LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Workers in the Field: Geographies of Difference in Helena Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*

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Abstract:
At first glance, the relationship between the characters of Helena Viramontes's novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* and the land seems evident: as migrant farmworkers they spend their days engaged in picking crops and tending the soil. But beneath this guise of simplicity are a range of sociopolitical and economic forces making their relationship to the land seem natural while simultaneously obscuring the difficulty and danger associated with such work. As the novel demonstrates, these workers risk pesticide exposure, as well as deportation and lack of health care. Through Katherine McKittrick's concept of *geographies of difference*, we see the highly racialized and spatialized environment in which these workers live. By examining human and cultural geography in *Under the Feet of Jesus,* we see how space and place are wrapped up in complex ways with matters of identity and power. Furthermore, space is the lens through which we can see this myriad of forces in its perpetual state of motion and flux. Examining the significance of geography to this novel sheds new light on Viramontes's work a little over a quarter of a century after publication. Space may ultimately be the fertile ground in which future study of migrant farmworkers in literature can reveal the important intersections between the racial-sexual body, practices of hegemony, and our current environmental crisis.

Keywords: Helena Viramontes; place and space; migrant labor; geographies of difference; *Under the Feet of Jesus*; farmworkers.

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Introduction

Though it has been more than 25 years since Helena María Viramontes first published *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), her lyrical prose and sharp eye for capturing social injustice remains critically relevant. The novel, which follows a migrant Mexican-American family working in the California grape fields, centers on its young female protagonist, Estrella and the precarious position within which her family lives out their day-to-day lives. Estrella, her younger siblings, their mother Petra, and their mother's lover, Perfecto Flores live in a small bungalow beside a dilapidated barn in California's Central Valley. They are one of the many families living in the region as farm laborers picking grapes. Alejo and his cousin Gumencido cross paths with Estrella's family when they offer the family peaches they have stolen from the fields. Estrella and Alejo develop affection for one another in the field and Estrella's family cares for him when he becomes sick from pesticide poisoning, eventually taking great risk and expense to get Alejo to the closest medical facilities. Despite the years since its publication, the political bent of Viramontes's novel remains relevant. Migrant labor still accounts for a significant portion of the produce harvested in the U.S., and these workers regularly face poor living conditions, with limited access to medical care or support. Furthermore, they often find themselves caught between economic forces that encourage their labor and sociopolitical forces that marginalize and criminalize their presence. The combination of such economic, social and political forces makes their work both dangerous and difficult.

In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Viramontes demonstrates how economic forces play a significant role in the politics of California literature. In this regard, *Under the Feet of Jesus* is not alone. The clash between agrarian capital and race and class politics in California-based fiction has a long and inspired history. This literary heritage reaches back to early twentieth-century works like Frank Norris's *The Octopus* (1901) and Harold Bell Wright's *The Winning of Barbara Worth* (1911) as well as forward to 20th century works like John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and even more recent works such as T.C. Boyle's *Tortilla Curtain* (1995). As George L. Henderson's *California and the Fictions of Capital* makes clear, California's economy throughout the 19th and early 20th century centered around an unstable relationship between agriculture and capitalism (1998: xi). The literary realism that emerged from this background, was infused with concerns for the 'social and geographical processes of uneven development and the circulation of capital' (xi). *Under the Feet of Jesus* is an important contribution to literature in this vein as the novel addresses both these processes of uneven development and the economic and political forces that maintain these distributions of capital.

Additionally, Viramontes's attention to the racial-sexual body in *Under the Feet of* Jesus illustrates the presence of a raced and classed labor force that stands in contrasts to what Sarah Wald, in *The Nature of California: Race Citizenship and Farming Since the Dust Bowl,* discusses as the role of the white, universal citizen embodied in the American farmer:

> The American farmer stands in for what scholars have termed the abstract person or universal citizen. The abstract person or universal citizen is an ideal. It is the disembodied or abstraction of citizenship that renders the presumed whiteness and

> maleness of citizen invisible. This allows the position of the citizen to appear to be universal. The abstract person as universal citizen receives the promise of equality before the law. Yet because society's construction of race renders whiteness and masculinity as invisible, the nonwhite normal subject becomes embodied and marked as different…outside of or on the margins of, universality. (2016: 7)

This standard of citizenship allows the large-scale farmers to fade into the California landscape as abstract while the classed and raced workers in the fields remain embodied and, to borrow Wald's term, 'marked'. Viramontes's prose makes visible the hardships endured by these workers and the very material realities surrounding their labor.

