity. These migrants, who according to Víramontes are invisible to mainstream America, without stable social connections, without a permanent place to live, cannot develop a sense of place, a feeling of belonging to a specific geographical location or a community. “Petra often feared that she would die and no one would know who she was” (166). Estrella, too, thinks fearfully of a young girl’s bones found in La Brea Tar Pits: “No details of her life were left behind, no piece of cloth, no ring, no doll. A few bits of bone displayed somewhere under a glass case and nothing else” (129). Alejo, the young worker from Mexico, likes to imagine himself as a solid mass of boulder; he then “not only became part of the earth’s history, but would exist as the boulders did, for eternity” (52).

The socioeconomic situation not only affects the psyche of the migrants, but also in a very real sense their physical health. One sure sign of their hardship is a visible early aging process. When Petra first meets Perfecto Flores she can hardly guess his age: “He looked old, but the nature of their lives had a way of putting twenty years on a face, so that a man of fifty looked like he was seventy, and perhaps she looked fifty herself, though she was only thirty-three at the time” (111). She herself is overweight and suffers from varicose veins; she is constantly tired and overworked. It is impossible for her to keep her children clean, which Estrella becomes conscious of only when she goes to school or to a white clinic. Víramontes portrays her protagonists in unembellished details, yet without depriving them of dignity. They are foremost victims of a system that instrumentalizes them for profit.

This simultaneous exploitation of human beings and the land becomes most obvious in the agribusiness’s use of insecticides and pesticides. By foregrounding the issue of toxicity, Víramontes highlights a net of relationships into which human as well as nonhuman beings are intricately embedded. She also exposes mechanisms of oppression that affect primarily underprivileged races and classes and that have a special influence on women, thus stressing criteria central to ecocritical, ecofeminist and environmental justice analysis.

Although the social and political system of California is marked by absentee ownership in the novel, its presence is pervasive in the daily lives of Víramontes’ protagonists. There is very little open criticism of the system, as the central consciousness is Estrella’s who hasn’t
understood its mechanisms yet. The text, however, illustrates how the people as well as the land are forced to produce as much as possible, how the Chicanos/as are nothing but an anonymous mass whose workers are treated like animals: “The driver released the bolt of the back door, and the first of the piscadores were herded out of the corruded flatbed” (67). The ruthless spraying of insecticides and pesticides—the pickers are not informed when the fields are sprayed—demonstrates the indifference towards their health. Estrella has only a vague sense of the danger. She has heard the foreman lie about pesticides not spilling into the ditch and wonders: “You think ‘cause of the water our babies are gonna come out with no mouth or something?” (33). Petra has very concrete fears: “Would the child be born without a mouth, would the poisons of the fields harden in its tiny little veins?” (125). These fears are well grounded. Cesar Chavez has pointed out that the number of miscarriages of women working with grapes is very high, and that there are many cases of cancer and “terrible, terrible examples of birth defects—children born without arms or legs” (Ingram 588).

When the plane spreads the clouds of white dusty chemicals it is first the birds that begin to caw. Soon Perfecto Flores feels the poison, he “coughed into his fist, and his nose began to run and he blew his nose and sneezed again. Flies tumbled like leaves from the bushy trees, dropping onto his shoulders and then onto the ground” (81). Humans are as endangered as insects when they are directly exposed to the toxic spray. Alejo who works to finance a college education is surprised by the plane when he is stealing peaches. He is hit by a massive dose of the spray which settles in his respiratory tracts and threatens to suffocate him. Afraid to fall like the insects, “his whole body began to cramp from the shrinking pull of his skin squeezing against his bones” (77). His former desire to achieve the solidity of stones simply vanishes as he believes himself to literally sink into the earth:

He thought first of his feet sinking, sinking to his knees jointed, swallowing his waist and torso, the pressure of air squeezing his chest and crushing his ribs. Engulfing his skin up to his chin, his mouth, his nose, bubbled air. Black bubbles erasing him. Finally the eyes. Blankness. Thousands of bones, the bleached white marble of bones. Splintered bone pieced together by wire to make a whole, surfaced bone. No fingerprint or history, bone. No lava stone. No story or family, bone. (78)

