

Research on Diversity in Youth Literature

Volume 4 | Issue 2

Article 2

April 2022

Naturalizing the Border: Eco-Justice Poetics in Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe and All the Stars Denied

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Recommended Citation

Postma-Montaño, Regan (2022) "Naturalizing the Border: Eco-Justice Poetics in Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe and All the Stars Denied," *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 2.

Available at: <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl/vol4/iss2/2>

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If we understand ourselves as part of a living ecosystem continually being shaped by and shaping us, then everything we do has ecological implications, and every attempt to mend or protect our ecosystem is inevitably rooted in questions of social justice.

-Aurora Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories*

The impetus for my study is the persistent marginalization and exclusion of Latinx writers and artists, as well as Latinx peoples more broadly, from many mainline environmental conversations, which often construct a false binary between environmental and social justice issues. Via an analysis of two Latinx historical young adult novels set in the US/Mexico borderlands, Benjamin Alire Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012) and Guadalupe García McCall's *All the Stars Denied* (2018), I highlight the importance of centering Latinx voices, especially young Latinx voices, in these discussions on eco-justice for the way these voices challenge the field of environmental studies as a whole and enable us to preserve and generate more mutual connections between humans and nature.

The reason for choosing these novels for a study on Latinx forms of eco-justice is that both *Aristotle and Dante* and *All the Stars Denied* strategically intertwine resistance to social and political crises with corresponding environmental concerns. While a surface reading of these novels may suggest that neither novel speaks to environmental concerns, my examination yields a deep awareness of the role of the natural world in the young adult characters' lives. In *Aristotle and Dante*, for example, the desert landscape of the borderlands around El Paso, Texas serves as a transformative and reparative space in which the two titular characters work through questions of identity and toward acceptance of the love they have for each other. *All the Stars Denied*, which concerns the unlawful discrimination and deportation of Estrella and her family to Mexico despite their status as US citizens, highlights the role of the environment via eco-poetry. Indeed,

in the midst of injustices, Estrella writes eco-poems which, I argue, should be read as an important mode for Estrella to affirm her connections to the land her family has called home for generations. At the forefront of my study then is the notion that *Aristotle and Dante* and *All the Stars Denied* use eco-justice poetics¹ to position the natural world as central to the well-being of people and as interconnected to social justice issues.

This intertwining of social issues with environmental concerns is a hallmark of Latinx environmentalist thought and action.² Aurora Levins Morales in *Medicine Stories: Essays for Radicals*, for example, observes that every social struggle invariably is an ecological struggle. The converse is also true, as every ecological struggle “must also be embedded in the call for universal social justice” (9). This bold statement further leads us to understand that if we see “ourselves as part of a living ecosystem continually being shaped by and shaping us, then everything we do has ecological implications, and every attempt to mend or protect our ecosystem is inevitably rooted in questions of social justice” (4). To Levins Morales the segregation of social justice movements and environmental activism constrains both efforts because human oppression and environmental degradation often intertwine. As she insists, an eco-activism with a narrow focus on wildlife and wilderness, that is, one that primarily focuses on the conservation of species and the preservation of wilderness, does not and cannot account for “the unequal impacts of ecological destruction on different groups of people, or the different relationships they may have to land, water, trees, and other species” (6). In the end, such a

¹ By “eco-justice poetics” I refer to the use of environmental metaphors and eco-poetry with environmental and social justice ends.

² With “Latinx Environmentalisms” I draw on Wald, Vázquez, Solis Ybarra, and Ray in *Latinx Environmentalisms: Place, Justice, and the Decolonial* who use the term to underscore “the variety of ways in which Latinx cultures are often...environmental but hardly ever identify as environmentalist” (3). The term constitutes a “political choice to redress the vacuum of attention given to Latinx environmental thought, particularly in literature and cultural productions” (3).

narrow focus, which is usually the recourse of middle-class, urban whites, “ends up perpetuating the injustices that are blocking our way toward lasting solutions” (6). For Levins Morales, in order for “human society to be sustainable on earth, it must become inclusive, must take into account the well-being of each one of us” (4). Put another way, the inclusion of voices of all humans must be built into our collective vision of environmentalism even as our entire ecosystem needs to inform our vision of social justice (8-9).

My study thus seeks to redress what constitutes environmentalism and environmental young adult literature, insisting that for many Latinx peoples, as well as for other marginalized and racialized communities, engagement with nature and land is interconnected with social justice imperatives. From this lens, *Aristotle and Dante* and *All the Stars Denied*, I argue, perform an eco-justice intervention by deploying eco-poetics as a literary tactic to contest the marginalization and exclusion of Latinx scholars, writers, and activists from mainstream environmentalism. Rather than draw a bright line between society and nature, these novels link social justice endeavors—whether homophobia and border politics in *Aristotle and Dante* or the unlawful deportation of US citizens in *All the Stars Denied*—with an environmental awareness that sees the natural world of the borderlands as vital for human contemplation and growth.