It is perhaps no surprise, however, that Viramontes is so attuned to these social and political matters as she was notably influenced by the Latinx labor movements of César Chávez and the United Farm Workers. Her work, in *Under the Feet of Jesus* as well as *Their Dogs Came With Them* (2007), consistently brings the importance of the Chicano movement to California history and literature. Furthermore, as Dennis López notes, the novel's ties to social realism connect but also remove this novel from easy literary histories for 'the often overlooked fact that Chicana/o and Latina/o writers have always been vital and chief contributors to the broad canons of US radical protest literature' (2019: 336). While Viramontes's attention to both agrarian capital and the farmworker movement make it an important contribution to works in this vein, her addition of an environmental critique in *Under the Feet of Jesus* make it particularly worthy of study under a geographic lens. While most scholarship on Viramontes has focused on either her critique of the labor conditions or the environmental impact, a geographic approach to this novel allows us to examine both as intertwined and essential features of our interaction with the landscape.

Much of the scholarship on *Under the Feet of Jesus* has focused on the social and political forces at work within the novel's portrayal of California agricultural life. Dennis López (2014), Sharla Hutchinson (2013) and Sarah Wald (2011) have all engaged in a discussion of the social, political, and economic forces that affect the laborers in the novel. The advertisement industry, for example, excludes workers from the national imaginary as well as the industrial realm of U.S. agribusiness (Wald 2011). Due to this conflict, Viramontes's young protagonist, Estrella, navigates conflicting modes of identity and erasure. As López has noted, this is one of the ways that Viramontes 'juxtaposes the concrete social particularities of the laboring body' with the more abstract forces that depend on gendered and racialized hierarchies (2014). The abstract (and often obscured) nature of these forces is one of the primary struggles underpinning Estrella's struggles and the novel as a whole. These forces (social, political, economic) come more directly in the novel from figures such as the overseers, border patrol, educators, and health providers that dictate where, when and how Estrella ought to be. In his more recent work, López has explored this obscurity through the lens of spectrality, examining 'a fundamental connection between Viramontes's figurative appeal to the 'ghostly' and her more openly political and economic concerns in telling a story about the poverty, exploitation, violence, and humiliation inflicted yearly on farmworkers in the United States by capitalist agribusiness' (2019: 309). This work beautifully captures the political and economic

concerns that weigh on Estrella and her family and the ways in which such concerns are displaced in order to seem almost invisible.

The other major approach to Viramontes's novel has been via the environmental route. This thread of scholarship in the vein of David Vásquez (2017) and Christina Grewe-Volpp (2005) has approached the need to examine environmental matters of pesticides and toxicity within the novel. Not unlike the social and political aspects of the novel, the environmental effects of industrial farming have their own policing and structuring effects on Estrella's life that goes beyond the figure of border patrol, educators, or health providers. Instead, these effects permeate the novel's background and come to the forefront when Estrella's friend Alejo falls victim to pesticide poisoning. These environmental approaches highlight the sometimes less-acknowledged dangers faced by migrant field laborers while revealing the need to examine connections between the sociopolitical and environmental within the novel.

The scholarship from these two branches: the socio-political and the environmental demonstrates the extent to which Viramontes in *Under the Feet of Jesus* addresses key social and political issues for agricultural laborers without losing sight of the importance of environment. In fact, the novel demonstrates how, from the position of field laborers, environment and sociopolitical concerns are deeply entwined. From this perspective, the importance of space and the need for a geographical reading becomes clear. By paying closer attention to concepts of space and place, we not only unite the environment with the social and political protest at work within the novel, but also invite an understanding for how these divides intersect with material and immaterial forces both in the novel and in the lives of migrant farmworkers more broadly. Ultimately, in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Viramontes illustrates how the spectacles and practices of hegemony in their political, economic, social and environmental forms, racialize and spatialize the migrant worker, placing them as simultaneously natural and unnatural habitants in a cultural geography that intersects with and diverges from the physical landscape.

Space and Place: Geography, Race, and Belonging

The deep entanglements of race, identity, and space in *Under the Feet of Jesus* begin at the already complex intersections between landscape, geography, and the role that economics and society play in such configurations. In his now well-known book *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (1998) Denis Cosgrove notes the way in which landscape is always 'a *social* product, the consequence of a collective human transformation of nature' (14). His observations helped pave the way to an understanding of the deeply social and cultural forces mediating landscape. Landscape is particularly significant to *Under the Feet of Jesus* as the California landscape has long served national imaginings as a sort of second Eden. David Wyatt in *The Fall into Eden* contextualizes the process as such:

> The American settlement of California marked the end of Western man's Hesperian movement. So great was the beauty of the land that it conferred on the completion of the quest the illusion of a return to a privileged source. As the sense of an ending

