

Toward a Transnational Chicanidad: New Tribalism, Environmental Justice, and China

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Introduction

In 2018 mark! Lopez was an invited speaker for the Clean Air Asia conference in Beijing.¹ This is a conference organized with the aim to develop policy changes for clean air initiatives in response to the impact of the logistics industry in China, specifically port pollution. Lopez attended as a representative for the US-based nationwide organization the Moving Forward Network (MFN) as well as the local organization East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice (EYCEJ) which focuses on the areas of South East Los Angeles and Long Beach. As an invited speaker in China, he shared his local Los Angeles experience and community-based efforts to impact the clean air policy in general and especially that around the San Pedro Port Complex. The San Pedro Port Complex refers to two ports, the Los Angeles Port and the Long Beach port that together have a massive impact on the US economy.

Lopez's global reach is not new and in fact, he comes from a lineage of internationally recognized Chicana/o activism. In 2017 he was awarded the

¹ mark! Lopez writes his name as "mark!" to refer to the fact that he is enthusiastically anti-capitalist. The writing is designed to spark an interest and possible discussion so that people can learn more about his politics and life commitments.

Goldman Environmental Prize, a recognition comparable to a Nobel Peace Prize.² This award propelled Lopez into the world scene which led him to become an invited speaker in China. Additionally, he comes from a family of community grounded environmental-focused activism. For instance, his grandmother Juanita Gutiérrez, was a founding member of the Mothers of East Los Angeles, a community organization, with global impact, that was extremely active in the late 20th century where they focused on different issues pertaining to community empowerment and justice.³

The experiences and political commitments that Lopez's holds complemented the mission of Clean Air Asia, an organization with the aim to better the air quality in Asia through policy work that reduces air pollution and emissions. The Clean Air Asia conference was a multi-day conference that focused largely on their own localized discussion about air issues in China and also brought in speakers from around the world to discuss the work and success they were doing in their home location around clean air issues. At the conference, the politically engaged audience was eager to learn about Lopez's experience around the MFN and EYCEJ as these lessons were extremely relevant, timely, and motivating.

The reason that organizers in China were looking at Los Angeles in general and EYCEJ/MFN in particular, was because of the policy changes that have occurred around zero emissions politics such as the California Greenhouse Gas Emission Inventory Program. This emission inventory is in charge of looking at historical trends of greenhouse gas as well as looking at the progress made in California to bring down these figures.⁴ This is an important tool that shows that there has been progress made in terms of lowering air pollution. Nonetheless, as identified by the Neighborhood Data for Social Change the communities of South East Los Angeles are 94% Latino and experience a higher rate of pollution than

² "2017 Goldman Prize Winner mark! Lopez," The Goldman Environmental Prize, accessed 12 July 2022, <https://www.goldmanprize.org/recipient/mark-lopez/>.

³ Mary Pardo, "Gendered Citizenship: Mexican American Women and Grassroot Activism in East Los Angeles," in *Chicano Politics and Society in the Late Twentieth Century*, ed. David Montejano., 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 58-79; Mary S. Pardo, *Mexican American Women Activists: Identity and Resistance in Two Los Angeles Communities* / Mary S. Pardo (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

⁴ "Current California CHG Emission Inventory Data," California Air Resources Board, California Government, accessed 18 March 2022, <https://ww2.arb.ca.gov/ghg-inventory-data>.

Los Angeles in general.⁵ Thus, while the air is improving in the places where the Latino populations live, they continue to face a disproportioned impact. While these policy shifts become formalized through the city of Los Angeles it is interesting that the Clean Air Act conference organizers did not prioritize formal state actors to present but the grassroots movements who have played a key role in ensuring that environmental policy changes occurred. This was the reason that Mark Lopez and his co-presenter Ana Baptista were invited. Nonetheless, the invitation to China stemmed from earlier moments of collaboration between Chinese officials who collaborated with the MFN through other avenues. This general connection between Lopez and China grounds the oral history approach I undertook which sought to uncover how he ended up in China, the work he did once he was there, and how he reflected on the importance of this trip. I share a small portion of this oral history throughout this paper.

