Bodies of Water: Politics, Ethics, and Relationships along New Mexico's Acequias

Elise Trott
University of New Mexico

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/anth_etds

Part of the Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons

Recommended Citation

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Electronic Theses and Dissertations at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthropology ETDs by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.
Elise Trott
Candidate
Anthropology
Department

This dissertation is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication:

Approved by the Dissertation Committee:

Lindsay Smith, Chairperson
Erin Debenport
Ronda Brulotte
Michael Trujillo
BODIES OF WATER:
POLITICS, ETHICS, AND RELATIONSHIPS ALONG NEW
MEXICO'S ACEQUIAS

by

ELISE TROTT

B.A., Anthropology, University of Chicago, 2007
M.A., Anthropology, University of New Mexico, 2012

DISSEPTION
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
Anthropology

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

December, 2017
DEDICATION

For Patrick, who loves his homeland with compassion and fury.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Sylvia Rodríguez, who first introduced me to the acequias and whose encouragement, rigor, and insight have continually spurred me to look more closely and think more deeply. This study would not have existed at all without her example, guidance, and support. I would also like to express my gratitude to Paula Garcia, the late Estevan Arellano, and the other members of the Mayordomo Project – Kenny Sanchez, Quita Ortiz, Gilbert Sandoval, Juanita Revak, and David Garcia – for welcoming me onto the team. I thank Paula and the rest of the New Mexico Acequia Association staff for kindly including me in meetings, events, and projects over the last seven years and repeatedly affirming their belief that I had something to offer. I also thank the many other mayordomos, acequiers, and acequia organizers who have generously guided me along their ditches, answered my questions, and offered their thoughts on my ideas. I especially thank Jorge Garcia for the many introductions and phone calls that he made on my behalf, and Pilar Trujillo and Juliet Garcia for helping me develop my research questions.

From beginning to end, this study was shaped by the gentle guidance of Dr. Erin Debenport. Her creative and thought-provoking ideas, sweet and sincere encouragement, and inspiring scholarship have provided an invaluable example and support. I also thank Dr. Lindsay Smith for her close readings and challenging critiques, Dr. Michael Trujillo for feeding my New Mexico obsession, and Dr. Ronda Brulotte for generously stepping in when I needed her. I am grateful to my entire committee for the time and energy they devoted to this study. I also wish to thank Dr. Cathleen Willging for her mentorship, for
an abundance of professional opportunities in the community I love, and for reading my
grant applications even when she had a million other things to do.

My graduate career has been made so much warmer by the company of my fellow
graduate students, especially Daniel Shattuck and Lara Gunderson, who have studied,
researched, and written alongside me since Day One. Dr. Stephanie Spong, Dr. Calinda
Shely, and Geneva Smith have also been invaluable friends and supports.

I wish to express my gratitude to the individuals and institutions who have offered
me indispensable financial support throughout my graduate career, including the UNM
Department of Anthropology, the UNM Department of English, the Anderson School of
Management, Dr. Beverly Singer and the Alfonso Ortiz Center for Intercultural Studies,
Dr. José Rivera and the UNM Center for Regional Studies, the New Mexico Water
Resources Research Institute, the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, the
Scholars Strategy Network, the American Association of University Women, and the
Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Finally, I cannot adequately express my deepest love and daily gratitude to my
parents, who have ceaselessly guarded and guided me; to Dan, my lifelong friend; to
Nikki and the little ones, who make all our lives infinitely sweeter; to the Jaramillo
family, who have so generously embraced me; and to Patrick (and Oso), my home and
my heart.
BODIES OF WATER: 
POLITICS, ETHICS, AND RELATIONSHIPS ALONG NEW MEXICO’S 
ACEQUIAS

by

Elise Trott

B.A., ANTHROPOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO 
M.A., ANTHROPOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO 
PH.D., ANTHROPOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO

ABSTRACT

Growing public attention to global economic and environmental instability and collapse have brought new urgency to a classic activity of anthropology: looking for alternative economic and environmental models in other ways of life. This dissertation is a case study of the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which New Mexico’s acequias (communally-managed irrigation ditches) are produced, experienced, and contested as an alternative form of living, creating community, and relating ethically to the environment. Drawing on over six years of participant observation and in-depth interviews with Nuevomexicano (Spanish- and Mexican-descendant), indigenous, and non-indigenous acequia users and organizers in North-Central New Mexico and the South Valley of Albuquerque, I analyze social and political projects involving acequias, including resistance to a proposed housing development in Albuquerque’s South Valley, the formation of emergent publics in opposition to state logics of water governance, the coalescence of mutual support and resilience in human and nonhuman relationships along
the acequia, and the efforts of women activists to increase Los Alamos National Laboratory’s accountability to indigenous women’s health.

I argue that *acequieros* (acequia users and activists) have often been represented as melancholy and illogical citizens and are subject to technologies of governance that I call chronotopic marginalization, which de-materialize and de-politicize their contemporary concerns and displace them in time and space from decision-making processes. Second, I suggest that acequieros are engaged in the formation of fluid publics, emergent social and political spaces shaped by the materiality of the acequia itself and the human and environmental relationships that it structures. Third, I illuminate the nature of these relationships using the concept of mutualismo, meaning mutual dependence and protection. Finally, I suggest that while the political projects of fluid publics, shaped by relationships of mutualismo, are borne of the place- and race-specific experiences of New Mexico’s acequieros, they also represent a unique, though precarious, effort to contest injuries of social isolation and abandonment by the state and the institutions of capitalism both in New Mexico and elsewhere.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .............................................................................................................................................. xi

LIST OF TABLES ................................................................................................................................................ xii

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................................. 1
  Findings and Theoretical Frameworks ............................................................................................................... 5
  Background ........................................................................................................................................................ 12
    Identity Terms ............................................................................................................................................... 12
    Acequias in New Mexico ............................................................................................................................... 15
  Research Sites ................................................................................................................................................ 24
    North-Central New Mexico ........................................................................................................................... 25
    The South Valley of Albuquerque ............................................................................................................... 31
  Project History ............................................................................................................................................... 34
  Methodologies ............................................................................................................................................... 37
  Plan of the Dissertation ................................................................................................................................ 40

CHAPTER 2 BODIES OF REPRESENTATION: NUEVOMEXICANO SUBJECTS IN THE THICK PRESENT ........... 45
  Melancholy New Mexico in Popular and Scholarly Imaginations ................................................................. 47
  Acequias in the Thick Present .......................................................................................................................... 60

CHAPTER 3 DELIBERATING BODIES: CONTRA SANTOLINA AND CHRONOTOPIC MARGINALIZATION .......... 65
  Santolina/“Sand”olina ..................................................................................................................................... 69
  Paper Water and Wet Water; Water Authority and Water Expertise ............................................................. 73
  Postcolonial Neoliberal Governance and Water Use Decision-Making ..................................................... 82
Enduring Chronotopic Marginalization ........................................................................93

CHAPTER 4 POLITICAL BODIES: WATER RIGHTS, WATER ETHICS, AND
“FLUID PUBLICS” ........................................................................................................96
Publics and Counterpublics .......................................................................................101
“Active Water Resource Meddling” ...........................................................................103
“Water means money, right?” ..................................................................................109
Fluid Publics ..............................................................................................................114

CHAPTER 5 ASSEMBLED BODIES: CULTIVATING MUTUALISM IN
PRECARITY ..................................................................................................................123
Mutualismo in New Mexico .......................................................................................127
Multispecies Assemblages of Mutualismo ................................................................130
Community Assemblages of Mutualismo ................................................................136
Mutualismo, Solidarity, and Resilience ....................................................................140

CHAPTER 6 FEMININE BODIES: REFERENCE MAN, VULNERABILITY,
AND WOMEN IN WATER ACTIVISM ......................................................................156
Women and Nature ....................................................................................................160
Los Alamos National Laboratory and the Blurring of the Human and the
Nonhuman ..................................................................................................................163
The Women Speak: Contamination, Vulnerability, and Care ..................................167
The Center Space of Vulnerability and Care: Intersubjectivity and Oppositional
Consciousness ............................................................................................................182

CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION .........................................................................................192
APPENDICES ............................................................................................................202
Appendix A Protecting Water: From Acequia’s [sic] to Standing Rock ....................203
Appendix B Environmental Racism: A Letter from New Mexico to Flint.................206

Appendix C Las Mujeres Hablan: The Women Speak Women’s Declaration for New Mexico 2010 ..................................................................................................................................................209

Appendix D El Agua es la Vida..................................................................................213

Appendix E Resolution 2015-04: Support Women in Acequia Leadership...........216

REFERENCES.............................................................................................................217
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Regional Acequia Associations

Figure 2. Tractors march through downtown Albuquerque to protest the Santolina development

Figure 3. Acequeros take a break from cleaning the acequia

Figure 4. Bendición de las Aguas, Congreso de las Acequias, 2010
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Parallels between water and women’s bodies.........................................................177
Chapter 1

Introduction

I organize acequias because I have nothing better to do. There really is nothing better to do.

-Don Alfonso

About a week before Christmas in 2015, I visited Don Alfonso at his home in the Mora Valley of New Mexico, on the eastern edge of the Santa Fe National Forest. David, a farmer and community organizer, had arranged for the three of us to meet so that I could ask the two men about their history as local leaders and activists. After arriving at Don Alfonso’s house and exchanging gifts – paper plates of Christmas cookies from me, jars of home-made chokecherry jam from Don Alfonso, and small paper bags containing roots of dried oshá, a mountain-growing plant used most commonly as a cold and flu remedy, from David – we climbed onto the bench seat of Don Alfonso’s blue truck so he could take us on a tour around the valley. The dirt road connecting Don Alfonso’s home to the state highway ran along the base of a mountain, and as we drove, he recounted how, in the early 1800s, his ancestors – settlers from Spain and Mexico – had negotiated with the Native American Pueblo of Picurís on the far side of the mountain to cut a branch off from their water source, the Río Pueblo, and bring it down to the near side of the mountain so that the settlers could irrigate their fields and fruit trees. That branch became the first of the valley’s acequias, a Moorish word that came to North America

---

1 Throughout this dissertation, I have given my interlocutors pseudonyms except where they explicitly asked to be quoted by name. I also refer to public figures (i.e., published authors, political figures) by their names.
with the Spanish to describe their customary system of gravity-fed irrigation ditches. In the centuries after the first Spanish colonizers arrived with Don Juan de Oñate in 1598, a complex network of acequias spread throughout the region that is now New Mexico, creating riparian growth and watering the fields, orchards, and gardens of Native and non-Native dwellers. Hundreds of years later, Don Alfonso and David both became deeply involved in organizing the users of those acequias to protect their water from governmental and industrial threats.

We pulled off the highway and drove slowly along a narrow dirt path into a big field of dried grass. A few hundred yards down the path, we saw five or six horses of different colors trotting toward us, having spotted Don Alfonso’s truck and wanting to find out if he had brought them any hay. Don Alfonso stopped the truck and we sat quietly for a few minutes, watching the horses, buffeted by occasional blasts of winter wind. Then, he turned to me, suddenly serious, and said,

You see, the worst penal institution is not that business nowadays full of Mexicans and black people for the corporations to make money because the government pays them. Sabes? The main prison that we’re having now is the mentality that we’ve grown into, no? And how do we break that? So that we can be liberated. So we can be a free spirit again and enjoy life. And praise the Creator, no? And praise each other, and see a God in each other, no? And see a love in each other, no?

Don Alfonso paused for a few long seconds, watching the horses. “So that life has some meaning,” he added, his voice shaking. We sat in silence as he pulled a napkin out of the glove compartment and touched it to the tears in his eyes. Then he sighed. “Otherwise one gets pretty tired of eating frijoles and chile every day.” We all laughed as he started up the engine again.
Acequias were an integral component of the colonization of the New World by the Spanish and the mestizo and indigenous settlers who accompanied them from New Spain into what is now New Mexico. For the descendants of these groups in the present day, acequias are vital symbols and conduits of history, culture, ecology, and spirituality, as well as a material component of their struggles for autonomy and self-determination in the wake of their own domination by the United States after 1848. A specific place-based history of living, working, and struggling on the arid landscape of New Mexico continues to be told and re-told by acequeros (users of acequias) and acequia organizers to this day. At the same time, when talking to acequeros about the acequias, I have often noticed them making rhetorical and logical leaps like Don Alfonso’s – from the place- and race-specific geography, technology, and traditions of the acequias to expansive assertions about consciousness, freedom, human relationships with one another and the environment, and the possibility of profound spiritual, physical, and interpersonal wellbeing. In these moments, conversations focused on recollection and reminiscence shift to urgent exhortations about the present and future. Don Alfonso’s perspective and others like it that are included throughout this dissertation depict acequias as more than a subsistence practice or a racial/ethnic tradition; rather, they center acequias as a corrective for a wider sense of oppression and uncertainty. According to Don Alfonso that day in the Mora Valley, the acequias are bound up with human connections to one another and to the environment – connections that contribute to liberation from oppressive structures, institutions, and patterns of thought like the prison he mentions, and thus literally give life meaning. This dissertation explores the values, affects, and
human and non-human relationships that make these connections possible.

Don Alfonso’s comments about consciousness and liberation resonate within a wider of context of growing public attention to global economic and environmental instability and collapse. Economic uncertainty and fears about the accelerating pace of climate change have brought new urgency to a classic activity of anthropology: looking for alternative economic and environmental models in other ways of life. Depictions of other (primarily indigenous and non-Western) lives as more holistic, more sustainable, and simply more satisfying, proliferate both within the field of cultural anthropology and in popular media. Many of these depictions point to the interconnectedness of the human and the nonhuman as remedies for contemporary ills. Yet, few do more than point to different lifeways as possible objects of desire. This research delves into the possibilities and pitfalls of centering place- and race-specific traditional practices as models for a better way of life.

In this dissertation, I examine the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which acequias are produced, experienced, and contested as an alternative form of living, creating community, and relating ethically to the environment. This takes the form of description and in-depth analysis of a number of social and political projects in which acequia users and allies are engaged, including contestation over governmental technologies of water management and water-use decision-making, the formation of material and conceptual alliances with other groups engaged in water struggles, and the promotion of women’s bodies, discourses, and practices in measuring and cultivating community health and wellbeing. As I trace the connections that acequieros make with one another and with their environment that make acequias meaningful to their users and
advocates, I also investigate the ways that such connections function (or fail to function) as alternatives to global economic and environmental uncertainty. This work is not a comprehensive story about the practice and politics of acequias throughout New Mexico in the present moment. Rather, I examine the organizing and activist work of select groups of acequieros in New Mexico as diagnostic of the challenges facing alternative and oppositional models of environmental engagement and natural resource use, and as a provocation in the form of emergent social and political possibilities. This study is thus about precarity, potentiality, and endurance.

**Findings and Theoretical Frameworks**

This study has three interconnected aims. First, this research represents an ethnographically-grounded investigation of how a particular model of environmental engagement is actively produced and experienced as an alternative to contemporary inequality and insecurity. Second, I examine how the concept of acequia practice as an alternative to economic and environmental uncertainty functions as a social and political project, and how it succeeds and fails under contemporary regimes of governance. Third, this study problematizes the overwhelming focus of scholarship in New Mexico on questions of race and ethnicity, heritage, and tradition that continually reinscribe the region’s specificity and rootedness in the past, foreclosing consideration of the ways that New Mexican experiences reflect and speak to wider social, political, and environmental questions.

Over the course of the dissertation, I argue that the acequia users and activists whom I describe have often been represented as melancholy and illogical subjects, whose contemporary concerns are illegible to the neoliberal postcolonial state. Moreover,
drawing on Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of the chronotope as a fusing of space, time, and subjectivity, I suggest that they are subject to technologies of governance that I call **chronotopic marginalization**, which de-materialize and de-politicize their contemporary concerns and displace them in time and space from decision-making processes. Second, I suggest that in this difficult context, acequia users and activists are engaged in the formation of **fluid publics**, emergent social and political spaces that are shaped by the materiality of the acequia itself and the human and environmental relationships that it structures. The salient characteristics of fluid publics include a tendency to exceed and absorb disparate categories of racial/ethnic and political identity, an allowance for unexpected political tactics and alliances, and a quality of being both precarious and difficult to govern. I suggest that these characteristics of fluid publics are made possible by the ethical and material relationships among individuals and between individuals and the environment that are produced along the acequia, which I describe using the concept of **mutualismo**, my third major contribution, meaning mutual dependence and protection. Finally, I suggest that while the political projects of fluid publics, shaped by relationships of mutualismo, are borne of the place- and race-specific experiences of New Mexico’s acequiers, they also represent a unique, though precarious, effort to contest injuries of social isolation and abandonment by the state and the institutions of capitalism both in New Mexico and elsewhere.

In recent years, global uncertainty about dominant economies and environmental models has been reflected in an explosion of literature across the biological and social sciences and the humanities, suggesting that the overlapping processes of capitalist globalization and anthropogenic climate change have created a new epoch of human
influence on Earth’s ecosystems. Sometimes called the “Anthropocene” (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000; Crutzen 2002; Zalasiewicz et al. 2008) or the “Capitolocene” (J. W. Moore 2016), the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) posits that this era is characterized by a crisis in confidence in the problem-solving capacity of conventional politics and anxiety “around futures that we cannot visualize” (211), prompting a search for feasible models of future life.

The economic theorists J.K. Gibson-Graham (2011) suggest that the global scale of the present environmental and economic crisis is “creating a new ‘we’ and convening new publics on this planet” (3). In accordance with their long-standing interest in the diversity of local economies as sites of resistance to capitalism (see also Gibson-Graham 2006), Gibson-Graham see this convening as a vital moment for what they call an “antidote field guide” (2011, 26) of local practices that can present models for a new, more ethical, economy. As the anthropologist David Graeber (2004) has described, this interest in documenting alternative economic and environmental moralities, such as the gift exchange (Mauss 2000), has been a hallmark of the discipline of anthropology since its earliest days. While this project has often objectified and romanticized its subjects, Graeber (2004) also points out that some of these early projects “succeeded, somewhat despite themselves, in laying the groundwork for a theory of revolutionary counterpower” (24). As I will discuss, contemporary efforts to map alternative economies continue this mixed legacy. In the last decades, this interest has guided work on indigenous environmental knowledge and biodiversity (Escobar 2008; Nazarea 2005; Shiva 1993), in which local knowledge and cultural memory are seen as “repositories of alternative choices” (Nazarea 2006, 318). Similarly, studies of peasant land disputes, especially in
Latin America (e.g., Edelman 1999; Scott 1977; van der Ploeg 2012), center land-based people as models of resistance, sustainability, and “moral economy” (Edelman 2005; Rodríguez 2006). In these literatures, specific places are understood to be containers for difference that, due to their very particularity, resist the universalizing processes of capitalism (Gibson-Graham 2006) and “[build] on subaltern practices of difference for the construction of alternative socionatural worlds” (Escobar 2008, 67).

Scholars of New Mexico have depicted the environmental practices of the region’s Hispanic or Latino farmers and ranchers as one such alternative socionatural world, shaped by the racially and ethnically-specific histories and economies of Latino people in New Mexico, fused with their culture, memory, and senses of home (Arellano 1997; García 1998; Peña 1998b, 2005; Pulido 1996). For example, the poet and historian Juan Estevan Arellano (1997) coined the concept of “la raza bioregionalism” to describe a model of environmental stewardship based on the affective and material relationship of Hispanic and mestizo people with the landscape of New Mexico as a home place. Similarly, the philosopher and environmental scholar Reyes García (1998) calls this model of stewardship “(home)land ethics.” Both authors privilege the specific connection of New Mexican Latinos to their environment over time as the driver of an alternative ethical, holistic, and sustainable way of life.

In these and similar conceptions, local communities (often communities of color) are positioned as sites of global critique, resistance, and social change. As such, diverse individuals who are disillusioned by their perceptions of mainstream society (e.g., consumer culture, corporate greed, social alienation) coalesce around these communities as imagined spaces of ethical connection with one another and the environment.
However, scholars have problematized the desire to translate local formations to other contexts and scales (Hardt and Negri 2000; Tsing 2012, 2015), and critiqued objectifications of “traditional” communities as existing outside of capitalist relations or as having commensurable values and ideals (Martínez-Alier 2002). At the same time, the anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) cautions that forms of life that oppose dominant logics tend to exist precariously and under constant threat of extinction or exhaustion by political and economic marginalization. This dissertation is situated at the conjunction of these perspectives, drawing on the possibilities of alternative environmental and economic moralities, while taking seriously the challenges posed by the contextual specificity and material precarity of such emergent ways of life, as well as the tendency to objectify them with modernist desire. I explore the possibilities and challenges of this conjunction ethnographically, tracing how it is produced and contested both within and outside acequia use as an ethic and practice that is oppositional to dominant postcolonial neoliberal frameworks of water management.

I also utilize a growing body of literature in anthropology, political ecology, and the humanities that destabilizes anthropocentrism in the relationship between humans and the environment by looking at how environments actively create meaning rather than function as passive containers for meaning. My work draws particularly on critiques of “hyper-separation” (Plumwood 2002) and “hyper-incommensurability” (Latour 1993) between the human and the non-human. As Gibson-Graham (2011) explain, such critiques take two forms. The first points to the shared materiality of humans and non-human creatures and environmental objects, reconfiguring agency as not only within the purview of human individuals but as a function of specific assemblages of human and
nonhuman elements (Alaimo 2010; Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Bennett 2010; Strang 2004; Tsing 2015). For example, the anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015) looks for the ways that specific interactions of people, organisms, and capitalist landscapes produce new and emergent forms of life. The second critique of anthropocentrism emphasizes affective and ethical connection, both among people and between humans and non-human creatures and environments. The cultural theorist Donna Haraway (2016) argues that global environmental crisis has created a situation in which “bounded individualism” has become “no longer thinkable” (5) and kinship of all kinds is a method of survival and wellbeing in the contemporary world. As Gibson-Graham (2011) describe, these ways of seeing the human and the nonhuman emphasize “connection rather than separation, interdependence rather than autonomy” (5). Employing a specifically feminist perspective on the body as the interface by which humans are connected to other humans and nonhumans (Anzaldúa 1999; Holmes 2016; Latour 2004; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983), these perspectives foreground the mutually constitutive relationship of humans and their environments as a way to disrupt conventional Western, colonialist, and patriarchal conceptions about how individuals act on the world.

In order to elucidate the ways that these concepts of kinship and shared materiality form the basis of social and political projects centered on acequias, I place these ideas in conversation with classic and contemporary studies of publics and counterpublics. The concept of the “public,” developed by Jurgen Habermas (1989), Benedict Anderson (1983), and Michael Warner (2002, 2005), describes the way in which groups are constituted by discourse, rather than by their relationship to the state or
any other external entity. As discourses circulate, social spaces are formed among groups that hear them and recognize themselves as being addressed by them. In this way, the formation of publics is a method of making worlds. Crucially, this world-making may function in opposition to dominant social structures, thus constituting what Warner (2002, 2005) calls a “counterpublic.” Similarly, acequieros form publics around discourses of water use and management in New Mexico. In this study, I combine the literature on the nonhuman with concepts of public formation to examine how environmental landscapes, like acequias, enable the formation of emergent publics and counterpublics.

The application of these literatures to understand social and political formations around acequias is unique in the scholarship of New Mexico. This study thus represents a re-orientation of the scholarship of New Mexico away from a regionally-, historically-, and racially/ethnically-specific past to ask how New Mexican citizens are engaged in producing their presents and futures. Furthermore, I not only show how larger anthropological questions about human-environmental relationships and sociopolitical formations are applied to New Mexico as a region, I argue that the social and political projects in which acequieros are engaged can provide key insights into the formation and resilience of alternative social projects involving water and other natural resources under contemporary postcolonial neoliberal technologies of governance, both in New Mexico and elsewhere. I suggest that the case of the acequias is diagnostic of many of the pressures of increasing global environmental and economic instability, as largely racial/ethnic minority and often socioeconomically disadvantaged citizens seek to maintain their access to and use of water in the face of drought and water scarcity on the
one hand, and on the other, efforts to accumulate, privatize, and otherwise profit from public resources via natural resource extraction (e.g., fracking), urban and industrial development, and the financialization and marketization of water and other natural resources. The acequias are thus a kind of “canary in the coalmine” for the futures of small-scale, land-based, and autonomous models of natural resource use as these pressures increase around the world. While acequias are an example of the precarity of these ways of life, I also suggest that they are a model of potentiality. As I will describe over the course of this dissertation, acequias represent both the unique survival of a residual form of ecological practice and a surprisingly successful example of an emergent ethics and politics of the human-environment relationship. This dissertation thus illuminates how this site, which has largely been depicted in ways that are of mostly regional interest, is in fact productive of useful models of human-nonhuman connection and endurance.

**Background**

Identity Terms

Throughout this dissertation, I use the term “Nuevomexicano” to describe a particular population in New Mexico that has been the object of anthropological study and local popular psychology alike for decades. This group has variously been called Spanish or Spanish-American, Hispanic, Hispano or Indo-Hispano, Latina/o, Chicana/o, and Mexican or Mexicana/o, among other terms. Each term has its own history and each individual his/her own reason for choosing one word over another. Some choose to emphasize their descent from the Spanish colonizers of New Mexico, who themselves
included a mix of heritages, including Arabs and other Europeans.2 Others emphasize the mestizo and indigenous backgrounds of the settlers who came up from what is now Mexico in the centuries following the colonization, or their subsequent intermixture with the indigenous people of New Mexico. Still others prefer to identify as Latina/o or the more politicized Chicana/o. For many, the question of identity terms is fraught, both politically (e.g., Gonzales 1985, 1993; Mitchell 2005) and personally (Nieto-Phillips 2008). I have heard many Nuevomexicano friends criticize their older relatives for insisting that they are Spanish without acknowledging their mixed Mexican and indigenous heritage, while also complaining that non-Nuevomexicano friends and acquaintances are too quick to judge them as racist or misguided for mentioning their Spanish roots. In my own experience, non-Nuevomexicano colleagues and acquaintances are disturbingly eager to ridicule Nuevomexicano people for “thinking they’re Spanish,” an experience with which many of my Nuevomexicano friends are familiar and to which they are sensitive. I choose to use the term “Nuevomexicano” because, as Michael Trujillo (2009) has indicated, “all members of the population it describes know and understand it, and I have never heard anybody object to being called Nuevomexicano” (xv-xvi). I also prefer “Nuevomexicano” because itforegrounds a fundamental identification with New Mexico as a home place, more than (though not exclusive of) connection to Spain or Mexico, while also capturing a sense of distinctiveness from the mainstream, English-speaking United States (though some Nuevomexicanos, especially

---

2 The question of Nuevomexicanos’ “Spanish” identity has been examined and reflected upon extensively (e.g., Gonzales 1985, 1993; Mitchell 2005; Nieto-Phillips 2008). At least in part, emphasis on Spanish identity can also be traced to American efforts to prove New Mexico’s suitability for statehood by highlighting the “European” heritage of the region’s citizens. Scholars often point out that before this period, Nuevomexicano people primarily called themselves “Mejicanos,” a term which itself encompassed indigenous, Mexican, and New Mexican heritage (Trujillo 2009, xv).
the younger generation, may speak little Spanish themselves).

In the popular imagination, Nuevomexicano people are thought to reside in the mostly rural communities of Northern New Mexico, which are depicted both as idyllic traditional villages and also as cultural and economic backwaters, blighted by drugs, violence, and isolation (e.g., A. Garcia 2010). Paternalistic and racist or classist theories about Nuevomexicano isolation, such as the idea that many Nuevomexicano families are in-bred, still circulate regionally, recalling similar representations of rural Appalachian communities. However, as scholars have documented (Deutsch 1987; Kosek 2006), Nuevomexicanos have in fact been as mobile as other populations in migrating throughout the region, the country, and between rural areas and urban centers.

The Nuevomexicano population is alternately distinguished from or conflated with the state’s population of more recent Mexican immigrants by scholarly and popular representations. In reality, though Mexican nationals are still generally understood by their white, Native American, and Nuevomexicano neighbors to be a distinct group and regularly face hostility from those neighbors as they do throughout the country, the last couple of decades have seen them become increasingly integrated into Nuevomexicano communities and traditional practices, especially in fields like agriculture. However, observers tend to either elide the two populations or take care to highlight the hostility between them, often seeming to particularly relish the implication that Nuevomexicanos may be unaware of, or in denial about, their own Mexican heritage. Nuevomexicanos are also considered to be distinct from New Mexico’s Native American population, with popular understandings depicting the two groups as either harmoniously coexisting or bitterly divided, though again, the reality includes cooperation, conflict, and intermixture

14
over many centuries. For the purposes of state promotion and tourism, official discourses describe Nuevomexicanos as part of the state’s “tricultural harmony,” along with Native Americans and the White population, most often locally called “Anglos.” As scholars have indicated (Guthrie 2013; Rodríguez 1989, 1992), this imagery both erases the existence of other groups and reifies a divide between the three “cultures” of New Mexico that is far less distinct in reality.

Defining the population of Nuevomexicano people in New Mexico is complex, multifaceted, inherently imperfect, and loaded with overlapping and often conflicting understandings stemming from various political, scholarly, and personal agendas. Nonetheless, a substantial body of popular and scholarly fascination with Nuevomexicano people has been built up into a palimpsest of images and imaginaries that often obscure the lives that they purport to represent, a topic which I discuss in the next chapter.

Acequias in New Mexico

Before the Spanish colonization of what is now New Mexico, communities of indigenous people, with roots in the region long predating the arrival of Europeans, farmed the land, often irrigating their crops with gravity-fed irrigation canals. When the Spanish arrived in 1598 and began to establish settlements, they brought with them a similar system of irrigation – the acequias – that had come to Spain with the Moors in the 8th century. Almost immediately upon his arrival, don Juan de Oñate forcibly conscripted more than 1000 indigenous laborers to dig the first acequia near the present-day Native American Pueblo of Ohkay Owingeh, a pattern that was repeated throughout the region.
The acequia scholar Juan Estevan Arellano (2014) traces the word “acequia” to Yemen, from the Arabic word *saqiya*, meaning “cupbearer.” In fact, the hydraulic technology of the acequias is represented in arid regions throughout the world, including the Middle East, Central and South America, the Iberian Peninsula, and the Southwestern United States. This technology comprises the use of diversion dams (*presas*) to cut off a branch of water from a river or stream into a canal, off of which are dug a system of lateral ditches (*sangrías*) with headgates (*compuertas*) that divide the water into individual plots of land, culminating in a final canal (*desagüe*) that returns overflow to the stream. However, the term “acequia” does not only refer to the irrigation ditch itself, but also to a system and ethic of communal management, maintenance, and decision-making. Each acequia is overseen by elected officers, including a *mayordomo*, the manager and caretaker of the ditch, who is responsible for making sure that all the *parciantes* (irrigators) receive their share of water. Allocation of water, called the *reparto* or *repartimiento*, takes place according to the agreed-upon custom of each ditch, but is usually structured either by fixed amounts of time or according to acreage. The underlying principle of the repartimiento is that all living things (people, animals, and plants) are owed a share of water in times of both plenty and scarcity, a rule that many scholars and acequieros posit comes from the Islamic Rights of Thirst and Irrigation (Arellano 2014; Rivera 1998; Rodríguez 2006).³ The water-sharing practices of acequieros are detailed in the laws and regulations of the Spanish colonization of the New World, including the Laws of the Indies and the Plan of Pitic. These policies encouraged the building of irrigation infrastructure, stipulated that water be held in common for

³ Rodríguez (2006) quotes Dante Caponera (1973, 13): “juridically the right to take water to quench one’s thirst or to water one’s animals” (135).
public welfare, and assigned the administration of water law to the courts (Arellano 2014). The Law of the Indies also advised that the land and water rights of Pueblo communities be respected and preserved, though this mandate was at best unevenly applied, beginning a long history of mixed exploitation, conflict, and cooperation (see Chapter 5 for a more extensive discussion of the relationship between Pueblo and Nuevomexicano communities over water). The structure and ethics of acequia irrigation were thus fully integrated into Spanish and then Mexican governance of the New World.

After the Mexican-American War of 1846-48, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed to cede the land that became New Mexico to the United States. Importantly, it included a provision that preserved the validity of existing Spanish water laws. For this reason, acequias are recognized as public entities in the New Mexico State Constitution. In 2003, as a result of extensive organizing and lobbying efforts by a group of acequia organizers, acequias were designated as political subdivisions of the state, with the rights to borrow money, enter into contracts, and accept grants. Acequeros also gained the right to adopt and administer their own by-laws, including the powers to “bank” unused water rights for the use of other irrigators, and to subject water transfers to the agreement of the whole acequia. Interestingly, the recognition of acequia customs of communal water management by the state stands in stark contrast with the fates of the Spanish land grants, which were awarded to settlers during the Spanish colonial period but were then stolen, bought up, or otherwise appropriated by the U.S. government and American arrivals after the Mexican-American War. Acequias are perhaps the only example of communally-held

---

4 “The rights, privileges and immunities, civil, political and religious guaranteed to the people of New Mexico by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo shall be preserved inviolate” (NM State Constitution, article 2, section 5).
natural resources that is officially recognized and at least ostensibly protected by the U.S. government.\textsuperscript{5}

From the Spanish colonial period to the present day, acequias have functioned mostly as autonomous local associations of parciantes, concerned primarily with the day-to-day work of maintaining the ditches, apportioning water, and resolving internal disputes. No one knows for certain how many acequias are currently in existence in New Mexico, though they at least number in the hundreds. Acequias have been integral components of community life for many villages through New Mexico, running like a system of arteries through yards and across roads, marking the seasons by the volume of their flow and the rituals of their maintenance. Acequeros often recall the outsize role the ditch plays in their childhood memories as they recall walking the paths that are formed by its banks and playing in its waters. Ditch customs also mirror and are intimately bound up with Catholic ritual in Nuevomexicano communities through processions, blessings, and prayers. As the anthropologist Sylvia Rodríguez (2006) has beautifully described, acts of irrigation, ritual, and community cooperation around the acequia “produce local subjects and instruct them how to live” (xxiv). Rodríguez also points out that, like the Catholic church, acequias have historically been solidly patriarchal, with men controlling the access to, and politics of, the ditches.

Acequias have also been the sites and objects of deep social and political conflict in New Mexico. From the earliest days of the Spanish occupation, negotiations between the region’s Native inhabitants and Spanish and Mexican settlers over the right to divert

\textsuperscript{5} While Native American tribes retain the right to manage their land, water, and natural resources, this right is part of their government-to-government relationship with the United States.
and use water could be alternatively violent and relatively peaceful. Oppositional relationships over water have intensified and multiplied over the intervening centuries with the second colonization of the region by the U.S. and the area’s growing population and intensifying development up to the present day. Conflicts over water were significantly heightened by a process of state water rights adjudication beginning in the 1960s, which requires acequeros and other water users to defend their water rights. In the adjudication process, water users in each stream system become defendants in a legal suit to determine their “priority date” (i.e., the date that their water right was first put to use) and the amount of the right. This system of prior appropriation gives preference to water users with the oldest priority dates. Senior water rights thus tend to belong to indigenous nations, followed by acequeros, and then more junior users including municipal and industrial entities. As I will describe, this arrangement has often served to deepen existing racial and ethnic divisions and pit communities against one another along racial and ethnic lines. Stream systems in New Mexico can be wrapped up in the considerable time, expense, and conflict of adjudication for decades.

Though individual acequias have operated as self-organized associations since before U.S. statehood, the water rights adjudication process spurred many acequias to organize into regional networks and associations. In 1987, the Taos Valley Acequia Association (TVAA), an organization of 55 community acequias, became one of the first regional associations of acequias, forming to help organize the legal defenses of two stream systems undergoing adjudication and to protest water transfers for tourism development (see Rodríguez 1987). Groups of acequias around the Río Pojoaque and the Santa Cruz Irrigation District north of Santa Fe also formed regional associations in the
1980s. In 1990, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization called the New Mexico Acequia Association (NMAA) was incorporated by a group of acequia leaders with the stated mission “to protect water and our acequias, grow healthy food for our families and communities, and to honor our cultural heritage” (New Mexico Acequia Association n.d.). The NMAA provides legal and technical support and advocacy to acequias around the state. Currently, the NMAA recognizes about 20 regional acequia associations, most of which are clustered in the north-central part of the state, along with several other informal associations (Figure 1). In partnership with these regional groups, the NMAA has engaged in a number of activities in defense of acequias, including successfully lobbying for water transfer, water banking, and stock pond bills at the state legislature, all of which have helped acequias to retain water rights, assisting acequias to apply for capital outlay for acequia maintenance and infrastructure, and numerous workshops and community programs focused on acequia governance, practical farming assistance, and youth outreach. In recent years, regional and statewide acequia associations have partnered with both indigenous and non-indigenous groups to address a range of issues related to environmental and community health, including resistance to (sub)urban development (see Chapter 3), the preservation of small-scale agriculture and seed-saving.

---

6 It is important to draw a clear distinction between two types of acequia associations. As described above, the word “acequia” refers to both the irrigation ditch itself and the association of users who live directly alongside the ditch and are responsible for managing and maintaining it. Throughout this article, I simply refer to this type of association as “an acequia.” In contrast, entities like the TVAA and NMAA are organizations that focus on education, technical and legislative support, and advocacy and activism. I refer to these organizations as “acequia associations.” The importance of making this distinction was particularly emphasized to me by a commissioner of one South Valley acequia, who scolded, “See, you’re interchanging acequias with the association of acequias… and this is what sometimes angers me, is somebody came out here and helped organize the acequia association, [and now] they’re the lifesavers of the acequias. They’re not! The acequias have been there and will be there after we’re gone!”
practices, and concerns about the contamination of land and water from industrial development and nuclear technology (see Chapter 6).

Figure 1. Regional Acequia Associations; Courtesy of the New Mexico Acequia Associations
As the diversity of these projects indicate, acequia water rights and water management practices are continually under threat from outside influences such as pollution, contamination, urban and industrial development, and the ongoing adjudication process, as well as from internal forces like the aging and attrition of ditch users and the apathy and urbanization of younger generations. Throughout the Western U.S., water is a scarce and precious resource. The state of New Mexico is especially subject to intense water shortages, caused not only by its desert climate coupled with years of inadequate precipitation and warming temperatures, but also by a much-disputed interstate compact, according to which New Mexico must deliver a certain percentage of water from the Río Grande to the state of Texas. These extreme conditions have heightened competition between Native American communities, acequias, and other water users. At the same time, the temptation for acequia users, who are often members of racially- and socioeconomically-marginalized communities, to sell off their water rights to any of an array of individual and corporate buyers for impressive sums of money is nearly irresistible.