That the characters in these novels possess deep ties to the natural world and the borderland landscapes in which they live should not come as a surprise. As Wald, Vázquez, Solis Ybarra, and Ray point out in *Latinx Environmentalisms: Place, Justice, and the Decolonial*, “Latinx literatures and cultural productions often offer deep and significant insights about environmental issues, environmental ethics, and the intertwining of environmental ills with the social ills of racism, capitalism, and colonialism” (3). At the same time, this bold insistence within Latinx literatures and cultural productions to acknowledge the interconnections between

environmental issues and racism, capitalism, and colonialism, to use the terms by Wald et al., may lead to the marginalization of what Latinx environmentalisms have to offer. Eco-activisms that work toward the preservation of wilderness and/or the conservation of species may not easily forgo their privileges, specifically when redefining the field could lead to questions of the easy alliances by mainstream environmentalism with whiteness, racism, and national belonging. This then is an important reason for expanding the environmental justice frame to include movements that take a more holistic approach to addressing such problems. With this in mind, I hope to illustrate the rich and needed Latinx ways of knowing and telling that inform eco-justice, as well as how these Latinx voices, as presented in Latinx young adult novels, might inspire future generations to a renewed understanding of the environment and the self and further still, to the fight for a more inclusive eco-activism.

Healing the Borderlands in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*

Set in the 1980s in the border city of El Paso, Texas and its desert environs, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* depicts the quandaries of ethnicity and sexuality faced by the two titular Mexican American male adolescent characters, fifteen-year-old Aristotle (Ari) Mendoza and Dante Quintana. When Ari, trying to escape his summer boredom, meets Dante at the local pool, the two become instant friends despite their many differences. While some of these differences are driven by the personality of each character, for example, Dante loves poetry and art while Ari finds it challenging to express himself, other differences involve social identities. In this regard, Dante's father works as a college professor while Ari's father works as a postal carrier, thus positioning class as an important distinction for each character. Furthermore, and to underscore racial and ethnic differences, Dante is fair skinned while Ari's complexion is darker, and Dante struggles with his ethnic identity while Ari is more at peace

with his but struggles to accept his sexual orientation. The novel in many ways treads between these differences as the two youths seek to understand the truths of their lives and “discover the secrets of the universe.” I will return to these differences momentarily. For now though, I wish to advance the idea that the natural world of the borderlands serves as a key locus for Ari and Dante as they seek healing and find confidence in their Mexican American queer identities. In this, I argue that the desert borderlands become a place in which Ari and Dante can discover the secrets of the universe—a place in which to learn their Latinx identities, form supportive communities, and experience freedom via contemplation, discovery, and ultimately love.

We must remember, however, that the border and the borderlands are fraught spaces; their long history of racism and exclusion permeate our understanding of the desert environs around El Paso, Texas. Thus, even as we contemplate what Sáenz’s counter-figuration of the desert borderlands offers, we also must reckon with the historical and present realities of the US/Mexico borderlands as spaces impacted by physical, environmental, and cultural violence.³ The beginnings of this violence in the US/Mexico borderlands, as Chicana writer and theorist Gloria Anzaldúa informs us, can be traced to the 1800s when “Anglos migrated illegally into Texas, which was then part of Mexico, in greater and greater numbers and gradually drove the *tejanos* (native Texans of Mexican descent) from their lands, committing all manner of atrocities against them” (28). The violence continued in and following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), which resulted in the border fence that “divides the Mexican people” and stripped “Indians and Mexicans of their land while their feet were still rooted in it. *Con el destierro y el exilio fuimos desuñados, destroncados, destripados*—we were jerked out by the roots, truncated, disemboweled, dispossessed, and separated from our identity and our history” (29-30). If we pay

³ For more on racialized violence in the region, see *Refusing to Forget*.

close attention to Anzaldúa's environmental metaphors, they reveal the intertwining of land and Chicana bodies. In this case, being "jerked out by the roots" entails an epistemological and ontological rupture, that is, separation from the land caused a separation "from our identity and our history." This "wounding," to use Anzaldúa's notion that the border is an "open wound" (24), in turn gives rise to toxic binaries, whether of peoples ("us" versus "them") or of relationships with the environment (human versus nature). The physical borderlands, in this way, are mapped onto psychological, sexual, and spiritual borderlands of the self.⁴

Aristotle and Dante evokes this wounding and existential crisis via Ari's dreams. In one such dream, Ari and his brother Bernardo, and then Ari and Dante, find themselves separated by the geo-political US/Mexico border between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez. In both instances they are unable to understand each other regardless of language, English or Spanish, and this separation and in-communication leaves Ari feeling "lost" and "alone" (Sáenz 78). At play in this dream, which Ari considers important for its foreboding questions of identity, is the way the border structures relationships, in terms of inter-personal and intra-personal connections—how one relates to others as well as how one understands oneself. We see this split emphasized in the demarcation of English and Spanish and the lack of understanding which contrasts with the fluidity and hybridity of language use in the borderlands region. Anzaldúa describes her hybrid borderland language, for example, in terms of a rich mixing and switching of codes between English, Castilian Spanish, North Mexican dialect, Tex-Mex, and Nahuatl (20). What is needed, therefore, are alternate ways of thinking that lead toward connection, hybridity, and healing—that lead to the secrets of the universe.

