

# The Migrant Experience in the Works of Mexican American Writers

Sherry York

It is commonly agreed that life experiences shape a writer's literary products. Common advice for novice writers is to write about what you know. In recent years several Mexican American authors have written about the migrant experience. The results are a number of novels, picture books, poems, biographies, and nonfiction works from writers who have experienced migrant farm worker life.

These books are worthy of consideration by language arts and social studies teachers because they provide an authentic look into a segment of society that still exists in the United States today. These works of literature contain recurring themes regarding education, family, poverty, labor, immigration, and citizenship—all topics that are especially relevant in our post-September 11 society.

## Migrants in Stories, Novels, and Picture Books

One of the first Mexican American writers to use the migrant experience as a primary focus in fiction was Tomás Rivera, a native of Crystal City, Texas. *And the Earth Did Not Part/ y no se lo tragó la tierra* was first published in 1971 after it won a Quinto Sol Award. The fourteen interconnected stories are based on Rivera's experiences as a migrant worker in the 1940s and 1950s. A well-known educator and advocate of Chicano literature, Rivera overcame the poverty of his childhood and youth and was chancellor at the University of California at Riverside when he died in 1984.

Today Rivera's legacy lives on at the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute in California, which "promotes the well-being of the Latino population of the United States," and the Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award, established in 1995 at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas. This award is presented annually for children's and young adult literature that portrays Mexican American culture in a positive manner. Pat Mora's *Tomás and the Library Lady* (1997) is based on the real-life experience of young migrant worker Rivera and the Iowa librarian who introduced him to the world of books. Beloved by librarians across the country, Mora's picture book is a tribute to her one-time co-worker Tomás Rivera. Fittingly it was awarded the Tomás Rivera Award in 1997.

Viola Canales, author of *Orange Candy Slices and Other Stories* (2001) and a native of McAllen, Texas, recalls her mother's sad account of picking cotton in the fields of west Texas. The recalled sadness was not about the work, but about taking her younger brother and sister to a local cafe for a hamburger and a Coke and being denied service. The

owner pointed to a sign that said, "We don't serve Mexicans." She felt like crying but didn't because as the oldest, she needed to care for her younger siblings.

*Macho!*, (1973), a novel by Victor Villaseñor, is a fictional account of Roberto García, a young Mexican Indian who endures the hellish conditions at Empalme, Mexico, a temporary camp and processing center where those who wanted to work in the US were legalized. Roberto eventually enters the country illegally so that he can work in the fields and send money to his impoverished family. Interspersed through the narrative are passages that provide factual information about the bracero program in the 1950s and 1960s, the effects of the program on labor conditions in both Mexico and the United States, and about "Operation Wetback," which resulted in numerous injustices. Another novel published during the Chicano movement of the 1970s is *The Plum Plum Pickers* (1971), by Spanish American writer and teacher Raymond Barrio. This account of an exploited migrant worker family was more political than autobiographical.

José Antonio Villarreal's *Pocho* (1959) focuses on changes that occur in the Rubio family after they settle in California during the depression era. Although the family does work in the fields, acculturation and loss of culture are the main themes of the novel. *Esperanza Rising* (2000), by Pam Muñoz Ryan, is one of the first Latina-authored children's books to use the migrant experience as an integral part of the story. Set in the same time period as *Pocho*, this award-winning novel is based on the life of the author's grandmother, Esperanza Ortega, who was forced by circumstances to leave her privileged life in Mexico and work in the fields of California. Readers experience with Esperanza the cruel realities of rough work in miserable conditions, and empathize with those seeking to improve conditions and also with those workers so desperate for work that they dared not support labor-organizing efforts for fear of losing the poor jobs they had. In the author's notes at the end of *Esperanza Rising*, Ryan discusses the Deportation Act of 1929, which resulted in at least 450,000 Mexicans and Mexican Americans being "repatriated" to Mexico.

*Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), a poignant novel by Helena María Viramontes, is told from a teenage girl's point of view. Estella falls in love with Alejo after they meet in a migrant camp. Alejo is exposed to pesticides in the fields and becomes extremely ill. Because of their desperate poverty, Estrella's family can barely afford food and gasoline and cannot afford medical treatment for Alejo, who has been

abandoned by his worker companions. In a heart-breaking scene, Alejo, who is near death, is left at a hospital and the family returns to continue their struggle to survive.

Pesticide poisoning is also a theme in *Cactus Blood* (1995), a Gloria Demasco mystery by Lucha Corpi. In this adult mystery a young woman is exposed to pesticides when fleeing through the fields after being raped. The woman survives for more than twenty years, but her health is seriously compromised. As the novel ends, she is returning to Mexico to die in the land of her birth. Other characters in the novel had been involved with farm worker unions during the 1970s.

Echoes of Gary Soto's experiences in fieldwork can be seen in his young adult novel *Jesse* (1994). Jesse and his brother have left home because of an alcoholic stepfather and are attending junior college and working in the fields when they need money for food. Inspired by the farm workers' struggle, Jesse draws a *huelga* (strike) scene about which his mother says, "These lazy people are giving us a bad name" (126). After his brother is drafted, Jesse contemplates his sad world, "fields running for miles with cantaloupes like heads, all faceless in the merciless sun" (166).

