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## Disrupting Discourse: Introducing Mexicano Immigrant Success Stories

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The goal of this article is to disrupt and challenge the negative discourses often associated with Mexican immigrants by introducing Mexicano concepts of success, including buena gente, buen trabajador, and bien educado. These concepts emerged within a Mexicano immigrant community in California that I have been a part of for more than ten years. In collecting data for this project, I conducted a qualitative study, using ethnographic methods, over a two-year period. This article focuses on two individuals: Luis and Armando.

*Caught between the Indio-Mexicano rural uncles  
 who stacked hundred pound sacks of pinto beans  
 on boxcars all day, and worked the railroad tracks  
 behind the Sturgis sheds, who sang Apache songs  
 with accordions, and Chávez uncles and aunts  
 who vacationed and followed the Hollywood model  
 of My Three Sons for their own families,  
 sweeping the kitchen before everyone came to visit,  
 looking at photo albums in the parlor.  
 (Jimmy Santiago Baca, 17)*

**W**ho am I? Definitely not Mexican American. Not really Chicano. *Yo soy Mexicano*. Growing up in a migrant community where most of us were first generation *Mexicano*, I always identified myself as one. Much different than



other hybrids of Mexicans, a *Mexicano* self-identifies with *Mexicanos* from Mexico, or newly arrived immigrants, and feels lost when Mexican Americans or Chicanos talk about the power in being a cross-breed between a *Mexicano* and an American. As a *Mexicano*, I do not have a strong connection to White European American (WEA) ways of being, but instead I am much more familiar with *Mexicano* ways of being. Ironically, I am not from Mexico, but instead I was born and raised in California.

Having lived in a migrant community for many years, I have seen many success stories within *Mexicano* communities. These stories ranged from single mothers taking care of their children to small business owners doing everything they could to survive. Ironically, these community members, who I thought were successful, were often considered unsuccessful by WEA discourse. It was not until many years later that this picture got clearer and I realized that my *Mexicano* community members were being identified as unsuccessful because they were being framed by a WEA perspective of success.

In grappling with these ideas, this article focuses on *Mexicano* concepts of success, including *buena gente*, *buen trabajador*, and *bien educado*. These concepts emerged within a *Mexicano* immigrant community in California that I have been a part of for more than ten years. In collecting data for this project, I conducted a qualitative study, using ethnographic methods, over a two-year period. This article focuses on two individuals: Luis and Armando. The following section provides a framework for understanding *Mexicano* notions of success in a transnational context. Within this framework I highlight transnational theorists' conceptions of oppression, as well as point to several *Mexicano* ethnographies that provide a foundation for understanding the key constructs of *buena gente*, *buen trabajador*, and *bien educado*.



## Framework

Appadurai's work claims that we are all part of a transnational world and therefore the United States should not control how people across the world think, write, evaluate, etc. Rather, people need to encompass the different perspectives that appear globally, especially as they relate to world system images. He writes, "The crucial point, however, is that the United States is no longer the puppeteer of a world system of images, but is only one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes. The world we live in today is characterized by a new role of the imagination in social life" (29). Appadurai's concept of globalization is key to understanding how the US has had a major influence on the world system images. Even within the US, there is a similar practice, which simultaneously centralizes WEA ways of being, while marginalizing all others that are produced in the US. In recognizing this, the same puppeteer (described by Appadurai) that controls world system images also exists within the US, but in this case the subordinate status is given to people of color. Appadurai's work has influenced my ways of thinking because it has made me realize that the global oppression of practices—what is being defined as good or bad—also appears within the US borders.

Similar to Appadurai's work, Mignolo's work focuses on the history of the colonial world. Mignolo's work claims that there is a long history of normalcy of oppressive practices that has kept certain groups on the margins. He elaborates that this oppression has not been solely attributed to race, but has encompassed different forms. For example, he writes, "In the sixteenth century, race did not have the meaning it acquired in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, the racial classifications from the eighteenth century are based on skin color rather than on blood purity, which cannot be understood without the former" (934).

Understanding this history of oppression is crucial when grappling with the accepted/expected discursive practices in the US. In other



words, race has not been a sole contributor in constructing and determining people's oppression. As Mignolo writes, there have been other factors, which have influenced the identification of a dominant group and an oppressed group. In most cases, the dominant group's ways of being are what influence the entire group (whoever that may be). For example, since WEAs have been viewed as the dominant culture in the US, then their cultural practices, ideas, and ways of being have been classified as idealistic, and thus all other cultures are expected to follow these practices. Acknowledging this, it is not surprising that a wide variety of "success stories" produced in the US have been evaluated by WEA standards.