> merged with the wonder of beginnings, California as last chance merged with California as Eden. (1986: xvi)

This reading of California as Eden is so prevalent that Don Mitchell has suggested that California was 'not so much discovered as *made*' (1998: 1, emphasis in original). As Mitchell is quick to note, however, this making is not purely in the imagination. The realization that the making of landscape is both material and imaginative, having therefore effects in both realms. In California (as elsewhere) the physical labor associated with the making of landscape is often obscured, leaving the assumption that landscape belongs purely to the realm of the cultural. The desire to obscure such labor is an attempt to naturalize the often-brutal conditions of this labor. 'As this happens, workers must overcome not just conditions of inequality and the oppressive work of power, but the stabilized landscape itself. They must destabilize not just the relations of place, but the very ground upon and within which those relations are situated and structured' (34). In this way, the workers face not only unequal labor conditions, but also the way that those conditions and the environment as a whole are seen within the national imaginary.

When the landscape becomes a stabilized sense of place, what seems natural is actually highly regulated by racial-sexual politics that determine who belongs where. Katherine McKittrick in *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (2006) explains that:

> Practices of domination, sustained by a unitary vantage point, naturalize both identity and place, repetitively spatializing where nondominant groups "naturally" belong. This is, for the most part, accomplished through economic, ideological, social, and political processes that see and position the racial-sexual body within what seems like predetermined, or appropriate, places and assume that this arrangement is commonsensical (2006: xvii).

McKittrick's use of the term 'naturalize' is particularly important for the analysis of Viramontes's work, which addresses the agribusiness's history of portraying the fields and fieldworkers as a pristine, second Eden. As Sarah Wald notes, 'narratives about food and farming, moreover, often recall a Jeffersonian fantasy of the yeoman farmer, linking food to a nationalist nostalgia' (2011: 568). The agricultural industry within the U.S. works to create the image of the yeoman farmer through advertisements and product labels that erase the brutal aspects of field labor. As McKittrick writes 'if *who* we see is tied up with *where* we see through truthful, commonsensical narratives, then the placement of subaltern bodies deceptively hardens spatial binaries in turn suggesting that some bodies belong, some bodies do not belong, and some bodies are out of place' (2006: xiii, emphasis in original). These ideas of place work to naturalize or denaturalize belonging. As Tim Cresswell has observed, 'place' combines the spatial with the social– it is 'social space' (1992: 3). The social in this way regulates the ways and places bodies can exist in space. Furthermore, Estrella's oscillation between being in and out of place directly reveals the importance of geography to understanding the myriad of influences acting through and upon her.

These forces within Viramontes's novel work hard to make the landscape, and these are some of the larger, hegemonic forces at play within the novel. While Estrella is a critical component of the physical *making* of the landscape through her labor, she does not have equal power in constructing the national imaginary due to her position at the imaginative and discursive borders of that imaginary. The erasure she faces is often expressed through a sense of being out of place. Through an analysis of the intersection of space and place in this novel, therefore, we see where these hegemonic forces crisscross as well as work against and within one another in the social, political, economic, and environmental realm.

Images of Second Eden: Naturalizing Labor and Harvesting Profit

Viramontes exposes the mythology of California as a second Eden as an image created by agribusinesses and disseminated by commercial products and labels. California, historically pictured as a land of natural bounty, is a significant choice of setting for Viramontes's novel. As Christa Grewe-Volpp has noted, 'in the Euroamerican imagination California is the land of agrarian abundance, a kind of garden of Eden, the goal of a real as well as mythic journey West' (2005: 65). This garden of Eden imagery erases the brutality of the labor and the condition within which the laborer is often forced to live. Grueling labor within this Euroamerican imagination simply seems impossible. This myth of paradise is also significant in the ways that it plays alongside narratives of food production within the U.S. As López has noted, Viramontes centers our attention on the laboring bodies in order to reveal the hierarchies of race and class that work to erase the migrant laborer from the national imaginary (2014: 47). While this erasure typically hides behind glossy labels and advertisements, Viramontes uses advertisements within the novel to show the clear hegemonic processes at work in these labels that manufacture not only consumer convenience, but their ignorance of the production process as well.

