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# La Querencia: La Raza Bioregionalism

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JUAN ESTEVAN ARELLANO

I am convinced that the death of my community is not necessary and not inevitable. I believe that such remnant communities as my own, fallen to the ground as they are, might still become the seeds of a better civilization than we now have—better economy; better faith, better knowledge and affection.

Wendell Berry  
*Wild Earth* (1995)<sup>1</sup>

Although Wendell Berry was writing about his hometown, he very well might have been writing about northern New Mexico. I write from the point of view of a member of a small rural community that has been dwindling for most of this century. It may be that my community's economy, faith, local knowledge, and affection for itself will dwindle then disappear or be replaced by a commuters' suburb. When we lay out the ground work for developing an "Environmental History of La Raza," we should begin with land and water use in the Rio Arriba Bioregion, which extends from Ciudad Juárez–El Paso to Colorado's San Luis Valley. Whether we call ourselves hispanos, Chicanos, nuevomexicanos, manitos, paisanos, or raza, there are three important documents we have to familiarize ourselves with. *Recopilación de leyes de los reynos de las indias*, 4 vols. (1681), *El tratado de Guadalupe–Hidalgo* (1848), and the subsequent *Protocolo de Querétaro* (1848) all guarantee our right to exist as defined by the "Laws of the Indies."

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The term bioregionalism has been recently coined by geographers. When the *Recopilación* was being compiled, however, *nuestros antepasados* (our predecessors) were laying the foundation for what Kirkpatrick Sale calls bioregionalism. "[T]he crucial and perhaps only all-encompassing task is to understand *place*, the immediate specific place where we live. The kinds of soils and rocks under our feet; the source of the waters we drink; the meaning of the different kinds of winds; the common insects, birds, mammals, plants, and trees; the particular cycles of the seasons; the times to plant and harvest and forage—these are the things that are necessary to know."<sup>2</sup>

Though once we, *la raza cósmica* (The Cosmic Race), might have been an alien presence in this land—because of our Spanish fathers—we have now become as natural in this landscape as the piñon tree. Whether we (or Native Americans) acknowledge it or not, most of us have Native American blood running through our veins. That communion with the landscape ties us to the enduring code of brotherhood just as the poet makes the landscape itself the carrier of memory.

What is happening in Los Alamos today began with memory, but we are on the verge of losing our memory. If we lose our language, we will lose most of our environmental history. Never! Our memory has now assumed the form of the landscape itself. This is the essence of *Querencia*, if we lose either memory or landscape, we lose both. A metaphor has become a reality; an absence has become a presence.

*El que pierde su tierra pierde su memoria* (he that loses his land loses his memory), and no amount of money or technological advances will help us recover that loss. For some, Los Alamos has been seen as the promised land. For others, it has become an enigma, a virus destroying all the data on the hard disk with no way of retrieving it or saving it. The challenge for all of us is to find a way of rediscovering what we already have. Although physically in northern New Mexico, Los Alamos is really not part of the bioregion; like in *Gulliver's Travels*, it is a floating island. Sale reminds us that "bioregionalism calls for human society to be more closely related to nature, and to be more conscious of its locale, or region or life-place. . . . It is a proposal to ground human cultures within natural systems, to get to know one's place intimately in order to fit human communities to the Earth, not distort the Earth to our demands," which has been the mission of Los Alamos.<sup>3</sup>

What constitutes a bioregion? In the *Recopilación*, volume 2, book 4, title 5, law 1: That the lands and provinces, that have been selected for settlement, have the following qualities, it is declared:

*Ordenamos, que havindose resuelto de poblar alguna Provincia, ó comarca de las questán á nuestra obediencia, ó despues se descubrieren, tengan los pobladores consideracion y advertencia á que el terreno sea saludable, reconociendo si*

*se conservan en él hombres de mucha edad, y mozos de buena complexión, disposición y color: si los animales y ganados son sanos, y de competente tamaño, y los frutos, y mantenimientos buenos, y abundantes, y de tierras á proposito para sembrar, y coger: si se crían cosas ponzoñosas y nocivas: el Cielo es de buena y feliz constelación, claro y benigno, el aire puro y suave, sin impedimentos, ni alteraciones: el temple sin exceso de calor, ó frío: (y habiendo de declinar á una, ó otra calidad, escojan el frío) si hay pastos para criar ganados: montes y arboledas para leña: materiales de casas y edificios: muchas y buenas aguas para beber, y regar. . . .<sup>4</sup>*

TRANSLATION:

It is ordered, that having resolved to settle a province, or region which is under our jurisdiction, or later discovered; the settlers be considerate and be advised that the land be healthy, recognizing if men of old age are conserved within it, as well as youth of good complexion, disposition, and color. They should recognize if the animals and livestock are healthy, of good size, if the fruit trees and sustenance are good and abundant, if the lands are good for planting and foraging: if poisonous and noxious things grow: the sky is of a good and joyful constellation, clear and benign, the air pure and sweet, without impediments or alterations: the climate without excess heat or cold: (and having to choose between one or another quality, choose the cold) if there is good grazing for livestock: forests and trees for firewood: materials for houses and other buildings: a plentiful supply of good waters for drinking and irrigation. . . .<sup>5</sup>

