Harvesting Identities: A Migrant’s Journey from the Fields to the Green Mountains

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I am a migrant student. Growing up, I faced a multitude of challenges such as a lifestyle of mobility and the presence of stereotype threat. Migrant students travel with their families across state lines during the planting and harvesting seasons looking for menial labor work (Parra-Cardona, Bulock, Imig, Villrruel, & Gold, 2006). Despite these obstacles, numerous migrant students graduate from high school and successfully transition to college. However, existing research fails to highlight the ongoing struggle of identity formation among migrants. I use Claude Steele’s stereotype threat theory, Pierre Bourdieu’s social reproduction and habitus theories, and scholarly personal narrative to capture a glimpse of the trials and triumphs in my struggle to make sense of my stigmatized identities.

My father was the last, but I am the first.

Luis Urrieta (2003) was the first in his family to achieve academic success and end his family’s migrant trend. Like Urrieta, I am a product of this trend. This lifestyle had a significant impact on my educational attainment as a migrant student. Despite the academic barriers prevalent in this lifestyle, I managed to change my future.

El Migrante

There are over 200,000 migrant students in today’s schools; 87% of these students identify as Mexican-American (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Migrant students travel with their families across state lines looking for work. This continuous uprooting and relocating routine impedes the academic success of migrants (Parra-Cardona, Bulock, Imig, Villrruel, & Gold, 2006). Due to varying educational requirements state-to-state, it is near impossible for migrant students to complete and advance from one grade level to the next (Martinez & Cranston-Gingras, 1996; Martínez & Cranston-Gingras, 1996).
Adolescent migrants are the most vulnerable of family members. By the time they reach a specific age, they are asked to take to the fields. This early work engagement results in the students’ increased levels of absenteeism and low graduation levels (Zalaquett, McHatton, & Cranston-Gingra, 2007). However, despite numerous odds, some migrants make it out as the first in their family to break the cycle.

Current studies address how migrant students can or may succeed in the K-12 system. However, they fail to examine the experiences of migrant students beyond their primary and secondary education (Gibson & Hidalgo, 2009). It is through their college successes that higher education administrators and educators can understand how migrant students are capable of ending the cycle. I intend to shed light on these historically underrepresented voices in higher education by exploring my story. *Hači comienza mí historia.*

The Beginning

I was born in the heart of the Rio Grande Valley, just a few minutes north of the U.S.-Mexico border. At the time of my birth, my parents were only in their late teens and were already caring for three daughters. Without a high school diploma, my father cared for his family the best way he knew – migration. Every day I would watch my parents wake up por la madrugada, ready to battle the sugar beet fields filled with waist-deep weeds. From a distance, I could see the force behind every slash. My parents withstood the torturous heat from sunup to sundown as their arms flailed across the air, whacking the weeds out of the ground. Whether rain or shine, work had to be done, money had to be earned, and food had to be placed on the table. With their restless feet, calloused hands, and aching backs my parents walked up and down the surcos determined to work the full 12 hours of sunlight.

We migrated to Wahpeton, North Dakota for the first eight years of my life. My parents waved to us from their van as my sisters and I boarded the bus for summer school. The late enrollment and constant withdrawals from school left my hermanas and me lagging behind our classmates academically. Instead of brushing up on algebra or fulfilling summer reading requirements, we spent our time learning about crops and the importance of our role as migrants. We were forced to manage our education in unstable learning environments (Zalaquett et al., 2007). The relentless cross-country travel resulted in constant code-switching between states, educational languages, and cultures (Martinez & Cranson-Gingras, 1996). The lack of institutional alignment across states exacerbated the already difficult transition from one school to another. Beginning in kindergarten, we were withdrawn from school early in the spring semester and enrolled late in the fall, which resulted in difficulty establishing significant relationships with teachers and mentors. My teachers often failed to acknowledge my true academic potential and so
did I. Labeled as a migrant student, it was tough for me to plead for placement in advanced courses and I was seen as the troublemaker, *la mal comportada*. It was an internalized stereotype I fought against constantly. Should I succumb to the stereotypes, or could I rise above?