Interestingly, however, the deepening of these challenges has also coincided with a proliferation of social and political organizing by acequeros and acequia associations. Much of this development can be attributed to the New Mexico Acequia Association (NMAA) and the particular vision of Paula Garcia, its executive director, a county commissioner with a long familial history in the farming and ranching community of Mora. Under her guidance, the NMAA has formed several productive partnerships with other groups in New Mexico around environmental and natural resource issues. For example, in 2006, the NMAA joined the indigenous organizations Tewa Women United,
Traditional Native American Farmers’ Association, and Honor Our Pueblo Existence to form the New Mexico Food and Seed Sovereignty Alliance, which works to preserve landraces of seeds that are indigenous to Northern New Mexico, as well as to advocate for “growing of traditional foods, sharing scarce water resources, sharing seeds, and celebrating our harvests” (New Mexico Acequia Association 2006). A yearly seed exchange event organized by the Alliance includes Pueblo and Aztec dancers, prayers by members of local cofradías (lay Catholic brotherhoods), and tables and presentations by a variety groups concerned about community and environmental health topics such as water contamination and nuclear safety (see Chapter 6). The event is hosted alternately by a Pueblo and a traditional Nuevomexicano community and emphasizes a message of cross-cultural unity around land, water, and food.

These partnerships are explicitly intended to reject the ways in which land, water, and natural resource conflicts in New Mexico have been divided along racial or ethnic lines, pitting indigenous, Nuevomexicano, and Anglo populations against one another. At the same time that they are working to create solidarity among groups in New Mexico, the organizers of the NMAA, led by Paula, talk about an “acequia movement” that they envision as part of a global struggle over access to and control of water resources. Paula and others especially point to the 1999-2000 struggle over the privatization of the municipal water supply in Cochabamba, Bolivia, as both a parallel and a model for acequieros concerned about the weakening of local water management. One of the slogans of the Cochabamba protests, “El agua no se vende; el agua se defiende” (Water is not sold; water is defended), is also widely used by acequieros. Acequia leaders have met with Oscar Olivera, one of the leaders of the Cochabamba protests, as well as a
number of other national and international environmental justice activists, such as Winona LaDuke and Vandana Shiva, as they imagine acequia organizing as a local site of global environmental and economic struggle.

Importantly, these developments are the work of a select group of acequia organizers and activists, represented primarily by the NMAA, and are not universally embraced. They meet plenty of resistance from traditional acequia users throughout the state who are uninterested in being conscripted into social and political organizing beyond the protection of their own stream system. For many, likely still the majority, of acequia users, envisioning and building alliances with geographically dispersed groups around concepts of environmental and social justice has little relevance to their own experiences and goals. Nonetheless, the contemporary moment sees acequias as perhaps more threatened but also more actively organized than at any other point in their history.

**Research Sites**

As a reflection of the scope of contemporary acequia organizing, the research for this dissertation took place in multiple sites, including several small communities in north-central New Mexico, as well as the cities of Santa Fe, Española, and Albuquerque. For the purposes of description, these sites can be roughly divided into two categories: 1)

---

7 These efforts are sometimes seen as the incursions of “outsiders” – people with little or no history in New Mexico or with acequias – in debates around land and water use, which are largely resented and viewed with suspicion. When asked about environmentalists and social activists who become involved with acequias, one elderly acequiero commented to me, “I resent people from the East or outsiders trying to come into our areas and tell us what to do and how to do it. And now those people may want to get active in the acequias just to control how things are done… They want to bring their urban ideas into a rural area, and rural and urban just don’t mix.” As this acequiero’s statement attests, the priorities of environmental and social activists are often viewed as alien to the issues that concern acequieros, especially as they may connote an “urban” perspective that is felt to be divorced from acequieros’ lives and experiences.
rural and semi-rural communities in north-central New Mexico, and 2) an urban neighborhood in Albuquerque known as the South Valley. While acequias exist and function in many other parts of New Mexico, much of the statewide organizing of the acequias in the last two decades that I describe in this dissertation has originated from and focuses on these communities.8

North-Central New Mexico

The majority of active regional acequia associations in New Mexico are clustered to the west, north, and east of the city of Santa Fe on either side of the Río Grande (see Figure 1), including Rio Arriba and Taos counties, as well as large swaths of Santa Fe, Mora, Sandoval, and San Miguel counties. Locals generally refer to this region as “Northern New Mexico,” although the designation is not only geographical. Historically, this area was densely populated by Spanish and Mexican settlers who occupied land grants deeded to families, communities, and some Pueblo groups by the Spanish crown. These settlements, in turn, closely overlapped with and infringed upon the Native American Pueblos that had occupied the area along the Río Grande for centuries, each of which is a sovereign Native nation. This region has thus been the site of generations of continuous occupation and multiple colonizations (see also Kosek 2006; Masco 2006).

The area is still populated by descendants of these groups, along with growing numbers of affluent White transplants and Mexican immigrants. For example, according

---

8 While outside the scope of this dissertation, acequias in other parts of the state operate in different contexts with diverse pressures. These include the spread of large-scale corporate monoculture in the Southern and Eastern parts of the state, and the urban development and increasing gentrification of the formerly agricultural communities of northwest Albuquerque. Additionally, many of the state’s Native American Pueblos practice acequia-based agriculture, though their systems are largely managed internally.
to the U.S. Census, the population of Rio Arriba County in 2015 was 71.5% Hispanic or
Latino, 13% White (non-Hispanic or Latino), and 18.5% Native American. The 2015
population of Taos County, which includes the affluent tourist town of Taos, was 56.1%
Hispanic or Latino, 36% White (non-Hispanic or Latino), and 7.5% Native American.
For comparison, the statewide population in 2015 was 48% Hispanic or Latino, 38.4%
White (non-Hispanic or Latino), and 10.5% Native American.

Until the 19th century, the economy of Northern New Mexico was based largely
on agriculture and the cultivation of livestock. After the Mexican-American War of 1846-
48, large swaths of both Spanish and Pueblo lands that were ostensibly protected by the
1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo were denied by the U.S. government, lost to land
deals of questionable legality, or bought up by the National Forest, depriving many
inhabitants of their land base and forcing a massive shift toward wage labor, primarily
agriculture or resource extraction, such as mining or logging. Since the construction of
Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) in 1943 in the town of Los Alamos,
approximately 30 miles northwest of Santa Fe, laboratory jobs have employed many
inhabitants of Northern New Mexico. Additionally, tourist development in and around
Santa Fe, Española, and Taos has constituted a source of both income and economic
pressure for the residents of Northern New Mexico, causing land and housing prices to
rise and pushing Native and Nuevomexicano people out of their historic communities to
less desirable areas. Still, the region tends to be substantially poorer than the rest of the
state, with a median household income of $36,098 in Rio Arriba County from 2011-2015
and $36,582 in Taos County, compared with a statewide median household income of
$44,963.
Since U.S. statehood, Northern New Mexico has also been a site of considerable struggle over land, water, and natural resources. The historian Robert Rosenbaum (1981) describes the landscape of Northern New Mexico in the years after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo as “dotted with brushfire conflicts” (15) of Nuevomexicano resistance to American colonization, like Las Gorras Blancas (White Caps) of San Miguel County (northeast of Santa Fe), who used guerrilla tactics like destroying fences and setting fires to protest the appropriation and privatization of land by the Americans (see also Rosales 1997). Seventy years later, the Alianza Federal de Mercedes (Federal Land Grant Alliance), led by the Chicano activist Reies López Tijerina, organized for the repatriation of the land grants to the heirs of their original individual and community owners. Members of the Alianza were responsible for several dramatic confrontations over Nuevomexicano access to traditional grazing and logging lands that were taken over by the National Forest Service, including the 1966 occupation of the Echo Creek Amphitheater in the former San Joaquín de Río Chama land grant by Alianza members (see Kosek 2006) and the well-known 1967 raid of the Tierra Amarilla county courthouse, which resulted in an armed showdown with the National Guard. Similar confrontations continue to occasionally arise to this day (Correia 2013).

While these conflicts have often been couched in terms of Nuevomexicano rights to engage in traditional subsistence and natural resource management practices on formerly common lands, they are also explicitly or implicitly about underlying structures of racial and socioeconomic inequality. The displacement of Nuevomexicano and Mexican communities from public lands during and after the U.S. occupation was a material articulation of their differential citizenship as racialized others with fewer rights
to land and natural resources than white American settlers (Kosek 2006). Successful claims to land use rights by Nuevomexicano groups have generally been based on arguments about cultural identity and authenticity. However, as several scholars have pointed out (Kosek 2006; Pulido 1996, 1998), these claims are successful in part because they decline to challenge the articulation of nature with race and class in favor of more palatable assertions of cultural tradition (see Chapter 2).

Moreover, these dynamics are part of a broader pattern of racial and ethnic conflict that has served to reinscribe the domination of both Native American and Nuevomexicano people in New Mexico. Rodríguez’s (1989, 1990, 1996) work has elucidated the way that ethnicity has operated as a political and economic construction in contexts of cultural and environmental conflict in New Mexico. While Native American and Nuevomexicano groups have experienced exclusions from citizenship as racially marked others, they have also been constructed in opposition with one another. This is part of what scholars have called the “tri-ethnic trap” (Bodine 1968), which Rodríguez (1990) describes as the “dilemma in which Hispanics are confronted on the one hand with the devastating consequences of their land loss and subordinate status, and on the other with the Anglo glorification, advocacy, and imitation of Indian culture” (543). These ethnic politics are evident in public art throughout New Mexico (Guthrie 2013; Rodríguez 2007) and in the built environment of tourist communities, like Santa Fe (Wilson 1997), where the veneration Pueblo culture conceals the economic and social marginalization of both Nuevomexicano and Native American communities.

The pattern of pitting Nuevomexicano communities against both Native American and White neighbors has played out repeatedly in environmental and natural resource
conflicts in New Mexico (Kosek 2006; Masco 2006), and is clearly at work in the case of acequia water rights, where prior appropriation law places acequieros in an adversarial position with regard to senior water users (i.e., the Pueblos, whose status as sovereign nations means that natural resource disputes involving them must be adjudicated through federal courts) on the one hand and a proliferation of more powerful corporate and municipal users on the other. In this way, the management of water and water rights are an example of the way in which nature and natural resources function as sites for the governance of racially marked bodies (Kosek 2006; D. S. Moore, Pandian, and Kosek 2003). As access to water and its use are inscribed with race and class, the tri-ethnic trap is a “means by which the Anglo majority [can] divide and rule the natives” (Rodríguez 1989, 91).

At the other extreme from complete opposition between ethnic groups is a discourse that has been characterized as “tri-cultural harmony,” popular in official state and tourist representations of the cultures of New Mexico. Trujillo (2009) describes tri-cultural harmony as a “local brand of multiculturalism that elides the area’s simmering conflict along ethnic and racial lines” (8). These discourses emphasize differences between New Mexico’s “three cultures” – Pueblo, Nuevomexicano, and Anglo – as colorful, natural, and harmonious, serving to reify ethnic and cultural differences while glossing over conflict between groups. Discourses of tri-cultural harmony also notably elide the existence of other populations, such as Mexican nationals, whose identities are not recognizable by official discourses. Together, concepts of tri-cultural harmony and the tri-ethnic trap serve to either conceal racial and socioeconomic domination or to minimize and relegate it to intergroup conflict between marginalized peoples.
Contemporary acequia users and organizers in Northern New Mexico are the heirs of these conflicts and the fusion of racial and socioeconomic inequality with nature and access to natural resources. The first generation of acequeros to envision regional and statewide alliances of acequias had participated in or were intimately familiar with the land grant struggles of Tijerina and others. Many were politicized by the Chicana/o movement and its focus on the empowerment of Mexican-American people, although others were deeply suspicious of having their local concerns absorbed into broad-based race or class organizing. Several of the first generation of acequia organizers were part of La Academia de la Nueva Raza (Academy of the New Humanity), founded in Northern New Mexico in the 1970s by a collective of local Chicano intellectuals and community leaders who believed in popular education and consciousness-raising through the sharing of local knowledge – el oro del barrio (the gold of the community), dialogue, and a cycle of thought and action (Montiel, Atencio, and Mares 2009). La Academia published a journal called El Cuaderno de Vez en Cuando (The Occasional Journal), as well as a collection of oral histories and stories called Entre Verde y Seco (Between the Green and the Dry), which contemplated the components of una vida buena y sana (a good and healthy life) in community, art, and working the land. While many of this generation of local intellectuals and community leaders have died, their words and accomplishments are continuously recalled and invoked by acequia leaders, while most of those that remain continue to play an active role as advisors and visionaries.

9 I translate “Nueva Raza” here as “New Humanity” because this is the translation that the Reverend Antonio Medina – an acequia organizer and one of the only surviving founders of La Academia – prefers. This translation emphasizes the utopian vision of racial transcendence contained in the Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos’ (1925) concept of “La Raza Cósmica” as a “fifth race” of people that contains all races, but leaves implicit its connection to the mixed racial heritage of Latin America and its incorporation into the Chicana/o movement’s resistance to white supremacy.
At the same time, the last decades have seen several significant changes in the forms and participants of acequia organizing. As I have described elsewhere (Trott 2012), some acequiers articulate the idea of mobilizing around a shared “agrarian” ethic of ecological stewardship and community engagement rather than racial or ethnic identity, representing a departure from the ethnic categories that have conventionally structured conflict over land, water, and natural resources in New Mexico. I have suggested that these activists’ discourses about multi-ethnic unity diverge from official discourses of tricultural harmony because they do not seek to erase racial and ethnic conflict, but rather, they attempt to build solidarity around an emphasis on shared experiences and an ethic of environmental stewardship (also see Chapter 5). At the same time, acequia leadership has undergone a conspicuous shift from the generation of patriarchs that first organized the acequias regionally and statewide to a growing cohort of female leaders (see Chapter 6). In this context, the tension between calls to ally with other social or environmental justice causes and the profoundly place-specific concerns of many acequiers, combined with a fundamental wariness of outside interests, remains a central dynamic of acequia organizing. In this dissertation, I explore how these dynamics are reflected in several current social and political projects involving the acequias.

The South Valley of Albuquerque

While the majority of acequia organizing takes place in the communities of Northern New Mexico, a small group of acequias have remained active in the South Valley, a neighborhood and census designated place in Albuquerque, New Mexico’s largest city. Located west of the Río Grande, the South Valley occupies the area of the Atrisco Land Grant, designated by the Spanish crown in 1692. Unlike many of the
Spanish land grantees, the heirs to the Atrisco land grant were able to successfully prove their claim to the grant in the Court of Private Land Claims in the late 19th century, which allowed the land to remain in the hands of the heirs well after U.S. statehood, though it has since undergone multiple changes in ownership via private development corporations. The South Valley is one of the poorest and least white communities in New Mexico, with a 2010 population that was 80.2% Hispanic or Latino, 16.5% White (non-Hispanic or Latino), and 2.2% Native American. This includes large numbers of 20th and 21st century Mexican immigrants in addition to descendants of 17th-19th century settlers. The median household income in the South Valley from 2011-2015 was $34,357, with 29.4% of residents living below the poverty line.

Although it is urban, the South Valley has retained some of its historic character as a farming community, giving it the contradictory qualities of both a rural area and a socioeconomically marginalized urban neighborhood. Driving through the valley, one sees both the characteristic dollar stores and strip malls of many low-income U.S. city districts, as well as small farms, dirt roads, and unpaved irrigation ditches lined with giant cottonwood trees. Despite its reputation for high crime rates and unemployment, parts of the South Valley are also seeing gentrification from mostly young, white Albuquerque residents drawn in by the area’s low cost of living and appealing green spaces.

Since U.S. statehood, a large proportion of the acequia water rights in the South Valley have been sold or lost, and many of the ditches themselves have been filled in and built over. The Middle Río Grande Conservancy District (MRGCD) was established in 1925 to maintain the main irrigation canals and deliver water to Albuquerque irrigators according to a strict rotation. While the longstanding control of the MRGCD has
contributed to an impression that the acequias of Albuquerque have ceased to exist, several acequias still operate within the Valley to maintain and organize their individual ditches. Additionally, acequia organizers in the South Valley are actively engaged in projects to uncover, map, revitalize, and in some cases reclaim, the original water rights of residents (see also Markwell 2009). In 2006, with assistance from the NMAA, representatives from several South Valley acequias formed the South Valley Regional Association of Acequias (SVRAA).

While the SVRAA is integrated into the statewide structure of the NMAA, acequia organizing in the South Valley takes a somewhat different shape from elsewhere in the state. Whereas acequias are still a familiar part of the landscape of Northern New Mexico, acequia organizers in the South Valley are working to educate the neighborhood’s urban residents about the existence and purpose of the ditches. This takes the form of school and youth programming, as well as efforts to encourage residents to declare their water rights with the State Engineer (see Chapter 4). The South Valley acequias are also engaged in addressing some of the social ills of the neighborhood, including programs that use agriculture to help treat individuals with mental health and substance use issues, as well as efforts to increase residents’ access to healthy, organic foods. While acequia leadership in the South Valley includes many Nuevomexicano people with long histories in the region, it also includes a number of more recent transplants from Mexico, California, and elsewhere. These leaders see the acequias as part of a more global effort to empower indigenous and land-based people, redress social and economic inequality, and increase biodiversity. Interestingly, while many Northern New Mexico acequieros have the sense that the South Valley functions primarily as a
cautionary tale about how water rights can be lost, South Valley acequeros have played a major role in spurring other acequeros to become involved in new concerns, including fighting urban sprawl (see Chapter 3) and allying with other indigenous groups involved in water conflicts (see Chapter 5). In this dissertation, I consider how these projects produce an imaginary of the acequias as an emergent oppositional model of human connection to the environment.

**Project History**

Despite having been born and raised in New Mexico and being used to seeing water glimmering in the narrow ditches along the sides of roads and branching back into fields and down into culverts, I came to this research with little familiarity with acequia history and practice. Shortly after moving back to Albuquerque from Chicago to begin my graduate studies in anthropology, I jumped at the chance to take a class with the well-known anthropologist Sylvia Rodríguez before she retired from the University of New Mexico. As part of that class, Dr. Rodríguez mentioned an opportunity for an interested student to help with a community-based collaborative research project to document the traditional knowledge of mayordomos, the managers and caretakers of the ditch. Enamored as I was (and still am) of anything to do with the culture and landscape of New Mexico, and also wanting to impress a professor that I deeply admired, I volunteered.

Supported by the NMAA and the Alfonso Ortiz Center for Intercultural Studies at the University of New Mexico, the Mayordomo Project was a community-based participatory research project designed to address the aging and attrition of mayordomos, whose detailed knowledge and practical skills are integral to the functioning of the acequias. The project team was comprised of Dr. Rodríguez, NMAA staff, and several
mayordomos, including a father who was training his daughter to take over the work of the ditch from him. My initial task for the project was to produce written analyses of transcripts from interviews that had been conducted with mayordomos from around the state. When the project members approved of my analyses, I was asked to join the team. Over the next three years, I helped to conduct and analyze interviews with mayordomos, participated in field visits to different acequias in Northern New Mexico, which I documented with video and audio recordings, consulted on the development of a handbook and internship program to encourage the training of new mayordomos, and developed and edited an educational video called *The Art of Mayordomía* (2013), which the NMAA now distributes as part of a multimedia toolkit for mayordomos.

In 2011, I was given permission by the Mayordomo Project team to write my Master’s thesis about the project. The resulting study, entitled “‘Planting Seeds is a Metaphor’: Being Agrarian, Agricultural Activism, and Emergent Identity in New Mexico” (Trott 2012), examined discourses of identity formation and group boundary maintenance among project participants in comparison with conventional categories of ethnic and socioeconomic identity. Through the close analysis of interviews, events, and conversations that took place as part of my research with the Mayordomo Project, my thesis argued that NMAA discourses articulated a concept of “agrarian” identity that transcended the ethnic identity categories that have been inscribed on land and water issues by a regional history of ethnic conflict, as well as by past ethnography. This preliminary study led directly to my interest in acequia organizing as a site of emergent social and political projects, which this dissertation investigates.

My history of research and engagement with acequia organizing is inseparable
from my personal history as a native New Mexican, as well as from numerous connections of friendship and family that have developed parallel to my scholarship. Native American and Nuevomexicano people in New Mexico are keenly aware of anthropology’s long fascination with the region and are not hesitant to empower themselves with the right to refuse interests that they perceive as self-serving, exploitative, or disconnected from local concerns. For this reason, Nuevomexicano communities sometimes share the longstanding reputation of the Pueblos as being hostile to outsiders, suspicious of scholarship, and difficult to access (e.g., Guthrie 2013; Kosek 2006). While each scholar’s experience is inherently particular to them, my own research has been received almost exclusively with enthusiasm and generosity. I believe that this was at first because of support from locally-respected scholars like Dr. Rodríguez and the late Estevan Arellano, and over time, because of my long-term personal and professional commitment to New Mexico. I am not a “Native” anthropologist or even what the anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) called a “halfie,” but I am increasingly connected to acequeros and acequia allies through both friendship and marriage. For this reason, while the values, experiences, and concerns of this community were not originally my own and can never be fully mine, they also no longer exist “out in the field” or solely as “research interests;” rather, they have come to be integrated into my daily life and my closest personal relationships. I do not claim that this perspective necessarily gives me more or better insights into anthropological questions in this community, but it has given me a deep desire to understand it and represent it responsibly, tuned to the ways that scholarship and its circulation interact with the material and meaningful concerns of the people I care for, and who care for me, every day.
Methodologies

This dissertation draws on over six years of observation, participation, and conversations in and around acequias, as well as in-depth interviews with acequiros and acequia organizers. I engaged in participant observation (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011) in a variety of contexts. First and foremost, this included the act of “walking the ditch,” which every acequiero knows well. In places throughout Northern New Mexico and the South Valley of Albuquerque, I accompanied mayordomos, commissioners, and other acequia users on walks along their ditches, having my attention drawn to points of interest: an old stone dam hand-built by one acequiero’s ancestors, a culvert where a mayordomo had once found and dragged out an entire basketball hoop, a property where a land-owner had restored his piece of the ditch after it had been paved over for many years, a place where another mayordomo had been threatened with a gun by suspicious property-owners, a still spot where kids used to swim, a bridge from which we dropped rose petals into the water to pray for a good planting season. Like all landscapes where humans have lived and worked (Basso 1996), these places functioned as mnemonic devices for stories, reflections, complaints, exhortations. Rodríguez (2006) memorably describes the men who guided her along tours of the ditch as “psychopomps leading me through the watery underworld, showing me where to walk and what to look for while they recounted the perils, strengths, and pitfalls of each place” (xxii). Similarly, in my experience, these walks constituted an embodied process of familiarization with the universe of diverse tasks and concerns of acequiros. Importantly, walks along the ditch were as much an opportunity for acequiros to speak about their fears and dreams for the future as their memories of the past. In this way, walking the ditches allowed me to develop a mental
map of the storied histories, complex presents, and imagined futures of acequia communities.

Participant observation for this dissertation also included a number of other contexts. These included observing and sometimes (very unskillfully) helping with the practice of acequia irrigation at various stages, including the yearly *limpia* (cleaning), where acequia users gather in the early spring to clean out and prepare the ditch for the irrigation season; daily maintenance of the ditch such as repairing banks and culverts, and removing blockages; conflict resolution between mayordomos and parciantes; routine irrigation where parciantes open their headgates to flood their fields, using shovels to carefully guide the water into each row of crops; and planting, harvesting, and cooking both traditional foods like chile, beans, tomatoes, and corn, and more unconventional but increasingly popular high value crops like kale, salad greens, and beets. I attended both public events and private celebrations focused on acequias, such as annual water blessing ceremonies that mark the feast day of San Isidro, patron saint of farmers, and the traditional start of the irrigation season on May 15th; seed exchange events where farmers bless and trade heirloom seeds; and farmer’s markets. I also participated in acequia association events, such as outreach meetings to educate community members about their water rights, legislative and acequia governance trainings, and the NMAA’s annual *Congreso de las Acequias* (Acequia Congress), which brings together acequias from across the state to learn about matters of concern to acequias and pass resolutions. I attended sessions of the state legislature where acequia-related bills were under consideration, as well as county commission meetings concerning a development that acequias opposed (see Chapter 3). I also participated in protests and conferences where
acequia leaders and organizers interacted with other national and international environmental and social justice activists. Together, these sites allowed me to witness the ways that acequeros and acequia activists experience, interact with, and produce the acequias, both materially and discursively, and in both private and public settings. This participant observation enabled me to become familiar with the various discourses concerning water rights, use, and management that form the basis of acequeros’ claims to water. I witnessed how acequeros envision methods of establishing healthy and viable futures for their families and communities while negotiating with the priorities of other water stakeholders. In these contexts, I also had the opportunity to observe how the claims of acequeros are received and contested within a variety of contexts, including state and municipal water-use decision-making and broad-based social and environmental justice movements.

During this time, I have talked at length with acequia users, organizers, and allies about their personal histories with the acequias, their experiences with and perceptions of acequia organizing, and their understandings of the challenges and opportunities facing acequias now and in the future. These discussions have taken the form of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, as well as impromptu conversations at events and meetings. In these conversations, I was able to ask individuals with long histories and deep personal commitments to acequias to reflect on their reasons for involvement and their hopes and fears for the future. I often brought up issues that confused or concerned me to ask for clarification and advice. As I began to write up my research, I shared my ideas with some of my closest friends and research participants, who then affirmed, contested, or refined my understandings. The analysis in this dissertation is thus “grounded” in data through an
iterative process of drawing out themes and sharing them with others for guidance (Glaser and Strauss 2009).

As I have conducted research and shared my thoughts with acequiers and acequia allies over the last six years, I have also contributed to a number of acequia-related projects and events. In addition to my work on the Mayordomo Project, I was invited to take part in an NMAA initiative called La Escuelita de las Acequias, a group modeled on La Academia de la Nueva Raza, where acequia leaders and allies could share their knowledge and plan their tarea, or work, for the acequias. I contributed my extremely modest video-editing skills to several different acequia-related projects, including a protest against a proposed housing development and an oral history of a local organization. I was often asked by organizers to take pictures or video of events for websites, newsletters, or social media. I also assisted with the development of a museum exhibit about acequias at the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology on the University of New Mexico campus and helped to plan educational and outreach programming around the exhibit. While these activities represented relatively minor contributions to the efforts of acequia organizers, I continually expressed a willingness to contribute my skills in order to signal my commitment to the acequia community and build trust, creating what one of my NMAA collaborators described as a “productive working relationship.” In this way, I did my best to conduct my research as part of a mutual exchange rather than a one-way flow of knowledge (Rodríguez 2015). As acequiers and allies are fully empowered to refuse participation in research, this reciprocal exchange is not only an ethical requirement but also a practical necessity (Harrison 2010).

**Plan of the Dissertation**
This dissertation situates acequia organizing within its regional and global context, and illuminates how acequias are productive of a variety of different social and political projects in a context of economic and environmental inequity and uncertainty. Throughout, I return to the particular insights that acequias offer into the nature of human connections with one another and the environment. A running thread through the dissertation is the concept of “bodies of water.” Acequeros regularly refer to water in general and acequias in particular as “life-blood” – of communities, landscapes, and individual lives. As a natural extension of that metaphor, each chapter returns to the concept of the body and its different valences as material being, physical and affective experience, or a coherent group or public. The last chapter of this dissertation especially elaborates on the nature of the body as an interface with the human and nonhuman world and a site of both power and pain, as well as the way the body may be analogized with water itself. Together, these chapters offer a meditation on the mutually constitutive nature of human and nonhuman bodies, as well as how they form and are formed by social and political spaces.

In Chapter 2, I critically analyze the ethnography of New Mexico as a body of representation that has constructed the region and its citizens as melancholic in the Freudian sense, meaning existing in a state of mourning without end. Because this region has been repeatedly represented in scholarship and popular media, I argue that it is necessary to understand how these representations dematerialize and depoliticize the contemporary concerns of Nuevomexicano people, as well as separate them from the experiences of marginalized groups elsewhere. I explicitly position my own research against this underlying pattern in representations of New Mexico in order to examine
how acequias function in the present.

Chapter 3 explores some of the ways that representations of Nuevomexicano citizens affect their ability to make claims about water use decisions in the context of a proposed housing development that South Valley acequia users perceive as threatening their precariously-held water rights. In this chapter, I elucidate a specific mechanism of postcolonial neoliberal governance that I call “chronotopic marginalization” that functions to displace oppositional voices from deliberating bodies. These first two chapters depict the challenges that acequieros face in advancing an oppositional and alternative ethic of water use and management.

In the following three chapters, I explore the ways that acequieros are forming publics and counterpublics around water in this challenging context. Chapter 4 analyzes Northern New Mexico and South Valley acequieros’ layered, interchangeable, and sometimes contradictory discourses about water’s value, such as its economic potential, historic usage, cultural significance, emotional resonance, ecological benefits, and more, in order to understand what kinds of social and political bodies are produced by shifting and divergent expressions of water’s importance, and what kinds of claims are enabled by them. I utilize two examples of the ways that acequieros make claims about water based on variable understandings of its value in order to propose the concept of “fluid publics” – publics that flow one into another, shaped by the materiality of the acequia itself and the human and environmental relationships that it structures.

In Chapter 5, I consider the nature of these human and environmental relationships as assemblages produced by mutualismo (mutual aid), a centuries-old custom of dependence and protection in Northern New Mexico. I first describe the
reciprocal and mutually protective qualities of the acequia as a multispecies assemblage of human and nonhuman elements. I then employ the same concept of mutualismo to understand the fraught relationship of Pueblo and non-Pueblo communities along a stream system in Northern New Mexico. Finally, I suggest that acequia activists are engaged in an effort to extend mutualismo to a future public of water protectors in two other contexts of water struggle: the protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline project in Standing Rock, North Dakota, and the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. Ultimately, I argue that mutualismo is a model for cultivating resilience in contexts of social abandonment by the institutions of government and capitalism.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I center an effort by indigenous activists to compel Los Alamos National Laboratory to make the health of pregnant, indigenous, land-based women the standard for acceptable levels of water contamination as a lens to analyze the gendered nature of environmental injustice and acequia activism. I examine the concept of the female body as a center space of both vulnerability and care in order to elucidate the centrality of women leaders and female bodies in emergent concepts of human-nonhuman mutualismo that function in opposition to environmental exploitation and collapse. I argue that the bodies of women are a “theory in the flesh” (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983) that contests official standards of allowable harm.

This ethnographic study centers the acequia as an assemblage of the human and the non-human and a fluid social space that moves according to a topography of human relationships. Over the course of this dissertation, I suggest that this fluid social space possesses particular affordances that make social and political projects based on it flexible, resilient, and difficult to govern. At the same time, I point to ways that it remains
precarious under contemporary postcolonial neoliberal governance. These qualities expand our understanding of how environments influence social and political claims to water, not only in New Mexico, but in water conflicts throughout the world.
Chapter 2

Bodies of Representation: Nuevomexicano Subjects in the Thick Present

In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.

- Sigmund Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*

In the face of unrelenting historically specific surplus suffering…, I am not interested in reconciliation or restoration, but I am deeply committed to the more modest possibilities of partial recuperation and getting on together.

- Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene*

Only months before his death in October 2014, the Nuevomexicano intellectual, poet, and farmer Juan Estevan Arellano published his last book, entitled *Enduring Acequias: Wisdom of the Land, Knowledge of the Water* (2014). In it, Arellano weaves stories from his life growing up in Embudo, New Mexico with his experiences farming and irrigating the land there, his travels around the world to learn about the irrigation practices and infrastructures of other people and other times, and his research into the history of water-sharing in arid lands. The book proceeds like a stream of consciousness, in turns encyclopedic – as in his exhaustive documentation of the history of the Embudo Land Grant or his cataloguing of different types of irrigation infrastructure – and impressionistic, as he recalls snippets of poems, movies, and old sayings about nature, water, and human relationships. In the book, these streams of knowledge merge and mix together. For example, despite his expertise in ancient Islamic water law, Spanish etymology, and folklore, he chooses to explain the foundational ethic of acequia water-sharing, the Islamic Right of Thirst, with a common New Mexican prayer: “My mother
would say, ‘Para vos, para nos, y para los animalitos de Dios’ (For them, for us, and for God’s little animals). One can’t find a better definition of the Law of Thirst” (11).

Throughout the book, Arellano is haunted by the possibility that the practice of acequia irrigation might someday be abandoned. Recalling the acequia-irrigated landscape of his childhood, he writes, “It is a memory of a certain landscape that invades my dreams, tortures me when I am awake, knowing that in a generation or two this landscape will be a thing of the past” (7). Yet, pages later, he states, “It’s not in the vein of nostalgia, or thinking about ‘the good ol’ days,’ that I write about acequias but rather with an eye toward the future, the twenty-first century and the new millennium” (21-22).

Here, Arellano’s last work is situated not only at the intersection of disciplines – hydrology, history, folklore, law, anthropology – but also at the intersection of the too-quickly receding past and the unknown future, at a place that Donna Haraway (2016) calls the “thick present,” a present of uncertainty, fear, and cautious hope.

In this chapter, I consider Arellano’s work as part of a long history of scholarship and representation of New Mexico in general, and Nuevomexicano people in particular. As New Mexico is perhaps one of the most studied places in the field of anthropology, new scholarship on the region must take into consideration the substantial knowledge architecture that has already been built up around it, influencing not only the way scholars understand New Mexico, but also the ways that New Mexican citizens understand themselves. In order to reflect on representations of New Mexico, especially in anthropology and cultural theory, I trace a consistent theme in this literature: the understanding of Nuevomexicano citizens as a people who are essentially and exclusively defined by their rootedness in a place-specific history of dominance and domination.
Despite changing theoretical frameworks and political preoccupations in the scholarship of New Mexico over decades of scholarship, I argue that this theme persistently reappears. Moreover, I suggest that this repetition continually reconstitutes Nuevomexicano people as melancholy subjects in the Freudian sense, existing in a state of mourning without end. I point to the ways that this pattern of representation has sometimes stymied Nuevomexicano social and political projects. Ultimately, I trace this pattern in order to explicitly situate my own scholarship of acequia ethics and practice against it. Instead, I ask what it might mean to turn our gaze, even if only temporarily, away from the historic traumas of the past and consider acequias and their users as part of an assemblage of the human and the nonhuman existing in the precarious and indeterminate present. While doing so might appear to entail giving up the desire to redress the wrongs of the past, I follow the feminist cultural theorist Donna Haraway’s (2016) suggestion that complete redress is not only impossible but possibly even undesirable, and that in fact the only possible path forward is one of “partial recuperation and getting on together” (10).

**Melancholy New Mexico in Scholarly and Popular Imaginations**

Throughout the first part of the twentieth century, New Mexico was a popular site for anthropologists – particularly the students of Franz Boas, including Elsie Clews Parsons, Ruth Benedict, Alfred Kroeber, and others – to study and document the distinctive cultural traits of isolated and disappearing cultures. As such, the region plays an outsize role in the discipline’s original interest in salvaging remnants of primitive ways of life. While most of the early anthropologists in the region were primarily interested in Pueblo Indians, other scholars looked to the rural Nuevomexicano villages
of New Mexico as havens for untouched pre-modern Spanish culture. For example, the folklorist Aurelio Espinosa (1985) theorized that ancient Spanish folklore traditions had traveled “in a single leap” (3) into the American Southwest, where they could still be identified more or less unchanged from their medieval forms in the 1940s and 50s (see also J. M. Espinosa 1978). Similarly, the New Mexican-born priest Fray Angélico Chávez (2012), whose writings enjoy prominence in the “Regional” literature displays in New Mexican bookstores, purports to trace the Spanish “essence” of Nuevomexicano people back through the founding of New Spain to Castile and all the way back to Biblical Palestine. He connects the arid landscapes, pastoralism, and monotheism of Palestine, Castile, and Northern New Mexico into a distinctive castizo culture, meaning “all that is perennially Spanish” (122), evocatively describing Nuevomexicano people as having “a landscape’s essence simmering in living blood” (6). Chávez contends that a contemporary Nuevomexicano individual has a soul that “is the living soul of his forebears, gone to sleep perhaps, but nonetheless alive” (268). According to these perspectives, Nuevomexicano people embody an ancient and untouched Spanish culture that has survived in the particular arid landscape and geographic isolation of Northern New Mexico, which the geographer Richard Nostrand (1996) has called the “Hispano Homeland.”

In the tradition of the salvage anthropologists, these authors depict Nuevomexicano people as a unique but disappearing culture. Like other salvage projects, these scholarly and popular representations are generally romantic, valorizing the isolation and distinctiveness of Nuevomexicano people and places. Such representations are commonplace in popular culture as well. Traveling to the villages of Northern New
Mexico is regularly described as an experience that is like “going back in time.” For example, in a 2013 episode of CNN’s travel and food series, *Parts Unknown*, local Nuevomexicano musician and actor David Manzanares tells host Anthony Bourdain that New Mexican Spanish sounds to modern Spanish speakers like the English of Shakespeare (Vitale 2013).

However, such romantic images inevitably contain the possibility of darker representations. In a work entitled *Forgotten People*, originally published in 1940, the Chicano scholar George I. Sánchez (1970) cited Nuevomexicanos’ supposed isolation and persistence in traditional pastoralism as evidence of their unfitness for contemporary life. He described them as a “severely handicapped social and economic minority” whose “status is one of privation and want, of cultural inadequacy and of bewilderment” (27). Though sympathetic, Sánchez argued that Nuevomexicano people were inexorably tied to land-based subsistence practices and “medieval” cultural and spiritual forms, theorizing that they literally had no experience of “Western civilization beyond the sixteenth century” (12). Ultimately, he lamented, “Today we find these humble people still struggling unsuccessfully to make their age-old patterns work in an unresponsive setting” (13). Similarly, though Chávez (2012) champions and valorizes the traditional culture of Nuevomexicanos, he also worries that their castizo spirit cannot survive the cultural influences and socioeconomic changes of modern life. He predicts,

But when the landscape of New Mexico, already alienated for the most part, has been largely churned up by the bulldozer, and the air filled with English sounds in the accents heard from New England down to Texas, that is, when the old language of Cervantes is no more, it can only mean the end as an entity for an extremely small population. Their long experience of suffering has nothing to hang on to. (272)
Here, as in salvage anthropology elsewhere, the dark alternate side of romantic representations of isolated and disappearing cultures is the sense that these ways of life are backwards, helpless, and unfit for the contemporary world. This image of Nuevomexicano communities is as common as the idyllic one, with popular understandings tying social ills like poverty and drug use alternately to Nuevomexicano culture or culture loss.

These processes are familiar to scholars of indigeneity who have extensively documented the ways that understandings of cultural wholeness and distinctiveness are connected to expectations that indigenous ways of life are incompatible with modernity and thus in the process of dying out (e.g., Cattelino 2010; Clifford 1988; Muehlmann 2009; Povinelli 1999). Characteristically, such narratives also continually reference language as a marker of both cultural authenticity and loss of culture (Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998), in the same way that Chávez and others tie the “language of Cervantes” to Nuevomexicano people. These perspectives understand Nuevomexicano groups to be attached to the past in a way that disconnects or disqualifies them from modern life, a way of thinking that, as Michael Trujillo (2009) has described, “reproduce[s] a cultural logic that conceptualizes modernity and culture in opposing terms” (86).

