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Social Justice, Culture and Equity: Mexican Immigrant Agricultural Workers

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Oppression, Exploitation, and the Creation of Identity in California’s Transnational Communities: The Case of the Mexican Agricultural Worker

By Shari René Harder

This paper discusses identity creation and the environment of oppression and exploitation that exists for California’s Mexican Transnational agricultural workers. How do we, as consumers, contribute to the oppression of Mexican transnationals and other migrant workers? Many of us are not willing to admit that we contribute to this problem but in fact we are collectively responsible for the perpetuation of socialized misconceptions of this particular population. If we, as consumers, continue to purchase agricultural products produced on farms that employ Mexican migrant laborers at substandard wages; and permit the use of dangerous pesticides in those same contexts, then we also contribute to the exploitation and the undermining of the wellbeing of said workers. This essay seeks to address such questions by examining the adaptation of Mexican migrant agricultural workers to life in California.

While many of us are not willing to acknowledge our contribution to the exploitation of California’s migrant labor force, we as consumers do benefit directly by continuing to purchase agricultural products produced on farms that employ Mexican laborers at substandard wages; and permit the use of dangerous pesticides and herbicides. If we, as consumers, continue to purchase agricultural products in those same contexts, then we too contribute to the exploitation and the undermining of the wellbeing of said workers. Through our social interactions with others, we help to create one another’s identities (Delgado, 2000). And ultimately, we are collectively responsible for the perpetuation of socialized misconceptions of the Mexican migrant population.

Since the late 1860’s, migrant laborers from Mexico have worked in California’s agricultural fields. One hundred years later, in the 1960’s, Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers (UFW) fought for the rights of these same workers. By the 1970’s, legislation was pushed through in California to benefit migrant workers, due in large part to Chavez and UFW’s efforts. It is now 30 years later and powerful political and social interests have once again sought to curtail the rights of migrant laborers by rescinding those legal, educational, and economic reforms of just a generation ago. Consequently, significant reforms have been diminished, and it is the migrant laborer who is left marginalized by having very little political power or economic clout, and who knows that any time he or she spends on the union picket line detracts from time spent earning wages in order to feed his or her family (Gutiérrez, 1995).

Migrant workers began working the fields in California and the southwest in...
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the 1800’s. Later faced with the threat of unionization by organized workers, landowners began recruiting labor from Mexico. It was thought that the Mexicans were simple people, with little in the way of plans for their futures, and therefore, they would work for a short time and return to their country of origin. Operation Wetback, and the Bracero Program, brought in workers from Mexico to participate in various kinds of menial labor in the United States (Menchaca, 1995). Historically, these migrant workers have done the work others have been unwilling to do. Sensitive crops such as strawberries need to be picked manually so that they are not bruised. Hiring inexpensive migrant labor was found to be a necessity in order to minimize production costs (Fox, 2004).

A study by Vernez and McCarthy (1995) concluded that although the United States continues to benefit economically from the immigration of Mexican farm laborers, “the magnitude of current flows—and the flows’ disproportionate share of poorly educated immigrants—combined with ongoing changes in the state’s economy has increased the costs of immigration to the state’s public sector and to some native-born workers” (Vernez, 1995). Therefore, California “faces a growing challenge as it attempts to integrate these new immigrants while also trying to promote the welfare of the state and all its residents” (Vernez, 1995).

Power relations, social stratification and the inability of many Mexican transnational workers to organize, have kept them from achieving benefits many other American workers enjoy. Exploitation and oppression play a key role in perpetuating the socialization of this American underclass. As such, “Anglo Americans have been socialized to view people of Mexican descent as social inferiors and uncultured foreigners who are expected to retain their physical distance from dominant group members. Historically, these social boundaries have been maintained by violence; however, in contemporary society “interethnic social apartness is maintained by the institutionalization of rules of correct interethnic social comportment” (Menchaca, 1995, p. 170). This distance is also perpetuated by economic stratification and the migrant laborer’s limited access to resources that could elevate their standard of living or social mobility (Gutiérrez, 1995).

Culture is commonly defined as consisting of the behaviors, values, and beliefs learned and transmitted from generation to generation (Geertz, 1973). Everyone’s reality is influenced by their parents’ perceptions, and what they choose to pass on in the way of tradition and beliefs. With age and experience these influences take an appropriate place dependent on the ability to be aware of cultural filters. Hence, with examination and reflection; first being aware of such perceptions and then setting aside such filters, one can more clearly weigh and consider those influences and values that hold relevance.

