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## We Are Not Victims: Oral Histories of Four Mexican-American Women

Carmen Melendez Maayan  
*University of South Florida*, [carmen.maayan1@gmail.com](mailto:carmen.maayan1@gmail.com)

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Master's Thesis

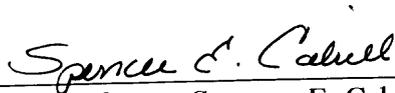
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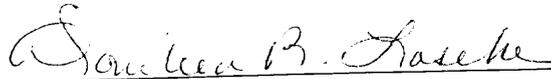
with a major in Sociology has been approved  
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Examining Committee:



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Major Professor: Spencer E. Cahill, Ph.D.



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Member: Donileen Loseke, Ph.D.



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Member: Ella Schmidt, Ph.D.

**WE ARE NOT VICTIMS: ORAL HISTORIES OF  
FOUR MEXICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN**

by

**CARMEN MELENDEZ MAAVAN**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Sociology  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida**

**May 2000**

**Major Professor: Spencer E. Cahill, Ph.D.**

## Dedication

I lovingly dedicate this work to my family who gave me the space I needed while I was consumed with this project. To my husband, Marty Maayan, who provided much support and insightful knowledge and who was an active participant in his own right. To my daughter, Kate McGovern, who provided technical assistance when mom didn't know how to work the computer, and to my son, Bill McGovern, who prepared his own meals while mom wrote late into the night.

Most of all, I dedicate this work to those remarkable women, Mercedes, Teresa, Viviana and Yesenia, who opened their hearts and gave unselfishly of themselves, whose words guided this ethnographic journey and whose strength and determination fortified me along the way. From the bottom of my heart,

*¡Muchas gracias y para adelante, comadres!*

## Acknowledgements

This work is a collaboration of many hearts and many voices. My immense gratitude for the outcome of this work goes to my thesis committee members. Their knowledge and expertise was invaluable to the completion of this work.

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my committee chair, my mentor and my friend, Dr. Spencer E. Cahill, who believed in me, was tireless in his dedication to this work and who lived and breathed this project right along with me.

My deepest thanks to my teacher and friend, Dr. Donileen Loseke, whose door was always open, who challenged me and was generous with her advice beyond measure.

*Mil gracias* to my dear friend, Dr. Ella Schmidt, who encouraged me and whose keen insight and Latina knowing-ness was a great contribution to this work.

Thank you all for allowing me to *do* sociology a little differently. Thanks to you this bird found her voice.

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WE ARE NOT VICTIMS: ORAL HISTORIES OF  
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*An Abstract*

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Major Professor: Spencer E. Cahill, Ph.D.

This ethnographic inquiry focuses on the lives and work of four Mexican-American women who run a center in the Mexican migrant farmworker community in which they live. Through the center, they provide vital services to their community such as medical care, immigration assistance, educational and community outreach programs. Via these women's oral histories, this ethnographic work seeks to broaden our understanding of women who are fully aware of their subordinated status in the dominant society yet are not passive victims. By listening to their own voices, we learn how they overcome personal adversity and challenge cultural ideologies. In the process, these women have created meaningful lives. In addition, their work at the center enables them to act as bridges connecting the members of their community to the larger society.

The data for this ethnographic work was gathered from May 1999 to March 2000. Weekly visits were made to the center. Field notes were compiled from personal interaction, observation and conversations with the participants as well as tape-recorded informal interviews. This work yields a remarkable picture of these women's resiliency, perseverance, determination and strength.

Abstract Approved: Spencer E. Cahill  
Major Professor: Spencer E. Cahill, Ph.D.  
Associate Director of Interdisciplinary Studies  
Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Social  
Sciences and Sociology

Date Approved: April 18, 2000

## Introduction

It's a warm sunny morning. The car radio is playing my favorite music. As I drive, I look at the beautiful scenery outside my window and try to relax. This trip always fills me with anticipation and trepidation. Route 41 is a long winding road that leads to the small rural town where the Mexican farmworker community that I will call Orange Grove is located. It is a thirty-five mile trip that I have been making every week for a year. My eyes scan the rows of orange trees and spy the fruit pickers. Their labor fills the 25-foot trailers parked alongside the orange groves. By day's end, the filled trailers will be hitched to a truck and hauled first to packing plants and then to market. The men and women farmworkers, intent on their work, are unaware of me as I drive by. Their feet are steady on the ladders perched against the trees. Their shoulders stoop from the weight of the bags they are filling. Working mechanically, leaving the branch intact, they yank the fruit free of its birthplace. Most of these workers will be gone when the trees are picked clean. As migrant workers they follow the harvest from state to state. They pick whatever is ripe, sometimes with fingers numbed from the cold. At other times, insects drawn by the smell of sweet-pungent fruit mixed with sweat, buzz incessantly around their heads. Once I saw the pastoral beauty of this countryside and romanticized these peoples' lives. I now know that the migrant farmworker leads a very rugged life characterized by back breaking labor and menial wages.

My purpose for this trip is to gather data for my thesis. My focus is the four Mexican-American women who run a farmworkers' center in the small town. As I near my destination, I experience a sense of hesitation, expectation and anxiety coupled with temerity and excitement. These are familiar feelings, ambivalent and unsettling. I'm torn between wanting to be here and being a part of these women's lives and feeling like a voyeur, the outsider looking through a window. Lately, trying to understand these feelings, I have begun to delve deeper into my role as researcher and about the story I want to tell. I am reminded of what Chicana essayist and poet, Maria Lugones (1987) calls, "world travelling".

Travelling [sic] to someone's world is a way of identifying with them because by travelling to their world we can understand *what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes.* Only when we have travelled to each other's worlds are we fully subjects to each other.

Although I entered these women's world with a traditional view of how to conduct research, I discovered that I had invested my self in their lives. My dilemma lies between the fledging sociologist part of me who wants my work to be acceptable to the academic world and the other part of me who recognizes that I am emotionally engaged in this work as well.

Traditionally, sociologists have examined social life in a scientific frame. Each piece of information is measured and recorded, then analyzed in its relationship to other data. From this scientific perspective, problems, events and behavior are predicted and theories formulated. Often, however, these universal theories are not relevant to minority

women's experiences. This becomes problematic because, as Chicana author Gloria Anzaldúa (1990) notes, "what is considered theory in the dominant white academic community is not necessarily what counts as theory for women-of-color" (Anzaldúa 1990:xxv). Such a theory would account for varied nuances of social experience. Jurgen Habermas (1987) also has criticized traditional theory because "it conveys not what theory means in human life, but only what it means in the isolated sphere in which it comes into existence" (Habermas 1987:401). What is needed then is a theory that crosses borders, blurs boundaries and reflects what goes on in the inner and outer worlds of people.

I believe Dorothy Smith (1987) comes closest to this goal when she emphasizes that an inquiry should be undertaken from the experience of the observer. Her "standpoint theory" is significant, "for the relations explored here can be grasped only as we are insiders participating in them [and] at the same time, in exploring them we bring into view not just our actual practices of thinking, reading, making sense of accounts and so forth; but the social relations we participate in by doing so" (Smith 1987:199,203). Smith believes that as sociologists, we should not discard our personal experiences as a reliable source of information nor should we try to make our experiences conform to abstract frameworks. Rather, "we must examine 'junctures' where multiple and diverse experiences [of] the discredited and deprived voices of those who know society differently are allowed to speak' (Smith 1987:24). As inhabitants of marginal spaces, I would argue that some of these "discredited and deprived" voices belong to the women who are highlighted in this study. Further, if we are to understand how subordinated people make sense of their world, we must create space where these voices can be heard.

So, I begin from my standpoint as a Latina, a woman of color, a minority woman with a desire to do sociology differently than it is often done. Noted anthropologist, Ruth Behar (1996), a Latina and fellow border crosser, speaks from personal experience when she notes, "I am here because I am a woman of the border: between places, between identities, between languages, between cultures, between longings and illusions, one foot in the academy and one foot out" (Behar 1996:162). This sentiment is indicative of the Latina experience. I believe it speaks to those of us situated between two cultures as we find ourselves enmeshed in the constant push-pull of accommodation and resistance that defines our ethnic identities.