Beginning in the 1980s, as anthropologists questioned the conventional ways in which the discipline constructed cultural authenticity, scholars of New Mexico began to critique romantic images of the region and its citizens, revealing their central role in the construction of New Mexico as an object of desire for tourists, art collectors, state boosters, and others (Guthrie 2013; Lavender 2006; Mullin 2001; Rodríguez 1989, 2007;
Weigle 2010; Wilson 1997). These scholars show how the commodification of culture conceals and reinforces the region’s unequal race and class relations, imposes hierarchies of authenticity and cultural legitimacy, and de-politicizes internal conflicts and differences. At the same time, scholars began to draw on new theoretical frameworks that foregrounded the influence of political and economic factors on Nuevomexicano subjectivities and material circumstances. Rather than attributing the characteristics of Nuevomexicano life to cultural authenticity, these scholars emphasize the ways that historical intersections of global political and socioeconomic forces have shaped the conditions and experiences of the region and its citizens. For example, the ethnohistorian Joseph Whitecotton’s (1996) comparative study of ethnicity in Oaxaca, Mexico, and New Mexico’s Española Valley draws on world systems theory to posit that Nuevomexicano identity formed in response to the region’s political-economic situation as a “periphery within a core” (18), characterized by dependency on and growing incorporation within the world-system while still remaining politically and economically marginalized. Similarly, the anthropologist Sylvia Rodríguez (1987) theorizes that mobilizations of Nuevomexicano identity in Taos around issues of land and water were attributable to political-economic and environmental pressure from tourist development. Rodríguez also reexamines understandings of Nuevomexicano connection to land, arguing that rather than an inherent cultural characteristic, contemporary pressures had facilitated “the crystallization of land as a symbol of Hispano cultural survival and social self-determination” (314; see also Rodríguez 1992).

These studies became part of a sizable body of scholarship refuting essentialist arguments about cultural difference in favor of examining the specific articulations of
capitalism with racial and class dynamics in New Mexico through the U.S. occupation after the Mexican-American War of 1846-48 and the subsequent penetration of American political and economic interests into the region (Deutsch 1987; Dunbar-Ortiz 2007; Gómez 2008; Kosek 2006; Mitchell 2005; Rodríguez 2007). These studies elucidate the ways that characteristic processes of U.S. colonization and expansion, especially the capitalist expropriation of natural resources and the racialization of citizenship, played out in the context of New Mexico. Significantly, many of these scholars argue that these processes of American occupation not only formed the material political-economic realities of the region’s inhabitants, but also shaped their subjectivities and experiences of place-based cultural difference. This is especially true with regard to Nuevomexicano people. For example, the geographer Jake Kosek (2006) examines popular understandings of Nuevomexicano “rootedness” to the land, showing how this image is discursively constructed out of Nuevomexicanos’ dependence on land-based subsistence practices combined with their history of conflict with the U.S. government. Crucially, perspectives like Kosek’s understand Nuevomexicano subjectivities as being centrally constituted by processes of injustice and disenfranchisement.

These works unsettle representations of New Mexico as geographically isolated and culturally exotic, while also refuting the idea that cultural authenticity and culture loss determine the fitness of Nuevomexicano people for contemporary life. These texts also do the important work of critically analyzing material and ideological forces that have contributed to a present in which Nuevomexicano communities are substantially sociopolitically and economically marginalized. Yet, in some of these works, I also find a troubling reemergence of the tendency to equate contemporary Nuevomexicano people
with extinct ways of life. In a representative example, Kosek suggests that while many Nuevomexicano people are no longer interested in land-based practices like farming and ranching, a “history of loss” and “sentiments of longing” (42) for these practices and the landscape that supported them bind Nuevomexicano people to their homes and to one another. Here, material losses are not only major constitutive forces in the lives of contemporary Nuevomexicano people, the affect of loss is actually “the very glue” (42) that makes their lives and communities coherent.

Similarly, in her ethnography of heroin addiction at a Northern New Mexico recovery center, the anthropologist Angela García (2010) argues that “Hispano addictive experience is closely related to history and not merely cultural or personal pathology, as it is so often described” (9). García purports to focus attention on the material production of heroin addiction in New Mexico, drawing on Freud’s concept of melancholy as “a kind of mourning without end” (75) to argue that heroin addiction in this community is driven by social and historical loss, which have created “a local ethos of melancholia through which heroin addiction, and heroin-related death, can be read as a kind of contemporary consequence” (71). In this way, García explains contemporary drug addiction by pointing to the same sentiments of loss and dispossession that Kosek identifies as the fulcrum of Nuevomexicano subjectivity. While her linkage between historic injustice and the contemporary socioeconomic suffering of drug addicts’ lives apparently refutes perspectives that attribute Nuevomexicano drug addiction to cultural inadequacy, it also specifically locates the sources of poverty and suffering in the past. What remains unexamined in her analysis are the contemporary political-economic circumstances that structure drug addicts’ lives, except as they supposedly reflect historic
losses. By ignoring these circumstances, García constructs an image of Nuevomexicano subjectivity that is strikingly similar to Sánchez’s image of the “forgotten people” – both depict Nuevomexicanos as isolated, marginalized, and unable to function in contemporary life because of a pathological attachment to the past.

The explanatory power of this pattern of thought extends beyond scholarship. Another vivid example is provided by the journalist Rubén Martínez’s (2012) reflections on life in Northern New Mexico. Martínez continually depicts the Nuevomexicano people he encounters as being locked in the past, such as Martínez’s neighbor Wilfred, who, “like every good norteño, reveres the past, eulogizes it – reinvents it” (43). Martínez purports to analyze the objectification of the desert West as an object of desire, yet his text is filled with undesirable Others – nameless Nuevomexicanos who cling to Spanish identity and hate Mexicans (143-44), who greet Martínez’s presence with hostility because every Anglo arrival reminds them of what they have lost (29), and who are constantly mourning and fetishizing the past. At one point, Martínez sympathetically records the anger of a family of Anglo transplants to Northern New Mexico who “did not regard themselves as outsiders, but [who] stepped into an aura of the past that ensured they would be viewed as invaders to be resisted” (137). Ironically, Martínez does record interactions with Nuevomexicano people who are complex and modern, interested in things as diverse as Danza Azteca and punk music, yet he describes Nuevomexicano people as a whole as isolated, alienated, and pathologically nostalgic.

Clearly, understanding that the material and affective consequences of historic disposessions are a crucial factor in contemporary Nuevomexicano circumstances and subjectivities is not the same thing as equating every negative impression of Northern
New Mexico with an “aura of the past.” Yet, I also caution that it may be a fairly short leap from one concept to the other. I suggest that the fault lies in the tendency to rely on and reproduce the substantial existing knowledge architecture about Nuevomexicano people that highlights their attachment to the past to the exclusion of other influences, affects, and concerns. Moreover, in the same way that Sánchez’s early depiction of Nuevomexicanos as culturally inadequate represents a negative reflection of positive romanticized images of New Mexico’s isolation and cultural distinctiveness, so do depictions of Nuevomexicano people as pathologically nostalgic contain the possibility of a positive valence. This most often takes the form of valorizing Nuevomexicano resistance to modernity. For example, in the introduction to a study of the northern New Mexican town of Cañones (Kutsche and Ness 1981), the authors explain that they originally chose Cañones because they “wanted to find a small, isolated, subsistence village at the end of a dirt road, without telephone or television, totally Roman Catholic, totally Hispanic, monolingual in Spanish – a baseline to serve as a measure for change elsewhere” (2). The authors soon realize that Cañones is not the isolated village they had been looking for; nonetheless, they marvel that,

Improved roads, telephones, television, and education have neither drained its [Cañones’] citizens into the cities (quite the opposite), nor have they destroyed its pride in its Hispanic life. It shows no signs of assimilating, no melting pot blurring of the edges of its separate identity. In fact, through such innovations as the appropriate technology movement and the land grant movements, it is working out new ways of making a peculiarly Hispanic adaptation to the land and the climate. (221)

These scholars end up finding the “totally Hispanic” village they were looking for, though its unique character is a result of resistance to assimilation, rather than cultural authenticity. Ironically, they end of replacing one image of nostalgia (i.e., the survival of
authentic cultural forms) with another (i.e., resistance to the present). Michael Trujillo (2009) has critiqued this “positive vision” (101) of Northern New Mexico village life as resistant to assimilation, as well as a similar argument in Charles Briggs’ (1988) work on la plática de los viejitos de antes (the talk of elders from bygone days) in the Northern New Mexico village of Córdova. Briggs employs a Gramscian perspective on hegemony and resistance to argue that la plática de los viejitos de antes is a form of oppositional cultural critique in the context of political-economic domination. Trujillo suggests that, “although unknowingly,” these authors’ depictions of Nuevomexicano life as oppositional and counterhegemonic “reflected their own modernist longing” (101) for counterhegemony and resistance. The instinct to highlight resistance as a marker of Nuevomexicano subjectivity continues to be a thread in more contemporary work on New Mexico, such as Sarah Horton’s (2010) ethnography of the Santa Fe Fiesta. Horton draws on concepts of invented tradition and ethnic nationalism to argue that the Nuevomexicano Fiesta Council establishes the Fiesta as a counterhegemonic act in opposition to Santa Fe’s gentrification and development. It is important to note that these perspectives do the extremely important work of describing how residual cultural forms remain relevant, meaningful, and powerful for Nuevomexicano citizens. Yet, as Trujillo has indicated, the tendency to romanticize Nuevomexicano subjectivities as resistant to the present is nearly irresistible.

The desire to describe and to valorize Nuevomexicano survival and resilience over more than a century of American colonization is both understandable and important, even as these perspectives also decline to engage the history of Spanish colonization before it. These perspectives also push back against the erasure or devaluation of
Nuevomexicano lives in comparison to White dominance and the veneration of Pueblo culture (see Introduction for discussion of the “tri-ethnic trap”). Trujillo’s critique illuminates the desire for positivity, often inspired by authors’ affection for and admiration of Nuevomexicano life, that fuels these perspectives on Nuevomexicano identity and resistance. Likewise, it is crucial to document the very real consequences of Nuevomexicano dispossession and loss, both in terms of the dire material circumstances of many Nuevomexicano populations and of Nuevomexicano experiences and imaginaries of themselves and their communities. Yet, I am troubled by the way in which even positive visions of Nuevomexicano people in the present understand them primarily in relation to the affect of historic trauma, disappearing ways of life, and resistance to the present. Even when well-intentioned, there is an uneasy slippage between analyses of Nuevomexicano circumstances and critiques of Nuevomexicano lives. García’s choice of the Freudian concept of “melancholia” is fitting for this pattern of thought. Freud contrasts the healthy process of mourning, which is natural and eventually overcome, with the pathological state of melancholia – a “delusion of (mainly moral) inferiority” (Freud 1957, 246), in which the individual turns her/his sense of loss into self-hatred. According to Freud, “melancholia behaves like an open wound… emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished” (253). In the same way, though explanations of Nuevomexicano marginalization and resistance that point exclusively to the events and cultural forms of the past are largely intended as a critique of colonization and material exploitation, I suggest that they also have an ironic tendency to reproduce the same pathologization of Nuevomexicano subjectivities as essentially different from, and therefore unfit for, contemporary life that was articulated by Sánchez and others so many
decades ago.

Moreover, this understanding constructs Nuevomexicano suffering as separate from other forms of contemporary American hardship and thus, significantly, inaccessible to contemporary forms of justice. In her long-term research with an aboriginal group in Australia, the anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli (1999) has made a similar critique with respect to official state strategies of recognition that acknowledge the colonization and exploitation of indigenous people. Povinelli argues that recognizing the historic suffering of aboriginal people functions as a form of catharsis that “allow[s] the nation to get on with its business” (31). However, at the same time, “something very different happens with the indigenous subject. For not only are indigenous people scarred by loss in their discursive passage into being, the historical and material pressures on them to identify with the name of this passage (tradition) affectively constitutes them as melancholic subjects” (31). Povinelli shows that while the recognition of historical oppression of indigenous people allows the nation to move past its own role in that oppression, it simultaneously binds indigenous subjects to the traumatic past by connecting their essential identity to their historic losses. As the legal scholar Wendy Brown (1995) has described, recognition thus “fixes the identities of the injured and the injuring as social positions” (27). The crucial point is that it is not in fact the injuries of the past that make individuals into melancholy subjects, which is the argument that García makes about Nuevomexicano drug-users. Rather, it is the way in which some populations are only understandable in reference to their historical injuries that infinitely reproduces their experiences of loss and mourning, thus creating their melancholia. I argue that this process is an effect of the way in which the scholarly and popular
knowledge architecture about Nuevomexicano people continually reproduces accounts of loss and attachment to the past to explain almost any aspect of contemporary Nuevomexicano life.

This knowledge architecture has already had consequences on the political prospects of Nuevomexicano people. For example, Kosek (2006) describes a series of protests that took place in the late 1990s on Borrego Mesa in Northern New Mexico over the access of Nuevomexicano communities to National Forest land for logging. Kosek recounts how, in the aftermath of a successful protest where activists drove onto Forest Service land to cut fuel wood in defiance of environmental groups, local newspapers “all focused on the ‘traditional cultural bond’ between Hispanics and the forest generally and firewood specifically” (128). This traditional bond was felt by almost everyone involved to constitute a legitimate and inalienable claim to certain forms of land use. However, an earlier protest that centered around differential access to jobs and legal recognition based on class- and race-bias was unequivocally denounced in the press. Kosek explains that “in the eyes of many who had supported the demonstration on Borrego Mesa, Hispano activists were no longer voicing their concerns in a ‘socially acceptable’ manner and, therefore, no longer deserved public support” (132). In this case, the political action of Nuevomexicano activists was only successful as long as it adhered to accepted understandings of their authentic, traditional connection to forest resources. In contrast, when they attempted to mobilize around contemporary structures of inequality, their claims became unrecognizable to the public. Similarly, Laura Pulido (1996, 1998) describes a Northern New Mexican agropastoral collective that successfully established grazing rights based on their traditional occupation of the region and their cultural
connection to the land. However, Pulido (1998) argues that privileging this connection to land resulted in the erasure of structural and economic inequalities and the ultimate reproduction of those inequalities, illustrating “the extent to which structures of inequality set the terms of resistance” (136). As I noted in Chapter 1, scholars of indigeneity have repeatedly critiqued this double-bind, in which the political claims of indigenous people are only recognized inasmuch as they perform an acceptable version of cultural authenticity.

I suggest that the body of representations of Nuevomexicano people functions to make them understandable only inasmuch as they exhibit connections to a regionally-specific past in the form of nostalgia, inadequacy, or resistance to the present. This way of thinking has become a central piece of the knowledge architecture that not only forms our understandings of Nuevomexicano communities, but also determines what kinds of truths about those communities are legible or illegible. As such, narratives of Nuevomexicano melancholia are not merely descriptive, but in fact determine what can and cannot be described (Scott 1998). In other words, explanations of historical injury have become the only kinds of explanations for contemporary Nuevomexicano circumstances that scholars and tourists alike are able to recognize, excluding complex, resistant, and non-legible populations and processes. Those aspects of life that do not lend themselves to the established pattern of representation are thus elided and potentially, by their elision, stamped out.

Acequias in the Thick Present

Within the scholarly and popular representation of New Mexico, a distinct and growing body of writing, photography, memoir, and cultural history focuses on acequias.
Much of this work describes acequia practice as an integral part of the unique cultural heritage depicted by Chávez. For example, the works of José Rivera (1998) and Juan Estevan Arellano (2014) intertwine the practical intricacies of acequia irrigation and the nuances of Nuevomexicano history with equal intimacy, lovingly and painstakingly detailing the minutiae of the water’s flow across the land along with a complex genealogy of names and places over generations of settlement. Like the writing of Chávez, Espinosa, and the other salvage authors described at the beginning of this chapter, these works contain a distinct strain of documenting a disappearing way of life. Also similarly, they emphasize the importance of the Spanish language, exhaustively detailing Spanish terminology for the tools and methods of acequia practice (Arellano, Rivera, and Lamadrid 2014; Rivera et al. 2014), and worrying that loss of these terms would represent a “fatal tipping point that might signal the collapse of the upper Río Grande acequias” (Arellano, Rivera, and Lamadrid 2014, 453). Yet, acequia scholars like Arellano, Rivera, and Rodríguez have also led the way in studies across the fields of hydrology, ecology, community planning, and anthropology that tout the cultural and ecological benefits of gravity-fed irrigation systems in environments of aridity and water scarcity, not only in New Mexico, but worldwide (Sanchiz-Ibor et al. 2014). Rodríguez has also suggested the Nuevomexicano people may benefit from, and have much to offer to, broad-based coalitions with other social and political groups. This contradicts the fears of scholars like Chávez (2012) who insists that, while some individuals may “join the agrarian and urban Mexicans or Mexican-Americans in their social protests, and consequently like to be called ‘Chicanos’ along with them”, the “true Spanish New Mexican” rejects “ethnic considerations in the mass” (270). In contrast, Rodríguez (1992)
suggests that the Nuevomexicano experience, while regionally- and historically-specific, “both enhances and in turn is reinforced by a broader Chicano identity. They are at odds neither theoretically or empirically” (106). At the same time, as I will describe in Chapter 3, acequeros and their allies are engaged in a struggle against the pattern of representation that I critique here, which makes their concerns legible only in relation to past disposessions. Additionally, many acequia organizers liken the political struggle of the acequias to other water conflicts all over the world (see Chapters Five and Six).

In fact, as the remainder of this dissertation will explore, contemporary acequia scholars and organizers are situated at the conjunction of two desires – to cherish and valorize Nuevomexicano acequia culture as a unique, precious, and disappearing artifact on the one hand, and on the other, to claim a stake and voice in global conversations about ethical water use and environmental justice. It is this conjunction that is expressed by Arellano’s dreams of a disappearing landscape paired with his refusal of nostalgia that I described at the beginning of this chapter. Following this model, I explicitly set the analysis of this dissertation against the body of scholarship that reinscribes Nuevomexicano melancholia.

In the context of global climate change and capitalist instability, the anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015) critiques the narratives of growth and progress with which Western societies tend to understand the world. These narratives, which underpin such cherished imaginaries as democracy, justice, even hope itself, are increasingly difficult to uphold. This is not only because of current economic and environmental crises, but also because of failures of analysis like the one I critique here, which persistently fall short in understanding the ways that Nuevomexicano people are
constituted by, and participating in, the present. The Latin American anthropologist Arturo Escobar (2008) refers to this predicament as the exhaustion of modernity, in which “modernity’s ability to provide solutions to modern problems has been increasingly compromised” (21). In this context, Tsing (2015) advocates paying attention to the unstable and precarious assemblages of the present. She comments that, “Indeterminacy, the unplanned nature of time, is frightening, but thinking through precarity makes it evident that indeterminacy also makes life possible” (20). Here, Tsing proposes examining the ways that the present – the conjunction of the difficult past and the uncertain future – produces emergent and unexpected forms of life. Similarly, Haraway (2016) also refuses a future-oriented perspective, suggesting that we turn our gazes instead to the ways that humans and non-humans are “entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings” (1). These configurations certainly include historical structures and processes, and yet they exist independent of any complete narrative of wholeness, progress, or justice. In fact, Haraway suggests that such narratives of “reconciliation and restoration” (10) are not useful in the present moment, when so much of the trajectory of our lives and our environments is damaged and uncertain. She suggests setting them aside in favor of “the more modest possibilities of partial recuperation and getting on together” (10). Accordingly, I argue that while an emergent ethnography of New Mexico cannot ignore the material and affective influences – both positive and negative – of the past on contemporary lives, it should explore the possibility that the explanatory power of these influences may be nearly exhausted or at least over-determined. Instead, an emergent scholarship in this region must examine the ways that Nuevomexicano and other lives are produced in the present,
looking specifically for projects, compromises, and solutions that are limited, yet still possible.

As I have described here, the body of scholarship and popular representation about Nuevomexicano communities has constructed and reinforced a knowledge architecture of Nuevomexicano people that depicts them as melancholic subjects, connected to the cultural forms and historic injuries of the past in ways that make them ill-suited to the present. Even as theoretical frameworks and political commitments have shifted, this pattern of explanation has persisted, sometimes to the detriment of the social and political projects of Nuevomexicano people themselves. In this dissertation, I push back against this pattern of representation by exploring the material circumstances, as well as the relationships and imaginaries that give acequias meaning to their users and allies in the present. This involves exploring some of the ways that acequieros and acequia organizers come up against this knowledge architecture and attempt to negotiate its effects (see Chapters Three, Four, and Six). It also involves recognition of the precarity of acequia ethics and practices as a viable way of life and form of opposition to current environmental conditions and sociopolitical structures, along with an understanding of its possibilities as an emergent world-making project. This dissertation thus examines the “thick present,” holding both its limitations and its possibilities together and elucidating the particular forms of life that they produce. As I will explicate throughout the dissertation, these forms of life are not only of regional interest but rather have insights to offer to groups engaged in land, water, and natural resource struggles throughout the world.
Chapter 3

Deliberating Bodies: *Contra Santolina* and Chronotopic Marginalization

Late on a Thursday evening in the late spring of 2015, the Bernalillo County Commission voted on a series of three appeals filed by community associations against the County Planning Commission. The appeals addressed the Commission’s recent decision to change the zoning of nearly 14,000 acres on the west side of the city of Albuquerque from rural agricultural use to a “Planned Community Zone,” as well as the approval of a plan for a massive new residential and business development, called “Santolina,” on the newly zoned space. The appealing organizations came primarily from the South Valley of Albuquerque, a mostly Hispanic and lower-middle class region of the city located west of the Río Grande and just east of the proposed development. The South Valley occupies the area of the Atrisco Land Grant, which was designated by the Spanish crown in 1692. It remains semi-rural and has been the site of a modest revival in local agriculture in recent years. The organizations – including the South Valley Coalition of Neighborhood Associations, the South Valley Regional Association of Acequias, the Center for Social Sustainable Systems, the Southwest Organizing Project, New Mexico Health Equity Working Group, and the Pajarito Village Neighborhood Association – appealed the Commission’s zoning change and approval of the new development based on concerns over lack of water and the possible negative impacts of increased traffic and urban sprawl on community and environmental health. Over the previous months, opponents to the Santolina development had continually filled commission meetings, waited through hours of testimony and questioning, and lined the steps and aisles of
meeting chambers to voice their opposition, even as public comment periods were repeatedly delayed and rescheduled by the commission. On that Thursday evening – perhaps because of exhaustion after months of long meetings or confusion about which meetings would include crucial decisions and which would simply consist of hours of deliberation – the group of protesters was smaller than usual. Mostly women, many of whom had their children with them, listened to several hours of testimony, including the appeals.

Late in the evening, a motion from one commissioner to defer voting on the appeals was quickly rejected by three of the remaining four commissioners, who then rapidly moved to vote on, and then defeat, all of the appeals. As the first appeal was voted down and the second brought up to vote, a group of women approached the bench. “I have a statement to make,” one woman said. Despite commissioners and staff members attempting to interrupt her, clustering around her and telling her that it was not the time for public comment, this individual – the director of one of the appealing associations and one of the organizers of the protests against the Santolina development – staunchly proceeded to read her statement in a loud but quivering voice. Gaining volume, even as tears ran down her face, she reiterated her opposition to the development, concluding:

We have tolerated a great amount of disrespect and antagonistic attitudes and behaviors exhibited towards us… We have been wrongly categorized as anti-growth, disorganized, and dramatic… We are at a loss. What more can we say or submit that would have the power to allow you to hear us? … We are asking each of you to respect the community who has every right to partake in decisions that dictate the future of our county, our city, and our state… This is why we’re here before you so that maybe you can listen to us. We don’t know what else we can say.
Surrounded by other opponents, many of whom were also in tears, the speaker defiantly stared at the commission. After a long silence, the commission quietly resumed voting, eventually denying all three appeals even as the group of protestors chanted: “Shame, shame, shame!”

---

In this chapter, I reflect on the question at the heart of this protester’s statement: “What can we say that would allow you to hear us?” Over the course of months of planning, protesting, and attending meetings, opponents to the Santolina development continually echoed versions of this question: Why won’t they hear us? Why can’t they understand us? What can we say to make them listen? Organizers were often disheartened and exhausted by their sense that their thoughtful reasons for opposing the development fell on the deaf ears of those in authority. Time and again, individuals wondered why, when the commission’s meeting chambers were filled to standing room with protestors to the development and no one but the developers themselves appeared to voice support for the project, did the plan continue to move inexorably forward?

Opposition to the Santolina development has constituted a major recent political project of acequeros and their allies in the South Valley of Albuquerque, mobilizing them to contest the logics and mechanisms of water use decision-making in their neighborhood. In this chapter, I explore the ways that Santolina protesters experienced a specific kind of inability to be heard. Placing these experiences within a current environment of postcolonial neoliberal government, I point to specific technologies of power over water use decision-making that create these experiences. Through the lens of encounters between Santolina opponents, developers, and city and county officials in
meetings, protests, and the media, I trace the ways that protesters’ concerns are not only
dematerialized and depoliticized, but also subject to a recurring dislocation in time and
place that continually positions them outside of the space where water use decisions are
made. I describe a process of “chronotopic marginalization” that functions to displace
undesirable participants from the decision-making process while preserving an
appearance of neutrality and accessibility. I suggest that the logic behind chronotopic
marginalization echoes the knowledge architecture of melancholia that obscures the
concerns of Nuevomexicano communities in the present, which I described in the
previous chapter. I also show how the experience of chronotopic marginalization
produces feelings of impotence, hopelessness, and paranoia that make it difficult for
opposition to dominant frameworks of water use to persist.

The endurance of subaltern and oppositional ways of life has been posed by the
anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) as an urgent question for scholars. Povinelli
describes a moment in the trajectory of alternative and subaltern social projects between
potentiality and actuality, where new possibilities of life emerge. She asks: “How do new
forms of social life maintain the force of existing in specific social spacings of life? How
do they endure the effort it takes to strive to persevere” (9)? This chapter responds to
Povinelli’s question by investigating the deliberative process over water use in general
and the Santolina development in particular as one of the social spacings of life that
acequeros’ alternative social project of water use must endure in order to survive. By
investigating the specific ways that the persistence of acequia ethics and practice is
challenged and maintained in the space of the Santolina planning process, this analysis
maps out some of the specific challenges of the terrain on which water conflicts are
taking place in New Mexico, some of which I already indicated in Chapter 2. At the same time, it offers a deeper understanding of how alternative social projects and ways of life are countered and threatened by the technologies of postcolonial neoliberal governance, which is characterized by official anti-racism and equal representation, along with ideologies of market-based exchange and personal responsibility.

**Santolina/“Sand”olina**

Originally part of the approximately 80,000 acre Atrisco land grant, the swath of land that the proposed Santolina master planned community is poised to occupy has a long history of shifting ownership and failed development. In 1969, after various land sales had reduced the size of the land grant to about 55,000 acres, several of the heirs of the Atrisco grant formed the Westland Development Company to manage the land, despite a state Supreme Court struggle with the Town of Atrisco, which attempted to refuse to transfer title (Metzcar n.d.). The real estate developer SunCal bought the land in 2007 with the backing of a New York hedge fund, but the bankruptcy the following year of one of the company’s lenders, Lehman Brothers, brought development to a standstill (Wei 2010). In 2010, another lender – Barclays – foreclosed on the land and set up an entity called Western Albuquerque Land Holdings LLC (WALH) to develop and make it profitable (Provost and Bienvenu 2015). The Santolina community is one of WALH’s first major plans to develop the area.

Though the development will be privately owned and built, the planning process involves a series of hearings with different governmental entities. First, the plan was presented to the Bernalillo County Planning Commission (CPC), which approved it in December of 2014 with a number of conditions, including limits on the amount of water
that could be used and the stipulation that the extension of roads and other public utilities to the development be completed at no expense to the county. The plan was then put before the Bernalillo County Commission in a number of different stages. At the first stage, the “Level A” Master Plan was approved by the County Commission with a 3-2 vote in June 2015. Hearings of the “Level B” plan, which includes more details on property boundaries and transportation systems, were held throughout 2016. In November 2016, the Bernalillo County Commission approved the use of tax increment development districts (TIDDs) to reimburse the developers for the cost of public amenities with future tax revenue by the same 3-2 vote margin. The County Commission expects to conduct hearings to approve or deny the Level B plan in 2017.

The completed Santolina development is projected to rival the size of Las Cruces, New Mexico’s second-largest city, and is potentially just one of a series of similar developments along the west side of Albuquerque. These would add considerably to the already sprawling developments to the northwest of Albuquerque, including the city of Rio Rancho, which – like Santolina – grew from a former Spanish land grant into an Albuquerque housing development before finally being incorporated into a separate municipality in 1981. Similarly, the area of Albuquerque known as the “West Side” (i.e., west of the Río Grande) has grown speedily in recent decades, marked by privately-owned, densely-constructed, “master planned” communities like Santolina. Despite data indicating that current growth in the Albuquerque metro area is exceedingly slow – only 0.1% between July 2013 and July 2014 (Provost and Bienvenu 2015) – Santolina proponents claim that the planned 38,000 new homes, along with retail and office space, schools, and open spaces, are desperately needed to accommodate future population
growth. For example, in an open editorial to the *Albuquerque Journal*, Art de la Cruz, one of the three County Commissioners who has consistently voted in favor of the development, argued that “growth is inevitable” and that, “It is foolhardy to believe that the state’s most populous county will not continue to grow” (De la Cruz 2015). While opponents have urged County Commissioners to spend their time considering other kinds of development, like infill of existing city property, the Santolina developers repeatedly seek to deemphasize the choice between Santolina and other possible development activities by depicting the Santolina proposal as nothing more than an opportunity for the county to engage in proactive planning. Santolina proponents have been quick to assure the commissioners and the media that any number of changes can be made to the development design at an appropriate time in the future, insisting that for the time being, the development is “just” a plan. In fact, during a roundtable discussion about the project that was televised on a local station, one of the developers commented that whether any building actually occurs is “immaterial;” it is simply important to plan ahead (New Mexico In Focus, a Production of KNME-TV 2017).

Opposition to the development originated in the early meetings of the Bernalillo CPC from residents of the South Valley of Albuquerque, the future neighbors of the development. One early opponent related to me how individual challengers to the project, including representatives from South Valley neighborhood associations and acequia associations, as well as a handful of nonprofit organizations focused on environmental and community health issues, noticed their common cause and began to work together, eventually forming a group called *Contra Santolina* (Against Santolina) that now organizes the majority of the opposition to the development. While some opponents point
to the numbers indicating a slowing of growth in Bernalillo County, they largely focus
their arguments on the question of “smart growth,” depicting Santolina as an example of
outdated, poorly-planned urban sprawl and calling it a “zombie development” – an
optimistic housing project that will end up half-built and mostly abandoned, like other
community plans such as the Mesa del Sol development in Albuquerque, which remains
incomplete and severely under-populated nearly ten years after building began.
Throughout the hearing process, opponents to the development have continually filled
meetings wearing bright yellow T-shirts that read, “Santolina, WTF? What’s the Future?”
Public comment periods have been dominated with their concerns, which range from the
preservation of open spaces to the potential for massive un-accommodated increases in
traffic to the dubious veracity of developers’ claims about the numbers of new jobs that
the development will create. In these ways, resistance to Santolina shares in larger U.S.
anxieties about the prospect of foreclosed homes and empty communities gutted by the
2008 financial crisis and recession.

However, opponents’ most consistent concern about Santolina is water, of which
the completed development will require an estimated twelve million gallons a day to
supply thousands of new residents, businesses, and parks. On their Facebook group,
Contra Santolina members describe themselves as “a coalition of organizations, leaders,
and community members in Albuquerque committed to defend water, our most precious
resource.” They have organized rallies around County Commission meetings and draped
signs that read “Santolina Sucks Water” off an overpass near the County Commission
chambers. In the summer of 2015, just before the Level A Master Plan was approved,
protesters staged a march through downtown Albuquerque led by three farmers driving
tractors and holding signs saying, “*El Agua es Vida*” (“Water is Life”), “*El agua no se vende, el agua se defiende*” (“Water is not sold, water is defended”), “Farmers Say No,” and “Rural/Urban Unite” (Figure 2). While the tractor march was the most well-attended protest, Contra Santolina members continue to show up reliably at County Commission hearings, such as a Halloween-themed action in late 2016 where protestors appeared in the commission chamber wearing zombie costumes and holding signs printed with the slogan, “Don’t be a Santolina Zombie.”

![Figure 2. Tractors march through downtown Albuquerque to protest the Santolina development](image)

**Paper Water and Wet Water; Water Authority and Water Expertise**

From the beginning, the debate over the Santolina development has continually revolved around the issue of water. As Rosa, one of the leaders of the Contra Santolina group, explained to me, no one had originally believed that the project was feasible
because of the amount of water required to support it. During the early hearings of the CPC, she related, “Even the chairman [of the CPC] was asking, ‘Well, where’s the water gonna come from?’ They were even asking it themselves. They knew, everybody in the South Valley [knew]… the situation with water,” meaning the state’s condition of intense water shortage. However, in July 2014, WALH developers presented a letter from the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority (ABCWUA) stating that the Water Authority had the capacity to serve the proposed development. Individuals involved with the County Commission hearing process later debated what exactly the letter really meant – did “capacity” mean that there was enough available water to supply Santolina or did it simply mean that the ABCWUA infrastructure was capable of serving Santolina? The executive director of the ABCWUA later clarified in a hearing that the Water Authority had not committed to serve the new development but had simply stated that they could, as long as the development met all the required policies and ordinances, including stringent water conservation requirements. Nonetheless, Rosa recalled, the ABCWUA letter “changed the entire game.” She commented, “We all, I think most of the citizens in this state know we’re in a drought. But ever since the Water Authority came out with that letter that basically says that they can provide the water for the developers, water was no longer an issue.”

Despite the letter, opponents insist that the idea that there is enough water to supply the new development is laughable. These concerns are voiced prominently by members of the South Valley’s acequias. In an article on the New Mexico Acequia Association (NMAA) website (J. Garcia n.d.), South Valley mayordomo Jorge Garcia outlines acequieros’ concerns in detail. Regardless of the Water Authority’s assurance of
supply, he explains, projections from the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District (MRGCD) and the Middle Rio Grande Council of Governments (MRCOG) suggest that the Santololina development could severely overtax the water supply allocated by the San Juan/Chama water diversion, which provides both irrigation and municipal water to Albuquerque. This could result in the draining of existing wells and the aquifer. Not only would such an event deplete the water supply for acequias, Garcia also concludes that developers might seek to “acquire and ‘retire’ existing water rights” (J. Garcia n.d.) from South Valley acequias. This concern appeared to perplex the county commissioners, who asked NMAA Executive Director Paula Garcia to explain the acequias’ resistance to the development at a hearing in early 2015. Executive Director Garcia stated that historically, developers and industrialists looking for water rights in New Mexico have often targeted the acequias, seeking to buy up acequia water rights or acquire them by proving that they had been misused or abandoned. Acequieros maintain that such tactics have led to significant losses in traditional acequia water rights in urban areas like Albuquerque and Santa Fe.

Despite developers’ vociferous protestations that they are not interested in acquiring acequia water rights and that surface water rights in fact have nothing to do with municipal water supply, opponents continue to insist on the discrepancy between the “paper” water that the developers claim will be available in theory and the “wet” water that actually exists for use. Startlingly, while water is purportedly a central element in the decision-making process over Santolina, the question of the very existence of millions of gallons of it remains unanswered, while those involved in the debate fundamentally disagree over who has the knowledge and authority to answer it. Rosa explained, “But the
question still remains: they to date haven’t shown where they will get the water. It’s one thing to say, ‘Here’s my paper water for you,’ but then you know what we say, right? People who have knowledge [say], ‘Well, where’s the wet water behind it?’ We’re the ones that have the water rights, right? In the Valley.’” Rosa underlined her belief that acequia users were the real experts on water, saying, “We know as people who work with acequias and the farmers and people who irrigate, we know where the water would come from, because we understand more of how the water system works in New Mexico, which is a very complex process.”

In addition to asserting their particular knowledge about water, Santolina protesters also argue that while the Water Authority may literally be the “authority” on water, it has no real expertise, pointing out that the board of the Water Authority is made up of city councilors, three of the same county commissioners deciding on Santolina, and the city mayor, none of whom have any notable experience in hydrology, conservation, or other fields related to water. The composition of the board has long been a source of contention for acequia organizers, who have unsuccessfully petitioned the state legislature to make board membership an elected, rather than appointed, position. As Rosa related to me, the business community, including the Santolina developers, “came out full force” against those efforts.

While the developers and pro-Santolina commissioneres express confidence in the Water Authority’s determination about water availability, it was strikingly clear during several of the County Commission hearings in 2015 that the commissioners did not fully understand the water issues at stake. During the public comment period of one hearing, when Executive Director Garcia from the NMAA stood up to voice her opposition to
Santolina, Commissioner Debbie O’Malley – also a Water Authority board member – requested that Garcia be exempted from the five minute allotment for public comment so that O’Malley could ask her a number of detailed questions about water rights and the relationship between the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District and the Water Authority. Similarly, O’Malley and another commissioner interrupted the public comment period a second time to question an environmental engineer who joined the public opposition to the development about the difference between surface water rights and groundwater rights. Though both Garcia and the environmental engineer were not present at the hearing in an official capacity but only as members of the public opposed to the development, their knowledge about water rights was apparently novel to the commissioners. The three pro-Santolina commissioners remained content to rely on the word of the Water Authority, and in fact made a show of talking to one another and wandering in and out of the commission chambers during public comment; however, the other two commissioners were clearly troubled by their lack of understanding of the complexities introduced by other water experts who had not been consulted or acknowledged.

For their part, the acequia organizers protesting Santolina expressed frustration that the complexities of water usage were not being considered. Time and again, they attempted to contrast their own expertise against the developers’ clear but unelaborated assertion of water availability by spelling out layers of detail about the implications of Santolina for the water system. For example, Rosa tried to explain:

The [Water] Authority would have to retire [acequia] water rights or they would have to pump more from the river; either option is terrible. And if you pump more from the river, we know what’s going to happen to the aquifer and water table –
so it drops, what happens to the wells that we all depend on? So all these secondary complications and impacts are not being analyzed at all. At all! Nothing! We are the ones that are bringing it up but you would think that it would be part of their analysis and it’s not.

Despite protestors’ demands that developers explain where the water for Santolina will come from and how it will affect the aquifer, wells, and acequias, the developers have declined to directly counter the arguments made by opponents. When pressed about the complexities of the water system, along with the uncertainties introduced by drought conditions, the Santolina developers have continually indicated that the Level A and Level B hearing processes are not the appropriate place or time to deal with such details and insist that water issues will be resolved at some point in the future. Shortly before the Level A Master Plan was approved, Rosa expressed exasperation at this way of thinking:

Why approve it now and then look at those things later? This is what I told County yesterday because they were telling me the same thing: “This is just Master Plan A, you know? All those discussions will come later.” I said, “But it seems to be that the more phases it goes through, the harder it is to stop it.” And the [WALH] lawyer’s sitting there shaking his head at me. I’m like, “You know, I’m not some idiot.”