It appears that Sale was following "las leyes" to arrive at his definition of bioregionalism. The same philosophy was expressed by Marcus Cato (234–149 BC), when he advised people in search of a good piece of land, saying that "It should have a good climate, not subject to storms; the soil should be good, and naturally strong. If possible, it should lie at the foot of the mountain and face south; the situation should be healthful . . . it should be well watered . . ."<sup>4</sup>

In *Recopilación*, volume 2, book 4, title 7, law 1: That the new settlements be established with the qualities of this law.

*. . . . Procuren tener el agua cerca, y que se pueda conducir al Pueblo y heredades, derivandola, si fuere posible, para mejor a provecharse de ella, y los materiales necesarios para edificios, tierras de labor, cultura y pasto. . . . No elijan sitios para poblar en lugares muy altos, por la molestia de los vientos, y dificultad del servicio y acarreto, ni en lugares muy baxos, porque suelen*

*ser enfermos, fundense en los medianmente levantados, que gozen descubiertos los vientos de el Norte y Mediodia: y si huvieren de tener sierras, ó cuestas, sean por la parte de Levante y Poniente: y si no se pudieren escusar de los lugares altos, funden en parte donde no estén sujetos á nieblas, haziédo observación de lo que mas convenga á la salud, y accidentes, que le puedan ofrecer, y en caso de edificar á la ribera de algun Río, dispongan la poblacion de forma, que saliendo el Sol, dé primero en el Pueblo, que en el agua.*

TRANSLATION:

. . . . Try to have water close by, and that it can be conducted to the town and other property, diverting it, if possible, to better utilize it, and the materials necessary for buildings, lands for agriculture and pasture. . . . Don't select sites to settle which are very high, plagued by winds, and with difficulty of servicing and transportation, or in very low places, since they are prone to illness; settle in mid-elevations, where the north and south winds prevail. And if there are mountains or slopes, that they be facing east or west: and if it is not possible to avoid high places, settle in areas where there isn't any fog, observing what is best that it can offer regarding health and accidents: and if building on the shore of a river, determine how, when the sun comes out, it first hits the town, then on the water.

The Plaza del Embudo (today Dixon) fits this description perfectly, so does Alburquerque. Fray Angélico Chávez, *My Penitente Land* (1974) attempts to define this Querencia and tie it to the Biblical lands of North Africa, from where our ancestors, the Moors, came.<sup>7</sup> In *Recopilación*, volume 2, book 4, title 7, law 3: That the land and surroundings be abundant and healthy:

*Ordenamos, que el terreno y cercanía, que se ha de poblar, se elija en todo lo posible el mas fértil, abúdante de pastos, leña, madera, materiales, aguas dulces, gente natural, acarreos, entrada y salida, y que no tengan cerca lagunas, ni pátanos en que se crien animales venenosos, ni haya corrupción de ayeres, ni aguas.*

TRANSLATION:

It is ordered, that the land and surroundings, which are to be settled, be the most fertile, with abundant pasture, firewood, lumber, materials, sweet waters, natives, transportation, ingress

and egress, and that there be no lake close by, nor marsh lands where venomous animals live, nor any corruption of winds, or waters.

The above laws lay the foundation of what has become our *Querencia*, that which gives us a sense of place, anchors us to the land, and makes us a unique people. Historian David Schama in *Landscape and Memory* (1995) writes, "Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock."<sup>8</sup>

Our environmental history is based on a solid foundation. Our ancestors were environmentalists—not extremists—who understood what was meant both by private property and by common lands. Berry reminds us that, "Historically, the commons belonged to the local community, not to the public," as environmental extremists such as Sam Hitt, Joanie Birdie, the Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management want us to believe.<sup>9</sup> Before we use the common land, we need to return to the past and mine that rapidly disappearing knowledge, to understand our privileges and responsibilities. As *nuevomexicanos*, today we have had almost nothing to say about our region's character and identity, yet we are the ones who have defined that character and identity. Since the 1940s, the region's "pseudo identity" as exemplified by Taos and Santa Fe, has come from tourists and immigrants—the so-called arts community.

As Sale writes, in terms of this *Querencia*, or bioregion, we have to know, "The limits of its resources; the carrying capacities of its lands and waters; the places where it must not be stressed; the places where its bounties can best be developed; the treasures it holds and the treasures it withholds—these are the things that must be understood." He goes on to say a bioregion is governed by nature, not the legislature, "or the United States Department of Energy," or any other government entity.<sup>10</sup>

When we talk about the *dehessas y montes* (the commons), we are concerned about lands where we all have a common interest, an interest that precedes our interest in private property. For we not only share in the common wealth, but we also share in the common health; the two are inseparable. Berry writes, "If we have the 'right to life,' as we have always supposed, then that right must stand upon the further right to air, water, food, clothing, and shelter."<sup>11</sup> This is exactly how the Laws of the Indies defined perfect places for new settlements.