The earth, called “madre” by Petra, takes him back. But this kind of merging with Mother Earth does not evoke feelings of a harmonious unity with nature, on the contrary, it threatens to destroy him, to crush his bones like those of the animals and plants that fell to the bottom of the sea millions of years ago and turned into tar oil, as he had once instructed Estrella. Alejo must go through the devastating experience that he is subject to social and biological forces just as the soil is. Agribusiness, always impersonal in the novel, instrumentalizes a chemically and technically modified nature to eradicate undesirable natural phenomena, regardless of human health requirements. Alejo is reduced to the materiality of his body, his dreams and aspirations of a better future are of no account in the economic system he thought would help him achieve his ambitious goals. He becomes seriously ill. The other workers seem to be familiar with the symptoms of his disease which they ironically call “daño of the fields” (93), superstitiously avoiding their chances as if that could ward off similar fates for themselves.

Alejo becomes too sick to analyze the causes of his poisoning. Estrella, however, has learned her lesson when Alejo taught her about the origin of oil:

She remembered the tar pits. Energy money, the fossilized bones of energy matter. How bones made oil and oil made gasoline. The oil was made from their bones, and it was their bones that kept the nurse’s car from not halting on some highway, kept her on her way to Daisylle to pick up her boys at six. It was their bones that kept the air conditioning in the cars humming, that kept them moving on the long dotted line on the map. Their bones. (148)

Chicanos/as and the oil are mere resources for the white agribusiness, both instruments of its perpetual needs. Viramontes not only reveals a socialist attitude here, she also depicts the natural environment as a biological or rather geological fact, and at the same time as deeply enmeshed in a social and cultural system. Texts like these demonstrate how much the ecological crisis is one of the mind. They demonstrate the consequences of an ideology that is based on hierarchical dualism which sets one race and one class over other races and classes and over nonhuman nature. The pervasiveness of toxic elements, however, shows that this ideology is finally self-defeating. Since the publication of Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring in 1962 there has been a growing awareness of the fact that toxicity does not stop at your own backyard, that there is no green oasis to seek refuge in. Drinking water, air, food—everything can be contaminated. “However one might wish otherwise,” writes Lawrence Buell, “the modern nature that toxic discourse recognizes as the physical environment humans actually inhabit is not a holistic spiritual or biotic economy but a network or networks within which, on the one hand, humans are biotically imbricated (like it or not) and, on the other hand, nature figures as modified (like it or not) by technê” (Buell, “Toxic Discourse” 657). In the novel it is flies that die and Alejo who might die from the chemicals, but in the end we are
all affected as we eat the fruit that is being sprayed. Anthropocentric and ecocentric criteria cannot be clearly separated. Human beings are part of the ecosystem which in its turn is part of a social and economic system in which all elements—human and nonhuman, cultural and natural—are interdependent.

Because they feel powerless, most of the protagonists have resigned themselves to their fate. One of them, however, achieves heroic status by rebelling against what others deem a hopeless situation. It is Estrella who has had to take responsibility for her younger brothers and sisters from a very early age on, who has never submitted to rules and regulations, an intelligent, curious young girl with a strong desire to learn. When Alejo gets sick, she takes care of him, persuades the family to drive him to a clinic although they don’t have enough money for a doctor. When the nurse, condescending and with obvious disgust for the dirty migrant workers, charges them ten dollars just to tell them to go to another clinic, Estrella becomes furious. Driven to despair, conscious of the unjust treatment Chicanos/as suffer as minimal wage laborers, she all of a sudden realizes that they are victims of racism and exploitation, that the system only functions because it profits from their work. “Estrella had figured it out, the nurse owed them as much as they owed her” (148). She gets the crowbar from Perfecto Flores’s car and slams it on the nurse’s desk, demanding their money back—with success. Although Estrella’s eruption of violence is an individual act, it is political in a larger context as it is based on the realization of a social context encompassing the categories of race and class and even the natural environment. Estrella understands that her people, despised and ignored, are instrumentalized matter just as the land. Her use of the crowbar is an act of self-empowerment without which Alejo and others would be crushed like insects. She has asserted her dignity and maybe saved Alejo’s life. Of course this is not the kind of resistance Chicano political leaders like Cesar Chavez called for. It is only a first step of a young girl who has not yet learned the power of words. It is a drastic move in a desperate situation, a small victory over one member of a society that does not see and does not listen to Chicanos/as as individual people with basic rights. The text finally offers other, more efficient means of rebellion against an environmentally racist and unjust system, and they have to do with conceptions of home.

