

Advancing Environmental Justice By Expanding The Literary Canon

[review of Petr Kopecký and Jan Beneš, eds. *Environmental Justice in Ethnic American Literature* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2025)]

When Americans and others think about racism, they typically recall images of slavery, lynchings, segregation, police brutality, job and housing discrimination, and related features of injustice affecting millions of African Americans. Likewise, they may remember the terrible injustices that have occurred to other groups of peoples of color, including harsh and brutal treatment of American Indians, various Asian communities, Latino/as, and other marginalized groups. The struggles against these features of racism have tarnished American history, despite some political attempts to erase them from national memory.

Environmental racism has traditionally been less visible. Although its effects are as devastating and at times lethal, it often lacks the drama of other more egregious examples of racist history, practices, and actions. Victims of environmental racism often suffer debilitating illnesses and conditions that take more time (if at all) to attract widespread media attention.

Still, the long quest for environmental justice has reached some public attention in recent decades. And this attention is reflected seriously in the literary traditions of American ethnic and racial minorities. That focus is highlighted in a remarkable new book edited by Petr Kopecký and Jan Beneš. *Environmental Justice in Ethnic American Literature* is a carefully curated collection of essays by predominantly Czech scholars bringing literary voices of Black, Latino/a, Indigenous, and Asian American to the forefront of the struggle against environmental racism and to the crusade for environmental justice. The volume stands as a powerful antidote to both scholarly and public neglect of environmental injustice and the literary responses of marginalized populations.

The editors' Introduction provides a valuable overview of the book as a whole. It maps the past and present terrain of ethnic American literature on this theme represented in their selected chapters. These incisive works both enlighten scholarly and other communities and alert them to the prospects of corrective political action. The Introduction reveals effectively how the essays can be situated within second-wave and third-wave ecocriticism. It also details the specific scope and structure of the book, guiding readers to the very specific visions and arguments of the authors they include in the edition.

A key element that emerges is that the authors are enthusiastic about treating an astonishing variety of genres in their essays. They write about farm, immigrant, detective, and cli-fi novels, nature writing, indigenous poetry, and other forms ordinarily absent from much of conventional literary criticism. Likewise, they focus predominantly on women of color, with texts by and about them. Finally, they address mostly lesser-known but still highly accomplished and critically well-regarded authors. In short, by focusing mostly on these talented women and men artists, they have expanded the literary canon and have countered the repressive tradition of racial and gender exclusivity.

Although all but one of the chapters focus on non-canonical writers, Parisa Changizi concludes the volume with an ecofeminist reading analysis of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and *Home*.

By all accounts, Morrison is a gigantic figure of contemporary American literature, clearly in all definitions of the standard literary canon. Her novels actually serve as a useful departure point precisely because of her stature. All her works command attention and as Changizi shows, these literary works establish a solid foundation for the other works highlighted in this book.

A Mercy is a bridge that reveals the historical continuity of the insidious effects of environmental racism, especially to Black women. The ravages of slavery on women in plantations, for example, led to abuse, rape, forced breeding, and child abandonment, among other miseries. Combined with total neglect of the natural environment, the conditions of the Black population only worsened through the 20th century and beyond. *Home* continues Morrison's critique. A (horror) story of eugenic sterilization and eugenics, it chronicles the savagery of American racism and bogus science. In the process it broadens our vision of environmental racism.

Jan Beneš also treats environmental racism affecting African American communities in his chapter on "The Black Agrarian Novel." There, he focuses on Natalie Baszile's *Queen Sugar*, a farm novel that celebrates Black farmers who serve as stewards of the land and as they overcome the trauma of severe environmental racism. The chapter relates the novel's stories of environmental injustices against Black farmers over the decades and how the characters set about getting remedies through resourcefulness and persistence.

Queen Sugar expresses powerful Black ties to the land. That is the essence of its environmental justice spirit and focus. An examination of this novel leads naturally into a deeper understanding of how discrimination against Black farmers blended into traditional American civil rights grievances and protests, expanding our vision of the civil rights movement as a whole. Likewise, this novel expands our vision of American literature, eroding further the domain of white male scholarly domination.

That welcome erosion continues in Stanislav Kolář's chapter. His incisive focus on two novels by Carlos Bulosan and Alejandro Morales reveals the powerful connections between environmental problems and institutional racism affecting Filipino and Latino communities respectively. Bulosan's work, *America Is in the Heart*, is almost 80 years old and only fairly recently rediscovered. His treatment of marginalized, low-paid, Filipino seasonal workers in agricultural fields in California reveals the pervasive environmental injustices these workers endure. The xenophobia and violence that Filipino social and environmental activists faced only exacerbated their pain and alienation. This novel is an early groundbreaking effort, worthy of far greater contemporary readership and critical attention.

