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# Connecting Community Voices: Using a Latino/a Critical Race Theory Lens on Environmental Justice Advocacy

Claudia Anguiano, Tema Milstein, Iliana De Larkin, Yea-Wen Chen & Jennifer Sandoval

*This study examines the contested space of environmental inequity and demonstrates how engaged intercultural communication research can be used to put forth seldom heard cultural environmental meaning systems. In an attempt to bridge ecojustice–environmentalist divides, we use Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) to understand and promote practices of Hispanic communities enacting environmental justice and cultural activism. We also exemplify the value of an explicit focus on the role of race in environmental issues for communication scholarship.*

**Keywords:** *Latino/a Critical Race Theory (LatCrit); Environmental Justice; Hispanic Communities; Cultural Activism; Intercultural Alliances*

Intercultural scholarship has concentrated for some time on the ways the communication field can translate academic knowledge into the practice of public spaces (Barge, 2001; Broome, Carey, de la Garza, Martin, & Morris, 2005; Shome & Hegde, 2002; Valles-Santiago, 2003). This study expands upon and refocuses this ongoing discussion by engaging in research that attempts to understand and shift practices of cultural relations with the environment. We attend to the intercultural discord among environmental organizations, which we argue stems from disparate understandings of relations to nature that have created tensions between grassroots

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environmental activists of color and mainstream conservation organizations (Cole & Foster, 2000; Cox, 2010; Sandler & Pezzullo, 2007). We join other scholars in efforts to prompt active dialogue with environmental organizations about the charges of perpetuated racism, classism, and insensitivity to cultural groups that have resulted from a limited activist agenda with little relevance to minority communities (Bullard, 1993; Camacho, 1998).

In the past two decades, the environmental justice, or ecojustice, movement in the United States has grown extensively and, with it, scholarly discussion about how culture and nature intersect on issues of social inequity (Cox, 2010; Sturgeon, 2009). Despite differences among factions, scholars note that “much has changed within, transpired between, and happened around” issues disputed between mainstream and environmental justice movements (Sandler & Pezzullo, 2007, p. 12). The present study is wrought from and exemplifies such change. We concur with others who argue that, notwithstanding noted differences in ideologies and visions, environmental justice and mainstream environmental movements can work together and jointly support common issues (Gelobter et al., 2005; Schlosberg, 1999).

In this study, we focus on the contested space of environmental inequity, and how engaged research can bring forth seldom heard cultural environmental meaning systems to inform policy. Localized in the state of New Mexico, where long-standing issues of cultural, racial, historical, and political struggles intertwine with environmental advocacy (Maciel & Peña, 2000; Pulido, 1996), this community-based participatory research (CBPR) project reflects the possibility for effective cooperation between mainstream environmental groups, community advocacy and environmental justice organizations, and communication researchers who collectively reach out to Hispanic<sup>1</sup> populations to better understand ecocultural meaning systems. Facilitating such understanding is particularly important in New Mexico, where Hispanics make up 44.9 percent of the state’s population (compared to 15.4 percent nationwide), the highest proportion of any state.<sup>2</sup>

Sandler and Pezzullo (2007) note that finding productive ways for ecojustice and mainstream environmental movements to work together depends on acknowledgement of “significant differences in the value orientations” (p. 313). Similarly, this study was premised upon the importance of recognizing such orientational differences. Collaborator Michelle Otero (from The Wilderness Society) identified Hispanic communities’ desire to recognize and broadcast their environmental cultural values by writing “ourselves into the land” (personal communication, August 15, 2008). We particularly focus on ways recognizing differences can account for perspectives and cultural practices that inform understandings of environmental justice. Thus we incorporate Latino Critical Race Theory (“LatCrit”) to analyze both the perceived and actual clashes between culturally grounded Hispanic New Mexican environmental activism and dominant mainstream environmentalism.

We begin with a discussion of pertinent environmental justice movement literature, paying special attention to scholarship on Latino/a environmental discourse and examples pertinent to New Mexico. Next, we conceptualize how LatCrit applies to the environmental justice movement and offers a useful analytical

framework. We then analyze Hispanic narratives derived from several recent workshops undertaken with our collaborators to show how particular Hispanic communities have envisioned their approach to environmental issues and included pertinent cultural strategies. This collaborative project's attempt to bridge the ecojustice-mainstream environmentalism divide demonstrates highly practical applications of intercultural communication research by helping a largely white, middle and upper middleclass mainstream movement and a socioeconomically marginalized minority movement work together in mutually beneficial ways. We end with a discussion about what this study could mean for intercultural collaboration among mainstream organizations, scholars, and grassroots activists, and how such a research perspective can address the lack of attention to race, and more specifically Latina/o voice, in environmental communication scholarship.

