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Sembrando Sudor, Piscando Conocimiento: Mi Testimonio Through the Pain and Wisdom of mi Madre

Rosalinda Godínez

Her slender body slightly bent forward and her dark brown eyes looking directly into mine. “Te avergüenzas de mí?”¹ my Mami asked that night while we were alone in the kitchen.

I stayed quiet.

She was referring to earlier that day when she came to pick up the house key from me during school. My Mami had just finished working in la pisca² and was dressed in her work clothes: boots, pants, button up shirt, and a bandana around her neck. Her clothes and body were filled with the dust from the fields and her hands had a thin black layer of soil. I did not know how to tell her that I immediately handed her the key and walked away, because I felt embarrassed that she was a farmworker.

I now know that this embarrassment was learned. Being a farmworker was a job that you should feel embarrassed of doing. Es lo más vergonzoso de los trabajos. In my community, other jobs like working in factories or cleaning houses were considered worlds better than piscando en el fil. This is due to the constant message that farmworkers are dirty, illegal, and “burros.” We internalize and respond to these messages. My parents internalize these messages and even call themselves “burros” to refer to their labor in the fields and their lack of formal schooling. I, on the other hand, responded with embarrassment. I never wanted to end up working in the fields.

That day at school, my Mami saw how her niña was embarrassed when I walked away with my head down.

¹ I follow the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and other Womxn of Color who do not italicize Spanish words to avoid denoting the Spanish language as inferior to English. I do; however, italicize to emphasize the importance of the word.

²harvest

Senti vergüenza. Pero no de ti Mami...

Piscando Conocimientos: La Inmensa Sabiduría de Mi Mami

Yo soy Rosalinda Godínez, a Chicana daughter of Maria Elena Ramirez-Godínez and Francisco Godínez-Guerrero (Que en paz descanse). My parents immigrated from Michoacan, Mexico to a small town named Grandview in the Central Valley of Washington State, which is where I was born and grew up. Both of my parents began harvesting seasonal fruits and vegetables in 1989. My dad was able to secure a stable and yearly position as a tractor driver in a vineyard where he worked until his cancer diagnosis in 2011. My mom continues to work in the grape fields.

I write this testimonio not only to make sense of my feelings of vergüenza that I was not able to explain to my mother but also to acknowledge her wisdom and hard-work. My Mami has always been a womxn of action: she shows, not tells. For instance, while working in the grapes she would show me how quickly I needed to move to *piscar la uva* efficiently yet, gently. In the kitchen, she showed me how to make homemade tortillas, tamales, beans, enchiladas, queso. I remember her telling me many times, “Tu mira. Yo nomas se.” Farm-working womxn like my Mami *know and show us* their knowledge in ways that are not always acknowledged and valued. In this piece, I will not attempt to speak for my Mami, but I will center her in this testimonio como una mujer con inmensa sabiduría, que a mi me ayuda a *piscar conocimiento*.

Viñas de Sueños, Varas de Dolor

I was twelve when my parents first took my older sisters and me to pick³ grapes. We started at six am in the cold October morning. We wore layers of clothes to protect us from the cold --button-up shirts, sweatshirts, windbreaker, boots, thick pants, hats, gloves, and a bandana around our faces. Two in each line: Maricela and Blanca en una linea and Irma and I en otra linea. We moved like amateurs down the line, cutting the grapes with our scissors and putting them in the basket strapped around our upper body. When we filled our basket, we would drag our feet towards the small bin on the dirt ground, where we were to dump the grapes. Our backs would hurt, our bodies were covered in dirt, and our hands were cut and sticky from the grapes and her juices. We spent most of the time complaining. If we were not complaining about the discomfort of our bodies, we were complaining about the unfairness of waking up at five am to work a 12-hour shift -- a shift that our parents worked every day of the week. We would not finish many baskets, which would make my Mami say “apurenle chiquillas.” She did not want us to ruin her good name as an

³ I use this word intentionally instead of *harvest* because this is the word we would use to describe the labor.

efficient womxn worker.⁴ My Mami moved promptly down the line, putting vines of grapes after vines of grapes in her basket, dumping basket after basket in the bin. My Mami would have to come to our line and help us finish. Or my Papi would have to stop driving the tractor to help us pick, and then he would also get our bins from the ground and put them into the large bin that was attached to his tractor. It was in those moments where my parents would not fail to remind us: “*por eso le tienen que echar ganas a la escuela.*”

Seven years later, I returned to the fields with my Mami. I had just finished my first year in college and was mentally drained from studying, but I wanted to remind myself, as I would in high school, my reason for pursuing schooling: I did not want to end up in the fields. For three weeks we were to deshojear⁵ the grape vines. This time working was very different from my sloppy-complaining-self who worked in the pisca only on Saturdays. I was considered a worker like my Mami, which meant that I needed to work efficiently and commit to working 12 hours a day, Monday through Saturday. This time, my Mami could not help me, she was being rushed to finish her own rows. I wanted to quit. Every. Moment. Of. The. Day. Especially when the foreman would come to my row demonstrating with his hands how fast I was supposed to go. He would say, “*asi mira, asi!*” I would pick up my pace, but at the same time, I would bite my tongue and repasar my Mami’s words in my mind, “*necesitan ver que eres trabajadora como yo.*” I would try to be a hard worker, but I could not keep up with my Mami.