**Stereotype Threat**

Being a migrant meant that I was assumed to be lazy, dirty, and uneducable (Valencia & Black, 2002). Given these stereotypes, I was ashamed of my identity. I was convinced that it was not a way of living, and for years thought it acceptable for me to underperform academically. I developed stereotype threat. Claude Steele (1997) defines stereotype threat as the “social-psychological threat that arises when one is in a situation …for which a negative stereotype about one’s group applies” (p. 614). These social-psychological threats encourage individuals in the stigmatized group to live down to societal expectations (Steele, 1997). As a *migrante* I was constantly exposed to messages defining me as “dysfunctional,” “at-risk,” and “developmentally challenged.” I came to internalize these messages and became “self-threatening” and “self-defeating” (Strayhorn, 2010, p. 311). I was branded as a migrant, seen as a migrant, and treated as a migrant. For years, I would remain a closeted migrant student and would walk behind my shadow.

Studies have addressed my migrant experience of constant self-blame, yet fail to connect stereotype threat to these emotions (Zalaquett et al., 2007). Although emerging research shows the effects of valuing one’s culture and one’s being, the educational system fails to support migrant students and frequently devalues their backgrounds (Valencia & Black, 2002). That was my experience.

**Trudging Forth**

In 1992, my family took a brief two-year *stay-cation* from migrating. My padre successfully found a job working for a concrete pavement company and my mom found work in a jean manufacturing company. This was their attempt at living ‘normal’ lives. I lavished at the idea of giving up the fields and seized every moment. Unfortunately, within those two years, my family suffered severe financial hardships. The events had a compounding effect on my parents and their inability to support our family. My father decided we should once again pick up our belongings and head down the highways. After two days, we finally made it to our destination, Breckenridge, Minnesota. This would become our summer home for six years. I was ten years old, and that meant I was old enough to work the *betavel*! This time, there was no escape.

I remember every *mañana*, sitting somberly staring at my mom as she would get dressed. Quietly, I would watch her put on her working clothes stiff with *soquete*
from the previous day’s work. The most interesting part of her routine came when she would cover her face. My mother’s beauty radiates from within, and watching her cover her face was like denying her beauty to shine through. First, she would take a bandana, fold it in a triangle, and deliberately place the straight edge over her nose bridge and tie it so the knot would be above her ponytail. She would then take another bandana, fold it into a triangle, and place the straight edge across her forehead and tie it right below her ponytail. Next, she would take one last bandana and tie the opposite ends of the same side together so it would lie on top of her head and cover her neck. Afterwards, she would put on her sombrero. Finally, with her sunglasses, she would trap her beauty. Se desapareció! Deep in thought I wondered if this is what would become of me? The threat in the air was inescapable. How much longer would my mom keep disappearing? Would I end up like my parents? How could I ever change this? What can I do to change my parents’ lifestyle, my sisters’ lifestyle, and my lifestyle?

For six years I stubbornly walked through the fury of fields. I became my parent’s worst nightmare, la nesia. I fought back in tears, throwing tantrums and shoving my azadón back into their hands. When it rained, the mud trapped our boots in the fields and they would become irretrievable, leaving us barefoot. I would refuse to contribute to the mediocrity of this lifestyle. I pleaded for my parents’ mercy and complained about child labor. I figured with my educación I could teach my parents about the law. My parents persisted. We needed the money. We forged on as a family. I was initiated into the life of a migrant farmworker. Not much later, I made a personal promise that I would never end up a migrant farmworker—that I would one day stop the cycle and my parents would stop migrating. The only way out, as I saw it, was through my academics.