In a similar fashion, Enrique Dussell writes about how Europe has guided the interpretation of the world's history over the last 200 years, and how this practice has marginalized different cultures and their perspectives of the world. He writes, "Although Western culture is globalizing—on a certain technical, economic, political, and military level—this does not efface other moments of enormous creativity on these same levels, moments that affirm from their 'exteriority' other cultures that are alive, resistant, and growing" (224). In his work, Dussell encapsulates the notion that marginalized groups produce culturally specific practices—in this study, culturally specific success stories—despite western domination. Drawing from Mignolo's work I am identifying *Mexicano* concepts of success that reflect *Mexicano* perspectives/ideas/ways of being in the US. By identifying alternative views of success, I am hopeful that dominant US society can reconfigure how *Mexicano* practices, and more specifically—success stories—are evaluated.

The practice of using dominant criteria to measure Others' worth is examined in Chandra Mohanty's work, wherein she confronts the influence in "Western feminist work on women in the third world" and its negative effects. In her work, she writes about the unfairness of being evaluated by criteria that is unknown to the participant. She



writes, "As a matter of fact, my argument holds for any discourse that sets up its own authorial subject as the implicit referent, i.e., the yardstick by which to encode and represent cultural Others. It is in this move that power is exercised in discourse" (55). By acknowledging her claim, it is important for people to understand the powers behind the evaluation perspective that guides different activities. In a sense, her work speaks directly to Appadurai, Mignolo, and Dussell and their critiques of how US discourses influence the world by creating unfair and unfamiliar criteria to which all are being judged.

Appadurai, Mignolo, Dussell, and Chantry have greatly influenced my work, and in particular this article. That is, their work demonstrates how WEA discourses, often identified as US discourse, influence others in the world. More specifically, their work makes evident that global oppression is practiced in the US by targeting people of color. More specifically, their work has made me realize the negative impact that marginalized groups, like *Mexicanos*, have faced and currently face (in the US), because they are being evaluated by, to use Chantry's words, "a yardstick" that is not their own.

One way in which *Mexicanos* are commonly misevaluated by WEA standards is by sizing up their sense of success. I argue that *Mexicano* conceptions of success may contrast with WEA notions of success. Whereas WEAs may define success around concepts such as independence, wealth, and formal education, *Mexicanos* may define success within constructs such as *buena gente*, *buen trabajador* and *bien educado*. Let me briefly describe these concepts. *Buena gente* refers to a sense of interdependence and the desire to put the needs of "others" before oneself. A *buen trabajador* is defined as a hard worker. The type of work the individual does is not important, but it is the simple act of "working hard" that is valued. Lastly, *bien educado* is an individual who is well mannered and respectful of all others, despite their age or social status.



Even though researchers have not directly identified *buena gente*, *buen trabajador* and *bien educado* in their work, they generally speak to these terms in their qualitative data on *Mexicanos*. For example, Angela Valenzuela writes about students who have strong cultural resources and she alludes to the constructs of *buena gente*, *buenos trabajadores*, and *bien educado* as she discusses her participants. Importantly, the schools she studied are organized in such a way that *Mexicano* students must either follow WEA views of school success or maintain and further develop their cultural resources (including *buena gente*, *buen trabajador*, and *bien educado*). In most cases, it is difficult to accomplish both without being criticized; such was the case with her participant Frank, who chose not to excel academically. Understanding that individuals like Frank are successful despite not obtaining WEA standards of success is important in conceptualizing alternative notions of success.

Carger's *Of Borders and Dreams: A Mexican-American Experience of Urban Education* is another ethnography that describes data that can easily fit the concepts of *buena gente*, *buen trabajador* and *bien educado*. This study tells the story of the Juárez family and focuses on the education of Alejandro Juárez, the eldest of the Juárez children. In one instance, Carger describes Mr. and Mrs. Juárez in terms that resemble the notion of *buenos trabajadores*. She discusses how Mr. Juárez has had an extremely difficult time financially supporting his family. During his life, Mr. Juárez has tended pigs, worked in construction, painted, washed dishes, dug ditches, made ice cream, and sold tacos in order to survive. No job is too menial. Alejandro's father certainly bears out that observation. For him, there is dignity in work, any work. This mentality clearly emphasizes the need for Alejandro's father to be identified as a *buen trabajador*.

As Alejandro's graduation nears, Carger's discussion on the Juárez family highlights aspects of the construct of *buena gente*. To the



displeasure of the Juárez family, they are given only two tickets to attend Alejandro's graduation. When Mr. and Mrs. Juárez learn this, they insist that Mr. Juárez give his ticket to Carger so that she can attend. Mrs. Juárez says, "My husband says he wants you there, no matter what we have to do" (103). Luckily for everyone, other arrangements are made and everyone attends the graduation. However, the willingness of Mr. and Mrs. Juárez to give up their ticket is an excellent example of *buena gente*. Apparently, Mr. and Mrs. Juárez valued Carger's friendship; as a result, they put her needs first.

Carger's work was important to my work because it provides examples of *Mexicanos* being *buen trabajadores* and *buena gente*. Carger's example of the Juárez family being *buen trabajadores* and *buena gente* provided me a lens to understand concepts embedded within *Mexicano* ways of being that have been traditionally ignored by WEAs. Additionally, this work helped me further understand the concept of *buena gente* by providing ample examples.