If we want the land to be taken care of properly, duty and sentiment are not enough. We must have people living on and from the land who are able and willing to take care of it. We need to implement a different kind of education, philosophy, and economy. We cannot demand good care of the land from public officials. We have to understand that we

cannot save the land and water apart from the people or the people apart from the land and water. To save either, we must save both; for that we need a strong rural economy.

Los Alamos destroyed that rural economy. It destroyed the diversity that existed in northern New Mexico, and in its place created an economy based on fantasy. Instead of preserving the possibility of intimacy in land use, as dictated by the Laws of the Indies, Los Alamos created a consumer society interested in sterile or inconsequential intimacy. Lust for money supplanted intimacy with the land. Our economic system of *cambalache* (barter) was taken over by a money economy and greed.

Laura Jackson, in her paper, "Agricultural Industrialization and the Loss of Biodiversity," warns us that as the number of farming families dwindle, we lose not only essential and perhaps irreplaceable knowledge, but "When the minds responsible for these farms have left the countryside, replaced by minimum-wage labor in factory-style facilities, so will the potential to conserve and improve the agricultural landscape."<sup>12</sup> Although Los Alamos pays good wages, few locals can get past a certain wage level. What we have in the Rio Arriba Bioregion is a colonial economy and colonial economies place no value on caring for the land. They do not teach, encourage, reward, nor protect. Now we have environmentalists who have no concept of our history and who want to teach how to care for the land.

When land was handed down from father to son, so was that knowledge of the land, of how to water from the *acequias*. That is not the case today; now the land passes so rapidly from one owner to another that there is no time to learn how to use it. Every time a piece of property is put on the market its price goes up and so do its taxes; then the county commissioners get blamed for driving prices up. In Embudo, between 1970 and 1996 the price for land has gone up from \$1,000 an acre to over \$40,000. As a result, it is predictably abused with old cars abandoned in the orchards, mobile homes in arroyos, luxury homes on mountain tops and in *ciénagas* (marshes). Berry reminds us, "If conservationists are serious about conservation, they will have to realize that the best conserver of the land in use will always be the small owner or operator . . . who knows how to use the land in the best way, and who can afford to do so."<sup>13</sup>

To prevent land and water abuse, the best blueprint is to follow the Laws of the Indies as our forefathers did. We have to preserve what we have, but at the same time realize an economic benefit that only comes from intimately knowing the land. "We have to move towards vigorous local economies capable of sustaining a stable and capable rural population, rewarding them appropriately both for their products and their stewardship."<sup>14</sup> Sale tells us "that bioregions are not only of different sizes but often can be seen to be like Chinese boxes, one within another,

forming a complex arrangement from the largest to the smallest, depending upon which natural characteristics are dominant."<sup>15</sup> It is this intimacy with the land that we must protect, this knowledge that has to be preserved. Some of us have been doing it for a lifetime. "We do not inherit the land from our parents, we have it borrowed from our children," therefore we have a moral obligation to turn the land over to our children in a better condition than we got it, not worse. We have a solid environmental history to back up our philosophy of Querencia, or bioregionalism, as the best model for moving forward as we approach the twenty-first century. It is a knowledge that draws on classic Greek agricultural practices, Roman law, Moorish customs, along with knowledge inherited from the Mayas, Aztecas, and Pueblos. Here in New Mexico the knowledge from Africa, Europe, and the Americas converged in 1598. We are therefore, *la raza cósmica*, *la nueva raza*; we are a walking diversity of bloods, cultures, and languages, anchored in *nuevomexico*, *nuestra Querencia*.

#### NOTES

1. Wendell Berry, "Private Property and the Common Wealth," *Wild Earth* 5 (Fall 1995), 6.
2. Kirkpatrick Sale, *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision* (San Francisco, California: Sierra Club Books, 1985), 42.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
4. *Recopilación de leyes de los reynos las indias*, tomos 4 (1681; Facsimil edición, Madrid: Ediciones Cultura Hispanica, 1973), tomo 2, libro 4, título 5, ley 1.
5. This and all subsequent Spanish-to-English translations by author.
6. *Marcus Porcius Cato on Agriculture, Marcus Terentius Varro on Agriculture*, trans. William Davis Hooper, rev. Harrison Boyd Ash (1934; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1935), 5.
7. Fray Angélico Chávez, *My Penitente Land: Reflections on Spanish New Mexico* (1974; Santa Fe, New Mexico: William Gannon, 1979).
8. Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 6-7.
9. Berry, "Private Property and the Common Wealth," 7.
10. Sale, *Dwellers in the Land*, 42.
11. Berry, 8.
12. Laura Jackson, "Agricultural Industrialization and the Loss of Biodiversity," unpublished paper quoted in Berry, 9.
13. Berry, 11.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Sale, 56.

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