

Christina Holmes

*Ecological Borderlands: Body, Nature, and Spirit in Chicana Feminism*

Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016

ISBN: 978-0-252-08201-6 (PB)

*Reviewed by Dong Isbister, 2019*

**Dong Isbister** is an assistant professor of women's and gender studies at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. Her research and teaching interests include collective memory and immigration, transnational feminism, environmental humanities, US multiethnic studies, women's literature, feminist pedagogy, and translation and interpreting studies. She is the co-author of "(Re)connecting People and the Land: Ecomemory in Environmental Writings by Ethnic Minority Women Writers in China" (2017). She is also the author of "Rainbow," a poem published in *Transnational Literature* (2010), and "Self as Diasporic Body: Hung Liu's Self-Portrait Resident Alien" (2009), and "A Transnational Feminist Reading of Kyoko Mori's *Polite Lies*" (2008).

**Quote:** "*Ecological Borderlands* is not only about undertheorized Chicana borderlands environmentalism, but also about a passionate scholar working at the intersection of disciplinary borders to build connections and coalitions."

\*\*\*

Recipient of the 2013 National Women's Studies Association/University of Illinois Press First Book Prize, Christina Holmes builds her interdisciplinary research around Gloria Anzaldúa's "ecological borderlands" and weaves human, nature, and spiritual bodies into theorizing subaltern/borderlands environmentalism and conceptualizing performative ecological intersubjectivities. In particular, she uses analytical approaches (for example, case study, ethnography, and document analysis) to examine selected works of Chicana and Mexican American scholars, artists, and activists and to "bring together . . . three main lines of inquiry (Chicana studies, ecofeminist philosophy, and posthumanist new materialist feminism)" (119). By doing so, she invites her readers to critically consider disciplinary divides and geographical exclusions in ecofeminist and environmental research and to explore new and underappreciated ways of knowing.

In her "Introduction," Holmes first contextualizes and defines the concept of "ecological borderlands" that emerges from the critical efforts of Chicana and Mexican American scholars, artists, and activists, hoping to explore social and geopolitical issues embedded in relationships among women, nature, and spirituality in a border region. The "ecological borderlands," for Holmes, is "marked by translocal and transnational flows of people, flora, and fauna, as well as by a multiplicity of economic, political, and cultural paradigms" (3); it encapsulates ecological consciousness and diverse ecological practices employed in Chicana feminist ecocriticism, such as activism, creative cultural activities, and scholarly intervention. In addition, a close review of the genealogy of ecofeminism reveals a noticeable lack of connection between "Western centrism" and Chicana and Mexican American borderlands environmentalism. Holmes, therefore, proposes in-depth discussions of ecofeminist epistemology, methodology, and varying

models at the interstices of Chicana studies, ecofeminist philosophy, and new materialist feminisms. These discussions should also take place in the context of ongoing debates over embodiment, woman-nature relations, and spirituality.

In chapter 1, "Borderlands Environmentalism," Holmes delineates her rationale for recognizing and emphasizing the diverse ecological practices--subaltern environmentalism--of Chicana and Mexican American women. Holmes puts her research in dialogue with existing environmental justice literature and ecofeminism. By reviewing a pertinent body of literature thematically, she identifies and explains the limitations of a "historical framing" too focused on a US national context (32), disciplinary composition solely in social sciences, and androcentrism. Holmes discusses how ecofeminism is often associated with white feminism, which has been criticized for marginalizing women of color. She also points out that the focus of ecofeminism on the relationship "between the oppression of women and that of nature" is hard to universalize (34). For Holmes, these limitations pose challenges to advancing and configuring environmental movements in the US in general. After discussing the wave model of historical advancement in American environmentalism--similar to the commonly known narrative of different waves of American feminism--Holmes notes that it does not effectively explain the lives and histories of marginalized groups, such as Mexican American women, who live in the borderlands and continue to experience environmental racism. Further, most literature derives from social-science research whereas strategies and tactics for environmental justice implemented in other disciplines, such as art, are equally important. Lastly, even though American ecofeminists have integrated gender analysis into environmental theorizing and activism, women of color have their own geopolitical, economic, legal, social, and cultural connections with the environment; their lived experiences and borderlands environmental activism are based on materialized environments, such as land, water, and factory and farm labor. It is in this context that Chicana and Mexican American women scholars, artists, and activists employ unique strategies that include "the use of spirituality, coalition-building, 'translocal' and transnational framing, and cultural production" in Chicana/o environmentalism (41).

In chapters 2, 3, and 4, Holmes moves on to theorize about performative intersubjectivity in multiple geographical sites by analyzing some of the ecological narratives of Chicana feminists in Mexico and the US Southwest, raising the environmental themes of body, nature, and spirituality, as I discuss below, which, she argues, remain mostly undertheorized.