### Environmental Justice Movements

Environmental justice efforts grew out of the civil rights movement, laying their foundations in the 1980s by bringing attention to the unequal distribution of environmental hazards across society, based on race and class. While environmental communication scholarship has begun to address the role of culture and communication in environmental affairs via critical and critical/cultural approaches (e.g., Cox, 2010; Pezzullo, 2001; Rogers, 1998; Sturgeon, 2009), we argue that the communication discipline would greatly benefit from a specific focus on knowledge production to address the role of race in environmental issues.

In contrast to the mainstream environmental movement, where voices of disenfranchised minority communities are often "stifled, ignored, and in many ways co-opted" (Hofrichter, 1993, p. 85), the environmental justice movement is generally seen as a more democratic and participatory grassroots phenomenon (Brulle & Essoka, 2005; Szasz & Meuser, 1997). Additionally, scholars regard cultural activism as an important part of the environmental justice movement, as it accounts for the benefits of "incorporating people's cultural, everyday experiences arising from their history, common concerns, and aspirations into organizations for environmental justice" (Hofrichter, 1993, p. 85).

Conflict between the mainstream environmental movement and the environmental justice movement was intensified after Richard Moore, co-director of the Southwest Organizing Project,<sup>3</sup> charged that dominant environmental organizations were exclusionary, responsible for "environmental racism" and lacked minority leadership (Sandler & Pezzullo, 2007). The term "environmental racism" was coined to describe how corporations and government disproportionately target disenfranchised minority communities when situating environmental hazards, such as hazardous waste landfills and polluting industries (Dowie, 1995; Weintraub, 1994).

While Latino/a voices are often unheard in the environmental realm, there is evidence supporting unique Latino environmental discourses and efforts (Milstein, Anguiano, Sandoval, Chen, & Dickinson, 2011), as well as cases where Latino communities have faced the repercussions of environmental racism (Figueroa, 2001;

Peña & Gallegos, 1993). Some focus has been given to the particular dynamic of environmental racism between New Mexico Hispano communities and mainstream environmental organizations, including early active participation of land-grant activists like Reies Tijerina in *el Movimiento* of the 1960s civil rights movement (Hammerback & Jensen, 1980; Kosek, 2004; Maciel & Peña, 2000). Recently, scholars have explored the collective grassroots initiatives for land and water resources by New Mexican Chicano/a environmental activists and the feminist epistemology embedded in efforts to affect change (Cordova, 1997; Garcia, 1998; Pulido, 1996). These studies demonstrate the manner in which New Mexico Hispanic communities both struggle with and resist dominant environmental groups and how such conflict has spurred an emphasis on people of color taking action against environmental concerns that affect their communities (Correia, 2007; Figueroa, 2001; Macias, 2008).

With a few noted exceptions (e.g., Bretting & Prindeville, 1998; Figueroa, 2001; Peña 2005; Pulido, 1996), there is still little focus on the voice of Latina/os within the realm of environmental justice; of those in existence, none take an environmental communication perspective. Lynch (1993) articulates that it is “an unwillingness to sever people from the landscape, the technological from the political, or the environment from cultural identity” (p. 118) that differentiates U.S. Latino and mainstream Anglo-American-driven environmental perspectives. Here, we focus on New Mexican instances when, as the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice (<http://www.sneej.org>) explains, Hispanic:

communities have been at odds with national environmental organizations who, in the past, tend to advocate for policies and programs which may not be in the best interests of the community when it comes to job opportunities, grazing rights, land and water rights or just the simple fact of not being inclusive of community voices and expertise (Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, n.d., para. 3).

For Hispanic New Mexicans, the link between environment and ethnic identity is both salient and complex, as their struggle against environmental injustices is coupled with issues of cultural conquest (Figueroa, 2001). A deep history of colonization implicates New Mexican Hispanics as both colonizers and colonized, yielding a complex mixed race identity (e.g., indo-Hispanic, mestizos, and anglo-Hispanic) that results in interesting paradoxes and views about land ownership. These paradoxes partly can be attributed to more recent patterns of exploitation exercised since the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (Cervantes, 2003) ended the U.S.–Mexican War and ceded almost one half of Mexico to the U.S., with the Southwest Hispanic colonizers essentially repositioned as the colonized. Examples of racialized environmental law go back to the *U.S. v. Sandoval* decision of the 1890s, which rejected Hispanic community forms of property following U.S. colonization of the Southwest (Peña, 2005). Such historical moments established a precedent of political and social inequity between the two countries, affecting Mexican–U.S. interactions to this day.

A number of contemporary authors have addressed how internal colonialism, the continuous and systematic perpetuation of racial inequalities in the U.S., has influenced local Hispanic knowledge and “native” perspectives of communities, as it

affects attachment to land and place (Figueroa, 2001; Macias, 2008; Raish, 2000). Peña's (2003) review of contemporary Latino/a environmental scholarship concluded that earlier environmental historians of New Mexico "often used racist constructs of Southwestern environmental history to argue against the restoration of stolen Spanish and Mexican land grants" (p. 55). Wilmsen (2007) triangulates the complexity of New Mexican environmental discourse where, due to their simultaneous positioning as oppressor and oppressed, Hispanics have occupied a more ambiguous position on the "axis of victimization" (p. 238). This literature provides both insight into the factors that compound the complex relationship between mainstream and justice-focused environmental movements, and context for better understanding the historical and cultural situatedness of U.S. Hispanic environmental meaning systems.

