

---

MIGRANT CONSCIOUSNESS: EDUCATION, *MÉTISSAGE*,  
AND THE POLITICS OF FARMWORKING IN LATINO COMMUNITIES

Jose Salinas and Ruben Viramontez Aguiano  
Bowling Green State University

Awad Ibrahim  
University of Ottawa

---

Within the conceptual apparatuses that have governed our labeling of ourselves and others, a space [*métissage*] is thus opened up where multiplicity and diversity are affirmed. This space is not a territory staked out by exclusionary practices. Rather, it functions as a sheltering site, one that can nurture our differences without encouraging us to withdraw into new dead ends...For it is only by imagining nonhierarchical modes of relation among cultures [nations and languages] that we can address the crucial issues of indeterminacy and solidarity.<sup>1</sup>

#### UNFOLDING THE MIGRANT CONSCIOUS

The personal, it seems, is by and large subsumed under the grand narrative of historical objectivity in academic discourse. However, as bell hooks argues, the personal is and can be “such a fertile ground for the production of liberatory [praxis] because it forms the base of our theory making.”<sup>2</sup> Our intent in this essay is to use the experiential and the personal to create a luminal in between space where it meets the “objectively” historical and academic. Specifically, we intend to utilize concepts that are central to the praxis of critical thinking as illustrated by others including Peter Baird, Sofia Villenas, and Donna Deyhle to illustrate the unique space that migrant farmworkers occupy in education through what we call the “migrant conscious.”<sup>3</sup> Within this essay, we see the migrant conscious as *concientización*: coming to consciousness of the plight of Mexicans and Latinos in general as they struggle with the inequities in the farm fields and in our nation’s schools. To explore this process of *concientización*, we are building on one of the authors’ Salinas’ and his experiential knowledge as a former migrant farmworker and now the Director of the Ohio Migrant Education Center (OMEC). Clearly, language can only touch the surface of this unique experience.

The experience is told neither for narcissistic self-aggrandizement purposes nor for its absolute uniqueness (because it is not). But, to fully appreciate Salinas’s experience and the migrant farmworker evolution in general, especially over the last thirty years, one has to keep in mind the picture of the worker in the field and the relevance of that picture to our nation’s schools. It is at the intersection of the life in the field and the life in the classroom that the migrant conscious is born, thus producing a space of in-

betweenness, of *métissage*. In general, the migrant social consciousness is an ongoing process that impacts and is impacted by different socio-ecological factors on a daily basis. Put otherwise, a person's social consciousness is intricately tied to his/her identity. Moreover, the self-awareness one gathers through bodily experience serves as a compass to one's adaptation and survival. For farmworkers, this bodily *concientización* is heavily influenced by their life in the field in an effort to survive that, in turn, is impacted by social, economic, political, cultural, linguistic, geopolitical, and educational factors. As a result the migrant conscious and identity are, on the one hand, set on a foundation of "resiliency" that is flexible and dependent on social, cultural, economic, and educational contexts and, on the other, built in a space of in-betweenness: torn between the life of the school and the life of the farm.

As Henry Trueba put it, "A person's ability to define their identity in different ways in order to function effectively in different settings and cultural contexts is clearly related to their quest for survival and success." For Trueba,

there is an intimate relation between people's capacity to endure hardships, challenges and difficult situations in life (that is what we call *resilience*), and their ability to redefine themselves in order to function effectively in new social, cultural, linguistic and economic contexts.<sup>4</sup>

This is reflected in the migrant child who has mastered the ability to redefine him- or herself to effectively succeed in different school systems and in diverse communities and social settings. The *métissage* or rubbing of different cultural norms, systems, and ecological factors create the child's unique experience.<sup>5</sup> Because of this psychic and bodily experience, the migrant child becomes a bi-product, a bidirectional recipient of lessons learned at the school and ones learned from the parents in the field. These lessons are increasingly celebrated, but in many cases, challenged in the classroom. What follows is an explanation of how migrant children have developed the capacity to learn in traditional formal educational and nontraditional environments and the resiliency to confront adversity.

#### FARMWORKING AND ORGANIC INTELLECTUALISM

According to Antonio Gramsci, learning and thinking are processes that extend beyond the classroom. Gramsci captures the essence of these processes in what he terms *organic intellectualism*. The organic intellectual for Gramsci is one who integrates, pushes, and develops intelligence and learning outside the traditional, formal educational setting. Gramsci used the example of the parent activist and the parent organizer.<sup>6</sup> Within the Mexican migrant context in particular and Latinos in general, Cesar Chavez exemplified this organic intellectualism. Chavez was both a migrant and a farmworker and highly sophisticated "academic." He understood the psychic and bodily suffrage of life in the fields and our need to theorize it, to give it a name, a color and a texture.

