

Cultivating Land-Based Literacies and Rhetorics

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In her recent article on the first Chicana organization, the *Comisión Femenil Mexicana Nacional* (CFMN), Kendall Leon argues for the need for more situated accounts of community rhetoric in order to account for practices or processes of affiliation deployed by marginalized communities that are not easily visible. In fact, Leon argues that Chicana, as a rhetorical identity, “emerges in response to a shared experience by Latin@s and/or Mexican@s of being treated as a-rhetorical” (2). In response to this challenge, Leon offers a methodology and heuristic that recognizes how marginalized folks produce rhetoric beyond a focus on “public texts”(2).

In my own experiences working with farm worker activists in Orlando, Florida, I find that farm workers, many of whom are Latin@ and/or Mexican@, have similarly deployed rhetorics in response to ideologies of literacy that construct them as a-rhetorical. These ideologies of literacy, farm workers argue, operate on a mentality that suggests learning to read and write—or learning to speak a language of power, particularly English or Spanish—will gain them upward mobility or help them become more efficient and effective organizers. Nevertheless, Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) organizer Gerardo Reyes argues that this traditional notion of literacy is not what “changes reality.” In fact, he and other farm workers contend that due to the transient nature of their labor, learning English is the last thing on the list of important needs (Personal interview).

In turning to the CIW, I aim not only to contribute to growing scholarship on situated accounts of community rhetoric in community literacy studies but also to show how the focus on land and environmental issues in farm worker activism contributes to place-based studies in environmental rhetorics. In doing so, I look beyond the notion of text entirely in order to better listen to and account for the arguments farm workers make about literacy and about how their labor and organizing practices are interconnected. I find that farm workers build a theory of social change through what I call land-based literacies and rhetorics. These literacies (acts of interpretation and communication) and rhetorics (organizational and community-building practices) ultimately build a theory that 1) recognizes the ways in which land can produce relations and 2) recognizes the value of embodied ways of knowing.

FARM WORKER ORGANIZING IN FLORIDA: REFRAMING LITERACY

One of the primary areas of concern for many of the organizations we work with at the Youth and Young Adult Network of the National Farm Worker Ministry (YAYA) is labor rights. Farm worker labor organizing cuts across several issues implicated in “the new activism,” including but not limited to youth organizing, technology, literacy, immigration reform, and women’s rights and health issues. Farm work and domestic labor are the only two sectors of labor excluded from federal worker protection rights enjoyed by other workers.¹ They are also, tellingly, the two sectors of labor that constituted the earliest forms of legal slave labor and that arguably paved the way for modern-day capitalism.

I have been most involved in two campaigns: the CIW’s Fair Food Program (FFP), and FWF’s *Campesinos’ Gardens* (Farm Workers’ Gardens). For these organizations, changing reality begins with dignifying farm workers and farm work labor, often in opposition to traditional ideologies of literacy and literate activity. Many farm workers claim that the persistent privileging of traditional literacy devalues not only their knowledge as skilled laborers but also their ability to organize themselves and build movements for social change. Additionally, they argue that—however well-intentioned—promoting traditional literacy as a universal tool of empowerment can have a dehumanizing effect on farm workers, especially those who do not speak a dominant language of power like English or Spanish.

Farm Labor is Skilled Labor: Ideologies of Literacy, Race, and Labor

The CIW is an internationally recognized grassroots organization made up of farm workers and allies (primarily college-aged youth). Since it formed in 1993, it has primarily worked to address labor abuses in farm work and agribusiness, including, in the most extreme cases, modern-day slavery.² The CIW operates like a union, and their FFP seeks to increase the wages of tomato farm workers in Florida and to instill a code of conduct for their labor that can ensure the protection of basic farm worker rights, such as access to restroom facilities and lunch breaks.³ I attended the CIW’s 2013 Encuentro conference as a representative of the Youth and Young Adult Network of the National Farm Worker Ministry. Other YAYA members and I gathered with youth, academics, and other activists from all over the nation to attend sessions and workshops on organizing for the CIW’s campaign for fair food.

