

**Del Otro Lado: Literacy and Migration across the U.S.-Mexico Border,**  
by Susan V. Meyers. Carbondale: SIUP, 2014. 208 pp.

*Reviewed by Rubén Casas, University of Wisconsin-Madison*

Like goods, labor, and bodies, literacy—including the assumptions people hold about reading, writing, and how these are taught—travels across and through borders. In the U.S., where people move across the U.S.-Mexico border routinely, teachers and scholars are affected by more than just how well students can read and write in English, they are also affected by the different literacy values students bring to classrooms; likewise, students are affected by the varying ways literacy is situated in their home contexts and in their new ones. This is the origin point for Susan V. Meyers' *Del Otro Lado: Literacy and Migration across the U.S.-Mexico Border*, which seeks to explore the complexities of literacy in a transnational context, as well as to give voice to those who, coming from the other side of the border, value literacy differently than many teachers, scholars, and students do in the U.S.

The core of Meyers' argument in *Del Otro Lado* is that for Mexican-origin students and their families, literacy is valued differently, not less. This is a significant claim to make, as Mexican American and Mexican-origin students have long been accused of not caring about education. *Del Otro Lado* goes a long way to explode this assumption by examining literacy attitudes in rural Mexico and other migrant communities, the places where many Mexican-origin students first acquire a sense of what literacy is and what it can do for them. It is in rural Mexico where Meyers finds evidence of people caring about education and literacy even as they remain skeptical of what Meyers calls the "literacy contract," which is to say the vague and idealistic promises made to students about the value of traditional education. This concept is reminiscent of Victor Villanueva's critique of the "bootstraps" mentality so prevalent in the United States: just as U.S. culture teaches that hard work can pull any student out of poverty, the Mexican system makes a similar promise about formal education and how it leads to upward mobility. To demonstrate the prevalence of the literacy contract across borders, Meyers analyzes the historical crises of education that have long motivated literacy studies and posits that while traditional literacy education may yield positive upward mobility for some, students who come from Mexico have legitimate reason to be skeptical of its overall value. *Del Otro Lado* unpacks this skepticism, and just as importantly, points out the valid alternative ways Mexican-origin students value literacy in relationship to their personal happiness and economic wellbeing.

Meyers' examination of educational skepticism first plays out in the introduction, "So You Can Buy a Taco over the Internet," where she argues

that literacy scholars and teachers should recognize Mexican-origin literacy as a complex transnational phenomenon. Here we are introduced to Jacqueline, a “bright, driven young woman” whose college aspirations are the first within her family (1). But as Meyers reports, these aspirations are threatened when, at twelve years old, Jacqueline moves from the U.S. back to Mexico to be closer to her extended family. There she enrolls in middle school, where she struggles to perform as well as she did in the U.S. Some of her struggle is due to the inefficiencies of the Mexican system, but some of it is also due to Jacqueline’s U.S.-learned literacy skills. As she relates, “I don’t really understand some words [in Spanish. . . .] But [in the U.S.], I understand everything” (1). Jacqueline’s example highlights not only the difficult experiences of students who move across borders, but also the gaps in extant literacy scholarship: as Meyers points out, whereas existing literature has illuminated the challenges students face when they transition from Mexico to the the U.S., little has been written about the reverse. Students such as Jacqueline are nonetheless being educated on both sides of the border, and those of us who teach writing, composition, and literacy would do well to attend to and learn from their experiences.

The three chapters following the introduction comprise the first section of the book, and in this section Meyers situates her study in the general scholarship on literacy and its perceived crises (see Brandt; Connors; Gee; Trimbur), as well as in studies that more specifically engage connections among literacy, migration, and economic development (see Kalman; McAslan). Meyers then goes on to show how the contract mentality holds sway in studies by Gerald Graff, Linda King, and Brian Street, which she argues uncritically embrace the assumption that students who “subscribe to the demands of public education” reap the benefits of social and economic capital (16). Working through these three studies, Meyers seeks to explode this myth, and then moves into a reconsideration of how people travelling across the U.S.-Mexico border position themselves in relation to institutionally sponsored forms of literacy.