Notably, Rosa’s comment points to a dynamic that has characterized the entire hearing process. Repeatedly, Santolina supporters and opponents have been at odds over the decision-making process itself – specifically, the appropriate time and place for decisions to be made. This tension made itself felt early in 2015 before the approval of the Level A plan, when one member of the County Commission, Art de la Cruz, published an editorial in favor of the Santolina project (De la Cruz 2015). Opponents were enraged, arguing that the hearing process was “quasi-judicial,” meaning that the commissioners were to act as neutral arbiters of the evidence in favor of and against the
Santolina development. Protestors complained that they had been refused access to the commissioners by county staff for months previously with the understanding that the commissioners were not allowed to discuss the matter with constituents before the hearing. They insisted that de la Cruz had compromised the decision-making process by making his opinion known before hearings had been completed. Protestors’ fury was directed particularly at the fact that de la Cruz’s district includes the South Valley, speculating that he was in the pocket of the developers and demanding that he recuse himself from the hearing process. During the protest preceding the Level A hearing, activists constructed a piñata filled with lemons, peanuts, sand, and fake $100 bills with de la Cruz’s face on them to signify that the development was “a lemon” that was both metaphorically and literally “built on sand,” for which the county was being paid “peanuts” and which was providing potentially illusory profits to de la Cruz and other supporters. At the hearing, the county commissioners and staff admitted that there had been some confusion about whether the hearings were quasi-judicial or rather “legislative” – meaning that the commissioners were allowed to favor a particular outcome – and the two commissioners who were most sympathetic to the protestors, O’Malley and Maggie Hart Stebbins, voiced concern that constituents’ perspectives had not been heard. Nonetheless, the dispute was chalked up to a misunderstanding and the hearing went forward as planned.

As hearings continued throughout the spring and summer of 2015, they became the sites of an ongoing struggle over the appropriate time and order for public comment. When the tractor-led march through downtown Albuquerque brought more than one hundred opponents to the Level A hearing to participate in the public comment period,
the preliminary parts of the hearing dragged on throughout the afternoon and late into the evening as attendees trickled away without having expressed their opinions. An attempt by O’Malley and Stebbins to move the public comment period up in the agenda so that participants could have the opportunity to speak was voted down by the other three commissioners and the public comment was eventually rescheduled for the middle of the next day, requiring many opponents to miss a second day of work to attend. The pattern of delaying or rescheduling public comment was repeated several times throughout 2015 and 2016. At one hearing, opponents covered their mouths with duct tape to express their outrage at the sense that they were being deliberately silenced.

For their part, the three pro-Santolina commissioners appeared to grow increasingly frustrated with what they saw as the protesters illegitimately taking issue with the hearing process itself. In his own editorial in favor of the development in the *Albuquerque Journal*, commissioner Wayne Johnson (2015) stated, “It’s said when you have the facts argue the facts. When you have the law argue the law. If you don’t have either, argue the process.” Developers continued to complain that demands for proof of the availability of “wet” water for the development were not appropriate for the plan that was under consideration and would be adequately addressed much later in the planning process. The editorial board of the *Journal* backed up the commissioners and developers, claiming that opponents were spreading drama and creating a “too-emotional process,” recommending that the county should “take a time-out from the marches and play money stunts to shame officials” (*Albuquerque Journal* 2015) in favor of gathering facts.

In this hostile context, theories about possible hidden profit motives on the part of the developers and commissioners, backdoor deals, and shadowy national and
international influences proliferated among Santolina opponents. A particularly prominent but unsubstantiated theory centered on the possibility that Barclays bank, which had foreclosed on the Santolina land, was secretly interested in obtaining undisclosed but potentially numerous surface water rights to sell. Others theorized that the Santolina developers were not interested in building a development at all, but merely in acquiring development rights to sell off to real estate investors. At one hearing, a protestors circulated a printout with information about the China Water Investment Group Corporation with text at the bottom that read: “HAS NEW MEXICO WATER BEEN SOLD TO THE CHINESE?? IS CHINA VESTED IN THE WESTERN ALBUQUERQUE LAND HOLDINGS SANTOLINA PROJECT?” In the summer of 2016, opponents’ felt that their fears of corrupt dealings between the county commissioners and the developers were substantiated when Commissioner O’Malley accused the developers of trying to buy influence on the commission by donating to a political action committee that was backing a pro-Santolina County Commission candidate. With such suspicions circulating among opponents, protestors at County Commission hearings sometimes grew agitated, yelling, “Who are you working for?” or “Who paid you off?” at various participants in the hearing process.

It was in this context that the frustrated protester at the beginning of this chapter fought back tears as she argued against the repeated depictions of her cause as “anti-growth” and “dramatic.” She attempted once again to refute representations of opponents to the development as paranoid, overly emotional, hostile to change and to outsiders, and disconnected from the realities of municipal growth. Ultimately, she pleaded with the County Commissioners to simply hear her.
Postcolonial Neoliberal Governance and Water Use Decision-Making

Notably absent from the debate over the Santolina development has been any real discussion of racial or socioeconomic dynamics. While individual protestors have complained of racism on the part of the developers and commissioners, there has been very little public recognition that the South Valley of Albuquerque, which will likely be most impacted by the water use, traffic patterns, and potential shifts in economic opportunity resulting from the future Santolina development, is also home to the city’s largest percentage of poor and non-white citizens. The lack of consideration of this fact is likely due in part to Commissioner de la Cruz’s support for the development. Throughout the hearing process, de la Cruz has taken multiple opportunities to narrate his own childhood in the South Valley as the son of working-class Nuevomexicanos and has insisted that he has the best interests of the South Valley at heart in his decisions about Santolina. Additionally, the developers have been anxious to demonstrate their concern for minorities and the working class. For example, during a discussion of the numbers of jobs that Santolina was required to create during the first years of development in order to continue building, Commissioner Stebbins voiced concern that so many of the predicted jobs were construction work, as those are temporary positions and would not contribute to long-term economic development. Both Commissioner de la Cruz and one of the developers’ lawyers responded with almost comical indignation, asserting that construction is good and dignified work, that de la Cruz’s own father had supported their family with a construction job, and that they would not allow construction workers to be denigrated. Though Stebbins attempted to explain that she had not meant to imply that construction jobs were of lesser value, her point about Santolina’s promises of lasting
economic opportunity was completely lost in the resulting discussion of de la Cruz’s and the developers’ qualifications as defenders of the working class.

Similarly, the gendered dimensions of the Santolina conflict have gone completely unmarked, even though well over half of the development’s opponents, including the Contra Santolina leadership, are women. Interestingly, the county commissioners have also consistently split along gender lines, with the three male commissioners voting reliably for the development, while the remaining two female commissioners have not only voted against it but also expressed some of the same concerns as the Santolina opponents regarding the fairness of the hearing process. This quality of the conflict was particularly poignant at the hearing described in the beginning of this chapter when women and children clustered around the protestor reading her statement and comforted her as she wept. Nonetheless, no attempt has been made by either side to address these very apparent gendered divisions. Rather, the hearing process has often implicitly aggravated these divisions, as the Santolina opponents have been consistently labeled with negatively feminized qualities, such as paranoid, melodramatic, and overly emotional. Such labels have been used to dematerialize and depoliticize opponents legitimate concerns as frivolous fictions.

These rhetorical maneuvers around race, class, and gender are characteristic of the logics that dominate contemporary methods of governance. As scholars of such methods have shown (Markell 2003; Melamed 2011; Povinelli 2002; Winant 2001), current postcolonial neoliberal rationalities of governance – both in New Mexico (Guthrie 2013; Rodríguez 1989) and globally – highlight an official stance of anti-racism, multiculturalism, and gender equality that purports to value racial and gender difference
and to deliberate among them with neutrality. In fact, scholars have shown that this
stance serves to both reinforce and conceal the persistent racial and gendered dimensions
of inequality. Moreover, this regime of governance constrains the terms under which
groups can make political claims by foreclosing racial, socioeconomic, and gendered
subject positions, and absolves the neoliberal state of blame for the harms that continue to
befall racially, socioeconomically, and sexually marginalized citizens. In the case of
Santolina, the official anti-racism and multiculturalism of the County Commission, of
which de la Cruz’s self-positioning as a representative of the Nuevomexicano working
class is an example, has made it nearly impossible for Santolina opponents to protest the
development in racial or socioeconomic terms. De la Cruz appeared to actively work to
deflect this possibility as he made a show of aggressively questioning the Water
Authority about the availability of water and then announcing to the public that he was
satisfied as a member of the South Valley community that water would not be an issue,
repeatedly invoking his own heritage as evidence of his good faith. The developers and
commissioners have thus been able to deflect the possibility that opponents might be seen
as representatives of a predominantly poor and non-white community that is being
negatively affected by a privatized and lucrative venture backed by international capital.
Similarly, no one has even attempted to broach gender as a possible dimension of the
conflict, despite clear examples of gendered power relations like the composition of the
county commission itself, as well as the politicized use of implicitly gendered accusations
of drama, irrationality, and emotionality against protestors.

In this context, protestors have attempted to base their arguments against the
Santolina development primarily on claims about their superior knowledge of the water
system. Over more than two years of deliberations, Santolina opponents have collected maps of the water system and graphs of water usage, cited climate studies, crafted lawsuits, recruited journalists from major publications like *The Guardian*, produced letters from hydrologists, engineers, urban planners, and community health specialists, and persistently attended every meeting and hearing. Yet, as the protestors at the beginning of this chapter expressed, their work appears to fall on deaf ears. Each time some element of the Santolina plan comes up for a vote, it passes by the same 3-2 vote margin. At the same time, protestors are bewildered by repeated demands, like those from Commissioner Johnson and the editorial board of the *Albuquerque Journal*, that they “get the facts,” when they feel that they have presented nothing but facts.

Crucially, in a neoliberal and officially anti-racist context, the debate over Santolina is only apparently about expertise. In reality, the developers’ and pro-Santolina commissioners’ ongoing refusal to engage with the data presented by protestors is not based on claims that their expertise on the water system is necessarily invalid, but that it is simply not the right time or place for it to be considered. Each time they make this type of claim, the developers and commissioners articulate an imaginary of a specific fusing of space and time – what M.M. Bakhtin (1981) called a “chronotope” – where the facts will be reviewed, all parties will be heard, and fair and rational decisions will be made. The literary concept of the “chronotope” describes a narrative moment in which “spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole” (84). A chronotope is thus a specific envelope of space and time that is evoked discursively. In the context of Texas country music, the ethnomusicologist Aaron Fox (2004) describes the chronotope as an imaginative alignment of particular places, moments in time, and
subjectivities. Similarly, the imaginary of a proper forum for fair and impartial water use decisions that county commissioners and Santolina developers continually evoked includes this same overlap of time, space, and subjectivity. The temporal dimension includes both specific moments (e.g., public comment periods, specific hearings, appointments with commissioners) and more abstract temporal concepts (e.g., “at the proper time,” “when we have the facts,” “when the time comes”). At the same time, these moments were described as occurring only in specific physical places (e.g., hearing chambers, commissioners’ offices) – places that were in theory open to the public and yet were often difficult for individuals to successfully access. To align within these spatial and temporal dimensions was to be one of an imagined set of actors (e.g., public servants, concerned citizens) who are imbued with the right and ability to participate in and actually influence water use decision-making processes. The envelope in which these times, spaces, and subjectivities intersected constituted a chronotope where participants imagined that their voices would be heard.

In the Santolina hearing process, this chronotope was repeatedly narrated. Instances of its narration include the developers’ insistence that if it turns out that there is not enough water for the development, then the plans will be revised, as well as commissioners’ assertions that there is an appropriate forum for public comments to be heard and recorded. For Santolina opponents and supporters alike, these statements are predicated on belief in the existence of a real space and time where the amount of available “wet” water will constitute a real influence on the design of the development and members of the public will become full participants in the decision-making process. However, as these comments also indicate, the most significant fact about this chronotope
is that aspiring participants are perpetually displaced from it, both spatially and temporally. It is always in the past or in the future or someplace else; it is never here and now. Throughout the confusion over the quasi-judicial or legislative nature of the deliberative process, along with the repeated delaying and rescheduling of hearings, votes, and public comment periods, protestors have felt that they are literally never on time or in the right place to influence the decision-making process. Crucial decisions have always either already been made when opponents were absent, excluded, or unaware, or they are projected to occur at some future but indefinite time. The debate over de la Cruz’s decision to publicly support the development in the *Albuquerque Journal* is a vivid example: de la Cruz insisted that constituents had been welcome to make their feelings known at any point preceding the hearing process, but opponents claimed that when they had tried to access the commissioners, they had been turned away. In this case, the spacetime during which de la Cruz had presumably assessed and weighed the positions of his constituents and made a corresponding decision had already passed, while his constituents were unaware. Though they attempted to redress this wrong by demanding that de la Cruz recuse himself, the whole issue was chalked up to a misunderstanding. In this way, opponents experienced a continual sense of dislocation and deferral, making the spacetime of deliberation and decision-making into a chronotope from which they were continually marginalized.

During my observation of the protests and hearing process, I often experienced this sense of dislocation myself. More than once, despite my best efforts to triangulate scheduling information from the Bernalillo County website with Facebook events from protestors, I ended up missing hearings where public comment was allowed or crucial
votes were held. Other times, I found myself sitting through hours of deliberation over only peripherally-related matters when I had expected to witness decisions being made. Twice, I walked into the commission chambers to discover that no one was there at all. One evening, when a public comment period was moved up by several hours, I watched opponents around me desperately attempt to rally absent participants using Twitter, Facebook, and text messages. Along with Santolina opponents, I was left with the distinct sense that urgently important decisions were being made but that they were always being made somewhere else and some other time.

Significantly, I also had the distinct feeling that my failures to access the decision-making process were no one’s fault but my own: I had not researched the hearing process carefully enough, I had not been committed enough to show up at all of the hearings, I had scheduled something that conflicted with the most important meeting. While these self-recriminations may well have sometimes been true in my own case, there is a core group of Santolina protestors that shows up consistently and tirelessly and yet, are left with the same sense of having missed the crucial place and moment when minds were made up and votes were cast, with no one to blame but themselves. After the hearing described at the beginning of this chapter, one of the protestors lamented the small turnout of opponents on her personal blog, wondering, “When did we stop caring?” In fact, this is also an integral characteristic of the chronotope of decision-making evoked during the Santolina the hearing process. Not only its existence, but also its accessibility is a matter of dogma – all the participants in the process are compelled to believe that there is (or will be, or has been) a publicly-accessible spacetime where they can participate in decisions being made; therefore, involvement in it is a matter of individual,
personal responsibility, rather than a function of power.\textsuperscript{10}

Scholars working in myriad ethnographic contexts, including New Mexico, have richly documented the ways that neoliberal governmentality differentiates citizens – especially indigenous people and other groups who have been historically marginalized or victimized by the state – in part by imbuing them with a temporal dimension that shifts the moment of their injury into the past (e.g., Barker 2011; Brown 1995; Cattelino 2010; Clifford 1988; Muehlmann 2009; Povinelli 2011). Povinelli (2011) calls this technology of governance a “narrative maneuver of time and other” (50) that views certain citizens from a “temporal horizon of a future perspective: a future from whose perspective their present suffering has already been mourned and buried” (61). Similarly, Kregg Hetherington (2011) has documented the way in which Paraguayan government officials employ discourses of transparency and rationality in order not to deny injustice, but simply to “[reposition] it in relation to the present” (96). The chronotope that emerged discursively during the Santolina hearings to encompass the space, time, and subjects involved in making water use decisions also functions to re-locate the perspective from which opponents are viewed – as alternately too precipitous in their concerns about water or resentful over decisions that have already been made. Crucially, both perspectives depict protestors as illogical, governed by emotion, and thus incapable of participating in the rationalities of the official, supposedly neutral and agreed-upon procedures of water

\textsuperscript{10} Interestingly, the slipperiness of “access” has recently gained more public attention in the context of health care reform after the election of President Donald Trump. This is exemplified by Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders’ argument during the January 2017 confirmation hearing of Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price that, “‘Has access to’ does not mean that they [Americans] are guaranteed health care. I have access to buying a $20 million home. I don’t have money to do that” (CNN 2017). Similarly, citizens are promised that they have access to participation in the deliberative process – if they can find it.
use decision-making. In this way, the simultaneous evocation and displacement of this chronotope becomes a technology of marginalization.

I argue that like the narrative maneuvers of time described by other scholars, these maneuvers of chronotopic dislocation are equally central to the contemporary regime of official anti-racism and equal representation that structures water governance in New Mexico and throughout the country. They are in fact more effective in marginalizing the perspectives of undesirable others (i.e., individuals and communities who contest the dominance of market-based logics of water consumption and conservation), because they do not depend on existing narratives about the racial or gender identities of particular citizens and are not limited to casting the sources of their complaints into the past. Instead, chronotopic marginalization functions fluidly, capable of shifting crucial decisions into the horizons of both a past and a future perspective, while also effectively excluding any undesirable participants – not only women and racially and socioeconomically marginalized Others, but allies and scholars like myself. In this sense, chronotopic marginalization is an ideal technology of officially anti-racist and equally representative governance as it does not need to distinguish between types of citizens to exclude.

Crucially, the use of chronotopic marginalization is equally effective at allowing those in power to disassociate themselves from any marginalization that may occur. As Wendy Brown (1995) has argued, the regime of official anti-racism and recognition “casts the law in particular and the state more generally as neutral arbiters of injury rather than as themselves invested with the power to injure” (27). Dislocation from the spacetime of water use decision-making functions similarly to shift blame away from
those in power, as well as to make the exclusions of some parties impossible to redress. When the exclusion has occurred in the past, it is always unintentional; when it is predicted to occur in the future, those in power assure citizens that they may participate as long as they are responsible enough to do so in the appropriate manner. In this way, any blame for the exclusions that occur is either placed on the heads of the excluded or diffused as an unfortunate accident.

In this context, the pro-Santolina commissioners became impatient with what they viewed as protestors irrationally taking issue with “the process.” Both the commissioners and the press continued to depict the commission as a neutral arbiter while rendering the development’s opponents as a disorganized group of malcontents who were stuck in the past, paranoid, and disconnected from reality. De la Cruz (2015) commented that “some folks just do not want any growth, period.” In fact, the frustration engendered in protestors by their continual marginalization sometimes manifested in the kinds of emotional outbursts and paranoid theories that Santolina proponents used to characterize them. Such theories, which circled around backroom dealings and participants being paid off to support the development, eloquently articulated protestors’ feelings of dislocation and confusion as they cast around for explanations for their exclusion. In this context, it is easy to understand the emotional words of the protestor described at the beginning of this chapter, who finally decided to actually disrupt the process, sobbing through her insistence that she was not being dramatic, imploring the commission: “What more can we say or submit that would have the power to allow you to hear us?”

Finally, in addition to frustration, anger, and paranoia, protestors also felt exhausted. This emotion is eloquently articulated by the blog post of the protester who
stood up to confront the commissioners: “When did we stop caring?” In the end, this exhaustion is perhaps the most important effect of the chronotopic marginalization I have described. Each experience of displacement, which feels like – but cannot be proved to be – deliberate exclusion, serves to leach energy from the wills of protestors. Povinelli (2011) calls experiences like these “quasi-events” – mundane hardships that “resist cause-effect characterization” (144). Such quasi-events serve both to “aggregate harm in such a way that its ethical and political demand is dispersed and dissipated” (30) and to subject victims to “the violence of enervation, the weakening of the will rather than the killing of life” (132). I suggest that quasi-events are not limited to the material hardships that Povinelli describes, though plenty of Santolina opponents experienced those as well, such as the mundane difficulties of getting transportation to the county commission chambers or finding time to attend a hearing in the middle of a workday. Further, the maneuvers of chronotopic marginalization enacted by the commissioners and developers are also emotional quasi-events. While never registering as truly violent or unjust, quasi-events such as delayed public comment periods, deferrals of important issues to some indefinite future, and the related consistent, low-level hum of scorn and impatience from the government officials and developers who govern the process effectively discourage and disorient protestors without providing them an object of clear blame. Their primary effect is the building-up of frustration, not only with the decision-making process but within protestors themselves, as they self-recriminate and question their own commitment to explain their failure to access the spacetime where important decisions are made. Nor do they operate purely along racial, socioeconomic, or gender lines, though their effects intersect with and reinforce these structures of marginalization. These
emotional quasi-events thus protect and shore up the dominant logics of postcolonial neoliberal governance simply by making it consistently difficult, emotionally and physically exhausting, for opposition to those logics to persist.

**Enduring Chronotopic Marginalization**

Ultimately, while the Santolina opponents have felt frustrated, powerless, and exhausted at many points throughout the hearing process, they are also aware that it is in the quasi-events of the deliberative process that the conflict will be won or lost. At one point during the summer of 2015, I asked Diego – another organizer of the Contra Santolina group – what was going to happen next. He replied,

> Well, we go to hearing on Monday and we will raise our objections and we'll see if any of the three commissioners that have been voting us down may change their mind. However I'm not optimistic that they will. I foresee that, but that's been part of our strategy is the resistance rather than victory. From the beginning, recognizing that victory would be a hard deal. But our tactic, our strategy really is resistance, is that if you're gonna do it [the Santolina development], you're gonna pay to do it because we're gonna resist it all the way. And that can be a victory in itself. It's like guerrilla warfare. You just keep resisting until the other side wears out, and that way you really never lose.

Crucially, as Diego described, quasi-events can be a tool of resistance as well as a strategy of governance. As I describe in the next chapter, acequia organizing in the South Valley specifically has been characterized by persistence in guerrilla-like tactics, not only to resist incursion from government and industry on existing acequia water rights, but even to reclaim rights that had been lost. The opponents of the Santolina development also seek to make the process consistently frustrating and emotionally enervating for the county commissioners and developers as well. The exhaustion of the opponent is the goal for both sides.
So far, this tactic has met with some limited measures of success. For example, on June 1, 2017, after nearly two years of vocal protest from the Contra Santolina community groups, New Mexico Second Judicial District Court judge Nancy Franchini ruled that Santolina opponents were, in fact, unfairly treated by County Commissioner de la Cruz before and during the Level A hearing described in this chapter. Judge Franchini’s decision stated that de la Cruz’s op-ed in favor of the Santolina development had placed his impartiality in question. The decision effectively reversed the zoning amendment and denial of opponent’s appeals that took place during that hearing. The *Albuquerque Journal* editorial board (2017) reluctantly admitted that “it turns out” the opponents were correct in distinguishing between the commission’s legislative and quasi-judicial functions, while complaining that, “It’s a shame a commissioner’s pre-emptive cheerleading has, at least temporarily, hamstrung the project on something other than its merits.”

In this context, it is important to ask not only how alternative social projects and ways of life endure, but how do they endure longer than dominant frameworks? For acequia users and organizers in New Mexico, this question is central to their continuing existence and vitality. The conflict over the Santolina development functions as a lens to illuminate the nature of water struggle in a postcolonial neoliberal environment. The endurance of alternative or oppositional frameworks of water use is rarely explicitly suppressed, but rather is subjected to a process of subtle depoliticization, dematerialization, and dislocation via technologies of governance like the chronotopic marginalization that I have described here, which not only displaces opponents from access to the decision-making process, but also functions to absolve the state from blame.
and turn responsibility for these failures of access back on opponents themselves. This strategy dovetails neatly with existing narratives about Nuevomexicanos’ pathological nostalgia, which also has the effect of invalidating their present concerns. Nonetheless, in this context, acequia users and organizers persist in attempting to produce projects of water use, decision-making, and community formation that often push back against these technologies of governance in both predictable and unpredictable ways, and with varying levels of success. Three of these projects make up the focus of the remaining chapters of this dissertation.
Early on a chilly Saturday morning in March, I pulled into a tiny gas station and convenience store set a little way back along a thickly shaded state highway near the city of Española, an hour and a half drive north of Albuquerque. Jimmy, a retired federal employee, official of the local irrigation district, and mayordomo of a nearby acequia, was waiting for me at the gas station, holding a big mug of coffee from home and chatting with an acquaintance who was filling up his car. Always brisk and business-like, Jimmy hopped into his truck and instructed me to follow him onto a nearby dirt road, closely lined with barely budding trees and drifts of dried leaves, that led back off the highway. I followed Jimmy’s truck down the road, catching glimpses of the dry, leaf-clogged ditch that ran alongside it, marked regularly with little metal gates topped with a wheel that open the ditch into the properties along the road. After about a mile, Jimmy pulled off into a cleared, deeply rutted space that had been made into a makeshift parking lot for about fifteen cars and trucks, many with the long handles of shovels, hoes, and other tools poking out of their beds.

Jimmy and I were team members on a community research project to document the knowledge of mayordomos from different communities around the state with film and interviews. Along with another anthropologist, an acequia organizer from Santa Fe, and a father-daughter team of mayordomos from another community, we went out on day trips to different acequias, carrying little pocket-sized video cameras, and talking to
mayordomos about their experiences and challenges. That day in March, Jimmy and I were meeting a mayordomo named Ernie to see the annual cleaning of the ditch, called the _limpia_. Much discussed and written-about by acequia scholars and devotees (e.g., Crawford 1988), the limpia is supposed to bring together all the _parciantes_ (water users) of an acequia each spring to clean and reinforce it in preparation for the irrigation season to begin. While many acequias require less laborious maintenance than they once did because they have been lined or paved, and others hire day laborers or rent back hoes to clean out the ditch, the limpia remains both a symbol and a still-common practice of the acequia’s communal ethos. Each parciante is supposed to participate in the cleaning effort, either in the form of physical labor or financial contribution to pay workers (known as _peones_), in equal proportion to their share of the water, thus reinforcing both their right and their commitment to the ditch and the community.

As Jimmy, Ernie, and I walked over to the ditch that morning, the limpia was already underway. Ernie’s acequia was still a traditional earthen ditch and about thirty workers – men and boys of all ages and a handful of women – were scooping out the leaves and debris that had filled it over the winter, then deepening and straightening the sides and bottom with shovels. I began to film as Ernie explained that he had another thirty or thirty-five workers cleaning the ditch further up, making sixty workers in total. Jimmy was impressed: “Sixty?! Awesome.” Ernie theorized that the big turnout was because so many people were out of work and looking for a way to make a little bit of money. “I guess because of the way the economy is and stuff,” he said, “we got a big huge response.” Jimmy found one of the signs Ernie posted around the village to advertise the limpia sitting in the back of his truck and held it up for me to film. In hand-
painted black letters on a square piece of particle board, it read:

DITCH CLEANING
SAT. MAR. 19
Call Ernie
[phone number]
Workers needed

Figure 3. Acequeros take a break from cleaning the acequia

The workers were just finishing up the portion of the ditch they had been cleaning and were leaning against the ditch bank, propping their elbows up on the handles of their shovels and drinking from plastic water bottles (Figure 3). “So here we are!” Ernie announced for the camera, “This is a yearly thing, it’s a traditional thing, it’s a cultural thing… We get a good community response, we get community cooperation… we’re farmers, we plant gardens. And we take it real, real serious, the ditch cleaning, and we
enjoy it and we have fun.” We followed as he walked along the ditch, explaining how they organized the cleaning. Ernie’s presentation for the film quickly evolved – as it nearly always does with acequiers – into a detailed technical discussion with Jimmy comparing the width and depth of this acequia with others they had seen and known, how it had and had not stood up to flooding, and the different Spanish terms for portions of work. A few minutes later, Ernie interrupted the discussion to face me again and state, “I got my sons here, he’s [a nearby worker] got his sons here. I even have a grandson here. My uncle was the mayordomo before me. My grandfather was the mayordomo before my uncle. So we have a deep tradition here with this ditch.” Another worker interjected seriously, “A deep history.” Ernie concluded, “And so that’s why we’re still at it… keeping up the land.”

Soon, Jimmy and I had gotten enough footage for our project and Ernie was anxious to get back to work. As I walked back to my car, I paused to talk to one of the workers, who wiped his brow with a bandana and crossed his arms on the top of the ditch bank. “I’ve been doing this ever since I was a youngster.” He said,

My dad used to, I used to go with him to clean the ditches. As I grew older, boy, every year I would look forward to it, money in my pocket, put money in my pocket. And it’s eventually turned into like a traditional, traditional stuff… One of my younger boys is here today with me too and his kids probably will be doing this too, as long as there’s acequias, no? And it’s a good thing. It’s good coming to do the ditches. It’s good for…

He paused, apparently searching for words. Then he gestured to his chest with a work-gloved hand. “Ourselves. It’s good for the heart. It’s good for the character. It’s good for the community.”
When acequeros speak about the ditch, as they did on the day of this limpia in one small community in Northern New Mexico, they speak in layers of practice, ethic, and affect, both historic and contemporary. The ditch and its uses are valued in multiple ways: for its economic potential, for its historic nature, for its ancestral significance, for its emotional resonance, for its ecological benefits, and more. Acequeros’ reflections about the ditch shift fluidly between memories of past experiences, appreciation of the ditch’s sociality, contemplation of its spiritual, physical, and moral benefits, and frank acknowledgement of the opportunity to make a little money. Acequeros assert these valuations interchangeably, even as they may appear disparate or even possibly contradictory.

This chapter investigates this interchangeability of the measure and value of acequias in particular and water more generally. I examine two examples of the differing ways that acequeros stake claims on water based on shifting configurations of acequias’ value. In the first case, acequeros engage in discourses about an ethic of ecological stewardship to combat water management practices by the State Engineer. In the second, acequeros espouse a nuanced understanding of water’s economic value to encourage water users to declare their water rights in a socioeconomically marginalized community. In both examples, as in the vignette at the beginning of this chapter, acequeros’ primary claims about water are also layered with other interchanging understandings of water’s importance. I center these two cases in order to ask: what kinds of publics are produced by shifting and divergent discourses about water’s value, and what kinds of social and political claims are enabled by them? By looking at how acequias actively create meaning rather than function as passive containers for meaning (e.g., Bennett 2010;
Forsyth 2003; Strang 2005; Tsing 2015), I argue that in the same way that water is an “endlessly transmutable” (Strang 2005, 98) substance, acequeros embrace plural and divergent configurations of the acequia’s value, which then form the basis of what I will call “fluid publics.” Drawing on Annemarie Mol and John Law’s (1994) concept of “fluid sociality,” I argue that fluid publics are social spaces that flow like acequias, according to a topography of human relationships. I elucidate the characteristics of these spaces, including variable arrangements of meaning, value, and political actions that constitute a flexible, emergent, precarious, and difficult-to-govern politics of water against and within the logics of postcolonial neoliberal water governance that I described in the previous chapter.

**Publics and Counterpublics**

The concept of the “public,” developed by Jurgen Habermas (1989), Benedict Anderson (1983), and Michael Warner (2002, 2005), describes the way in which social spaces are constituted simply by discourse, rather than by their relationship to the state or any other external entity. According to Warner (2002), other organized groups select participants “by criteria of territory or identity or belief or some other test of membership… A public, however, unites strangers through participation alone” (56). For this reason, publics are both flexible and open-ended, allowing for a changing membership constituted through attention to particular discourses. As individuals hear discourses and recognize themselves as being addressed by them, they become part of the public that those discourses create, a process that Louis Althusser (1971) called “interpellation.” In the context of discourses concerning water, the sociocultural anthropologist Nikhil Anand (2016) has coined the term “hydraulic publics” to define the
social spaces that emerge out negotiations over urban infrastructures of water distribution in Mumbai. While Anand examines the ways that different human efforts and built environments involved in maintaining, delivering, and negotiating over water produce variable configurations of social belonging and citizenship, I describe how discourses about water’s use and value can form the basis of emergent social spaces and politics of water both within and outside the state.

The formation of publics is an act of world-making that has the potential to be both practical and transformative. Warner (2002) explains that this characteristic is a function of the fact that publics entail both “the known” — the real-world context of discourse and its circulation, and “the unknown” — the variety of individuals who might become members in a public through being addressed by it (64). In the case of publics formed by discourses around water, the practical materialities of water user and management interact with the unpredictability of the social spaces that form around those materialities and that may push against or test the limits of established modes of understanding, relating to, and acting on and with water. In these moments, the world-making action of a public may function in opposition to dominant social structures, thus constituting what Warner calls a “counterpublic.” While the counterpublic may appear to possess the qualities of a social movement, Warner cautions that counterpublics only become social movements when “they acquire agency in relation to the state” (89), which requires them to adopt the discursive forms and rationalities of the state. Rather, counterpublics in Warner’s conception operate outside the attention of the state and without coming into direct contact with it.

The discourses around the value and meaning of water and acequia practice that I
analyze in this chapter are public-forming, and thus world-making, activities that may or may not position themselves in relation to the state. As publics, they are mutable in terms of membership and central discourses and yet still coherent as meaningful worlds, as well as potentially oppositional to dominant frameworks of water use, management, and distribution. In the next sections, I describe two different, but intersecting, publics that acequia users and organizers comprise and through which they enact social and political projects around water.

“Active Water Resource Meddling”

In 2012, at an annual gathering of acequia users from around the state organized by the New Mexico Acequia Association (NMAA), called the Congreso de las Acequias (Acequia Congress), the newly-appointed State Engineer was invited to give a keynote speech. At the time of his speech, acequia users and organizers had achieved a number of notable successes in getting acequia water rights recognized and codified in New Mexico law, as I describe in Chapter 1. At the same time, some acequia communities were coming to the end of the long and taxing process of state water rights adjudication. Acequieros in these communities often expressed anger or ambivalence about the adjudication settlements, but also acknowledged that at least some, if not all, of their water rights had finally been established for good. In this context, the State Engineer went out of his way to assure acequieros that they were to be counted as legitimate water consumers in the state of New Mexico and entitled to an equal stake in water distribution. In fact, he explained, their water rights were to be protected by an initiative of the State Engineer’s Office called Active Water Resource Management (AWRM). First introduced in 2004, AWRM was intended to give the State Engineer the necessary tools to “actively”
manage water resources in the face of drought, including the authority to create new rules and regulations, the installation of water meters, the creation of new water districts, and the appointment of “water masters” who monitor water usage. Such tools would supposedly prevent water from being wasted and ensure that water was apportioned accurately and fairly to all water rights holders according to their seniority.

However, despite the State Engineer’s promises of acequiers’ equal inclusion within New Mexico’s water economy and assurances of his respect for acequia culture and commitment to honoring acequia water rights, his keynote address produced rumblings of discontent in the Congreso audience. During the question and answer period at the end of the State Engineer’s speech, some acequiers expressed indignation at the idea that the government could monitor water usage better than they could themselves. One gentleman called the speech “insulting” and complained that the State Engineer was accusing acequiers of greed. Others perceived the speech as reinforcing historic inequities in access to water and other natural resources (see Chapter 2). A venerated scholar and acequiero commented that, “Those that have, get, and those that don’t have, don’t get.” For his part, the State Engineer appeared unsure of how to answer such complaints and simply reiterated his intentions to honor “the culture of the acequias.”

This clash of perspectives is characteristic of the complex and fraught relationship that has traditionally existed between the acequias and the Office of the State Engineer. While the adjudication process, along with legislation and advocacy from acequia groups over the last few decades has led to the recognition of acequia water rights, and in some cases, even protection or assistance from the State Engineer, a fundamental divide remains between the state’s logics of water management and the claims to water made by
the acequias. In particular, acequieros have widely and frequently expressed their dissatisfaction with AWRM as a techno-bureaucratic form of government water management, especially as the imposition of water masters appears to them to be a clear appropriation of the traditional role of the mayordomo. A 2013 resolution authored by the NMAA (2013) contends that “acequias have managed to share water without the use of meters for generations.” Acequia users and their allies are also concerned that AWRM regulations empower the State Engineer to make determinations about who owns water rights, a power that properly belongs to the courts. At an early meeting with the previous State Engineer about AWRM, a well-known lawyer representing several acequias in Northern New Mexico called the initiative “Active Water Resource Meddling” (P. Garcia n.d.).

At the 2012 Congreso, acequieros took issue with the State Engineer’s fundamental depiction of water usage. One participant, a mayordomo and retired forest ranger named Norman, aimed particular criticism at a pie chart on one of the State Engineer’s Powerpoint slides, which showed the percentage of water use in New Mexico by type of user. According to the chart, agriculture accounted for 77% of water use. However, Norman contended that it was wrong to categorize acequias as the same kind of water consumers as large-scale agricultural users or municipal and industrial entities. With acequias and the kinds of small-scale agriculture that they serve, he explained, the water supply is not consumed; rather, it is improved and replenished by the irrigation process, which refills the aquifer and nourishes riparian growth along the banks of open ditches. Months earlier, Norman had explained it to me this way:

Losses in delivery [of water] are not really losses. Water that percolates under the
dirt and underground is not lost; it goes back into the recycling of water in the natural way. It goes back into the main stem, so it isn’t a depletion. It may be a loss in the delivery amount of volume of water from the diversion point to the farm gate, but it is not a depletion.

Acequeros often employ this argument to counter criticisms that acequias lose too much water to evaporation and are thus inefficient and irresponsible in a time of drought. To the contrary, they claim that evaporation and absorption of water are part of a holistic understanding of the water cycle, according to which a loss of water volume as registered by a water meter is not really a loss for the whole environment.

These linked claims about the holistic ecological benefits of acequia irrigation and acequeros’ particular ability to manage those benefits are fundamental to acequeros’ claims to water in many contexts of contestation. As other scholars of Nuevomexicano environmental practices (Arellano 2014; Peña 1998b; Rivera 1998) have described, acequeros like Norman draw on discourses of place-based knowledge and stewardship to argue that acequias be set apart from conventional understandings of water consumption. Echoing descriptions of indigenous environmental knowledge and practice (e.g., Nazarea 1999; Bicker, Sillitoe, and Pottier 2004), these scholars represent Nuevomexicano stewardship of land and water as based on a long history of living on and caring for the land. Most notably, the Nuevomexicano intellectual Juan Estevan Arellano (1997) developed the concept of “la raza bioregionalism,” which describes an ethic of environmental stewardship based on querencia, a term that references a specific fusing of Nuevomexicano memory and the landscape of New Mexico. Arellano asserts that Nuevomexicano people are “as natural in this landscape as the piñon tree” (32), and thus uniquely suited to cultivate and care for it. Similarly, the philosopher and environmental
scholar Reyes García (1998) describes a method of reciprocity and a sense of belonging between Nuevomexicano people and their landscape that he calls the “(home)land ethic.” Both of these concepts center acequias as a vital part of environmental stewardship in New Mexico. For example, García writes about the paradoxical act of flooding a field with water in an arid landscape,

Lying awake in my high-ceilinged bedroom, I am worrying about irrigating these surrounding meadows, for there are those using water from the river system who consider only the economic dollar value of the land… But to let the water run wild and the willows and cottonwoods spring up along the overflowing ditches is high on my agenda. If I let so much water flow… it is because I want to increase the total value of the land in proportion to a standard of biodiversity, not to a monetary standard, according to some ultimate measure beyond my own or anyone’s comprehension rather than according to some myopic short-term profit margin. (102)

Significantly, according to these perspectives, the value of water is not only cultural as it pertains to traditional agricultural practices, or environmental as it feeds the aquifer and cultivates riparian growth; it is also moral. Here, good stewardship of land and water – including equitable water-sharing in a time of need – is considered to be a moral imperative, making the idea that acequeros might waste or steal water offensive. At the same time, the acequia system itself is understood as a “moral economy” (Rodríguez 2006) that functions according to understandings of the communal good.