### **Latino/a Critical Race Theory (LatCrit)**

LatCrit provides an ideal lens for examining environmental justice issues affecting Hispanic communities, which until now largely have been ignored by critical race theorists. LatCrit is a recent intellectual project that flows from Critical Race Theory (CRT), which situates race within legal scholarship and serves as a conceptual tool for taking seriously accounts of race (Crenshaw, Gotanda, & Peller, 1996). The basic tenets of CRT are that whiteness and racism are predictable, structural, institutional, mainstream, and common phenomena. Whiteness works through hegemonic systems and occurs at material, ideological, local, and global levels (Delgado, Stefancic & Harris, 2001). Consistent with the environmental justice framework, LatCrit theorists share the perspective that racial inequity and racism is a normalized everyday occurrence (Perez Huber, Lopez, Malagon, Velez, & Solorzano, 2008; Stefancic, 1997).

A guiding principle of the LatCrit framework is "to center Latinas/os multiple internal diversities and to situate Latinas/os in larger inter-group frameworks, both domestically and globally, to promote social justice awareness and activism" (Latina and Latino Critical Legal Theory (LatCrit), n.d.). LatCrit efforts are committed to four basic aims or functions: (1) the production of critical and interdisciplinary knowledge; (2) the promotion of substantive social transformation; (3) the expansion and interconnection of antistubordination struggles; and (4) the cultivation of community and coalition among outsider scholars (Valdes, 1999). LatCrit scholars like Delgado Bernal (2002) have urged researchers to highlight the experiences of people of color as validated holders and creators of knowledge.

An important contribution of LatCrit has been an explicit focus on the intersections of oppression that come from multiple parts of identity, including ethnicity, culture, nationality, and language issues experienced by people of color. As a theoretical framework, LatCrit holds much utility in allowing us to consider the way race, ethnicity, class, and culture frame environmental history and ecological politics (Peña, 2005). While environmental equity has been addressed in critical race literature (Collin, 1994; Foster, 1993; Poirier, 1993; Yamamoto & Lyman, 2001), at the time of writing, the LatCrit thematic index from 1996–2008 symposia unearthed only

10 articles on environmental racism in/justice<sup>4</sup> (LatCrit, n.d.). These studies with a LatCrit perspective recognize that environmental standards reflect unique values across different environmental issues and contexts (Iglesias, 1996–97).

By highlighting complex racial identity, LatCrit provides an ideal lens to focus on the sociopolitical and historical forces that undergird cross-group histories and experiences of environmental in/justice. Moreover, using LatCrit from a communication perspective allows us to explore Hispanic environmental discourse and provides an effective way to address disconnects between mainstream environmental discourse and Hispanic participants of this study. While the Hispanic label in New Mexico, with its ties to Spanish ancestry, connotations of colonial cultural values, and perceived claim to the conferred benefits of “whiteness” (Rinderle, 2005), may seem incommensurate with politically crafted Latino/a CRT identity, Porras (1996–1997) reminds us to embrace a plurality of identity labels, arguing that LatCrit should understand identity classifications as strategically fluid.

### **Methodological Structure and Goals**

This project is situated within the methodological orientation of CBPR, which seeks social change through community engagement in research. Within the unique cultural, social, and historical milieu of New Mexico, this may encourage mainstream environmental organizations serving the region to better achieve intercultural environmental policy reform in ways that account for and connect with the concerns of people of color.

Responsive to past environmental struggles between Hispanic New Mexican communities, and striving to reverse such relations, the state offices of two nationwide mainstream environmental organizations contacted university communication researchers to seek ways to incorporate Hispanic voices, and localize knowledge and cultural values into their environmental policy agenda. The organizational leadership explained that politicians often dismissed them as speaking only for wealthier predominantly white communities in urban centers of the state (such as Santa Fe and the affluent center of Albuquerque), and that these same politicians typified Hispanic voters as unconcerned about or even antagonistic toward environmental issues. These politicians then used this argument to legitimize their votes for environmentally destructive industry. The environmental organizations had recently hired Hispanic community outreach staff, clearly recognizing that some strategies used by the mainstream environmental movement had served to be limiting, irrelevant, and disempowering for Hispanic communities.