The literature on Mexican-American women and work has concentrated on women doing "paid work", such as Mary Romero's (1992) study on women working as paid domestics, Vicki Ruiz' (1987) study on women cannery workers, and Susan Tiano's (1994) study on women in the *maquila* industry. Lillian Schlissel, Vicki Ruiz and Janice Monk (1988) provide a historical account that indicates that Mexican-American women have been invaluable in providing essential services to their communities for centuries. However, this is a historical-economic view centering on Mexican-American women from the Southwestern United States. According to Juan Garcia (1995), "associations composed solely of women [of Mexican descent] have received the least scholarly attention" (Garcia, 1995:20). Often those associations that did get attention involved politically active women embracing an Anglo feminist ideology. The work of Elizabeth Higginbotham and Mary Romero (1997) takes an economic-feminist approach to Mexican-American women's work. Garcia (1995) indicates, "when scholars have discussed [Chicana] women, they have briefly alluded to their contributions [and]

typically they have subjected Mexican-descent women to patriarchal...ideologies” (Garcia 1995:24). Contributors to the area of “women and work” research, Mary Pardo (1997) and Lynda Dickson (1982), explore the field of community work by women offering a social class analysis, a view that “acknowledges how women are positioned differently in paid community work” (Pardo 1997, Dickson 1982).

While the literature represents a great deal of historical, economic, political and feminist perspectives of Mexican-American working-class women, we know little about their personal struggles, how they think and feel, what they worry about or enjoy. As students of social life we need to learn about the infinite complexity that comprises one individual life. I believe that the inclusion of an interpretation arising from our active participation and personal interaction with our “studied population” is warranted.

According to Dorothy Smith (1987), this viewpoint would offer students of social life a way of being “both a knower and a discoverer, not as self-indulgent or with self as sole focus but with an aim to knowing a socially constructed world from within” (Smith 1987:22,23). An ethically formulated investigation, filtered through a subjective lens, would enable us to see individuals as they live and work and think and feel, fully human rather than as stereotypical models.

My personal border journey into the lives of the women in this work began a year ago, when I was searching for a suitable project for my master’s thesis. A classmate of mine who knows of my interest in Latina issues, told me of a Mexican migrant farmworker community near my home. I was confident that being a Latina would work in my favor both with my department and the people I hoped to study. I was convinced that in a short time they would be regaling me with all the oppression, victimization,

horrors-of-the-fields stories I had read about in the existing literature. It was these stories that I thought would make excellent thesis material.

I proceeded to visit the center and met the women who run it. The center's founder, Mercedes, was agreeable to my doing a thesis project there and staff members Teresa, Viviana and Yesenia were enthusiastic about the project. The following week, having secured departmental approval, I began making "site" visits and keeping fieldnotes. Over the next few months, I made myself very accessible to the women at the center. I was included in their daily work as they strove to provide essential services to their community. Through the center, these women help to provide food, medical care, jobs and housing and assist in unraveling immigration's red tape. For them this is not a job but their life's work, a mission and a labor of love. I asked to be allowed to participate in their community outreach program. I watched and listened as they interacted with the people who came to the center. The staff often worked past closing time and on weekends. Together, these women and I have shared meals, attended meetings and participated in the center's special events.

As time went on and I gained their trust, they began to draw me into their confidence. They began to accept me both as friend and as yet another bridge to the Anglo culture. These women spoke with me openly, candidly, often sharing painful, personal stories with me. As I became transformed from uninvolved researcher to active participant, I stopped looking for thesis material and began seeing these women not as mere objects of study but as real people. I began to examine my feelings and became increasingly concerned about my role as researcher. What began as a thesis project that was analytical and objective, became an exploration of how Mercedes, Teresa, Viviana

and Yesenia have crossed borders and made a meaningful place for themselves in their community. This work then is not a scientific analysis but a preliminary sketch of the inner reality that makes up these women's lives and what they are accomplishing for themselves and their community. With strength and determination, they have overcome adversity and created meaningful lives.

The data for this ethnographic work was generated over the course of my final year as a graduate student. I chose to concentrate on one organization to maximize on the richness of the unique setting. The four women highlighted in this work were responsible for the majority of interactions between the center and the community. By choosing a small number of participants, I felt I would be better able to grasp the meaning and depth of their experiences. To preserve their confidentiality, their names and the location of the center are fictionalized. The dialogic format afforded the opportunity for the participants' own words to be heard.

This ethnographic work can be seen as an important step in making Mexican-American women more visible and vocal. This is just a preliminary exploration. There are many issues that need to be examined on the subject of Mexican-American farmworker women doing community work. From my involvement with Mercedes, Yesenia, Viviana and Teresa over the course of a year, I observed them at their work and interacted with them on a personal level. From this interaction, I compiled detailed notes from our extensive conversations, personal observations and tape-recorded informal interviews. In every sense, I was a true participant observer. To the best of my ability, I have let these women's voices guide what follows.

Each of us is moving,  
changing and with respect to others.

As we discover, we remember;  
remembering we discover; and most  
intensely do we experience this when  
our separate journeys converge.

Eudora Welty  
*One Writer's Beginnings*

## First Contact

The drive from my home to Orange Grove takes me through some of the most beautiful countryside I have seen in Florida. Expensive cars with foreign names and elegant, sprawling homes regally preside over large parcels of land. Multicolored horses graze leisurely in the manicured fields. Rolling green hills slope gently towards the horizon. My destination lies in the valley at the foot of this lush countryside. As the road winds downward, I reach the outskirts of Orange Grove.

The next three miles marks the geographical border separating the hills from the valley. The vast change in landscape is unmistakable. The homes, smaller and less elegant sit much closer together, their yards touching intimately. Children's toys litter the small yards and modest cars line the driveways. The road continues to spiral downward until, deep into the valley, it reaches the farmworkers' center in Orange Grove, and another border is crossed. Red, white and green ribbons, the colors of Mexico, are tied around the trees. On a square, hand painted wooden sign, the Christian proverb, "without a vision the people perish."

A modest house is the centers' administrative hub. The door is wide open and I step through it into a dim room. My eyes are drawn to a large fish tank. Covering the length of an entire wall it lends an air of coolness to the warm room. To the left, a large bookcase contains pamphlets, newsletters, books and flyers. On top of the bookcase, a

box contains grocery coupons. To my right, I notice a small, thin woman who looks to be in her early fifties sitting at a desk talking on the telephone. Behind her, an old air conditioning unit, now silent, protrudes out of the wall. Two posters on either side, *Ciudadania Americana* (American citizenship) and *Recycle* share the remaining wall space.

The woman is wearing a faded blue denim dress and eye glasses perched atop her head. Her long salt-and-pepper hair is wound in a single braid down her back. She holds up one finger indicating, “just a minute”. I smile tentatively, nod my “sure”, and sit in one of the chairs that line the wall in front of the desk. My ears pick up the melodic sounds of Spanish, my native tongue. The woman is telling the person on the other end the family would be allowed \$34.00 in food stamps. Yes, she agreed that it was not enough for four people but at least it was something. While I wait, I glance nonchalantly around the room. On the opposite wall from where I am sitting is a large portrait of a chubby little dark-haired girl perhaps 4 or 5 years old, with smiling eyes. I glance to the left of the fish tank and see a hallway, a bathroom and what was probably a small bedroom now converted to an office.

The woman hangs up the phone and asks me, “*How may I help you?*” in perfect English. I am taken aback. I expected to hear a Spanish accent. I stumble over my words and eventually say something about hearing of the center and doing my thesis. She nods her head and introduces herself as the director, Mercedes. She says she’s glad I’ve come to write about the center and its people. I am relieved and start to relax. Mercedes tells me that a while back someone else, a young white woman, came from the university to write about them but she only stayed for a day and then only included a paragraph about

her being a community organizer in her report. "*I sure hope you are going to do better than that.*" she said. Firm and to the point, Mercedes did not mince words. I was taken aback by her frankness.

We talked for a few minutes and then the phone rang again. She was obviously busy so I took my leave. As I drove home up the steep hills, I wondered what I was getting myself into. I sensed this project was going to be much different than I had anticipated and my first reaction was to withdraw and not do it. During the months that followed, however, I was very glad I had not crumbled beneath those initial doubts.