⁴ For a further exploration of the natural borderlands and the impact of racialized environmental degradation in the work of Anzaldúa and Jovita González, see Solis Ybarra's article "Borderlands as Bio-Region" in which she underscores the ways "colonization, exploitation, and racism impact the land and its people" (176).

These alternate ways of thinking do not come easily because, as Anzaldúa points out, the border, in addition to dividing countries, also divides people. It divides them not only from each other but also, in its most insidious ways, parts people from the inside out. The border, understood in this way, reveals itself in Ari's dreams as he finds himself split in two. Anzaldúa captures this phenomenon perfectly in her notation that the border is a 1,950 mile-long wound "running down the length of my body, / staking fence rods in my flesh, / splits me splits me / *me raja me raja*" (24). As she further states, "our psyches resemble the bordertowns and are populated by the same people. The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our head" (109). From this theoretical lens that has us investigate how the outer realities of the border are mapped onto the psyche, the next step forward in our examination of *Aristotle and Dante* is to look closely at the ways in which "awareness of the situation" leads to inner changes that have the possibility to propel societal changes.

The transformation of Ari, from a person split in two, and of Ari and Dante, with their many differences, comes in the form of a reconceptualization of the borderlands, that is, in an epistemological shift in which the borderlands and their desert environs are seen as the source of reparative possibilities. Much in the same way that Anzaldúa posits that *nepantla*, the interstitial place that means "torn between ways" in Nahuatl (100), becomes the launching point for a "third way," a new consciousness, a mestiza consciousness,⁵ *Aristotle and Dante*, I propose, positions the concept of ecotones as an instrument of transformation. We first learn about ecotones when

⁵ For more information on *nepantlera*-ism and the new mestiza consciousness, see Keating.

Ari's mom, a teacher by trade, introduces the concept to Ari as a way to alleviate adolescent anxieties:

“Ari, do you know what an ecotone is?”

“It's the terrain where two different ecosystems meet. In an ecotone, the landscape will contain elements of the two different eco-systems. It's like a natural borderlands.”

“Smart boy. In transition. I don't have to say anymore, do I?” (238)

Derived from an English element, the *eco*, and a borrowing from the Greek word for tension, ecotones are natural areas where two different ecosystems meet and where, because of this natural mestizaje, they boast higher levels of biodiversity. Thus, while, at first glance, the ecotone seems intended to address adolescent transitions, the ecotone takes on greater significance. In this, the ecotone, like Anzaldúa's borderlands, allows us better to understand how outer terrains can be mapped onto inner worlds where divisions exist, which in the case of the novel are psychological, sexual, and tied to ethnic belonging. In contrast to binary thinking, the “natural borderlands,” Ari comes to realize through his mother's counsel, can be reconfigured in terms of positive assets, that is, as places that thrive *because* of their diversity. These new ways of seeing the borderlands, this newfound epistemology, will become significant as Ari and Dante search for the secrets of the universe. As Anzaldúa reminds us, to thrive in these kinds of spaces, “the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures. By creating a new mythos—that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave—*la mestiza* creates a new consciousness” (102). Thus, in the same way that Anzaldúa's notion of hybridity entails a rich consciousness, made of divergent and convergent “materials,” ecotones, as presented in *Aristotle and Dante*, allow for a positive understanding of complex identities.

And, this ecotone way of understanding is deeply needed. As Mexican American adolescents living in El Paso, Ari and Dante grapple, each in different ways, with different facets of identity, including sexuality, gender, ethnicity, class, and language, especially as these intersect. Dante, for example, worries about coming out to his parents because he believes that his sexuality will keep him from conforming to Mexican male gender expectations of producing heirs: “The thing is I love my dad. My mom too. And I keep wondering what they’re going to say when I tell them that someday I want to marry a boy. I wonder how that’s going to go over? I’m the only son. What’s going to happen with the grandchildren thing? I hate that I’m going to disappoint them” (227). Ari likewise struggles with accepting his sexuality; however, Ari’s worries are largely driven by fear of violence, specifically the troubling history of violence towards gay people in his family. For much of the novel, Ari does not know the reason why his older brother Bernardo is incarcerated. Much to Ari’s dread, it turns out that Bernardo beat a transgender prostitute to death (331-32). To add to Ari’s dilemma of accepting his sexual identity, he further learns that his Aunt Ophelia was rejected, for large parts of her life, by her family because of her romantic relationship with a female partner. Even in death, the extended family refuses to attend Aunt Ophelia’s wake (284). Even more, an enraged classmate does not help Ari’s problems, as Ari explains, “he got mad and called me a *pinchi joto* and all sorts of other names and he said he was gonna kick my ass all the way to the border” (205). To Ari, being gay means emotional rejection and physical violence.