Collaboration among these two organizations, the researchers, and two additional cultural advocacy organizations unfolded. The group chose to use a CBPR framework (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008) that was informed by Atencio’s (1988) notion of *la resolana*<sup>5</sup> (shining light on community knowledge). *La resolana* is a communication practice rooted in Hispanic New Mexican history and oral tradition that embraces community stories and lived experience as important forms of knowledge. The notion of *resolana* helped frame and design this study, as CBPR and *la resolana* are

consistent with the LatCrit perspective. A CBPR methodology works with la resolana and LatCrit perspective to provide a place for Hispanic New Mexican communities to have voice. Like la resolana, at its core, CBPR has “no cookbook approaches to follow” (Hall, 1992, p. 20) as it is intended to be a social process that is participatory, practical, collaborative, emancipatory, critical, and reflective (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).

In total, five groups gathered to design and implement the overarching project: (a) Conservation Voters of New Mexico (CVNM); (b) The Wilderness Society (TWS); (c) the cultural advocacy group Arts de Aztlan; (d) University of New Mexico’s (UNM) Resource Center for Raza Planning (RCRP); and (e) a research team in UNM’s Communication Department. All representatives of the five groups shared deep ties to New Mexico and were committed to engaging local communities to tell their stories, and each collaborating staff person from the non-academic organizations was Hispanic New Mexican. The project was developed so local Hispanic people could express their stories about connections to the land and, thus, the inspiration and framing of the workshops were culturally informed and helped contextualize our interpretive findings.

The research team and collaborating groups were also highly committed to the project’s CBPR orientation to facilitate cooperative, engaging, co-learning, and empowering processes for all partners involved. For example, one indicator of the successful collaborative and generative processes used was that several advocacy leaders built on this project and formed a nonprofit organization to promote positive intra and intercultural environmental change through community expression, communication research, and advanced media technologies. Though some of the research team identify in different ways as Latina or Hispanic, we saw ourselves as cultural outsiders to the project’s particular New Mexico communities and relied on one another, and at times on our collaborating partners, to intercode and make sense of the narratives and meanings that emerged from the workshops.

Collaboratively, we developed and implemented a series of free workshops in two locations to connect and gather oral histories and creative writing from community members in the tradition of la resolana. The workshops were sponsored by both TWS and CVNM, documented by the communication research team, and designed and facilitated by then TWS staff member Michelle Otero, a member of the Deming community who has worked extensively as a creative activist in the communities this project sought to reach (which included Deming). The two workshop series took place in separate New Mexican communities: (a) Albuquerque’s Sawmill neighborhood, an urban neighborhood that triumphed against a polluting sawmill in their midst; and (b) Deming, a small city in southern New Mexico. Participants engaged in the workshops, which Otero titled “Tell Your Story: Honor New Mexico,” to explore their understandings of and relationships to the land through creative writing. Although mindful that Sawmill and Deming are distinct communities, we combine both sites in our analysis because of our focus on their shared context as Hispanic New Mexico communities. While some of Sawmill’s participants self-identified as activists (as they had already successfully organized to curb pollution in their



community), participants in Deming had not officially organized for environmental activism.

This project used both fieldnotes and transcripts from the workshops, as well as participant creative writings as data. Data collectors were collaborating group members and graduate students from the research team who attended the workshops, took fieldnotes, and recorded workshop sessions. The workshops met once a week for two hours and engaged participants in creative writing or storytelling exercises and readings on the land. A total of nine workshops were conducted—four in Sawmill and five in Deming.

This method allowed us to focus on the everyday lexical choices of these communities. We focused on the narratives of participants, who were pivotal in voicing, framing, or struggling with issues of environmental justice, even though this was terminology not generally used by participants themselves. We also augmented our data by looking at Southwest environmental justice groups' mediated data, such as websites, in order to enrich the data collected.

### Analysis of Environmental Justice Coalitions

Our collaborative project aimed at listening to and giving voice to our participants' own language and experiences within the context of "environmental" issues. Our analysis found that participants' relations with nature are inextricably tied to explicit cultural values and practices. It also discredits the myth perpetuated by some politicians—and which our collaborating organizations actively work to challenge—that New Mexico Hispanics are uninterested in environmental issues. As our study shows, there is strong interest and support for environmental sustainability among our participants. Even though the language participants use to describe themselves may be different, we found their practices and perceptions incorporate a *de facto* integration of "environmental justice" and "environmental" concerns at the grass-roots level. In what follows, we analyze participant discussions of experiential knowledge of environmental racism and describe how the Hispanic communities we studied culturally shift the meaning of "environmentalist."

*Vecinos (Neighbors) in Nature: Challenging and Extending the Meaning of "Environmentalism"*

Environmental racism has generated a need for unique organizing tactics and compelled disenfranchised groups to incorporate culture as an integral part of environmental justice strategies (Bullard, 1993; Figueroa, 2001). Importantly, the environmental justice movement efforts widen what an *environmentalist* is (Cox 2010). We argue that our Hispanic community member participants may *already* practice social and environmental sustainability, but that their strategies are tied to culturally specific values and meanings and thus differ from those advanced and advocated by the dominant environmental movement.