---

---

He was a *farmworker intellectual*. It is not surprising therefore that his tireless efforts to advocate for farmworkers who were without formal education or training were soon heard around the world. Similar to Chavez, the first author of this article, Salinas, also began his organic intellectualism through observing his parents fighting for the rights of other fellow farmworkers. His first “classroom” lesson, if you like, was a south Florida migrant labor union rally. His parents utilized their organic intellectual skills including problem solving, conflict resolution and reflection to negotiate better wages and improve living conditions for all migrant workers.

When times were financially hard and circumstances were dire for his family, Salinas can recall taking trips to the city dumps to collect recyclable materials that his family would redeem for cash. He learned at a very young age that copper and brass metals brought significantly more money than aluminum. These precious experiences not only served as vital lessons in life but they paved the road to the formation of his migrant conscious.

This organic learning had a direct influence on his formal educational development as a migrant child. His identity was driven by his migrant experience at an early age. Salinas knew at a deeper level what it meant to be a migrant in the school, that his experiences were distinct and unique from other children. While mainstream children ate dinner, finished their homework, and played with friends after school, migrant children in Salinas’s situation experienced an entirely different reality. After getting off of the bus, his brothers and sisters quickly changed into work clothes and put together a quick meal before headed to the tomato fields. Once there, the kids joined their parents and worked until it was time to go home which sometimes wasn’t until late at night. Once they got home from the field, the family took turns showering while doing homework and waiting for dinner to be prepared. No time for friends, very little time for television.

Central to the migrant conscious thus were the long hours in the fields juxtaposed by the hours in the classroom that were driven by the sociocentric compass of the Mexican farmworker family in this case. Often the mainstream culture reinforced hidden curriculum values such as individualism and competitiveness in schools while, by and large, the migrant’s survival in the fields and their success in the classroom were guided by their collective nature. Further illustrating this point, Villenas and Deyhle use Critical Race Theory to argue that mainstream schools have failed to acknowledge the importance of a curriculum that reflects this nation’s culturally diverse communities.<sup>7</sup> Guadalupe Valdes gives an example of one culturally shared value among Latino families that schools fail to recognize. “What English speakers call ‘education,’” Valdez writes, “is school or book learning. What Spanish speakers call ‘educación’ has a much broader meaning and includes both manners and moral values.”<sup>8</sup> “My parents,” writes Salinas autobiographically,

---

believed that being “*educado*” meant being accountable to yourself and to the people around you. Although education is a right in the United States, they believed that with it comes great responsibility. We have a responsibility to be supportive of one another as we strive to achieve educationally.

Still, some schools have expectations that cannot be met by children who do not share the same privileges and experiences as those from the mainstream society. For example, as experienced by many migrant communities, the public library system can be a very foreign and frightening institution to Latino families.<sup>9</sup> Teachers that naturally expect students to visit a public library for the purpose of taking books out for school related projects may not understand that many Latino parents unfamiliar with the library system fear their children losing the books resulting in hefty fines. Sadly for many students, their first visit to a public library is through the school. This is what George Splinder calls “cultural discontinuity.”<sup>10</sup> Migrant children for Splinder are often caught between two cultural realities. On one hand migrant children are part of an educational system designed for mainstream children, while on the other hand migrants live and learn on the margins of society.

#### NEW FACES AND THE MIGRANT IDENTITY

It was obvious by the turn of the twentieth century that Ohio,<sup>11</sup> other northern states, and the nation were experiencing a noticeable change in the migrant population within the fields and in the classrooms. With less traditional migrant families resembling Salinas’s family returning to Ohio to continue the harvesting cycle, farmers began considering their options for replacing a dwindling workforce. An ambitious, but risky solution to solving the workforce shortage was to hire Mexican and Central American immigrants, some documented and some undocumented. The migrant farmworker experience would forever change by the last part of the twentieth century as farmers became relentless in their efforts to harvest migratory crops faster and more efficiently, which resulted in driving most migrant families similar to Salinas’s to seek other means of sustainable living. As a result of continuing global economic shifts, the migrant context has dramatically changed. The new migrant face includes single men, or couples with one or two children[] small when compared to the size of more traditional Latino migrant families. The new migrant farmworker has a more indigenous face. Many come from Central American, countries like Guatemala, and are considered Mexico’s undocumented population since part of their long journey to the United States requires them to overcome the dangerous and often deadly social obstacles of the Mexican frontier.<sup>12</sup> Many from these regions speak no English and consider Spanish their second language. Their first language is reflective of the indigenous dialect spoken in their home country/region. The language and cultural differences they bring to the United States pose unique educational challenges.