The case study concerning Lopez's trip, *East of East LA: International Solidarity, Environmentalism, and Chicana/os in China*, serves as the backdrop for this paper where I work to theoretically engage identity shifts of Chicanidad within the context of global capitalism in general and in its dialectical relationship with China. To develop the global analytical tools to frame the significance of this trip, I realize the theoretical framework of "new tribalism" as posited by Gloria Anzaldúa. Anzaldúa develops new tribalism as a concept that urges an engagement with identity concerns in the contemporary moment of global capitalism.⁶ To do so, I focus on the components of the logistics industry which create the conditions for transnational political solidarity. New tribalism serves to extend previous notions of *mestizaje*, which critics claimed were too essentialist, to one centered on solidarity and the development of identity within the context of a changing economy.⁷ In this paper, I argue that if new tribalism positions contemporary identity in relation to the changing urban and spatial environment and if the logistics industry creates direct material connections between Los Angeles Chicana/Latina people and China, then the trip to China

⁵ Meghan Nazareno and Aileen Qin, "Neighborhood Wellbeing Environmental Quality for Latino/a Communities in Southeast Los Angeles," accessed 18 March 2022, <https://la.myneighborhooddata.org/2021/08/neighborhood-wellbeing-and-environmental-quality-for-latino-a-communities-in-south-east-los-angeles/>.

⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* (London: Duke University Press, 2015), 65-94.

⁷ Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 245-46.

represents a moment where working-class communities are moving toward the transnational engagements that subvert the state in an effort to reach solutions.

New Tribalism and International Politics

[Going to China for this conference] didn't come out of nowhere. I was surprised. I was like, "Oh, shit. This is really dope." I wasn't necessarily shocked. It didn't come out of nowhere. I understand that it was, as everything in the movement, it is the culmination of work that folks had been putting in for years. Even though a lot of the work that was put on a decade ago or two decades ago, the intention wasn't to get here. This is where it's brought us.⁸

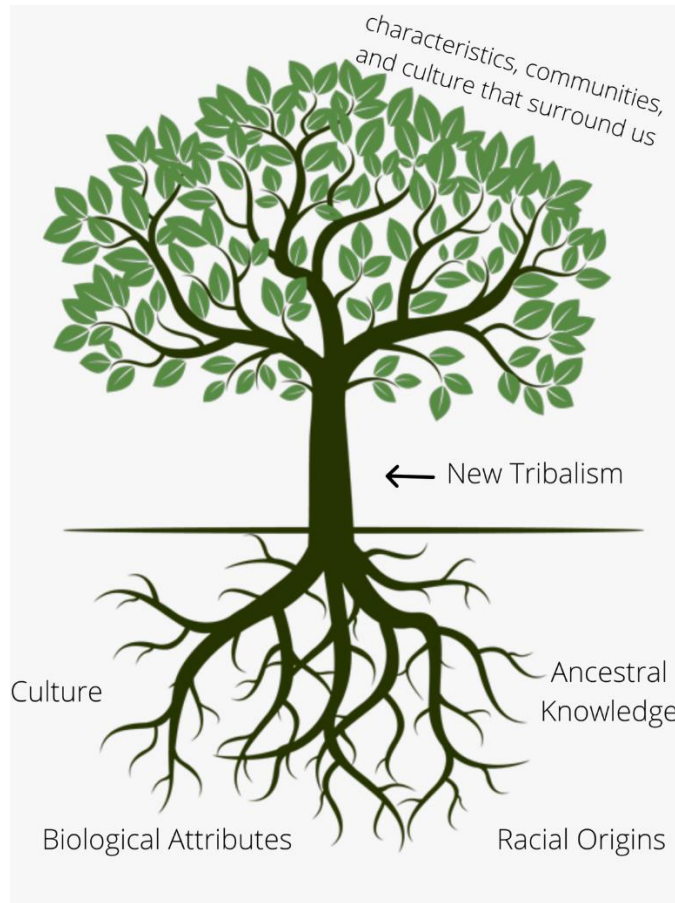
Lopez's trip to China is indicative of a larger conjunctural moment where Chicanidad is becoming more globally expansive and the connections to China are becoming ever more apparent.⁹ This case study provides a concrete example to excavate the materiality and dialectical nature of new tribalism. To introduce new tribalism, Anzaldúa begins with the metaphorical example of the tree of life, (*el arbol de la vida*) to describe the interconnection between individuals and the changing world. New tribalism builds on Anzaldúa's previous work around *mundo zurdo* which pushes against the constraints of static identity categories.¹⁰ Nonetheless, new tribalism makes an important epistemological shift toward materiality. Where *mundo zurdo* argues "that by changing ourselves we change the world," new tribalism focuses on the material shifts within global capitalism as interacting dialectically with the changing aspects of identity.¹¹

⁸ mark! Lopez in discussion with author, November 2020.