Retaining one’s sense of identity is developed through culture, religion, and family ties, particularly because symbolism and tradition are relevant to building and reinforcing a sense of personal and collective identity and meaning (Geertz, 1973). The identity of the Mexican transnational agricultural workers of California are strengthened as they “feel themselves oppressed by higher strata of
the world-system; they are doubly motivated to pursue the creation of a local identity” (Wallerstein, 1974, p. 353). Culture, social justice, and questions of equity relate to the plight of migrant farm workers in that this is a group that has been oppressed for well over one hundred years in this country, and such patterns of oppression and marginalization have resulted in our present day system of feudal peonage (Menchaca, 1995).

This essay has encouraged me to think intently about my own upbringing, and the strong work ethic of my ancestors who were farm workers. This, I believe, compares favorably with that of the farm labor experience of Mexican transnationals who are the subject of this discussion, and the many obstacles and challenges faced in such work. By contrast, however, I believe that the cultural values and social mores of my grandparents’ day are no longer the values of today. Farming at that time in America was considered a more noble line of work, and its products and produce were more appreciated and valued by consumers. Farms were family-owned and passed from generation to generation. Today, we live in a capitalist world system. “Capitalism is based on the constant absorption of economic loss by political entities, while economic gain is distributed to private hands” (Wallerstein, 1974, p. 348). A large percentage of family-owned farms have evolved into corporations where the bottom line has become more important than the value placed on human dignity.

Immigration reform is needed in order to find a way for migrant workers to be properly afforded their human rights. Mexican transnational agricultural workers of California employed at low wages have permitted growers, and subsidiary corporations, to keep costs low in order to maximize profits. They choose the work most people do not wish to undertake, live in substandard housing, and generally have no medical insurance. Yet, they grant us the benefits of affordable food prices, as well as contributing to the state’s revenue, even when they are unable to reap any benefits (Chavez, 1998).

Growers benefit from better public relations for themselves, not for their workers and so perpetuate the myths of migrant workers taking over the jobs of California’s citizens. As Paulo Freire has observed in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, “The oppressors do not perceive their monopoly on having more as a privilege which dehumanizes others and themselves. They cannot see that, in the egoistic pursuit of having as a possessing class, they suffocate in their own possessions and no longer are; they merely have” (Freire, 1972, p. 45). Erick Schlosser argues that, “Illegal immigrants widely reviled and often depicted as welfare cheats are in effect subsidizing the most important sector of the California economy” (2003, p. 79). The growers reap the benefits of cheap labor and then when the harvest is over, the Immigration and Naturalization Service rounds them up and sends them back to Mexico. In this way, the growers are not responsible for providing any type of job security or benefits. They know that when the next season rolls around, there will be a fresh group of undocumented workers to work the fields. We have inherited a type of feudal system that relies on human desperation (ETN, 2002).
Mexican transnational agriculture workers remain in the lower levels of socioeconomic stratification due to low wages, inadequate medical services, and lack of access to education (Del Castillo, 1982). It is not a question of higher or lower levels of socioeconomic strata that result from capitalism, it is the laws and their unavoidable results that are disquieting (Marx, 1867). Children of migrant workers, as young as 12, are working in order to help the family survive. It is estimated that there are 2-3 million Mexican migrant workers in the United States of which 10% are aged 14-17, which means there are approximately a couple hundred thousand children working in the fields in this country (ETN, 2002). This prevents migrant children from receiving a consistent education, in turn perpetuating the cycle of uneducated workers seeking agricultural work and consequently living from paycheck to paycheck. When a family is struggling just to pay for day-to-day living expenses, medical and dental care is not a priority. Due to low wages, they cannot afford medical or dental insurance, and evidence has shown most of their employers do not offer these benefits (Gutiérrez, 2001).

Agricultural landowners are engaged in the cycle of oppression with migrant workers by signing them on as sharecroppers. Sharecropping originated in the dark ages and continued into the late 1800’s in the southwest. “Ethnic relations during this era took place under an extremely exploitative, paternalistic sharecropper system and were supported by open racism, (and) strict social segregation…” (Foley, 1977, p. xiii). The sharecropper takes responsibility of one area of the farm by hiring the workers himself and absorbing the cost of production. In this way, the sharecropper is also responsible for making sure his workers have green cards. In some cases this is a migrant worker who speaks little English and has perhaps been coerced into signing a 15-page contract written in English. He now may find himself in thousands of dollars of debt because the crop failed due to heavy rains and he is unable to pay his workers. Additionally, he is unable to pay the commission merchant the high interest rates for operating expenses. If the crop does well, the sharecropper still may make little profit, as he has contracted to sell the product to the owner of the land at a discount leaving little profit (Schlosser, 2003).