Similarly, Morales' *The Rag Doll Plagues* focuses on the structural racism and environmental injustice that colonialism and postcolonialism wrought. Published in 1992, this novel is also an older literary work that sheds light on the plights of Mexican immigrants to the United States. As Kolář indicates, the novel details the multiple trials of this minority population, especially in Southern California. Racism and discrimination also include multiple instances of polluted air and toxic contamination, among other environmental risks. Morales' readers can understand the long history of environmental injustice affecting this population.

Petr Kopecký focuses effectively on environmental injustices affecting Latino communities in California. His chapter on California Chicano/a writing gets to the depressing heart of how agricultural work, along with accelerating climate change, can have devastating effects on their

personal health. His treatment of two powerful novels, *Under the Feet of Jesus* by Helena Maria Viramontes and *Cactus Blood* by Lucha Corpi is strong, accurate, graphic, and disturbing. The characters mirror reality by addressing the severe bodily consequences of the pollution and deadly pesticides they face every day.

In his concluding paragraphs, Kopecký sums up the effects of these literary works forcefully by noting that literary fiction has the potential to unearth what is out of sight. This is hugely important: at UCLA, where I teach, I have many Latino/a students whose parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, even siblings, face the same dismal environmental realities in the early 21st century. I hear their stories regularly. These novels, and others like them, can reach much wider audiences.

Even more hidden from “mainstream” public awareness is the precarious condition of American Indians. Even less visible, even among many humanities scholars, is the impressive tradition of Indigenous literary expression and production. Miroslav Černý successfully challenges this neglect and exclusion by highlighting the poetry of Ofelia Zepeda, a Tohono O’odham Nation. She is an eco-feminist writer who, he argues, should be more fully acknowledged within this tradition, particularly for her captivating use of bilingual language in her poetic expression.

The geographic region of the U.S. Southwest is the site of massive population displacements and appropriations of Indigenous peoples. This has caused numerous eco-disasters that are reflected in Zepeda’s poetry, revealing her as a major artistic activist. Černý demonstrates with extensive textual detail and analysis how losses of indigenous languages are inseparable features of the environmental justice movement.

Martina Horáková’s chapter on “Braiding Indigenous Women’s Environmental Knowledge” adds significant theoretical features about environmental movements while also deepening our knowledge and understanding of Indigenous women and their literary expressions. Many of these women have been bearers of knowledge and educators of future generations, specifically of land management and the entire ecosystem. As Horáková argues, their work should be perceived as examples of restorative environmental justice.

A crucial contribution in the chapter is naming numerous Indigenous women whose nonfiction, hybrid texts, memoirs, short fiction, critical writing, storytelling, and other forms of creative expression have added enormously to their general scholarly absence resulting from institutional sexism and occasional, even more overt, neglect. These women’s voices and visions provide powerful additions and alternatives to mainstream ecofeminist discourses. Horáková’s examples constitute persuasive arguments for much greater inclusion within and outside the academy.

Among the most distant themes from conventional literary treatment and analysis is the domain of animal colonialism. Denisa Krásná challenges this exclusion in her provocative and persuasive chapter that focuses on Ruth Ozeki’s 1998 debut novel *My Year of Meats*. Using the literary work as a point of departure, she shows how the concept of milk and meat colonization constitutes a form of environmental injustice against humans and nonhuman animals.

The novel is shown to be one of extensive social advocacy, exploring the intersectionality of multiple social issues including race, gender, and environmental justice. Krásná’s comprehensive analysis of Ozeki’s novel focuses on the horrors of the animal industrial complex. She highlights, for example, how drugs, hormones, chemicals, and poisons are forced into animals. Moreover, they endure unspeakable conditions in feedlots while standing in urine, feces, and mud, with no

place to move. All of this also has horrific consequences to human health. Above all, this novel and the entire chapter about it bring animal welfare into the discourse of both environmental justice advocacy and expand the literary canon.

Environmental Justice in Ethnic American Literature is a major contribution to scholars, activists, and anyone interested in the environmental crises of the early 21st century and the literary and other expressions of ethnic communities in America. The editors and contributors to this volume have all done masterful jobs in detailing, with admirable precision, how the authors have represented their respective minority communities and brought awareness and enlightenment to the, sometimes devastating, environmental injustices they have faced—often for decades or more. And in so doing, they have expanded the literary canon in ways that will be profoundly valuable for present and future generations.

Taken as a whole, the book transcends its strong value as a work of scholarship alone. Most, perhaps all, of the writers in the volume create their works in hopes that they might have an effect on real life. They are genuine political actors. Their efforts perform an essential resistance role in the continuing struggle for environmental justice. Their works are not merely ancillary to broader political struggles in an oppressive society. They are not merely pleasant if supportive diversions from “real” political actions and struggles. They are intrinsic features of those struggles. Showcasing these powerful expressions of resistance may well be the most durable contribution of this collection.

Paul Von Blum
UCLA