⁹ Similar arguments about the dialectical relationship between global capitalism, identity, and the future direction of Ethnic Studies have been made by E. San Juan Jr., "The Ordeal of Ethnic Studies in the Age of Globalization," in *Displacements and Diasporas: Asians in the Americas*, ed. Wann W. Anderson and Robert G. Lee (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005) 280. Also, the centering of global capitalism to contextualized quotidian Chicana/Latina politics has been argued by Pancho McFarland, "The Chicano Rap on Globalization," in *Chicano Rap Gender and Violence in the Postindustrial Barrio* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 115-132.

¹⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa, "La Prieta," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), 205-206.

¹¹ Anzaldúa, "La Prieta," 208.



(Image 1.1. Tree of Life as interpreted and depicted by author)

The arbol de la vida is described with deep roots and far-reaching branches and leaves to represent the interconnection between the individual biography and the changing material world that is constantly in flux (Image 1.1). The roots are dug deep into the soil as they refer to the ancestral origins, racial understanding, cultural roots, and biological attributes. These are the features that ground the individual but do not constitute its whole. The whole is reached when one conceptualizes the changing material conditions which we interact with. The leaves and branches reach far and wide and provide new experiences. This can mean a change of geographical space, new cultural communities, and in this case the impact of the logistics industry central to global capitalism. Thus, the new tribalism framework understands that established Chicano identity is important,

but it is changing as the contemporary global economy and lived experience shift which is pushing identity concerns in new directions.

Anzaldúa explains new tribalism:

The new tribalism is about being part of but never being subsumed by a group, never losing individuality to the group nor losing the group to the individual. The new tribalism is about working together to create new 'stories' of identity and culture, to envision diverse futures. It's about rethinking our narratives of history, ancestry, and even of reality itself.¹²

I identify three central tropes of new tribalism: 1) the fact that identity must be constructed dialectically with the material shifts in the world; 2) we are in a conjectural moment rooted in a capitalist crisis; 3) the nepantleras are the ones who will lead us in the direction of new tribalism. Anzaldúa anchors an understanding of contemporary identity as impacted by the changing urban and spatial landscape where Raza lives and interacts. Identity formation is a multilayered dynamic process that results from the impact of different geographical and temporal plains. Thus, to move from concept to form it is important to articulate how Lopez's case study encompasses the possibility to move toward a new tribalism. To do so, I utilize the three tropes that define new tribalism to analyze the oral history data.

At the geographical level, the politics around Los Angeles and the ports construct Lopez's lived experience, these are the leaves that construct a sense of Chicanidad. One that is constructed in an urban space. Mark! states:

I remember I went to a workshop, they [East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice] were hosting leadership development workshop, it was called Goods Movement 101. [...] It's all about how international trade works, globalization and capitalism. It's talking about how things are manufactured in China, and then are shipped over to the ports of LA and Long Beach and then put on trucks. Then those trucks take it to the rail-yards that are in

¹² Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 85.

Commerce in East LA and then those trains take it out to the rest of the fucking country. [...] I didn't understand that before that workshop. I knew it but I didn't understand it within the context of a system. I didn't understand it within the context of NAFTA. I didn't understand it within the global capitalism that they were breaking it down in. Most importantly I didn't understand that that shit was right fucking here. That that infrastructure that facilitates this is right here. We are at one of the major arteries of global capitalism right here.¹³

The quote demonstrates how mark! came to understand his home as part of a larger web of the logistics industry. It was because he was raised in (the metaphorical leaves of) Los Angeles that his identity and political position were/are incorporated and influenced by the goods movement of global capitalism.

The San Pedro Bay Port Complex, based on 2020 figures, handles the most containers per ship in the world and is ranked number nine overall globally in terms of imports. The economic impact that this port holds is immense as it controls 74% of all west coast market shares and 31% of the market shares in the United States. While these percentages account for the activities of trade, the Los Angeles Ports statistical reports claim that it accounts for 1 in 12 jobs in the Los Angeles and Long Beach region as well as 1 in 48 jobs in the United States. Additionally, the top five trading partners with this port are China/Hong Kong, Japan, Vietnam, Taiwan, and South Korea. This is a massive port that impacts the United States and is connected globally with the rest of the world.¹⁴

While the unique politics of urban Los Angeles are influential, it is the ancestral roots grounded in Chicanidad that lead to an internationalist collaboration with folks in China. Collectivism on a global scale, based in material realities, has been a politics central to Chicanx organizing in particular and BIPOC organizing in general. For example, the organization Mothers of East

¹³ mark! Lopez in discussion with author, November 2020.