Estrella eventually becomes aware of the disjointed reality between the image projected about the food industry and its harsh reality. She witnesses such advertising early as she reads *Mille the Model* magazine with her neighbor Maxine. Within the magazine Estrella discovers:

> Words like the kind in the newspapers thrown in trash cans at filling stations, or oatmeal instructions, or billboard signs that Estrella read over and over: *Clorox makes linens more than white…It makes them sanitary too! Swanson's TV Dinners, closest to Mom's Cooking. Coppertone–Fastest Tan Under the Sun with Maximum Sunburn Protection.* (31)

These products manufacture not only the promise of cleanliness, good food and tanned skin, but more generally, middle-class, white ascendancy. Sharla Hutchinson argues that the imaginary created within these images aims to 'mediate consumer desire, developing…a wish-fulfilling function (paradise, social harmony, democracy, etc.)' (2013: 975). This wish-fulfilling aspect of advertisement illustrates the power over culture that it holds. Such advertisements tell consumers the items they need to purchase to achieve such class status, effectively erasing those living outside the parameters of such status. The image

presented by Clorox in particular, clashes with the pee-stained mattress sitting on the porch of Maxine's house.

This contrast's importance has stakes not only in the economic realm, but in the social as well. The products promoting cleanliness had strong implications for racial and class divides within the U.S. imaginary. As Carl Zimring posits in *Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the U.S.*:

> Between 1865 and 1930, new constructions of waste and race re-defined white people as innately cleaner than any non-white peoples. Equating non-white skin with dirt, these constructions (apparent in popular culture, academic discourse, and repeated tropes in advertising) marked new, emerging constructions of environmental racism. (2017: 5)

Zimring notes that these constructions of race and cleanliness are significantly tied to pop culture and advertising as well as educational discourse. While advertising and pop culture play the most significant role in highlighting these themes, in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Estrella also finds herself at odds with the educational system when she faces the realization that the lack of access to clean water in her home environment means she is not up to her teacher's standard of cleanliness. 'Until then, it had never occurred to Estrella that she was dirty, that the wet towel wiped on her resistant face each morning, the vigorous brushing and tight braids her mother neatly weaved were not enough for Mrs. Horn' (2017: 25). This desire for cleanliness is repeated in both the economic and instructive realm. The purity of white linens further mirrors a nationalist desire for a pure white, middle-class culture. Lastly, the Coppertone advertisement exacerbates this divide between clean (and white) and dirty (not white), with its cynical promise to provide the 'fastest tan under the sun' a tan achieved not through the outdoor work performed by farm laborers, but by the middle class on holiday. Such advertisement ultimately points at a long-standing contradiction of a white consumer culture wanting tanned skin while marginalizing those born with darker skin. These advertisements work to exclude the farmworker from the national imaginary, which is white and middle class, with access to clean water and TV dinners. Even in the realm of advertisements, Estrella faces exclusionary forces. She is, after all, not the intended consumer of these images, nor is her life representative of the products displayed.

The image of the Sun Maid raisin woman is another commercial example that Viramontes uses to demonstrate the hidden exploitation of human labor. While Estrella may not fully understand the significance behind the advertisements for Coppertone or Clorox, in the case of the Sun Maid raisins, Estrella sees through the second-Eden image and is able to testify that:

> Carrying the full basket to the paper was not like the picture on the red raisin boxes Estrella saw in the markets, not like the woman wearing a fluffy bonnet, holding out the grapes with her smiling, ruby lips, the sun a flat orange behind her. The sun was white and it made Estrella's eyes sting like an onion, and the baskets of grapes resisted her muscles, pulling their magnetic weight back to the earth. The woman

> with the red bonnet did not know this. Her knees did not sink in the hot white soil…The woman's bonnet would be as useless as Estrella's own straw hat under a white sun so mighty, it toasted the green grapes to black raisins. (49-50)

Estrella contrasts the picturesque bonnet and 'ruby lips' with the muscle strain and stinging eyes that she experiences. Her physical labor contrasts so strongly with the glossy image on the box that she is able to discern the misrepresentation of her labor. The colors, furthermore, pit the white sun and the white soil in the earlier half of the image against the black raisins in the second. The 'hot white soil' is particularly distinct from what we would typically imagine as brown or black soil. The image here reinforces the sense of heat, of working under a hot sun. Additionally, the oppressive nature of these elements mirrors the oppressive force of the white owners of large industrial farms that force women like Estrella to work under such conditions. Through these contrasts: on the one hand the aesthetically-pleasing advertisements, and the other, the grueling reality of labor, Viramontes is at work to dismantle these portraits of farmworker life. In doing so, she demonstrates the physical consequences of an imagined geography that perpetuates itself through mostly hidden exploitation of human labor.