Further, on another intersectional level, Ari and Dante also require an ecotone understanding as they consider their ethnic identities. The teenagers ask questions about this identity throughout the novel, pondering what it means to be a “real Mexican”: Does it mean living in Mexico (44), being poor (45), “looking Mexican” (72), going by a nickname (38) or a

Mexican-sounding name like Maximiliano (269), speaking Spanish (45, 87), driving a truck with chrome rims (193, 245), or liking menudo (273)? And can you be Mexican and an English professor (24)? Can you be a Mexican boy and kiss other boys (273)? These questions sometimes rub on Dante who feels that, perhaps for his lighter skin and his parents' educational attainments and social status, that "Mexicans don't like [him]" (40).

In the face of these questions, ecotones function as a way to re-imagine what before was a bifurcating, dualistic understanding of the world and of the self into a more cohesive, balanced ecology that celebrates intersecting identities as an asset. In other words, the youths' multiple identities can be strengths rather than deficits when properly viewed as such. What is required, then, is for this transfiguration of land and self to be activated. This transformation, which is reparative at its core, begins by radically reimagining the landscape of the borderlands.

In Ari's first trip to the desert outside the city limits of El Paso with Dante and his dad, Mr. Quintana, the three take turns looking at the stars in the night sky through a telescope, away from the light pollution of the city. As they stand in silence and Ari takes his turn looking through the telescope, he explains: "Something happened inside me as I looked out into the vast universe. Through that telescope, the world was closer and larger than I'd ever imagined. And it was all so beautiful and overwhelming and—I don't know—it made me aware that there was something inside of me that mattered" (42). As Dante watches Ari look through the telescope, Dante whispers "Someday, I'm going to discover all the secrets of the universe" (43). When Ari asks Dante what he will do with these secrets, Dante replies, "Maybe change the world" (43).

This initial experience marveling at the night sky grows Ari's fascination with the desert and he often drives the 1957 cherry-red Chevy pickup his parents gifted him for his 16th birthday to the desert to hang out with his friends, a safe place where can contemplate the secrets of the

universe (246). It is in this natural space where he begins to transform; his inner reflections allow him to see his value as a person—“there was something inside me that mattered” (42). Thus, to Ari and later to Dante, the desert becomes a transformative and reparative space where they realize what it means to be human, and, as we will come to see for Ari, what it means to accept his sexuality as a gay person.

The novel reinforces this connection between nature and Ari’s self-acceptance and capacity for relationship in various references to animals and other elements of the natural world. In this, Ari comes to love of self through loving nature and letting nature reciprocate. This love of nature is first modeled for Ari by Dante. In a particularly heart-wrenching moment, Ari and Dante witness some neighborhood boys kill a little sparrow with a BB gun. Dante is deeply grieved and Ari agrees to help him bury the bird, although he does not “feel anything for the bird” (55). Following this moment Ari contemplates the experience, “As I walked home, I thought about birds and the meaning of their existence. Dante had an answer. I didn’t. I didn’t have any idea as to why birds existed. I’d never even asked myself the question. Dante’s answer made sense to me. If we studied birds, maybe we could learn to be free. I think that’s what he is saying” (55). In these moments, Ari connects with the natural world and begins to develop a renewed understanding of himself and his capacities.

This emotional connection with nature intensifies as Ari begins to imagine nature as a kind of lover. Driving back from Aunt Ophelia’s funeral through the desert to El Paso, Ari gazes out the window at the black storm clouds ahead, opens the back window, and breathes in the smell of rain. The moment quickly becomes sensorial and sensual: “You could smell the rain in the desert even before a drop fell. I closed my eyes. I held my hand out and felt the first drop. It was like a kiss. The sky was kissing me. It was a nice thought. It was something Dante would

have thought. I felt another drop then another. A kiss. A kiss. And then another kiss.” (293). Via his growing relationship with nature, it seems, Ari becomes comfortable accepting Dante’s kiss. Connecting with the desert borderlands allows him to accept himself as a human with sexual feelings. As if to emphasize this connection, it is the desert landscape in which we see Ari and Dante wrestle with their romantic love for each other in the final scene of the novel. The two head out in Ari’s pickup after bowling with their parents. They discuss their first kiss and Ari’s rejection of Dante when he said dishonestly that he did not feel anything. In the space of the desert, Ari and Dante recognize their deep love for each other and reconnect with a mutual, desired kiss. In another way, this ending of the novel in the desert marks Ari’s love and acceptance not only of Dante but of himself and his sexuality:

As Dante and I lay on our backs in the bed of my pickup and gazed out at the summer stars, I was free. Imagine that. Aristotle Mendoza, a free man. I wasn’t afraid anymore. I thought of that look on my mother’s face when I’d told her I was ashamed. I thought of that look of love and compassion that she wore as she looked at me. “Ashamed? Of loving Dante?”