When the migrant workers home is only an old jalopy and a temporary dilapidated bungalow, when their migrations do not allow any identification with a specific geographical location, when this missing sense of place leads to a loss of identity—how can they ground themselves physically as well as psychologically? What is home for the homeless? This question is of special significance for Chicanos/as in the Southwest as many of them don’t regard themselves as immigrants but as indigenous people who were colonized by EuroAmericans after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 when about half of Mexican territory fell to U.S. Americans, i.e. roughly today’s California, Texas, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, more than half of Colorado and the Oklahoma Panhandle. “While Mexico remains the homeland in the sense of a motherland—a cultural source and a nation of origin (be that the present republic or the republic at its greatest extent)—the Southwest is the present home of the Chicanos, a home that since 1848 has helped make them what they are” (Chavez 4). Others legitimize their presence by referring to the myth of Aztlán according to which the original land of the Aztecs was to be found in the Southwest of today’s USA, although most probably it was just 400 miles north of Mexico City (Leal 6-13). This “authentic” geographical location of the original Aztec territory has symbolic as well as political significance in the collective Chicano/a consciousness. It enhances national self-confidence, at times, especially during the political movimiento of the 1960s, it has even supported efforts to reclaim the Southwestern territory. Aztlán thus offers not only a geographical homeland, but also a cultural and psychological identity. It accepts and even celebrates an indigenous heritage, and it unifies marginalized people into a community. Besides these positive aspects, however, the myth of Aztlán has some negative implications. It articulates a nationalistic consciousness which excludes other races. It also romanticizes an era marked by war and conquest and a rigorous class hierarchy, an Aztec culture that had eradicated a matriarchal Mayan culture.

Without referring to Aztlán, home is the desired goal for all the protagonists in Under the Feet of Jesus. For Perfecto Flores memories of “his real home” (78), “his native soil” (100) become so prominent that he wants to leave Petra’s family and go back before he is too old to do so. Alejo needs to be home when he is sick, but might not make it. Petra has lost her home when her husband left her with five children; Estrella dreams of the barn as a fixed abode. While none of them will reach a physical home, the two female protagonists succeed in establishing an alternative home, free of geographical specificity, free of traditional conceptions of Aztlán.

Petra creates a home by keeping her family together. She thus fulfills general expectations of female role models. However, she extends and transforms this role because she demonstrates—out of necessity, to be sure—the absurdity of keeping house according to white standards of cleanliness and perfection and as a safe haven against the corruptions of the world. She also redefines the term family. Despite their poverty she takes in another member, Alejo, because of a deepseated feeling
of solidarity towards her own people: “—If we don’t take care of each
other, who would take care of us? Petra asked. We have to look out
for our own” (96). However, Petra’s home is defenseless against the
dangers of a racially and economically discriminating society. It is not
clear whether she can keep Perfecto Flores from leaving her, whether
she can heal Alejo or always protect her children. When her Jesus
statue falls and breaks it means a loss of the documents’ safe place “under
the feet of Jesus.” It also implies a loss of a naive belief in the power of
religion to ward off evil. Whether Petra will from then on rely on more
realistic, pragmatic solutions is left open. Her efforts to create a home
for her family must nevertheless be interpreted as almost heroic in the
context of the radically unstable circumstances of the homeless.9

Real hope, however, lies in the young protagonist Estrella, the
rebellious girl who shows as much solidarity and readiness to help
as her mother. The new home she finally comes to envision lies in
the immaterial dimension of words. Although she does not master
the power of language and reaches for a crowbar to achieve immediate
goals, she gains an understanding for the significance of words as
meaning making instruments, just as Perfecto Flores’s tools give him
a name and an identity.