This project was instigated by mainstream environmental groups that recognized the deep disconnect between the word "environmentalist" and Hispanic communities

unwilling to ascribe to such a label despite practicing sustainable ethics. A collaborating staff member of CVNM noted that:

A critical gap exists in understanding cultural attitudes to environmental issues, particularly in areas represented by legislators who are frequently friendly to industry interests with their votes. We want to build a relationship with rural communities that have typically perceived environmental organizations as disconnected from their own values—the struggle is in gaining access to communities where this relationship has been rocky, for understandable reasons. Previous voter engagement efforts, particularly those conducted around election seasons, have often centered upon short-term campaigns, not long-term relationships—i.e., political “strip-mining.” How do we avoid that approach and research these perceptions/attitudes in a respectful, long-term relationship-oriented way? (personal communication from Benavidez, March 13, 2008)

Industry-friendly state legislators have exploited the perception that minority groups are disinterested in environmental issues. At the same time, mainstream environmental organizations have begun to focus on ways to break the perception that they speak largely with and for non-Hispanic white populations in affluent urban centers.

The contested issue of terminology is a key part of this study and of the environmental movement as a whole. As redefined by the environmental justice movement, the environmentalist label challenges conventional thinking about the environment, suggesting instead that “the environment is everything: where we live, work, play, go to school, as well as the physical and natural world” (Schweizer, 1999). DeLuca (2007) astutely observes that environmental justice activists have successfully shifted the meaning of environmentalism from a *wilderness* focus to a *human and habitat* focus.

Dowie (1995) has pointed to hesitancy among environmental justice activists in referring to themselves as environmentalists and, when used, the label necessitates cautiously adding the word justice. Our participants seldom used the label directly in the workshops. There was little to no direct identification with the formal identity of “environmentalist,” “environmental justice activist” or “cultural activist” despite the fact that their articulated behavior was largely analogous with the environmental justice movement’s aims.

In contrast with the individualistic and culture-nature binary view of dominant Western environmental discourse, for our Hispanic New Mexican participants, their environmental concerns stemmed from close ties to their community, neighborhoods, and place. As rearticulated by SWOP, “for us, workers rights, racial and gender justice, economic development and youth empowerment all fit within the EJ [environmental justice] tent, because EJ is about the place we live, work and play” (Rodriguez, 2008, para. 9). This resonates with Yamamoto and Lyman’s (2001) argument that racial identity forged by indigenous groups, and groups traditionally described as racial minorities, influences the “differing spiritual, cultural and economic connection to the environment” (p. 329).

This everyday culturally and socially informed environmentalism is one that adopts a more relational idea of humans and nature, and is embedded in our

participants' everyday customs. The excerpt below exemplifies how ties to the environment affect and are affected by both cultural customs and social phenomena. As two participants ("D" and "S") explained:

D: It's people; you start bringing in people. When I was growing up here I can walk in a straight line. There were two houses from here to school. Felix Perez's dad used to own alfalfa fields . . . I used to play with a slingshot; shoot at rabbits and pheasants. Dona Felicitas would cook up the pheasant. That was my whole life . . . everything nice. Then the town started growing. There was horrendous change: buildings, paved roads, cars. People were coming from all over. It was starting to be a town, a big town. The feeling that I get, you know, when a place starts growing up, is that the worst people in the world come to it. And it all depends on the people, *costumbre de la gente* (custom of the people), you know? What customs they have and all that. And when any *ciudad* (city) starts growing, people change.  
S: It diminishes.

D: And it's not the people change here. It's the people that come in bring change and that is what it's all about.

S: In the old days, everybody use to visit everybody.

D: In the olden days. .. if I was building a house and I was right next to him living next to him. I would get out there "and let's help." Nowadays you know what it is all about—it's about the mighty bucks.

The *costumbres* referenced by our participants speak to a cultural and relational value orientation that illustrates the importance of community building within relations with the environment. D argues that disconnection characterizes communities that privilege money over community. The cultural tradition of keeping close connection with neighbors and ways of life are explicitly tied to participants' environmentally sustainable actions.

In discussions, the use of Spanglish was significant for participants' connections with the environment. For instance, participants referenced Spanish names for places in meaningful ways. One participant ("C") explained why it was important for him to speak of "not New Mexico but Nuevo Mexico:"

C: Our own art, cuisine, music, colors—New Mexican sunrises, sunsets—the most beautiful thing in the world. All different, every time you see one. Spiritual. I don't own Nuevo Mexico—I am a part of it. She shares herself with me. I walk on her—she's been before me and will be here long after I'm gone. I thank the Lord for blessing me with the sense of vision to recognize that.