## Resilience

During one of my visits to the center, Mercedes was sitting with a young Mexican woman. The young woman was wearing jeans, a t-shirt and sneakers. Her long dark hair hung loose and flowed down her back, adding to her youthful appearance. Mercedes, holding a restless baby on her lap, listened intently. The baby, probably 3 or 4 months old, had a dirty face, stained clothes and from the way he was wiggling, probably a dirty diaper, too. A toddler, perhaps 1 or 2 years old, was sitting on the floor near the mother. Barefoot like his brother, his face was dirty and his clothes stained. Reminiscent of a spectator at a tennis match, his dark eyes followed the large gold fish swimming back and forth in the large tank. One short leg bent towards his buttocks, he reached around with one hand and absentmindedly fiddled with his bare toes. Yesenia, at her desk working on the computer, looked up as I walked in, greeted me warmly and went back to what she was doing. I sat opposite her desk. Mercedes, her full attention on the woman and trying to hold the baby, greeted me with a nod of her head. She was used to my comings and goings and continued asking the young woman questions. They were talking in Spanish. I sat down and listened as the young mother told Mercedes her story. They heard there was work in Florida so they left their home in Mexico and came here. They have been here for three months. Her husband got a job laying cable and his boss rented them a house. After the job was complete, the husband was let go and told to come back for his

check later. Two months later, the husband has yet to collect his check. Because they could not pay the rent, the boss threw them out of the house and sold their belongings. Mercedes asked for the boss's name and upon hearing it, nodded her head. She said she knew the man, a dishonest Mexican who cheats his own people. The family, consisting of the husband and wife and three small children, have been living in an abandoned car in an empty lot. Last night, the police found them living in the car and took them to jail. There, they were given food and a jail cell for the night. This morning, the family had been released back into the street no better off than they were when the police found them. She said that she was told about the center as she wandered about town looking for help. Mercedes asked about the whereabouts of the husband and the other child. The mother was told they could take a four-year old child in pre-K at the local elementary school. She took him there where he would be fed and cared for until 3 pm. The husband is at the home of new friends he made at work. Mercedes asked her why he wasn't looking for work. The woman said that he had no papers and was waiting until somebody gives him a job where he doesn't need papers. She said that at this hour, he was probably still sleeping. Mercedes told her that if her husband was willing there was work picking pumpkins. The woman shrugged her shoulders and said, "a ver si el quiere ir" (*if he wants to go, he'll go*). Mercedes said she knew of a vacant house where they might be able to stay. She'd talk to the owners and see if she can persuade them to let the family have the house. She asked the young mother if she was willing to clean houses for the owner in exchange for rent. The woman nodded her head, "sí."

Another time, while Mercedes and I were talking, a middle-aged man knocked on the door and walked in. "¿Perdón, se encuentra doña Mercedes aquí?" (*Excuse me, is*

*Mercedes here?)* Mercedes asked how she could help him. He said that he was told that she knew everything in this town and had come to ask her help in securing a house. She asked him if he wants to buy a house. He said he did, although he already owned a house in town but it is too small for his growing family. He has brothers coming from Mexico to live with him and he needs a larger house. Mercedes asked the location of the house. He told her the name of the street. Mercedes said she was familiar with the area and told him that instead of looking to buy another house, he should fix up the one he has. She told him she had just found out that the county is going to pave the roads in that area and they will give loans to residents who want to fix their homes or build new ones. The man was interested and wanted more information. Mercedes told him to come back in a week because a representative from the county was coming to a meeting at the center and he would have more details. The man agreed to come back, shook her hand, nodded his head in my direction, and walked out.

One afternoon, Mercedes, Corey, an assistant pastor who is assigned to this ministry from a local church, and I were having lunch and talking when a man walked in and interrupted our conversation. He said he was told that Mercedes could help him find a lawyer. Mercedes asked him why he needed a lawyer. He said he had a case pending mediation because he hurt his leg and his lawyer wanted him to settle for \$3000 and that's not enough. *"How much is the lawyer charging you?"* Mercedes asked him. The man said he had to pay the lawyer \$2000 for taking the case and that would only leave him \$1000 and *"that's not enough because I'm hurt and can't work. Besides, I don't trust him."* he added. Mercedes agreed that this sum was not enough, but she said that once the case has gone into mediation and they are making settlement offers, it's too late

to get another lawyer. Seeing the dejected look on the man's face, Mercedes told him to come back in an hour. She said she would make some calls and see what she can do. She went to her office leaving Corey and me to finish our lunch.

Corey is an assistant pastor of a local Lutheran church. She has been assigned to the farmworker community as part of the church's outreach mission. Between bites, I glanced at the portrait hanging above Corey's head. *"You know", I've been coming here all these months and I have been curious about that little girl in the picture. Who is she?"* I asked. *"You don't know about Sarita?"* asked Corey. I shook my head and Corey began to tell me the story of the smiling little girl. About five years ago, there was a group of children playing right outside the center on Keyes Street. A speeding pick up truck struck Sarita. The driver of the truck did not stop and after a while the children went back to playing, including the little girl. That evening, at home, Sarita started to feel sick. She told her parents of the events of the afternoon and her parents called for an emergency ambulance. The paramedics came and took Sarita to the hospital. Sarita's parents do not have medical insurance, so the paramedics couldn't take her to the local hospital that is about 15 minutes from her house. Instead, they must drive 40 minutes to an urban hospital that treats all patients even if they don't have insurance such as the indigent or migrant workers. There, Sarita sat in the emergency waiting room for hours. She was feeling sick but did not show any obvious signs of distress, such as bleeding or vomiting. Hours later, while still waiting to be seen by a doctor, six-year old Sarita slips into a coma and dies. The doctors later determined that she suffered internal bleeding. The entire community came out for the funeral. Corey said that Mercedes was inconsolable. Mercedes was so determined that this would never again happen to a child

that she set out to raise money to build a place for the children to go. Appeals went out to the community and the money was raised. A large modern building was built and the new learning center was dedicated to Sarita's memory. The learning center provided a place for children to go for after-school activities and during the summer months. Yesenia teaches summer school there.

Mercedes and I talked about how she came to help this community over twenty years ago. Mercedes was born in Texas to Mexican farmworker parents. By the time she was thirty years old, her mother had seven children, four of whom survived. When Mercedes was still a baby, her mother contracted cancer and died. Mercedes' father took the children and split them up between different orphanages. Later, he remarried and reclaimed the children. Mercedes' new mother was a Lithuanian immigrant, a white woman, who in Mercedes' words, "*was in her own world and we were in ours.*" Mercedes had the benefit of a Catholic education and by age 15, had lived in a convent for two years. For her, it was a natural decision to become a nun. Of this time in her life, she recalled, "*I loved being with the nuns and convent life. I loved it a lot. The only bad part was that I thought I should reconcile with my stepmother and the whole family and I thought I could come home and things would be better but they weren't.*" Her father refused to let her become a nun and took Mercedes to a white family as their maid. For Mercedes this was a good thing, however, because it was here, with this wealthy childless couple, that she received the closest thing to the love of a real mother. She said her employer was very good to her and taught her a lot of things.

When Mercedes turned 17, she married an older man, a war veteran who "*had a lot of problems.*" After three children, Mercedes decided that she needed to leave this

abusive relationship but *“the Catholic Church kept telling me I need to go back to that husband even though it was a very abusive situation, more mentally than physically.”* Not long after ending this marriage, Mercedes entered into yet another abusive relationship in which three more children were produced, giving her a total of six children. Of this marriage, Mercedes said, *“I never wanted to marry a Mexican because I thought if I did I would end up with a domineering husband. I saw how my brothers treated women. But then I married this white man and he was worse than three Mexicans.”* This relationship proved to be extremely oppressive. In her words, *“this man thought for me, bought the groceries, told me how to dress and everything else.”* Mercedes admitted that on the surface she was *“very submissive yet inside, part of me was yelling and screaming all the time.”* For ten years, Mercedes *“was soul searching, looking for people to help me, knowing something was wrong with me but not really knowing what.”* She was so distraught over this relationship that she turned to mental institutions for help.

While Mercedes was searching for answers, she had a religious experience that changed the course of her life. She was advised to go to a Christian women’s meeting and it was here that her life began to change. *“And after that meeting, I don’t know, nobody laid hands on me or anything like that but something happened. After I left that place, I was totally different.”* She began to study the Bible and to attend these women’s meeting every week. At the time in her life when she was most needful of emotional reassurance, she was asked to go to a Mexican migrant farmworkers’ camp with a black woman minister. This minister needed a Spanish speaking person to translate the Bible stories

and discussions. Mercedes agreed to help and was very impressed by this woman's ability to run three ministries and by her commitment to the poor.

