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Del Otro Lado: Literacy and Migration across the U.S.–Mexico Border

Susan V. Meyers
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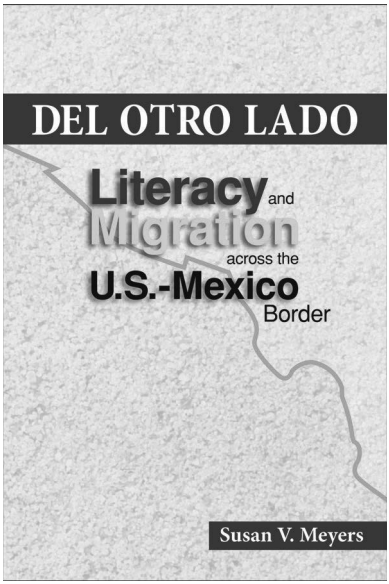

There are few researchers today in rhetoric and composition, particularly in emerging literacies, who are talking about transnational literacy practices and the effects of a changing global economy on migration and thus on literacy. In *Del Otro Lado: Literacy and Migration across the U.S.–Mexico Border*, Susan V. Meyers, a bilingual ethnographer, set a huge task for herself as she immersed herself for a full year (with a Fulbright Fellowship) in rural Mexico and then traced the migratory patterns of students in Mexico to the U.S. and back. Her reflective critical ethnography calls into question stereotypes about Mexican immigrant students—that they are lazy or disengaged or even that they are victims of a callous school system. And she shows us with insightful reasoning, passionate and personal stories, and carefully documented historical research that "migration and literacy are intimately connected—and that migration complicates and is a catalyst for literacy acquisition" (7).

Meyers argues that the *literacy contract*—what she calls that implicit and sometimes explicit understanding that literacy is a resource and if families participate, that is, subscribe, to the activities and value systems of the institution of public education, then there will be a reward. This reward is almost always supposed to be improved economic circumstances. But in rural Mexico—and I would argue in hundreds of other places in the world where there is *not* a wage-labor economy—the promise of literacy is seriously overrated. Indeed, the idea that literacy improves one's economic status is one of the greatest colonizing myths of our time as it is simply not true for most of the world. This book shows us how a local community with "few resources positions itself with respect to larger more powerful institutions" (12) that sponsor, endorse, define, and institutionalize education. While the book traces the development of this "literacy contract" in both the US and Mexico, thus setting the context for significant similarities and differences in the promise of education in both countries, it really sings when

Meyers gives voice to the people who live in the village of Villachuato, Mexico (pop. 4000), and migrate to Marshalltown, Iowa (pop. 24,000). Their voices stay with readers as they challenge much of what we *think* we know about literacy. As Meyers writes, "language is explicit; culture is not" (13). This book helps make that culture visible.

In chapter one, "Crisis and Contract: A Rhetorical Approach to Transnational Literacies," we learn about various rhetorics of crisis around literacy, tracing multiple definitions and concepts around literacy from those of the funding agency UNESCO to many in the US and in Mexico. The many sponsors of literacy include everything from religions to civic groups. Most important, Meyers makes visible the levels of awareness (implicit and explicit) that rural Mexican communities carry with respect to their life conditions and opportunities to attain resources. How these rural Mexicans position themselves socially with regards to schools is ultimately what permits them to assume what Meyers calls a more "flexible, rhetorical stance toward literacy: one that reads the implicit lines of institutions' rules and finds ways of complying, though tentatively and selectively" (36-7). And one might add "resistance" to the list of ways they respond to the threat of oppressive conditions. Remittances (both monetary and social such as values and new behaviors) brought back to Villachuato by their migrated family members do improve the social capital of the families in Villachuato, positioning "community members at home to function rhetorically, rather than reactively, to sources of social oppression" (39). In other words, there is a change, a sort of heightened awareness of the benefits and consequences of the literacy contract that the citizens of Villachuato can size up and then resist or buy into on their own terms.