I took Dante’s hand and held it.

How could I have ever been ashamed of loving Dante Quintana? (359)

Here the desert becomes a place where Ari’s contemplation of love comes to fruition. In the desert ecotone, as opposed to in their homes or other customary social spaces, the two together map a new space of community where they find shelter, love, and friendship. In this space, we indeed see Ari letting himself love Dante, and further we see him finally loving himself. While many may consider this an idealistic ending for two young Mexican American gay men in the 1980s, as Angel Daniel Matos suggests, the novel offers “an alternative, more reparative take on

the limits and possibilities of queer Latinx life in Texas in the late 1980s” (49). Building on Matos’ analysis, it is important, for the viewpoint of this study, that the desert is the catalyst for this reparative take, revealing the power of healing through connections with the land and nature.

Through eco-poetics *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* establishes a connection between people and land. Much like Anzaldúa’s border theories that grew from lived experiences in the US/Mexico borderlands, the novel posits ecotones as reparative for healing the wound that separates human communities and as a balm for understanding the splits that humans experience as they seek to understand the secrets of the universe. Ecotones generate alternative possibilities where one can be *both/and* in terms of ethnic and sexual identity. The emergence of such possibilities, from multiple sites of resistance, environmental as well as social justice movements, creates spaces for healing. In this, the desert is radically redefined in as much as Ari and Dante’s views of themselves.

Eco-Poetic Activism in *All the Stars Denied*

Set along the Texas/Mexico border, in this case the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, during the Great Depression (1929-33), *All the Stars Denied* tells the story of the deportation of over one million *mexicanos* to Mexico.⁶ The “repatriation,” as it was called, included the removal of people of Mexican heritage to Mexico; the majority (600,000) of these estimated one million people were US citizens (Balderrama and Rodríguez 195, 225). At the center of this story is protagonist Estrella (age 15) and her family, first, as they become the target of the Texas Rangers because of their protests to Juan Crow laws that legalized segregation of whites and Mexicans /

⁶ For information on this historical period, see Alanís Enciso and Balderrama and Rodríguez.

Mexican Americans.⁷ The family is separated from each other and deported to Mexico, even as they have been residents of the Rio Grande Valley since the original Spanish land grants in the mid-18th century.⁸ In this, the novel does not shy away from acknowledging the numerous travesties faced by deportees, including the dehumanizing treatment before deportation as well as the struggles to survive in a nation and culture largely foreign to them.

Following García McCall's *Shame the Stars* (2016), which is set a generation earlier and features the struggles of Estrella's parents Joaquín and Dulceña in their fight with the Texas Rangers who murdered and lynched Mexicans and Mexican Americans with impunity, *All the Stars Denied* highlights what the collective historical memory of the US has either forgotten or occluded. Both novels thus propel the notion, as Angel Matos describes in his analysis of *Aristotle and Dante*, that young adult historical novels "commonly constitute[e] a reimagining of the past, one that either filters historical representation through contemporary ideologies and frameworks, or one that recuperates a history that has been omitted through patriarchal and normative pressures" (32). To Matos, this Janus-like sense of historical narratives allows readers to recuperate the past as a way not only to understand the present but also to imagine a more hopeful future. As a historical novel, *All the Stars Denied* thus offers the possibility that the deportation regime that ICE enacted at the time the novel was written would set off warning bells of the damage of such practices, past and present. Moreover, by foregrounding historical resistance to injustices via Estrella, the novel shows how resistances in the past offer activist models for present-day readers who can learn from their forbearers.

⁷ For more on Juan Crow laws, see Muñoz Martinez.

⁸ For more information on the Tejano communities in the 18th and 19th centuries, see Alonzo.