Viramontes upsets the expectation with which consumers have come to interpret cultural images of agricultural production. The '*who* we see' becomes 'tied up with *where* we see' (McKittrick 2006: xiii). Therefore, if the consumer buys into the mythology of a second-Eden California, it naturalizes the smiling brown bodies depicted in advertisements and product labels while obscuring the actual bodies that labor. Furthermore, the relationship between the worker and the state (explained further in the next section) is inextricably tied up with matters of profit, immigration, and citizenship, a relationship too difficult to expand on fully, but one that has 'at times pressur[ed] the state to open borders and at other times call[ed] for increased enforcement' (Shea 2003: 126). This contested relationship between nation, economy and citizenship works continually against the favor of the worker, erased as producer by the advertisements that narrow the cultural imaginary of fruit production to an idyllic image of small-scale farms and that spatialize the labor within these fields as a part of our Jeffersonian heritage.

Violent Spectacles: La Migra and State Power

In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa tells the account of the appearance of *la migra* (border patrol) in the fields. 'My aunt saying, "*No corran*, don't run. They'll think you're *del otro lao*"' (1987: 26*)*. In this scene, Anzaldúa accounts for the fear of being caught and the difficulty of explaining one's circumstance given the assumption of criminality. Though not directly present in the text, borders play an important role in the novel. The state does as well, present in the haunting force of border patrol. These officers, enacting the power of the state, draw the border line, deciding who belongs and who does not. Their role is, therefore, connected to managing state interests and matters of citizenship. Within the novel, these divisions are largely geographic. This physical geographic segregation, such as the separation created between borders, or between the field laborers and the company owners, illustrates the importance of geography to the power of the state. As Jacqui

Alexander writes in *Pedagogies of Crossing,* 'physical geographic segregation is a potent metaphor for the multiple sites of separation and oppositions generated by the state' (2006: 5). The state uses borders and geographic separation to create geographies of difference, to determine who belongs and who does not.

In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Viramontes illustrates state-produced geographies of difference by examining how the physical border translates to emotional and psychological borders as well. These borders create uneven geographies across which narratives of criminality and not-belonging are mapped. The border patrol, though never present physically within the novel, becomes a much larger symbol of the disciplinary force of the state. Viramontes introduces the border patrol within what is often viewed as a particularly American pastime: baseball. As the field lights come on, Estrella has the sensation that they are: 'headlights of cars, blinding her. The round, sharp white lights burned her eyes and she made a feeble attempt to shield them with an arm. The border patrol, she thought and she tried to remember which side she was on and which side of the wire mesh she was safe in' (60). The headlights cause Estrella to experience the trauma of passing through the contentious geographic space of the U.S.-Mexico border.

Though she is not literally or physically present at the border, and though she is a citizen and has her papers located under the foot of the small Jesus statue so significant within the novel, the imagined presence of the officers serves as a symbolic reminder of traumatizing violence committed against the Latinx community. Estrella's blind fear regardless of her actual citizenship status points to the state-sanctioned terror that infiltrates the farmworker community. For a mixed-status family like Estrella's, she is always forced to wonder 'which side of the wire mesh she [is] safe in' (60). The terror this scene causes for Estrella reenacts Alexander's conception of how hegemony functions. The spectacle created through flashing headlights denotes violence and fear as well total state power. Estrella finds herself forced to flee what is ultimately a harmless situation because the trauma she has been living with at a young age encourages her to read the lights as portentous signs of violence. The scene ultimately reminds us the of the degree to which Estrella and her family have been living constantly in a precarious relationship with the state.

This relationship, while welcomed by the corporate entities seeking cheap labor, carries with it the emotional residue of the border. Gloria Anzaldúa speaks of this residue writing: 'Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow string along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition' (1987: 25). Though Estrella's family has successfully crossed the border physically, their presence within the United States transgresses the decisiveness of the *us vs. them* divide, bringing with it evidence of the boundary as unnatural.

While there is a physical border that is designed to modulate the flow of people between two countries, there are also the imaginative borders that mentally barricade the access to citizenship. Despite the fact that Estrella's mother has birth certificates under the feet of the porcelain Jesus, Estrella still feels the presence of the border patrol after her (63). As Shea has argued, 'early in the novel, Estrella's mother warns her against

internalizing the dominant terms of "criminality" within the state' (2003: 139). Despite her mother's warnings, however, Estrella still feels the force of *la migra* after her. The reason for this unrelenting feeling lies in her inability to point directly at the source. Though her reaction is to run home and defend herself, there is no one she can fight; *la migra* was never at the field in the first place. Her inability to point to the source of her fear indicate the complex matrix of power at work as well as how geographies of difference continually place her in a position of vulnerability that is rooted in spatial matters.