The main character in *Juanita Fights the School Board* (1994), the first novel of the *Roosevelt High School* series by Gloria Velásquez, is the daughter of farm workers. Juanita is sometimes embarrassed by her parents who do not speak English. Of farm work, Juanita says, "I hate it. My back always hurts, and it's burning hot" (10). The counselor, Ms. Martinez, shares the information that her father came to the United States to work in the fields.

In *The Jumping Tree* (2001), by René Saldaña, Jr., a classroom teacher who has experience as a migrant farm worker sympathizes with her students who miss months of school to work in the fields. While teaching a Texas history class about Martin Luther King and civil disobedience, the teacher shows the class a picture of a sign on the door of a restaurant, "No dogs, Meskins, or niggers allowed in here" (129). Rey, the main character in the novel, begins to learn about the ugliness of bigotry that he has never encountered in his south Texas community because his parents do not migrate. "Something in my chest hurt. Like I wanted to cry" (129).

**Memories: Autobiographies and Biographies of Migrants**

Professor Francisco Jiménez writes of his migrant worker experiences in *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child* (1997). Cataloged as autobiographical fiction, the narrative revolves around Francisco's experiences as a Spanish-speaking child in English-only schools. His difficulties are compounded by the family's need to move frequently in order to find work. The sequel, *Breaking Through* (2001), is cataloged as a biography. It begins, "I lived in constant fear for ten long years from the time I was four until I was fourteen years old" (1). His fears become reality when his family is deported after his brother gets a janitor's job at school.

Two picture books, *La Mariposa* (1998) and *The Christmas Gift* (2000) are also derived from Jimenez' experiences

as a migrant worker. *La Mariposa* is based on a story from *The Circuit* in which Francisco is able to find some success in the classroom despite the language barrier. *The Christmas Gift* is based on memories of a dreary Christmas in which rain has prevented the family from working. Although there is no money for Christmas presents, Francisco desperately wishes for a red rubber ball. Both picture books clearly illustrate the desperate poverty of the farm workers and, in spite of all, the richness of the love and kindness of family and friends.

Poet Juan Felipe Herrera shares his remembrances of the migrant life in two bilingual picture books, *Calling the Doves* (1995) and *The Upside Down Boy* (1995). The first title represents the poetic viewpoint of an only child of a young migrant family in which the father speaks to the birds and the mother recites poetry. The beauty of nature and the fun of sleeping in a tent under the stars are presented from an innocent child's point of view. *Calling the Doves* ends with the mother's decision that the family must settle in one place so that the child can attend school. *The Upside Down Boy* continues Juan Felipe's story as he starts school with no

knowledge of the English language and is bewildered because he cannot understand the teacher's instructions.

Another Texan, Elva Treviño Hart, writes about her life as the baby of a migrant family in *Barefoot Heart: Stories of a Migrant Child* (1999). It begins, "My whole childhood, I never had a bed" (3). Hart describes her family, work in the fields, and her school years so vividly that the

reader gains a clear understanding of what life as a migrant was like for one individual. *Migrant Daughter: Coming of Age as a Mexican American Woman* (2000) is Frances Esquibel Tywoniak's story of her early life as a migrant worker and her determination to attend college. Tywoniak became a teacher and administrator in San Francisco.

Gary Soto's *Jessie De La Cruz: A Profile of a United Farm Worker* (2000), is a biography of a courageous farm worker woman who became involved in the organizing efforts of United Farm Workers union. The book is dedicated to "all farm workers, who feed the nation."

Simón Silva's autobiographical book *Small-Town Brownie: Cosecha de la Vida* is dedicated to "all past, present, and future Campesinos, anyone who has ever felt alone, frustrated, unimportant, insignificant, or invisible." Silva describes his family's migrant work experiences with humor and with sadness. "The day moved on, and we were steam-cooked like vegetables on a giant wok since the freshly irrigated field provided all the necessary moisture to keep us turning" (57). Silva's illustrations are found in the picture book *La Mariposa* by Jiménez, in *Gathering the Sun*, a picture book tribute to farm workers by Cuban American Alma Flor Ada, and on the cover of *Jesse* by Gary Soto.

*Barrio Boy* (1971) by Ernesto Galarza is an autobiographical account of Galarza's early life and immigration to Sacramento, California. His descriptions of life in the barrio include much about the *trabajo* (work) and *chanza* (opportunity). The author and his mother left Mexico during the Mexican Revo-

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lution. Because his mother was determined that he become educated, Ernesto attended a school that he describes as “not so much a melting pot as a griddle where Miss Hopley and her helpers warmed knowledge into us and roasted racial hatreds out of us” (211). His summers were spent in migrant labor camps, and he once lost a job after he took part in a protest over the death of a child that was caused by drinking polluted water in a camp. Galarza later wrote several factual reports and nonfiction books about farm workers including *Merchants of Labor* (1964), *Spiders in the House and Workers in the Field* (1970), and *Farm Workers and Agribusiness in California, 1947-1960* (1977).