During one of our sessions on the history of the CIW’s campaign for fair food (also known as the “fair food movement”) and its accomplishments, Reyes articulated a critique of ideologies of literacy that highlights the ways in which literacy, race, labor, and ability are often bound together: “People think that because Indigenous or poor and uneducated people do this work, that the work lacks intellect or skill. People assume that ‘anyone’ can do this form of labor because ‘these people’ can. But, we have skill. Many of us are Indigenous, and we have grown up knowing how to work with the land” (Reyes, “History”). While, here, Reyes is linking literacy in the form of education to race, class, labor, and ability, he later went on to talk about more traditional forms of literacy and their

impact, arguing, “people think that because we do not know how to read or write, and because we cannot speak English or Spanish that we are ‘unskilled’ workers. But we are experts at what we do” (Reyes, “History”).

When Reyes made these remarks, he was speaking not only about the farm labor that farm workers perform, but also about the organizational and rhetorical labor that they accomplish. The knowledge for organizing, he explained, comes from farm labor and from the land. Reyes was acutely aware of his predominantly college student and academic audience in arguing for a kind of ally who respects the rhetorical skills that farm workers have gained from their labor and experiences, if not from formal education.

This wasn’t the first (nor would it be the last) time that I encountered farm workers bringing up ideological stances on traditional notions of literacy as they discussed the importance of their work. For example, FWF’s Campesinos’ Garden was developed as part of its commitment to food sovereignty for farm workers. FWF is a “multi-ethnic” organization that seeks to secure better working and living conditions for farm workers. During my first visit to the Fellsmere garden, coordinator Yolanda Gomez explained the importance of the garden for farm workers by juxtaposing it against traditional notions of literacy:

I used to always say that my kids needed to be educated and learn English so that they didn’t have to do this work because I think this is how we are always taught to think. But, you know, there is nothing wrong with this work. This work is beautiful and someone has to do it. This garden is not about fresh food—it’s a food movement. (Gomez)

For Gomez, the garden carries political weight: It stands as an argument, not only for farm worker rights to healthy food but also for the value of their labor and their knowledge *in opposition to* ideologies that undermine and devalue it in relation to literacy. Nevertheless, she argues, farm work is valuable knowledge work.

The reframing of literacy in these ways not only asks us to reconsider the ever-present “literacy myth” that literacy acquisition is a universal tool of empowerment (Graff, “Introduction”); it also asks us to consider the ways in which certain ideological stances to literacy are bound up in notions of race, labor, productivity, and even “humanity.” My own research is invested in critical literacy studies that stem from both rhetoric and composition (Rhet-Comp) and Indigenous studies. Several scholars in each discipline have worked to interrogate the relationships between and among literacy, class, education, and race. These scholars highlight the ways in which literacy as a social and cultural construct affects the material conditions of people’s everyday and civic lives (see, for example, Deborah Brandt and Catherine Prendergrast). Some of the most fruitful and enduring projects, such as Graff’s *Literacy Myth*, have taken an historical approach that accounts for contradictions between ideologies of progress and decline in literacy acquisition. In an article commemorating the 30th anniversary of the *Literacy Myth*, Graff reiterates that literacy acquisition “guaranteed neither success nor a rise from poverty,” particularly for African Americans, and at least partially located its power, resilience, and contradictoriness in the development of school systems and citizenship practices (“Literacy Myth at 30” 642).

More recently, in her examination of the role of literacy in the production of citizenship, Amy

Wan has also linked literacy to labor and productivity similarly to how the farm workers have through an examination of literacy training for immigrants seeking work in the U.S. during the 1920s. Her work shows how the public turn in higher education has made the English classroom (especially the rhetoric and composition classroom) a “citizen-making space,” and she challenges the uncritical uptake of citizenship as a heuristic in rhetoric and civic engagement and community literacy courses (174).

As community engagement or civic engagement learning becomes institutionalized, and as literacy practices in the classroom are implicated in these processes, we are met with the need and challenge to adapt a pedagogy *and curriculum* that can be aligned ideologically with communities materially affected by them. In other words, as universities desire to become more “public,” and as scholars want to make our work more public, we should consider how our community partners might affect the trajectory of our curriculum and pedagogy. Instead of assuming that our disciplinary standards define our commitment to communities, we might consider how our commitment to communities challenges our disciplinary norms.