This position of vulnerability comes from narratives that place her family, in McKittrick's terms, as bodies out of place. The emphasis on body here is key, as the policing and geographic divide is very much a racial-sexual one. Estrella finds herself fighting against the cultural imaginary of a white middle-class America, just as she had previously done when examining the lack of reality in the advertisements from *Millie the Model*. Just as agricultural corporations fabricate geographies of difference to spatialize and naturalize the labor they rely on, the state also has stakes in the imaginary of what is natural or not, particularly in the realm of citizenship. What appears through examining the ways in which companies and the nation create and alter geographies of difference is the way in which the state and the companies within the novel work in similar yet disparate ways. While the companies use racial and gendered imaginaries to demonstrate how migrant laborers *naturally* belong in the field, the state uses similar tactics emphasizing the racialized body as means of indicating such laborers do *not belong*. Laborers are situated within the clash between the state and companies.

White Uniform, Red Lipstick: Harelipped Children and Gendered Places

While the economic and political forces within the novel make for clear examples of the hegemonic forces altering and shaping the cultural and geographic imaginary surrounding migrant farmworkers, they are by no means the only forces Viramontes's novel addresses. At work too are the social forces that spatialize these workers. Though there are a variety of ways we might examine Viramontes's use of the social as a spatializing hegemonic force, of greatest interest perhaps is her use of gender in the novel. Each of the characters within the novel faces gendered expectations and realities altered by their gender. Perfecto, for example, finds himself caught between the duty he feels as the male head-of-household and the lack of financial support that he is able to find the family. Likewise, Petra faces a series of gendered expectations and obligations that only grow more complicated with her ill-health and pregnancy. However, despite these various examples, Estrella's age–somewhere between childhood and adulthood–makes her gender particularly important within the novel as she is caught between societal, economic, and gendered roles.

Within the novel, Estrella has two main models of femininity: her mother and those provided by pop culture. In reading Maxine's *Millie the Model* magazines, Estrella learns about conventional standards of beauty. This beauty is exemplified in Millie's 'bold yellow hair in a flowing flip, her painted breasts, perfect smiles on her chest' (30). In addition to the racialized image of beauty, 'the model was crying, big tears melting from her ice blue eyes,' illustrating the fragility the 'ideal' woman of the period would exhibit (30). Despite the obvious physical differences between Millie's description and Estrella's, perhaps their

largest difference comes from their experiences. Millie's ample tears, for example, contrast starkly with Viramontes's image of Estrella as 'she opened her eyes and spread the grapes and did not cry' despite muscle cramps and heat exhaustion (54). Furthermore, her tearless goodbye to Alejo in the hospital reveals that Estrella suppresses even the hardest emotions for the good of her family and community. Unlike Millie and unlike the target audience of this magazine, Estrella is simply not allowed to 'have a good cry' nor is this form of beauty or femininity accessible to her. Instead her life requires her to perform her gender in a way that contradicts what she reads in pop culture magazines and society-at-large as feminine.

Her actions and her ability to suppress her emotions reinforces her economic importance for the family. As López notes, Viramontes here draws our attention to the long history of female labor both in and outside the home (2014: 64). Estrella's youth and strength make her important to the family's income. So important, in fact, that despite being young and female, Estrella must work in the field alongside the men. Estrella's developing realization of her solitary female presence within the field indicates her growing awareness of the social significance of space and her transgression into a male-dominated realm:

> She was the only grown female there. The mother had yelled No and Estrella should have been safely tucked away like the other woman of the camp because the moon and earth and sun's alignment was a powerful thing. Unborn children lurking in their bodies were in danger of having their lips bitten just like the hare on the moon if nothing was done to protect them. (69)

Estrella, by working in the field, meets a complex matrix of risks based on her gender. She realizes that she is in a precarious position as a woman alone in the fields. She also faces the risk of pesticide poisoning for herself and future children. These future children 'lurk' somewhere in the hazy, but perhaps not-too-distant future as she begins to feel a deep attraction to Alejo. These risks all meet in one space and center around the critical factor of gender. Her mother's fear for Estrella's unborn children indicates a combination of concerns for Estrella as becoming a sexual being whose position puts her and her potential children at risk for chemical harm. The spatialization of gender and risk ultimately contrasts with the capitalist demand for laborers and the family's economic needs. Further, Estrella's physical position within the field conceals her from the public imaginary that conceives of fourteen-year-old girls wearing Coppertone tanning oil while reading *Millie the Model*. She is, therefore, separated from her peers physically and in the imaginative realm as well.

