

Toxic Pastoral

ENG/ENV M30: Environment across Cultures

Prof. Heise

20 April 2023



Toxicity in Environmental Storytelling



Marina Zurkow: *Mesocosm* (Wink, Texas) [<https://vimeo.com/3803>]

Carson's Toxic Landscapes



Rachel Carson (1907-1964)

Carson's Toxicity Narrative

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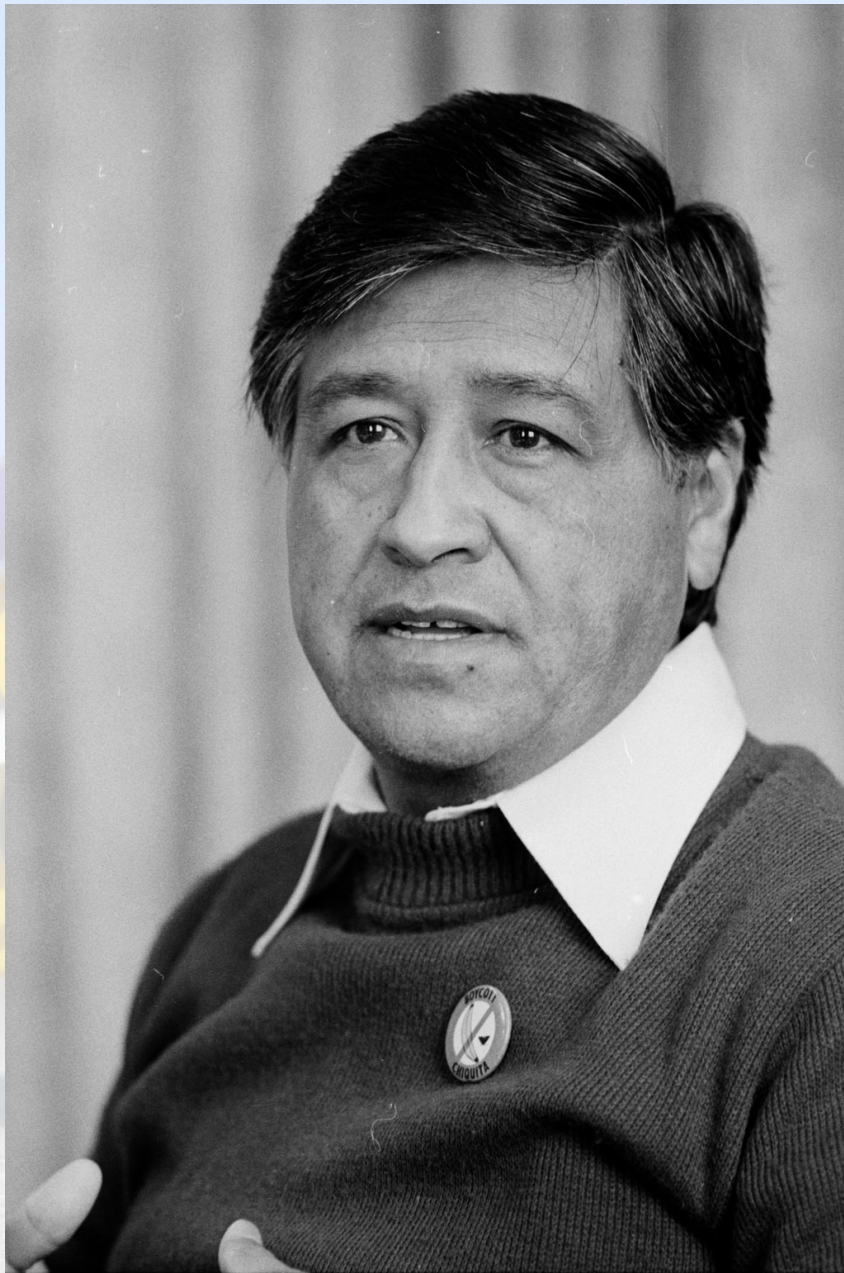
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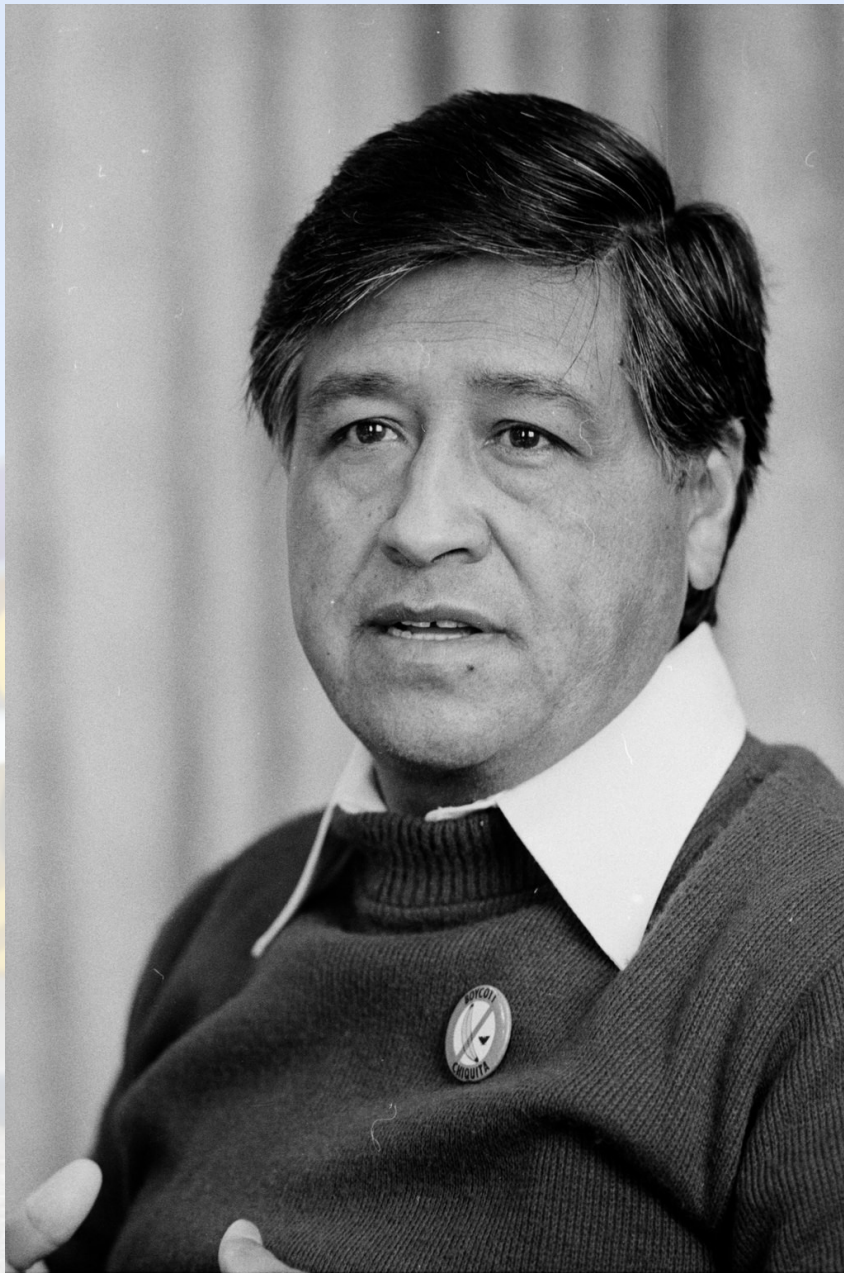
Carson's Toxicity Narrative: Pastoral with a Dash of Apocalypse

