

Review

Exploring the Intersection of Literacy and Migration: A Rich Ethnography

Todd Ruecker

Meyers, Susan V. *Del Otro Lado: Literacy and Migration across the US-Mexico Border*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2014. Print. 208 pages.

Over the past few decades, as the US Latina/o population has grown, so have Mexican American student populations. Between 2001 and 2011, the Latina/o student population in US schools grew from 17 percent to 24 percent of the overall student population, with Mexican Americans constituting the largest group in this growing population (NCES “Projections”). By 2020, the Latina/o school enrollment is expected to grow 25 percent over 2008 numbers, compared to small decreases for White and African American students (NCES “Enrollment”). With these demographic shifts in mind, WPAs should be aware of the diverse backgrounds of their students as they seek ways to support the success of migrant students across institutions. Susan V. Meyers’s recently published multi-year ethnography, *Del Otro Lado: Literacy and Migration across the US-Mexico Border*, helps contribute to existing literature on the literacy practices of the ever-growing migrant Mexican student populations.

Meyers begins her book with one particular student, Jacqueline, and a story that illustrates the complexity of the transitions Meyers strives to document in her book. Jacqueline has lived on both sides of the border, spending a couple years in a Los Angeles elementary school before returning to her town, Villachuato, the focal Mexican town in the study. While Jacqueline appreciates the social circles in her Mexican hometown, she, like many in the rural community, which is culturally and geographically distant from the country’s central education offices, is becoming increasingly distant from school and the college ambitions she had developed while in

the US. Meyers uses this narrative to illustrate the point that “international migration facilitates formal education—at least for certain family members” (5). She notes that in rural Mexico community members are “deeply invested in choices related to their children’s future,” goals that often include advanced education (5). The complex way that Meyers treats her subjects is evident in the methodological approach she sets forth in this opening chapter. Meyers’s work involved qualitative and archival work in both Mexico and the US. She draws extensively from New Literacy Studies, which recognizes the socioculturally situated nature of literacy practices. She identifies her methodology as critical reflexive ethnography, which engages in some of the practices of traditional research but places informal community contact at the center.

Meyers situates her work in broader political contexts in chapter one. She explores the political connotations of dominant understandings of literacy, which tend to focus on a functional definition in service of larger economic development. She explains how her perspective recognizes how literacy is situated and enacted in specific contexts. This perspective helps Meyers explain how rural areas are often left out when textbooks and curriculum are developed and mandated from the central education agency in Mexico City and how urban students are prioritized in these particular policies. With this orientation in mind, she makes it clear that she is not going to portray the community she profiles as simply uninformed and marginalized, noting, “I argue that local actors often assume 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” (37). In chapter two, Meyers explores the challenges facing both herself as a researcher as well as the town of her focus. For instance, she gives a detailed history of Villachuato, beginning with its colonial origin as a hacienda and progressing to the ways that NAFTA negatively impacted its agriculture-based economy. Of particular relevance, she notes, is the impact of extensive migration to the US, a practice which has halved the population of the town. During this discussion, she observes that a number of the migrants have gone to Iowa rather than places like California, where the agricultural labor market is saturated and housing prices continue to rise. This has implications for those working in writing programs around the country because it helps illustrate the fact that migrant populations are found in a wide variety of US contexts.

Chapter three shares a rich description of the Mexican education system that is largely focused on establishing the point that national policies do not always mesh with local ones. This mismatch comes into play when choices are being made, integral choices such as which textbooks to use and which

type of secondary school programs are offered in different communities. For instance, Meyers argues that it would be logical for Villachauto's secondary school to focus on agriculture career training; however, the school focuses on an office preparation program because it is less expensive to run than an agricultural program. Her ultimate argument in this chapter is that "rural communities have been increasingly alienated from the schools that serve them" (83) and that education requires some level of "permanent migration" (87) in the way it can distance rural students from their communities.

Chapter four examines the role literacy played (or did not play) in the lives of six women from the community. The first woman profiled, Esperanza, is the oldest person in the community at one hundred years old. She recalls early courtships conducted through formal letters, explaining how she used literacy to turn down one suitor who tried to pressure her into accepting. Others were not so lucky; one, Patricia, was raped as a teenager, forced into a marriage, and soon became pregnant. Determined to prevent her daughter, Lucia, from facing the same fate, Patricia sought to sponsor her daughter's literacy development despite objections from her husband. Meyers shares stories of women hurt by formal schooling experiences. For example, one woman, Myra, was told she should not write with her left hand and was later hit by a teacher at school for not knowing the complete multiplication tables. Meyers also profiles a woman who spent her life in LA, noting how the schools there "communicated to her that she was not destined for high achievement—and therefore, may as well not even try" (108). Drawing on these different stories, Meyers emphasizes the point that physical access to school is not enough because there are a variety of factors, such as "ideologically and psychologically based" oppression that hindered the pursuit of literacy by these women (101). She explains that the social networks and environment surrounding formal literacy opportunities played an important role in enabling women to successfully pursue language and literacy.