In the second chapter, “‘Aren’t You Scared?’: The Changing Face of Oppression in Rural, Migrant-Sending Mexico,” Meyers offers a political and economic profile of her research site, Villachuato, Michoacán. This profile seeks to give voice to people who lack forms of traditional schooling and—because they have managed to lead meaningful and successful lives nonetheless—do not see the same value in formal education as many in the U.S. do. Said another way, Meyers gives space for research participants to speak about their educational experience and finds that what they have to say “flies in the face of official beliefs and expectations about literacy” (12), particularly in regards to how literacy is the path to upward mobility. In this same vein, chapter three, “‘They Make a lot of Sacrifices’: Foundational Rhetorics of the Mexican Education System,” focuses on Mexico’s educational system and its effects on the

people of Villachuato. Although Meyers shows how the Mexican curriculum has historically emphasized the dignity of work and of rurality, she ultimately concludes that the promise of upward mobility implicit in formal education does not typically materialize—especially in rural communities. In reality, the discrepancy between literacy’s promise and the lack of opportunity in Mexico leads many students to resist the state-sanctioned curricula imposed on them and to abandon formal schooling altogether. This chapter also demonstrates why many U.S. educators believe that Mexican-origin students and families do not care about literacy and—importantly—asks literacy workers to rethink this facile assumption.

Indeed, rather than not valuing literacy, Meyers shows how the residents of Villachuato resist institutional curricula for pragmatic rewards: to put it succinctly, Villachuato residents who dismiss formal literacy efforts do so because such education has little effect on their livelihood. We see lived examples of this reality in the second half of *Del Otro Lado*, where Meyers presents the case studies that make up her ethnography. In the fourth chapter, “‘They Didn’t Tell Me Anything’: Community Literacy and Resistance in Rural Mexico,” Meyers presents a chronological snapshot of women’s educational experiences spanning from the Mexican Revolution to the post-NAFTA era. This chapter demonstrates how women found success in life through alternative literacies and by investing in interpersonal relationships—all in spite of persistent state-sanctioned efforts to educate them in ways that privilege the interests of the state over those of rural Mexicans. In chapter five, “‘So You Don’t Get Tricked’: Counternarratives of Literacy in a Mexican Town,” Meyers delves deeper into the conflict between rural Mexican schools and the students they are meant to serve, finding that even as teachers try to instill the abstract value of formal education, the economic realities of rural life make migration a more promising alternative. Meyers does not shy away from evidence of students’ willingness to embrace what is useful in formal schooling, but she also emphasizes how they are more attracted to pragmatic, transferable skills that will help them navigate institutional bureaucracies and find employment. As the chapter not-so-subtly implies, educators on the U.S. side of the border would benefit from recognizing that, for some students, the value of education lies in the ways it leads to immediate work, rather than achieving (often unrealistic) social mobility.

The final chapter takes Meyers to Marshalltown, Iowa, a so-called receiving community where many migrants from Michoacán, Mexico relocate in the U.S. Perhaps more than any other, this chapter evinces the complexities of literacy education within a transnational setting. Meyers deftly describes the nonlinear nature of reading and writing for these students, and her cataloguing of student and teacher experiences makes a compelling case for revising teacher preparation so that it is responsive to transnational literacy

contexts. Such pedagogical implications are also carried into the conclusion, where Meyers makes a final case for replacing the contract mentality with an understanding of literacy that acknowledges that people have alternative ways of achieving meaningful lives, alternative reasons for being and not being in school. Although the scope of Meyers' book doesn't offer explicit strategies for teaching in transnational contexts, it does suggest a practical philosophy for teachers to adopt. In short, we will have to rely less on educational and economic conceptions of literacy particular to the U.S. and more on complex, transnational conceptions of literacy.

Literacy in a transnational context deserves more critical attention like that which Meyers pays in *Del Otro Lado*. All told, the book is a useful reminder that literacy—the cultural practices and assumptions people hold about reading, writing, and learning—is an indelible part of the movement across borders that characterizes the twenty-first century. By paying attention to the values of the people most affected by the ebbs and flows of migration, we stand to develop meaningful educational strategies that will help Mexican-origin and other border-crossing students succeed in a transnational world. And on their own terms.

*Madison, Wisconsin*

### Works Cited

- Brandt, Deborah. *Literacy in American Lives*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. Print.
- Connors, Robert. "Crisis and Panacea in Composition Studies: A History." *Composition in Context: Essays in Honor of Donald C. Stewart*. Ed. W. Ross Winterrowd and Vincent Gillespie. Carbondale: SIUP, 1994. 86-106. Print.
- Gee, James. *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourse*. London: Falmer, 1990. Print.
- Kalman, Judy. *Writing on the Plaza: Mediated Literacy Practices Among Scribes and Clients in Mexico City*. Cresskill: Hampton, 1999. Print.
- McAslan, Erika. "Social Development." *The Companion to Development Studies*. Ed. Vandanna Desai and Rob B. Potter. London: Arnold, 2002. 139-42. Print.
- Trimbur, John. "Literacy and the Discourse of Crisis." *The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary*. Ed. Richard Bullock and John Trimbur. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1991. 277-95. Print.
- Villanueva, Victor, Jr. *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*. Urbana: NCTE, 1993. Print.