Viramontes further illustrates the importance of space in the novel through the nurse, whose appearance and attitude toward the family reflect her middle-class values. 'The young woman emerged holding her purse and car keys…She had on a fresh coat of red lipstick' (137). The lipstick, and her heavy perfume, stand out to Estrella as it separates her from the women she is used to seeing within the camps. Furthermore, the woman dismissed the family, saying: 'Hon, you gotta understand. I gotta pick up my kids in Daisyfield by six' (146). Her children, unlike Estrella, have an education; her car, unlike Perfecto's has enough gas to get to Daisyfield. The greatest contrast between the two in this interaction, however, is the nurse's capacity to walk away from the suffering, her ability

to leave such suffering behind as simply a bad day. When she takes the money and tries to leave, 'Estrella slammed the crowbar down on the desk, shattering the school pictures of the nurse's children, sending the pencils flying to the floor, and breaking the porcelain cat with a nurse's cap into pieces' (149). The nurse, completely startled, has not even recognized the desperation the family felt until she fears for her own physical harm. Estrella resorts to violence as the only means to make the nurse understand the predicament. Estella finds herself forced to act physically to protect her loved ones, an echo to the ways she must physically work as well.

Despite her mother's desire to keep Estrella innocent, Estrella must take on traditionally male-gendered behaviors and actions as means of defending her family and those she cares about. These actions, however, particularly in the clinic, illustrate how the actions of violence committed against the family are repeated to the point of seeming mundane, while acts of resistance from Estrella appear shocking: 'While the white nurse sees Estrella's act as violent, she does not see the systemic violence that bears down on the migrant family because it is rendered invisible through its normalization' (Shea 2003: 139). These acts work to make Estrella's actions seem as though they do not belong within the space where the nurse from Daisyfield lives. These acts are spatialized, making Estrella's natural place within the economic system appear to be in the field, while her cultural place in the home or in school. Ultimately, the push and pull of these social traditions and economic forces serve as another means through which the place and space in which Estrella finds herself is coded and mapped out through often conflicting geographic binaries. Estrella, as a young woman in the field is deemed to be a both natural and unnatural worker. She is simultaneously in and out of place, and her ability to resist dominant modes of belonging, her realization and ability to be out of place, results in her ability to lead her family through the difficulty of treating Alejo. Her gender and to some extent her age, serve as social forces that make up the geographic landscape within which Estrella finds herself. These social forces, like the economic and the political, have drivers behind them, but from the perspective of Estrella and her family, these drivers are murky, as unable to be identified as the lurking presence Estrella feels in the baseball field. Nevertheless, the political, the economic, and the social are all deeply intertwined and enmeshed in profoundly spatialized ways.

We Make the Land and The Land Makes Us

In addition to the economic, political, and social spheres of influence on space, *Under the Feet of Jesus* also presents the role of the environment as an antagonistic force that influences how the characters of the novel perceive and negotiate space and, more importantly, their place within it. With its images of pesticide poisoning and contaminated water, description of the natural environment plays an important and often hostile role within the novel. This final section explores how the ideas and images of the landscape alter the physical environment and how the physical environment informs and alters the imaginative. What seems natural comes into question as Viramontes associates aspects of the environment with the hegemonic forces pressing down on the workers. In demonstrating the interplay between the physical and the cultural, Viramontes blurs the boundaries so that at times it

is impossible to know which is which, ultimately pointing to the difficulty of identifying the source of the geographies of difference as well as the difficulty of re-charting them.

One of the clearest examples of hegemonic force within the environment is the use of pesticides in the field. Their importance within the novel has led Dora Ramírez-Dhoore to argue that the pesticides become a prominent character, embodied in the figure of the 'hare-lipped child'. Ramírez-Dhoore argues that the child ghost reminds the characters of their environmental surroundings as 'slowly, their hearts are taken by the consumer-driven necessity for pesticide spraying, the medical system, and the authorities' (2010: 191). This analysis emphasizes the fear surrounding the pesticides in the novel. In this way, the pesticides form a hidden, yet powerful presence that is not dissimilar from the role that *la migra* plays. While *la migra* serves as policing forces in the interest of the state, the pesticides police the environmental politics of the field, removing unwanted inhabitants, human and insect alike.

As readers, we may view the pesticides as a byproduct of the agricultural industries seeking of profits. As Vázquez indicates, however, Estrella and the rest of her family are unable to properly identify the hegemonic source hurting Alejo. As Vázquez further notes, this may very well be the means through which Viramontes explains the removed and complicated power relations within the novel. In the complicated web woven by the state and by companies with economic interests, it may be easy to lose sight of some of the social and environmental forces surrounding the novel's description of hegemony and power structures. However, through examining toxicity, Grewe-Volpp indicates how 'Viramontes highlights a net of relationships into which human as well as nonhuman beings are intricately embedded' (2005: 69). Despite the fact that we can look at the cause of the poisoning in the environment, it is clear why it might be important to consider the environment and the pesticides within them as part of an interconnected system. 'Anthropocentric and egocentric criteria cannot be clearly separated. Human beings are part of the ecosystem which in its turn is part of a social and economic system in which all elements–human and nonhuman, cultural and natural–are interdependent' (72). The chemicals that spill into and coat the natural environment in Viramontes's novel, are no longer separate from, but rather a part of the natural environment within the text. Discussing the environment in such a way is not meant to erase the forces amplifying and creating such a hostile environment, but rather, to demonstrate how such an environment acts as a hegemonic and spatializing force within the novel.