Mercedes went out to the migrant camp every Wednesday for three years, taking her three youngest children with her. Of that experience, she said, *"things were real bad with my husband but it was the only thing he allowed me to do. And I get real tickled when I see farmworker women coming in here and saying, 'well, my husband will only let me come to the sewing group or my husband will only let me do that' and I know dang well that they are going to find a way to get liberated in that little sewing group. So the one thing that my husband allowed me to do turned out to be my liberation tool."*

However, the situation at home did not improve. *"I mean just because I was Christian didn't mean everything had stopped,"* Mercedes explained. At this point, she made a decision that changed the course of her life. She put it this way, *"I took my off my apron and turned off the pots on the stove and I told the kids you can go with me or you can stay but I'm going."* At 42 years old, with three of the six children, an old car, a dog and little else, Mercedes left her husband and embarked on a new life. It is not clear what happened to the other children and Mercedes did not elaborate.

With the help of a friend, she found a place to live and soon after, started going to college. Mercedes said this was her physical salvation because when she went to school and began to learn, her eyes began to open. *"Little by little I began to grow and those migrant workers that I had helped began to come and look to me for help. And that's how I started. Right here in Orange Grove."* Mercedes started helping migrant workers apply for food stamps and social security and taking pregnant women to the clinic. *"I started realizing that everything was pretty much the same as when I was a kid growing up in the*

*migrant camp in Michigan.*” In 1979, Mercedes with the help of some friends founded the help center to serve the community of migrant farmworkers. The basic mission of the center was to bring relief and basic education to this disenfranchised community.

Twenty one years later, the center provides essential services through its food bank, thrift store, health clinic, community outreach and youth group. On Sunday mornings, Mercedes with the help of Corey, the local assistant pastor, her son and daughter-in law, hold children’s church. Of her spiritual mission to her community’s children, she says, *“When one is already poor and cannot compete in language, dress or social economy and when prejudices and racism runs high, it makes our job of instilling hope and self worth extremely difficult. The racism and prejudice still exist but so does the spirit of our forefathers. We are teaching these youths about their history and asking them to remember what great people we came from and to know that this country will give them as much opportunity as they prepare themselves to handle.”*

While Mercedes’ story is obviously one of hardship and pain, it is also about overcoming tremendous obstacles in her childhood and as an adult victim of abuse. Her tenacity and resiliency as she continues to push against the forces that seek to oppress her is evident by the work she does in her community. Her belief that the youth should be taught about spiritual things as well as their ancestry indicates a strong sense of recognition and self-acceptance of herself as a Mexican and as a teacher and preserver of their culture.

## Determination

*“From the time I was little, I always wanted to be an elementary school teacher. First when I was in Mexico. But then when I came over here, I guess everything changed because our life was so hard and it was so difficult to learn the English language. I mean, I don't even want to think how hard is for our people. So I guess you can say that it's a calling from God because a lot of people ask me how much do you get paid there? Or, what do you get there? Or, why are you stuck in there? I mean because the pay is very low and I know we don't have any retirement benefits or medical. We are probably worse off than a lot of people. But it's always been in my heart. I do it because, you know, I love my people.”*

This intense love and devotion to her people is what keeps Yesenia striving towards her goal of one day becoming a teacher. Born in Mexico, a petite, seemingly fragile young woman of twenty-six, she wears her long hair in a single braid down her back. Possessed of a quick wit and infectious smile, Yesenia is intensely serious and yet quick to laugh. When she was 11 years old she crossed the Rio Grande into the United States along with her parents and her younger siblings. The family immediately began following the crop circuit, picking fruits and vegetables from one state to another and returning again to Orange Grove at the end of the season. Besides helping to pick crops, Yesenia also had to oversee the care of the two babies. They were left in the car and she

would go back and forth from the field to the car feeding them and changing their diapers. Yesenia described this as a very hard life, one that the children found very tiring. *"I mean, you don't have time for yourself. It's always like it's like so hectic because you always have to be working to make a living and it's not like you have a choice whether you want to go or not."* To help pass the time while doing this hard work, Yesenia remembered a game the kids played, *"we would each pick a tree and we would race to see who could fill up the bin the fastest. And the winner could go and rest. We never wanted to look at how tired we were."* Amidst all the traveling and hard work, the children managed to go to school.

At age 13, Yesenia started to help out at the center by teaching English to the migrant workers. Of her beginnings here, she said, *"at first, I would just walk over here and just help them, you know, my people. The little I know and that I had learned, I wanted to give it back to them. I really wanted to be a missionary, I mean, when I was 14, I wanted to be a nun but my mom never wanted to let me go."* At 16, her family settled permanently in Orange Grove and Yesenia was able to go to high school where she excelled in her studies. She said of her decision to work at the center, *"I know my people don't know how to read and write in English and if there is nobody here for them, I mean, what are they going to do?"* Feeling that she had a religious calling to help her people, Yesenia joined the staff at the center in 1992. *"I look at it this way that maybe, you know, I'm not getting anything from the people but I know that from the Lord, I am getting more than I can ever give, you know. This is why I don't stop and I keep going."*

Yesenia teaches summer school, coordinates a program for teaching young girls health and sex education and is the center's secretary. She can usually be found at the

reception desk where one of her duties is the translation of documents, such as birth certificates, marriage certificates and other legal documents from Spanish into English. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), requires that all documentation be translated before it is submitted. This is a tedious and time-consuming process that Yesenia performs many times in the course of a regular workday. A few weeks ago, while she was taking a break, we spoke of her own troubles with INS and the “system”.

After living, working and paying taxes in the United States for over fifteen years, Yesenia’s family is still waiting for INS to grant them permanent residence status. She has postponed her marriage for two years because if she gets married, she has to file under her husband’s name. This will cause her to lose the waiting time that she has accrued. She refers to this as being “*in the process*,” which interferes with her education as well. As an undergraduate student at the university, Yesenia has been classified as an “international student” because of her lack of resident status. This translates into paying the university \$600 in extra fees while being ineligible for financial aid. “*I’m sorry to say this but it really pisses me off. I’m a citizen of Mexico but have no benefits there and I’m paying US taxes and have no benefits here either.*” This is an example of some of the barriers that Mexican immigrants face as they attempt to pursue the American dream. “*You know I had these big plans. I was going to graduate and make big money but you don’t get that if you are illegal, like they say if you don’t have your alien number. What are we extra- terrestrials that they treat us like we’re from another planet?*”

During the summer months, Yesenia teaches school to the community children, helping them with whatever subjects they had problems with during the school year. She considers this a gift from God because this is yet another way to help her people. “*I want*

*to finish my degree and I want to fight so I can help my people open up some of those closed doors. We are not happy just picking oranges and making less money and doing jobs that nobody else wants to do.*” Yesenia is determined to rise above her problems, achieve her own personal goals and those that she envisions for her people. *“I feel that as role models, it’s our job to tell the kids all the things we’ve gone through and to talk to them about where we come from.”* She uses the metaphor of a ladder that she is continually climbing, *“It’s like, when you’re taking steps and you don’t know if you are going to fall off. I am still climbing, taking little steps but I’m going to get to the top and when I get there it’s going to be a great thing for my people to see.”*

Yesenia’s determination to help her people is very evident. She feels very strongly that her purpose is to be here for them. It’s because of her strength, her belief that God has chosen her for this mission and her determination to rise above her problems, that she has overcome the difficulties that she has endured. Not about to give up on her goals, Yesenia continues her struggles with the “system” and in the process is paving the way for others in her community.

## Perseverance

It is nearly noon. I take a drive around the neighborhood and quickly discover that only Keyes Street, where the center is located, is paved. The side roads near the center are of hard-packed dirt. The houses are old, tired and run down, some in more need of repair than others. Most sport some type of garden, whether in the back or in the front yard. Some yards are littered with cars in various stages of repair or abandonment. Most houses do not have screens on the open windows. I notice men loitering outside some of the houses, smoking, playing dominoes, talking or just sitting silently watching the events on the street. The noon whistle blares its bone-wrenching sound and can be heard for miles. This lets the workers know they can break for lunch. For most, this will be the only rest period they will have today. Driving down a dusty, unpaved road, I pull up in front of a house that houses the center's free clinic. Inside, colorful murals of happy children playing, line the walls. Most of these were painted by university students who come here as part of their internship requirements. Here, too, doctors from an urban hospital volunteer their services. On alternate Saturdays, children are immunized and sick adults are tended.