Such moral and place-based discourses of water have a strong affective dimension. When asked about why they devote themselves to acequias, Norman and others regularly evoke the aesthetic sensations of walking the ditch, commenting that, for example, “It’s hard work but it’s enjoyable, and it’s rewarding after you hear the water flowing and you see the green.” Furthermore, the cultural, environmental, and moral
dimensions of acequia irrigation are rarely expressed as separate from one another, but are rather bound up together in discourses of water’s non-economic value. For example, during a walking tour of Norman’s acequia one day, he paused and mused,

The riparian vegetation along these acequias support a variety of wildlife, birds and all kinds – some of them are helpful for the acequia and some of them are not, but they’re still wildlife and it provides a habitat for all of that. And that’s part of the experience that you have when you walk the acequia is watching this wildlife that survives in that band of green. And that band of green was created when the acequia was first constructed and it formed that habitat and that habitat was important to my ancestors in probably access to deer coming down to drink from it, rabbits – I’m sure they used wild rabbits as part of their diets and feeding their stock, you know, stock waters.

As we walked along the different branches of his acequia, it was common for Norman to move fluidly from observations about the current condition of the ditch and the land surrounding it to imagining his ancestors in the same place and commenting on what they may have seen and felt. In this way, for many acequeros, water contains multiple overlapping layers of value – as a mnemonic for the past, an ecological benefit, and a moral imperative.

At the same, New Mexican scholars – many of whom are acequeros – have contributed to recent studies in the fields of hydrology, ecology, community planning, and anthropology, that study the cultural and ecological benefits of gravity-fed irrigation systems in New Mexico and worldwide (Sanchiz-Ibor et al. 2014), including one study that appears to confirm the hydrological benefits of acequias in purifying and replenishing the aquifer that acequeros have long claimed (Guldan, Fernald, and Ochoa 2014). These studies afford acequeros a new, scientifically validated position from which to contest the State Engineer’s expertise and to make claims about the non-
economic value of water and their own role in its management and protection.
Interestingly however, these studies rely in part on the same techno-bureaucratic apparatuses of water measurement that acequeros are attempting to contest in the hands of the state. In these ways, acequeros’ project of achieving independence from state water management and market-based models of water consumption draw on layered and interchanging claims based on place-based knowledge of water, moral commitment to land and home, affective experiences of belonging and wellbeing, and now, technological measurement and assessment.

“Water means money, right?”

Somewhat different claims about water are being made by acequeros in the South Valley of Albuquerque. As I describe in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, the management of water from the Río Grande in the city of Albuquerque, including water used for irrigation, has been centralized under the Middle Río Grande Conservancy District (MRGCD) since 1925. The MRGCD maintains the main irrigation canals and manages the delivery of water to Albuquerque irrigators. Nonetheless, acequias still operate within the Valley, including several that have formed the South Valley Regional Association of Acequias (SVRAA). A major activity of the SVRAA and other acequia organizers has been to educate South Valley residents about their water rights and encourage them to declare their rights with the State Engineer. José, a mayordomo in the South Valley, explained this project to me over the course of a long walk along the Arenal acequia one winter evening. “The general belief before,” he explained, “was that there are no more acequias in the [South Valley]. Yes, there are the MRGCD ditches and some people get water from it, but ‘Joe’ over there on that side shouldn’t be messing with the water
because there are no more acequias to take the water.” To combat the idea that the acequias of the South Valley had disappeared, José and a number of other activists and community organizers undertook a mapping project to document the region’s acequias. He described this process as one of gradual discovery as they unearthed acequias that had been covered over or abandoned, uncovering the original network of ditches like a palimpsest, “We mapped all of this, all the big ones and the small ones. We mapped every single turnout that we found along the ditches, all the ditches in the South Valley.” As they mapped the acequias, these organizers also began to encourage residents with water rights to declare them with the State Engineer so that they would be on record in the event that the Valley was ever adjudicated, while also working with landowners to discover and reclaim unused water rights. They held regular meetings in the community and brought in a notary to help residents fill out and file water rights declarations. Diego, the farmer and organizer quoted in Chapter 3, played a major role in this project and later recalled,

We felt it was a way of making a direct connection with the parciantes that they still had water rights, that the water had not been adjudicated and that if they declared their rights, that was the first step in maintaining [them]. And if they had abandoned their irrigation, of restoring their lands to irrigation before they’re adjudicated and that we prove that they never intended to abandon.

Here, Diego indicated several key components of New Mexico water law with which acequia organizers are constantly contending. In New Mexico, rights to surface water that were established before 1907 are still considered to be valid as long as they come from a man-made diversion and are being put to “beneficial use,” which the New Mexico State Constitution calls “the basis, the measure and the limit of the right to the use of water” (Art. XVI, Sec. 3). If a court determines that water has not been put to beneficial use for a
period of four years or longer, the right can be considered forfeited or abandoned. For this reason, South Valley organizers like José and Diego began to knock on doors throughout the community to inform residents that they might have water rights that they were not claiming. As we walked along the acequia, dry and full of leaves during the winter, José stopped and pointed to a house across the ditch,

It’s like this house for example. This house I bet you has water rights. Whether they use it or not is a different question, but if somebody will come and appraise, they will say: ‘Ok, you don’t have water rights right there because these are buildings, but the rest of this place you can actually use your water.’ That’s how it works. This property and this land has not lost the right to the water that belongs to it. To the land, right? All this land should be irrigated; there should be ditches going all over the place providing water to everybody. So what needs to happen is that people get reorganized and then they start opening those ditches.

The vision José described to me was of restoring the flow of water throughout the community along historic pathways that had been forgotten, but not completely lost. This often involved dealing with complex and abstruse details of water and property law. For example, to secure water rights to one property in the South Valley from being declared abandoned, José, Diego, and others were able to prove that the property owners had not received the required notices of abandonment. They admitted that the water rights to this property had not been put to use in the required four year timeframe; however, they were able to take advantage of the slow-moving and, in this case, ineffective bureaucracy governing the mechanisms of forfeiture and abandonment in order to reclaim the right. Since then, this property has become the site of a community garden and popular open space.

I asked José why it was important for people in the South Valley to reclaim water rights and he gave me what he called “a cultural reason” and “an economic reason.” The
cultural reason, he said, was simply “maintaining a way of life.” However, he described the economic reason at great length. Once again, he indicated a property that we were passing along the ditch,

Let’s say those people over there, right? So say they’re disconnected from the main ditch, but they do have water rights. Well eventually they’re going to lose those water rights if they don’t use them, so when people are losing the water rights, they don’t know that you’re losing an economic value in this community. Because that means money, right?

Here, José advanced a seemingly straightforward argument about the economic value of water. In New Mexico, as in the rest of the Western U.S., the scarcity of water makes it by far the most valuable resource many water rights holders have, with a seemingly endless supply of developers, corporations, and wealthy residents willing to offer huge sums of money to buy them up. In the South Valley, the cities of Rio Rancho and Santa Fe, among other entities, are eager to arrange water transfers with acequiers. In fact, the SVRAA has often provoked anger from South Valley water rights holders wanting to transfer their water rights because of its integral role in passing legislation to prevent such entities from obtaining water rights, such as the 2003 Water Transfer Law making it possible for acequias to subject individual water transfers to the approval of the whole acequia. In the context of acequiers’ vociferous arguments against the commodification of water, I was surprised to hear José put forward such an economically-driven perspective on water’s value. However, he went on to tell me a story that complicated this perspective. Several years previously, he and the other organizers had experienced conflict with one South Valley acequia whose parciántes disliked the bylaw restricting water transfers and questioned the legitimacy of a recent election for the acequia commission. The parciántes were able to successfully overturn the election and amend
the bylaws to remove the water transfer provision. However, José recalled a conversation he had had with the mayordomo of this acequia,

I remember meeting up with Don Miguel – an old *veterano*, very firm and intelligent man. I remember going to his house and we sat down and talked and he says: “Yeah, but I don’t want anybody to come and tell me about my private property.” That was his argument and that was the argument that the Anglos from that side were making. And so I said: “Yeah Don Miguel, but think about it, no? Say you live over here on the end of these houses? And then the flow of water depends on all these houses getting the water they need to get for you to get the water. Say they start selling their water rights because it’s their individual right, one by one. And the only one who remains is you. Well, there’s not going to be enough water to get you water.

In his conversation with Don Miguel, José was describing a basic fact of acequia irrigation – that the water users at the far end of the acequia depend on the acequiers who get water before them maintaining their ditch and using their water within established limits in order to get their own water on time and in the correct amount. While in theory, acequiers can sell their water rights without affecting the rights of their neighbors, the physical and geographical realities of gravity-fed irrigation mean that changes to the ditch itself (e.g., one property owner filling in his/her portion of the ditch) have significant effects on the volume and flow of water, thus impinging on all the other members of the acequia. In the same way that the physical flow of water depends on the participation of the whole acequia, José argued that the economic value of water is also dependent both on communal participation and on its staying in place. The goal of the water rights education project was not for residents to sell their rights to make “quick money,” but to retain them over time to be used or leased while remaining connected to the land to which they originally belonged. José exclaimed, “So if the whole valley maintains their water rights, think about the economic value that exists right here in terms
of water! If we were able to understand the value of water, then we have a vested interest to maintain an economic value, right? And so that helps not only for us to take care of it, but that also forces us to regulate relationships amongst ourselves because then we’re all vested in maintaining what we have.”

Importantly, while these South Valley organizers clearly articulate their attention to water as an economic value, they are precisely not valuing water as a commodity. In his analysis of value and the commodity, sociocultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1986) contests the idea that a commodity is simply an object of economic value, suggesting instead that something becomes a commodity when “its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature” (13). While acequia water rights are clearly objects of economic value, acequia organizers do not locate that value in water’s exchangeability to other owners and other places (i.e., via sale or transfer) but in its capacity to hold economic value within the community. José explained, “That’s one of the main problems with poor communities is that they’re poor because they’re not able to maintain the value within the community. It’s a matter of disempowering a community because there’s nothing of value here. Some sort of power over what we have and over our own relationships and the way we conduct ourselves is taken away.” As José explained, the economic value of water counteracts two trends that negatively affect poorer communities like the South Valley: lack of resources and isolation. Acequia organizers in the South Valley are thus staking claims to water based on a layered understanding of its economic value in place through its effects on the community, specifically in terms of empowerment and cohesiveness.

**Fluid Publics**
The acequia organizers described in these two examples are actively involved in creating social spaces of meaning and action through the circulation of discourses around water and its value. As I have described, the discourses about the value of water contributing to these publics are far from unified. In the case of AWRM, its many acequiero critics advance a perspective on the value of water that is designed to directly contradict the mainstream market logic of supply and demand that governs the State Engineer’s approach to water management in a time of drought. Instead, they circulate a discourse about a moral economy of water sharing and stewardship, which draws on concepts of ecological ethics, traditional knowledge, and affective attachment to land and water. In this way, these individuals articulate a posture of refusal toward the dominant rationalities of water use (i.e., consumption) in New Mexico, as well as the technologies that govern it (i.e., meters and water masters). In contrast, South Valley organizers are circulating discourses around water rights that do not shy away from recognizing their substantial economic value. These discourses in fact center the economic value of water as a mode of empowering socioeconomically marginalized community members to establish themselves as water users and demand recognition as such from the state.

In these divergent contexts, acequia organizers configure water’s value in diverse ways – as an economic resource, an environmental benefit, an object of cultural practice, a source of community cohesiveness, a terrain of moral action. Even among acequeros and organizers, individuals value water differently and also shift between valuations fluidly. The nature of water itself makes this variation possible. The anthropologist Veronica Strang (2004, 2005, 2009) traces the ways that water’s essential characteristics have resulted in common themes of meaning across time and place, including water’s
essential variability. She writes, “Water’s diversity is, in some respects, a key to its meanings. Here is an object that is endlessly transmutable, moving readily from one shape to another: from ice to steam, from vapour to rain, from fluid to steam… This process of transformation never ceases: water is always undergoing change, movement and progress” (Strang 2005, 98–99). Water’s fundamentally transmutable nature thus allows it to operate as a signifier that is a non-rigid designator (Kripke 1980), an object that can take on shifting meanings in different contexts and over time. This transmutable quality is key to acequia organizers’ ability to layer and shift between discourses about the value of water. This is exemplified in Norman’s comments about the riparian growth along the acequia being evidence of water’s environmental value as well as its cultural importance over time. In this sense, water is fungible, making it possible for different actors to value it differently and, most importantly, to exchange one form of its value for another. The anthropologist Jessica Cattelino (2008) has analyzed the nature of fungibility in the context of money, arguing that it is the quality of exchangeability of money that “makes ‘moments of its valuation’ political” (199). Crucially, as water’s transmutability lends itself to divergent interpretations of its meaning and value, those interpretations function as political acts.

Further, inasmuch as acequeros articulate discourses about water’s value that run counter to dominant understandings, they sometimes take on the characteristics of a counterpublic, operating outside of and in conflict with dominant logics of water’s value and use. This counterpublic quality can range from relatively civil moments, like acequeros’ voiced opposition to the water management policies and practices of the State Engineer in public meetings and conferences, to significantly more uncivil actions, like
occasional vandalizing, tampering with, or destroying state water meters, which can rarely be traced back to any responsible individuals. In other cases, acequeros attempt to negotiate the boundaries of engagement with the state. For example, Norman has been involved for decades in a complex mediation process over the water in his stream system with other Pueblo and non-Pueblo water users, in which he and the other stakeholders sometimes draw on and sometimes refuse the involvement of government officials (see Chapter 5 for a more extensive discussion of this relationship).

In New Mexico then, diverse publics form around the situations and values of water’s distribution. However, I argue that to conceive of these publics as varied but essentially discrete would be to miss their role in forming a flexible but cohesive social space that both resists and operates within the technologies of state water governance. In fact, the diversity and interchangeability of understandings of water’s value contribute to what Annemarie Mol and John (1994) law call a social space that “behaves like a fluid” (643, emphasis original). Mol and Law use the metaphor of blood to describe how social space might contain endless shades of internal variability while still remaining essentially the same substance. Similarly, I argue that the publics of acequia users and organizers are not simply formed in response to the flow of water through the acequia, but are themselves fluid spaces that flow one into another. The circulation and exchangeability of different discourses around the value of water thus constitutes what I will call a “fluid public.” Taking Mol and Law’s concept of fluid social space as a jumping-off point, I suggest that the fluid public is a social space that not only contains “variation without boundaries and transformation without discontinuity” (658), but that also flows like an acequia, according to a topography of human relationships. Discourses and
configurations of value shift but a relationship of dependency between participants remains. In the context of water distribution of Mumbai, Anand (2011) has also hinted at this quality when he describes water pressure as a kind of zero sum relationship between citizens, where more water pressure for some citizens means decreased pressure for others. However, along the acequia, the relationship between individuals is essentially different. While a water hog along the acequia may reduce the amount of water that other users get, it is actually the individuals who sell off their rights and let the ditch fall into disuse that truly disrupt the flow of water. Maintaining the connection of each participant to the ditch and to one another is what keeps the water flowing. These connections are what distinguish the fluid public as a social space. In the remainder of this chapter, I propose some essential characteristics of such a social space, and the kinds of political action that it makes possible.

First, fluid publics are social spaces that have no conventional boundaries. This characteristic is to a certain extent contained within Warner’s original concept of the public, the membership of which grows, diminishes, and changes according to the circulation of discourse. Applying this understanding of the public to a context like New Mexico complicates traditional understandings of the terrain of struggle over water, which have tended to divide participants along racial or ethnic lines (Trott 2012). Similarly, conventional boundaries like rural vs. urban, North vs. South (i.e., Río Arriba vs. Río Abajo), indigenous vs. Nuevomexicano, or farmer/rancher vs. environmentalist that have generally organized understandings of water struggle in New Mexico no longer function to accurately describe the social space of the acequia, as individuals cross-cutting these categories are placed into relationship with one another along the ditch. This
quality of the fluid public also serves to complicate Warner’s concept of the public vs. the counterpublic. While Warner speculates that counterpublics can become publics when they acquire a relationship to the state, the concept of the fluid public suggests that a social space can have characteristics of both a public and a counterpublic that may become more or less significant at different times. The two cases of acequia organizing described here illustrate this point, as acequieros attempt to lay claim to water within the mechanisms of state (e.g., by declaring water rights, engaging in adjudication processes, or testifying before the legislature) while also circulating discourses about the cultural, environmental, and moral value of water that explicitly refuse to engage the state on its own terms. Here, acequieros are forming a fluid social space that is at different times both public and counterpublic.

Second, the lack of boundaries that characterizes the fluid public means that **fluid publics allow for unexpected tactics and alliances**. An eloquent example of this possibility is contained in the relationships among some of the South Valley acequia organizers. When I first began to learn about acequia organizing in the Valley, José suggested that I talk to Don Miguel, the mayordomo of one the Valley acequias, and in fact called up Don Miguel on my behalf to arrange an interview. During my conversation with Don Miguel, he spoke approvingly of José’s work educating Valley residents of their water rights. Around the same time, I heard from several individuals the story of the seemingly bitter conflict between the SVRAA and one of the South Valley’s acequias over the matter of the water transfer bylaw. In fact, it turned out that this was Don Miguel’s acequia. Seeing that their relationship was now cordial, I commented to Diego that they must have convinced Don Miguel to see their point of view; but he corrected
me, explaining that Don Miguel’s acequia had never seen fit to adopt the water transfer bylaw. Despite the fact that they were still at odds over water transfers, the SVRAA organizers and Don Miguel had little trouble working together on water rights education. Furthermore, José explained enthusiastically to me that the conflict between SVRAA and Don Miguel’s acequia had significantly advanced the overall cause of the acequias in the South Valley because the New Mexico Supreme Court had seen fit to deliberate between them, thus acknowledging their existence as valid entities. As José put it, “Nobody challenged [us, saying,] ‘We shouldn’t be having a case in the Supreme Court with acequias because they actually don’t even exist.’” In this case, there were significant internal conflicts and inconsistencies in the participants and political projects of acequieros in the South Valley. Nonetheless, even this internal conflict contributed to the formation of the South Valley acequias as a public simply by establishing their existence as real, functional entities. The South Valley acequias were thus allied in the project of establishing themselves as legal entities even as they conflicted with one another over a separate political project. This possibility of coherence despite conflict is a function of the fluid public where, as Mol and Law (1994) describe, “similarity and difference aren’t like identity and non-identity. They come, as it were, in varying shades and colours. They go together” (660). In other words, differences inside the fluid public occur and change while still remaining part of the same social space.

This point indicates a third characteristic of fluid publics: fluid publics absorb disparate elements. As Mol and Law suggest, fluids are mixtures; they are viscous in the sense that “things tend to stick together but aren’t dependent on one another” (661). In the same way, the fluid public as a social space allows for the possibility that new
elements can be absorbed without compromising the essential coherence of the public. While this characteristic certainly accounts for the ability of the fluid public to incorporate new members and new projects, it also allows participants in fluid publics to claim or reclaim discourses that may seem at odds with the whole. For example, South Valley organizers are able to make claims about the economic value of water rights without compromising the claims of other organizers that water should not be commodified. In a sense, organizers are able to espouse a perspective that values water monetarily without fully adopting a market-based ideology of water consumption.

Finally, these characteristics of fluid publics as flexible social spaces mean that fluid publics are difficult to define and also difficult to govern. Anand (2011) suggests that like hydraulic infrastructure, hydraulic publics tend to leak, overflow, and generally “exceed the technopolitical systems that govern [them]” (559). Similarly, Mol and Law argue that fluid social spaces are especially robust as they have no essential boundaries to protect. At the same time, while fluid publics may be unusually resilient, their particular forms can also be precarious. For example, acequieros working to prove that acequias are a moral and environmental benefit that should be free from techno-bureaucratic governance by water meters and masters have been quick to embrace hydrological studies of acequias’ environmental benefits, though these studies draw on many of the same techno-bureaucratic tools of water measurement that they resist elsewhere. As a fluid public, acequieros are able to absorb and adapt these tools of measurement to their own purposes without creating internal discontinuity; yet, these acts of adaptation may also compromise their resistance to engage the state on its own terms. Nonetheless, their essential fluidity means that while particular flows may collapse or change, the public
continues to endure. Mol and Law liken this quality of fluid sociality to guerrilla armies who “circumvent” and “infiltrate” (662). Similarly, as I described in Chapter 3, Diego likens his organizing work to guerrilla warfare, commenting that “the goal is resistance rather than victory… you just keep resisting until the other side wears out.”

Ultimately, fluid publics are social spaces that are made fluid by the topography of flowing water, like the acequia. I argue that the flow of fluid publics is essentially a function of the connections of dependence between participants, who make variable and interchangeable claims about the value of water. In the next chapter, I examine the nature of these relations in greater detail. Fluid publics endure as long as discourses of water’s value continue to flow between participants, being exchanged one for another in ways that are political and often, but not always, strategic. At different times, fluid publics may articulate discourses that constitute their members as water consumers that are recognizable to the state, while at others, they may become counterpublics that challenge the policies and practices of the state. They contain contradictions and can be compromised by their inclusion of disparate and problematic elements. Yet when one avenue of opportunity gets cut off, other flows persist. In this sense, they offer the potential for both resistance to, and potential transformation of, dominant frameworks of water management and measurement. In the remaining two chapters of this dissertation, I describe two such resistant and transformational projects.
Chapter 5

Assembled Bodies: Cultivating Mutualism in Precarity

...para protegerse contra las injusticias de los tiranos y de los déspotas, de los usurpadores de la ley y de la justicia, de los ladrones de vidas, honras, y propiedades (...to protect each other against the injustices of tyrants and despots, the usurpers of law and justice, and those who steal our lives, honor, and property)

- Mission of La Sociedad de Protección Mutua de Trabajadores Unidos (United Workers Mutual Protection Society)

In November 2016, about two weeks before the United States Army Corps of Engineers denied an easement under the Missouri River near the reservation of the Standing Rock Sioux for the completion of an underground oil pipeline known as the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), acequieros from around the state of New Mexico gathered at a hotel in the Northern New Mexico town of Taos to listen to a presentation about the pipeline and the indigenous people who were protesting its construction. The event was the annual Congreso de las Acequias (Acequia Congress), a yearly gathering of acequia users from all over the state organized by the New Mexico Acequia Association (NMAA), a Santa Fe-based nonprofit that provides technical assistance and advocacy to acequias. Each year during the Congreso, acequieros participate in educational workshops on perennial issues of acequia use and governance, such as how to write by-laws or apply for capital outlay, pass resolutions on legislative and political issues, and listen to presentations on current political and environmental issues that might affect acequias. In past years, topics have included drought, urban development, and initiatives from the Office of the State Engineer.
At the 2016 Congreso, the NMAA staff had made a large banner printed with an image of *San Ysidro Labrador*, the patron saint of farmers, and the words “Acequias Stand with Standing Rock” and “*Agua es Vida*” (“Water is Life”). Throughout the day, Congreso attendees were encouraged to sign the banner with messages of support that would then be sent to the growing camp of Standing Rock Sioux and their allies who were protesting and physically obstructing the construction of the pipeline. At the end of the day, the banner was filled with messages in different colors of marker:

*La Agua es la sangre de la tierra* [sic] (Water is the blood of the land)

Blood is thicker than oil, we stand as one

We stand with you Water Protectors! God bless, keep up the fight!

*Sin agua no hay vida. Bendiciones de Taos* (Without water there is no life. Blessings from Taos)

Love & blessings to the water

Blessings to all my Brothers & Sisters in Christ. My Heart beats with you as the beat of a drum!

Thank you for Standing Tall for the Community of life

Prayers & *Fuerza* (Strength) to all water protectors!! From el pueblo de Chimayó Mimbres Valley is with you in spirit!!

Our Prayers and support for the Water protectors in your Area. *Que Dios Este Con Ustedes* (May God Be With You All)

Congreso attendees were also able to make donations and buy prints of the NMAA logo with the words “Acequias Stand with Standing Rock, Agua es Vida,” with proceeds to be sent to the protestors. Later, NMAA staff posted a picture of the banner on Facebook with the message:

Acequias stand with Standing Rock!

We are united with the water protectors at Standing Rock. At today’s Congreso
In the previous chapter, I proposed the concept of a “fluid public” to describe the social space created by acequieros’ discourses about water and its value, which is shaped by relationships of interdependence. In this chapter, I examine the nature of these relationships more closely, as they occur both among people and between people and the environment. I ask: what kinds of interpersonal and environmental relationships are formed by the acequia as a material and social space? To answer this question, I first explore the ways that acequias mediate human relationships with the environment. I describe the acequia as a multispecies assemblage, meaning a gathering-together of human and nonhuman components in a relationship that has communal effects (Tsing 2015). I then discuss the ways that acequias mediate human relationships with one another. I focus on the case of Pueblo and non-Pueblo communities in one stream system in New Mexico whose acequias have brought them into a fraught relationship with one another. I examine these human and nonhuman relationships through the lens of the community planning scholar José Rivera’s (1984, 1987, 2010; Rivera et al. 2014) work on the custom of mutualismo (mutualism, or mutual aid) in Nuevomexicano communities, which allows me to elucidate the material and symbolic mechanisms by which affects of kinship and solidarity are cultivated and challenged in contexts of precarity over water.

Third, I extend the concept of mutualismo to consider two emergent efforts by a
group of acequia activists to create solidarity with racially, historically, and geographically disparate groups – the indigenous activists protesting an oil pipeline in Standing Rock, South Dakota, and the mostly African-American families affected by lead poisoning in the municipal water supply in Flint, Michigan – over shared concerns about water safety and access. I suggest that by attempting to connect acequeros’ concerns with the experiences of activists in Flint and Standing Rock, these efforts attempt to bring into being a public of “water protectors” that extends the bonds of mutualismo beyond New Mexico. I argue that these efforts underscore several unique insights that the acequia as a multispecies assemblage can offer into the ways that human relationships with one another and with the environment contribute to resilience in the face of abandonment by the state and by capitalism.

The anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015) has written about multispecies assemblages made up of both human and non-human actors, such as the plants that thrive after human-made fires. She describes these assemblages as the coming together of diverse lifeways, in which different worlds are not only gathered, but made. Thinking in terms of assemblages, according to Tsing, inspires the question: “How do gatherings sometimes become ‘happenings,’ that is, greater than the sum of their parts” (23)? Accordingly, I ask this question about the formation of relationships along and around the acequia. Specifically, how do shared spaces and experiences transcend simple coexistence to become reciprocal and mutually protective? Moreover, how might disparate groups with histories of socioeconomic and environmental marginalization draw on these relationships of reciprocity and protection to become what the environmental activist Vandana Shiva (Peña 1998a) calls “subversive kin” (vii)?
Mutualismo in New Mexico

In this chapter, I elucidate the nature of these assemblages that form with and along the acequias by drawing on the concept of mutualismo, or mutual aid. I argue that where these functions of mutualismo are preserved and/or cultivated, they contribute to resilience in contexts of social isolation and abandonment (Povinelli 2011). My understanding of mutualismo is drawn primarily from the work of the New Mexican community planning scholar José Rivera (1984, 1987, 2010) who has written extensively about the *sociedades mutualistas* (mutual aid societies) that formed in the Nuevomexicano villages of New Mexico during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a time of societal and economic upheaval resulting from the U.S. occupation and eventual statehood of the region. Such societies were a common form of social welfare in this period throughout the United States and Latin America, especially among immigrant and minority groups, providing financial and social resources and assistance in the absence of a government safety net (Carlos 1973; Foster 1953; Hernández 1983; Katz and Bender 1976; Krainz 2005; Martin and Martin 1985). As Rivera describes, societies like *La Sociedad de Protección Mutua de Trabajadores Unidos* (United Workers Mutual Protection Society, SPMDTU), which was established in 1900 in the San Luis Valley of Southern Colorado and then expanded into New Mexico and Utah, were popular protective associations among Nuevomexicanos, who drew on these resources in their efforts to preserve their independence under U.S. governance. As in many other places, mutual aid societies in New Mexico provided their members with resources like insurance, money for burials, social events, and religious services. They persisted in Northern New Mexico even after welfare from the federal government became more
widely available to Nuevomexicanos after U.S. statehood.

However, while mutual aid societies in New Mexico mirrored the customs of other immigrant and minority groups in the United States and elsewhere around the turn of the twentieth century, the work of Rivera and colleagues (2014) suggests that the practice of mutualismo in New Mexico was also embedded in two other kinds of voluntary associations in New Mexico – the cofradías, or lay Catholic brotherhoods (e.g., the Penitentes) that provided religious services to rural and isolated villages in the absence of Catholic priests throughout the 19th century, and the acequias, which were operated and maintained by irrigators independent of any centralized hydraulic infrastructure. All three types of association, Rivera and colleagues explain, operated autonomously from the government and the Catholic Church to mobilize local resources in times of need and form what historian Thomas Glick has called “consensual communities” (447). These communities, Rivera and colleagues argue, are also unique in their particular resilience in the face of outside forces. They contend, “All three forms have survived for two or up to more than four centuries to include periods of rapid social change, transformations in the legal-political environment, and a barrage of pressures brought forth by the forces of modernity in a post-industrial society” (Rivera et al. 2014, 444).

The central characteristic of Nuevomexicano life up to and even after the turn of the 20th century that made these three kinds of voluntary associations so vital to the survival of Nuevomexicano communities was deep geographical and cultural isolation. Far from any urban areas and the centers of government and the Church, the acequias, the cofradías, and the sociedades mutualistas were instruments of both physical and social
survival that required community members to organize themselves and support one another in the absence of any larger institutions. Moreover, even as Nuevomexicano communities became more integrated into dominant society over time, mutualismo remained a method of maintaining autonomy. While the cofradías, acequias, and mutual aid societies of the turn of the century began by providing resources and services that were not provided by the Church or the government, they soon transformed into conduits for resources and services that sidestepped the Church and the government in order to resist dependence on them.

They did this by developing practices of reciprocity and mutual protection. These included autonomy and self-governance, as well as rituals and shared meanings that reflected and reinforced communal bonds and emphasized internal coherence and separation from the dominant culture. In the case of the acequias, these took the form of election of acequia officers and codification of water use decision-making processes. They included rituals like the *limpia*, where acequia users cooperate to clean the acequia each spring, and local San Ysidro Day ceremonies, where acequieros mark the beginning of the growing season by processing along the ditch and blessing the water and fields (Rodríguez 2006). An extensive acequia-specific Spanish vocabulary of plants, tools, and maintenance terms also reinforced internal ties and distinction from other groups. These practices, Rivera and colleagues describe, “bonded the residents into a collective imaginary deeply rooted in the land” (452). Even as Nuevomexicano people traveled widely outside their home communities and their physical remoteness diminished, the experience of social isolation, along with the methods that they developed to produce social life in those conditions, resulted in the formation of durable connections with one
another and with the environment.

Mutualismo and its reciprocal and protective characteristics – self-governance, communal rituals, and shared meanings – operate in this chapter as a lens to illuminate the durable environmental and interpersonal relationships that are structured by the material and interpersonal nature of the acequia. As I will describe, these relationships may continue to form the basis of autonomous and resilient social and political projects – i.e., fluid publics – in contemporary contexts of social isolation and abandonment.

**Multispecies Assemblages of Mutualismo**

Early one spring, I and a handful of other acequieros, acequia activists, and researchers visited a valley stream system northwest of Santa Fe to spend a day following Norman, a retired forest ranger with decades of tenure as a mayordomo and centuries of familial history in his valley, along his acequia. Over the course of the day, he would drive us from place to place, pulling over periodically on the side of highway and leading us back to some point of interest overlooking the river or one of the many ditches that ran off of it. That morning, we followed Norman along the bank of a ditch, walking single file with the running water on one side and a slope of thick grass and reeds on the other. It had rained the night before, and the plants were clustered with water drops. After a couple of minutes of walking and chatting, Norman paused and pointed out the clear indentation of a mountain lion’s paw in the mud. A few feet further on, our shoes sunk into the still-fresh ground of an earthen berm separating the running water from an old ditch, empty except for a few inches of rainwater, running back into the grass. Norman explained that they had been forced to divert the flow of the ditch around a boulder that had tumbled down the river during a rainstorm weeks before. “You could hear it up at the
house,” he recalled, “going ‘boom, boom, boom!’ down the river.” Several minutes later, we stopped at the mouth of a culvert that transported the water from the ditch under the road next to it. The water around the culvert was muddy, foamy, and swirling very slowly. Norman and Johnny – the other mayordomo who had joined us for the day trip – stood over the culvert and gazed down into the frothy water. “This guy keeps coming back here,” Norman said. “Oh yeah,” Johnny replied, “I’ve got one like that too.” Norman rolled one sleeve of his flannel shirt up above his elbow, knelt down by the ditch, and stuck his arm deep into the water. He fished around for a few seconds and then pulled up a big handful of reeds and sticks – part of a beaver dam that was blocking the culvert. After pulling up a few more handfuls, the water began to drain into the culvert, making a sucking sound as it was pulled into the pipe. Norman stood up and dried his arm on the leg of his jeans. “Now he’s gotta find somewhere else to build his house,” he commented. He and Johnny stood still for several more moments, watching the flowing water with satisfaction. “That puppy’s moving now,” Johnny said.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the affective dimension of many acequieros’ relationships with water – what Norman often described as “hearing the water and seeing the green”, which contributes powerfully to concepts of the acequia’s “holistic” environmental value and the role of acequieros as environmental stewards. In the face of concerns from environmentalists and developers that open irrigation canals might be at best sub-optimal and at worst wasteful in conserving water because of evaporation and absorption, many acequieros have maintained that acequias are valuable for cultivating multiple forms of life along and around their banks in addition to irrigating fields and crops.
This quality is a favorite topic of conversation with Norman and Johnny. During the same visit that Norman cleaned out the beaver dam in his culvert, Johnny told a story about an acequia in the southern part of the state where scientists had discovered an endangered species of flycatcher nesting in the new growth along the ditch bank. Norman agreed, “It forms all kinds of habitat for all kinds of species of animals.” Acequias around the state are increasingly being converted to concrete-lined canals or pipes, which are commonly understood to be a modern necessity to preserve scarce water flows and reduce the labor involved in maintaining the ditches. Nonetheless, I have yet to meet an acequiero who will not at least pause to admire water flowing through a traditional, unlined, earthen acequia. For Norman, the unlined ditches are a matter of passion. He argues that lined ditches lose the shading effect of vegetation, which keeps the water cool, in addition to the benefits of riparian growth and the replenishment of the aquifer, which I described in the previous chapter. “Besides,” Norman once joked to me, “when I’m up checking the acequia, I have real thick vegetation where I can hide and take a nap.”

These conversations evoke the image of numerous lifeways – birds, insects, mammals, and all manner of plants, in addition to napping mayordomos – that are assembled by the acequia. As I discussed in the last chapter, scholars have generally understood the relationship between the human builders of the acequia and the life that it cultivates as one of environmental stewardship. Yet, in my experience talking to acequeros like Norman, it is also clear that the relationship of humans to the acequia and its other lifeways is reciprocal. For example, after a long conversation about the incursions of the State Engineer on acequeros’ customs of water measurement and
management, I asked Norman why he held acequias so dear. He answered, “I think it’s just in-bred in you because of so many years dependent on it. Your life depended on it. It’s an emotional tie to something that’s like your home.” He continued, “I don’t believe anything that it’s attached to only Spanish people. It doesn’t matter what nationality you are, if you were raised in a place and you loved it and you worked your butt off in it and you improved it, it pays you back with sustaining you.”

Here, Norman described a relationship in which acequeros pour their labor into the maintenance of the ditch and the resulting animal and plant environment repays them with sustenance. This sustenance takes the form of providing water for their households, crops, and livestock, attracting game like deer and rabbits, and cultivating an aesthetically pleasing environment of shade and cool running water. Of course, as several acequia users have acknowledged to me, this relationship is no longer necessary in the contemporary world, where “we can just go to Walmart for whatever we need.” Yet, as Norman described, mutual dependence with the acequia was a relationship that had existed over generations, originating from a time when acequia communities were located far from urban centers and institutions of state water governance. Many acequeros and acequia organizers like to emphasize the fact that the first thing that groups of Spanish and Mexican settlers did upon arriving in the New World was to dig an acequia, even before they built the church. The acequia was thus the first infrastructure that buffered settlers from the isolation and aridity of their new homes. Moreover, many acequeros have long personal and familial histories with their water sources. One day, Norman told me the history of a spring that his grandfather had diverted to supply his family with water. He had engaged in years of negotiations with the State Engineer and the New
Mexico Timber Company to gain title to the spring. Then, Norman remembered,

He worked that out and he got the right-of-way and he was able to spend the money to buy the piping and the cement work and actually go do the work. And we had done all the work up on the spring; the spring box was ready and we sealed it and connected the pipe. And we had gotten the rolls of the pipe – big 300-foot rolls of plastic pipe that we had to haul up there on our backs because you can’t get a horse up there, it’s a 60% grade. And so my grandpa had always wanted to get that spring running down here and he decided that he was going to take the first roll starting from the spring down. And I told him, ‘Grandpa, there’s all my brothers and my dad and me… we can measure and you can drop it off at the lower part so you won’t have to carry it up.’ Because he was the oldest person in the group. Well, ‘No,’ he says, ‘I want to take my roll to the spring because I want to start it.’ So he did. He carried it up there, all the way up, and then we connected it. By that evening we had the water running here, we had connected it down. And he went to his house and filled his buckets with the spring water and took them home. The next morning is when he had his heart attack. A fatal heart attack. And it was caused by the exercise he did the previous day.

At this point in the story, Norman was quiet for several moments. Then he concluded,

“It’s those things, those sacrifices, that you take to heart when you do those kinds of improvements. It becomes a very integral part of your life.” He then listed for me all the things they had used the water from the spring for, from drinking water to irrigating crops to grazing livestock to swimming in the summer. It is this long-term relationship of sustaining and being sustained that gives the acequia such power for users like Norman. Over time, as the geographical and economic isolation of acequia communities has lessened, this relationship of sustenance has transformed from a material necessity to a value. Acequeros like Norman deeply cherish a sense of independence that derives from the acequia. Acequeros often echo the comment of one farmer and acequia organizer I talked to who recalled his grandfather instructing him, “Mijito [my son], if you can grow enough, if you can grow your own beans, if you can grow your own corn and your own calabaza [squash], the world can go to pot.”
Like the forms of human mutualism described by Rivera and colleagues (2014), the human-nonhuman mutualismo of the acequia is also coded in rituals and shared meanings. Perhaps the best example is the prayer that many acequieros say as they sow their fields in the springtime: “Uno para vos, uno para nos, y uno para los animalitos de Dios” (One for you, one for us, and one for all God’s little creatures). This prayer acknowledges that the act of planting and watering produces more than just crops for the farmer but rather cultivates both human and non-human life. Mutualismo is also expressed in the ritual of walking the ditch, as we did that day in the early spring with Norman and Johnny. Rodríguez (2006) has analyzed the way in which ritual processions in the Taos Valley trace a sacred irrigated landscape of holy and hydraulic sites in order to “promote harmonious relations among community members and with the divine power that controls nature, life, and death” (103). Similarly, the everyday act of walking the acequia traces a multispecies landscape, where acequieros engage in watching, listening, and correcting the flow of the water around and in response to the contingencies of parciantes’ needs and plant and animal lifeways, as well as the effects of weather and time, like crumbling banks, falling branches, and shifting boulders.