The use of pesticides is a problem of concern to a cognizant and increasingly health-conscious public. DDT was used in farming for many years and caused many deaths. Even my own grandfather died at a young age from working in his apple orchards where he used this pesticide. DDT has since been banned from use in agriculture. Presently, pesticides such as methyl bromide and parathion are widely used and are not a great improvement. Research has shown these pesticides to be extremely toxic to workers causing physical problems for which many of the workers do not seek medical care because they fear retaliation by the growers (Chavez, 1998). Twenty percent of migrant laborers have had medical problems related to pesticides. However, this is not a realistic statistic as most workers are reticent to seek medical care (ETN, 2002; Chavez, 1998).

**Figure 1:** A photograph of my grandpa picking grapes on the farm in Illinois. He also had livestock and apple orchards from which he sold cider by the gallon.
DDT he used on his orchards caused his death at an early age.

Working in the fields, farm workers are consistently exposed to harsh weather, from the very cold temperature of the mornings and nights to the full heat of the sun throughout the day. Evidence shows a significant percentage of migrants suffer from chronic musculoskeletal pain due to bending over for sometimes ten or more hours every day picking crops. Many do not seek medical care due to stoicism and for them this pain becomes chronic. Evidence has shown that many suffer from depression due to being separated from their families for long periods of time and living without that emotional support (Menchaca, 1995). Being aware of these conditions, it is not surprising that evidence has shown the average life span of a migrant worker to be 49 years old (Edid, 1994).

The majority of growers in California are still employing 30-60 percent undocumented workers because these workers are willing to work for the lowest wages and for the longest hours. These laborers work in a world absent of job security, for growers who hire on a daily basis, without contracts or benefits. These migrant workers willingly engage in a work environment where they are pressured to produce as much as possible earning piece-rate wages and often working 12-14 hours per day (Fox, 2004).

Migrant workers continue to lack the basic needs such as adequate housing that is affordable. Chavez reveals the results of his ethnographic study of Mexican transnational agricultural workers in his book, Shadowed Lives, Undocumented Workers in American Society. He reports that the Office of Migrant Workers has found that in most communities there is far from enough affordable housing for migrant workers. This leaves thousands of workers either crowding into homes and garages, or living in their cars, or sharing available resources in ‘shanty towns’ made from pieces of lumber and without heating, bathrooms or adequate cooking facilities. Undocumented workers attempt to hide themselves, living in constant fear of deportation, often at the side of fields, in ditches, or in caves in the hills above the Salinas Valley. They live without heat in the evening, sleep on makeshift beds, and use substandard
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There are laws in place to protect migrant workers otherwise unaware of their rights. Nevertheless, many do not seek the protection of such laws due to fear of losing their jobs as a result of retribution by their employers. “However, the oppressed, who have adapted to the structure of domination in which they are immersed, and have become resigned to it, are inhibited from waging the struggle for freedom so long as they feel incapable of running the risks it requires” (Freire, 1972, p. 32). Documented as well as undocumented workers who are aware of their rights sometimes do not fight for them, fearing retribution from the growers (Chavez, 1998). “The oppressed suffer from the duality which has established itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically. Yet, although they desire authentic existence, they fear it. They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized (Freire, 1972, p. 32). As Erick Schlosser explains, “left to its own devices, the free market always seeks a work force that is hungry, desperate, and cheap – a work force that is anything but free (2003, pg. 108).

With thousands of migrant workers entering the fields every year, many of the community social services offered are adversely impacted or diminished. In some cases, social workers have returned to the homes of migrant workers, only to find that those families have returned to Mexico. “In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” (Freire, 1972, p. 34).

We, as conscious citizens impact our own communities by acknowledging that we benefit from the byproducts of migrant labor, and therefore we are all “collectively responsible for what takes place in the fields” (ETN, 2002). Americans have an obligation to be informed about the conditions of those workers who produce our food supply. We are currently seeing an increasing demand for organic foods as people become more aware of the benefits to its consumers as well as its producers. We must increase our demand for organic foods so that pesticides and herbicides are effectively banned. The Food Agenda 2000-2010 online petition, which I urge readers to electronically sign, calls on elected officials to support several mandates for safer food. The Food Agenda 2000-2010 would (a) require a suspension of genetically altered crops unless they are proven safe for consumption and the environment (b) begin the reduction of the most dangerous agricultural pesticides, and (c) employ a long-term “transition to organic” programs that would shift agricultural production in the United States from pesticide-based treatments to 30% organic farming by the year 2010 (http://www.organicconsumers.org/petition1.htm).