The sun would slow me down. Sweat trickled down my face and back, making me itchy and sticky. I could not remove my long-sleeve button up flano, hat, nor the bandana around my face because they “protected” me from the sun, chemicals, and dust. I dragged my feet down the row pulling more leaves than I should from the vines. Other workers passed me, talking, teasing, and laughing with each other. I was tired. My mind was running with thoughts: “How can the workers seem happy right now?” “This is hard,” “I should take a long bathroom break,” “How can I get out of this?” “I hope the foreman doesn’t come again,” “I’m glad I’m in school” ...

When our first fifteen-minute break came around at 8 am, I was the first one to sit down under the shade to drink water.⁶ My dry mouth appreciated it. Half asleep, I would lean my head to rest against the grape vines, closing my eyes for a bit. Then, the foreman would interrupt my moment of rest yelling, “*Ya se [a]cabo el bre!*”⁷ and we all had to get up to keep working. The rows were never-ending.

⁴ Womxn in the fields continue to be viewed as second to male workers. They have to prove their efficiency and skills every day on the job.

⁵ Thinning the vines by removing some of the leaves.

⁶ We have to bring our own water to work because the water that the owners provide smells bad and looks dirty.

⁷ Break.

The only moment in the fields that I looked forward to was our thirty-minute lonche,⁸ which was slow to arrive and the first to leave. I would walk as fast as my body allowed to the car, to the food. Arriving to the car, I saw las mujeres taking their food out to share with everyone. Mi tia would bring her tacos de papa, la otra tia would bring her ceviche, and my mom would bring her homemade bean tacos. Sitting on the dirt ground, in a semi-circle, we would savour la comida. Las mujeres would talk and laugh, many times with food in their mouths. I would listen, wondering where they got the energy.

"Ya se [a]cabo el bre! Vamonos a trabajar otro ratito!" the foreman would yell.

We continued working another 5 hours. Same routine. Same lines. Same pressure. By this point, the sun was the only one working hard. Everyone began to slow down. Not even the yells of the foreman got us to pick up the pace. The sun was HOT. We were thirsty, tired, sweating, and in pain. When I knew the foreman was not around, I would stop. I stopped moving my hands, my body, my feet. I stood there doing nothing. I could feel the sweat glue my flano to my arm so I had to remove my flano, paño, and gloves off to let my skin breathe. At this moment, I didn't care about the chemicals, dust, or sun that damage my body.

When we arrived home, I would go straight to the couch to lay down. My muscles ached, my back hurt, and my legs were rubbery from all the standing. When laying down, I could not move positions from the soreness: I laid flat and my body sunk on the cushion of the couch. When my sisters would talk to me as I laid there, I would ignore them saying "uh huh." I did not have the energy to talk. When my nieces played and laughed while I tried to sleep I would get frustrated and yell, "Go play somewhere else!" The fields had defeated me. It would make me tired and moody. Every chance I got I would tell my mom, "ya no puedo." I wanted to stop working, but she did not let me and instead would remind me that I only had a few more weeks left to go.

I would sleep until it was time to work the next day. Work, sleep, work, sleep was my routine for those three weeks. My mom, on the other hand, would still do her mandados, clean, and cook. She was tired too.

I was relieved knowing that my time working en el fil was finally over. I would head back to school con ganas. Ganas de sentarme in my comfy chair to write my papers and study. To not have to worry about the sun, chemicals, and body aches. Ganas de soñar que mi vida puede ser diferente. Las viñas allowed me to dream of something better than working in the fields. For womxn like my Mami, las viñas become varas de dolor. They do not have the luxury to quit as I did. They tolerate the humiliation, difficult labor, body pain, and exhaustion of el fil.

⁸ Our spanglish version of lunch.