---

Thus, although the new migrant identity still resembles both Salinas's and Ruben Viramontez Aguiano's experiences, it is clear that U.S. society continues to be driven by global factors which are also transforming the migrant farmworker experience in the United States. The new migrant consciousness and identity are impacted by factors such as transnationality, anti-immigration policies, European and Indigenous language differences, and other social, cultural, political, economic, and educational challenges. What follows is a meta-analysis of how these ecological changes are impacting the public school system in Northwest Ohio as well as how the communities in this area are responding to the adjustments. Moreover, we illustrate how the "migrant consciousness" of the childhood experience, the experience of *métissage* and in-betweenness has evolved through the lens of the first author, Salinas, now the OMEC director, as he struggles to serve the new faces of the fields and classrooms.

#### OLD AND NEW ISSUES FOR EDUCATIONAL DEMOCRACIES

The United States has continued to become a cultural tapestry; at the center of these social shifts has been the process of migration and immigration. Historically, Henry Trueba argues, public schools in the United States have developed curricula based on a mainstream lens with the assumption that all other children, including migrant children, would assimilate.<sup>13</sup> However, as Armando Portes and Lee Hao have shown, these linear models of assimilation were too simplistic in nature and failed to critically acknowledge the social, cultural, linguistic, economic, familial, and political realities of people of color.<sup>14</sup> The result is a public school system that has struggled to educate migrant children, at least over the last thirty years. According to Duane Campbell, "critical theory denies that social systems such as schools are neutral but assumes that, as systems designed by people, schools contain within themselves the values of the designers."<sup>15</sup> Further illustrating this point, often mainstream educators have failed to acknowledge the cultural, social, political, and geo-linguistic limitations of the curriculum and its impact on migrant children. For the most part, school districts with decades of experience working with migrant children had a basic understanding of the educational needs of this transient, mostly American born population. Teachers were generally concerned with the lack of continuity in the child's education due to the transitory nature of the lifestyle.

But children often lost valuable instructional time in a migratory move. Salinas is quite familiar with this environment through his personal experiences as a child of migrant farmworkers. For example, an issue that plagued these "migrant" students in high school was the loss of precious credit hours due to incompatible state graduation requirements that made it difficult for most students to get a diploma within the standard four-year window. This particular obstacle became all too real for Salinas for example. Although his grades never suffered in high school, he knew he was in jeopardy of not graduating with his

classmates. Schools in Texas, for example, where Salinas spent some of his high school years, only required one semester of government while Ohio, where he finished his high school, required a full year of this same course/subject. Needless to say, special secondary credit accrual programs for migrant students were vital.

With most migrant children growing up fluently bilingual, the need for English as a second language (ESL) instruction was rare. Some children served as cultural and language brokers as they assisted their monolingual Spanish-speaking parents with the family's interpreting needs at clinics and government offices on countless occasions. Schools too would occasionally utilize the bilingual skills of migrant students. Their ability to communicate in both languages was a valuable resource for the school when serving migrant students who did not speak English. It was not unusual to have one or two monolingual Spanish-speaking students assigned to Salinas for example to assist with interpreting and translating needs in the classroom throughout the school day.

In many districts, migrant students are not considered part of the school community. Schools will often differentiate between "our kids" (students with permanent residence in the district), and "those kids" (the transient migrant children who leave the district after the harvest season). This discriminatory behavior is more evident in the distribution of educational resources. Often, access to vital supplemental educational programs and resources are reserved for students who stay in the district throughout the academic calendar year since their progress (or lack thereof) will determine the school's overall academic performance. In many cases, schools find it acceptable to withhold needed supplemental academic services like ESL and before/after school tutoring expecting migrant students to stay in the district for only a short time. These services are often seen as the responsibility of the home schools. Not only is this unethical in an educational democracy, it violates numerous laws made to protect the language minority.