Critical literacy studies in Latin American Indigenous studies advance a somewhat different agenda and historical trajectory than we do in rhetoric and composition studies, and I think this difference is important in a discussion of literacy and farm labor. Though in Rhet-Comp we tend to locate a link between *citizenship* and literacy (often as a relatively recent phenomenon), scholars in Indigenous studies locate that same link as one between *settler-colonialism* and literacy, citing a different historical trajectory and locus for understanding formations of literacy. For example, Walter D. Mignolo has argued that the spread of Western literacy (as alphabetic writing and European languages) was bound by a missionary, *colonial* agenda that constructed alphabetic literacy as sign of “true” civilization in a way that had never been done before but that persists into the present day (*Darker*). This is one of the primary logics used to rationalize the colonization of “savage” Indian nations. In this way, though Indigenous studies recognize that notions of literacy certainly do shift and change over time, these scholars see literacy as an enduring product and producer of ongoing colonialism. Additionally, they recognize the ways in which epistemic or discursive violence is connected to material violence.

LAND-BASED LITERACIES AND RHETORICS

Place-based work in Rhet-Comp has discussed the importance of ecology or, more recently, of “ecological literacy” or “rhetorical ecologies” (Dobrin and Weisser; Goggin; Edbauer); however, Matthew Ortoleva compellingly argues that ecology has often been taken up in our field in a manner that is potentially problematic, given the tendency to talk about it as a metaphor. He cites a long history of ecological and environmental concern in our field, beginning with Kenneth Burke and moving on to Jenny Edbauer’s concept of “rhetorical ecologies.” Ultimately, he argues that the tendency to dematerialize discussions of ecology occurs most often in composition studies, and he proffers that exploring the relationship between ecomposition and ecological literacy can illuminate more fully the consequences that our literacy practices have on our ecological communities. According to

Ortoleva, “ecological literacy means understanding material and discursive relationships, and how these relationships are created, maintained, modified, solidified, and radically changed by acts of language” (66). Moreover, scholars like Thomas Rickert suggest that more work on place in rhetorical theory could further “ontological insights into the dissolution of the subject/object dichotomy and the vital role of the material environment in rhetorical practices” (42).

I argue that farm worker activism challenges us to consider what I call land-based literacies and rhetorics. I bring literacies and rhetorics together because I have found that farm worker literacies are deeply interwoven and in some ways synonymous with farm worker rhetorics. I use the “land” to shift the ontological presuppositions inherent in the term “ecology.” I am referring to an ontological position that sees humans as “the Earth being conscious of itself” (Cajete 61). This is an indigenous concept of relationality that is similar to the notion of ecologies—of networked relationships existing among various human and non-human objects—however, this indigenous concept relies on a relational ontology at the level of *kinship* quite literally. As such, land-based literacies are literal *acts* of interpretation and communication that grow out of active participation with land. While these are literacies that are predominantly extradiscursive, they are nevertheless rooted in relations among discursive phenomena (like communication) and ecology. Indigenous relationality recognizes that humans and the environment are in a relationship that is co-constituted and not just interdependent. Additionally, Indigenous relationality recognizes the environment’s capacity to *produce* relations.

The CIW and FWAf are influenced by Indigenous creeds and principles in their organizing practices that, I argue, contribute to their theory of social change. For example, the CIW draws on the Zapatista model of organizing, citing its non-hierarchical structure and attention to environmental concerns as direct influences on their own organizational frame. FWAf’s Campesinos’ Garden campaign locates exigence for the garden partly in terms of environmental racism and the notion of food sovereignty, which is a concept influenced by Indigenous environmental movements. Indigeneity is also often invoked as a trope of argumentation for both the CIW and FWAf, who value farm worker labor in terms of Indigenous relationality.⁴

Reyes has argued that the land *and* working with the land has taught him and other members of the CIW how to organize and build coalitions. During our final session at Encuentro last September, we were all encouraged to act out physically or create a gesture that could represent or symbolize our commitment to the farm worker movement. Reyes began by making the gesture of hoeing. He said that when you are hoeing the ground to plant a seed, you have to loosen the earth and bring it toward you. Doing this enlivens and conjures up diverse kinds of sediments and mixes them all together. But after you have planted the seed, you have to replace the earth you dug up—put it back in its place. This, he said, serves as a metaphor for how the CIW organizes itself in relation to community: “it’s not about doing work that benefits only you,” he cautioned. “It’s about being able to connect with others for the benefit of us all” (Reyes, Closing remarks). This act of creating community, he argued, is how change happens.