Importantly, this relationship of acequieros with other lifeways is fraught and fractious. One day an acequiero might gently remove the beginnings of a beaver dam to encourage the creature to build elsewhere; another day, s/he might bury dynamite in a gopher’s den. The mutualismo of the acequia is not peaceful coexistence, but rather a constant negotiation among diverse lifeways and the contingencies of nature and time. Yet in this ongoing negotiation, the acequia not only gathers these lives and natural forces together, but brings them into a long-term relationship of exchanging labor for
sustenance, cultivating a relationship of mutual dependence and support.

**Community Assemblages of Mutualismo**

The fraught but fruitful multispecies assemblage of the acequia mirrors the mutual dependency that structures relationships between parciantes along the acequia, as José described them in the previous chapter. As José explained in his conversation with Don Miguel, the flow of water depends on the participation of each parcianta, with the important effect that what each individual chooses to do with her/his water right has ramifications along the rest of the ditch. For this reason, water users are not truly private or individual, but linked with one another by the materiality of the acequia. Here too, as acequia scholars have documented (Arellano 2014; Rivera 1998; Rodríguez 2006), these relationships are difficult and are constantly being negotiated, sometimes existing in relative harmony and at other times, exploding into conflict and strife. These characteristics are often equally true of relationships among acequias within a stream system, where one individual acequia’s relations of mutual dependency are mirrored on a larger scale.

The Jemez river, from which Norman’s acequia is diverted, originates from the confluence of the East Fork Jemez River and San Antonio in a volcanic caldera north of Norman’s home in the village of Jemez Springs. The river runs south through Jemez Springs, where a two-hundred-year-old stone structure cuts off a branch of the water to form the head of Norman’s acequia. Nine miles further south, the river enters the villages of Cañon and Cañones, where other ditches are diverted from it. Over the next fifteen miles, it flows through the Native American Pueblo of Jemez, then the village of San Ysidro, then Zia and Santa Ana Pueblos, with diversions for irrigation in each place. This
landscape, as in other stream systems all over the state, was created by the Spanish colonization of the region, when Spanish and mestizo groups settled along the rivers and fought or negotiated with the Pueblos for a share of their water. Over time, these communities experienced periods of both peace and conflict with one another, with struggles occasionally erupting as a result of new or unforeseen pressures on the water supply.

For example, in the extremely dry summer of 1996, Jemez Pueblo to the south of Norman’s village made a “priority call,” which forced holders of more recent (i.e., junior) water rights to scale back their water use. Norman learned of the priority call on his acequia via a letter of injunction from a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) attorney. One winter afternoon two decades later, he related the story to me at his kitchen table:

It was in 1996. That was a real bad drought year and we just got a letter – they were shutting us off, period… and it included not only the acequias but it included all waters that we were using, including drinking water, municipal, industrial… those were all to be shut off because the Indians claimed prior rights. And we held a meeting on my lawn and said, ‘Well, what do we do now?’ [Someone said], ‘Oh, we’re gonna fight ‘em!’ That evening, I got a phone call from a friend of mine… and he says, ‘Did you know that there’s gonna be a big meeting at Jemez tomorrow morning regarding the injunction and what’s gonna happen to you guys?’ And I said, ‘No.’ And he says, ‘Well, there is.’ And so the next morning I went over there and I walked in on the meeting. The purpose of that was they were going to visit all of our acequias and the infrastructure, but they didn’t know where they were. So I offered, ‘Well, I know where every one of them are and I’ll call ahead to the mayordomos and the commissioners to meet us.’

And so there was Bureau of Reclamation people, Bureau of Indian Affairs people, lawyers, State Engineer people. It was a big caravan of people. We went to the first place and they got to meet some of the people that were mayordomos and commissioners and some of the Indian people that were with us, they went to school together and they got to talking and they were friends. And then we went to the next stop, the same thing. We came here, the same thing. And myself is the same thing, you know, because we were raised together.
So here we were, about noon, and I told them, ‘I suggest a change in the itinerary.’ I says, ‘You’ve already looked at our infrastructure, why can’t we go this afternoon and I’d like to see your diversion and your irrigation systems.’ And so they agreed and we had lunch and then turned around and went back. And we visited Jemez [Pueblo] and they explained that the river was dry. They had about enough water for one acequia that they were diverting. And from that point on, the river was dry. And then we went to Zia [Pueblo] and they had no water at all. They were running maybe a half inch of water in their concrete-lined ditches. And that was new to me! Because I had never had occasion to go visit their infrastructure. And then I said, ‘Well, you know these people are part of us and they don’t have water, and here we are up here and even though it’s a drought year, we weren’t having any trouble irrigating.’ We didn’t actually know the impact that it was causing to them down there. When that became obvious to me, then I says, ‘Well, why are we fighting? Why an injunction?’ And I says, ‘I think we can do something about it.’

What followed, according to Norman, was a process of reconciliation and negotiation.

The Pueblo leaders and non-Pueblo mayordomos and commissioners sat down to work out a rotation schedule according to which each community would get certain days of the week to use the water so that each community would get a share of whatever water was available. Over the course of this negotiation, Norman recalled, the participants shared their anger over the ongoing state water adjudication process that had begun years earlier, relating that they blamed one another for the hostility and anxiety the process had caused. He explained,

All of a sudden we realized, ‘Did you cause this?’ ‘No, did you?’ ‘We have a letter here and it says you are suing me.’ They says, ‘It’s the federal government that’s doing it on our behalf, but we’re not doing it.’ And actually that relationship built back up to where we were trusting of each other again and said, ‘Ok, well this is our destiny, we need to have a say of what we’re gonna do.

Here, Norman and other members of these communities sought to re-imagine and re-establish a relationship of mutualismo between Pueblo and non-Pueblo communities in this stream system that they believed had been disrupted state water law (i.e., the ranking
of water rights between senior and junior users) and water rights adjudication. The catalyst for this effort was the realization that, like parciantes on an individual acequia, the ways that these communities used water affected one another. As Norman describes, when he saw how little of the water was making it downriver, it was “a wake up call” about the realities of these communities’ mutual material dependence on one another. Moreover, both Pueblo and non-Pueblo communities shared a desire for autonomy from state structures of water governance, as well as a mutual suspicion of the agents of the state in the form of city lawyers and government officials.

Like the mutualismo among parciantes and between parciantes and the other lifeways of the acequia, the efforts of Norman and his neighbors to (re)establish a relationship of mutualismo was coded in shared meanings and rituals. In their conversations and reminiscences, they intentionally privileged the positive aspects of their histories – friendships, marriages, common histories and memories of living, working, and going to school together – over the painful histories of Spanish colonization and violence toward the Pueblos, as well as later periods of Nuevomexicano exclusion from the sovereignty of the Pueblos.\textsuperscript{11} As Norman describes, the first act of this relationship of mutualismo between Pueblo and non-Pueblo irrigators was to “walk the acequias” of each community in the stream system. Norman describes a sprawling group of acequeros and community leaders processing from one irrigation structure to another to familiarize themselves with the hydraulic landscapes of their neighbors and to witness

\textsuperscript{11} While the sovereignty of the Pueblos as Native nations is recognized by the federal government, it is part of the relationship that these nations are understood to have as “domestic dependents” of the United States, and therefore is very different from the sovereignty of other nation states. For this reason, while Pueblos may enjoy greater control over land, water, and other natural resource decisions than other citizens, they still experience systematic denials of their rights by the U.S. government.
the places where the water runs short or dries up. Like the processions described by Rodríguez (2006), this procession was intended to cultivate harmony by inscribing a new sacred landscape that encompassed both Pueblo and non-Pueblo sites.

In the years since this act of mutualismo, the relationship between Norman’s community and his Pueblo neighbors has undergone periods of relative harmony and recurring strife. The water-sharing agreement that they established to weather the drought in 1996 was basically successful. In a documentary video made by the University of New Mexico law school about the agreement several later (Voices of the Jemez River 2004), both Pueblo and non-Pueblo participants celebrated a sense that they were preserving both a shared existence and an irrigated landscape that they held dear. In part because of the success of the agreement, community leaders sought permission from the State Engineer to have the water rights adjudication of their stream system referred to a mediation process. However, dissatisfaction among non-Pueblo participants with what they perceived to be a biased and overly authoritative manner from the Department of Justice mediator resulted in the mediation falling apart. Almost ten years later, Norman and the Pueblo leaders decided to resume mediation, though it has proceeded only in fits and starts with numerous disagreements, disruptions, and delays. The last time I asked Norman about the mediation, twenty years after the first water-sharing agreement, he and one of the Pueblo governors were still attempting to re-start the process with a newly elected State Engineer. In this way, like the multispecies relationships along the acequia, the mutualismo between communities that the acequia structures is also fraught and difficult, and yet it also remains durable over time.

**Mutualismo, Solidarity, and Resilience**
In the cases I have described here, the acequia as a material assemblage of people, plants, animals, and landscapes structures a kind of relationship that I characterize as mutualismo. This relationship may exist between the landscape of the acequia and its parciantes on an acequia, among parciantes along the acequia, and also between parciantes of different acequias in the same stream system. On each of these scales, mutualismo is characterized by a material relationship of connection and dependency that originated in a context of isolation from state institutions of water governance and continues to exist as a means of preserving autonomy from those institutions. In these landscapes, mutualismo is cultivated by rituals that map common space and shared meanings that articulate an ethic of harmonious coexistence. At the same time, mutualismo is constantly threatened by conflict and division, though it appears to remain durable over time as long as participants are compelled to continually pick up the pieces of their relationship by the material connections and contingencies of the flow of water.

In the last section of this chapter, I explore the possibility that this relationship of mutualismo might extend to another scale: the formation of connections between geographically- and racially- or ethnically-disparate groups.

Environmental justice approaches to understanding human relationships to the environment (Adamson, Evans, and Stein 2002; Di Chiro 1998; Faber 1998; Peet and Watts 2004; Shiva 2006), which foreground questions of social justice in considerations of environmental change, exploitation, and degradation, often emphasize the creation of solidarity between and among environmentalists and groups that have been marginalized in structures of environmental inequality, such as racial or ethnic minority communities who have been disproportionately affected by pollution or environmental degradation.
The Indian environmental activist Vandana Shiva (Peña 1998a) has called for “an emergent politics of diversity” that marshals disparate marginalized communities into “subversive kin” (vii) in order to contest capital on a global scale. Shiva envisions subversive kin as capable of transforming human relationships with the environment. However, as I described in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, the desire for broad-based political solidarity around environmental issues exists in an often uneasy relationship with the complexities of individual human-environment relationships. Here, I describe two recent efforts by a group of acequia activists to create “subversive kin” among acequeros, the Native American protestors at Standing Rock, South Dakota, and the African-American families of Flint, Michigan.

In the past, successful connections have formed, though fleetingly, between acequeros and other groups around threats to water. The anthropologist and acequia scholar Sylvia Rodríguez (1987) has written about the formation of an alliance between Nuevomexicano and non-Nuevomexicano citizens in organizing against a proposed condominium project near the town of Taos that opponents saw as endangering their watershed. In a recent conversation, Rodríguez reflected on the partnership that took shape,

Looking back now, of course I see that these sort of Anglo-Hispano coalitions that formed around environmental issues, the ones that drew in Nuevomexicanos always had to do with water. And there were other environmental issues that Anglo environmentalists tried to involve Pueblo people or Nuevomexicanos in that they’re, you know, they’re not going to get involved. But if their water supply, whether it’s a spring or a river or a stock pond, and whether it’s water quality or quantity or transfer of water rights, that’s when they get involved.

As Rodríguez indicated, threats to water have sometimes brought Nuevomexicano
communities who are reluctant to participate in wider forms of organizing into alliances with others. Rodríguez describes such alliances as an “active and volatile interface” between water users. Moreover, these partnerships tended to disintegrate as soon as the issue they formed to address became less urgent.

However, as I described in Chapter 1, there has been a distinct strain of discourse and organizing among acequia activists from the NMAA and the South Valley acequias aimed at the formation of alliances with other racially- and socioeconomically-marginalized groups involved in struggles over water. For example, in the ethnographic vignette that began this chapter, these activists sought to mobilize acequieros from around the state to take action in support of a group of Native American protestors attempting to oppose the construction an underground oil pipeline called the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). In spring 2016, members and allies of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe had formed the Sacred Stone Camp near the site where the pipeline was to be dug underneath the Missouri River to transport oil from the Bakken shale oil fields in northwest North Dakota to an oil tank farm in Southern Illinois. The original route of the pipeline crossed the Missouri River near the town of Bismarck, North Dakota; however, in part because of citizens’ concerns about the effects of a potential leak on their water supply, the pipeline had been rerouted nearer to the Standing Rock Sioux reservation. The Standing Rock Sioux sued the Army Corps of Engineers, citing inadequate consultation with the tribe and noncompliance with the National Historic Preservation Act. The tribe maintained that the pipeline would disrupt sacred tribal sites, endanger their primary water source in the event of a leak, and infringe on land that was rightfully theirs under the 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie. Thousands of indigenous and non-
indigenous allies gathered at the Sacred Stone Camp and overflow camps throughout 2016, drawing international attention as protestors experienced violent confrontations with police, videos and images of which were spread widely by social media.

In October 2016, the New Mexico Acequia Association published an essay on its website and in its newsletter entitled, “Protecting Water: From Acequia’s [sic] to Standing Rock” (Appendix A; New Mexico Acequia Association 2016). In part, the essay grew out of a pilgrimage that two South Valley acequia organizers had made to the Sacred Stone Camp as members of a group of Aztec dancers to pray and dance with the Standing Rock Sioux. In the essay, these activists, along with the leadership of the NMAA, call for a sense of unity and shared purpose around the protection of water. The essay states:

Here in New Mexico, there is a long tradition of being caretakers and protectors of the water in the arid environment we call home. “El Agua es Vida/Water is Life” is a universal concept that echoes the fundamental importance of water to survival. In acequia communities, we view water as a don divino, or divine gift, and as a common resource that sustains all life.

The essay thus establishes both acequia users and Standing Rock protestors as participants in a transcendent, global understanding of water as a shared resource. It goes on to call the Standing Rock protest “the rise of one of the biggest collective actions to protect water” and the galvanizing force behind “a movement that has unified indigenous nations and allies to protect water.” It advocates that alliances be established among indigenous and “land-based” people around the world and compares the Standing Rock protests with a number of conflicts over water in New Mexico, including protests against the proposed Santolina housing development near the South Valley of Albuquerque (see
Chapter 3) and concerns about the contamination of water in Northern New Mexico from the Los Alamos National Laboratories (see Chapter 6). The essay concludes, “In keeping with our mission, the NMAA supports access to clean water for generations to come for all people.”

In the weeks after the essay was published in the NMAA newsletter, acequia activists and allies shared it widely on social media. A group of youth involved in *Sembrando Semillas* (Sowing Seeds), an NMAA initiative to teach young people the practice and ethics of acequia irrigation, followed postings of the essay with a video voicing support for the protestors at Standing Rock, which was shared over 30 times on social media by individuals and other community organizations with comments including, “Thank you for keeping our traditions,” “Plant seeds, not pipelines,” and “Beautiful group of young people dedicated to Mother Earth!” Acequieros continued to post about Standing Rock in the following months, especially as newly-elected President Donald Trump took steps to accelerate the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. Many of the same acequieros who had circulated the essay to Standing Rock posted live video of the Standing Rock protestors dismantling and evacuating their camps on social media, debating whether or not the protestors should have left peacefully and vowing not to stop watching or forget. While interest in Standing Rock was exhibited mostly by young acequia and environmental justice activists, even some of the older acequieros who are generally less likely to get involved with non-local issues expressed concern about the way the Standing Rock protestors were treated, quietly donating a few dollars and wondering, as one gentleman commented to me, whether “we’ll be next.”

Similarly, around the same time, some of the acequia activists of the NMAA
circulated another essay advocating solidarity with the families of Flint, Michigan who had been adversely affected by a money-saving effort during the spring of 2014 to switch the water supply of the city of Flint from treated Lake Huron water to water from the Flint River. As has been well-documented in the press, despite a bad taste and smell that Flint residents immediately noticed in the water along with mounting evidence that the water contained extremely high levels of lead, city and state officials had continued to insist that the water was safe to drink for over a year. A federal state of emergency was declared in Flint in January 2016. Nevertheless, citizens of Flint, well over half of whom are African-American, must still use bottled or filtered water as the municipal water supply remains unsafe to drink.

In response to the ongoing water crisis in Flint, Beata Tsosie-Peña – an indigenous activist who has worked on a number of environmental justice projects in New Mexico, including the Food & Seed Sovereignty Alliance with the NMAA – wrote a letter for the website Truthout, entitled “Environmental Racism: A Letter from New Mexico to Flint” (Appendix B; Tsosie-Peña 2016). Published online in March 2016, the letter was circulated at events and via email lists and social media among several young acequia activists from the NMAA and some of the South Valley acequias. In the letter, Tsosie-Peña expresses deep empathy with the plight of the families in Flint based in the similar environmental injustices experienced by indigenous people in New Mexico and elsewhere. Tsosie-Peña writes,

Dear Families of Flint,

I know that you might be angry or frustrated that Flint’s water crisis is fading from national attention. In this fast-paced news environment, the devastation that families in Flint, Michigan are facing is beginning to fade from front-page news. Yet Flint’s residents are still dealing with the short and long-term effects of
contaminated water… I know this story, because I have lived it too. In New Mexico, Native communities like mine have been experiencing a similar problem for months but have not received much attention in mainstream media.

Tsosie-Peña goes on to describe the August 2015 spill of contaminated water from the Gold King Mine in Colorado, which leaked poisonous minerals into the Animas and San Juan Rivers. She calls the Gold King Mine spill “one of many instances in a long history of environmental racism against Native Peoples.” She contends that oil and gas production, uranium mining, and the creation and storage of nuclear weapons in northern New Mexico are not only evidence of a “continuing policy of genocide, a loss that Native Peoples have endured for centuries,” but also “part of a shared history with other communities of color and poor people in the United States.” Tsosie-Peña explains, “Just like Flint, just like in Detroit, poor people of color are considered collateral damage for big business.” Tsosie-Peña expresses a sense of kinship with the residents of Flint, stating,

As someone who has experienced ongoing environmental racism, and witnessed my elders and beloved landscapes survive through the relentless attacks, I want to offer solidarity and support to our brothers and sisters in Flint… I want the families of Flint to know: You are not alone. Even though we are miles and states apart, we are in community together.

Significantly, Tsosie-Peña speaks to Flint based not only on a shared history of capitalist exploitation, but also from a future perspective of survival. After assuring the families of Flint that they are not alone in their struggle, she offers detailed advice based on her own and her community’s experiences in New Mexico. She suggests that Flint citizens create cross-community partnerships, build community within their town, support the leadership
of women specifically, and find ways to make their voices heard. For each suggestion, she offers examples and encouragement from Native activists. Finally, she concludes,

Mamas and families of Flint – we see you. It’s up to us to recognize that even separated by geography, we are more similar than different and that we face the same struggles against racism and injustice. Regardless of our identity or where we call home, it’s up to us to stand together, organize, oppose harm and oppression, and continue to create safe, beloved communities for all our families.

Like NMAA’s essay about Standing Rock, the letter to Flint was circulated by acequia activists and other environmental justice organizers primarily on social media.

In both of these documents, the writers engaged in what Althusser (1971) called “interpellation:” summoning or calling into being a particular set of subjects through the act of addressing them. In Chapter 4, I described how the discourses of acequia organizers about the value of water and ethics of water management interpellate a “fluid public” of acequia users that, I have argued in this chapter, are connected by a material and symbolic relationship of mutualismo. Similarly, the creation and circulation of these documents represents an effort by some acequia activists to imagine and interpellate a wider public based on mutualismo among acequieros, protestors at Standing Rock, and families in Flint, Michigan.

Like the mutualismo of the acequia, the Standing Rock and Flint essays imagine a relationship that emerges from an affect of isolation. While physical distance from the centers of power is no longer relevant in these places (or, for that matter, in the acequia communities of New Mexico) in the contemporary moment, the citizens of Standing Rock and Flint are isolated by their abandonment under the forces of neoliberal capitalism. The environmental anthropologist Laura Pulido (2016) describes the “racial
capitalism” at work in Flint as a process wherein “lives are so devalued by capitalism based on blackness and poverty that they are subordinated to fiscal needs” (1). In both Flint and Standing Rock, the lives of poor and racially marginalized citizens are understood to be less important than the functions of capitalism, resulting in their abandonment by capital, by the state, and by more privileged (i.e., White, wealthy) citizens. As the anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) has described, material and symbolic abandonment of less valued citizens is characteristic of the contemporary period in capitalist governance that she calls “late liberalism.” Nuevomexicano and indigenous communities in New Mexico are familiar with both historical and contemporary social abandonments, which takes material form in the continual chipping away of education, economic opportunity, and the social safety net by the neoliberal state, and are reinforced by negative representations, inattention from more privileged citizens and the media, and chronotopic marginalizations by the state, as I described in Chapters Two and Three. The writers of the Standing Rock and Flint essays are oriented from a position of empathy, positioning themselves as witnesses to the events in Standing Rock and Flint with a unique capacity for understanding the experience of social abandonment in both the past and the present. Tsosie-Peña begins and ends her letter to Flint by acknowledging the sense of “fading from national attention,” of being forgotten by the rest of the world, and assuring her audience, “we see you.” Similarly, this sentiment was echoed by acequia activists who made themselves present, both physically and via social media, to witness the dismantling and evacuating of the Standing Rock protest camps.

While the mutualismo of the acequia originally grew out of physical isolation, the
examples from Standing Rock and Flint attest to the possibility that mutualismo can also grow out of social isolation resulting from abandonment by corporations, the media, and the institutions of government. Most importantly, a shared affect of isolation can create mutualismo across significant divides of space, identity, and even political orientation. For example, this shared affect also appeared to be a major driver of one of the most surprising and effective alliances to come out of the Standing Rock protest – the arrival of U.S. military veterans who attempted to protect the protestors from the police. In a 2017 article in *The Guardian*, a U.S. Navy veteran and a Mescalero Apache protestor describe their similar experiences of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder. Speaking about their veteran allies, the protestor concludes, “they finally feel like they are understood” (Levin 2017). Here, these seemingly strange bedfellows were brought together by their shared experience of trauma and social abandonment. This scalability of mutualismo is possible in part because empathy is not only based on shared experiences, but on the ability to imagine and discern the feeling state of others (Halpern 2001; Rosaldo 1993). In the context of environmental justice, the Latin American anthropologist Arturo Escobar (2005) has observed, “It is essential to recognize the importance of economic factors and their structural determinants. But just as crucial as the reconstruction of economies – and indelibly linked to it – is the reconstitution of meanings at all levels” (301). As Escobar describes, struggles over the environment and natural resources are not only about material realities, but about the meanings attached to them. Similarly, hopeful acts of alliance like those I have described are not based merely (or even primarily, in the case of the veterans who came to protect Standing Rock protestors) on the recognition of similar environmental and economic circumstances, but
also on key shared meanings that coalesce into “consensual communities” (Rivera et al. 2014, 447) in concrete moments, like the Standing Rock protest. In ecofeminist thought, as I describe in Chapter 6, such communities are the product of what the feminist scholar Christina Holmes (2016) calls a “movement of affect,” which “connects people to each other and to the earth” (44; see also O’Laughlin 1993).

Secondly, the attempt to create mutualismo with Flint and Standing Rock is based not only on a response to shared isolation but also on the desire to maintain autonomy from the institutions that abandoned them. Like the mutualismo of the acequia, which formed out of the need for sustenance in an arid landscape and then transformed into a method of independence from the water governance of the state, the efforts of acequia activists to create an alliance among “water protectors” also took the form of flows of money and supplies, such as a “wish list” of camping equipment, medical supplies, and warm clothing that was set up through an online store for supporters to purchase and send directly to Standing Rock protestors. Additionally, they used social media as a method of drawing attention to water conflicts that resists dependence on traditional media to spread information. In these ways, the acequia activists imagine a mutualismo that exists across geographic space, through which communities engaged in water struggles can both relieve the feeling of isolation and support the autonomy of their allies through aid in the form of material resources and assistance.

This imagined mutualismo is also coded in rituals and shared meanings. Acequia organizers joined indigenous people from all over the country in travelling to Standing Rock to offer dances and prayers. In her letter to Flint, Tsosie-Peña exhorts the families of Flint to form “spiritual networks through traditional ceremony and prayers of
forgiveness and healing to our shared waters of the world,” as well as the creation of communities within Flint to “share stories, educate each other and organize.” The Standing Rock and Flint essays circulate shared discourses, such as the concept of protestors as “water protectors” opposed to profit motives and corporate interests, a moniker that became nearly ubiquitous in discussions among Standing Rock activists and on social media posts throughout 2016. Similarly, in the letter to Flint, Tsosie-Peña specifically identifies “women doctors, leaders and concerned mothers” in Flint as enacting the roles of “life givers, seed savers and caretakers of water.” Relatedly, as in the Facebook post described at the beginning of this chapter, it is common to see New Mexican water activists employ the English, Spanish, and Lakota translations of the phrase “water is life” (Water is life, el agua es vida, mni wiconi) to signal the shared meaning of the phrase in opposition to profit-driven water uses. Similarly, concepts about the sacredness of water, water as a human right, and the interconnectedness of human life and the environment are shared and offered across contexts of water struggle.

These attempts to construct symbolic and material mutualismo with those involved with both Standing Rock and Flint offers acequia activists a way to increase the contemporary relevance and importance of their local struggles in a time when most state and corporate actors see acequia rights as being of minor significance and mostly already adjudicated. Similarly, acequia organizers seek to garner public attention and material support for acequias by depicting them as part of environmental and social justice efforts. Such efforts offer a potentially new and exciting politicized vocabulary for meaningfully articulating the concerns of acequeros. However, in explicitly addressing Standing Rock and Flint, these letters are not merely a guise for these local purposes. I suggest that in
imagining a public of water protectors that includes groups like those at Standing Rock and Flint, the letters also imagine a form of mutualismo that extends beyond New Mexico and, like the mutualismo of the acequia, might cultivate long-term resilience under conditions of capitalist exploitation and social abandonment.

Importantly, such a coalition of water protectors shaped around the customs of mutualismo still exists primarily in the realm of acequia activists’ hopes and desires. While the Standing Rock and Flint essays were circulated among acequia activists, there is as yet no particular evidence of their lasting effect either among acequieros or other water protectors. Moreover, while the opposition of Standing Rock and Flint protestors has remained remarkably persistent, it is impossible to know whether expressions of solidarity from groups like the acequia activists will contribute to their resilience. In the context of indigenous language revitalization practices, the linguistic anthropologist Erin Debenport (2017) argues that the invocation of an imagined future audience “makes possible the continuation of hopeful projects.” In being unable to ensure the uptake of these efforts to create solidarity with other groups, the imagined mutualismo of these essays is necessarily uncertain and at risk of failure. Yet, this uncertainty makes their writing and circulation an act of hope (Crpanzano 2003; Debenport 2015; Miyazaki 2006).

These essays imagine a mutualismo among allied groups united around environmental issues that is not based only on identity or economic structures of inequality, but rather is formed in moments of coalescence around both material circumstances and shared meanings. Just as the mutual aid societies of turn-of-the-century New Mexico were formed in response to both the isolation and oppression
created by the U.S. conquest, this mutualismo is formed in response to particular forms of abandonment and oppression created by neoliberal capitalism and governance. In this sense, it can be seen as what Anna Tsing (2015) calls a “disturbance-based ecology” (5). In other words, mutualismo is a form of life that springs up, not in spite of capitalist expansion and exploitation, but because of it. It represents a method of “collaborative survival” (19) in response to the ruins produced by capitalism. Alliances like these are also what environmental anthropologist Donald Moore and colleagues (2003) call “[n]ovel rearticulations of race and nature,” which involve “new ways of imagining identity and belonging and the cultivation of new forms of political community” (47). These rearticulations of the social and environmental wreckages of capitalist exploitation problematize conventional ways of understanding the relationships of marginalized groups to the environment. Importantly, they also represent new and potentially transformative relationships between groups of people.

While solidarity with groups involved in contemporary and widely publicized environmental injustices offers acequia activists a way to interpellate other acequeros as participants in a broad-based environmental justice movement, I argue that the relationships that acequia communities have developed to one another and to the environment over a long history of material and symbolic isolation are a model of political participation and collaborative survival in a context of geographic, economic, and social abandonment. The traditions of New Mexican mutualismo, including autonomy borne of isolation and shared rituals and meanings, and their echoes in the letters to Flint and Standing Rock offer insights into how such forms of collaborative survival coalesce and remain resilient over time. This mutualismo reaches across both
time (from the mutualist traditions of the past to the imagined alliances of the future) and space (from New Mexico to Standing Rock to Flint and elsewhere). In the final chapter of this dissertation, I discuss how an alliance between indigenous environmental activists and acequia organizers is putting forward another model of interconnectedness, political participation, and collaborative survival centered on the bodies and leadership of women.
The Earth community stands at a defining moment in time. Injustices, poverty, ignorance, corruption, crime and violence have deepened and our Earth Mother is suffering. These offenses have led to values that have become hurtful and a destructive way of living.

We believe that women are sacred, unique human beings of the Earth. We believe that female and male energy is found within the other. We believe that all people belong to one earth community as a human family.

- Preamble, Las Mujeres Hablan (Women Speak) Women’s Declaration for New Mexico, 2010

In October, 1974, the International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP) – an independent non-governmental organization founded in 1928 to provide research and guidance on radiation exposure and its consequences – outlined a set of physical parameters that could be used to calculate the effects of exposure to various forms and amounts of radiation. Called “Reference Man,” the parameters were updated from a previous set of guidelines (“Standard Man”) that were defined after World War II in the context of increasingly common use of radioactive materials. The 1974 ICRP report states, “Although individuals vary considerably…, it is important to have a well-defined reference individual for estimation of radiation dose. Such a reference individual is convenient for routine cases of estimation of dose when the levels are sufficiently low that individual differences may be ignored” (“Report of the Task Group on Reference Man” 1974, 1). The remainder of the report exhaustively details the physical specifications of Reference Man, an individual “being between 20-30 years of age,
weighing 70 kg, is 170 cm in height, and lives in a climate with an average temperature of from 10 to 20 C. He is a Caucasian and is a Western European or North American in habitat and custom” (4). While Reference Man is technically hermaphroditic for purposes of calculating radiation exposures on both male and female reproductive organs, its non-reproductive physical and health features (i.e., body mass, cancer risk) are those of a male.

In 2008, in response to an inquiry from then-Senator Barack Obama and Congressman Henry Waxman, the Chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, a representative of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) asserted that, “EPA does not believe in continued use of Reference Man, and generally stopped using it in 1990. EPA continues to update and improve its age- and gender-specific models in light of continuing research” (Meyers 2008). However, despite EPA’s assurance that exposure recommendations now take age and gender into more careful consideration, some scientists and radiation safety advocates assert that many of its regulations still appear to rely on Reference Man as the standard to calculate radiation dosages and their risks (e.g., Makhijani 2009).

In the spring of 2015, a group of organizations called the New Mexico Food and Seed Sovereignty Alliance, which includes the New Mexico Acequia Association (NMAA), Tewa Women United (TWU), Traditional Native American Farmers Association (TNAFA), and Honor Our Pueblo Existence (HOPE), hosted an annual seed exchange event in the village of Peñasco, north of Santa Fe. While Azteca dancers drummed and sang around a small fire in the dirt parking lot outside the community center, farmers and acequieros from around the state gathered around an altar of woven
blankets arranged on the floor in the form of a cross to represent the four directions – North, South, East, and West. One by one, they presented seeds they had brought from home – corn, squash, melons, amaranth, garbanzo beans, sunflowers – relating stories about where and how the seeds had come to them from friends and relatives. Young Native American girls in traditional dress carried the seeds in tiny woven baskets in a circle around the altar before gently placing them on the side of the altar that represented the direction from which they had come. Once all the seeds had been set on the altar, members of the Native American pueblo of Santa Clara performed a rain dance to bless the seeds. Then, a handful of men from nearby Catholic cofradías, or lay brotherhoods, prayed and sang a Spanish alabado, or praise song. After the blessings were completed, event attendees got up and begin to wander around the long plastic folding tables set around the sides of the community center where the farmers had laid out their seeds. For the next hour, attendees chatted with one another, examined seeds, asked questions, and filled little envelopes and plastic bags with the seeds they wanted to take before sitting down to a lunch of enchiladas and salad.

After lunch, an indigenous activist from a group called Las Mujeres Hablan (Women Speak), presented a life-size cardboard figure in the form of a pregnant, Native American woman. Depicted in profile, holding her pregnant belly in her arms, with a long dark braid falling over her shoulder, the figure represented a counterpart to Reference Man. How can we be satisfied with understanding the effects of radiation on a generic white man, the activist asked, when women and infants are the ones who are most vulnerable to toxicity? She went on to describe how the threat of environmental contaminants in the ground, water, plants, and animals is increased for Native and land-
based women who hunt, fish, grow their own food, and rely on rivers and springs for water. Further, she asserted that women’s bodies contain the seeds of genetic memory. She concluded that because a pregnant, indigenous, land-based woman is most threatened, both physically and culturally, by environmental contamination from radiation, she should be the new Reference Man.

---

In this chapter, I examine this new imaginary of Reference Man as a pregnant, indigenous, land-based woman as an example of the ways that women’s bodies are both sites and metaphors of environmental threats and environmental connection in debates over water contamination and protection in New Mexico. I ask how discourses of gender function in the current social and political projects of acequia activists, and how they challenge or are reconciled with older forms and patterns of acequia practice and organizing. To investigate this question, I discuss the involvement of acequia organizers in efforts to protect indigenous and Nuevomexicano communities from the effects of nuclear technology emanating from Los Alamos National Laboratory, including Las Mujeres Hablan, a multi-ethnic coalition of female organizers in Northern New Mexico, and Communities for Clean Water, a network of community organizations focused on water safety and access. I examine the ways that discourses of gender operate to counter dominant methods of measuring and minimizing contamination of land and water with an alternative prototype of vulnerability and protection. I elucidate this prototype through the analysis of ritual spaces involving acequia organizers and their allies, which foreground women’s bodies and analogize them with water itself as both protective and in need of protection. At the same time, I explore how these discourses of environmental
health and contamination centered on women’s bodies are articulated in the context of a larger shift toward women in acequia leadership, a domain that was almost entirely male until very recently.

Like the discourses about water protectors and environmental racism described in the previous chapter, I argue that the concept of the female body as both a particular site of environmental injustice and a privileged source of interpersonal and environmental connection, which is circulated prominently by indigenous and Nuevomexicano women activists in New Mexico, represents a potentially emergent social and political space for some acequia organizers. Ultimately, I suggest that the expanding participation of women in acequia organizing and women’s bodies in acequia discourses about water contamination and safety may constitute an emerging fluid public (see Chapter 4) within acequia organizing that counters contemporary environmental insecurity with an oppositional model of human and nonhuman intersubjectivity and care. While this construction has inherent limitations, which I describe, I explore the possibility that it offers acequia activists an emergent and transformational model of mutualismo (Chapter 5) in the face of present environmental uncertainty.

**Women and Nature**

The particular relationship of women to the natural world is a topic that is fraught and full of tensions. In her article, “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?,” the anthropologist Sherry Ortner (1974) theorized that the key to women’s condition of subordination to men is the universally-held idea that women are physiologically, socially, and psychically closer to nature than men, who are associated purely with the domain of culture. According to Ortner, women are thought to embody a kind of
ambiguous intermediate stage between nature and culture, which places them in a
subordinate position to men the world over. She concludes that women must strengthen
their association with culture through “projects of creativity and transcendence” (87) to
achieve equal footing with men. Ortner’s perspective reflects the work of generations of
feminist scholars who have also linked women’s inferior status to their (real or imagined)
connection to nature, particularly by the constraints of reproduction (e.g., de Beauvoir
1953; Firestone 1970).

In contrast, beginning in the 1970s, feminists like Francoise d’Eubonne (1974),
who first used the term “ecofeminism,” valorized the connection between women and
nature. These thinkers celebrated the idea of women’s privileged, often spiritual,
relationship with the natural world. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, ecofeminists explored
the particular ways that women are structurally oriented to care for the environment
through their roles as farmers, gatherers of plants and seeds, and caregivers (Mies and
Shiva 1997). In their focus on women as environmental actors, these perspectives often
essentialize gender differences, as well as the relationship between women and nature. By
doing so, ecofeminist perspectives can re-inscribe the female/male and nature/culture
binaries that they purport to resist. Ecofeminists have also been critiqued for mystifying
and idealizing the relationship between women and nature, rather than confronting the
material inequality that women experience in diverse parts of the world (Biehl 1991;
Gaard 2011). In response to such critiques, some ecofeminist scholars have focused on
deconstructing perspectives that reinforce the binary of woman/man and nature/culture.
In contrast, they emphasize the intersubjectivity of humans with one another and with the
nonhuman world (King 1983; Plumwood 1986; Warren 1997). As the feminist scholar
Christina Holmes (2016) as pointed out, these thinkers anticipate the current turn in political ecology away from anthropocentrism and toward understandings of shared materiality with the nonhuman world.

Despite their limitations, many of these approaches offer a corrective to environmental justice perspectives that focus entirely on racial and class inequalities while neglecting to explore the gendered burden of environmental degradation and disaster (Kirk 1997; Stein 2004; Warren 1997). Studies have shown that women across the globe are disproportionately impacted by environmental inequalities, such as food shortages and proximity to pollutants, while also having less access to environmental decision-making (see Bell 2016 for a review of the literature on women’s experiences of environmental injustice; see Sultana 2011 for the emotional dimensions of these experiences). At the same time, women tend to be prominently involved in the leadership of environmental justice movements (Bell 2016; Buckingham and Kulcur 2009). Prominent examples include the work of Dolores Huerta with the United Farm Workers (UFW) and the environmentalist and one-time Green Party vice presidential candidate Winona LaDuke. As I will describe in this chapter, the gendered discourses of some acequia activists foreground the particular positionality of women, both in reference to the disproportionate effects of contamination from nuclear technology and within a web of relations with the human and nonhuman worlds.