In his current position as OMEC director, Salinas has continued to struggle with these same issues as he himself has faced being a migrant child and is thus critical of how the curriculum and the process of educating the new faces of migrant children are continuing to hinder their educational advancement. Unfortunately, the new migrant child has become a bigger challenge for school practitioners. As Patricia McHatton, Carlos Zalaquett, and Ann Cranson-Gingras put it, "Their cultural and linguistic diversity, difficult living conditions, and low levels of parental academic attainment further place migrant students out of sync with school systems that are unable or unwilling to accommodate their unique needs."<sup>16</sup>

We noted time and again, especially in the schools where we three work, that these unique needs are becoming the basis for a new *politics of labeling*, where Latino migrant children are placed in notable numbers in special

---

education classes. As in our work in the schools, one teacher answered, “I can’t get through to them.” But, as Salinas explains, most of these children do not have a learning disability, but rather there is a lack of understanding migrant children by the schools.<sup>17</sup> Their educational deficiencies stem from their limited grasp of the English language and their lack of academic content knowledge due to limited exposure to formal education systems in their home regions. Education for Mexico’s indigenous populations, to cite but one example, is limited to primary grades, or from life lessons they learn from their parents, extended family, and the community. For many children from indigenous backgrounds who come to the United States with their families, their first experience in a formal educational setting may very well be a public school classroom in Northwest Ohio or anywhere that becomes their first stop in the United States. Finding a bilingual person in the community who understands at least one of Mexico’s indigenous dialects and who has the capacity to serve as a liaison between the school and family is virtually impossible. The public school system finds itself in a quandary as it struggles to balance the needs of this unfamiliar child and the limited resources it has to serve all children.

Within this quandary Trueba identifies the need for school districts to acknowledge that it is inevitable that the new faces in the classroom will be called upon to play a very important role in the making of our new democracy and global economy.<sup>18</sup> The need to reinvent our democratic institutions and particularly our schools within a cultural diversity framework is unavoidable.

The need to reinvent our democracy through our schools is particularly important at the middle-school and high-school levels, especially because these children are the hope of not only migrant Latino families, but also all Latino families to continue into higher education and eventually end up as role models in U.S. society. However, the new migrant face now includes youth as young as fourteen-year olds who travel to the United States with an older brother or uncle, and sometimes on their own. In hopes of obtaining some level of education while in the United States, some will attempt to enroll in school presenting a plethora of problems for educators. While elementary teachers are trained to teach a variety of subjects, middle-school and high-school teachers have always remained content specific. High-school math teachers, for example, are trained only to teach mathematics. They are not qualified to address English language instructional issues that plague the new face of the migrant child.

At a macro level, as the number of Latinos in schools is increasingly exponentially, some districts have reverted to “nativist” thoughts and practices— manifestly racist practices couched under the umbrella of nationalism. For example, Latino students who are suspected of being recent arrivals to the United States are occasionally pressured to present a social security card as a requirement for enrolling in the public schools. This tactic is regularly used to discourage students and their families from completing the

---

enrollment process. However, as the *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) case makes clear, school districts are strictly prohibited from requiring a social security card, or any other document that may expose their undocumented status as a condition to enrolling in public schools. Another practice that some schools are implementing is placing non-English speaking high-school students in elementary schools. Their rationale is that the reading teachers at the elementary level provided better instructional resources for the language deficiency of these students. Though pedagogically logical, state officials found in many cases that the grade placement policy for their ESL population was inappropriate and forced school districts to rewrite this policy to conform to existing laws.<sup>19</sup> Some schools take the passive-aggressive approach when it comes to serving migrant students. As noted earlier, school personnel tend to ignore the presence of migrant students in the district patiently waiting for their withdrawal from school and for their next intrastate/interstate migratory move. Thus, the United States finds itself at a crossroad of moving toward change and choosing a culturally diverse democracy for all of our children or continuing an inadequate and discriminatory system.

One noticeable and hopeful change that impacted (and continues to impact) migrant children nationwide took place in August 2004, when the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) deemed that all school-aged children from migrant families are to be granted poverty status when it comes to the free school-lunch application. In a memo sent to school nutrition programs nationwide, the USDA asserted that all eligible migrant families would no longer need to prove income eligibility to qualify in the free school-lunch program, nor complete the free and reduced lunch application. Although the new school lunch guidelines brought welcomed news to all migrant families, further local, state, and national changes are required if our nation hopes to make great strides towards educational pluralism.