Though Reyes calls this performative act of labor a metaphor, it is also indicative of literal and material ways in which Indigenous land-based literacies and rhetorics function, as “the Earth being conscious of itself,” as previously mentioned. I want to stress, however, that Reyes is not “reading

the soil” here; instead, he is performing an act of relationality with the environment that is in turn teaching him about his own relation to other people. Indigenous scholar Gregory Cajete writes, “Native science [read: knowledge] acts to mediate between the human community and the larger natural community upon which humans depend for life and meaning . . . through this way of participation, Indigenous peoples receive gifts of information from nature” (20-21). Through this act of interpretation and communication—of literacy—he is building a rhetoric of creating and sustaining partnerships that is communal, embodied, and land-based. *This* practice, Reyes claims, is the central rhetorical force guiding the CIW’s efforts and *successes* in changing reality for farm workers (Reyes, Personal interview).

This orientation to relationality resists the subject/object dichotomy and the mind/body dichotomy as well. It suggests that humans and the environment are *always-already* co-constituted. This ontological premise is therefore unlike theories of environmental rhetoric that often presuppose a separation between humans and nature that must be bridged through identification (Burke). Rather, an Indigenous relational ontology recognizes the environment as a relative, and it argues for nature as a primary force in the creation of relations. In short, land-based rhetorics recognize the ways in which nature can *produce* relations. Therefore, when I refer to land-based literacies, I am invoking a relationship between land and bodies that produces knowledge, and that knowledge provides a “context in which process, product, and self might become one” (Cajete 47). One implication of land-based rhetorics, then, is the valuing of embodied ways of knowing/being derived from land and from with working/living/being with land.

The Archive and the Repertoire

Though, as Rickert argues, the dichotomous philosophy that would separate environment/human/mind persists in rhetorical theory, Indigenous philosophies and rhetorics have always resisted such dichotomies. Scholars of Indigenous philosophy like Vine Deloria have argued against the subject/object split, and have also argued, “American Indians hold their land—places—as having the highest possible meaning” (75). One way that meaning is produced in relation to land is through embodied ways of knowing, such as dance, theatre or, as Reyes has noted, laboring on/with the land.

Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor argues that the colonial construction of an oral/literate binary that has plagued much of literacy studies can be more accurately understood as an archive/repertoire binary (16). According to Taylor, the archive consists of the written and other textual methods of transmission by which Western epistemologies are always *valued* and “preserved” in tangible, material ways; while the repertoire is revealed through the embodied practices by which Indigenous peoples transmit cultural memory and knowledge. Indigenous peoples’ performances and embodied practices before and during the colonial period (and now) reveal that Indigenous groups “admitted to no ontological distinction between human and non-human creation,” that “Nature was ritualized just as ritual was naturalized” (38). As a part of farm worker organizing, teatro campesino has always had Indigenous roots, specifically Mayan and Mexican (“Aztec”). In the following section, I will show how the CIW has used teatro to archive and tell history in order to recruit *and* educate new allies.

EDUCACIÓN POPULAR: CIW TEATRO CAMPESINO

The majority of the farm worker organizations we partner with at YAYA utilize what is known as *Educación Popular* (Popular Education) in their organizing practices.⁵ *Educación Popular* is a popular form of education that is also a form of organizing in Latin America. It functions as a deliberately political form of education, and it utilizes forms and practices that are rooted in people's everyday ways of knowing. *Teatro* allows farm workers to connect with each other in a way that recognizes the humanity and dignity of all workers by "meeting them where they are at" (Reyes, Personal interview). *Teatro* operates much differently from ideologies of literacy that Reyes argues function on a logic that tells farm workers who they are doesn't matter.