Hablando Sin Vergüenza: Reclaiming our Stories and Challenging Systems of Power

In the academy, farm-working womxn are not given the space to share stories like these. Thus, leading to our experiences being male-centered or misrepresented by others who assume they know of our struggle. I want to reclaim our stories by documenting our knowledge and experience. In doing so, I attempt to follow the advice of educational scholars like Cindy Cruz who suggest that, “a project of reclaiming histories and narratives must be committed to exposing how systems of power have privileged certain kinds of narratives that serve to undermine and invalidate others.”⁹ In the case of farm-workers, we must call out the U.S. political governance and the agribusiness system that has worked to construct and maintain a logic of slavery.¹⁰ In this logic of slavery, people of color are inherently slaveable, property, and exploitable (Tuck and Yang, 2012¹¹; Nakano Glenn, 2015¹²). We have seen this logic of slavery evolve from black slaves, sharecroppers, and now farmworkers. Although varying, all share the exploitation and commodification of their labor while others (i.e. white male owners) profit from their labor. It is through this logic that human workers are stigmatized as “dirty,” “unworthy,” and “unintelligent.” Mexicans, the current face of labor workers, are further stigmatized as “illegal,” “job stealing,” “criminals,” and “Narcos.” This dehumanizes the Mexican farm-worker body, while also invalidating the knowledge of these communities.

I internalized the stigma towards us. Our Mexican farm-working body was seen as dirty and illegal, our minds as illiterate because of our limited formal education, and our job skills as mediocre. I argue that we internalize these stigmas in part because we do not always know about nor interrogate the systems of power that create and maintain our conditions. This piece (and others that I will write) are, then, dedicated to calling out these systems while keeping in mind our youth that need validation and that at the moment may not feel a deep connection to our farmworker culture because of the stigma. I also keep in mind our mothers and womxn relatives whose voices are not honored in all their complexities. For this reason, this piece is an invitation to womxn--our tias, amigas, madres, primas, cuñadas, abuelas, and comadres--to help me co-construct what it means to live in rural farm-working communities. What are the spaces that we create and want to imagine for ourselves and our children? Nosotras sabemos and we have so much strength, creativity, and

⁹ Cruz, C. (2001). “Toward an epistemology of a brown body.” *Qualitative Studies in Education*. 14(5). p. 662.

¹⁰ Smith, A. (2013). “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing” in *Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology*.

¹¹ Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, education & society*, 1 (1).

¹² Glenn, E. N. (2015). Settler colonialism as structure: A framework for comparative studies of US race and gender formation. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 1(1), 52-72.

wisdom that relates to how we live, work, and convivir with each other. I urge us to change the image of farmworkers.

To be a DAUGHTER OF A FARMWORKER is not (NOT)

to hate our field-work experience or

or people who view us as dirty

To be the DAUGHTER OF A FARMWORKER is to know our parents' efforts

to know how they endure el daño del fil por nosotros

To be the DAUGHTER OF A FARMWORKER is to love ourselves

our culture,

our bodies, our language...¹³

Testimonios: Pilgrimage Towards Healing

"My healing was felt in each moment, just like the air around me."

Writing my testimonio has helped me walk towards *healing*. Healing is viewed here as a pilgrimage "towards meaning, wholeness, connectedness, and balance"¹⁴ of the body-mind-spirit. In this pilgrimage, I allowed myself time and space to *stop*, to reflect, process, and remember my past, present, and future circumstances. I was also able to feel and confront strong emotions like pain, grief, and sadness, which has been challenging because as womxn we don't learn to feel our emotions. Instead, we learn to ignore, push aside, or swallow these emotions. Remembering the inhumane labor conditions and humiliation that we experienced made me feel anger and sadness. It angers me to know that my Mami still works in the same conditions that contributed to her physical pain and exploitation. It angers me knowing that schools are a place where many youth are made to feel embarrassed by our farm-working experience and hard-working families. In these moments of feeling, I extend myself care/love that allows me to feel peace in my heart. I feel a sense of release that lets me know, I am heading towards a healing space.

I end by telling my Mami what I was unable to say to her that night while we were alone in the kitchen:

Senti vergüenza. Pero no de ti Mami. En nuestras comunidades trabajar en el fil no es algo normal o respetado. Especialmente, la gente en la escuela, ellos no valoran el trabajo difícil que ustedes hacen porque es más importante memorizar la historia y cultura de los Americanos blancos. La escuela fue un lugar donde sentí la vergüenza de ser hija de dos campesinos. Cuando ibas a la escuela, sabía que no era un lugar que nos tenía las puertas abiertas. Esta vergüenza que me hicieron sentir no significa que yo no era una hija agradecida por lo que siempre has hecho y lo que me enseñaste en el fil. Al contrario, te agradezco todo lo

¹³ Modified from Luis Valdez's poem in Valdez, L., & Teatro Campesino (Organization). (1990). *Luis Valdez--early works: Actos, Bernabé, and Pensamiento serpentino*. Houston, Tex: Arte Publico Press.

¹⁴ Katz & St. Denis (1991) in Regnier, R. (1994). "The Sacred Circle: A Process Pedagogy of Healing." *Kluwer Academic Publishers*. 25:2, 129-144.

*que haces y sigues haciendo. Tu eres la mujer más importante en mi vida
y todo lo que hago es por nosotros.
Te Quiero,*

Rosalinda Godínez-Ramírez