Perfecto Flores taught her the names that went with the tools: a claw
hammer, he said with authority, miming its function; screwdrivers, see,
holding up various heads and pointing to them; crescent wrenches,
lopped pliers like scissors for cutting chicken or barbed wire; old wood
saw, new hacksaw, a sledgehammer, pry bar, chisel, axe, names that
gave meaning to the tools. Tools to build, bury, tear down, rearrange
and repair, a box of reasons his hands took pride in. She lifted the
pry bar in her hand, felt the coolness of iron and power of function,
weighed the significance it awarded her, and soon she came to under-
stand how essential it was to know these things. That was when she
began to read. (26)

Words can be used as tools: to order the world, to put fragments
together, to construct. The right use of words gives the speaker power
to name, to define, to identify. Estrella learns to read, but finds it very
difficult to speak: “[... ] she wanted to tell him [Alejo] how good she
felt but didn’t know how to build the house of words she could invite
him into” (70). This difficulty of self-authorization through language
reflects the situation of many people of color, especially of women.
Anzaldúa has noted that young Chicanas are taught to be silent with
sayings such as “Flies don’t enter a closed mouth” (Anzaldúa 54).
Furthermore, their existence and their experiences are usually ignored in
the discourse of white dominant ideology. Rosaura Sanchez has there-
fore called for an active counterdiscourse to resist efforts “to silence,
incorporate, or ignore voices of oppressed and exploited people living
within the borders of the United States” (Saldívar-Hull 52). Viramontes
practices such a counterdiscourse by writing about and making visible
the life of “invisible” migrant workers and by employing code
switching, “a language with terms that are neither español ni inglés, but
both,” a “border tongue” which, according to Anzaldúa, is for some
of her people “a homeland closer than the Southwest” (Anzaldúa 55).
In Viramontes’ novel, too, language functions as a home, a language
that resists notions of purity and correctness, but that expresses the
liveliness and flexibility of people having to adapt to specific border
circumstances and that creates a very specific border identity. Language
can also help bond people together. When Estrella says a simple “thank
you” to Perfecto Flores for his help, “he was struck by how deeply
these words touched him” (155), having never received any sign of
gratitude from “his country” which he had worked for all his life. So
home in this Chicano/a context has nothing to do with an identifiable
geographical location. It is rather a flexible category, susceptible to
temporal and spatial changes, a category which has to be created over
and over again. It is in a rather general sense the land of California,
but neither that of a mythic garden of Eden nor of a mythic Aztlán,
but one that is culturally dominated by the economic structures and
ecologically destructive practices of a Euroamerican agribusiness as
well as by the imagination and desires of Chicanos/as. By revolting
against her people’s definition and inherent abuse by another culture,
against their role as victims, Estrella participates in the construction
of yet another home which is first based on a new consciousness and
then, at least potentially, on the power of language to help create a new
environment which conforms to the principles of environmental justice,
a home that respects anthropocentric and ecocentric concerns because,
as the issue of toxicity has made clear, social justice and ecocentric
ideals go hand in hand. Or, as Celia Lawless argues, “home should be
viewed as a vital, thriving reality lived through language, people, and
habitable structures” (Lawless 376).

From an ecofeminist point of view, “the ideology which author-
izes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality,
physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the
oppression of nature” (Gaard 1). In Viramontes’ novel race, class, and
nature are the linked objects of oppression. Men—Alejo and Perfecto
Flores—are subjected to social injustice as much as women. However,
women are differently affected because of their reproductive capa-
bilities and their social roles. They have good reasons to be afraid of
miscarriages, and they are the ones who bear the main responsibility
in raising the children. Women therefore represent aspects of what Mary Mellor has termed “a deep material ecofeminism” which assumes the material embeddedness of humans into the natural environment which in its part is subjected to historical processes. “Whatever social lives people construct they are always delimited by bodily existence. Equally, social lives are delimited by the ecosystem” (Mellor 184). Because of their specific material and historical experiences, Mellor attributes a privileged critical consciousness to women, a differential consciousness, comparable to Anzaldúa’s mestiza consciousness in that it challenges dualistic thinking and aims to create new, more tolerant social models. Women’s often negative experience leads them to expose social injustice and to desire alternative ways of being in the world. Of course, as Mellor rightly observes, “relatively few women play this role purely as women, but as people caught in a matrix of oppressions that embrace many men as well” (Mellor 13).

