



## **Raul Lejano (1961-Present)**

Associate Professor of Environmental  
Education

**New York University, Steinhardt  
School**

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*“Be prepared to work harder, produce more, and be more original than others, because this society requires more from people of color.” Raul Lejano, 2006.*

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### **Overview**

Raul Lejano tackles environmental problems using perspectives and methods that draw from different areas of policy research. Lejano is interested in issues of public health, land use and environmental quality control, especially as these issues affect low-income people of color in inner cities and other communities at the margins, and has devoted his career to devising unique and effective methodological approaches to those problems.

*This interview was conducted in 2015.*

### **Early Life and Education**

Lejano developed an interest in the environment growing up in Metro-Manila, the Philippines, and witnessing many examples of environmental degradation. “I began to think about alternative futures for my city,” he says. Lejano earned his bachelor’s degree in civil engineering from the University of the Philippines in 1984. He then took a job as a structural engineer in a construction company. “It involved computer programming and it was a little boring, but it was basically a good job,” Lejano recalls. However, wanting to further his education and increase his focus on the environment, Lejano came to the U.S. for graduate school. He earned his master’s degree in environmental engineering from the University of California, Berkeley, and his Ph.D. in environmental health science from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

By 2000, Lejano was a Martin Luther King visiting professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the Urban Studies and Planning Department. After two years, he moved to the University of California, Irvine, where he is now an assistant professor in the Department of Policy, Planning and Design. “I love the ability to do really original research,” Lejano says of his current position. “This institution lets me do that. Also, the teaching gets exciting when I encounter motivated and intelligent students.”

## Career

Much of Lejano’s current work revolves around developing new methods of environmental policy analysis, focusing on what he calls “vulnerable inner-city environments.” Throughout his career, he has been especially interested in developing real-world applications for innovative theoretical constructs, especially as applied to community-based governing bodies and institutional modeling. He recently developed a theory of equity-based solutions for bargaining, and is now at work on developing institutional models that realize the theory. “The new equity-based theoretical solution to bargaining problems poses a radical alternative to market-based solutions,” Lejano says. The theory is partly developed in his 2006 book *Framework for Policy Analysis: Merging Text and Context*, which Lejano says is intended, above all, to lay out future directions in policy research. “Many problems in the environmental field—from environmental justice to habitat degradation—are just so resilient,” he notes. “This makes it all more important to study new institutional designs that might better respond to them. The need for innovation is great.”

## Importance of Mentoring to Career

The innovative, original thinking that has characterized so much of Lejano’s work has been inspired and nurtured by a host of mentors throughout his career. Lloyd Shapley, a renowned game theorist who was also Lejano’s research advisor, was an important early influence in shaping both Lejano’s thought and his approach to the discipline. “I would meet with him for marathon meetings that lasted four, sometimes six hours,” Lejano recalls. “I’ve never met anyone who could engage in theory the way he did.” More recently, Lejano has worked with Helen Ingram, a fellow professor at University of California, Irvine, on several projects and papers involving new institutional designs in environmental management. “She [Ingram] has taught me to think of institutions in a different light, really influenced my thinking,” Lejano says. Finally, Lejano’s mother, Alicia, herself an academic who did her graduate work at New York University, is a general inspiration: “She gave me my love for the academic discipline.”

Lejano has two ongoing research projects through which he has the opportunity to mentor a number of students, mostly young people of color. In the first, he and several students are working directly with a community in Southeast Los Angeles, examining what makes community-based institutions work in solving problems like chronic asthma and other public health issues. His second project is based in the Philippines, where he is studying how different elements in fishers’ organizations help or hinder the success of local fisheries. “My research, in general, has concerned itself with analyzing dilemmas of the disenfranchised,” Lejano says. As a Martin Luther King fellow at MIT, Lejano engaged students and faculty in discussions about race and policy, and

was part of a departmental committee for minority outreach. He has tried to propose similar programs in his current capacity at University of California, Irvine, so far without success.

For Lejano, trying to be an authentic and original thinker making tangible contributions to the field is the most important and rewarding component of his career. He acknowledges that achieving this can sometimes be difficult in academia, where established norms can inhibit original thinking. “Trying to publish new ideas in journals that don’t tolerate originality can be really frustrating,” Lejano says. “Some new concepts come from trans-disciplinary research, and mainstream journals can be hostile to ideas that don’t build on the work of people who have already been mentioned in them,” he adds. Despite such occasional frustrations, Lejano remains committed to his work, and to his belief that forward thinking is key to advancing the field.

## **Advice to Young Professionals**

His advice to young people of color interested in environmental careers draws on that: “You need to be bold in your thinking. Don’t fall into the environmental ethic of the rich, but at the same time don’t romanticize poverty—understand it more deeply. Be prepared to go against the too-ingrained common ‘wisdoms’ in academia. Learn critical thinking. And last, be prepared to work harder, produce more, and be more original than others, because this society requires more from people of color.”

## **For More Information**

**Email:** [lejano@nyu.edu](mailto:lejano@nyu.edu)

**Website:** [steinhardt.nyu.edu/faculty/Raul\\_Lejano](http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/faculty/Raul_Lejano)