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**Re-imagining Citizenship through Bilingualism:  
The Migrant Bilingual Child in Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus***

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Bringing together bilingualism and citizenship may seem to be a counterintuitive gesture to many given that the most prominent relationship between language and citizenship historically in the U.S. has been that of literacy in English as proof of citizenship.<sup>1</sup> It is increasingly becoming questionable, however, to what extent the monolingual approach to citizenship that distributes rights and obligations in relation to English and assumes a correspondence between one state and one language can meaningfully account for the practices of citizenship. In *After Race* Antonia Darder and Rodolfo Torres draw attention to how the changing demographics of the U.S.—most notably the increasing number of Spanish-speaking populations—have necessitated “the redefining of current ideas of citizenship” (Darder and Torres 2004, 69).<sup>2</sup> One productive result of such efforts to redefine citizenship is the notion of cultural citizenship, initially proposed by

<sup>1</sup> Literacy tests have been used as a means of weeding out undesirable immigrants since the nineteenth century (Smith 1997, 364-365). While these tests seldom claim racial preferences, they end up having a disparate impact on immigrant groups by favoring white, English-speaking immigrants. The dispute over voting rights in several Southern states during Reconstruction and the dispute over bilingual ballots in present-day California are examples of how literacy in English affects civic participation. Occasional works of scholarship, such as Heinz Kloss's *The American Bilingual Tradition* (1977), have tried to show the realities of linguistic diversity in certain historical periods in certain communities. Yet the notion of an “American bilingual tradition” remains largely incongruous with the politics of English that governed the U.S. in the past couple of decades. The congressional ratification of a bill that “designated English the federal government’s official language of business” in 1996 may best describe the monolingual impulse in recent policies and legislation regarding language (Darder and Torres 2004, 67).

<sup>2</sup> Juan Flores and Georges Yúdice note the high percentage of Spanish speakers among Latinos. “Ninety percent of U.S. Latinos, they say, “speak Spanish” (1997, 175).

anthropologist Renato Rosaldo and subsequently advanced by other scholars (Rosaldo 1997, 1994, Ong 1996, Flores and Benmayor 1997). A reaction to the limits to the legal and normative idea of citizenship, cultural citizenship locates the substantial meaning of citizenship in the everyday practices of sharing space and forming and exchanging opinions. In its initial formulation by Rosaldo, it radically decentered the emphasis on state power in citizenship by relocating the substance of citizenship in the lives of those considered outside the regime of citizenship such as minority groups or immigrants. Other scholars such as Aihwa Ong have tried to view cultural citizenship as registering both the regulatory force of the legal, normative side of citizenship and the revisions to such citizenship that occur in the lived realities of the disenfranchised. According to Ong, “[c]ultural citizenship is a dual process of self-making and being-made within webs of power linked to the nation-state and civil society” (1996, 738).

Bilingualism—as it refers to the dual languages of the home and the public—is a place where this dual process of self-making and being made can be seen.<sup>3</sup> In a linguistic environment where the home language conflicts with the public language, bilingualism at once reflects linguistic choice and the social imposition of language.

This essay examines how the Chicana writer Helena María Viramontes rethinks the boundaries of citizenship by exploring bilingualism as cultural citizenship in *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995).<sup>4</sup> Set in mid-twentieth century California, *Under the Feet of Jesus* features the growing-up struggles of a thirteen-year-old migrant bilingual child, Estrella, who moves from

<sup>3</sup> I use bilingualism here more for its social implications than its linguistic characteristics. Flore and Yúdice succinctly summarize the social significance of bilingualism when they say that “[Chicanos and Nuyoricans] and other Latinos have been able to use the language issue as a means to mediate diverse types of political enfranchisement and social empowerment” (1997, 175).

<sup>4</sup> The U.S. Department of Education defines migrant children as children and youth of school age (3-21) whose families migrate to find work in the agricultural or fishing industries (<http://www.ed.gov/programs/mep/index.html>). See Paul Green for an overview of the place of migrant children in institutional education.

one labor camp to another with her family.<sup>5</sup> The novel focuses on one summer she spends in a labor camp where she meets and befriends another migrant teenager, Alejo, who is exposed to pesticide fumigation and falls critically ill. The third-person narrative moves back and forth between the present and the past to provide details about how Estrella's father left, how Perfecto, a wandering handyman who is about thirty years older than her mother, came to be the substitute father, and how Estrella copes with the emotional hardships and the physical toil of migrant labor. By focusing on the role of bilingualism in Estrella's negotiations of identity and belonging, Viramontes shows how bilingualism can be the basis of questioning the assumption of monolingualism in contemporary articulations of citizenship.