The infiltration of the pesticides and other chemicals threatens both current and future life within the novel. Occasionally a violent spectacle, as when Alejo feels the 'gray shadow' of the biplane as it 'cross[es] over him like a crucifix', the chemicals within the novel sometimes take more subtle forms. Estrella, for example, notes the hidden toxicity of the water in the camp: 'Estrella had heard through the grapevine about the water, and knew Big Mac the Foreman lied about the pesticides not spilling into the ditch; but the water seemed clear and cool and irresistible on such a hot day' (32). Despite the appeal of the water, Estrella resists because of the fear of the chemicals within. The use of pesticides and chemicals so close to the workers reveals an impersonal attack on human health and welfare. As the pilot ignores the threat to human life, so too can those further removed

from the issue. This ability to ignore the environmental issue mirrors the ability of consumers to ignore the labor producing the agricultural products sold in stores.

Among the characters of the novel there is clear awareness that their physical struggle against often inhumane use of pesticides and labor policies results in crosshairs between various hegemonic forces. In modifying nature, agribusiness creates an environment that is itself a policing force, keeping workers in/out of specific places (out of the water and the field). Just as they are erased from the cultural imaginary through the use of advertisements, the pesticides are a willingness to remove these people from the imaginary. While their location within the field is naturalized in the economic realm, in the environmental realm, they are spatialized on the wrong side of the border between what belongs and what does not. By working among the pests in the field that are to be removed, they are also likewise viewed as unnatural habitants. Their movement in and around chemicals produces hierarchies of difference that separates power structures. The sterilizing image presented by the Clorox commercial thus returns with attempts to sterilize the region in the cultural imaginary which also results in changes to the environment.

As the pesticides become a normalized aspect of everyday life, with children who, upon receiving a tomato, know to wipe 'off the white coating of insect spray with their shirt sleeves,' the environment itself changes (38). As the environment changes, so too does the way we think through and interact with the environment. As the sprayers of the field do not view the harvesters as natural habitats, owed safety and protection in the field, their actions (continuing to spray) result in an environment in which those who are in the field suffer. Altering the environment in this way in turn alters how the workers imagine and spatialize the fields. This language becomes clear in Alejo's poisoning. He imagines the shadow of the plane as the figure of the cross and he fears that the punishment he has received is a work of God. Alejo has no real means to identify clearly the source of poisoning. While the plane, plane operator, and chemicals clearly hold an essential role, the politics surrounding space in the field has been so deeply engrained for Alejo that he is acutely aware of being where, according to the farm owners, he does not belong. He feels his suffering as punishment of this transgression. The definitive source of this punishment– the plane operator, the pesticide company, the individual that ordered the spraying–to name just a few–eludes easy identification. Instead, to Alejo it appears not as the effects of profit-seeking members of society, but from a divine source. This sense of the divine demonstrates how much the violence that upholds these geographies of difference can seem removed, abstract, and invisible.

Such conflation between economic-driven practices and religion ultimately underscores how it is the signifying binaries of belong/don't belong, citizen/criminal, consumer/producer that are often most visible in the wake of the hidden forces and individuals creating and policing these binaries. The binaries harden into a cultural understanding of who belongs while obscuring why or how such mappings come to be. These understandings of difference have a profound impact on decisions affecting politics, society, and the environment. However, examining or even working to deconstruct these binaries alone does not capture the ways they are caught up in one another. It is only through space that we can see this myriad of forces in motion.

Human and cultural geography, therefore, seems to be the means through which future study of literature centered on migrant workers and subaltern subjects can reveal the important intersections between the racial-sexual body, practices of hegemony, and our current environmental crises. A commitment to examining each of these concerns and their intersections allows a greater understanding of the violence that is made to seem incidental or natural. Therefore, as we continue to develop work that crosses the social and the environmental, cultural geography may be a lens to ground ourselves in a scale that can capture the body, the environment, sweeping nationalist and economic paradigms and, most importantly, remind us that little exists within our plane of vision as natural without forces working hard to imagine it as such.

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