### Poetry

Diana García, born in a migrant labor camp where her parents met, wrote *When Living Was a Labor Camp* (2000), a collection of poems that pay tribute to her family and to other farm workers. García’s introduction mentions several themes—*la migra* (immigrations officers), pesticide poisoning, the Repatriation Act, and the spirit of the working people.

*Elegy on the Death of César Chávez* (2000), a beautiful picture book written by Rudolfo Anaya and illustrated by Gaspar Enriquez, pays tribute to the memory of César Chávez, the leader of the United Farm Workers who died in 1993. Beginning with a quote from Shelley’s *Adonais*, this book is a poem, an elegy to a humble man who had lived the migrant life and was presented a posthumous Medal of Freedom for devoting his life to the better the lives of farm workers. In his struggle for civil rights and non-violence, Chávez has been compared to Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. A note from Rudolfo Anaya explains how he was moved to write this elegy. A chronology of the life of César Chávez is included. The book cover reverses to reveal a poster chronology. Information for those wishing to contact the United Farm Workers Union and the César Chávez Foundation is provided.

### Nonfiction

Several nonfiction books document the problems of migrant farm workers. *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* by Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez (1995) discusses the shameful disregard for the rights of Mexican Americans who “looked Mexican” by immigration officials. In *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* author Juan Gonzalez details how workers have historically been treated as “easily deportable labor” (203). Gonzalez discusses how fluctuations in the U.S. economy correlate with the *bracero* programs and “Operation Wetback” of the 1950s.

Beth Atkin’s edited collection, *Voices from the Fields: Children of Migrant Farmworkers Tell Their Stories* (1993), features interviews and photographs of children and teens. This book presenting the thoughts, feelings, and poetry of young migrants begins with a foreword by Francisco Jiménez and ends with a poem “Tierra Prometida/The Promised Land” by well-known poet Francisco X. Alarcón.

For *Fields of Toil: A Migrant Family’s Journey* (1994),

Isabel Valle spent a year with a migrant family. This newspaper reporter accompanied a migrant family from La Grulla, Texas through a year’s work on the migrant trail. Valle wanted to “physically put myself in their shoes and get the opportunity to let others know exactly what they go through” (xi). During their travels she learned a great deal about migrants and family, children, the role of women, housing, health, job hazards, labor union, immigration, illegal alien workers, education, and language barriers—all the major concerns of migrant workers past and present.

*Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail* (2001) began with Rubén Martínez’s investigation into the background of three brothers killed while being smuggled across the border to work in the fields of California. The author, a news editor and commentator, began his investigation in Cherán, Mexico, where he became acquainted with the inhabitants of the small town. Later Martínez followed up by visiting former Cherán citizens who were working in the United States. *Crossing Over* documents and personalizes the cultural and economic changes being brought about in both the United States and Mexico by migrant workers.

Nasdijj, in his memoir, *The Blood Runs Like a River through My Dreams* (2000), makes the point that not all migrants are of Mexican descent when he writes, “We worked the ranches of the West and crops anywhere. My cowboy dad was white. My mother’s people were with the Navajo” (3).

### Closing Thoughts

Through these books, those of us who have not known life as migrant workers can read and vicariously experience the farm worker life without dirtying our own hands. Values common in these books are a love of family, a willingness to work hard, and a desire for children to become educated and thereby lead easier lives. Sadly these books also contain numerous instances of prejudice and bigotry that caused pain to people who asked only for acceptance, respect, and the opportunity to earn a living.

Any number of interesting projects might be constructed around the migrant experience. What other ethnic groups have been employed as migrant workers in the United States? Comparisons between points of view would be appropriate. Is experience as a migrant worker necessary to produce authentic literature? What of the works of John Steinbeck, Gary Paulsen, and others? Another possibility might be to explore the concept of work migration in other countries.

Immigration and citizenship issues are concerns in many migrant stories. The issue of illegal immigrants who are victimized as they cross borders seeking work is being examined in recent fiction and nonfiction. These are especially relevant to citizens in the Southwest where it is not uncommon to hear of the deaths of men, women, and children headed north for the work they know is waiting. Manuel Luis Martínez’s novel *Crossing* (1998) is a gripping story based on a real incident in which thirteen undocumented workers suffocated in a boxcar near El Paso, Texas. *Delfino’s Journey* (2001) by Texan Jo Harper is a novel about two young Aztec boys who are tricked into working in a border slave camp with other “illegals” in horrible conditions. This

novel is also based on real-life situations.

In these troubled times, it is important for students (and teachers) to become aware that in our country are millions of citizens whose lives have been very different. These works of literature should be included in school libraries, added to relevant reading lists, and used as catalysts for discussions about the American experience from the point of view of migrant farm workers.

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#### Recommended Web sites

- César Chávez Foundation and United Farm Workers Union <<http://www.ufw.org>>
- Tomas Rivera Mexican American Children's Award <<http://www.education.swt.edu/rivera/mainpage.html>>
- Tomas Rivera Policy Institute <<http://www.trpi.org/>>

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*Sherry York is a retired school librarian. She has been reviewing books and writing articles for more than twenty years. She is the author of two books on Latino literature forthcoming from Linworth Publishing in 2002.*