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- **Antinuclear rhetoric** that compares toxins to nuclear radiation



Cesar Chavez (1927-1993)

Co-founder of the National Farmworkers' Association (NFWA), which merged with the United Farmworkers labor union (UFW)



- Life-long activism on behalf of farm workers, including grape, lettuce, and water melon strikes in the 1960s and 70s to protest poor working conditions
- From the mid-1980s, increasing activism against pesticides
- 1986 UFW video *Wrath of Grapes* on pesticide poisonings of farmworkers

1989 “Perils of Pesticides” Speech

- Anti-pastoral portrait of California agriculture as dominated by big agribusiness corporations
- Emphasis on class: how farmworkers are far more exposed to pesticides than consumers, let alone the managers and owners of the corporations
- Emphasis on gender: risk of women farmworkers exposed to pesticides
- Emphasis on race: most farmworkers are Mexicans, Chicanos, or come from other Central American countries

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- Anti-pastoral portrait of California agriculture as dominated by big agribusiness corporations:

"The problem is this mammoth agribusiness system. The problem are the huge farms. The problem is the pressure on the land from developers. . . . The problem is monoculture - growing acres and acres of the same crop; disrupting the natural order of things."



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"The wealth and plenty of California agribusiness are built atop the suffering of generations of California farm workers. Farm labor history across America is one shameful tale after another of hardship and exploitation."

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“We are proud to be a part of the House of Labor. . . . But the U.F.W. has always had to be something more than a union.

Because our people are so poor. Because the color of our skin is dark. Because we often don’t speak the language. Because the discrimination, the racism and the social dilemmas we confront transcend mere economic need.

What good does it do to achieve the blessings of collective bargaining and make economic progress for people when their health is destroyed in the process?”

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- Explicit criticism of California’s governor
- Strategic use of anecdote

Cherríe Moraga (b. 1952)



- Chicana essayist, playwright, political activist
- often focus on gender, sexuality (esp. Chicana lesbianism), and race
- 1981: co-editor, with Gloria Anzaldúa, of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*
- 1983: *Loving in the War Years: Lo que nunca pasó por sus labios*
- 1992: *Heroes and Saints*
- 2001: *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*
- 2011: *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings 2000-2010*

Moraga, *Heroes and Saints* (1992)



2001 performance at
Teatro Visión in San Jose:
Carmen Elena Sosa, VIVIS,
and Selena Sue Navarro as
Yolanda, Dolores, and
Cerezita

Moraga, *Heroes and Saints* (1992)



The Toxicity Story Pattern

- Waking up to reality from illusions of normalcy and pastoral
- Images of total poisoning - no escape
- Frequent emphasis on disruption of families
- Rage of the powerless against the powerful
- Emphasis on disabled bodies and ravaged landscapes