The idea of language as an important part of Hispanic environmental discourse has previously been noted as part of the Nuevo Mexicano experience (Maciel & Peña, 2000). When TWS's regional Southwest office named Deanna Archuleta director, she made the point that New Mexico was a unique backdrop for their conservation campaign as "perhaps uniquely among Hispanics, that sense of place nurtures a sense of self and is closely tied to it. That means that the language we use is necessarily different" (Knuffke, 2007, p. 55). Moreover, Archuleta hoped that fostering a new language would

help engage the next generation of conservationists. It's important to have people who understand the traditions and the culture—who speak the language. I don't

mean literally speaking Spanish; I mean speaking from a first-hand knowledge of shared traditions and experiences. (Knuffke, 2007, p. 55)

Language, whether Spanish or discursive terms and phrasings that more accurately reflect and construct one's ecocultural relations, is therefore closely tied to experiential knowledge and restructures the meaning of the term "environmentalist." Archuleta, however, further insisted that the conservation movement seeks to change the landscape of the Southwest by getting Hispanics *into* wilderness. Anglo-American environmental discourses that assume nature is an untouched space, that "wilderness is pristine," and that "protecting nature means protecting it from predation by humans" do not resonate with Latino communities (Lynch, 1993, p. 117). Identifying human society and the natural environment as mutually exclusive is one of the conceptual challenges standing between the mainstream environmental and ecojustice movements. We contend that Archuleta is attempting to connect Hispanics and the conservation movement without accounting for this difference in ideology.

### *Jobs or Health?: Experiential Knowledge of Environmental Racism*

Another hurdle to coalitional potential is a mainstream environmental movement approach that frames environmental issues as ahistorical or apolitical. The environmental problems discussed by our participants showed that they regarded their environmental relations as intertwined with social and political issues. We demonstrate how our Hispanic participants' narratives were embedded in a historical context that acknowledged complex connections between land, equality, class, and race.

Participants highlighted how relations with the land were overlaid with mistrust toward those with political power, and they often addressed socioeconomic politics relevant to New Mexico environmental issues. The following conversation between a participant ("S") and a workshop facilitator ("R") regarding the Sawmill community's polluting sawmill demonstrates the concern about double standards when it comes to exposing minority workers to harsh environmental conditions:

S: There are environmental problems; it's hard if you have a lot of people working. You couldn't see from one end to the other. People need jobs, but something better. It is hard to see from one end to the other. One guy I knew that worked here died the other day.

R: What did he die of?

S: The stuff in the factory. He had that carbide thing in his body. He did.

In this exchange environmental problems were inextricably linked with human concerns, as the narrative speaks to the material consequences and tragedy experienced by people who have to live and work in toxic-industry neighborhoods. In this particular case, S recounts the death of a former factory worker—a death emblematic of health issues that helped prompt the mobilization of community member action against neighborhood environmental health hazards.

Another participant allied environmental problems with the jobs that people have to take because of otherwise limited employment prospects:

L: Any place you go, you have environmental problems. It's hard because this is jobs for these people. People need jobs, but there has to be a balance of some sort between health and jobs.

Environmental justice movements, however, often avoid fighting for environmental issues that impinge on human interests or rights since, as DeLuca (2007) notes, "this human concern is frequently jobs" (p. 27). However, Hispanic communities frequently experience exposure to hazards differently compared to White workers of the land. Several participants described growing up in mining towns and families:

C: A lot of racism with double standards for the Whites and Mexicans. Mexicans worked the tunnels; the Whites worked the "soft jobs."

By highlighting the existence of racism through the double standards the Hispanic community faced, participants allow us to see ways labor and relations with the land are experienced as racially loaded. Allied communities should therefore consider all the factors at stake for those fighting against environmental problems and work to oppose the disproportionate exposure to environmental risks endured by the working class and people of color.

Overall, comments from our respondents demonstrate a prominent awareness of the instruments of colonization and forces of racism. Our participants encountered environmental problems based on perceived inequality and thus forefront a view of environmentalism that intertwines environmental and social justice.

#### *Posole<sup>6</sup>, Petitions, and Storytelling: Enacting Cultural Activism*

Cultural practices and value orientations were emphasised by those who played a role in New Mexico environmental activism. The environmental advocacy our participants described centered on a larger responsibility to the environment and overall concern with broad injustices rather than individualized actions. This section focuses on the ways in which food and stories are entwined within grassroots organizing for environmental justice issues and on the effectiveness of cultural activism as part of grassroots efforts.

Several participants in this study were integral in forming the Sawmill Advisory Council (SAC) (<http://www.thesawadvisory.org/>), which is a community-based, non-profit organization committed to: "prevention and elimination of environmental degradation and pollution; elimination of community deterioration" (Sawmill Advisory, n.d, para. 2). Long-standing generational ties to a particular place and a concern for the working poor in the community prompted the activism. In collaboration with SWOP, SAC successfully fought against Ponderosa Products, Inc., owner of the neighborhood's sawmill. The organized campaign resulted in the company adhering to SAC's request to reduce noise levels, dangerous air pollution, and to clean up contaminated groundwater (SouthWest Organizing Project, n.d.).