Viviana, the center's neighborhood outreach worker is waiting for me. A woman of short stature in her early thirties, Viviana has a quick wit, small black eyes that get smaller when she laughs and long black hair that she wears in the traditional style: a

single braid down her back. Born in Mexico, Viviana has been a farmworker since the age of 14. Because there was plenty of work and eight mouths to feed, Viviana's father did not send the children to school. At 16, she married a farmworker, a young man of 17. *"My husband joined my family and me and we followed the harvest."* Viviana admits this was very hard work. As a seasoned picker, she knows firsthand the different ways the work is carried out. *"Everybody gets two lines of trees which is about two acres and it takes two to three days to pick these clean. Picking oranges is very hard because you have to climb the ladder and you have to pull the oranges from the tree and throw it to the ground. Then you have to pick it up from the ground and fill a large sack which weights about 80 lbs. and when that gets full, you have to empty it into a large bin which takes about 10 sacks to fill. They paid us \$7 per bin."* This kind of work requires a tremendous amount of physical endurance and mental toughness. *"If you don't work, you don't eat. If it's cold you put on extra clothes and you work. If it's raining, you get wet and you work. You only get paid for what you pick. If you are sick, they give your lines to somebody else and you lose everything."* The farmworker is also at the mercy of the weather. In 1986, the cucumber crop was lost because of heavy rains. Viviana and her husband were stranded up north without work or money. By now, Viviana was 21 years old and had four children. They waited for a month for the weather to clear before they were able to find work and earn enough money to return south.

It was after this trip that Viviana and her husband decided not to follow the crop circuit. *"Then, I thought I wanted to do some other sort of work. I didn't finish school and didn't have a diploma but they gave me a chance at a store and they trained me to be a cashier."* For Viviana, doing such a different kind of work was very enjoyable. *"I*

*liked it very much and I did good at this work. Later, my husband got a job unloading sod and he left the fields, too.”* After working as a cashier for three years, Viviana quit the job and returned to picking crops. She recalled her reasons for leaving, *“I had trouble with my supervisor who was having marital trouble and he would take it out on the workers and I was afraid of him. He would throw things and yell and I was afraid he was going to hit me.”* Surprisingly, Viviana did not find the hard work of the fields undesirable. Of her return to picking crops she says, *“I felt at home and didn’t want to leave. I’m a woman who in spite of the hard work of the fields, I like it because I like being outside and I like the people. I get to talk to other women. We always find things to talk about, the weather, our children, our hurting backs, you know. We talk about everything and the time goes faster. I feel free because I can talk when I want and if I don’t want to talk, I just pick. And the field is a good place to forget your problems, too, because you talk and you laugh and it’s such hard work that you are really only interested in filling the bin. It’s like a stress reliever.”* For Viviana, the camaraderie she finds among these women workers allows her to forget her problems and enables her to get through the day. By her own admission, Viviana feels very much at home in this setting. This in itself is surprising for the literature bombards us with horrific narratives of the misery of the farmworker. For Viviana this is also a place where she finds friendship and liberation.

A few weeks later, Viviana and I chatted about how she came to work with Mercedes. *“Well, I know Mercedes for many years. She married me and my husband, you know. She was helping our people even back then. I was working in a plant nursery for a mean white woman. She didn’t hardly pay us any money, wouldn’t let us rest and*

*treated us bad.” Viviana began to seek out Mercedes and ask her about the laws and workers’ rights. When she began to share what she was learning with the other workers, the nursery owner fired Viviana for causing trouble. “Mercedes talked to me and said that she could use my help at the center, you know, doing outreach with pregnant women you know, prenatal care, health and nutrition and like that.” This was an invaluable service because Viviana says, “the women were afraid to go to the doctor because they were afraid of being deported but I started to teach them and they began to understand and to trust me and to use the clinic without, you know, being afraid.”*

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up to a drab, colorless cement block home. Traces of blue paint around the windows, tell of a color no longer there. Viviana walked up to the door and knocked. A young man answered Viviana's summons and greeted her in a friendly manner. I hung back, near the truck uncertain as to what I was supposed to do. The man eyed me suspiciously while Viviana hurriedly explained her mission. He stepped aside and motioned for us to enter.

The house was furnished with good quality furniture, bric-a-brac and pictures everywhere. It was very clean and very tidy. A young girl, very obviously pregnant, came into the living room and asked us to sit down. The young man turned on the television set as we sat down. The volume was very loud which forced Viviana to speak up to be heard over the noise. Although we were sitting about three feet away, the young man didn't look in our direction. Viviana asked the girl if she knew about the food groups and took a chart from her briefcase. She showed her the foods that she can substitute: tortillas for the bread, mangoes for the apples, eggplant and tomatoes for the celery and carrots. As the young girl and Viviana converse, I sat quietly and listened. I felt strangely ill at ease with the young man sitting beside me seemingly ignoring what was going on. "¿Trabajas en la labor?" asked Viviana. What a curious question, I thought to myself. I translated it to mean, "*Do you work at work?*" "Sí," she answers. Viviana wrote the girl's name, address, phone number, age and when she was due to deliver on a form. I was surprised to hear she was just 16 years old.

Our visit over, Viviana stood up and we took our leave. The young man seemed impervious to our departure. Later, as we are traveling in the truck on the way to another home visit, I asked Viviana what she meant by "la labor". She explained that working in the fields picking fruit was referred to as, "la labor (*la la bore*)". According to Viviana,

it was not unusual for women, “ *to work in the fields until it is time to deliver their babies and then, they return to work soon after they have it.* ”

We soon arrived at another location. We pulled up to a mobile home that appeared to be defying gravity perched precariously on concrete blocks. There were two pumpkin-sized holes in its side. The windows were open in the 85-degree heat. Four rickety steps led to a raised platform and the front door. Viviana told me to wait in the “mueble” (truck) and I gladly complied. She jogged briskly up the four steps and knocked on the door. After a few minutes and more knocking, the door opened slightly. Viviana told the occupant her name and why she had come. The door was opened wider and Viviana motioned for me to come quickly. She ducked inside. I climbed down from the “mueble” and followed my companion up the rickety steps.

I stood in the open doorway letting my eyes adjust to the dark room. Opposite the doorway, there was a small couch, not too clean and worse for wear. Viviana was talking to the young woman sitting next to her. The young mother was rocking a baby carriage with a bare foot and watching a Mexican game show on television. The television set was sitting on top of a microwave oven that was missing its door. The oven/table was on a bare wooden floor. There were no curtains and the walls were devoid of color or decoration. It was smelly and dank. A large box fan minus its protective cover whirred its exposed blades in a noisy attempt to cool the air. Standing there made me feel conspicuous, so I stepped inside. It felt hotter inside than outside. I felt the sweat run down the inside of my shirt. Viviana, undaunted by the stifling atmosphere, ignored the beads of sweat forming on her face and continued to talk to the young mother. The woman seemed more interested in the television show than in what

Viviana was telling her. She quickly shifted her eyes from Viviana's food group chart to the television and back again. All the while, she continued to rock the baby carriage. I couldn't see or hear the baby and I assumed it was probably asleep.

Feeling as if I were eavesdropping, I looked around for a place to sit. There were no chairs in the room. The dirty floor was uninviting. I sat on the only other piece of furniture in the airless room, a five-gallon tin can that previously held olive oil. I sat on the can next to some potatoes on the floor. Viviana wrote down the same information as with the previous client except that she told the young mother that she could bring the baby for its shots at the free clinic. The young mother nodded her head almost imperceptibly, her attention still on the show. Viviana stood up and I quickly vacated my seat and led the way outside. The young mother rocked the carriage watched the television, and didn't seem to notice that we were leaving. She did not show us to the door.

Feeling like an intruder, my curiosity nevertheless got the better of me, and I asked my companion, "*How did you find this woman?*" Viviana said that because she has lived in this community for 17 years, the people know her and about her work at the center. When a new woman comes to the community, word gets around to Viviana. "*I have spoken with many women and I've told them that now, you know, you have to help others, too, because we have to help each other. So one helps one and that one helps another.*" My next question surprised even me. "*How can she live like that and with a baby, I mean, the place is so terrible?*" Viviana her tone calm and matter-of-fact explained that this home "*was vacant just yesterday. Sometimes these people come in the middle of the night and usually have nothing with them. By tomorrow, they may be gone*

*and a new family will be here to take their place.” Viviana said that this woman was here with an uncle who was probably the baby’s father. “They are illegal and she is afraid. That’s why she didn’t want to give me too much information.”*

Viviana said that she tried to work with the husbands, too, but *“they act like they know it all and you have to do what he says. Mexican men have total say. The woman has to do what he says. When I first got married, my husband wouldn’t even let me go to the store without asking his permission. I had to account for every minute.”* I asked Viviana if her marriage was different now that she lived in the United States. *“Yes and no. My marriage is changing but very slow. My husband doesn’t want me to work. He says I have to be at home and pay more attention to the children. He says that if they don’t get better grades, then he’ll take them out of school and send them to pick crops. So I am leaving my job for my kids.”* Although Viviana expressed a desire to stay on and do this work, she felt that she had to do what her husband said for the sake of the children.