#### BY WAY OF CONCLUDING

Much has happened in the last thirty years that has not only changed the face of the migrant farmworker, but has also changed our schools and communities. By meta-analyzing the personal narrative of the first author as a migrant in the fields and in the schools and as now the OMEC director, we hope we have provided a foundation for understanding the space of *métissage* that farmworkers occupy. This is a bi-product, an exceptionally productive space that is intellectually fed by the school and the farm. It is an evolving space that is yet to be fully understood. Through this critical analysis we have provided a portrait of, first, the migrant conscious through bodily experiences and, second, how the migrant identity and consciousness continue to change the new face of farmworkers and reshape our nation. As educators, we have both the ethical and legal responsibility to remain cognizant of the evolutionary challenges of the cultures around us so that attention to social justice for those

---

who most need it is not neglected. Through this process all of our children, including migrant children, will realize the true potential of our society. And...

*For she who hope,  
Tell her the journey has begun!*

#### NOTES

1. Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-portraiture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 5. As authors we made a conscious choice to use the term *farmworker* versus *farm worker* in this essay. Although both are correct and mean the same thing, *farmworker* is the most commonly used term in the literature and by the U.S. Department of Education to refer to agricultural migrant workers.
2. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 168.
3. See especially Peter Baird, "Teaching to Empower Students," in *Choosing Democracy: A Practical Guide to Multicultural Education*, ed. Duane E. Campbell (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Education Hall, 2004); and Sofia Villenas and Donna Deyhle. "Critical Race Theory and Ethnographies Challenging the Stereotypes: Latino Families, Schooling, Resilience and Resistance," *Curriculum Inquiry* 29, no. 4 (1999): 413-45.
4. Henry T. Trueba, "Multiple Ethnic, Racial, and Cultural Identities in Action: From Marginality to a New Cultural Capital in Modern Society," *Journal of Latinos in Education* 1, no. 1 (2002): 7-28.
5. See Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices*, for full discussion of the concept of *métissage*. It is a radical concept which means "the constant interaction, the transmutation between two or more cultural components with the unconscious goal of creating a third cultural entity— in other words, a culture— that is new and independent even though rooted in the preceding elements...each one changes into the other so that both can be transformed into a third" (15). *Métissage* assumes two entities that are equally valorized. *Métissage*, therefore, similar to the concept of *mestizaje* mulatto, is an egalitarian hybridity, where ambiguity, multiplicity, fragmentation, and plurality of self— where one thrives on affirmation of difference not polarized and polarizing notions of identity— become the new landscape. It is within this tension of hybridity, we are arguing, that Latino migrant children find themselves in the United States: torn between the internal language, culture, and sense of self at home, and the external culture and language, where schooling plays a central role.
6. For full discussion, see Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux, *Education Under Siege: The Conservative, Liberal, and Radical Debate Over Schooling* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1985).
7. Villenas and Deyhle, "Critical Race Theory and Ethnographies."

8. Guadalupe Valdes, *Con Respeto: Bridging the Difference Between Culturally Diverse Families and Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996), 125.
  9. Ibid.
  10. George Splinder, *Fifty Years of Anthropology and Education 1950–2000: A Splinder Anthropology* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000).
  11. Salinas spent the majority of his life in Ohio both as a child and adult. It is where we all three met. Salinas and Aguiano are second-generation immigrants, while Ibrahim is a first-generation immigrant (for his experience, see Awad Ibrahim, “The Question of the Question Is the Foreigner: Towards an Economy of Hospitality,” *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 21, no 2 (2005): 149–62).
  12. Ruben Andersson, “The New Frontiers of America,” *Race and Class* 46, no. 3 (2005): 28–38.
  13. Henry T. Trueba, *Raising Silent Voices: Educating Linguistic Minorities for the Twenty-first Century* (Boston: Heine and Heine, 1989).
  14. Armando Portes and Lee Hao, “The Price of Uniformity: Language, Family, and Personality Adjustment in the Immigrant Second Generation,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25 (2002): 889–912.
  15. Duane E. Campbell, *Choosing Democracy: A Practical Guide to Multicultural Education*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Education Hall, 2004).
  16. Patricia A. McHatton, Carlos P. Zalaquett, and Ann Cranson-Gingras, “Achieving Success: Perceptions of Students from Migrant Farmworker Families,” *American Secondary Education* 34, no. 2 (2006): 25–39.
  17. Jose Salinas, *Educational Experiences of Children in the Migrant Stream: Ecological Factors Necessary for Academic Success* (thesis, Bowling Green State University, 2007).
  18. Trueba, “Multiple Ethnic, Racial, and Cultural Identities in Action.”
  19. Salinas, *Educational Experiences of Children in the Migrant Stream*.
-