Yet, even as *All the Stars Denied* showcases the effects of Juan Crow laws in Depression-era Texas that significantly impacted Mexicans and Mexican Americans, it is important to ask how eco-justice poetics frame the novel. For this we turn to Anzaldúa's historical observations on the Rio Grande Valley during and after this time period. As Anzaldúa states, "my grandmother lost all her cattle, / they stole her land" (30). The unlawful deportation and repatriation of thousands of Mexican and Mexican Americans and the subsequent takeover of their lands caused grave harm to families that had sustained themselves for decades by ranching. In the 1930s, Anglo prospectors turned large sections of scrubland more suitable for mesquites and cactus into cotton farms and citrus groves (31). This unsustainable form of agriculture led to a destruction of the land, as Anzaldúa explains, "in my childhood I saw the end of dryland farming. I witnessed the land cleared" (31). By the time that Anzaldúa wrote *Borderlands / La Frontera* in the 1980s "farming irrigation had depleted and polluted the Rio Grande" (116) and the clear-cut lands exposed topsoil to destructive erosion.⁹ To this, Priscilla Solis Ybarra notes that Anzaldúa's "environmental awareness helped her see the human crisis in this region, as well as how the land's exploitation relates to the injustices she finds in the human community" ("Borderlands" 115). Further, as an environmental scholar Sarah Jaquette Ray writing on Latinx literature highlights, "the colonial-capitalist patriarchy treats people it conceives as 'disposable' or expendable the same as it treats the environment" (147). This is to say that the colonial project of removing people systematically from their ancestral lands, evidenced in the deportation and

⁹ Solis Ybarra cites Arturo Longoria, a reporter for the *McAllen Monitor* (a newspaper in the Rio Grande Valley), who states, "Soil erosion in deep South Texas had become so extensive in the late 1980s that the National Wildlife Federation called the Rio Grande Valley one of the most severely wind-eroded areas in the United States. The NWF research concluded that an average of fifteen tons of soil per acre was being lost annually in many parts of the region" (116).

repatriation of Mexicans and Mexican Americans, likewise leads to environmental degradation, the polluted river and topsoil erosion that Anzaldúa observes in *Borderlands / La Frontera*.

Positioning environmental concerns alongside human oppression, in the case of *All the Stars Denied*, opens a space where we can see how challenging these problems offers us the opportunity to heal both land and people. It is my argument that *All the Stars Denied* deliberately places eco-poems within a text that recovers injustices against Latinx people in order to showcase possible solutions to these complex problems, namely the need to target both environmental degradation and human oppression simultaneously. In such a strategy we find the possibility of better, more mutual relationships between humans and nature.

The importance of Estrella's eco-poems is underscored at the very start of the novel in a short author's statement on eco-poetry, defined as a genre that "explore[s] the natural world, including the nature of humans" and that "urges the reader to think critically about the layered meaning within the context of the poem." We learn that Estrella writes these poems in the tradition of Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Pablo Neruda, Langston Hughes, Ernesto Cardenal, and others. To my view, herein is the delicate balance that García McCall hopes to strike: the poems "explore the natural world" while at the same time readers are to "think critically about the layered meaning with the context of the poem." In the following I examine in further detail how the "natural world" and the "layered meanings" offer a much needed Latinx perspective on environmental issues for young readers. At play in my analysis of Estrella's eco-poems is an exploration of this intertwined relationship between nature and people, with specific attention to the notion that environmental crises unfold alongside social crises. In particular, I point to the way that Estrella's eco-poetry allows her a locus from which to denounce injustices to the land and its inhabitants.

As the novel opens, white citizens, many who are newly arrived to the area, have begun implementing Juan Crow laws. These laws, much like their close kin, Jim Crow laws in the southern United States, instituted segregation. The first poem that readers of the novel encounter entitled, “Beyond the Creek,” speaks to these unjust laws:

Joyful crabgrass sings; the simple beauty of its long
Thin fingers ascend to the sky on angled wings on tall
rachis.

Smiling florets on slim spikelets; arms that bend
Back and forth, and side to side; hands that swing,

And twirl, and glide. Its lovely dance seduces spring,
And summer’s besot by the charm it brings. But
When the earth lies down to rest, the crabgrass dies
And leaves behind a void too great to sow with time. (0)

A literary devotee of Walt Whitman (28), Estrella’s first poem seems to pay homage to Whitman’s opus, *Leaves of Grass*, as it tells of the simple beauty of the joyful crabgrass. At the same time, however, Estrella chooses as her poetic subject crabgrass, a weed that most gardeners try to eradicate. In this way, the crabgrass appears to play the role of proxy for what is to come, the illegal seizure and deportation of Estrella and her family. Thus, while the poem emphasizes the borderlands as a natural place of water (the creek) and vegetation (the crabgrass) where human and nature intertwine as part of the natural ecology, interconnections between people and nature abound in her poem, ominously foreshadowing how the colonial-capitalist patriarchal project will uproot people from their ancestral lands. Here we are reminded of Anzaldúa’s

statement regarding the internal colonization of Chicax people, “we were jerked out by the roots, truncated, disemboweled, dispossessed, and separated from our identity and our history” (29-30). Thus by entangling natural images with social commentary, the poem evokes a long history of oppression of Latinx peoples in which they are treated like crabgrass, a weed in need of eradication. The poem reveals for us the deep conjoining of logics around race and nature.