These facts highlight the need for intersectional approaches to environmental justice that recognize race, class, and gender. Holmes (2016) proposes that renewed attention be paid to Chicana and Mexican-American feminists, who understand the female body to be a site of oppression, a node of physical and spiritual connection to
human and nonhuman others, and a source of pleasure (Anzaldúa 1999; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; Sandoval 2000). These perspectives attempt to disrupt female/male and nature/culture binaries, while still exploring the ecological consciousness of women in relation to their particular natural and cultural landscapes. Holmes (2016) coins the term “borderlands environmentalism” to describe this ecological consciousness, which “exceeds the frames” (40) of mainstream environmentalism, ecofeminism, and environmental justice. Similarly, in this chapter, the gendered discourses of acequia activists are situated within a geographic and cultural borderland, where indigenous and Nuevomexicano ecological consciousnesses intermingle while they also attempt to contest the dominant logics of environmental contamination and safety circulated by Los Alamos National Laboratory, which determine what kinds of environmental effects are visible to and addressable by the state (Scott 1998).

**Los Alamos National Laboratory and the Blurring of the Human and the Nonhuman**

Los Alamos National Laboratory was built during the second World War on a plateau between and to the west of Santa Fe and Española. The site was chosen for its isolation, so that the Manhattan Project could be conducted in secret and far away from any major population centers. In reality, the massive military-industrial center was built on land that had been occupied and valued by both Native American pueblos and Nuevomexicano communities for generations. As scholars of Northern New Mexico have described (Kosek 2006; Masco 2006; Trujillo 2009), the lab’s construction represented “a new moment in the colonial history of the Southwest” (Masco 2006, 101), as the technoscientific needs of the U.S. government superseded the rights of New Mexico’s
pre-American and non-White populations.

In the years since its founding, a relationship of dependency has developed between the lab and the surrounding communities. The lab is the largest employer in Northern New Mexico, providing a path to a middle-class lifestyle for generations of Native American and Nuevomexicano families. For many, a job at the lab not only means stable employment, but also access to other benefits, such as the opportunity for lab employees to send their children to Los Alamos public schools, which are better funded by local donors than the schools in neighboring communities, or a yearly scholarship contest that sends underprivileged students to college. In the decades after the lab’s construction, community members occupied only blue collar jobs, while all the higher-wage positions were filled by White employees. Today, Native Americans and Nuevomexicanos make up a larger proportion of the lab’s scientific and technical staff, though the highest-level scientists and executives still tend to be from outside New Mexico. Still, the wealth gap between Los Alamos and the surrounding counties is vast. According to the U.S. census, the median household income in Los Alamos County from 2011-2015 was $101,934, compared to $36,098 for Rio Arriba County, $58,982 for Sandoval County, and $54,315 for Santa Fe County. This gap is deeply felt by members of these communities. For example, a friend from Española told me about an Española High School vs. Los Alamos High School basketball game she had attended where, after the Española team scored a basket, the Los Alamos students chanted, “It’s alright, it’s ok, you’ll be working for us some day!” Often called the “City on a Hill,” Los Alamos is thus felt to be socially and culturally distant from the rest of Northern New Mexico, even as it is embedded in Northern New Mexico by flows of labor and money.
As the anthropologists Jake Kosek (2006) and Joseph Masco (2006) have described, the attitudes of many Northern New Mexicans toward the lab are ambivalent. While Los Alamos represents the unwelcome incursion of outside forces, it also sustains much of the region’s economy. At the same time, assertions that the lab is absolutely indispensable to the survival of Northern New Mexico communities is not only overstated, as Native American and Nuevomexicano citizens can and do find employment in many other places, but also a key discourse to justify the lab’s continuing presence. Kosek describes a public relations officer’s claims of the lab’s indispensability to the wellbeing of the region, pointing out that such claims assume that economic benefit “functions as the justification for any negative environmental and social impacts” (242). In fact, these impacts are extensive, ranging from the dangerous traffic resulting from lab commuters to the social and cultural hostility between communities to the real and imagined effects of nuclear technology on the land, water, and plants of Northern New Mexico.

In an essay for the inter-faith environmental advocacy organization GreenFaith, New Mexican indigenous activist and partner of the NMAA, Beata Tsosie-Peña (n.d.) writes,

In the western region of our Tewa world, in our beloved Jemez Plateau, site of a dormant super-volcano, and home to numerous ancestral, cultural sites, is where man first birthed the atomic bomb at Los Alamos National Laboratories (LANL)… This forcible act imposed a culture of violence on our soils, seeds, air, waters, future generations, and spiritual existence that continues to enact harm to this day. (1-2)

The effects of the nuclear experiments at the lab on the land and natural resources of Northern New Mexico from the Manhattan Project to the present day are only beginning
to be discovered and documented. Many strange and alarming environmental effects have been noted by lab scientists and others, from high concentrations of the radioactive isotope strontium-90 found in a common shrub throughout the region (Masco 2006, 33) to elevated levels of potentially dangerous chemicals including arsenic, perchlorate, RDX, and hexavalent chromium found in the soil of a nearby community (Drewniany 2015). In 2009, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and National Center for Environmental Health released the first report of the Los Alamos Historical Document Retrieval and Assessment (LAHDRA) Project, an effort to find and review the lab’s records about releases of toxic substances into the environment and surrounding communities. The initial report took a decade to complete as investigators encountered numerous bureaucratic roadblocks, missing records, security clearance issues, and a complete shutdown during the Cerro Grande forest fire of May 2000, which forced the evacuation of the town of Los Alamos and threatened or destroyed several structures at the labs. The completed report documents several instances of radioactive and chemical releases in amounts that had not been accurately reported to the public (Widner 2009).

While testing has been and continues to be done by Los Alamos scientists on radiation amounts and their health effects in the water, air, and plants of the region, community members are often distrustful of the lab’s official reports. As the anthropologist Joseph Masco (2006) recounts, this mistrust is in part a legacy of the culture of secrecy that governed the lab during the Cold War. For example, official protocols for one famously irresponsible set of nuclear experiments designated the land northeast of the lab, which is occupied by a number of Native American pueblos and the town of Española, as “unpopulated areas” toward which fallout could be safely directed,
while keeping the tests secret from residents (137; see also Kosek 2006, 248). People who live near the labs tell anecdotes of strange lights and explosions and wonder about the high rates of thyroid and other cancers among their family and friends. These experiences are part of what Masco calls the “nuclear uncanny,” a sense of disorientation and unease stemming from the ways that nuclear materials appear to “[blur] the distinction between the animate and the inanimate, and between the natural and the supernatural” (30). Similarly, Kosek characterizes the unseen, difficult-to-detect, and frightening effects of nuclear radiation in residents’ bodies and the natural environment as a kind of “haunting,” explaining, “Living next to a deeply secretive, historically deceptive nuclear research complex that produces a highly volatile, mobile, odorless, tasteless, invisible substance that is unimaginably enduring and deadly in its toxicity blurs the traditional boundaries between material and imaginary” (258). However, while these experiences of alienation and unease are part of life in Northern New Mexico, for many of the female Native American and Nuevomexicano activists that I describe in the remainder of this chapter, the blurring of boundaries between animate and inanimate, ecological and spiritual, and human and nonhuman bodies is actually familiar terrain on which they believe they are uniquely positioned to act.

**The Women Speak: Contamination, Vulnerability, and Care**

A major role of Los Alamos National Laboratory as a scientific institution of the U.S. government is to regulate scientific discourse (Masco 2006), determining what kind of scientific information is recognizable and verifiable (Scott 1998). In this context, residents of Northern New Mexico are often unable to investigate or assuage their concerns about the possible contamination of land, water, and natural resources by
nuclear materials as the lab not only constitutes the source of their concerns but also closely guards its own authority over the production and dissemination of information about contamination. For example, while the LAHDRA project was critical of the lab’s record of concealing information about radioactive and chemical releases, it was still sponsored by the Department of Energy, the same federal agency that operates the lab, ensuring that the public release of information about the lab remained under the control of the U.S. government.

However, in recent years, land and water activists in Northern New Mexico have been engaged in several efforts to extract information from the lab in order to hold it accountable for the physical and environmental health effects of decades of nuclear experimentation. Las Mujeres Hablan, a group of women leaders from the NMAA and several other community organizations in Northern New Mexico, collaborated with the LAHDRA project in interviewing community members and former lab employees who were affected by radioactive releases, holding public meetings, and providing community feedback on the project’s activities. For several years around the release of the LAHDRA report, the women of Las Mujeres Hablan were a conspicuous presence at public meetings of all kinds having to do with the labs and their impact on the surrounding communities and environment. For example, in preparation for a 2010 hearing by the New Mexico Environment Department on a permit to allow open burning of high explosive hazardous waste, Las Mujeres Hablan members interviewed experts on the dangers of open burning and presented their testimony during public comment periods, eventually contributing to the denial of the permit. They also demanded the establishment of an information repository in Northern New Mexico that would make information about
hazardous waste from the lab available to the public in physical form. Contending that it was not enough to make information available for download from the lab website, Marian Naranjo, a member of Las Mujeres Hablan and founder of a community-based environmental health organization called Honor Our Pueblo Existence (HOPE), argued that a physical repository was a matter of “restorative justice for the downwind communities of the Española Valley.”

The involvement of acequia organizers in these efforts have, unsurprisingly, been especially focused on the effects of contamination from the labs on ground and surface water. In 2008, as part of a related coalition of environmental and community health organizations called Communities for Clean Water (CCW), activists settled a Clean Water Act lawsuit against the lab for contamination of ground and surface water. In 2010, they successfully petitioned the EPA to determine that lab activities were contaminating storm water runoff, which required the lab to obtain a Clean Water Act permit. They continue to pressure the lab to monitor and report radioactive and chemical levels in the Río Grande and other water sources and are regularly present at public meetings and hearings regarding the lab.

Through these efforts, acequia organizers and their partners claim to “amplify[y] the voices of the diverse, multicultural communities impacted by LANL… to become the ‘vocal majority’ and hold local, state, and federal regulators accountable to their responsibility to provide clean water and protect the health and well-being of communities” (“How We Protect Community Waters” 2014). To do this, the CCW website clarifies that CCW “use[s] legal action, supported by scientific evidence” to pressure the lab and government agencies to enact environmental and community health
reforms. Importantly, all of these projects operate within the dominant logics of the lab’s institutional authority over scientific discourses, including the relative amounts of radionuclides and chemicals that are deemed safe and unsafe, as well as the methods for measuring and monitoring those amounts. Moreover, the remedies to contamination are also located within the established frameworks of government regulations and permitting. However, even as they participate within the existing structures of governance pertaining to environmental and community health, the women leaders of these organizations are also pushing back against these structures. In the introduction to a special summary of the LAHDRA report that was produced for Northern New Mexico community members, Las Hijas de las Margaritas write,

As we continue to speak, we are also engaged in integrating the scientific findings [of the LAHDRA report] with what we know in our hearts. We feel the on-going acute and chronic harm. For decades the Peoples living in the shadows of the nuclear weapons industry have been told that there is not enough evidence to prove that the industry’s development and manufacturing has caused significant damage. In our holistic worldview, if harm is caused to our kidneys, does that not affect our whole body? If the bees are harmed, does that not change the plants, the water, the soil? We know that our cultural perspectives and interpretative abilities are valid tools in healing our homelands. (Las Mujeres Hablan 2010)

At the same time that the writers of the summary endorse the report’s methods and findings, they also question its capacity to accurately reflect the injuries that community members have experienced. In fact, as these women activists consent to participate in the procedures of official governance of the labs, they repeatedly articulate an alternative framework for measuring and evaluating the lab’s historic, contemporary, and future impact on human and non-human bodies. The model for this framework is the female body itself.
In 2010, Las Mujeres Hablan wrote and circulated a document called the “Women’s Declaration for New Mexico 2010” (Appendix C). The Declaration begins with a preamble that states,

The Earth community stands at a defining moment in time. Injustices, poverty, ignorance, corruption, crime and violence have deepened and our Earth Mother is suffering. These offenses have led to values that have become hurtful and a destructive way of living.

We believe that women are sacred unique human beings of the Earth. We believe that female and male energy is found within the other. We believe that all people belong to one earth community as a human family.

The document goes on to list twenty-four declarations about the importance of women and their central role in cultivating physical health, cultural tradition, and harmony with the environment. The declaration emphasizes women’s physical bodies as being “intimately connected to Mother Earth as reflected in our moon cycles,” and to others as “the nurturers of the human seed.” In addition to these physical traits, the declaration describes a privileged role for women as “the primary caregivers of children through breastfeeding, feeding, and nurturing,” as helpers of other women by serving as midwives and caring for their children, and as “an important support system” for the operation of family farms and ranches. At the same time, the declaration describes women as caring for the environment by acting as “the first seed savers,” cultivating crops, and carefully harvesting traditional foods and herbs. Women are thus depicted as important subjects in their own landscapes, “dedicated to growing clean, healthy, and fair food and to restoring harmony to the earth.” Moreover, the declaration notes that women “hold essential traditional knowledge” and “play important roles in our communities as spiritual leaders who offer blessings at important times in our lives and who offer guidance on important
In addition to possessing these unique capabilities, the declaration portrays women as especially susceptible to the burdens of environmental contamination. This susceptibility is described as occurring on multiple levels. It first notes their individual physical vulnerability, stating,

Because of the nature of women’s bodies related to procreation and our intimate relationship with the earth through farming, herb gathering and earthwork, we are particularly sensitive to exposure to pollutants from various sources…

The parts of our bodies meant to nurture and nourish our children are also most susceptible to disease and cancer considering that elevated levels of breast cancer, ovarian cancer, and other deadly diseases result from exposure to toxins.

It then describes further social, emotional, and structural vulnerabilities, explaining that “mothers and grandmothers who feed and nurture their children” are concerned about the effects of environmental contamination on “our families and future generations,” and acknowledging that “New Mexico is home to various polluting industries,” in which “women are often low-wage workers,” increasing their exposure to toxicity. Finally, the declaration asserts that women have a key role to play in protecting their families and communities, “resisting all forms of violence,” and participating in social movements.

The Women’s Declaration for New Mexico thus advances an ecofeminist perspective on the inherent connection of women with nature, both through their biological bodies and their historic roles as farmers and preparers of food in indigenous and Nuevomexicano land-based communities. At the same time, it highlights women’s particular vulnerability to the risks of environmental degradation and exploitation. Ultimately, the declaration asserts that this connection and vulnerability make it necessary for women to be at the
forefront of organizing for environmental health and safety. Accordingly, women activists circulated the declaration at events like the seed exchange described at the beginning of the chapter and public meetings about the labs, collecting signatures from participants as an expression of support and affirmation. In this way, the declaration served to explain and justify the leadership role these activists had taken upon themselves.

The Women’s Declaration for New Mexico also outlines the central principles underlying the effort to replace Reference Man with a pregnant, indigenous, land-based woman, as described at the beginning of this chapter. The activists of Las Mujeres Hablan contend that women are most susceptible, both physically and socially, to the negative effects of nuclear technology on land, water, and plants. Moreover, pregnant women, as the holders of “genetic memory,” who are exposed to contaminants that may cross the placental barrier, embody interpersonal and cultural vulnerability. In recent years, activists have expanded this idea to critique the environmental and community health effects of other industries, including oil drilling and fracking, and climate change. As Joy, an indigenous woman activist, explained to me over lunch at a seed exchange event one year, she believes that women (especially pregnant, indigenous women who make land-based livings) function as an “indicator species” of the dangers of these processes. In other words, activists contend that women’s inherent qualities mean that they are the first to suffer ill effects from pollution, environmental degradation, and climate change, thus functioning as a warning to others. For this reason, activists propose the replacement of Reference Man with a pregnant, indigenous, land-based woman as an icon of vulnerability. Joy contends that replacing Reference Man in this way functions to
resist the dominant logic of scientific governance that measures “allowable” levels of harm by replacing it with a new logic of “do no harm.” Importantly, however, the centrality of the bodies of pregnant, indigenous women is not just a function of their vulnerability, but also of their importance in producing and reproducing community, culture, and the natural environment. In this way, pregnant women not only represent the object of care, but also the source of it. The bodies of pregnant women are thus depicted as a kind of center space where both nature and culture intersect and are protected and reproduced.

Interestingly, the way in which activists center the bodies of pregnant indigenous women as spaces of both vulnerability and protection mirrors the centrality of water in their discourses and practices. The importance of water and women’s bodies as center spaces of the creation and sustainment of life is highlighted by ritual practices that are
inhabited by the women activists in this chapter. For example, community events like the NMAA’s annual *Congreso de las Acequias* (Acequia Congress) and the *Owingeh Ta Pueblos y Semillas* (Communities and Seeds) seed exchange described at the beginning of this chapter regularly include a *Bendición de las Aguas* (Blessing of the Water) that literally and symbolically places water at the center of the event (Figure 4). Participants bring water from their homes to pour into a ceramic pot that is placed on woven blankets at the center of the event space. A great deal of time and respectful attention is paid to each man, woman, and child carrying canning jars, water bottles, and Tupperware containers filled with water from their stream, ditch, well, or faucet. Each participant names the source of the water and often relates something about their personal connection to it before pouring it into the ceramic pot. The combined waters are then blessed in one or multiple ways, for example by the burning of sage, traditional Pueblo dances, or Catholic prayers and alabados. At the seed exchange event, seeds and soil from different parts of the state are also placed in concentric circles around the pot of water, arranged according to the cardinal directions (North, South, East, West) from which they came. Even as the majority of these events include participants freely coming in and out of the event space, helping themselves to snacks and coffee, or talking quietly with one another around the sides of the room, these ceremonies draw quiet, respectful, sustained attention from every attendee.

The only other similar ceremony I have attended was at the baby shower of a friend and acequia activist. Most of the event featured the conventional baby shower activities with which I was familiar, including sharing a meal, opening presents, and writing bits of parenting advice on cards for the new parents. Both women and men had
been invited to the shower and, like many other such events I have attended, the men spent most of the afternoon talking outside while the women gathered close to the mother-to-be, exclaiming and commenting on the gifts as they were opened, telling stories about their own pregnancies and labors, and offering insights and advice. However, the event diverged from any other shower I had attended when, at the end of the afternoon, Joy brought all of the attendees together to give a blessing. She organized the guests into what she called a “circle of vulnerability.” She placed the mother-to-be in the center of the room, then instructed all of the guests who were grandparents to form a circle around her. Next, she arranged all the other women in a third circle, with all of the men forming the outer circle. She explained that the concentric circles symbolized the appropriate flow of care and protection in a community, with pregnant mothers occupying the center space as both the most vulnerable members of the community and the ones ultimately responsible for its reproduction and sustainment. In this blessing, the centrality of the mother-to-be mirrored the placement of water as an anchoring point and central focus in the water blessing ceremonies of acequia events.

The special importance and vulnerability of water and women’s bodies is not only coded in rituals, but also in official political statements of these women activists. For example, many of the statements in the Women’s Declaration for New Mexico are closely paralleled in the NMAA’s “El Agua es la Vida (Water is Life) Declaration (Appendix D), which outlines a statement of principles, threats to acequia water and land-based livelihoods, and a plan of action for acequieros and their allies. Table 1 details the parallel statements in these two declarations.
### Table 1: Parallels between water and women’s bodies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Women’s Declaration of New Mexico</th>
<th>El Agua es la Vida Declaration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sacredness; creating/sustaining life</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We believe that women are sacred unique human beings of the Earth.</td>
<td>We recognize, honor, and respect that water is sacred and sustains all life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whereas, because of the profound role of women in creation, ancient cultures and civilizations throughout human history and today have revered the earth as our Mother, the source of all life.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Supporting households; growing food</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whereas, women provide an important support system for all the activities of operating our <em>ranchitos</em>, the family farms and ranches.</td>
<td>We seek to sustain our ancestral connections to water which was historically been used for providing our families with household uses, growing food.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whereas, women have a special relationship with food in their role as farmers, nurturers, seed savers, and cooks.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Passing on traditional knowledge</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whereas, women are often the teachers of life skills to their children and are therefore important to ensuring that traditional knowledge is passed from generation to generation.</td>
<td>We believe that our acequias are fundamental to our culture and our identity as land-based people and we must be intentional in passing on our traditions to future generations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Traditional environmental knowledge embodied in the acequia culture is at risk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Necessary for clean, healthy, culturally significant foods</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whereas, many of the increasing numbers of small scale, independent farmers are women farmers from various backgrounds who are dedicated to growing clean, healthy, and fair food and to restoring harmony to the earth.</td>
<td>We maintain that water we use for growing food supports our self determination as a people, enhances riparian habitat, contributes to aquifer recharge, and results in health benefits both to the farmer and to those who eat local, fresh, and</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 (cont.): Parallels between water and women’s bodies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whereas, for millennia, women have harvested foods such as piñon, quelites, tsimaja, asparagus, verdolagas, chocoyole, and many varieties of berries, which we regard as special gifts and blessings.</th>
<th>culturally significant foods.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Socioeconomic marginalization</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…women are often low-wage workers…</td>
<td>Acequia and rural agricultural communities are economically disadvantaged…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Especially threatened by contamination</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whereas, because of the nature of women’s bodies related to procreation and our intimate relationship with the earth through farming, herb gathering, and earthwork, we are particularly sensitive to exposure to pollutants from various sources.</td>
<td>Water supplies in New Mexico are threatened by various sources of water contamination including mining runoff, lack of wastewater treatment facilities, improper dumping of solid, chemical, and radioactive waste, and urban drainage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whereas, the parts of our bodies meant to nurture and nourish our children are also most susceptible to disease and cancer considering that elevated levels of breast cancer, ovarian cancer, and other deadly diseases result from exposure to toxins.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key role in challenging unwelcome forces</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whereas, historically and in modern times, women have, out of the love of their children and men in their families, been at the forefront of resisting all forms of violence, including war.</td>
<td>We will support acequia and agricultural communities in challenging the economic and political forces in New Mexico that result in growth and development that are transforming our landscape and undermining New Mexico’s land-based cultures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whereas, women have played a key role along with men in social movements to achieve social, economic, and environmental justice by voicing concerns about the threats of toxins to our families and by calling for livelihoods for ourselves and our families that are clean, healthy, and dignified.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Like women’s bodies, the “El Agua es la Vida” Declaration establishes that water is
“sacred” and “sustains all life,” while acequias are described as “providing our families with household uses, growing food, and providing for our animals,” as well as fundamental to “passing on our traditions to future generations.” Water in general and acequias in particular are also described as particularly threatened by contamination, especially as acequia communities tend to be economically disadvantaged. Finally, the declaration establishes the importance of acequias in “challenging the economic and political forces in New Mexico that result in growth and development that are transforming our landscape and undermining New Mexico’s land-based cultures.” In these ways, water (particularly acequias) and the bodies of women are emphasized as central to the creation, sustainment, and reproduction of life in Northern New Mexico in the face of threats to both environment and community. Similarly, in her essay for GreenFaith, Tsosie-Peña draws a parallel between the way that environmental toxicity endangers future generations by contaminating the breast milk of pregnant women and the formerly “life giving” water of the Río Grande, which, by the time it reaches the Gulf of Mexico, has “picked up so much pollutants, residual toxins from oil spills, and industrial fertilizers from Big-Ag farms that it only serves to feed toxic red algae in which no other life can exist” (Tsosie-Peña n.d., 8). Concepts of bodies of women and bodies of water as spaces of biological and cultural reproduction and sites of vulnerability to contamination thus mirror one another in their emphasis on these bodies’ dangerous permeability.

While these projects to protect the health of both water and women’s bodies from environmental contamination emphasize the concept of women’s particular vulnerability, these projects are also part of a major shift in New Mexican land and water activism in
general and acequia activism in particular toward women in leadership roles. Recalling her work with the Taos Valley acequias before the NMAA was formed, the anthropologist Sylvia Rodríguez described the first efforts at consciousness-raising among Nuevomexicanos and acequieros as “untouched by feminism.” She commented, “I’ve seen boys run the scene forever and get carried away with this sort of heroic leadership idea, or else leaders who will never pass the torch and will never cultivate new leadership and seem suspicious of the young and hypercritical of the young.” In contrast, she spoke admiringly of the leadership of Paula, the executive director of the NMAA, who has created several youth-focused acequia programs aimed at developing new leadership and, as I described in the previous chapter, has worked to connect acequia concerns with global water struggles. Moreover, Paula, along with her mostly (at times, entirely) female staff, has overseen the organization’s growth in prominence from a small non-profit focused on regional issues of acequia preservation and governance to an influential and well-known presence in state land, water, and agricultural organizing and politics. Victories at the state legislature, like the passing of water banking and stock pond bills, and the formation of important community partnerships like Las Mujeres Hablan, Communities for Clean Water, and the New Mexico Food and Seed Sovereignty Alliance have all taken place under the guidance of Paula and other female acequia organizers. These achievements are characterized by a willingness to find areas of collaboration and compromise with politicians, government officials, and other groups, especially Native American activists, which are sometimes viewed with suspicion by older male acequia leaders. Ultimately, these transformations represent a further turn away from the framing of the acequias as sites of Nuevomexicano ethnic, political, and
economic resistance to Anglo dominance that I have described previously (see Chapter 1 and Trott 2012), and toward future-oriented efforts to reproduce and revitalize Nuevomexicano cultural traditions, like the growing of traditional foods, while emphasizing shared experiences with Native American and other “land-based” ways of life, as well as to situate acequias within global conversations about human rights and environmental justice.

In recent years, the NMAA has worked to formally recognize the leadership of women as part of their model of activism. A women’s leadership caucus called Las Comadres was formed in 2015 to support the leadership of women in acequia practice and organizing. At the 2015 Congreso de las Acequias, a resolution was passed to support women in acequia leadership (Appendix E). Like the Women’s Declaration for New Mexico, the Comadres resolution acknowledged the historical role of women as “providing labor and meals for others laborers,” “teaching children the values of land-based culture and way of life,” and “supporting their husbands, brothers, fathers, sons, tíos [uncles] and other community members who have official leadership roles as elected commissioners or mayordomos.” However, the resolution also officially recognizes the increase in women farmers and women in acequia leadership, describing women leaders as “upholding traditional roles in a shifting culture.” To date, Las Comadres has focused particularly on the task of involving youth and families in acequias as a method of increasing interest and participation. In the present moment, men are still prominent leaders, both within individual acequias and as part of regional and statewide acequia organizing. For example, the NMAA’s board of directors, called the Concilio, is mostly male, and the President of the NMAA has always been a man. Additionally, as I noted in
Chapter 1, there is a generation of acequia organizers and intellectuals that are still considered to be the philosophers and guiding lights of the acequias, and these are also all men. This is in keeping with a commonplace observation about organizing work in general that men occupy positions of leadership while women do the majority of the on-the-ground labor. Nonetheless, women are not only gaining in prominence in acequia leadership, they are also driving the involvement of the acequias in new social and political projects, like the resistance to the Santolina development described in Chapter 3, the alliances described in Chapter 5, and the efforts to protect water from nuclear contamination in this chapter. These efforts represent the ways in which women leaders are spearheading increasingly present- and future-oriented projects centered on the acequias as they claim the responsibility to protect and reproduce acequia culture and communities. In this sense, these women’s projects diverge from the male-dominated politics of early acequia conflicts and the land grant movement, which were focused on racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic resistance; rather, they are reorienting acequia politics toward collaboration and cooperation with human and nonhuman others, and cultivation of future spaces of environmental engagement and wellbeing.

The Center Space of Vulnerability and Care: Intersubjectivity and Oppositional Consciousness

The efforts of women activists in Northern New Mexico to replace Reference Man, the generic standard of allowable harm from radioactive and chemical contamination, with a pregnant, indigenous, land-based woman is an explicit critique of the way in which Los Alamos National Laboratory and the technonational project that it represents measures and distributes harm. Scholars of power and neoliberal/late liberal
governmentality (Agamben 1995; Foucault 2003; Ong 2006; Povinelli 2011) have elucidated the ways in which neoliberal technologies of governance designate some populations as undesirable and/or expendable to the state, a designation that largely proceeds along racial and socioeconomic lines. These expendable populations are subject to social and political abandonment in order to benefit other, more desirable citizens. This abandonment constitutes a power of the state that Foucault (2003) called “the power to make live and let die” (241). As Masco (2006) has described, this logic was at work in the original decision to build Los Alamos National Laboratory in Northern New Mexico, designating the area as a “national sacrifice zone” where land, natural resources, and people’s homes and livelihoods were superseded by the national project of developing nuclear technology. Moments of crisis have periodically laid this logic bare throughout the lab’s history. For example, during the Las Conchas forest fire of 2011, Native American and Nuevomexicano inhabitants felt that federal and lab officials had made strategic decisions to protect parts of the labs at the expense of some sacred Native American sites. This logic continues to operate as the largely poor and nonwhite citizens of Northern New Mexico are subjected to real and imagined harms by the legacies of the Manhattan Project and the effects of continuing experimentation at the lab from which other U.S. citizens are spared. Echoing the critiques of the profit motives that drive other sites of national sacrifice, like the events at Standing Rock, North Dakota, and Flint, Michigan (see Chapter 5), the women activists in this chapter regularly refer to the idea that Northern New Mexico is a sacrifice zone where Native American and Nuevomexicano citizens are sickened and endangered for the purposes of industrial profit and “perfecting the weapons of war” (Sanchez 2013).
As these activists explain, the idea of Reference Man is central to the function of this process. Reference Man is intended to operate as a completely generic human body, stripped of the corporeal particularities and social histories of the residents of Northern New Mexico. His racial, sexual, and geographic characteristics (white, mostly male, and Western European or North American “in habit and custom”) define a dominant logic of normality, with features that linguists call “unmarked” (Bucholtz 2001; Jakobson 1972; Trubetzkoy 1969; Waugh 1982). In her analysis of whiteness as an unmarked category, the linguistic anthropologist Mary Bucholtz (2001) argues that “unmarked status confers power by allowing whiteness to move through the social world ghost-like, unseen and unheard, evident only its effects” (87). Similarly, Reference Man’s unmarked features define the default parameters of acceptable risk of radiation, thus exercising considerable power over the amount of toxicity and contamination to which all citizens may be exposed. Those individuals who share Reference Man’s unmarked features fall within the risk of radiation that the federal government and the lab have deemed safe. However, those citizens who may be at greater risk of harm from the same levels of radiation – especially women, children, and those whose livelihoods expose them to more toxicity – may not necessarily receive extra protection. While the lab now officially states that Reference Man is no longer used to measure levels of exposure, the nuclear engineer Arjun Makhijani (2009) has documented several instances in which the physical specifications of Reference Man are still implicitly included as the standard against which levels of toxicity are measured. For example, Nuclear Regulatory Commission standards for radiation protection, assessments of compliance with the federal Clean Air Act, and maximum contaminant levels for transuranic radionuclides in drinking water are all
currently calculated using some version of Reference Man’s physical characteristics (Makhijani 2009). In these cases, Reference Man has become even more ghostlike, influencing the way nuclear risk is measured and allowed, even as his existence is officially denied.

In contrast, the women activists in this chapter are attempting to replace him with a deeply marked body – that of a pregnant, indigenous, land-based woman. In place of Reference Man’s unmarked racial, sexual, and socioeconomic characteristics, they propose a new prototype for measuring risk that is a microcosm of marked features – nonwhite, rural, female and pregnant, socioeconomically-disadvantaged. Reference Woman is thus an intersectional embodiment of precarity. Whereas Reference Man’s unmarkedness allows him to inhabit a ghost-like invisibility, Reference Woman’s body highlights visible markers of racial, sexual, and socioeconomic difference. At the same time, as both a mother and a farmer, she embodies intersubjectivity and relationality with both human and nonhuman others. As such, her body poses questions about how the contamination of land, water, and natural resources may affect not only her own physical health, but also the lives of the children she gives birth to and the family she cares for, as well as how the potential ill-health of her body may have downstream effects on the people, animals, and plants that she cares for. The introduction to the community summary of the LAHDRA report notes the need to consider such intersubjectivity, asking, “If harm is caused to our kidneys, does that not affect our whole body? If the bees are harmed, does that not change the plants, the water, the soil” (Las Mujeres Hablan 2010)? In this way, the prototype of a pregnant, land-based Reference Woman is not only the center space of precarity, but also a space of maximal overlap, where multidirectional
flows of vulnerability and care intersect. She represents what the feminist environmental and science studies scholar Stacy Alaimo (2010) calls the “trans-corporeal self,” a body that is formed and transformed by the flows of matter, energy, and relationships that pass through it. This trans-corporeality is also analogized to water itself, which is understood to be central to the sustainment of physical and cultural life, as well as deeply threatened by contamination. In this sense, women’s bodies are fitting sites of opposition to the “uncanny” and “haunting” qualities of nuclear contamination as they also exhibit the blurring of boundaries between the material and the immaterial, the human and the nonhuman. These qualities and their parallels with the permeability of water itself are underscored and reproduced in the circulation of discourses like the Women’s Declaration for New Mexico and NMAA’s La Agua es la Vida declaration, and through rituals like the water blessing and baby shower ceremonies that I have described (Tambiah 1979).

While the concept of Reference Woman as a center space of care and vulnerability emerges from the indigenous Tewa cosmology of women activists in Las Mujeres Hablan like Tsosie-Peña and Naranjo, it also recalls Chicana feminist ideas about mestizaje, which refer to both the intersecting oppressions of racist colonialism as well as the porousness of physical and geographical boundaries and the fluidity of subject positions embodied by Chicana women (Anzaldúa 1999; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; Sandoval 1998). In the concept of Reference Woman, these women activists advance what Cherré Moraga (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983) called a “theory of the flesh,” in which “the physical realities of our lives – our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings – all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity” (23).
Reference Woman is literally a body whose racial, gender, reproductive, and geographic characteristics represent a political and cosmological theory of vulnerability and care. As a physical manifestation of markedness in opposition to the unmarkedness of Reference Man, Reference Woman embodies an oppositional consciousness that, as Tsosie-Peña explains, poses the maxim “do no harm” against the dominant logic of “allowable harm.”

The prototype of Reference Woman also represents the emergence of a fluid public of women activists in Northern New Mexico. The extent to which women acequia activists have embraced a focus on women’s bodies as models of precarity, care, and intersubjectivity is largely a reflection of the influence of indigenous New Mexican activists, who have been instrumental in the formation of partnerships like Las Mujeres Hablan and the New Mexico Food and Seed Sovereignty Alliance. For example, organizing around Reference Man is primarily the work of Tsosie-Peña’s environmental justice organizing with an indigenous organization, Tewa Women United. Like the coalition-building around environmental justice that I described in Chapter 5, activism around women and women’s bodies is not universally-embraced among acequia users and organizers. Rather, it signifies a new direction in activism that is compelling to some acequeros and uninteresting to others. The emerging projects of NMAA’s Las Comadres Caucus display an attempt to reconcile the discourses of women’s centrality and environmental justice with older models of acequia practice and organizing that revolve primarily around the preservation of cultural tradition. For example, the Las Comadres Declaration attempts to establish continuity between women’s “historical role in the support and survival of acequias” and recognition of “the many sacred roles women carry, and the challenges women face,” as well as the growing numbers of women
farmers and leaders. Similarly, Paula’s leadership of the NMAA has also been characterized by a combination of supporting the needs of traditional farmers and ranchers via legislative advocacy and technical assistance workshops with strategic outreach to influential politicians and new social and environmental justice initiatives like the letter to Standing Rock (see Chapter 5) and the work of Las Mujeres Hablan. As a resident of a Nuevomexicano farming and ranching community, a county commissioner, and a social justice activist, Paula herself represents a kind of center space of these different strains of acequia organizing. I have heard many acequeros and acequia organizers comment – both admiringly and critically – about Paula’s efforts to keep one foot rooted in the ethnic mobilization of past acequia politics and one foot in emergent, broad-based coalitions. For example, one acequiero I spoke with who was a member of the Chicano consciousness-raising collective, La Academia de la Nueva Raza, remarked that Paula “knows the Academia” and has founded her acequia organizing in its philosophies of liberation. Another acequiero described her work as expanding acequias from their “land-based values and core” into “building bridges and awareness with urban areas and building trust with the Pueblos” in order to “reinforce the acequias.” A third observed that Paula “gets around a lot” to make connections with other groups, government officials, and politicians, and that she makes acequias attractive so that people see their worth and want to get involved in them. Others are more reserved, commenting that they’re “just not sure about this activism stuff.” Of course, still other acequeros steer clear of the NMAA or the regional acequia association organizing completely, preferring to focus on their own ditch and piece of land. It is important to note that this tension between individualistic acequia users who are only interested in
how the NMAA can help them retain their water rights, the more traditional acequiers
who value the acequias as a symbol of Nuevomexicano ethnic identity and resistance, and
the group of organizers and activists who would like to expand the acequias’ involvement
in broad-based environmental justice coalitions is tricky and precarious. It remains to be
seen whether the delicate balance that Paula has seemingly struck between these different
forces will endure over time.

It is also important to point out that the twin concepts of women’s vulnerability
and protective power are not necessarily experienced by all women as empowering, nor
are they necessarily oppositional to dominant structures of governance over the
production and reproduction of life. Feminist scholars have critiqued the ways in which
pregnant women and mothers have been especially burdened with neoliberal notions of
individual responsibility, while women who do not display culturally appropriate signs of
care for their born and unborn children, especially in favor of participation in political or
economic life, are depicted as unnatural, selfish, even monstrous (de Beauvoir 1953;
Tsing 1990). The neoliberal burden of care-giving on women can be exponentially
increased by understandings of the potential effects of environmental toxicity and
contamination. Breastfeeding, for example, can be seen as both an obligatory form of
maternal care and a potential source of contamination, a paradox which can be used to
justify onerous regimes of medical surveillance and intervention to ensure maternal
purity, as well as considerable social pressure and shame (Hausman 2011).

It is certainly possible to see the organizing of the women activists in this chapter
around Reference Woman and the release of toxic substances by Los Alamos National
Laboratory as reproducing these logics of contamination and responsibility on the bodies
and subjectivities of women, even as they endow women with considerable power as agents of biological, cultural, and spiritual reproduction. In reconsidering ecofeminist perspectives on women and the environment, Holmes argues that the association of women’s bodies with nature does not have to reify the hierarchical binary of man/woman and culture/nature, but can rather function to locate the female body as a point of mediation between the terms of the binary, with women themselves governing the process of mediation. Yet, as Chicana feminist scholars have long argued, occupying this point of mediation is a source of both pain and power. In practical terms, the growing influence of this concept of the female body among indigenous environmental activists and acequia organizers in New Mexico is associated with a major shift toward women in leadership positions. As I have described, these women leaders have in turn been the drivers of a more global perspective on the role of acequias in larger questions of social and environmental justice. They have thus acted as mediators between the regional concerns of individual acequieros and broader social and political projects around water safety and scarcity. How these women experience the responsibility, pain, and power of their role as mediators is a topic about which they are publicly quiet, but which I intend to explore in the future.