In chapter five, Meyers moves beyond individual profiles to return to a discussion of the Villachuato's orientation towards literacy. Literacy is very much an external force in Villachuato as the town itself does not have a library or bookstore, and its teachers tend to come from other parts of Mexico. Teachers view migration to the US as competing with Mexican education: Men in the town would become disenchanted and dismissive of school when they saw migrants returning from the US with material wealth in the form of things such as nice clothes and big trucks. Educational challenges were exacerbated because the liberal arts curriculum dominant in the schooling system was not directly applicable to the needs of the commu-

nity. To fulfill the associated literacy contract, which promised economic mobility with the greater literacy levels that came with education, students needed to move to an urban area.

In chapter six, Meyers takes us to the major Villachauto receiving community in the US: Marshalltown, Iowa. The major draw for migrants is work at a hog slaughtering plant which employs around 500 or so workers from Villachuato alone. Meyers notes that these migrant populations are sometimes received well by the larger, traditionally homogeneous community; however, there are also moments of tension. In an event celebrating the *El Día De Los Niños* tradition, the library hosted a storyteller reading in both English and Spanish. One Anglo mother complained that the event was not for “everybody” since there was some reading in Spanish and that they speak English in the US, a discourse the librarian countered. Mexican students face similar issues. Meyers explains how the US teachers easily slip into a deficit mindset when looking at Mexican students and the schools they come from, which communicates to Mexican students that their backgrounds are less valuable.

In the concluding chapter, Meyers complicates our understanding of the relationships between small towns, migration, and literacy. Harkening back to a point she made throughout, she situated the citizens of Villachuato as rhetorical in their approach to literacy: “Drawing on the available means at their disposal, they assess the contexts of their lives and make strategic choices about how to position themselves as literacy practitioners” (152). Meyers challenges the Mexican educators’ perception that migration is a threat to literacy, noting how literacy is consistently marginalized on both sides of the border: “Migration, then, is demonized, criminalized, and patently ignored, despite its huge influence on the lives and literacy outcomes of a vast number of young people who are or have been students in our classrooms” (157).

In an era where transnational migration continues to grow despite xenophobic attempts to seal border crossings and impede this process, Meyers’s book gives us a rich understanding of the practices of a particular community and how migration is intimately intertwined with literacy development. While she wisely does not try to be too ambitious in drawing broad implications from her work with one community, Meyers’s work helps WPAs better understand how to approach and explore the literacy practices of migrant students in their programs. Similarly, it is important for WPAs not to make broad assumptions about migrant students but rather to use the knowledge gained from Meyers’s work to think through ways to identify, learn about, and better serve diverse student populations in a writing program.

Meyers's work also builds the field's knowledge of an underexplored area: literacy instruction in rural communities. Drawing from Robert Brooke's work, Meyers makes important critiques about literacy instruction in rural contexts, such as how the literacy contract is complicated when students have to leave their home communities to realize the value of formal education and how textbooks typically fail to reflect the culture of rural communities. It is important for WPAs to recognize their rural student populations, increasing numbers of whom are migrants, and how their backgrounds are often ignored in textbooks, class discussions, and assignment development. In addition to training TAs to work more effectively with migrant writers, it may be necessary to train TAs from urban areas how to work closely and competently with rural students.

While reading *Del Otro Lado*, I appreciated the way Meyers personally engaged with the community and her research, providing a rich description of the focal community and the various contexts in which it was embedded. However, I would have liked to learn more about the participants she interacted with as well as her experiences in actual Villachuato classrooms. Much of the book, perhaps too much, was dedicated to contextualizing the Villachuato community in broader contexts. Because we did not learn enough about the teachers, students, and classrooms in Villachuato, the conclusion chapter similarly left me wanting more discussion regarding the implications for writing professionals working with students from migrant families in US schools and universities.

Meyers's book provides readers with a detailed glimpse into the complexity of migrant literacies and left me with questions for further exploration:

- How many of our students share some similarities to the individuals profiled in Meyers's book? What can WPAs and writing teachers do to learn about the complexity of their migrant students' literacies?
- What does it mean to administer writing programs and teach writing in a constantly changing world that will "continually challenge our assumptions" (161)?
- What role can/should writing professionals play in addressing systemic inequalities that continue across campuses and in larger society?

Meyers's book adds to a larger ongoing discussion of immigrant students in US schools and colleges. To this end, for learning more about immigrant student populations, I recommend the following edited collections: *Generation 1.5 Meets College Composition: Issues in the Teaching of Writing To US-Educated Learners of ESL*, *Generation 1.5 in College Composition: Teaching Academic Writing to US-Educated Learners of ESL*, and *Linguistic Minority*

Students Go to College: Preparation, Access, and Persistence. An important point alluded to in Meyers's work is that many of the students from towns like Villachuató won't make it into college classrooms. With this in mind, engaging in high school-college partnerships such as those described by Enrique Alemán, Jr., Judith C. Pérez-Torres, and Nereida Oliva or helping implement high school curricula like that described by Cruz Medina is important work for WPAs to consider.

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Todd Ruecker is Assistant Professor of English at the University of New Mexico, New Mexico's flagship university. His work regularly crosses disciplinary boundaries, and he has published extensively on the experiences of Latina/o writers transitioning from high school to college. He has published articles in composition, education, and applied linguistics journals, including TESOL Quarterly, College Composition and Communication, Journal of Hispanic Higher Education, Critical Inquiry in Language Studies, and WPA: Writing Program Administration. His book, Transiciones: Latina and Latino Students Writing in High School and College, was recently published by Utah State UP (2014).