Opening the novel with “Beyond the Creek” positions readers to evaluate these conjoined logics as they play out in the novel. After a contentious town meeting where Estrella and a group of Mexican Americans protest Juan Crow laws, the Texas Rangers are brought in to round up anyone who looks Mexican. Estrella barely escapes the initial wave of this racist frenzy by fighting off a lawman’s attempt to detain her, though she is bruised in the process. Back at home, her mother notes that the white newcomers to town and their legal posse, the Texas Rangers, treat them “¡Como vacas o chivas! That’s how they see us, Joaquín. We are nothing more than burdensome beasts, *the neighbor’s cattle*, a nuisance to be driven off what they see as *their* land even though *we’ve* been here far longer” (44). Estrella’s father adds to these metaphors, which soon will find materiality, that they are “mauled and harangued and loaded up on farm trucks, como bestias” (44). Soon thereafter, the family is rounded up, their ancestral house is burned to the ground, and they are sent in cattle cars to El Paso / Juárez for repatriation.

Whether it is the use of terminology such as “rounded up” (38, 52, 67), a term designated for herding cattle, or the action of putting Mexicans and Mexican Americans on cattle cars, the impetus is to make Estrella, her family, and others believe they are less than human. As Claire Jean Kim notes, exclusionary work occurs precisely at the synergistic taxonomies of race and species: “Animalization has been central not incidental to the project of racialization, and Blackness, Indianness, and Chineseness have been articulated on U.S. soil for centuries in

continuous and intimate relationship with notions of animality and nature” (18). In this, Kim further states that race “has been articulated in part as *a metric of animality*, as a classification system that orders human bodies according to how animal they are—and how human they are not—with all of the entailments that follow” (18, italics in original). *All the Stars Denied* shows how these metaphors of animality find materiality in the form of round ups and then deportations. Human bodies that are seen as goats or cattle, that is, seen within a metric of animality, allow for all the entailments that follow.

What is celebratory about the novel is that Estrella resists, not by buying into an anthropocentric hierarchical model of nature, but by foregrounding the dignity of animals.¹⁰ She flips the narrative by finding strength and beauty in the natural world, specifically by drawing on positive attributes of animals to understand herself and her experience. For example, in her poem “Across the Road,” the speaker describes the forced migration of cows in the driving rain. And yet, even as the cows are “resigned” to the “forceful rain,” the cows “keep / Their eyes to the ground as if in prayer” (113). The poem closes with an image of the cows as they “walk steadily, calmly, and don’t look back” (113). Rather than brute beasts, the cows embody spiritual endurance in the face of hardship. By refusing to appropriate the language of the abuser through the rejection of an anthropocentric model, Estrella strategically overturns the colonialist narrative of humans dominating land and animals and white people dominating Brown people.¹¹ In such a way, Estrella unveils the overarching calculus of racism that relies on making certain humans believe they are animals. Her eco-poems further counter this logic by emphasizing that animals have an inherent dignity, and thus, by extension, people too.

¹⁰ See theorist Donna J. Haraway’s studies *When Species Meet* and *Staying with the Trouble*.

¹¹ See Wald et al. for a discussion on race, colonialism, and environmentalism.

Being a resistance fighter, however, is not easy, as “Along the Barbed-Wire Fence,” one of the last poems in the novel, elucidates.

Along the barbed-wire fence, an oak has
matured. Its golden heart pierced by the barbed
wires of the barricade it has engulfed. Four lines
of barbaric fencing, swallowed up, imprisoned

within fifty rings of stout, slow-breathing
bark. The anchoring posts push and tug
with the passing seasons, but the oak is stoic,
unmoved — its heavy trunk incorrigible. (260)

Similar to her other poems, in “Along the Barbed-Wire Fence” Estrella creates an atmosphere in which the resilience of the natural world undermines human-made havoc. The oak is “stoic, / unmoved,” no matter how much the “anchoring posts push and tug” (260).¹² Though the “four lines / of barbaric fencing” have attempted to kill it by piercing “its golden heart,” the oak has fought back: it has “swallowed” the barbed-wire, “imprisoned” it “within fifty rings of stout, slow-breathing / bark” (260). The natural world overcomes the violence of humans; the barbed-wire fence that sought to imprison the oak has itself become imprisoned. Though not all is perfect, given that the oak has been pierced to its golden heart and Estrella and her family have been unjustly seized and deported to Mexico, the novel and the poem within it imagine what can be gained by resistance.

¹² The oak tree in *All the Stars Denied* evokes García McCall’s semi-autobiographical verse novel, *Under the Mesquite* (2011), in which the author utilizes images of nature to open discussions on inclusion and belonging. For a full discussion on nature and the mesquite tree in *Under the Mesquite*, see Herrera.