In a context of global economic and environmental insecurity, experiences of the “uncanny” or “haunting” influences of dangerous and unseen forces, real and imagined fears of sickness and contamination, and the blurring of boundaries between the animate and the inanimate, the human and the nonhuman, are increasingly shared by communities the world over. While the women activists in this chapter represent a public of concerned citizens attempting to hold the federal government and the lab accountable for the harms
of nuclear technology on the communities of Northern New Mexico, they also represent an emergent counterpublic that counters the hauntings of climate change, environmental exploitation, and nuclear technology with its own oppositional model of intersubjectivity and relationality among human and nonhuman beings. Reference Woman functions as a marked prototype of opposition to these forces as the physical embodiment of precarity and the center space of care.
Chapter 7

Conclusion

“They say where the land goes, the people go. I say: where the acequias go, the land goes, and the people go.”
- Don Alfonso

The day that I visited Don Alfonso and David in the Mora Valley, we finished our drive along the foot of the mountain and turned into town to have lunch at a diner where Don Alfonso greeted each of the patrons with a hand on the shoulder and a joke. After lunch, he drove David and I back to his house where we had parked our cars and we stood talking for a few minutes longer in the chilly afternoon wind. David had remained fairly quiet most of the day, interjecting occasionally to suggest a question for Don Alfonso that he thought I should ask. As we stood around our cars, he became reflective, commenting,

As I get older, I get back into thinking about how the farming is part of it, no? It’s the main part, but it’s not the real… it is real, but that whole consciousness-building, that’s the real part, no? That’s the real part. Because change is inevitable and we all feel it. It’s happening. So how do we change without hurting each other in a physical way, because there’s going to be chaos, there’s going to be all sorts of change.

As I spoke with acequeros throughout Northern New Mexico and the South Valley of Albuquerque, they were keenly aware of the environmental, economic, and social challenges facing small-scale farming, acequia irrigation, and the racially- and socioeconomically-marginalized citizens that practice them. Yet, I continually heard
comments that echoed David’s and Don Alfonso’s conviction that the acequias embodied a critique and a remedy for these challenges. For example, Guillermo, an elderly farmer from the South Valley whose family had been farming the same piece of land for nine generations and who was teaching his son and grandson to take over the farm from him, explained,

The apathy is a really big challenge because we’re anesthetized by what we eat and what we see on the media. The human energy has been taken from us to serve a purpose… We don’t have to think anymore and the more thoughtless we are, the more easily manipulated to suit the economic system and the political system and it’s a sad state of affairs. But this is one place to change it. And that’s what we’re doing, besides raising chile.

For these individuals, the acequia is more than a race- and place-specific traditional practice, but also a material, symbolic, and semiotic terrain on which to combat the ideological and socioeconomic oppressions of the postcolonial neoliberal state and around which to cultivate an alternative model of connection with one another and with the environment.

As I have described in this dissertation, acequeros and acequia activists who seek to preserve and perpetuate the practices and ethics of the acequia must contend with technologies of postcolonial neoliberal governance that make it consistently difficult for them to endure. These include an existing knowledge architecture of popular and scholarly representations of Nuevomexicano communities that depict Nuevomexicano citizens as backwards, melancholic, and tied to the past in such a way that their contemporary lives, concerns, and political projects are dematerialized and depoliticized. My critique of these representations not only identifies this consistent thread running through much of the scholarship on New Mexico, but also proposes a framework for an
emergent ethnography of New Mexico. Rather than privileging linear narratives that define Nuevomexicano subjects primarily as historically injuring and injured subjects, I propose an ethnography of New Mexico that examines assemblages of human and nonhuman lives in a thick present (Haraway 2016) of capitalist exploitation and collapse. I argue that framing New Mexico in this way opens up the possibility of moving forward through social and political projects that are partial, precarious, indeterminate, and yet hopeful.

I also submit the concept of **chronotopic marginalization** to describe the narrative maneuvers by which the oppositional points of view of acequieros and others are displaced from the spaces and times of official state deliberative and decision-making processes around water rights and water use. While other scholars have identified the use of such narrative maneuvers to cast moments of injury into the past (Povinelli 2011) and to temporally defer or reposition justice (Hetherington 2011), I have shown how the mundane evocation of a chronotope in which fair and inclusive deliberation and decision-making takes place operates independently from existing narratives about gendered or racialized Others to displace any undesirable citizens from water use decision-making processes. This chronotopic marginalization also functions fluidly with regard to time, shifting between the past and the future, while allowing the arbiters of the state to remain neutral and free from blame. Finally, as I have shown, the very mundane-ness of this technology of marginalization operates emotionally, creating self-recrimination, frustration, and exhaustion for acequieros and acequia activists, whose ethics of water use oppose the dominant logics of the state. Ultimately, the concept of chronotopic marginalization and its characteristics are also applicable to alternative and oppositional
models of environmental engagement and natural resource use beyond New Mexico. I suggest that understanding the way that these technologies of state governance play out for acequeros in New Mexico illuminates the challenges that other such perspectives and practices face.

In this context, I argue that the acequeros and acequia activists with whom I worked are engaged in the formation of emergent social and political projects around water and water use. I propose the concept of the fluid public to describe acequeros’ layered, shifting, and sometimes contradictory claims about water’s value, which operate both against and within state structures of water governance. Fluid publics are characterized by the fungibility of water and claims about its value, making it possible for acequeros to layer and exchange these claims as well as shift between them in response to specific contexts, challenges, and opportunities. For these reasons, I suggest that fluid publics are able to exceed the bounds of racial/ethnic and political identity, opening up the possibility for new and unexpected political tactics and alliances and making them particularly difficult to govern. The concept of fluid publics involves placing unexpected literatures into conversation with one another. Here, I have drawn on anthropological, political ecological, and philosophical scholarship that centers the environment as an active creator of meaning combined with classic approaches to the formation and interpellation of publics. This novel, multidisciplinary theoretical framework has allowed me to elucidate how the materiality of the acequia itself has structured the emergence of new social and political spaces in New Mexico.

The most salient feature of fluid publics and the diverse social and political projects that they enable is that they are structured around and in response to the
materiality of the acequia itself as an assemblage that gathers together human, nonhuman, and environmental elements. I describe the relationship between these elements as mutualismo, a concept that draws on the common custom of mutual aid among marginalized communities as it has been practiced in New Mexico. I argue that the cultivation of mutual dependency, reciprocity, and protection among the geographically- and socially-isolated mutual aid societies, cofradías, and acequias of late 19th- and early 20th-century New Mexico is mirrored in the contemporary relationships of parciantes on an acequia, as well as between acequieros and the acequia environment, and among acequieros from different communities who are connected by the geography of water in New Mexico. On each of these scales, I aver that past relationships of physical dependence in a context of aridity and geographical isolation has transformed into an ethic of autonomy from dominant institutions, cultivated by rituals and shared meanings that promote harmony between acequieros and their human and non-human compatriots.

In addition to illuminating these mechanisms by which the acequia functions to organize human and nonhuman landscapes and social spaces, I have also argued that some acequia activists are engaged in emergent efforts to expand the fluid publics of the acequia into new spaces and political projects. These include recent efforts to create solidarity among acequieros and other “water protectors” in Standing Rock, North Dakota, and Flint, Michigan. Through the circulation of essays about Standing Rock and Flint in acequia newsletters and social media, as well as the summoning of material support in the form of visits, money, and supplies, these acequia activists seek to extend the practice of mutualismo across geographical space and historical, racial/ethnic, and cultural differences. Moreover, I suggest that these cases are examples of how the place-
and race-specific experiences of acequeros and acequia activists in New Mexico can speak to a larger question in environmental and social justice: namely, the mechanisms by which broad-based coalitions can coalesce around shared affects of abandonment and practices of autonomy, opening up the possibility for diverse groups to become “subversive kin” (Peña 1998a).

While this effort promotes the social and political interconnectedness of disparate groups, another emergent effort of these activists foregrounds a specifically female model of human-nonhuman connectedness in order to hold powerful corporate and state actors accountable for environmental harms in New Mexico. By proposing a pregnant, indigenous, land-based woman as the model against which to measure levels of land and water contamination, these activists theorize the female body as a center space of vulnerability to harm, as well as the locus of power to (re)produce both nature and culture through care. In this dissertation, I believe that I have only begun to understand the role of indigenous and Nuevomexicano women and their bodies in theorizing environmental threats, and in leading opposition to environmental injustice, as well as the implications of this powerful role on the experiences of women and their individual, familial, and social lives. These questions are deserving of much deeper study, which I hope to undertake in the future. I suggest that examining the ways in which these women are forming new social and political spaces in New Mexico has the potential to increase scholarly understandings of the gendered burden of environmental degradation, as well as possible transformations in the politics of the environment and natural resources that women can offer as leaders and stakeholders.

In addition to these theoretical contributions, this dissertation utilizes multi-sited
ethnographic methods to elucidate the social and political projects of acequeros and
acequia activists in ways that are both broad and deep. Through my unique, long-term,
and reciprocal personal and professional relationships with these individuals in both
Northern New Mexico and the South Valley of Albuquerque, I was able to gain insights
into the challenges, opportunities, and experiences of acequia organizers over many years
of struggle and change. By combining these methods with a diverse theoretical
framework that draws on several disciplines, including anthropology, feminist cultural
theory, political ecology, and philosophy, I bring the ethnography of New Mexico out of
the 19th and 20th century regionalism to which it has largely been relegated in order to
allow the experiences of New Mexican citizens to speak to larger questions about human
relationships with one another and with the environment.

Importantly, the social space of fluid publics as well as the social and political
projects that they enact are limited and precarious. As the case of Contra Santolina
shows, the demands of endurance in the face of chronotopic marginalization by the state
are relentless, opening up individuals to frustration, exhaustion, and disillusionment. At
the time of this writing, Santolina opponents are currently fighting efforts by the
Santolina developers to postpone the presentation of a comprehensive water agreement
that the commission requires for approval of the next phase of the development. If the
developers are successful in getting the commissioners to approve the next phase without
the agreement, it may end up being finalized privately. This case is yet another example
of the chronotopic marginalization of official deliberative processes, which displace
oppositional points of view from the space and time in which decisions are made.

While the fluid publics I have described are creative and difficult to govern, they
are also vulnerable and unstable. For example, while acequia activists have generally resisted the technobureaucratic technologies of water measurement and management favored by the state, they are also drawn to those same technologies when they appear to validate activists’ beliefs about the hydrological and environmental benefits of acequias. Embrace of water meters and other such methods of state water management may thus close off one avenue of acequiers’ resistance to the use of such technologies to enforce adjudication agreements, such as the recent Aamodt settlement in the Nambe-Pojoaque-Tesuque basin, which subjects acequias to a number of new measurement and reporting requirements, and other forms of state governance, even as new kinds of claims become possible. Relationships of mutualismo are likewise susceptible to ebbs and flows in feelings of kinship and solidarity as the human and nonhuman participants in the acequia find themselves in conditions of conflict as well as cooperation. Conflict is only heightened by the powerful effects of drought, increased water demand, and the marketization of water, which tends to pit individuals against one another.

Moreover, while I have argued that some acequia activists are engaged in efforts to expand the mutualismo of the acequia across space and into other contexts, the future of these hopeful efforts is uncertain and remains to be seen. Perhaps they will remain unfulfilled or become subject to issues of incommensurability between groups or the dilution of values across scales, as other coalition-building projects have experienced. These questions will only grow more important as diverse populations throughout the world contend with the effects of capitalism, environmental degradation, and climate change, and as oppositional perspectives to the dominant logics of environmental exploitation gain visibility via social media, crowd-sourcing, and grassroots organizing.
Finally, all of these challenges are deepened by the increasing effects of climate change in New Mexico and elsewhere, including growing aridity and drought along with the effects of linked phenomena, such as massive forest fires and flash floods, and spreading food insecurity. At the same time, these effects throughout the United States along with the escalating cost of living in places like the East Coast and California have also made New Mexico a popular destination for affluent white transplants looking for space and quiet, often displacing acequieros from their land and water or making it impossible for them to place unused land and water back into production. The effects of these forces are an important focus for continuing research in order to understand future possibilities and challenges for acequieros and their environments and communities.

Ultimately, however, I argue that the social space of the acequia and the human and nonhuman relationships that exist within it are peculiarly durable because they are grounded in the materiality of the acequia itself. The very nature of the gravitational flow of water along the ditch makes it all but impossible for individuals to completely separate themselves from the other people, animals, plants, and contingencies of weather and time that are gathered along the ditch. The acequia thus embodies the ethic and practice of interconnectedness.

Don Alfonso eloquently explained it to me this way, “I have a contention that we shouldn’t break things into parts unless we make a pledge to keep a concept of the wholeness. Because sometimes you take a part to analyze it, to study it and all of that, to exploit it. You can’t wait for that part to enrich another part, but you take it and you slurp!” Don Alfonso made a sucking sound, as if swallowing something from a straw. He
continued,

You suck it up right away and then you spit it out like that and you go pick another one out, suck it up and throw it out. That’s sacrilegious. I don’t know about sins, but I think those kinds of things are really sinful, when we do that. And you bring that down to nature, to the elements of life like water, no? Like the land. You bring matters like that to the sunshine, the fire, no? And to the air. You brings things out like that. Everything is for exploitation and it’s out of greed. No. All life is one and everything that lives is holy. It’s true. It’s true.

I nodded and said, “Yeah, I see.” Don Alfonso looked at me for a few moments and then commented, “When you said ‘Yeah’ like that? It almost sounded like ‘Amen.'”
APPENDICES

Appendix A Protecting Water: From Acequia’s [sic] to Standing Rock.........................203

Appendix B Environmental Racism: A Letter from New Mexico to Flint......................206

Appendix C Las Muchachas Hablan: The Women Speak Women’s Declaration for New Mexico 2010 ........................................................................................................................................209

Appendix D El Agua es la Vida....................................................................................216

Appendix E Resolution 2015-04: Support Women in Acequia Leadership.................217
Here in New Mexico, there is a long tradition of being caretakers and protectors of the water in the arid environment we call home. “*El Agua es Vida/Water is Life*” is a universal concept that echoes the fundamental importance of water to survival. In acequia communities, we view water as a *don divino*, or divine gift, and as a common resource that sustains all life.

Today, we are witnessing the rise of one of the biggest collective actions to protect water at the Standing Rock Sioux Nation at Cannon Ball, North Dakota. Hundreds of indigenous nations and their supporters are opposing the Dakota Access Pipeline Project (DAPL), a project of Energy Transfer Partners, planned to have the capacity to transport at least 570,000 barrels of oil a day across four states from the Bakken Oil Fields in North Dakota to Patoka, Illinois. The project is estimated to be more than half complete at a cost of $3.7 million. In addition to Standing Rock, there has also been strong opposition to the pipeline by a coalition of organizations in Iowa where dozens have been arrested for protesting the pipeline. Iowa farmers have sued to object to the use of eminent domain to make way for the pipeline through their property.

The construction on the pipeline started in May with permits from regulatory agencies in states along the route. However, the project is under litigation over permitting by the Army Corp of Engineers, which has jurisdiction over those portions of the pipe that cross bodies of water. For the Missouri River Crossing, the Corps determined that the pipeline would have “no significant impact” on the environment and therefore waived the requirement for a detailed Environmental Impact Statement. Furthermore, the Corp used an expedited permitting process, National Permit Process No. 12, rather than the more rigorous 404 permit. Another complication was that the Corps issues a verification to bore underneath Lake Oahe before granting the easement to cross the lake.

The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe sued the Army Corp of Engineers in federal court over a lack of compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act and adequate consultation with the tribe in the granting of the permit. In September, a federal judge denied the tribe’s request for an injunction and the tribe immediately appealed. At the same time, the Army halted further work on that section of the pipeline to review past permitting decisions. Although construction is proceeding in other stretches of the pipeline, the crossing of the Missouri River is on hold pending the ongoing litigation with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. A hearing is pending on the appeal for November but the litigation could go on over a year.

Besides crossing the Missouri River, the pipeline has another 209 river crossings. Opponents to the pipeline have raised concerns about the potential for leaks in the pipeline, which could contaminate communities, farms, rivers, and aquifers for millions of people. Communities have cause to be concerned about pipeline leaks. As recently as September 2016, a pipeline leak spilled 360,000 gallons of gas in Shelby County, Alabama. In 2011, a pipeline beneath the Yellowstone River in Montana leaked spilling 63,000 of crude oil leaving pollution along an 85 mile stretch of the river. A more recent spill in the same area contaminated the water supply for the community of Glendive, Montana. In the case of the Yellowstone River, Exxon Mobile paid a settlement of $12 million for cleanup activities but local communities are left to wonder if their
river and drinking water are safe.

In the case of the Standing Rock, if the pipeline were to fail for even one hour, the flow of the pipeline could potentially result in a spill of an estimated 822,498 gallons. Downstream communities on in the Standing Rock Sioux nation would be immediately affected but millions of communities downstream who rely on the Missouri would also be affected by the contamination if a leak would occur.

The pipeline has galvanized a movement that has unified indigenous nations and allies to protect water. Many local organizations, concerned citizens, and tribal councils including the All Indian Pueblo Council and Eight Northern Indian Pueblo Council, have organized around the issue, either through supply donations, political actions, or physical participation in the camps. In early September dozens of organizations, including Tewa Women United, Honor Our Pueblo Existence, Las Vegas Peace and Justice Center, and SWOP signed a letter to the president and NM’s congressional delegation supporting Standing Rock’s lawsuit and resistance. In less than one month over 100 tribes across the nation have gathered in North Dakota at the encampment. From New Mexico, various delegations of supporters, advocates, and ceremonial dancers have traveled to North Dakota to stand in solidarity and support with ceremony, prayers, supplies, and other volunteer services.

Recently, Virginia Necochea and Jorge Garcia, founders of the Center for Social Sustainability Systems (CESSOS) received a call to action for danzantes (ceremonial dancers) to pilgrimage and pray in solidarity with Standing Rock to protect nuestra agua divina [our divine water]. In an interview with Jorge and Virginia, they testified why Standing Rock is an important movement and a call for our acequieros here in New Mexico who have a powerful spiritual and physical connection to water to rally against developments and threats to water in our own communities.

Virginia reflected on her experience there, “Cuando llegamos [When we arrived], you could see all the people, corrals, cars, and tipis. They had ceremony every day; sweat lodges every evening, the drumming and praying never stopped! We did a procession to where the fire was at and it was one of the most powerful danzas I have ever been in. Witnessing all these different tribes and nations getting together for this cause made clear to me why our fight for water back home (here in NM) is also so important!”

Emphasizing this, Jorge questions “What is the best way to help Standing Rock? We must ignite a fire where all water protectors can gather and better understand the water issues in New Mexico. Standing Rock means bringing down the borders that exist and protecting our own area. Now more than ever, there is a growing need to unify the indigenous nations and land-based people of this nation around water.”

Virginia associates the Standing Rock struggle with the opposition to the Santolina development west of Albuquerque. “The village of Atrisco is questioning any development of Santolina because it is going to impact our acequias and wells with an overdependence of pumping water from the aquifer. After all of the research, facts, and resistance Santolina is being built despite the fact that our water is going to be affected.” Acequias are vulnerable to the impacts of overpumping of aquifers and the transfer of water rights out of agriculture which result in a loss of water rights to their respective communities. Acequias are also sensitive to contamination that affects water quality.

For this reason, NMAA has been involved with Honor Our Pueblo Existence and Tewa Women
United, along with other organizations, to raise concerns about pollution originating from Los Alamos National Laboratories in recent years. At last year’s Congreso de las Acequias, Marian Naranjo from HOPE explained that, because of concerns raised by the community, LANL now has one of the most stringent stormwater discharge permits in the nation which is intended to reduce contamination from the labs into the Rio Grande.

The vision of the NM Acequia Association is to see our acequias flowing with clean water, people working together to grow food, and communities celebrating cultural and spiritual traditions that are connected to land and water. The worldview that treats land and water as commodities threatens the continued life of our communities. NMAA shares concerns about water quality and the preservation of cultural and traditional uses of water. In keeping with our mission, the NMAA supports access to clean water for generations to come for all people.
Dear Families of Flint,

I know that you might be angry or frustrated that Flint's water crisis is fading from national attention. In this fast-paced news environment, the devastation that families in Flint, Michigan are facing is beginning to fade from front-page news. Yet Flint's residents are still dealing with the short and long-term effects of contaminated water. Even as donations have arrived to help families, safe drinking water remains a precious resource. It is all too familiar.

I know this story, because I have lived it too. In New Mexico, Native communities like mine have been experiencing a similar problem for months but have not received much attention in mainstream media. As the environmental justice organizer for Tewa Women United, I've seen the result of a poisoned water supply. TWU is a collective of intertribal women's voices in the Tewa homelands of Northern New Mexico.

Last August, the Animas River was poisoned when the Environmental Protection Agency caused a leak while attempting to treat contaminated water in the Gold King Mine in Colorado. That toxic water then tainted the Animas River and the San Juan River, creating lead levels 12,000 times the normal amount, in addition to contaminating the water with arsenic, mercury and other poisonous minerals. The toxicity of the water in Flint is eerily similar. This spill directly impacted our local Native communities that depend on the Animas for our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health.

To us, water is life. It's an intrinsic element of our humanity and faith as we are all water beings, and it's how we survive living in the desert. It is our human right. Our ceremonies depend on clear water and we see the Animas in spiritual terms as a living being. However, the Animas spill is one of many instances in a long history of environmental racism against Native Peoples. The New Mexico state government is more concerned about saving money or making money through oil and gas companies, uranium mining or nuclear weapons production in Northern New Mexico, than in taking care of the people who live here. By turning our sacred water and land into commodities for profit regardless of the cost to the Native communities who live here, the government has done irreparable physical, spiritual, emotional and cultural harm. It's continuing a policy of genocide, a loss that Native Peoples have endured for centuries and it's part of a shared history with other communities of color and poor people in the United States. Just like in Flint, just like in Detroit, poor people of color are considered collateral damage for big business.

As someone who has experienced ongoing environmental racism, and witnessed my elders and beloved landscapes survive through the relentless attacks, I want to offer solidarity and support to our brothers and sisters in Flint. I understand the anger, pain, and hurt of having their children harmed, and the fear of what's in store for their children as they grow. I know the heartbreak that comes when the people who are supposed to protect you are the one's who caused the problem. I want the families of Flint to know: You are not alone. Even though we are miles and states apart, we are in community together.

While it's heartbreaking that there are so many parallels between what Native communities are experiencing and what's happening in Flint, we have an opportunity to fight together for justice.
Create cross community networks. Through my work with Tewa Women United, we are working with our friends in the Navajo Nation who are also deeply impacted to organize and attend state hearings on the Animas River spill. As part of Strong Families New Mexico, we have been able to share what's happening in Northern New Mexico with partners across the state and keep this on the radar of our friends and allies. It's critical to maintain these connections with other communities impacted by government-created environmental racism so we can work together and amplify our voices. We are creating spiritual networks through traditional ceremony and prayers of forgiveness and healing to our shared waters of the world, knowing that water speaks to water, knowing that ancestral wisdom and guidance flows within spirit and offers eternal support.

Build community within Flint. In the coming weeks and months and years to come, we encourage you to depend on each other. That's not said lightly or to be cliché, but it is clear that we can't expect the mainstream media or government to create solutions. We have found power and healing in creating our own community spaces to share stories, educate each other and organize. Even in the midst of hardship, we must strengthen our community capacity to find solutions for ourselves by combining our strengths. For us, that's meant tapping into our cultural traditions and balancing them with current knowledge and technologies. We must follow Creator's original instructions to love, respect, and take care of one another, and good things will happen. Together, communities have many of the answers within; we can create the future we want.

Continue to support women's leadership. Another connection we have to Flint is the power of women's leadership. Many women doctors, leaders and concerned mothers started noticing that something was very wrong and pushed the story of Flint into mainstream conversation. Navajo organizer and friend, Duane Chili Yazzie, reminds us: "Our tribe is matrilineal, so women have always been the guide in assuring our survival as a people. Menfolk say what needs to happen, but women are the power, the force, behind our efforts to live and thrive. They're the spirit of our leadership. No way we could be where we're at or where we're headed without the leadership of women."

In Native communities, women have the role of being life givers, seed savers and caretakers of the water. Women in Native communities have been the one's to recognize that rampant environmental violence against Mother Earth is a reflection of violence against women and girls. Since we are most disproportionately affected, we don't have time to wait for the men in power to realize what's happening, we must do it ourselves and for our families.

Use your voices in all the ways you can. If the glare from the media lights fades, if the courts find no wrongdoing, if no one is held accountable - we must still use our voices to tell these stories to our families and children. We will pass these stories along - stories of courage, of sorrow, of community, of health. We also tell our stories so that our communities do not forget, so that we don't get it twisted and think this was our fault, so that we are reminding future generations of their inherent resilience. Whether it's creating art, lifting voices in song, or using our voice at the ballot box, we must keep speaking and telling our stories. We must nurture our relationships to all that is living with the restorative voice of intention.

Mamas and families of Flint - we see you. It's up to us to recognize that even separated by geography, we are more similar than different and that we face the same struggles against racism.
and injustice. Regardless of our identity or where we call home, it's up to us to stand together, organize, oppose harm and oppression, and continue to create safer, beloved communities for all our families.
Appendix C
Las Mujeres Hablan: The Women Speak
Women’s Declaration for New Mexico 2010

Preamble

The Earth community stands at a defining moment in time. Injustices, poverty, ignorance, corruption, crime and violence have deepened and our Earth Mother is suffering. These offenses have led to values that have become hurtful and a destructive way of living.

We believe that women are sacred unique human beings of the Earth. We believe that female and male energy is found within the other. We believe that all people belong to one earth community as a human family.

We, therefore, declare the following:

1. Whereas, women are the nurturers of the human seed within their wombs and bearers of the blessing of creation through the process of giving birth,

2. Whereas, because of the profound role of women in creation, ancient cultures and civilizations throughout human history and today have revered the earth as our Mother, the source of all life,

3. Whereas, women’s bodies are intimately connected to Mother Earth as reflected in our moon cycles that are the basis for procreation and birthing of children,

4. Whereas, mothers and grandmothers continue to be the primary caregivers of children through breastfeeding, feeding, and nurturing, from infancy through all the stages of our human lives,

5. Whereas, women have also nurtured other women historically and traditionally serving as midwives and helping one another raise their children along with their extended families,

6. Whereas, women are believed to have been the first seed savers and contributed to the cultivation of crops in a way that transformed human existence and, today, in our families and communities mothers and grandmothers have continued to be the primary caretakers of seeds,

7. Whereas, women have a special relationship with food in their role as farmers, nurturers, seed savers, and cooks and, therefore, they are the holders of culturally significant recipes and methods for storing and preparing food,

8. Whereas, many of the increasing numbers of small scale, independent farmers are women farmers from various backgrounds who are dedicated to growing clean, healthy, and fair food and to restoring harmony to the earth,

9. Whereas, women provide an important support system for all the activities of operating our ranchitos, the family farms and ranches, including serving as part of the labor essential to the process, providing meals for other laborers, and teaching children the values of land-based culture and way of life,

10. Whereas, women are often the teachers of life skills to their children and are therefore
important to ensuring that traditional knowledge is passed from generation to generation,

11. Whereas, women play important roles in our communities as spiritual leaders who offer blessings at important times in our lives and who offer guidance on important life decisions,

12. Whereas, women in traditional communities hold essential traditional knowledge including teachings about medicinal plants, where they can be harvested, and how they should be used,

13. Whereas, historically, women’s role as homemakers was broad and included helping one another to build, periodically plaster and re-plaster, and maintain their homes,

14. Whereas, for millennia, women have harvested foods such as piñon, quelites, tsimaja, asparagus, verdolagas, chocoyole, and many varieties of berries, which we regard as special gifts and blessings,

15. Whereas, historically and traditionally, women’s roles in families and communities were highly valued and the equally important role of men included providing the needed support system in order to raise healthy families,

16. Whereas, women today are often not respected as they were traditionally and are often subjected to violence in their own homes by those closest to them,

17. Whereas, historically and in modern times, women have, out of the love of their children and men in their families, been at the forefront of resisting all forms of violence, including war,

18. Whereas, because of the nature of women’s bodies related to procreation and our intimate relationship with the earth through farming, herb gathering, and earthwork, we are particularly sensitive to exposure to pollutants from various sources,

19. Whereas, the parts of our bodies meant to nurture and nourish our children are also most susceptible to disease and cancer considering that elevated levels of breast cancer, ovarian cancer, and other deadly diseases result from exposure to toxins,

20. Whereas, mothers and grandmothers who feed and nurture their children are concerned about the existence of synthetic hormones and pesticide residues in foods resulting in unprecedented effects on boys and girls such as premature puberty, cancer, and other long-term effects that are unknown,

21. Whereas, our families are also threatened by the unknown health and ecological effects of genetically engineered seeds, plants, and animals, and we are gravely concerned about the patenting of human life which could have unintended consequences for our families and future generations,

22. Whereas, New Mexico is home to various polluting industries, mining operations, power plants, and nuclear facilities that, although serve as a source of financial income for some of our families, also are responsible for pollution that harms all of our families and are part of a pattern of economic development that displaces traditional peoples from the land,

23. Whereas, women are often low-wage workers in these same polluting industries exposed to certain toxins and women are often low-wage agricultural workers who are exposed to pesticides and herbicides in industrial agriculture,
24. Whereas, women have played a key role along with men in social movements to achieve social, economic, and environmental justice by voicing concerns about the threats of toxins to our families and by calling for livelihoods for ourselves and our families that are clean, healthy, and dignified,

Be it resolved;

1. That we are gathered to declare our reverence for our women ancestors that nurtured generation upon generation so that we could be given the blessing of life,

2. Be it further resolved that we will collectively and intentionally work to carry on the seed saving, farming, and ranching traditions of our ancestors and to pass these teachings on to the younger generations,

3. Be it further resolved that we will resist the genetic engineering and patenting of life so that we may maintain the integrity of our seeds, our right to grow our own food, and the sacredness of life itself,

4. Be it further resolved that we will raise our children to be conscious human beings mindful of the sacred gift of life we have been granted by the creator, to be reverent of our Mother Earth, and to be respectful in their relations,

5. Be it further resolved that we will work in solidarity with each other in our struggles to defend the land, air, and water from contamination, exploitation, and commoditization,

6. Be it further resolved that we honor, respect, and recognize the dignity of women and their families throughout the world and here at home who are subjected to exposure to toxins through their work, their food, or their proximity to pollution and that we resolve to speak and act in solidarity with them in efforts to defend the health of their families and communities,

7. Be it further resolved that we will continue to play an important role in reshaping our communities to achieve a vision of safe, healthy, and joyful lives for our families and communities with good, healthy, locally grown food, good livelihoods that honor the dignity of every human person, and a meaningful, spiritual relationship with Mother Earth.

8. Be it further resolved that we will support the work of the New Mexico Food and Seed Sovereignty Alliance. (New Mexico Acequia Association (NMAA); Traditional Native American Farmers Association (TNAFA); Tewa Women United (TWU); Honor Our Pueblo Existence (HOPE); Agriculture Implementation, Research and Education (AIRE).

Mission: To continue, revive, and protect our native seeds, crops, heritage fruits, animals, wild plants, traditions, and knowledge of our indigenous, land- and acequia-based communities in New Mexico for the purpose of maintaining and continuing our cultural integrity and resisting the global, industrialized food system that can corrupt our lives, freedom, and culture through inappropriate food production and genetic engineering.

9. Be it further resolved that we will support the work of Las Mujeres Hablan. (New Mexico Acequia Association (NMAA); Honor Our Pueblo Existence (HOPE), Tewa Women United (TWU); Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety (CCNS); Embudo Valley Environmental Monitoring Group (EVEMG); New Mexico Conference of Churches (COC); Community Service Organization (CSO).
**Mission:** To address past, present and future issues arising from the nuclear industry and other releases of toxic chemicals that causes pollution and contamination to our land, air, and water; demand clean-up of these sites, question the continued manufacturing of nuclear weapons, and restore justice to the Peoples who have been impacted by this industry and other polluting activities within the Sacred Mountains of New Mexico and other places in the world,

10. Be it further resolved that we will honor and respect the women in our lives including our mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers by thanking them for giving us life and for nurturing us throughout our lives,

AND:

May it further be resolved that we the undersigned, have read this document and are in support of Las Mujeres Hablan: The Women Speak; Women’s Declaration for New Mexico 2010. We find it to be true and will assist wherever possible to learn and teach the children, boys and girls, the importance of living close to the land, having respectful relations with one another and act with dignity and respect to protect Mother Earth, so she in turn can continue to care for us.
Appendix D

EL AGUA ES LA VIDA

Congreso de las Acequias  December 2, 2006

Statement of Principles

1. We recognize, honor, and respect that water is sacred and sustains all life.

2. We reaffirm the connection between land, water, and our communities as the material and spiritual basis for our existence.

3. We practice the principle that water is life in our customs and traditions of water sharing also known as the repartimiento.

4. We recognize that we live in a desert and water scarcity is part of our existence. Because it is scarce and precious, the utmost care must be taken in using our water.

5. We honor the indigenous knowledge of our elders which guides the day-to-day operation of acequias, the cultivation of ancestral crops, and the care of our animals.

6. We recognize that our ancestors viewed water as a communal resource attached to the land and our water rights exist as a result of generations of their labor and self-governance.

7. We honor water as part of our heritage and believe that treating water as a commodity for generating profit is a fundamental disrespect of our way of life.

8. We seek to sustain our ancestral connections to water which has historically been used for providing our families with household uses, growing food, and providing for our animals.

9. We believe that as needs for water in our communities change over time, decisions about reallocations or transfers of water rights should be made through a cultural and spiritual attachment to place, through a feeling of querencia, and through local self-governance.

10. We believe that our acequias are fundamental to our culture and our identity as land-based people and we must be intentional in passing on our traditions to future generations.

11. We maintain that water we use for growing food supports our self-determination as a people, enhances riparian habitat, contributes to aquifer recharge, and results in health benefits both to the farmer and to those who eat local, fresh, and culturally significant foods.

Threats to Acequia Water and Land-Based Livelihoods

1. Unprecedented growth and development in New Mexico are driving demands to move water rights out of agriculture to urban, resort, and commercial development.

2. According to studies on future supply and demand, acequia communities are projected to lose 30% to 60% of their water rights base and farmland to development in the next 40 years.

3. Acequias in areas with high water demands may be driven to extinction by water transfers because of reduced pressure head at the point of diversion and fewer families to contribute to the maintenance and governance of the acequia.
4. Acequia and rural agricultural communities are economically disadvantaged and will likely experience a net loss of water rights as wealthier individuals, entities, and regions acquire water rights from a position of greater economic power.

5. Demands to move water out of our acequias come at a time when our communities are dedicating themselves to revitalizing agriculture and rebuilding local food systems. Erosion of the acequia water rights base will foreclose future options for rural community development.

6. Water supplies in New Mexico are threatened by various sources of water contamination including mining runoff, lack of wastewater treatment facilities, improper dumping of solid, chemical, and radioactive waste, and urban drainage.

7. Traditional environmental knowledge embodied in the acequia culture is at risk because of a lack of intentional efforts in our educational systems to recognize its importance and incorporate it into curricula.

8. Poor condition of our watersheds from overstocked forests and invasive species are likely to be reducing stream flows in our rivers which impacts wildlife, streamflows, and water quality.

**Acequia Plan of Action**

1. We will cultivate our acequia lands with the crops of our ancestors using native seeds and we will continually improve our soils on our farms and ranches to enhance efficient use of our water.

2. We will actively participate in the governance of our acequias and encourage new leaders to serve as commissioners and mayordomos.

3. We will celebrate our culture through funciónes, cambalaches, and festivales that honor traditional feast days and the culturally and spiritually important days in our growing season.

4. We will seek solutions to meet local water rights needs by supporting collaboration between acequias and mutual domestic water consumer associations in securing safe and healthy water for our families.

5. We will work to retain local ownership and control of water rights by strengthening acequia governance and preventing the transfer of acequia water rights out of their respective communities and the basins where they have historically existed.

6. We will establish projects to strengthen our farms and ranches as part of our way of life and as part of our livelihoods. We will also seek appropriate resources to rebuild our food system infrastructure locally and regionally.

7. We will establish community-based processes and centers for the documentation of indigenous and traditional environmental knowledge about our watersheds, acequia traditions, agricultural practices, and food traditions.

8. We will work to challenge the economic and political forces in New Mexico that result in growth and development patterns that are transforming our landscape and undermining our way of life.
Acequia Allies Solidarity Statement

1. We support and value the historical and cultural contributions of acequias to New Mexico and seek to sustain them and part of our collective heritage.

2. We will support acequia and agricultural communities in challenging the economic and political forces in New Mexico that result in growth and development that are transforming our landscape and undermining New Mexico’s land-based cultures.

3. We will work to change the existing unsustainable growth patterns in New Mexico by supporting policies that appropriately manage new growth and development in such a manner that will reduce water consumption and the demands to transfer water rights out of agriculture.

4. We will promote policies and projects that more rigorously conserve, reuse, and recycle water to reduce water consumption and the demands to transfer water rights out of agriculture, make changes to our personal water use to reduce urban and residential demands for water, and reject wasteful uses of water.

5. We will support local farmers and ranchers by intentionally purchasing locally grown foods directly from farmers and by supporting businesses that serve or sell locally grown foods.

6. We will support policies to rebuild local food systems by increasing financial and educational resources to farmers and ranchers and by investing in agricultural infrastructure.

7. We will dedicate time and resources to projects aimed at strengthening acequias, engaging youth in land-based culture, and creating educational projects that seek to sustain the traditional community body of knowledge that underpins the acequia culture.

8. We will be advocates in our own towns, cities, associations, and organizations for policies that support acequia culture and serve as allies of acequia communities.
Appendix E
Resolution 2015-04
Support Women in Acequia Leadership
Submitted by Las Comadres Caucus

Whereas, women have had a historical role in the support and survival of acequias for generations, including their role as farmers and irrigators, serving as elected officials in some cases, providing labor and meals for other laborers, and teaching children the values of land-based culture and way of life,

Whereas, women have both served in acequia leadership but more often women have fulfilled important but informal roles in the governance of the acequia by supporting their husbands, brothers, fathers, sons, tíos and other community members who have official leadership roles as elected commissioners or mayordomos,

Whereas, although women have occupied formal leadership positions within the acequia as elected comisionadas y mayordomas for decades, the number of women leaders in acequias has increased in recent years, while continuously upholding traditional roles in a shifting culture,

Whereas, we recognize that all acequias face challenges in regards to labor, leadership, and economic pressures,

Whereas, we recognize and re-affirm the Women’s Declaration for New Mexico of 2010, which was created in collaboration with Las Mujeres Hablan to honor and protect the many sacred roles women carry, and the challenges women face,

Whereas, women make up the fastest growing segment of new beginning farmers in the nation, including in New Mexico,

Therefore, be it resolved that New Mexico Acequia Association fully supports women in acequia agriculture as well as community and acequia leadership,

Be it further resolved that NMAA will continue to develop and strengthen support systems for women in agriculture and women as leaders, particularly in acequia communities,

Be it further resolved that Las Comadres Caucus and the NMAA will host a workshop in 2016 for women who participate in or who have an interest in acequia leadership.
REFERENCES


Las Mujeres Hablan. 2010. “Community Summary of CDC’s Los Alamos Historical Document Retrieval and Assessment (LAHDRA) Project.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), National Center for Environmental Health, Division of Environmental Hazards and Health Effects, Radiation Studies Branch.