¹⁴ “Annual Facts and Figures Card,” *The Port of Los Angeles Statistics*, <https://www.portoflosangeles.org/business/statistics>.

Los Angeles had political connections with women in South Africa who collaborated to develop similar urban infrastructure plans.¹⁵ In fact, it was Lopez's mother, Elsa Lopez, who was a primary figure in this global exchange. Other collectives organized by People of Color such as the Combahee Collective and The August Twenty-Ninth Movement (Marxist-Leninist) have also organized themselves around particular material and social realities with global liberatory implications.¹⁶ Lopez's politics and identity is one that is anchored in multiple generations of collectivism. For instance, in our interview, he references a story that his maternal grandmother told him about a time in Mexico when her mother (Lopez!'s great grandmother) would always share large parts of the pig they slaughtered with their local community.

My great-grandmother explained to my grandmother, if we give everything to everyone, everyone will give everything to us. Literally, every fucking time I even repeat that, I feel it in my body. When she said it, I felt fucking chills, and literally every time I tell that story, I feel it in my body." It hit me like, that's it, [...] this whole experience of life that I'd had up to this point, I get it, it's there.¹⁷

This type of intentional sharing, Lopez explained, was based on indigenous collectivism as people who had something valuable would share it in anticipation that others would also share with them when they were in a more favorable position. The geographical leaves of Los Angeles are influential but are grounded because of ancestral knowledge with deep roots. Yet, identity is dynamic, and it evolves and shifts through new interactions with different communities around the world. Thus, this trip to China presents a shift in his understanding of Chicanidad.

Given the expansive nature of identity, Anzaldúa argues for the second point of new tribalism which is to develop new terms to capture contemporary identity narratives. Anzaldúa views the current context of global capitalism as a conjunctural moment for identity issues, one she explains through the

¹⁵ Pardo, "Gendered Citizenship," 58-79.

¹⁶ The August Twenty-Ninth Movement (M-L), *Fan the Flames: A Revolutionary Position on the Chicano National Question* (1976); *The Combahee River Collective Statement*. United States, 2014. Web Archive. <https://www.loc.gov/item/lcwaN0028151/>.

¹⁷ mark! Lopez in discussion with author, November 2020.

Coyolxauqui symbol.¹⁸ This symbol refers to a process of disintegration and reconstruction with the aim to embrace the realities and contradictions of the contemporary moment before the development of any broad term of identification. This symbol is significant in the work of Anzaldúa as The Coloxuahqui Imperative explains the processes of ‘making and unmaking’ central to combating and healing spiritual, political, and global problems.¹⁹

The trip to China represents a Chicanidad that works to be part of a collaborative negation of the contemporary transnational contradictions—a possibility to reconstruct a community that rejects the destructive forces of the logistics industry. Where previous forms of 20th-century capitalist power were largely tied to the nation-state, the current moment is transnational and riddled with the implications of the Transnational Capitalist Class which present new forms of organization for power.²⁰ The process to reach new tribalism is not linear, China in this case study plays a central role in this development. Specifically, the communities and activists in China, who experience similar health hazards as a result of the logistics industry, represent the other ‘planetary groups’ that extend the tribe of communities. Together the communities transgress and resist the oppressive features of air pollution and the general logistics industries. Mark! reflects on the importance of new international connections:

I definitely think that the international connections are important. [...] I think it's important for the same reason that our communities within the US need to be connected is we need to be able to see beyond our communities. We need to learn from victories of other communities, and we need to share our victories.²¹

The final component of a new tribalism is one that is led by the Nepantleras, those activists and artists who create alliances that transcend the insider/outsider binary.

¹⁸ Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 85-94.

¹⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, “Let us be the Healing of the Wound: The Coyolxauqui Imperative-la sombra y el sueño,” in *One Wound for Another una Herida por otra: Testimonios de Latin@s in the U.S. through Cyberspace (11 de septiembre de 2001-11 de marzo de 2002)*, ed. Claire Joysmith and Clara Lomas (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2005), 92-103.