Guerra's *Close to Home: Oral/ and Literate Practices in a Transnational Mexican Community* also describes data that can be applied to the concept of *buena gente*. His research, which focuses on Jaime and Rocio Durán's social networks, is a four-year ethnography of a *Mexicano* community in Chicago. In his work, he demonstrates how his participants make sacrifices at their own expense so that their community can benefit. A prime example is a married couple named Jaime and Rocío Durán. This family's living environment clearly represents the communal living practices most common in small *ranchos* in Mexico. The concept of *buena gente* applies to participants such as Olga and her husband, who commonly allow people to live in their house. These data demonstrate that some *Mexicano* households are willing to make many sacrifices to help people in need. This idea of communal success is difficult to compare to the WEA standards of success that often emphasize self-sufficiency and independence.



Vasquez et al. in *Pushing Boundaries* also focuses on *Mexicano* constructs of success. This work looks at language learning and socialization in *Mexicano* communities. Vasquez et al.'s participants often resemble the qualities of *buena gente*, *buen trabajador*, and *bien educado*. In particular, they describe *Doña Maria*, who is given the prestigious title of *la sobadora* in her community. *Una sobadora* is often considered to have the status and positionality of a medical doctor and chiropractor combined. This work was especially important to me because in discussing *la sobadora* the authors describe data that encompass all the notions of success that I highlight in this article (*buena gente*, *buen trabajador* and *bien educado*). As a researcher, this work fueled my interest to further explore terms like *buena gente*, *buen trabajador*, and *bien educado* because it is apparent that these constructs are clearly valued in some *Mexicano* cultures; therefore, I thought it was important to introduce these concepts into academics.

### **Voces Mexicanas**

Most of the conversations used in this study were conducted informally over a two-year period during 2004-2006. In addition to interviews, I spent many hours socializing with Luis and Armando, which allowed me to learn valuable information. These social activities ranged from simply visiting them at their homes in Migration Town, to attending weddings with them, and in Armando's case, attending others' family functions such as graduations, baptisms, and confirmations.

### **Methodology**

I collected data for this research project over a two-year period. Data was collected using qualitative research methods, including participant observations and interviews. Each of the participants was observed a minimum of ten times in various environments (e.g., work, home, family events). Additionally, each participant was also interviewed a minimum of ten times. The interviews were both unstructured and



structured and each lasted at least an hour. Unstructured interviews gave my participants the freedom to speak freely on different subjects as long as they stayed within the context of the interview. Structured interviews gave me the ability to ask direct questions concerning comments or concerns raised during previous data collection sessions.

My analysis of these stories was closely guided by Strauss' idea of the comparative method, wherein I continually looked for specific themes that arose from within the data. Having identified the themes that arose from conversations, I triangulated the data with observations at social gatherings, observations at home, and interviews of participants and their friends. Finally, to make sure that I fairly represented an observation, and/or fairly transcribed an interview, I allowed my participants to carefully review my analyses. In both cases, Luis and Armando read over my analyses, or in some cases I read the material to them, and they added certain information they felt I had missed, and in other cases deleted some information which they felt I had misunderstood. Overall, both participants were happy with my analysis.

### **Data**

While the more recent ethnographic work on *Mexicano* communities often frames *Mexicanos* as successful, this is not the researchers' primary focus in their works. In this study, my focal point is on *Mexicano* success stories. In particular, I am interested in eliciting self-identified success stories and showing the variability of success stories within *Mexicano* communities. My own research is conducted in a small Mexican immigrant community named Migration Town (a pseudonym), which is located on the outskirts of the Sacramento Valley with easy access to Sacramento, the Bay Area, Lake Tahoe/Reno and a wide variety of recreational areas. The county population is 43,851, twelve percent of which are Hispanic. Out of that twelve percent, eighty-three percent identify as Mexican (Census, 2000; Yuba/Sutter Statistics, 2000).



Migration Town is predominantly working-class/poor. The largest employers are agricultural. Approximately 100 different farms (ranging from 1/2 an acre to 150 acres) grow various fruits year round, including peaches, prunes, kiwis, strawberries, cherries, and walnuts. The majority of the farm owners (about forty percent) are East Indian, followed by white farm owners (about thirty percent). The remaining thirty percent are owned by other ethnicities (Mexicans, Italians, Hmongs, Chinese, etc.). In contrast, about ninety-five percent of the farm laborers are *Mexicanos*, and five percent are other ethnicities (East Indian, Hmong, Chinese, White, etc.) (Interview, Chito, 1-29-03). Like most towns, Migration Town has four very distinct neighborhoods: South West; North West; South East; and North East.

### **Mexicano Constructs of Success**

I first met Luis in 1999 while visiting my parents. My father introduced me to Luis and described him as a hard-working man (*buen trabajador*). According to several rumors in the *barrio* (neighborhood), no one could outwork Luis. He was stubborn and competitive, and was especially proud of his hard-working ethic. On many occasions Luis challenged his friends to working contests, often defined as the individual who filled the most bins with fruit or pruned the most trees. Luis convincingly beat many other *buenos trabajadores* from the *barrio* (like *Valdés*, *Miguelito*, and *El Padrino*), and so most other workers did not accept his challenge.