In chapter two, "'Aren't You Scared?': The Changing Face of Oppression in Rural, Migrant-Sending Mexico," Meyers places herself in this community in a narrative that captures both her own personal story and sets a tone for the blending of the personal with the scholarly that permeates the ethos of the entire book. This setting of the scene shows us that the village of Villachuato is really like many communities in Mexico that send outbound migration to the US. For it is these "absent residents—what is *not* present, rather than what *is*, that truly characterizes Villachuato today" (58). In other words, this is a town that has strong community ties, ways of managing foreign influences (including a foreign researcher), and a political and economic history that is similar to others in its responses to a public education system that has not delivered on its promise in rural Mexico. Interestingly, it is through the power of fear (Aren't You Scared?) as a woman living and working alone in this isolated town that helps Meyers see how fear became a powerful force in making her, the researcher, assimilate to local behavior patterns.

In chapter three, "'They Make a Lot of Sacrifices': Foundational Rhetorics of the Mexican Education System," Meyers traces the Mexican curriculum and education system in general. Here we see how the legacies of colonialism, the strain of post-Revolutionary nation building, and the pragmatic realities coalesce in a need to "build a public education system quickly" (63). It becomes clear how the roots of the literacy contract differ in the US from Mexico. In the US, early colonists focused on building a new national consciousness that did not consider indigenous groups, while in post-

Revolutionary Mexico, the mestizo populations were firmly established and thus targeted from the beginning for education and civic engagement. This created "subtle differences in ways in which students respond to education in both settings" argues Meyers (65).

One of the unfortunate side effects of the ensuing national curriculum in Mexico is the disconnect between the curriculum and the training of teachers, all of which happens in urban areas far from the lived realities of rural communities (who do not have access to wage-labor economies). The economic realities of such a community call into question the value of a formal education—the assumptions underlying the literacy contract. Thus the endeavor of mass education—a capitalist entreaty—has little reward for rural citizens. The sacrifices they are asked to make just do not pay off or even relate to their daily lives. They are "empty promises" as Meyers puts it.

In chapter four, "'They Didn't Tell Me Anything'" Community Literacy and Resistance in Rural Mexico," Meyers delves into gender norms (and her own discomfort with these norms) in Villachuato, and it is here that we clearly see how the migratory patterns are indeed gendered in this village (men migrate, women stay back and tend the family). One thing is obvious—women have largely been left out of the scholarship on Mexican migration. Meyers goes on to show how women's "consistent form of self-preservation—whether in accessing literacy or deflecting the damaging influences of literacy institutions—was in the form of social networks" (93). This is the heart of the book, in my view—and certainly my favorite chapter. Here we see the skill of a sensitive and talented ethnographer bringing to voice six women representing four generations: Esperanza (age 99) who used letter writing to demonstrate the "power and malleability of literacy" (95); Patricia (early 70s) who parlayed her own experience with a neglectful mother and a teenage marriage into an ability to learn from returning migrants (a type of social remittance, if you will) and identified literacy as a form of power to protect her own daughter; Elvira (40 years old) whose mother would not permit her to be educated but who eventually migrated to the US for 4 years and learned much about the implications for literary, enough that her son lives permanently in the US and her daughter is one of the highest trained females in Villachuato, working for wages in a neighboring town; Myra who found schooling oppressive and left school at an early age, drawing instead on social networks (especially neighbors who migrated) to find an alternative recourse that eventually led to success; Maribel (self-proclaimed "wild girl") who left secondary school due to boredom, moved to a neighboring town, and learned to survive based on her social networks rather than on formal schooling, eventually marrying an American and living in the US where she wants her own children to be educated; and Nicole, a former classmate of Meyers at Seattle University who today is a successful attorney in the US and who credits all her successes to her family in Villachuato, not to her formal education despite her parents' own formal illiteracy. In sum, all six case studies of these women found that it was "interpersonal relationships that played an important part in their resistance, as exposure to other people's experiences or direct assistance from friends and family—increasingly expressed through domestic and international migration—became the means through

which these women resisted oppressive forces in their lives and, in some cases, found alternative means to literacy" (110).