Environmental issues as part of a broader social and cultural fight are a theme other scholars have noted about Southwest participants in the environmental justice movement. Cordova (1997) highlighted the importance of place-based conservation ideals in the context of Chicano/a land grant communities and grassroots mobilization of Chicano/a activists in the environmental justice movement. Focusing

on members of SWOP, she concluded that Chicano/as embrace values supportive of the “collective good” and maintain cultural and regional identity.

When discussing the SAC grassroots organizing campaign, participants extensively referenced food and stories, which we argue are cultural practices both integral to, and facilitative of, their activist mobilizations. One Sawmill participant recalled how she became involved as a Sawmill resident in the neighborhood’s effort. At her first meeting she volunteered and became very involved for many years after:

L: So within like 15 minutes I was the vice president and I was like, what is going on here? “And by the way, we are going to have enchiladas—you need to go home and get all this food.” and I was like, whoa! . . . One thing we understood is that every time we had an event, there was some kind of celebration; we had music; we had food. We understand the way our people think: food and music. There was a lot of posole that we made.

This participant attributed community activist success to understanding that involving people meant having posole, music and community engagement so that the fight against environmental injustices had a comfortable and familiar feeling. The notion of understanding “our people” speaks to an activism that recognizes, caters to, and grounds neighborhood organizing in its cultural traditions rather than imposing a foreign framework that would not resonate with the participants.

In both sites’ workshops, we saw a preference for face-to-face interaction and oral storytelling as a means of dialogue about salient socio-ecocultural issues. In Sawmill, participants actually overruled the writing aspect of the workshops, opting for oral storytelling instead to voice their lived experiences. Storytelling had a galvanizing effect:

S: The SAC is a hub of energy and storytelling and sharing. You can do a lot of work and nobody knows, but do something wrong and the phone doesn’t stop ringing.

The technique of telling stories, according to LatCrit scholars Soloranzo and Delgado Bernal (2001), can release new perspectives by presenting alternate possibilities and increasing solidarity amongst communities. S’s comments encapsulate how this community came together to fight the issues they faced, while emphasizing the equal importance given to the *process* and communion behind such community action.

This resonates with the concept of *la resolana* communication practice, taught by La Academia de la Nueva Raza and rooted in the history and tradition of Hispanic communities in northern New Mexico (Atencio, 1988). *La resolana* is often coupled with the notion of *el oro del barrio* (the gold of the community), which describes traditional wisdom and knowledge gained through lived experience (Atencio, 2009). The experience of *la resolana*, originally associated with the outdoor space where village men gathered to exchange community stories, remains a relevant piece of the current Hispanic discursive and cultural practices in the Southwest. S further explains that SAC was a gathering place that facilitated the transformation of their stories into advocacy, which left him feeling “very connected to this place here, because without us, none of this would have happened. It was because we cared about the environment.” Meaningful dialogue stems from everyday lived experiences, and

enables traditional community discussion to become a tool for implementing environmental justice change.

The enactment and use of storytelling hinges on the idea that change comes from neighborhood communion. In other words, this type of involvement in the environmental justice movement coincides with Atencio's (1988) vision that *la resolana* can "build knowledge from everyday life experience that will explain social phenomena and cultural productions . . . leading to informed social and political action" (p. 19). These concepts are not just useful theoretical constructs, but as our participants demonstrate, they are also tangible cultural tools that assist them to mobilize in pursuit of environmental justice.

## **Discussion**

This study results from the collaborative efforts of mainstream environmental advocacy groups, cultural advocacy groups, and academic researchers to better understand cultural and intercultural environmental meaning systems. By empirically illustrating the relevance of racialization, class, and equality in Hispanic cultural narratives of environmental issues, our study demonstrates how cultural groups perceived as "anti-environment" engage in environmental justice practices. Furthermore, our findings highlight the possibilities and limitations of engaged knowledge production and cooperative intercultural endeavors in environmental coalitions.

First, we agree with our collaborating mainstream environmental organizations' attempts at intercultural outreach. The larger environmental movement must honor the voices of local communities and acknowledge the importance of linking cultural orientations within the larger environmental agenda. In concert with Hofrichter (1993), we argue that cultural activism benefits and enriches environmental discourse. Our research aimed to go beyond documenting and connecting the desires, goals, and intents of the community by also honoring their particular cultural value orientation toward nature, in order to express their dual concern for community and environmental degradation. Emphasizing this point, Montiel, Atencio, and Mares (2009) note that *la resolana* is not just about awareness of "ecological destruction . . . but also of human communities and ethnic groups" (p. 1). As we have observed, this cultural approach recognizes the inextricable connections between environment, culture, and justice.