²⁰ William Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 26.

²¹ mark! Lopez in discussion with author, November 2020.

The individuals whom Anzaldúa calls “nepantleras” understand power relations and work to include new relationships and connections among various groups that have been positioned historically as antagonistic. To be more precise, nepantleras refer to mediators who have experience living in the interstices of different ‘worlds’ which empowers them to develop approaches to change and impact these worlds.²² They do not only learn from these experiences but also create their own new meaning.²³ I position Lopez within the lane of nepantleras. First, the contemporary period has seen the rise of neo-cold war rhetoric that has positioned China as an emerging enemy and threat to the United States.²⁴ On the one hand, Lopez is a United States citizen—a citizen of a country that today stands ostensibly antagonistically to China, yet he is also part of a collective effort to fight the detrimental impact of the logistics industry that is rooted in environmental racism and global capitalism. The trip to China, grounded in a need for clean air and a zero-emission logistics industry, represents a third space that is outside of the dominant relationship of international relations and beyond the good/bad binary of the perspective towards China.

As a result of environmental racism and of grassroots international solidarity, simple binaries are complicated and disrupted, as common ground and political solidarity are built. This is impacting the way Lopez moves forward in his life, in the way that he raises his daughters and thinks about the future of the world. It creates possibilities for a world where future Chicax people in Los Angeles can have conversations and relationships with those in China. Upon reflecting on the impact of this trip Lopez states:

It was difficult for me to be able to sustain any type of communication [with the folks in China], which has been a trip because I then look at some of the dual immersion [programs]. My daughters is on a dual immersion English-Spanish, but it has made me think about dual immersion Mandarin. Those programs have been around for a while but are emerging more. [...] I have

²² Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 245.

²³ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Interviews/Entrevistas*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2000), 267.

²⁴ Christopher Layne, “Preventing the China-U.S. Cold War from Turning Hot,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 13, no. 3 (2020): 343–85, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poaa012>.

thought about what are the implications. I think part of what drives it is like the economic imperative of the powerhouse that is China. Something I've thought about is like, "What are the implications for the movement, to have folks in our communities who can also speak Mandarin?"²⁵

While previous engagements with China have been present for Chicana communities, this trip was significant and reflects new movements for Chicana people in the world.

Conclusion

New Tribalism, as a theoretical framework, highlights the significance of China for Chicana Studies through political solidarity. The inclusion of global capitalism to discuss new tribalism centers the global and identifies the challenges and potentially expansive implications of our contemporary moment. There are certainly current challenges such as a language barrier and geographic distance which make the realization of a new tribalism difficult. Yet, the case presented here is an example of a larger movement toward a new conceptualization of Chicanidad within global capitalism and rooted in environmental solidarity. As noted by Critical Environmental Justice scholar David Pellow, the communities who are most affected by environmental racism must be at the forefront of change and their expertise and experiences are essential for the movement toward a more just world.²⁶ This is understood by the activists in China and the main reason that the organizations that Lopez represented were invited as key speakers. The new tribalism that was conceptualized by Anzaldúa is one that will require many nepantleras/os to realize and develop the infrastructure to cultivate transnational cultural and political networks.²⁷ It is important that our scholarship and politics

²⁵ mark! Lopez in discussion with author, November 2020.

²⁶ David N. Pellow, *What Is Critical Environmental Justice?* / David Naguib Pellow. (Cambridge, UK ; Polity Press, 2018).

²⁷ Similarly, feminist scholars have made a parallel argument about the importance of being relational and shared as a strategic approach to politics and collectivity that extends notions of the 'home' outside of patriarchal conceptualizations. See Oona Morrow and Brenda Parker, "Care, Commoning and Collectivity: From Grand Domestic Revolution to Urban Transformation," *Urban Geography* 41, no. 4 (April 20, 2020): 607–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2020.1785258>.

take the transnational dimensions of power into account to better frame how Chicane people are active agents within the context of global capitalism.

As I conclude this paper, I am left thinking about new possible avenues that link Chicanos with China. It becomes imperative to view this linkage not as tangential but imperative for the development of the discipline in the contemporary moment where transnational investments, pollution, and identity formation are in a qualitatively new phase. As China grows in global importance it is important to cultivate this relationship within our discipline.

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