In chapter five, "'So You Don't Get Tricked': Counternarratives of Literacy in a Mexican Town," Meyers travels to the larger city nearby, Puruándiro, to show how literacy in Villachuato is viewed always as something that comes from someplace else. Students and residents of Villachuato have an unfinished library so research materials are inaccessible without traveling by bus to neighboring Puruándiro. Even there, the library is poor. This "autonomous thing"—literacy, travels from elsewhere and is something they are not a part of—it might visit periodically (like this foreign researcher did) but it is Other in all senses of the word. This sense of literacy as autonomous and outside their reality enables the citizens of Villachuato to take what Meyers again calls a "rhetorical stance toward literacy: enacting those elements that serve them, and resisting the rest" (116). This resistance as a rhetorical practice is "contextual, positional, and strategic" (116).

And of course international migration is a larger-than-life reality and influence in this rural town. More importantly for this study, it interferes with the state and nationalist message of public education, which is that its value is in realizing a national consciousness. So this tiny village has its own literacy crisis—and one that is a microcosm of others throughout rural Mexico. What Meyers calls "un choque of ideas" unfolds as we see teachers who speak of their students in ways that show they do not really understand how the disconnect between the curriculum and the values it imparts do not address the communities' real needs. Nor are the home knowledges and funds of knowledge the students possess ever permitted space in classroom discussions. Indeed, the idea of literacy as self-defense, as resistance, is the real crisis, the true counternarrative at play here.

What is literacy? And why is it useful to the citizens of a rural, non wage-labor economy? One thing that is obvious is that while literacy does not improve one's economic mobility, it often does improve one's cultural capital. For one thing, there is still shame associated with illiteracy. For another, in a village dominated by migration, the remittances sent home by its citizens permit the people of Villachuato to participate and to resist education according to their own needs. They can become agents of their own lives.

In chapter six, "'Like Going from Black and White to Color': Mexican Students' Experiences in U.S. Schools", Meyers follows the migratory path to Marshalltown, Iowa, where the Swift factory (the third largest hog-processing plant in the U.S.) employs 500 workers from Villachuato (figures from 2002). Here we see how the stakes of the literacy contract are raised. The promises of school are higher for these children of the migrants, but the commitment they seek is also more demanding (you need to assimilate). Literacy here begins to function as assimilation because it promotes cultural values in openly ideological ways. Meyers does an expert job in delineating the differences between "education" and *educación*—the former is very much foundational to US education and concerns itself with school issues like academic mastery of content; the latter, *educación* means something different to Mexican families. It is about

behavior—the family's responsibility. So this division between behavior and academic work is a "distinction that continues to exist" and that "does bar a full conversion to U.S. approaches to learning" on the part of these immigrant students (144).

Meyers is deft at showing how teachers in the US are positively supportive of these students but at the same time are blind to ways the parents of these migrants resist full conversion to the US paradigm of learning. Teachers talk about the students' academic progress and struggles while parents keep asking "but are they behaving well?"—continuing to insinuate their own agency into what matters to them about their children—*educación* not education. In the end, the experience of attending school in the US does cause many students to accidentally assimilate or to resist assimilation. But they are also "profoundly ambivalent about fulfilling school demands and the literacy contract itself" (150).

Finally, in the concluding chapter, Meyers examines how literacy is changing in a transnational world. She notes that in Villachuato, formal education is not the "primary means to economic growth, rather education is the *result* of a family's financial success" (13). The skills taught in school, like the curriculum around it, are developed in urban centers far from the daily lives and needs of non wage-labor economies. They simply are not relevant to survival if you are a farmer or a migrant. At the same time, these migrants with all their remittances—financial and social—do represent new forms of social capital for a community like Villachuato, capital that can undo negative impacts of the lack of cultural capital.

In a compelling call to educators, Meyers ends by asking all of us to reconsider our notions about this literacy contract. No longer is it a "means to an end" especially for immigrants. The realization of this requires a shift away from the belief in the effects of the literacy contract. And this is profound, claims Meyers. It essentially asks us to open ourselves to a "new orientation," one that "negates the contract culture that has dominated our approach to education for decades" (158). Considering how literacy is structured by and for global economies, and how issues of transliteracy are emerging in this highly mobile global economy, it is time we take up Meyers' call to open ourselves to the multiple literacies of the world and to understand how migratory cultures affect us all. I heartily agree with Meyers that "transnational migration" is the "next horizon of literacy studies we need to consider" (36).