Because the family cannot live on just one salary, Viviana is returning to the fields to work until the children get home from school. *“Don’t you like your job here?”* I ask her. *“Yes, but my problem is that I think that because he sees that I like my work and that I am doing good here and that I am learning, I think he is a little bit afraid. He doesn’t want me to earn more money than him. He doesn’t like that at all.”* I asked Viviana if this is unusual. *“No, I have seen it before at least in those that come straight from Mexico. The women have a little fear that they can’t argue and that they can’t do anything against their husband’s wishes. In my marriage my husband has total say. He told me either I give the orders or you do but only one person can be in charge so I told him you be the boss.”* She explained why she believed this situation was partly the

women's fault. *"In Mexican families, the woman has to be submissive to the man. My mom is like that with my dad and the moms teach their daughters to be like that, too. When the kids grow up, they see how we take the power away from the daughters and give it to the boys."* Viviana said this was changing in her marriage but that it was a very slow process. *"The more I know, the more I have to teach myself but I also have to teach him and do it in a way that we don't get in trouble with each other. And then I have to educate my children. I am trying not to have a son who is macho but one who is understanding of the girl."* Viviana sees the necessity of changing the gendered oppression of her marriage but wants to also preserve marital unity. This is clearly a renegotiation of her role as a traditional wife. What is of utmost importance is that she is willing to instill in her children more egalitarian roles. However, by her own admission, change comes slowly. Therefore, she felt compelled to acquiesce to her husband's wishes and agreed to quit her job in order to pay more attention to the children. *"I don't want my children working as hard as I do in the fields so I'll leave my job so they can stay in school."* Viviana felt that part of her responsibility as a mother was to give up some things you want to do so that you can do other things for your children. *"I like it here but I have to sacrifice some of the things I want for what is best for my children. Because, I mean, we need to keep our kids in school and tell them where they come from, you know, their roots and tell the kids that they are not American, that they are first Mexican. They should be proud of that and they should not be ashamed of being Mexican."*

Two weeks after this conversation, Viviana left her job at the center and returned to picking crops. Mercedes told me that this was the third time that Viviana has done so since she began working at the center. However, Mercedes was confident that Viviana

would return. She told me that Viviana's husband was a domineering man but that each time Viviana comes back, she *"learns more, opens her eyes a little more and she starts to spread her wings a little bit more."*

By her own admission, it appears that Viviana has little influence in the decision making of her family. Her personal and social identity seems to come from her husband who is considered the dominant figure in her family. Her desire for autonomy is evident, however, when she talks of the freedom to say what she likes or not to talk at all while working in the fields. She exhibits a desire to break away from her husband's traditional expectations of wives and mothers. What seems striking, however, is that Viviana still manages to come back to a job she loves in spite of her husband's objections. The fact that she succeeded in persuading her husband to allow her to return to work at the center at various times, indicates her perseverance and determination to redefine her role in her marriage and work towards a more egalitarian relationship.

## Empowerment

*“When I first started, it was during the amnesty. They allowed people of the fields that worked for over 90 days from 1987 to 1989, to be eligible for permanent residency. I was not legal at that time but I had just gotten my work visa. So even though I was working here, I was not legal. But when amnesty came, I started helping with the immigration process. There was a group of three girls and we would drive every weekend to North Carolina in a van and help field workers there fill out their papers. We went to the drive-ins where they showed Mexican movies and there in the snack shop is where the people would come and we would help them fill out their papers.”*

Teresa was 17 years old when she started helping migrant farmworkers wade through the sea of immigration red tape. Today, after working 14 years in the same job, she has become the expert who people in the community come to see. This is one of the most important jobs that she performs at the center. Not bad for a girl who only learned how to speak English after she had graduated from high school.

Born in a small town in Mexico, one of six children, Teresa’s strong face, aquiline nose and high cheekbones suggest an Aztec heritage. Her family arrived in Texas and left soon after to follow the harvest. Teresa, only 12 years old at the time, was left behind to care for an elderly grandfather in Texas. Of that time in her life she remembered, “/

*wasn't going to school. I was cooking. I was cleaning. I was doing all the work for my grandfather."*

When her family came back a year later to get her, Teresa did not want to go to school. They gave her a choice, either school or go and work in the fields with the family. Teresa chose to work in the fields over going to school because, *"I didn't know the language and I was used to working."* There was a freeze in 1982 and the oranges had to be picked fast, so there was plenty of work even for a child of thirteen. Teresa would pick oranges from early in the morning until late in the evening. *"You know, everybody has to have their own bag and you have to pitch in to fill up the big bin."* She confesses that after a full week of this rigorous work, *"I told my mom, no, I want to go to school."*

According to Teresa, though, this was not the easiest thing to do and she found going to school was very hard work indeed. *"I remember it was very hard. I was kind of quiet but it was very hard like when the teachers would say do this and this and I just did it however I could. But, I mean, for me to really understand everything they were saying it was not easy. But the way I am talking now, I could not speak it then. I didn't learn English until after I started working at the center."*

Being very determined to be her own person, she recalls doing some things contrary to how she had been brought up. *"Girls in Mexico are not allowed to, you know, work by themselves or drive a car but I guess I was a little rebelde because I started driving here and getting paychecks and my dad had this old, old car and I told my dad I wanted to buy a new car. So I found a car that I liked and made the deal with the salesman myself."*

From a withdrawn girl who only knew how to work hard, Teresa began transforming herself into an invaluable asset to her community. *“When I started working here and doing immigration, I was so afraid I used to cry because it was very serious, you know, a lot of responsibility and I feel like if you do something wrong you’re risking that person’s livelihood and playing with their lives.”* Teresa is very proud to have helped her family secure their permanent resident status through her work at the center.

For her, the center is more than a place to work, it’s a haven where she feels secure and among family. *“I never feel in the morning like I don’t want to go to work because I’m happy here. I love helping my people, I mean, it’s something that I feel good about when we win a victory. I mean, I feel proud of this place and don’t let me hear you talk bad about this place because I’m going to defend it.”* Teresa says that she doesn’t know how they do the things they do because they don’t have a lot of money yet she says, *“we have done miracles here, I mean, I think God helps us and helps me do the work.”* Teresa feels her work has taught her a lot and she’s happy being here helping her community. Her work is very important because she says the center provides so many needful services.

Teresa’s commitment to her community and its youth goes even deeper. On one occasion, I was privy to a conversation Mercedes and Teresa were having about a particular young girl. Teresa noticed that a 17 year-old girl was being neglected by her parents. It seems the girl’s father died while she was little and her mother migrated to the United States to look for work. She left the daughter to be cared for by her grandmother in Mexico. While in the United States, the mother remarried and had other children but didn’t send for the girl. When the grandmother died, the girl, who was now 15 years old,

came to the United States to look for her mother. Her mother's new husband did not want to take care of this daughter.

Teresa said that she felt that the mother, fearing her husband's reprisal, did not show her daughter much affection. Teresa, feeling sorry for the teenager, asked her if she wanted to come and live with her and the girl accepted. Teresa said this was the last chance the girl had of getting an education because she feared the girl would be sent back to Mexico otherwise.

By not asking her husband's permission before she opened her home to the teenager, Teresa exercised the sense of autonomy and equality she feels in her marriage. Teresa said that in some ways Mexican women are still being brought up to be silent. As she puts it, *"I think our women are used to putting their heads down and take whatever the men tell them. I think this is a problem for our women because some are being abused by their husbands. They tell them that I don't want you to use birth control or I don't want to wear a condom. These women feel like since they are married to these men that they have to do what he tells them."* When I asked her how this situation might change, Teresa said the one thing is that women need to stop being afraid of their husbands. Teresa thinks that they need to teach mothers and daughters to be more open with each other so that they can deal with possible domestic abuse if it happens.