Freire believed that, “Human activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world and as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it. Human activity is theory and practice; it is reflection and action” (1996, p. 106). He added, “Lenin’s famous statement: ‘Without a revolution-
ary theory, there can be no revolutionary movement” means that a revolution is achieved with neither verbalism nor activism, but rather with praxis that is, with reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed” (Freire, 1996, pg. 106-7). We have an obligation to speak out for those who are unable to speak for themselves, whether because of language barriers, or because they are afraid of retribution from their employers. Migrant workers, like all Americans, deserve to work in a safe nontoxic environment, need medical insurance and adequate and affordable housing (Chavez, 1998).

California’s Mexican farm workers and the growers who employ them are locked into a complex and dependent relationship with one another. This relationship represents the cycle of oppression as explained by Freire, “The pedagogy of the oppressed is an instrument for their critical discovery that both they and their oppressors are manifestations of dehumanization” (1996, p. 30). We must prevent the spread of misinformation by speaking up within our own community circles. “True dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking – thinking which discerns in an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them – thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity – thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved” (Freire, 1996, p. 73). By engaging in transformative dialogue, we can educate each other about why we are having economic problems in this state, and not allow others to impose their ideas on us.

According to Jose Angel Gutiérrez, “To successfully make the world to one’s liking, a person must learn the relationship of power to the U.S. society; the role of an individual in groups and society; one must have political consciousness; one must know the depth of institutional power; and know how personal and group interests are served by power. You must have acquired extensive social capital with which to make fundamental social change” (2001, p. 11). Gutiérrez cites James S. Coleman (1990): “social capital… is that historical memory of what was; the ability to tap organizations and people for resources; the mobilization of those resources toward tactics, strategy, and goal attainment; and leadership.” Finally, one must take action (Gutiérrez, 2001).

It is my hope that this paper will force the reader to reflect on the obstacles of people within our culture and society who work very hard, and despite that fact, continue to face unlawful patterns of oppression. My hope is that more education and an increased awareness of the importance and value of Mexican migrant workers in America will prevail. “No reality transforms itself” (Freire, 1972, p. 39). Therefore, we must actively transform the process of identity creation based on fear and helplessness to that based on strength and optimism. The experience of migrants should be felt in the collective consciousness of the American people. “Our social world, with its rules, practices, and assignment of prestige and power is not fixed; rather, we construct it with words, stories, and silence. But we need not acquiesce in arrangements that are unfair and one-sided. By writing and speaking against them, we may hope to contribute
to a better, fairer world” (Delgado, 2000, p. xvii).

**Figure 2**: Public mural of the Virgen de Guadalupe, patron saint of Mexico and the Mexican people. She is identified in many Mexican communities with fertility and identity. Yermo Oranda, spokesperson for the White Hawk Indian Council, created this mural on behalf of the Watsonville city council. Oranda took into account the wishes of park-goers in illustrating the agricultural and religious history of the area. The mural was made possible by a Neighborhood Pride grant from the city. Photo Copyright © Shari Harder, 2004.

I look forward to uniting with others to change the perceptions of Mexican transnationals by confronting and challenging overtly biased views and by making sure we have the facts to support our opinions. Our ability to empathize reflects on the way we view ourselves. By championing the rights of the oppressed, we in turn begin the process of lifting our own burden of oppression. My wish is to promote and support organic farming and related safe agricultural practices by continuing to purchase organic farm produce, and by sharing the benefits of ethically sound and ecologically friendly farming and commerce.

Just as the agricultural worker benefits from a healthy environment, we also reap the benefits of what we sow. By promoting human dignity for everyone, we increase our own self-respect. Recent academic experience has informed me of the importance of not permitting myself to become apathetic, as well as
the importance of becoming proactive in our community’s growth and development. If this narrative has served its purpose, it will have altered the reader’s perceptions of Mexican transnational agricultural workers, just as the research of this material has transformed this writer.

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References


Online Reference
Appendix A

Fig. 01: Mexican farm workers prepare fields and plantings for a future crop on the California central coast. Note tractor rigged with containers for farm chemicals. Photo courtesy Ruben G. Mendoza.

Fig. 02: Farm labor contractors typically transport Mexican agricultural laborers in buses with attached portable latrines. Such rigs are common on the California central coast during the planting and harvest seasons. Photo courtesy Ruben G. Mendoza.
Fig. 03: Mexican farm laborers harvest and package lettuce crops from atop a mechanized harvester near Salinas, California. Photo courtesy Ruben G. Mendoza.