I established a strong relationship with Luis because he was a kind and hard-working individual. Although he carried himself as a tough man, he also had a soft side, which he liked to hide. For some reason, Luis always had an interest in me. For example, he found my size to be appealing. Since I am 6'6" and weigh 320 lbs., he envied my size because he felt that my presence demanded respect. Additionally, since he knew me well, he knew I was a *buen trabajador* as well. Admiring



my size, he thought it was surprising that I chose a profession that depended on my cerebral strength and not my physical strength.

I also took an interest in Luis because of his survivor instinct, his hard-working ethic, as well as his desire to always stay busy. Additionally, I admired how he feared nothing. I remember one time as we were casually having a conversation and he reached over, nonchalantly, without interrupting the conversation, and smashed a wasp against the table with his index finger. The idea of simply killing a wasp with his bare hand was not what impressed me, but it was the demeanor with which he did it.

On several occasions I helped Luis work on small, but time-consuming, projects. For example, every summer I always helped him clean out his swamp cooler, re-tar it, and change the pads. Although it was not a big deal, he really appreciated it. He often mentioned that he thought it was admirable that I helped him (and others) with these small projects. He told me on several occasions, "I am so glad that you do not think you are better than us. With all your college degrees and stuff, you really don't have to be doing this, but you do."

I met my other participant, Armando, in 1999 through my sister. As soon as I met Armando, we became good friends. Armando is a confident individual who loves to have a good time. When I first met him, I invited him to play basketball, and to my surprise he was actually really good. Although he never played high school or college basketball, he could play as well, if not better, than all my other friends who had played in organized basketball leagues.

Shortly after I met Armando we were at a Cinco de Mayo celebration, enjoying the music, when my sister asked him to sing a song with the band. Although at first he refused, he soon agreed. When he got up on stage, I applauded happily because I thought he was simply doing it to please my sister. As he started singing, I realized that he was not a



novice and instead was an excellent singer. With the crowd cheering him, he continued singing for about half an hour more. Once he got off the stage, I was flabbergasted because I did not know what to tell him. Finally, I said, "Where did you learn to sing like that? He simply laughed it off and said he had been singing since he was a little kid.

What I admire most about Armando is his kindness (*buena gente*) and hard-working ethic (*buen trabajador*). Over the last eight years I have seen him make many different sacrifices to help others. His optimistic view of life is especially humbling. Although he often faces many difficult obstacles, he has completed many difficult goals. Recently, he has obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in Social Work and Spanish, and more importantly, has obtained his legal citizenship in the United States.

Through the many conversations and interviews that I have had with Luis and Armando, there were three distinct and powerful constructs of *Mexicano* success that often came up, including *buena gente*, *buen trabajador*, and *bien educado*. Luis and Armando defined the term *buena gente* as most often associated with the practices of a particular individual or group of individuals who put the needs of others before their own. More specifically, they defined the term *buena gente* as an individual willing to sacrifice their individual goals for the benefit of the community. According to my participants, there is no one definition of *buena gente*, but it could best be described as "the willingness to help others."

The second construct of success that often emerged in their community was that of a *buen trabajador*, which they defined as an incredibly hard worker. They claimed that being a *buen trabajador* did not mean that an individual necessarily worked hard at a particular task, but instead it refers to a particular lifestyle in which work itself is valued as a quality of goodness. My participants further explained that the product of work is not necessarily evaluated, but instead it is the act of working hard or being disciplined that matters for the quality of a *buen trabajador*.



Lastly, my participants claim that a *buen trabajador* does not work for wealth, but instead he or she works for self-respect and to better the lives of those who depend upon him or her.

The last construct of success that my participants claimed appeared in their community was that of a *bien educado*. They felt a *bien educado* did not follow the literal translation in English, that is, to be well-educated through formal schooling; nor did it mean to be well-versed in a certain subject area. According to my participants, a *bien educado* refers to a way of life wherein the utmost respect is always provided to all people, regardless of the situation. Finally, my participants believed a *bien educado* is well-mannered and possesses a keen sense of situational and interpersonal awareness.

It is important to mention that I am in no way attempting to essentialize *Mexicanos* as only utilizing the constructs of *buena gente*, *buen trabajador*, and *bien educado* to define success. By no means am I attempting to claim that *Mexicanos* do not value traditional WEA notions of success (commonly defined as wealth, independence, and academic success). I understand that the diversity in *Mexicano* culture is great and that there are many different interpretations of success. Instead, what this study is attempting to show are some alternative views of success—success stories that are constructed in *Mexicano* communities—and are not necessarily viewed in the same way by WEAs or even all *Mexicanos*.