In Under the Feet of Jesus it is Estrella who learns to challenge strictly dualistic thinking, to rebel against her role as a woman in a patriarchal society, to revolt against an economic system that threatens to destroy her and her people, to rage against racist slander. In the end of the novel, when she confidently climbs the roof of the barn to look down upon her world like a star, “she believed her heart powerful enough to summon home all those who strayed” (176). She thus becomes the potential leader of her people, having acquired a consciousness that is aware of the interdependence of ethnic, gender, and environmental concerns, that will, like Anzaldúa, participate in the creation of a new culture, expressing “a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet” (Anzaldúa 81)—a culture that is a home on this earth.

NOTES

1. According to this report, sixty percent of African American and Latino communities and more than fifty percent of Asian/Pacific Islanders and Native Americans live close to uncontrolled toxic waste sites. See “Environmental Justice: A Roundtable Discussion” 155.

2. In Writing for an Endangered World, Lawrence Buell lists six loosely connected models of environmental concerns: the risk society paradigm, the environmental justice paradigm, the Gaia paradigm, the ecotheory paradigm, the green and anti-negationist ethics-of-care paradigm, the sustainability paradigm. See 197.

3. Gloria Anzaldúa writes about a similar autobiographical—incident in Borderlands: “In the fields, la migr. My aunt saying, ‘No corran, don’t run. They’ll think you’re del otro lan.’ In the confusion, Pedro ran, terrified of being caught. He couldn’t speak English, couldn’t tell them he was fifth generation American. Sin papeles—he did not carry his birth certificate to work in the fields. La migr took him away while we watched” (Anzaldúa 4).

4. “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán,” presented in Denver in 1969, documents the connection of Aztec origins with the idea of Aztlán being located in the Southwest, see Anaya and Lomeli, eds. 1-5.

5. The novel shows many parallels to Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath, especially when one compares Petra with Ma Joad.


REFERENCES


Josh Wallaert

The Ecopoetics of Perfection:
William Carlos Williams and Nature in
*Spring and All*

In *The Great American Novel*, William Carlos Williams writes:

> Davy Crockett had a literary style. Rather than blow his squirrel to bits he'd strike the tree just under its belly so the concussion would stun it. Such was the country with the element of time subtracted. (p 213)

It may be said that Williams has a similar “literary” style. He strikes the tree just below the belly of the squirrel, with “palpitating syllables” (209), letting the resonance of the word carry the reader by reverberations to the thing he means to say. If there is a moral here it is this: To write is to swing a hatchet. To write the thing, to locate it within a certain system of language and thought, to confuse the name of the thing with the thing itself, is to deny the potential of the thing to be more than, or other than, its representation in text at any one given time. In 1923, at the height of European and American modernism, Williams was beginning to connect time with violence, and violence with literature, and literature with nature, in ways that should resonate with ecocritics today.

While these connections were not immediately apparent to Williams’s contemporaries—indeed, they were not always apparent even to him—they have become increasingly important to critical studies in the last forty years. In 1967 Jacques Derrida proposed the question of our times, “What links writing to violence?” (101). In retrospect one finds that there is a hint of this question in nearly everything Williams wrote. “One must begin with words,” he writes. “But what then of smell? What then of the hair on the trees or the golden brown cherries under the black cliffs?” (158). Williams is concerned with the ethics of representation, and particularly with the ethics of representing
The existence of ISLE reflects the rapid growth of ecological literary criticism and environmental scholarship in related disciplines in the United States and around the world in recent years, which in turn reflects the steady increase in the production of environmental literature over the past several decades and the increased visibility of such writing in college classrooms. ISLE seeks to encourage such scholarship, writing, and teaching, while facilitating the development of a theoretical foundation for these activities. It also seeks to bridge the gaps between scholars, artists, students, and the public. ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment is indexed in The American Humanities Index (AHI) and MLA International Bibliography.

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