Farm workers use *teatro* as a method of communicating, analyzing, organizing, and persuading/recruiting. Reyes explains that in the CIW, farm workers often come together and act out the issues they see happening on the farms. These activities become a way to form an analysis and an understanding for how to change reality (Reyes, Personal interview). Additionally, this same method is used to teach other farm workers about the history of the CIW and to recruit more farm workers into the coalition by teaching them about the issues that other farm workers have faced and how the coalition has worked to change the reality that farm workers endure in the fields. Here, we see how *teatro* is used in two ways that are interconnected: it is used to form an analysis and understanding of what is happening on farms and then also to teach and recruit other farm workers and allies to the CIW movement.

Acts of Transfer

Taylor argues that (contradictory) colonial discourses both denied the epistemic quality of embodied performance and simultaneously denounced the practices because they produced idolatrous and dangerous "content" (33). This paradox is sustained by a logocentrism that is implicit even in emerging performance studies in rhetoric, where Taylor argues that the "scene" of writing or the "performativity" of discourses reduces extradiscursive phenomena to text. This same logocentrism is what Malea Powell has argued sustains a "textual fetishization" that turns non-discursive objects into text (Agnew et al. 122).

In part, this dilemma is reflected in the nature of disciplinary language we have taken up, namely *performance* and *performativity*. As a noun, "performance" cannot capture the immediacy and theatricality of an event. Though theorists like Judith Butler have coined the phrase "performativity" in order to account for language acts and processes, Taylor argues the tendency to render performativity as a quality of discourse moves it away from performance. Instead, Taylor opts for the English translation of the Spanish word for performance, *performatic*, to better capture the immediacy and theatricality of performance (6). Additionally, *performatic* offers a way to disrupt the "foundational dichotomies" between orality and writing Ortoleva notes, in that it offers a way to signal the "performatic, digital, and visual fields as separate from, though always embroiled with, the discursive one so privileged by Western logocentricism" (Taylor 6).

The relationship between the archive and the repertoire is not inherently binary: "[e]ven though

the relationship between the archive and the repertoire is not by definition agonistic or oppositional, written documents have repeatedly announced the disappearance of the performance practices involved in mnemonic transmission” (Taylor 36). Taylor questions the political implications of such a “violent” relationship between the two. If the repertoire—embodied practices and performances—is purely ephemeral and sub par, and if Western archives are truly “static,” whose memories disappear (36)? Moreover, in privileging or pushing for traditional literacy in community literacy or rhetoric and civic engagement methodologies or heuristics, whose knowledge and meaning-making practices are we disappearing?

It is important to note that, despite the colonial logic of erasure, here, Indigenous memory and knowledge have continued through embodied ways of knowing like teatro campesino (farm workers’ theater)—through literal acts of interpretation of communication that are also epistemological. These acts, however, are contingent upon experiences with the land that ultimately form and grow knowledge that is encoded in and transmitted through the body. In order to account for acts of transfer, Taylor turns to the “scenario.” The scenario is a paradigm that can account for the transfer of meaning without reducing the body to a text or a performance into a narrative: “there is also an advantage to looking at scenarios that are not reducible to narrative because they demand embodiment” (Taylor 55).

Teatro is/as the History of the FFP

The concept of performatic additionally disrupts the dichotomy between ontological and epistemological (is/as) affordances of embodied ways of knowing. While performances are certainly bracketed by their transitory nature, they nevertheless also carry epistemological weight when they are used to form critique or to construct or transmit knowledge. Each year at Encuentro, the CIW performs the “history” of the FFP, tracing it into the present day. The performance is both a way to inform new attendees about the founding of the CIW and the Fair Food Program and a way to recruit potential allies for the cause.

The play begins with a scene that depicts farm workers working in humane conditions—they have shade and water, and they are able to take breaks. They clock in and out of work, and they take home a paycheck that offers a living wage—this is present-day Immokalee. After setting this scene, however, the next scene opens with the juxtaposition of two events, one that occurred in 1996, when a farm worker was beaten for resting to take a drink of water and another that occurred just two years ago, in 2012, when a farm worker was beaten for defending himself against criticism of his work. Both men came to the CIW to file a police report. The original 1996 event spurred the formation of the FFP, but the more recent event reminds us that there is still work to be done. In the play, the two bloodied shirts worn by the farm workers stand as a symbol for why the FFP is so important.