### **Luis Tovar and South East Migration Town**

I have known Luis for about ten years. He is a soft-spoken, serious man and is commonly described as moody because at times he does not want to deal with you. "*Q-vole Luis? Como estas?*" ("How are you Luis? How are you doing?") I have asked him on more than one occasion, and he simply ignores me. Later on, he'll excuse himself and explain that he has a lot on his mind. While Luis is not an





extraordinarily large person, he has a powerful presence. He is 5' 10," weighs about 230 lbs, and is 41 years old. He has worked his entire life as a manual laborer, so he is in great shape. Having picked fruit most of his life, his face shows light scratches from fruit trees. Luis left Mexico shortly after the death of his father. Originally he arrived in Los Angeles, but left after two weeks because he felt that there were too many border patrol agents. Through his friendships, he had heard of Migration Town, which his friends claimed had plenty of work and few border patrol agents.

Migration Town's South East neighborhood, where Luis lives, is by far the ugliest part of town. Often the streets are dirty and the streetlights rarely work. The windows are broken in the old, abandoned buildings. Most of the homes in this neighborhood are about 100 years old and are completely rundown. There are no gas stations or fast food restaurants, but there is a small community grocery store. Interestingly, the people of this neighborhood feel safe, while those outside the neighborhood don't feel it is a safe place.

The triplex where Luis lives is over 100 years old and is painted in various colors, ranging from dark and light green to brown and most of the paint is chipping off. A one-foot-high chicken-wire fence guards the backyard. The owner of the triplex is "*El Padrino*/the Godfather" (the actual godfather to most of the children in the neighborhood). On the west side of Luis's triplex are railroad tracks. All day the screeching of the trains remind residents of the neighborhood's pain.

El Volcan, where Luis works as a bartender (as a second job), is a *Mexicano* bar located in the Peach Town neighborhood. A 1/2-mile bridge separates the rest of Migration Town from Peach Town. El Volcan is located in a section of Peach Town where nothing else exists besides a few bars and some old car lots. The front of the bar is a bright yellow color with black stripes. On Saturday, the only night the bar is open, "*El Guero*," works as the head of security. As an ex-convict and Marine



standing 6'6" and weighing 360 lbs, he easily towers over the migrant workers. *Guero's* uniform consists of black boots, pants, and a shirt. Around his 50" waist, which he claims is 42", is his black belt, where he hangs his pepper spray, handcuffs, and trusty .357. From any part of the parking lot that lies just in front of El Volcan, you can hear *El Guero* grumbling in his broken Spanish, "*Dame tu carta*" ("show me your ID"), which is then quickly followed by "*Cinco dolares*" ("five dollars," the entrance fee). When patrons sometimes complain about not having an ID or not having \$5.00, he just looks them straight in the eye and continues to say, "*Dame tu carta*" followed by "*Cinco dolares*." What most customers do not realize about *El Guero* is that he does not speak any Spanish except for "*Dame tu carta*" and "*Cinco dolares*."

The bar is the most eye-catching section of El Volcan, which is 25 feet long and runs north to south. Behind the bar stands Chito, a 25-year-old-man who stands 6' and weighs 370 lbs. He is an avid weightlifter, so his physique is huge. His back, chest, and shoulders are twice the size of any customer's. On his forehead he has a 1/4" scar he received as a baby from a broken bottle. Although nice, Chito can be a dangerous man. Underneath the bar he keeps a black .40 caliber Taurus with walnut grips.

### Armando and the North West Side

I have known Armando for about nine years now. He is twenty-nine years old, stands 5' 4", and weighs about 140 lbs. Armando has a strong, confident presence. He is loud, enjoys being the center of attention, and has many talents, including being an exceptional basketball player and singer. On numerous occasions he has sung in front of large audiences. In one situation, at a mutual friend's college graduation reception, he asked the *Mariachi* if he could sing with them, so he could dedicate a song to a special friend. Although hesitant at first, the *Mariachi* accepted. Armando sang "*El Rey*" ("The King"). With his impressive, loud voice, ("*Yo se bien que estoy afuera, pero*





*el día que yo me muera, vas a tener que llorar . . . llorar y llorar . . .* / “I know well that I am outside, but the day I die, you will cry and cry . . .”), the audience went crazy, and started giving *gritos* (yells). Afterward, the *Mariachis* were so impressed that they asked him to continue singing, which he kindly refused.

Armando’s family arrived in the US fifteen years ago and immediately enrolled him in school. Although it took Armando a few years to learn English, he quickly adapted and excelled in high school. After high school graduation, he attended the local university, where he graduated in May 2004 with a double major in Social Work and Spanish. Since then, he has been accepted to graduate school, but is unsure if he will attend. His family and himself have been in the US illegally. Only in the last year, 2008, has Armando received his citizenship.

One year prior to this study, Armando lived with his parents in a small *Mexicano* working class town named Red Oaks (located about 10 miles northwest of Migration Town). Since then, he has moved into a two-bedroom (1100 square feet) house in Migration Town’s North West, a neighborhood that is old, but safe. Although most of the houses are about 60 to 70 years old, and are about 1100 square feet, they look very nice. This neighborhood has one of Migration Town’s two major supermarkets. There are also three small gas stations and two fast food places. Lastly, there is a park, which is mostly visited by homeless.