The migrant bilingual child in Viramontes's novel exists outside the legal and normative understanding of citizenship in several ways. Excluded from the public schools and responsible for a Spanish-speaking family dependent on her for her labor and her proficiency in English, Estrella is largely immune to the institutional instructions of becoming a citizen-subject. Instead of being prepared by institutional education to later assume the full rights of a citizen, Estrella learns to become a member of a community through attending to the relations of affection and to the duties of caretaking in her circle of family and friends. While the recent scholarship on the "citizen child" focuses on whether the child should be accorded the full rights of a citizen or not, Viramontes explores how the migrant bilingual child already actively participates in the obligations of citizenship while attempting to claim the accompanying set of citizen's rights

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<sup>5</sup> Viramontes, in an interview, calls Estrella a "fucking tough" Chicanita who makes the novel a "tribute to the *Mujer*" (Heredia 1993/94, 178). Literary critic Debra Castillo points out that the novel is dedicated to Viramontes's parents "who met in Buttonwillow picking cotton" and to the memory of Cesar Chavez, an activist and organizer of Chicano farm workers (2004, 560). The dedication consciously draws together the personal and the political as the writer's family is interwoven into the larger social movement of the Mexican Americans and the labor movements of the mid-twentieth century.

(Bhabha 2006, 2003, Chen 2008).<sup>6</sup> As part of a racialized labor force, the migrant bilingual child also gestures to the long history of dispossession underlying the question of language and belonging for Mexican Americans in California. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed in 1848 to mark the end of the Mexican-American war and the incorporation of Texas, New Mexico, and upper California to the U.S. left ambiguous the question of language rights for the Spanish-speaking population residing in the conquered territory even as it conceded the rights of citizenship.<sup>7</sup> Estrella's Spanish-speaking home and her Spanish-dominant work environment stand outside the English-mediated public. By showing a way of life centered on a language that is excluded from the public, Viramontes questions the viability of English to account for the practices of citizenship that take place outside the normative public sphere.

In this essay I am less concerned with the definitional question of where the migrant bilingual child fits in the spectrum of citizenship than with what use Viramontes makes of the representational significance of the migrant bilingual child. From this perspective, Lauren Berlant's theory of infantile citizenship is helpful in thinking about the work of representation

<sup>6</sup> Legal studies and immigration policy are two areas where the status of the child as citizen is actively debated as increasing human migration across borders makes this a current topic. Ambiguously situated between a citizen and a citizen-in-training, the child often swings between being privileged and being disenfranchised in legal and policy matters of citizenship. Based on the deportation charges many immigrant parents with U.S. born children face—charges that often result in the deportation of U.S. citizen children along with their parents as they have no other caretaker in the U.S.—legal scholar Jacqueline Bhabha argues that children should be accorded the full rights of citizens (2006, 2003). Xiaobei Chen's analysis of recent immigration policies in Canada, on the other hand, show how the state favors children as potential citizens while discriminating upon the elderly in immigration reviews. She is critical of what she calls a “child-centered citizenship model” which “recognizes social rights, but downplays and even excludes the democratic requirement of collective actions by citizens mobilized to make claims” (2008, 74).

<sup>7</sup> The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo appears under the name “Treaty of Peace, Friendship, Limits and Settlement with the Republic of Mexico” in Statutes at Large. Articles VIII and IX discuss the effects of the Treaty on the inhabitants of the territories being incorporated. The Mexican citizens who choose to remain in the territories can “either retain the title and rights of Mexican citizens, or acquire those of the citizens of the Untied States” (Article VIII). It is unclear, however, if the retaining of the title and rights of Mexican citizens includes a right to use and maintain Spanish in everyday practices of citizenship. While the codification of California into a bilingual state in the state constitution of 1849 seemingly recognized the right of the conquered population to use Spanish as the language of civic participation, the recognition only lasted for a couple of decades until the English-only provision was readopted in the state constitution in 1894 (Del Valle 2003, 12-13).

vis-à-vis citizenship. As part of her study of “the privatization of U.S. citizenship” in the Reagan years, Berlant presents a theory of infantile citizenship based on the iconic status of the figure of the American child. The American child is a “*stand-in* for a complicated and contradictory set of anxieties and desires about national identity” (6). In her analysis of pilgrimage narratives to Washington D.C., she shows how the “innocence/illiteracy” of the infantile citizen exposes the failures of citizenship as a theoretical universality (1997, 27). The infantile citizen, by virtue of being uninitiated into real-word politics, offers a powerful critique of the discrepancy between the ideals of citizenship and the actual manifestations of these ideals. Yet, according to Berlant, the critique offered by the infantile citizen falls short of generating any agency for change as it is quickly subsumed by mass-mediated images of national culture and identity. In Berlant’s analysis, the innocence/illiteracy of the infantile citizen simultaneously enables and contains a critique of citizenship. By focusing on the tropology of the infantile citizen, Berlant places the work of representation at the center of a heuristic of citizenship. My analysis of *Under the Feet of Jesus* likewise is based on the assumption that the representation of citizenship constitutes an important part of its operation and effects.