Teresa is also coordinator of the Dream Youth organization sponsored by the center. Here, teenagers help other kids with their homework, provide tutoring and emotional support. When a farmworker was stabbed to death in their community recently, the Dream Youth held a candlelight vigil and acted as pallbearers at the funeral. The group members attend rallies, hold fundraisers and work closely with community

leaders in their efforts to rid their community of the drugs and prostitution that are so prevalent here. They are becoming visible as agents of change in their community.

Teresa also sees firsthand the problems youth face when they want to have material things now and are willing to compromise their education to get them. *"I hear kids tell me they are quitting school because they can get a job and buy themselves the Nautica's, the Nike's, the Tommy Hillfiger's, and they say they don't need education for that. I tell them they can have both. If they get their education, they can have better jobs and nicer things."* At a recent recruitment meeting for new members, she voiced this sentiment to the youth present: *"It all starts with a dream and then you have to work towards the realization of that dream. We want to teach you young people that education is the way to making those dreams come true."* Teresa says that a big problem facing the youth from this community is that they get confused and start acting out. *"I guess it's because they feel different. They want to forget that they are Mexicans. So they start acting out dressing like the kids from here because they want to look like the kids from here. They are what I call 'wannabes', you know, and want to blend in and that's not always good. I think our kids are 'wannabes' because they want to be something they're not. We have to let them know that this is our culture and that we're Mexicans first and that we have to remember where we came from."*

In a world that encourages and rewards individual accomplishments, what we see in Teresa is not just a struggle for individual empowerment but for community empowerment as well. *"Now I feel like this is me and I am who I am because of what I do. My work completes me and I wouldn't be happy just staying at home. I used to be*

*afraid but I am not afraid now. I think I have grown a lot and learned a lot. I feel strong and, I mean, this is what you call power. ”*

Clearly, Teresa is negotiating her role as wife and mother and worker. Her work allows her to have the social support she needs to be able to define herself in terms outside of her domestic sphere and to accomplish things outside of the traditional expectations. By attaining new knowledge and skills, Teresa has a well-defined sense of her own personal worth. By her own admission, she feels strong and empowered.

## Inconclusions

From time to time Mercedes and I would talk about my thesis and about what she and I wanted to accomplish. During one such conversation she told me, *“Focus on our strength, on the good things we do. Everyone talks about the oppression and victimization. It is almost a given. We’re tired of telling people about the terrible things that happen in the fields. We already know about the oppression. We already know our wages have not changed in 20 years. We all have horrors stories and we’ve lived through them and it’s because we have lived through them that we are here. It’s because we have suffered and struggled that we are here trying to build a community, trying to help our people.”*

It was three days before Christmas and we were standing among a pile of boxes stacked to the ceiling of the center’s main room. Mercedes pointed to the stack and said, *“Tell them how these women can get all these food baskets ready by working late into the night for days and all these toys, hundreds and hundreds of toys. We have to organize how to get them distributed, too. Most of the people that are getting these baskets don’t have a phone so we had to contact them in person, one by one, door to door. And what happens to our own families while this is going on? Some of these women have little kids at home and here we are sorting all this food, clothes and toys, putting all these things in boxes, labeling them and delivering them. And we still have to put in our regular work*

day." This double duty is indicative of the commitment of the women at the center. Not only are they holding down full time jobs and are responsible for the well being of their own immediate families, they are also taking care of the needs of an entire community as well. It takes a lot out of a person to be so committed to other people's welfare. Often this kind of work takes a toll on family relationships and it can be emotionally draining to give so much to others. Yet the women at the center have told me repeatedly that they love their work because they are helping their people.

A few weeks later, Mercedes told me about a telephone call she had just received. The Governor of Florida was introducing legislation that would eliminate an education policy favoring minorities for college admissions. The Florida Farm Workers' Union, the League of United Latin American Citizens and a host of other immigrant and minority organizations made plans to march on the state capital in protest of the proposed legislation. The organizers of the march did not notify the staff at the center in time for them to attend. Mercedes said that had the center been notified ahead of time, they would have participated as well. She said, *"It just goes to show you that we are not even considered as doing anything important in the farmworkers' movement. It goes to show that we are not only overlooked by the larger white society but, we are also overlooked by our own people. We are just not vocal enough and not active politically like those other organizations. Even though we are doing an extremely important work, we are not being recognized for that. So, the heck with it. What we are doing is important enough and we don't need to have those bigwigs give us any recognition. We don't need them to pat us on the shoulder."* Mercedes is aware of and recognizes the power/control of the dominant group and also of the rejection by their own people. When Mercedes says that

they are not vocal or active politically she is illustrating that their community is viewed and rated as having a low status by larger “bigwig” organizations. These “bigwigs,” in turn, are seen as having a higher status with more power and prestige. However, Mercedes rejects messages of inferiority by recognizing the value and worth of their work at the center. This social class stratification within the organized Latino movement denies Mercedes’ community agency, rendering them invisible and powerless. Yet, although, these women suffer degrees of alienation due to social class stratification, they live and create community nonetheless.

While Mercedes sounded annoyed and disappointed at being excluded from participation in the march, she nevertheless shrugged her shoulders and said, *“That’s what I want you to tell them about, how this is not a job, this is community service. How we are doing things for the farmworker community that nobody knows about except us. We always need more people but we need people that are committed, not to do it from nine to five and not looking for raises. It’s hard to explain the difference but this is more than a job, this is a life’s work.”* I wanted to let her know that their efforts were appreciated, so I said, *“You know Mercedes, you and your people are doing so much for your community. I think that you are all extraordinary women because there’s only a handful in the entire community involved in this work.”* Mercedes nodded, *“It’s that handful that is making a difference for the children here because this is where it’s going to show up, in the children. We have to put this into the children and then they’ll keep on doing it.”* Mercedes feels that instilling a love of community service in their children is going to preserve this community. The preservation of the community is key to the survival of all. This is where people with the same backgrounds, values and customs live

and work together for the benefit of all and for the preservation of their traditions, their sense of ethnic identity. Here in this community, they have the capacity to stay connected with who they are. These women are proud of their Mexican heritage. The one thing that stays constant is their ethnicity. This is a significant factor, in light of the importance of continuity of life patterns in the well being of the community. Their ethnic identity is exemplified by their shared history and values and serves as insulation against the oppression inflicted by the larger dominant society. Therefore, because these women are aware of the oppressive forces of sexism, classism and racism and are working to overcome these barriers, they are able to renegotiate and redefine their roles as Mexican American and as women. While from the outside, these rural and poor women may appear to be thoroughly oppressed, upon closer inspection we see how they are also resourceful and effectual human beings.

For decades, sociologists have studied people of Mexican origin from a familism perspective (Alvarez and Bean 1976) but have taken insufficient account of the Mexican-American women's experience outside of the familial dynamic. The interplay of gender, class and racism in community building by Mexican-American women can add much to our understanding of women of Mexican descent and how they maintain strong cultural roles and identity. Not only have social scientists neglected the study of Mexican-American women outside of the concept of family but mainstream scholarship also has not delved into the study of Mexican-American women doing paid community work. As students of social life, we need to start rethinking our assumptions associated with the race, gender and class exploitation facing Mexican-American women. By redefining our analytical tools, sociology can more fully represent what goes on in rural and poor

Mexican-American communities, what Mexican-American women are creating in spite of how the dominant society affects them and what keeps these communities culturally intact in spite of overwhelming pressure from the dominant society to assimilate.

The four women highlighted in this work have shown us how social life can be manipulated. By drawing on the strength of what they have and because of who they are, we can learn about how people with severely constrained options and choices nevertheless forge meaningful support networks that are suited to their needs and circumstances. By establishing the center, these women have established networks of support first among themselves as women and then with the community at large. Through the center as focal point and with these women acting as a bridge, the members of the community can move into different environments, crossing physical, social and cultural borders. Centuries of border crossings have given them the ability to establish communities that according to Emilio Zamora (1994), embody, “an all-inclusive Mexicanist identity, rooted in nationalism and working class values of fraternalism, reciprocity and altruism” (Zamora 1994:5).

For Latinas, crossing boundaries or borders has become a dominant metaphor in their search for self-definition and identity. There has been an outpouring of Latina literature within the last decades, such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga’s (1987) path breaking anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back*, wherein they explored the in-between space where two cultures meet. However, we should note that these voices, once outside of the mainstream, are now enjoying exposure, popularity and acceptance from within established academic circles. But, what of those Latinas like Mercedes,

Teresa, Viviana and Yesenia, who do not have access to academic audiences or may not be aware that such literature even exists? Do they not also have a voice, a story to tell?