La Realidad – Urbana-Champaign, Illinois

In 2000, my parents divorced and we ultimately stopped migrating as a family. My mom worked three jobs to help support her four daughters, while my father continued as a migrant. Life in high school was tougher than the fields. For three years I learned to delve into books. The time away from the fields allowed me to create and nurture extensive relationships with my teachers, something I could not establish when we migrated. Shortly after, financial concerns began to surface. How were we going to pay for high school and all its extravagances, like prom? We had band trips, lettermen jackets, banquets, prom, and not to mention, food.

In 2003, my twin and I were approached by my tío, who volunteered to take us on what would be our last trek up north. I knew I had to go, and I understood my purpose. It was time to help my family in any way possible. However, this time it was la espiga, in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois. We stayed in a one bedroom apartment, along with my uncle’s family. While many around us were deep in
their sleep, my aunt would come into the girls’ room and gently pat us on our backs saying, “Ya és hora míja” – it was time to start the day. My cousin, sister, and I would emerge from our room fully clothed in our migrating rags. Las mujeres prepared breakfast and lunch while los hombres caught a few more hours of sleep. Tacos were prepared and gently wrapped in foil. Needless to say, the protein and carbs consumed were burned through the day’s work. To beat the sun, we would hit the corn stalks by 4:30 a.m. This was mí realidad.

This reality eventually led to a better understanding of my long-standing relationship with the fields. The re-folding of fields to harvest different crops year after year and the magical process of farming to provide produce is a testament to the resiliency of agriculture in our lives. Despite Mother Nature’s temperament and wrath, very often crops yield sufficient amounts to satisfy the livelihood of farmers and their workers. Sometimes the fields are able to pick up from the previous year’s poor performance and produce double the yield expected. Just like the crops and the fields I tilled, I have become resilient in confronting obstacles. This experience taught me that the most important thing is to take life for what it is and make the best of it. The resiliency of la llerva travels throughout my body. If I could make it through the fields, I could make it through my journey to self-discovery and to the present.

Social Reproduction and Habitus

My journey has not been easy to share. The brief literature on migrant students and my story suggest that successful approaches to enhancing migrant students’ college access involve (1) the cultivation of capital, as described by social reproduction theory, and (2) the development of habitus, defined as how individuals identify themselves based on personal experiences and societal structures (Bourdieu, 1977). Migrant students are seen through specific identities that have been systematically oppressed and misunderstood within the educational system (Parra-Cardona, Bulock, Imig, Villarruel, & Gold, 2006). They are students of Color and are born into working-class families holding what is called “double minority status” – two subdominant identities (Gonzales, Blanton, & Williams, 2002). Their upbringing makes them view their world and educational opportunities differently. They develop a habitus not suitable for immediate success. Bourdieu’s (1977) work on social reproduction theory and habitus is particularly instructive in this overview of the migrant experience.

Social reproduction theory discusses the process in which one has acquired capital. According to Bourdieu (1986), “in its objectified or embodied forms, capital has the potential to produce profits and to reproduce itself, [or] contains a tendency to persist in its being” (p. 241). It has the ability of reproducing in ways that can either help individuals advance in society or keep them in place (Bourdieu, 1977).
The development and impact of cultural, social, and economic capital are salient among students of Color from working class backgrounds (Cerna, Perez, & Saenz, 2009; Nuñez, 2009a, 2009b; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, Strayhorn, 2010). The ladder to academic success for migrant students is dependent upon the reproduction of their inherited capital (Bourdieu, 1977). In my case, I had to work twice as hard to cultivate as much capital as my classmates.

Along with the cultivation of capital, the status of *habitus* may hinder or enable the educational attainment of migrants (Urrieta, 2007). The level of inherited capital determines the status of *habitus*, and the status of *habitus* determines how individuals perceive themselves in society (Urrieta, 2007). My *habitus* status hindered my development of capital. For me, migrant living included a below average quality of life where I felt suffocated, trapped, and did not know a way out. I had to learn to understand myself and my experiences.