While she chooses the child as the site of exploring the promise and illusion of citizenship, Viramontes does not resort to the iconic status of the child, and its innocence/illiteracy, as the repository of civic virtue. Rather, she attends to the formation of a critical literacy in the language of citizenship and places the possibility of civic virtue in Estrella’s recognition of a dual belonging in her immediate community of family and friends as well as in the state. I suggest that Viramontes shows a way of re-imagining the parameters of citizenship by drawing on Estrella’s bilingualism as a way of holding in constructive tension her dual belonging. The substantive meaning of citizenship for Estrella lies not in her legal citizenship or in her English

proficiency but in her ability to negotiate her surroundings and her relationships. The two languages of her world translate her dual belonging into the practices of citizenship in everyday life.

### **Literacy and Bilingual Development**

In Viramontes's representation of the migrant bilingual child, there is little romance with childhood innocence or illiteracy. Estrella acquires literacy in English early in the novel through an uncommon route. Instead of learning to read at school, Estrella learns to read through Perfecto Flores, with whom Estrella is forced to develop a relationship as he becomes a part of the family. Like the local schools she attends irregularly, Perfecto initially represents an unfamiliar threat to Estrella:

When Estrella first came upon Perfecto's red tool chest like a suitcase near the door, she became very angry. So what is this about? She had opened the tool chest and all that jumbled steel inside the box, the iron bars and things with handles, the funny-shaped objects, seemed as confusing and foreign as the alphabet she could not decipher. The tool chest stood guard by the door and she slammed the lid closed on the secret. For days she was silent with rage. The mother believed her a victim of the evil eye.

Estrella hated when things were kept from her. The teachers in the schools did the same, never giving her the information she wanted. Estrella would ask over and over, So what is this, and point to the diagonal lines written in chalk on the blackboard with a dirty fingernail. The script A's had the curlicue of a pry bar, a hammerhead split like a V. The small i's resembled nails. So tell me. But some of the teachers were more concerned about the dirt under her fingernails. They inspected her head for lice, parting her long hair with ice cream sticks. They scrubbed her fingers with a toothbrush until they were so sore she couldn't hold a pencil properly. They said good luck to her when the pisca was over, reserving the desks in the back of the classroom for the next batch of migrant children. Estrella often wondered what happened to all the things they boxed away in tool chests and kept to themselves. (24-25)

Perfecto's tool chest is a sign that he has entered Estrella's world despite the fact that she cannot

fully understand the circumstances under which he becomes a part of her life. On spotting the tool chest, Estrella immediately draws a connection between its contents and the alphabet, another “confusing and foreign” element in her life that she would like to understand but feels she has no access to. Based on the fact that the tool chest and the alphabet are both trying to keep things from her, Estrella in her preliterate stage draws a parallel between the tools in the chest and the letters of the alphabet, sensing an instrumentality to both that justifies her comparison. Not having been let into the linguistic order of relations between signs and meanings, Estrella relates to the letters of the alphabet as representational symbols when she matches the shape of the letters to the tools.

As she methodically matches the letters of the alphabet to the tools, however, her mental process of ordering is upset by memories of shame and humiliation associated with school. The memory of the teachers’ treatment of her based on her external difference from other students disrupts the calm of Estrella’s mental play and puts an end to the activity. The emotional disturbance, however, turns out to facilitate Estrella’s realization of the power of words. “[F]or the first time, Estrella realized words could become as excruciating as rusted nails piercing the heels of her bare feet” (25). Estrella cognizes the power of words by associating it with bodily pain, a sensation which she knows by experience and which resonates with the sensation of shame she was subject to. The relations between the alphabet and the tools obtain a new order of meaning at this point. Before it was just that the letter “i” looked like a nail; now Estrella comes to see that the alphabet, guarded as a secret and kept from her, can become a nail to hurt her. The realization that literacy yields a power that has real, material effects, such as those of the tools, propels Estrella’s desire for literacy. Based on the analogy between the tools and the letters of the alphabet in this scene, literary critic Paula Moya suggests that Viramontes develops an

“expanded notion of literacy” in the novel, in which “literacy [is] a skill involving a human agent’s total engagement with the world” (178, 179).<sup>8</sup>

This notion of literacy resists viewing literacy as a prerequisite for civic participation and instead questions the very grounds upon which it becomes a prerequisite for civic participation. The efficiency and effectiveness of communication assumed in literacy are results of the process of abstraction in language through which the material world that language is a part of can be ignored and forgotten. Viramontes reverses the process of abstraction in language wherein the referent becomes the sign by linking the letters of the alphabet to the tools in the tool chest. Her insistence on the tools and the physical qualities associated with these tools in Estrella’s acquisition of literacy reminds the reader that language entails a process of abstraction. By highlighting the relation between the physical world and language, Viramontes shows what goes unacknowledged in positing literacy as a prerequisite of civic participation. She illustrates that a fulfillment of the basic needs of life is a crucial condition of possibility for literacy, and ultimately, for civic participation.