Here the tension of the is/as of performance is made manifest. As a literal performance, these scenes simply utilize symbolic structures to present a moment in time; however, as a critique of the ways in which farm worker labor is continually exploited, it also functions “as a critical lens, as a heuristic system” (Taylor 73). In bringing together two distinct moments in time, the scene not only marks a history of victory, given that the FFP has been successful in changing reality for some

farm workers, but also one of continued violence for others. Rather than functioning (strictly) as a narrative, this scenario, particularly when juxtaposed against the previous scenario, provokes an affective reaction that is simultaneously hopeful and dreadful. It is forward looking, even while it is looking backward to claim victory.

Given that the performance is a continual archiving and remaking of the history of the FFP, it also offers a very different orientation to history that is land-based (or spatial) rather than temporal. In other words, space, in this case, produces time rather than vice versa. This shift in logics, according to Vine Deloria, accounts for situated, material experiences that give rise to “symbols, doctrines, insights, and sequences” and, as we have seen, performances and relations (70). The “constant making and unmaking” of these relations through teatro each year at Encuentro “points to the active role of human beings in promoting the regenerative quality of the universe, of life,” even as it is expanded each year to account for what has happened in the previous year (Taylor 39). What’s more, while spectators are always-already implicated in the performance, the CIW’s relational practice of recruiting folks into the teatro each year adds another layer of spectator involvement and investment in the performance and, by extension, the cause. Spectators become active “players” in the movement, potentially even before they have ever had a chance to actually participate in it.

IMPLICATIONS

In offering a situated account of CIW rhetoric, I have first shown how farm workers reframe literacy in order to account for the ways in which ideologies of literacy have been used to construct them as a-rhetorical. In order to account for their rhetorical agility, I have listened to how farm workers create a theory of social change through and with land-based literacies and rhetorics that recognizes the productive potential of nature and of embodied ways of knowing.

As Wan argues, much scholarship (and by extension classroom practice) in community literacy, rhetoric, and civic engagement has not been able to account for the contradictoriness of literacy as a universal tool of empowerment due to the uncritical uptake of citizenship production in these courses. What’s more, as Blake Scott has shown, models of corporate responsibility influencing service learning in rhetoric and civic engagement courses similarly should give us pause to consider what kinds of “citizens” we are producing in relation to literacy and civic engagement. If part of what farm workers want is for folks to *value* their forms of knowledge, and if, as Wan compels us, how we teach literacy matters, then we might start by incorporating farm worker (and other) critiques of literacy into our curricular design.

Additionally, we should think beyond our disciplinary norms to account for the repertoire of embodied meaning-making practices that the CIW argues is vital to creating and sustaining social change.

NOTES

¹ For example, the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, which protects workers' rights to unionize and participate in collective bargaining, excludes farm workers. Additionally, even under the 1966 amendments to the Fair Labor Standards Act (which originally excluded farm workers), they do not receive the same protections guaranteed to workers in other sectors, namely the right to overtime pay and minimum wage in certain circumstances. What's more, the law allows children as young as 12 to legally work in the fields.

² "Modern-day slavery" is a term the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) use to refer to ongoing situations in which farm workers have been kept and forced to work against their will. Because of the complexity and breadth of this issue, I am unable to offer a detailed account of it in this article. However, I would like to highlight that to date, there have been nine cases of modern-day slavery brought to trial in the U.S., all of which have been discovered in Florida. In some of these cases, workers were brought into the country illegally; in other cases, workers have been homeless citizens of the U.S. and/or documented and undocumented migrant workers already in the States.

³ The code of conduct can be found here: [http://ciw-online.org/fair-food program/](http://ciw-online.org/fair-food-program/).

⁴ Because of how constructions of indigeneity circulate in official and unofficial discourses, it is difficult to offer a conclusive account of Indigenous farm workers. Not all Indigenous peoples openly identify as Indigenous. Some speak Indigenous languages, and some do not. Indigeneity is marked differently across space and within geopolitical frameworks. Additionally, there are diverse and unequal experiences of indigeneity among farm workers, and I do not mean to reduce that complexity here. However, I do wish to highlight how indigeneity has been a central organizing trope in the farm worker activism I have been a part of in Orlando.

⁵ There are various histories and types of popular education, stemming from both Europe and North America. Here, I refer to the definition used by the CIW.

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