The oak's resistance to barbed-wire, evoking the poet's resistance to oppression in the borderlands, is significant. Barbed-wire, that the poem calls "barbaric," in Latinx history was, as Monica Muñoz Martinez notes in *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas*, a "favored tool for defining private property and guaranteed the successful colonization of the western United States" (12). As she explains, Anglo ranchers fenced the landscape in the 1870s impeding grazing patterns for livestock and altering ideas about "open land use and communal access practiced by rancheros for numerous generations" (12). This use of barbed wire and fencing, along with its subsequent impact on ranching, led to the sale of land for commercial farming—shifting the economy to one of ranching to farming within a decade. Soon, "Ethnic Mexicans in the Southwest found themselves assigned as manual agricultural labor in this new economy, giving rise to the popular Mexican saying '*con el alambre vino el hambre*'—with the barbed wire came hunger" (12). In describing the barbed-wire as "barbaric," Estrella reconceives the barbed-wire not as the instrument of progress and prosperity as seen from an Anglo perspective, but from a Latinx perspective, as a harbinger of oppression. In naming this history of oppression, she takes back power from colonizing forces. As Levins Morales explains, "One of the first things a colonizing power, a new ruling class, or a repressive regime does is attack the sense of history of those they wish to dominate by attempting to take over and control their relationships to their own past" (69). Further, such historical empowerment, as Levins Morales reminds us, means that "we inevitably swim rivers, lift barbed wire, and violate No Trespassing signs" (88). Put another way, an awareness of history leads to empowerment and from empowerment comes transformation of self and of the world.

It, thus, is not surprising that the novel ends with an eco-poem about a prickly pear cactus that has grown in Estrella's ancestral home since before she was born and a letter to her

grandmother, after whom she was named. In “Too Late” the poet gestures at what can happen from oppression, when like the prickly pear that had a tender heart when it was young now has “tough skin and thorns outside” from “years of abuse” (298). In her letter to her grandmother, Estrella wonders about how miraculous it was that “despite all the things that went wrong in your world, you stayed loving and kind not just to your family but to your people” (299). In other words, Estrella does not want to become like the prickly pear cactus; instead, she hopes that “I never grow thorns or become so tough, so hardened by life, that I lose touch with my true self—my identity as a mexicana, a loving, courageous woman” (299). Transformations can take a variety of courses, Estrella proposes. Properly empowered by history, that is, understanding that ancestors and predecessors who fought for social justice did not allow their “tender hearts” to become “hard, and crude, and thick” (298), means that transformation can take the form of becoming “my true self” (299). For Estrella, transformation entails becoming more, not less, of who she is: a loving, courageous mexicana.

Present in *All the Stars Denied*, therefore, is an intentional disruption of historical and nature writing. While the novel details the tragic history of Juan Crow in Texas and the resultant illegal deportation of US citizens, it strategically does so by foregrounding Estrella’s deep cultural attachment to the natural world. In this, *All the Stars Denied* serves as a powerful LatCrit counter-story that directs our attention to the often silenced and marginalized voices on *both* social justice activism and environmental concerns.¹³ In Estrella’s eco-poems, we find social justice issues and environmental concerns co-existing in ecological balance. The novel invites readers, especially young Latinx readers, to know this history and to imagine radical new kinships in their social and environmental activism.

¹³ See Anguiano et al. for a further discussion on connecting environmental justice advocacy with Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit).

Eco-Justice in Latinx Kid Lit

One of my primary goals with this article has been to invite us to listen attentively to Latinx voices on eco-justice. While environmental literature often has been the purview of white, middle class, largely urban writers, these two Latinx young adult novels allow us to re-imagine environmental thought within social and cultural contexts. In doing so, this reconceptualization has allowed us to rectify “some destructive ecocritical practices, challenging the field to once and for all abandon its tacit approval of settler colonialism implicit in its first wave enthusiasm for the pastoral and the biocentric” (Solis Ybarra, *Writing* 10). By listening to Latinx voices, we are provided ways of addressing both social justice *and* environmental concerns. In the process of emphasizing nature in the borderlands these novels have opened a space where we consider who is invited and who is excluded from conversations on the environment. *Aristotle and Dante* and *All the Stars Denied*, in this regard, have much to offer. These young adult novels point to the significant ways that Latinxs push forward for justice, while at the same time, inviting more complex understandings of the interconnections between land, people, race, violence, and healing as well as signaling the power of eco-justice poetics and eco-activism.¹⁴ Further, inviting young readers to see themselves as activists in justice causes for Latinx peoples, land, and identity may yield new insights on eco-justice and Latinx environmentalisms. These connections and insights, I believe, will help us foster new and better relationships between humans and nature.

¹⁴ At the 2019 Children’s Literature Association conference in Indianapolis, Michelle Martin and J. Elizabeth Mills brought our attention to the lack of children’s books that centered Black children and the environment in their presentation “Welcoming Black Children into Literary Wildscapes.” As scholars, teachers, librarians, and advocates of kid lit, I wonder in what ways we can continue this discussion on eco-justice in ethnic-American children’s and young adult literature.

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