At the same time, this study prompted us to continue to consider how theoretical knowledge can translate into practical strategies for addressing issues of environmental in/equity. To do so, we shared our interpretations of the sustainable Hispanic discourses, beliefs, and practices already enacted with our partner collaborating environmental organizations so that they could hold political leadership accountable for representing their constituents actual cultural values. As such, our collaborative study sought to translate theoretical knowledge into practical strategies for better policymaking, although it may be difficult to pinpoint the exact results. We would actually caution against using legal or political change as the sole measure of successful collective action. Instead, we advocate using cultural awareness —

encompassing “mobilization and cultural effects, including the creation of alternative discourse, community building, and empowerment as well” (Bernstein, 2005, p. 5)—as another indicator of social movement success.

Furthermore, while in many ways a community-focused Hispanic orientation to nature is contradictory to mainstream environmental organizations’ longstanding “wilderness” protection goals, such goals likely will not be abandoned. DeLuca (2007) argues that environmental advocacy should leave behind the trope of “pristine wilderness of the Romantic tradition, with its unfortunate race and class consequences” while acknowledging wilderness’ significance as “the excess and otherness that grounds and surrounds us, putting us in our place” (p. 49). In this way, it can provide both a context and restraint for humans. As such, our aspiration is not to redirect advocacy but to expand it by encouraging a representative and multi-voiced advocacy that acknowledges diverse contexts and relationships with/in environment.

Ultimately, LatCrit provides the tools to incorporate Hispanic meaning systems to build relationships that support community concerns—including ecocultural sustainability work—and to reclaim environmentalism as a core value in the Hispanic community. The use of a LatCrit framework to address mainstream environmental organizations’ current outreach to Hispanic communities also allows us to push forward the often-missing topic of race in communication scholarship (Allen, 2007). This notable absence could be remedied by theoretical approaches that aim to emphasize the experiences of marginalized communities. For years, white privilege within the mainstream environmental movement has worked against considerations of race (Pulido, 2000). However, this collaborative project helped stakeholders reflect on ways white privilege consciously and/or unconsciously affects environmental racism (Pulido, 2000). Future potential coalition-building thus requires new ways of negotiating and cooperating on the often-disputed race and culture concerns of environmental justice practitioners (Santiago-Irizarry, 2003). LatCrit directs our attention to the often-unacknowledged mainstream colorblind ideology so that, rather than obscuring community distinctions, we grapple productively with the ways in which environmental issues affect communities differently. In other words, by taking race, racial identity, and racism into account within environmental communication, these issues become importantly problematized—though not necessarily solved.

This study also allows us to extend LatCrit beyond academia and into praxis. Part of LatCrit’s guiding principles is to engage in meaningful communication among progressive movements, communities, and coalitions that deeply recognize difference (Bender & Valdez, 2011). Focusing on community stories, we strove to link environmental and cultural organizations, activists, participants, and scholars invested in the political and everyday issues of critical consciousness to propagate the building of culturally and ecologically sensitive projects.

The initiation of such research by community groups makes this collaborative project one that demonstrates the potential for coalition-building to honor cultural practices, transform voter engagement in environmental struggles, and ultimately



affect state electoral accountability in environmental issues. We remain buoyed by the possibilities of working together, arguing that “solution-oriented and policy-relevant” research is a tricky but worthwhile terrain (Sze & London, 2008). We hope communication research continues to value and build transformative intercultural alliances, not just among environmental and cultural organizations, but within academia as well.

## Notes

- [1] While mindful of the different ethnic self-identifying labels and their numerous meanings, in this paper we use Hispanic to refer to our study's participants. The term Hispano/Hispanic recognizes the unique historical contextualization of New Mexican populations and is widely used in New Mexico and other parts of Spanish colonized territories in the U.S. Southwest (Cervantes, 2003). Latino/a has been adopted as the preferred pan-ethnic label since it refers more exclusively to persons or communities of Latin American origin and is considered a more politically conscious label (Rinderle, 2005). While scholars like Oboler (1995) challenge the amalgamation of Spanish speakers under the umbrella term Hispanic and problematize its political implications and origin as a state-imposed identity label, we based our choice on the study participants' preferences.
- [2] The second largest population group in New Mexico is non-Hispanic white at 41.7, and the third is Native Americans at 9.7 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).
- [3] Southwestern Organizing Project (<http://www.swop.net>) is an international multi-racial, multi-issue, community-based membership organization that was founded in New Mexico in 1980. The organization strives for community involvement in social, economic, and environmental decisions affecting their lives to help them achieve social justice and control over resources.
- [4] Foundational LatCrit scholar Margret Montoya created this topic/theme index to categorize LatCrit scholarship published in the more than thirty LatCrit symposia that came out of law reviews from 1996 to 2008 (personal communication, 2010).
- [5] In this paper, we avoid italicizing Spanish words in an effort to represent and reflect the integrated and unmarked use of Spanish terms, phrases, and names by many of our participants in their communication. For reader comprehension, however, we include English translation in parentheses after Spanish words that may not be commonly known by non-Spanish speakers.
- [6] Posole, sometimes spelled pozole, is a ritually significant, traditional hearty stew that originates from Mexico.

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