It is precisely these seemingly “ordinary” women’s voices, muted for so long, that should now be heard. The stories these women tell are of home and children, hopes and dreams and faith, struggles and service. Their stories also reveal their determination, resiliency and strength. As they navigate between two diverse cultures, Mexican and Anglo, these women teach others in their community how to manage their lives between and within these two worlds. In the process, Mercedes, Viviana, Yesenia and Teresa, have created lives full of purpose and meaning.

Adam Kuper (1994) writes, “The privileged lie and mislead, but the oppressed come gradually to appreciate their objective circumstances and formulate a new consciousness that will ultimately liberate them. It is the voices struggling to articulate a message of liberation that the ethnographer must strain to hear” (Kuper 1994:543). My hope is that I have listened well to the voices of those women highlighted in this work. By telling their stories of strength and empowerment, I found my voice mingled with theirs in a mutual song of liberation. I am taking their stories across yet another border, rendering all of us visible and vulnerable to academic scrutiny. I only hope that crossing this border will prove to be as liberating for them as this journey has been for me.

This ethnographic work will hopefully serve to broaden our understanding of women as they live in and work for their community. Mercedes, Teresa, Yesenia and Viviana share similar though not identical experiences in the process of their daily living. This work is an attempt to highlight the common elements found in their experiences rather than provide comparison between them. Because each story is unique the dialogic

format affords Mercedes, Viviana, Teresa and Yesenia an opportunity to speak for themselves. The conversational format also affords a more complete illustration of the multiple aspects of their identities.

My vision for this work is that these women's stories serve to enlighten and motivate the reader towards meaningful discourse in which the borders between participant and observer are less rigidly drawn. Gloria Anzaldúa (1990) exhorts us to "connect the community to the academy" and proposes that we do this by what she terms, "de-academizing" theory (Anzaldúa 1990:xxvi). It is my heartfelt desire to render Mercedes, Teresa, Viviana and Yesenia fully human and to let their own voices tell us how they think and feel about their community, their work and themselves. According to Lynn Stephen (1997) this allows for "theory [to become] performance mediated by the voices and interpretations of those who are doing the acting" (Stephen 1997:22).

It is my belief that by telling their stories, Mercedes, Yesenia, Viviana and Teresa will be honored as strong women and powerful beings. The stories they tell are about determination, perseverance, resilience and power. All are strong women with their own personal histories of hardship, struggle, faith and strength. Mercedes, Viviana, Teresa and Yesenia have all overcome one obstacle after another in pursuit of what they feel passionately about. Whether it was to leave abusive relationships or the difficulties of pursuing an education, they were all motivated by their own internal passion. We can all draw motivation from that.

Their stories tell of oppressions, such as the bureaucratic hurdles that Yesenia faces as she tries to realize her goals. At the same time, however, we see how her determination to succeed will not allow her to give up her dream to be a teacher. Their

stories tell of abusive relationships at the hands of domineering men but also of how these women negotiate their private lives in a way that makes them victorious over these oppressive forces. In Mexico, as in most Latin American countries, there exists "dominant cultural ideologies proposing that women's proper place is in the domestic sphere". These are "powerful obstacles" to women's self-determination. (Stephen 1997:8). Faced with these cultural constraints, we note how Viviana negotiates her familial conflicts and is temporarily able to resolve these conflicts by accommodating to existing cultural traditions while she perseveres to redefine her role in her marriage. By constant renegotiation of her familial role, Viviana is gaining greater autonomy. However, because Mercedes also faces these constraints albeit at the hands of "white men," it is logical to assume that this ideology is not just cultural but patriarchal as well. Although by Mercedes' own admission she remained in undesirable relationships for too long, we see how she draws upon her internal strength and makes choices that ultimately result in her liberation.

All four women highlighted here have an impressive range of experiences, a record of struggles as well as achievements and success. They are strong because they define themselves as strong women and are not afraid to say what they think. For Teresa, empowerment came by overcoming the language barrier and temerity that plagued her as a young girl. Having gained skills and knowledge while working at the center, Teresa exhibits a well-defined sense of self-awareness. By freely expressing her dissatisfaction with the "system", Yesenia is able to strengthen her determination to continue her education. Viviana's strength comes from the realization that her role in her marriage can be redefined and she puts this to the test every time she succeeds in

returning to the work she loves. For Mercedes, her awareness of class and gender oppression whether it be internal from her own group or external from the dominant society, gives her the impetus she needs to form stronger support networks among the women at the center and within the community. All the women whose stories are narrated here suffer degrees of alienation yet they manage to live and create in this unfavorable environment. Even more important, they have created lives full of purpose, dignity and meaning.

An intimate element of daily life that allows Mercedes, Teresa, Yesenia and Viviana to cope with crises, is their religious beliefs. Religion, sociologically speaking, is a social institution; a structure built around accepted beliefs, norms and practices. Mexicans have been indoctrinated to Catholicism since the onset of the Spanish conquest of Mexico centuries ago. The Catholic Church is highly structured, bureaucratic and patriarchal. For women of Mexican descent, too often this religious influence has manifested itself as an oppressive force. This was evident when Mercedes told of her desire to leave an abusive relationship and of the Catholic Church's insistence that she remain in her marriage. Mercedes goes against the teachings of the Catholic Church and exercises her agency by obtaining a divorce. However, Mercedes also leads an organized church ministry for the children of their community. Religion for these women then can be seen as a duality being both a site of oppression as well as one of liberation. Because their spirituality is deeply personal, Mercedes, Yesenia, Viviana and Teresa harbor a reservoir of inner spirituality, a unifying spiritual energy that connects them to each other and to their community. They are vocal and open with regards to their religious beliefs and freely concede divine intervention in reference to the work that gets done at the

center. Often and openly, they give thanks for and credit to answered prayers and miracles for the success of the center and the work they perform there.

The center acts as a harbor providing stability and security and has been a tool of liberation for the women whose stories are narrated here as well as for others. It is here, at the center and in their daily interactions with each other and with the community, that the many themes such as love of their people, education of the young, self-empowerment, community building, ethnic identity, spirituality, collective identity and leadership intersect, and are experienced and shared. As leaders in their community, these women also provide stability and help foster a strong bond of continuity for future generations.

Of prime importance is that although gender inequality, cultural expectations and social injustice are key aspects to these women's experiences, these factors serve to intensify these women's struggle for self-empowerment. In no way are Mercedes, Teresa, Viviana and Yesenia passive victims. The knowledge and skills derived from their experiences serve as stepping-stones to their empowerment and liberation as women. In the process, they not only provide invaluable services to their community but they offer them a way to preserve their heritage as well. By their example, they lead others through their border journeys. In addition, they also act as bridges, connecting their community with the dominant society.

Their collective identity is fueled by and channeled through their involvement with the center. As such, their work at the center provides them public space from which to speak about their private lives. Smith (1987) provides thoughtful insight when she says, "the extraordinary moment came when...this was a place from which we could speak to and of the society at large" (Smith 1987:199).

This thesis project has also been about crossing personal borders. Echoing Lugones, I did some "world travelling" of my own and found myself as both observer and participant. My relationship with Mercedes, Yesenia, Teresa and Viviana and the experience of this thesis work were my bridges to a place I never would have gone under any other circumstance. Living this work and coming to know these women personally made it possible for me to identify with some of their experiences. For me, this was a revelatory journey as well. I began this journey as a detached onlooker and crossed the border to vulnerable observer, fully engaged and actively involved.

By letting me into their world, Mercedes, Yesenia, Teresa and Viviana showed me the value of holding on to your culture not as an inescapable burden but as a joyous gift, unique and priceless. In all they do, they celebrate their culture and encourage their community to preserve their heritage.

Together, these women and I have opened the window toward a new understanding of our relations to other individuals and other cultures. But just as important, we opened windows within ourselves.

**Sara Estela Ramírez: Sembradora**

**¡Surge! Surge a la vida, a la actividad, a la  
belleza de vivir realmente; perso surge radiamenta  
y poderosa, bella de cualidades, esplendente  
de virtudes, fuerte de energías**

**Sara Estela Ramírez: Sower**

**Rise Up! To Woman  
Rise up! Rise up to life, to activity, to  
the beauty of truly living; but rise up radiant  
and powerful, beautiful with qualities, splendid  
with virtues, strong with energies**

**Inés Hernández  
*April 9, 1910***

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