Unveiling the Forbidden Identity

After seven years of leaving the *labores del norté*, I made my way to the mountains of Vermont, which ironically has a flourishing migrant community. Being part of a program where identity exploration plays a relevant role in your position as a staff member and a student, it was time for me to open up – to be real, to be me. After all, how can I help students be themselves when I am not comfortable being myself? The University of Vermont (UVM) and the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) program hugged me and all my identities. This would be the place where I could open up without judgment, and the only person judging me would be myself. As a first-year student in the program, I found myself in affinity spaces where culture and race were at the center of the conversation. I slowly began to understand my identities and make meaning out of my lived experiences. After countless affinity groups and race-immersion discussions, I had an epiphany. Life as a migrant farmworker was not as rough and depressing as I made it out to be. My family and I shared countless laughs, celebrated many birthdays together, and had countless adventures in the fields. From my uncle’s American Idol talents, to my grandfather’s stories, even to old childhood games with the *primos*, life was great. These affinity spaces made me appreciate my experiences as a migrant and helped me make meaning out of my life’s deepest and most important experiences. The greatest value I gained from this lifestyle is the beauty of optimism and the virtue of compassion.

In Fall 2010, I attended the Social Justice Training Institute (SJTI). SJTI is a race-immersion institute where conversations are guided by our racial identities. This experience would frame the rest of my UVM experience and was the initial phase in my social justice and self-awareness journey. At first, the stories and emotions being shared ate at my core like never before. I felt an intense knot of emotion
well up inside of me that made me want to curl up and hide. My optimism reached
an all-time low, and I did not know how to navigate those emotions. A few days
into the SJTI, I began to share my stories, acknowledge my migrant experience,
and for the first time breathe life into my experiences – my light was switched on.
Despite the pain experienced in sharing this part of my life, my light kept getting
brighter as if a weight was lifted off my shoulders. My path to self-discovery and
understanding had begun. Now on the road to becoming an aspiring migrant
scholar, life is a constant journey of self-discovery. On my path, I have come to
understand that I can learn something new about myself at every turn. As I grow
older, my shadow may grow larger but I will always be at the forefront of my story.

Bringing it to the Academy

Yet in leaving home I did not lose touch with my origins
Because lo mexicano is in my system.
I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry “home” on my back.
-Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, 2007

I would not be the individual I am today without my past experiences. I may
be the only migrant student from the Rio Grande Valley who has made it to
Vermont and attained a master's degree in Higher Education and Student Affairs
Administration; and for some, I am the only migrant student they have met. For
others, my story is the first migrant story they have heard. It is up to me to keep
my light on and not lose ‘touch’ with who I am.

My journey was an emotional and personal rollercoaster that liberated me from
my shadow. I unveiled more of my being. I was working against myself, keeping
myself closed and away from my reality. It was not until those around me began
to view my life as significant that I began to believe that my life was significant
to me. As I reflect on my experiences, I look towards the educators and student
affairs practitioners who helped me find my way home, helped me find the value
in my identities, and helped me balance my past with my present. I believe my
story can inform the day-to-day work of student affairs practitioners and educa-
tors. My narrative highlights how personal journeys and meaning making promote
healing, growth, and understanding. It is important because personal success
and fulfillment come when balance is found between self and the outside world.

I migrated for a total of 15 years with two breaks, and it was during those two breaks
that I was able to effectively develop mentorship relationships with my teachers,
counselors, and friends. The small taste of having a mentor kept me craving for
more. My mentors helped me understand myself and make meaning out of my
lived experiences. Like Anzaldúa (2007), I carry my home with me wherever I
go. I have learned to practice vulnerability and be honest with myself. Higher
education is a fluid world where students can lose themselves, and as student affairs practitioners we are here to help them stay their course, rediscover who they are, establish a community, and succeed academically as well as personally—just as I did. It is time to begin harvesting our identities.
References