Holmes identifies and examines ecological themes in literature and visual culture in chapter 2, "Misrecognition, Metamorphosis, and Maps in Chicana Feminist Cultural Production." Selected texts of artists and writers in this chapter reveal a shared interest in place-making in relation to nationalist movements and border-crossing. For example, *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* (1969), a manifesto drafted during the Chicano Youth Liberation Conference, "offers a model of nationalism rooted in the land" and voices "a connection between contemporary Chicanos and their spiritual and cultural ties to indigenous communities" (55). *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1999) by Gloria Anzaldúa explores "borderlands subjectivity" in southern Texas, meanings of life and belonging in the borderlands, and possibilities for transformation (56). Cherríe Moraga's essay "Queer Aztlán" (1993) not only "critiques the racism of the mainstream women's movement and the homophobia of the Chicano movement" and "the sexism of gay Chicanos" (58), but also explores the relationship of women with nature. For Moraga, "indigenous

spirituality offers women a position of authority through association with nature goddesses and the land" where women are privileged as "founders of a new land": a "Queer Aztlán," "a queer space for queer citizens" (59). Holmes explains that these texts share "the notion that identities and their rootedness in place are both deeply felt and malleable" (59). Shared themes of "spatial and temporal relationships among humans and between humans and the borderlands environment" are found in Chicana feminist visual culture. For example, the murals of Juana Alicia and her collaborators invite their viewers to ponder sacred and hybrid spaces in which human-nonhuman and body-land are connected, transnational, temporal relationships creating "connections between social and ecological justice" (63). Like murals, self-portraits reflect Chicana artists' efforts to become visible and define themselves as subjects. Yreina Cervántez's self-portraits, especially the *Nepantla* series, exemplify Chicana artists' engagement in constructing contested bodily spaces and embodied power relations and resistance. Digital compositions by Alma López emphasize "the role of place and time in Chicana/o politics" by creating cartohistoriographical landscapes and using digitized maps to trace im/migration of women and the labor they perform.

Does nature remember? If so, what does that mean? In chapter 3, "Allegory, Materiality, Agency in Amalia Mesa-Bains's Altar Environments," Holmes employs an ecocritical lens to examine autotopography--a representational strategy--to tell both personal and collective stories in altar environments, especially altar installations. Mesa-Bains uses home altars in art installations, and the natural elements and/or physical objects included in her installations signify healing, homeland, and/or border-crossing points. Her artistic practice not only demonstrates her deeper connections with the environment, nature, and the more-than-human world, but also complicates the traditionally polarized private and public spaces, perceptions of ritual practices, and ways in which gender, race, class, nation, and nature are henceforth constructed.

Chapter 4, "Body/Landscape/Spirit Relations in *Señorita Extraviada*," provides a case study of the "activism-oriented documentary" and focuses on "its ecological cues" (99). At the center of Holmes's critical inquiry, once again, is Butler's performative intersubjectivity--the thematic thread in this book--constructed in multiple representational sites, including documentaries such as *Señorita Extraviada*. Unlike documentaries such as *Maquilapolis*, *Señorita Extraviada* invites its audience to reconsider environmental consciousness specifically developed in a non-America-centric context. In each subsection of the chapter, Holmes picks out the narrative threads in the documentary and points to the director's varying cinematic strategies which decenter spectator privilege and build intersubjective relationships (by, for instance, returning the gaze), while also using religion to (re)write the gendered body as sacred, remap nature, and transform the spectator. In the last subsection, Holmes draws on media studies and film reviews to discuss three reception patterns that can be seen as compromising some critical components of the documentary: the politics of agency and outrage; globalization, the ultimate deterritorializing machine; and the investigative documentary gaze (114-17). She concludes the chapter by affirming "the potential of cultural production to carry spectators and readers toward human/nature/spirit relationships" (120).

In chapter 5, "Building Green Community at the Border," Holmes uses ethnographic methods and document analysis to study feminist and ecological consciousness at a rural women's intercultural center in New Mexico, a space for women with a wide range of interests in social

and ecological justice, personal skill-building and empowerment. Although the center's activities are not predominantly environmental in nature, the center integrates ecological consciousness in its focus on the intersection of social and ecological justice in the borderlands, as Holmes explains. What readers learn about the center is its confirmation of a recurring theme of belonging in Chicana and Mexican American "women's work for social and ecological justice across the borderlands" (125). This sort of community-building and consciousness-raising (for example, bodily awareness and ecological consciousness) has implications for healing and for creating a more inclusive community.

Holmes wraps up her monograph by revealing a major finding--"borderlands environmentalisms display a politics of deterritorialization aimed at decolonization" (147)--that helps open up a space to interrogate the narrow scope of ecofeminism and American environmental movements in order to practice environmental activism in more culturally specific forms and locations. She also takes the time to reiterate her main argument: that "the politics of the body, of spirituality, and of the connections between women and their 'natural' and built environments could be usefully explored with a focus on the performative practices that create selves-in-community or performative intersubjectivities" (147). To conclude the chapter, Holmes emphasizes her book's contribution to interdisciplinary research.

Gloria Anzaldúa states in *Borderlands*, "A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (Anzaldúa 1987, 3). *Ecological Borderlands* is not only about undertheorized Chicana borderlands environmentalism, but also about a passionate scholar working at the intersection of disciplinary borders to build connections and coalitions. The book demonstrates Holmes's in-depth interdisciplinary research and admirable skills in weaving three major areas of inquiry together and clearly identifying and defining organizing concepts and key terms. With her readers in mind, Holmes frequently makes connections between chapters regarding theoretical frameworks and critical lenses. She also provides solid and well-grounded discussions of subaltern environmentalism occurring in ecological borderlands via varying representational strategies. Students, researchers, and instructors will find the monograph especially beneficial if they are interested in, for instance, ecofeminist epistemology and methodologies, Chicana studies, im/migration and globalization, social movements, ecofeminism of color, ecological and social justice, environmental humanities and art, film studies, and digital humanities.

### ***Reference***

Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/la frontera: The new mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinster/Aunt Lute.