The house Armando resides in is painted a light peach color; its uneven surface gives it an authentic southwestern look. The yard is nicely trimmed and shaded. The inside of the house looks modern, with a charcoal gray carpet complementing the black, tubular furniture. The kitchen, measuring 12” x 20’, is painted a brick color with white drawers and shelves. The house has two rooms measuring 15” x 10” each, which have two large windows with a white, old-fashioned border and white ceiling fans. Overall, the house is clean and well-kept.



## Buenos Trabajadores

**Luis:** Luis’s favorite spot for many of our conversations was his porch. He always sat on the same old oak bench, wearing a worn, but clean pair of denim shorts and a black cobra tank top. He often carried cigarettes, which he only smoked on occasion. On those evenings we sat for hours as we ate peaches and talked about his life. Every hour or so we were silenced by the roaring of the train. Four minutes later we were talking again. A very confident man, Luis was eager to share his stories with me. When I asked him why he came to the US he replied, “*Depues de la muerte de mi padre, mi madre no tenía mucho dinero para darnos. Por que yo era el más viejo yo me fui para ver que me encontraba*” / “After the death of my father, my mother had limited money to give us. Since I was the eldest I decided to leave to see what I could find.”

Since the American English word “success” cannot be literally translated into Spanish, I reworded my question and asked him, “*Que hace una persona admirable en su comunidad*” / “What makes someone admirable in your community?” He responded: “*Una persona admirable, o sea, una persona que se considera buena gente en mi comunidad es una persona que no sea creída. O sea una persona que siempre quiere ayudar a todos. O simplemente, una pesona que siempre considera a otra gente enfrente de los deseos de él*” / “An admirable person or a person who is considered *buena gente*, in my community is someone who does not consider himself better than others. Or, simply put, a person who always considers other people’s desires before his or her own.”

According to Luis, a successful person is someone who is considered *buena gente*, which became apparent when he shared the following story:

*Cuando yo primero llegé a California yo no tenía ningún centavo. Pero unos amigos que ya vivían aquí me dieron la oportunidad para vivir con ellos. Durante esos tiempos, estos compas me consiguieron un trabajo también. Que buenas gentes. Por ellos aquí estoy ahorita./*



When I first arrived in California I did not have a penny to my name. But some friends that had lived here for a short time gave me the opportunity to live with them. During this time these “very special friends” also found me a job. These men are such good people. Because of them I am where I am today.

Like most recent Mexican immigrants in this community, Luis is a farm laborer. Although he lives in Migration Town about nine months a year, while picking peaches, prunes, or working in the cannery, he also visits Mexico approximately three months out of the year.

According to Luis, he enjoys Mexico because it keeps him grounded in his *Mexicano* roots. Since Luis enjoys a traditional Mexican lifestyle, including the products commonly used in Mexico, he has surrounded himself with a community that encompasses all of these desires. Clifford writes about incidents like these and describes them as an imaginary world that many diasporic cultures live in, which is clearly the case for Luis. In Migration Town, Luis created an imaginary world that resembles Mexico. For instance, he lives in a neighborhood that is about ninety percent Mexican, and ten percent Hmong immigrants. Additionally, “*El Centro*,” the store where he shops, is a Mexican store where he can find plenty of Mexican products such as *colitas de puerco* (pig tails), *Roma detergente* (laundry detergent), and *Pan Tostado de Bimbo* (pre-toasted bread). On Saturdays, Luis works as a bartender at El Volcan, which features a live Mexican band. Although Luis makes a strong effort to create a transnational community, he still dreams about his homeland, “*La Piedra, México*”: “*Ya despues que ahorre un poco de dinero yo me quiero ir para tras para comprar una casita y una tierra*”/ “Once I save a little bit of money I want to return to Mexico to buy a small house and some land.”

Luis’s recent immigration status greatly affects his positionality in the US. His consumerism, which is minimal considering he is making minimum wage, is concentrated in Mexican businesses. Additionally,



the traditional Mexican male role also influences his ideas of success, which is embedded in being a *buena gente*.

Luis holds the status of a *buena gente* in Migration Town because he is always helping people. For example, although Luis does not earn a lot of money (making less than minimum wage) Luis is always willing to share his money, especially in expensive celebrations such as *bodas*, *quinceañeras*, *baptismos*, etc., to help his friends. Additionally, Luis also helps his friends in other ways, including mowing their lawns, collecting aluminum cans for them, babysitting, etc., which helps him obtain a *buena gente* status.

Homi Bhabha’s concept of hybridity is also prevalent in Luis’ life. In his work Bhabha writes about the interdependence of colonizer and colonized or what he calls the “Third Space of Enunciation” (206). In professing the notion of an international culture, Bhabha states, “not based on exoticism or multiculturalism of the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity” (207). In Luis’s case, his third space is clearly a coalition of his *Mexicano* and American ways of being. For example, Luis lives in a predominately Spanish-speaking community but still manages to speak English when he pleases: “*El otro dia no podia encontrar el transmission fluid for the carro, y tuve que ir al 7-Eleven para comprar otro*”/ “The other day I could not find the transmission fluid so I went to 7-Eleven to buy another one.” Other small examples of hybridity appear within Luis’s life: He commonly talks about establishing his credit to get a car soon, “*Tengo que agarrar credito para comprarme un carro. Te enmajinas . . . con un carro todo estuviera más facil*”/ “I need to get credit, so I can buy a car. Can you imagine . . . with a car everything would be much simpler.” Luis’s goal of buying a car may be seen as a WEA view of success because it could be linked with achieving greater independence. With little doubt, Luis’s ideas of life slowly changed as he lived longer in the US. Although Luis makes an effort to maintain traditional



*Mexicano* ways of being, WEA ideologies and perceptions of success slowly influence his lifestyle.

**Armando:** For a two-year period I have had many conversations with Armando concerning his definition of success. For example, during a Fourth of July family party he publicly announced he was graduating from college. After his announcement, we talked on an old broken bench to discuss his future goals. Armando told me, “*Tu sabes...* I want to attend graduate school, which means I would have to commute again. That is hard. I need to have extra money for gas, leave early, and then spend all day on campus. I am not sure if I am ready to continue doing it.”

Armando has been in the US as an undocumented worker/student for the last fifteen years. In 2008 he received his legal citizenship to the US. In one of our conversations Armando shared that his parents came to the US because they were extremely poor in Mexico and thus were looking for a better life: “*No, en Mexico no tenemos nada de dinero. Había días que no tenemos dinero para comer. Por esa razón nosotros nos venimos para aca.*”/ “No, in Mexico we did not have any money. There were days we did not have money to eat, so my family moved to the United States.” In Mexico, all his family members worked to make ends meet. Through their collective effort, most months his family made enough money to survive. In some months, especially when a family member lost a job, his family barely had money to eat. Frustrated with this situation, Armando’s family moved to Migration Town. The following is a conversation between Armando and me about his concept of success.

OP: So, Armando, *platicame que es una persona successful*/ tell me what is a successful person?

AB: That is a hard question. There are so many different ways to describe successful. *Tu sabes?* / You know? To some people it might mean to have



a lot of money, while to others it might mean to have an education. There are many different ways to describe a successful person.

OP: OK. I agree with that. But specifically, how do you describe a successful person?

AB: To me a successful person is someone who is smart. Do you know what I mean? Like for instance, I am successful because I have graduated from college and it was very hard for me. The only bad thing about this is that because I do not have a Social Security card I am not able to work right now at a good paying job. Soon I will, though, and I will be able to buy many things that I have always wanted.

OP: That is a good point. How did you graduate from college? It is not easy for anyone, and I recognize that it is especially hard for someone in your situation.

AB: One main reason that I graduated was because of the support of my parents. Without my parents I would have not been able to accomplish nothing. My parents are very poor, but almost every day my father and mother would give me any extra money they had. Another very helpful experience that I had was that I had a lot of people who emotionally helped me. Most of my neighbors knew that I was attending college so any time I would run into them, they always reminded me to keep on working hard in school because otherwise I was going to have a very tough life working in the fields with them. They also, especially a couple of them, always reminded me to stay very proud of my culture. Because of them, I think, Spanish was my major along with my Social Work major.

OP: So what does your family in Mexico think of you? Do they think you are a *gringado*?

AB: Me? A *gringado*? No way! My family from Mexico still thinks that I am the same. I still have traditional *Mexicano* values and that



is something they feel is important. They do tell me, though, that my Spanish is beginning to sound funny. They also tell me that I am very lucky. They always remind me that it was great that I worked hard and was able to accomplish so much. I still am not legal here [in the US], though.

Gupta and Ferguson, and Clifford elaborate on the idea of culture and, more specifically, on people who occupy multiple borderlands and thus are considered “border crossers.” The border crosser is relevant to *Mexicano* immigrants because, as in the case of Armando, *Mexicanos* are often asked to straddle two worlds while rarely belonging to either, which often makes it frustrating because each culture contradicts the other and thus the active agent, the individual, feels lost.

In Armando’s traditional *Mexicano* community, common *Mexicano* practices such as *bailes*, *quinceañeras*, and *menudo* on Sundays are common. Because he is familiar with these cultural practices, it is easy for Armando to participate. However, he is forced to operate in WEA ways of being that often do not accept his *Mexicano* ways of being. For example, at various times in his college environment he was made uncomfortable because of his skin color and accent. This was often the case in his classrooms where his *Mexicano* ways of being were often put at a deficit. In hopes to avoid these incidents, Armando created and used a “memory of place” (Gupta & Ferguson; Clifford) to construct a new world imaginatively. Armando lived in a *Mexicano* neighborhood where his *Mexicano* traditions are alive and well, which gave him the power to survive. As he puts it, “Without my *Mexicano* friends and traditions I would be nobody.” Living in a *Mexicano* community also gave Armando the strength to recognize that although his *Mexicano* culture is often criticized, its benefits clearly outweigh its sacrifices.



Arguably, Armando views success as obtaining a higher education, which may be considered a WEA concept of success, but his poverty, darker features, Spanish language, and immigrant status marginalize him and keep him from becoming “successful” according to WEA standards. Noting Armando’s hard-working ethics, it is clear he is an excellent example of a *buen trabajador*. Although Armando is an extremely busy man, due in part to his status as a full-time student, he still found the *ganas* (drive, desire) to be an active community member in his neighborhood and a *buena gente*. For example, through our conversations I learned that Armando often helped people build and/or fix their homes, drove neighbors to doctors’ appointments, read letters, and basically fulfilled many requests from his community members.

As a result of his active participation at school and in his community, Armando is recognized as a *buen trabajador*. He is admired by many and has achieved many different goals that make him a well-respected community member. Although Armando may have achieved a common WEA view of success (receiving his Bachelor of Arts) he has maintained his commitment to service and accessibility to the *Mexicano* community.

### **A Transnational View of Success**

Luis and Armando have found ways to reconcile *Mexicano* and WEA social values for their own benefit as well as the benefit of their community. Nevertheless, both recognize the racial and linguistic divisions that divide *Mexicano* and Anglo worlds. Luis perceives the divisions as ones he can broach through hard work, whereas Armando considers the chasm of race (and the privilege of whiteness) that separates his people from WEA to be impassable.

Since Luis is a new immigrant he views the US as the land of opportunity and blames his inability to get a better job (other than as



a fieldworker and a bartender) on himself: “*En unos años cuando ya puedo hablar inglés yo voy a poder encontrar un trabajo mejor.*”/ “In a few years, when I can speak English I will be able to find a better job.” Luis does not view the US negatively. On the contrary, he believes that the current laws, which many would regard as anti-immigrant, work to his benefit. He claims his ideas of success are embedded within the qualities of *buena gente*, *buen trabajador*, and *bien educado*. He says, “*Lo más importante de una persona es que sea una buena gente. Si no tiene eso no tiene nada.*”/”The most important thing for a person is to be a good person. If he does not have this then he does not have anything.” He believes that because respect is highly valued, it is important for everyone to represent that through the persona of a *buena gente*.

In contrast, Armando believes that a successful person is someone who has attained a college education, “*Una persona que tiene un título le tiene hecho.*”/ “A person who has a college education has it made.” For this reason, Armando attained a college education at all costs, which he completed despite, at that point, his undocumented status. On the other hand, Armando despises people who completely attempt to assimilate into WEA culture. Armando is an expert “border crosser.” Living in his transnational world while also functioning in mainstream US society allows him a space to operate in. According to Armando, there is no middle ground regarding issues of identity and solidarity, which he primarily identifies with his *Mexicano* community. Having this belief is perhaps the biggest difference between himself and most WEAs pursuing a college education. Armando always used a critical lens while obtaining his education, so he was able to be an active critical agent in his formal education process, which always made him critically aware of his *Mexicano* positionality.



The bridge to success and social esteem connects to both sides of the border. We as educators fail *Mexicano* students when we narrowly define social success in terms of extrinsic rewards as embodied in the symbols of wealth and the benefits of elite culture. The intrinsic rewards of belonging and being useful to one’s people are far more powerful incentives for learning and forgoing one’s place in the world. As mentioned early in this manuscript, my intent is not to stereotype *Mexicanos* and/or WEAs. Instead, I hope to establish a space where a conversation about different notions of success may appear.

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## Reflections on Racism and Immigration: An Interview with Victor Villanueva

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Victor Villanueva studies the intersections of rhetoric and racism. He is the recipient of the 2009 CCCC Exemplar Award, which honors scholars whose work represents the best our field has to offer. Villanueva also won NCTE's David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English and CEE's Richard Meade Award for Research in English Education for his book, *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, an autobiographical tale that exposes the problems with literacy education in America based on his own experiences as a Puerto Rican growing up in New York. Though Villanueva does not often write specifically about immigration, his work illuminates the connection between rhetoric, racism and xenophobia, and encourages all of us in the field to consider how our conceptions of literacy oppress those not of the dominant culture.

**O**n January 22 of this year, we huddled around a computer in our dingy office on the Syracuse University campus and held a wide-ranging, ninety-minute interview with Victor Villanueva via Skype. A portion of that interview is captured here. In this interview we were hoping to get a sense of the way in which a scholar of color and the son of Spanish-speaking, Puerto Rican parents sees the issues of race and immigration coming together to form a powerful discourse concerning xenophobia, linguistic diversity, and social power. We started by first discussing Villanueva's own experience as a colonized individual and then moved on to larger issues related to race and immigration.