If Viramontes is critical of how literacy can close the door to civic participation, she is equally unwilling to idealize illiteracy as innocence. In fact, the failures of citizenship to include the community of migrant farm workers are not pointed out through Estrella’s illiteracy but through Estrella’s realization of the power of language, the major propellant in her drive toward literacy. In her desire for literacy as something that illustrates the power of language, Estrella shows a keen awareness of how language is complicit with the violence of power. In other words, an awareness of how language can hurt accompanies the understanding of what language

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<sup>8</sup> While I agree with Moya’s reading of “language as a tool of communication,” I am hesitant to move onto viewing “language as a tool that has the power to transform the world” from this as Moya does (178). As I will show in the rest of my reading of *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Viramontes displays a keener awareness of the limits of language for social transformation than Moya acknowledges (183).

can do. If one views Estrella's entrance into literacy as her symbolic entrance into the existing social order, her potential as an actor within this social order is already delimited by how language couples with power to maintain the status quo. Viramontes addresses Estrella's vexed relationship to the social order by using Estrella's bilingualism to both mark her place in the social order and to establish a distance from it. On the one hand, her literacy in English confers her a place in the English-dominant social order. On the other hand, Spanish's role in Estrella's acquisition of literacy in English points to the mediated relationship Estrella develops with the dominant language.

Contrary to the long-held controversial belief that bilingualism impedes cognitive development, bilingualism is a key component of Estrella's acquisition of literacy.<sup>9</sup> Her literacy in English comes by way of her relationship with the Spanish-speaking Perfecto. In depicting Estrella's acquisition of literacy as a bilingual experience, Viramontes draws attention to the personal, intersubjective characteristic of Estrella's literacy.<sup>10</sup> A man whose presence Estrella resents at first, Perfecto patiently "barter[s] for her voice" as he teaches her what the tools are for and how to use the tools. "[A]quí, pegarle aquí, to take the hinge pins out of the hinge joints when you want to remove a door, start with the lowest hinge, tap the pin here from the top, tap upwards" (25-26). The mixing of Spanish and English in the representation of Perfecto's speech

<sup>9</sup> Linguists D. Kimbrough Oller and Barbara Pearson say that "[t]he claim that bilingual children of many language backgrounds show academic or intellectual deficiencies was widespread through most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century" (2002, 5). It is generally received knowledge in academic circles now that earlier studies of bilingualism's negative influence on development presented a faulty correlation between bilingualism and intelligence (Hakuta 1986). Psychologist Ellen Bialystok, among many other scholars, views the early 1970s as a turning point in research on bilingualism and cognitive development (1991, 6). She also points out that the spate of research that suggested a positive relation between bilingualism and development in the '70s, starting with Wallace Lambert's study of bilingual children in Canada, may have been propelled by a political need to "dethrone the predominant view of bilingualism as a liability" (1991, 6).

<sup>10</sup> My reading of the intersubjective characteristic of Estrella's literacy owes to Moya's reading of literacy in *Under the Feet of Jesus* as "embodied, intersubjective, and egalitarian" (2002, 184). Moya reads the intersubjective characteristic of Estrella's literacy in terms of how "what Estrella knows depends on her communicative interaction with others" (2002, 184-85). My discussion of the intersubjective characteristic of Estrella's literacy is focused more on the role the Spanish-speaking Perfecto plays in Estrella's learning to read in English.

combines the voice of the omniscient narrator with the voices of Estrella and Perfecto to create a multi-voiced language for the novel. The Spanish part of the sentence conforms to the rule of direct representation, but the English translation of Perfecto's speech imbues it with another voice, or other voices. Is this a transcription of what the bilingual child, Estrella, hears? Or, is this the narrator mediating Perfecto and the reader while experimenting with free indirect discourse?<sup>11</sup> Instead of directly answering these questions, Viramontes focuses on how Estrella's literacy is based on an intersubjective experience of languages:

Perfecto Flores taught her the names that went with the tools . . . Tools to build, bury, tear down, rearrange and repair, a box of reasons his hands took pride in. She lifted the pry bar in her hand, felt the coolness of iron and power of function, weighed the significance it awarded her, and soon she came to understand how essential it was to know these things. That was when she began to read. (26)

Estrella's growing trust and affection for Perfecto is central to her learning to read. Perfecto's role in Estrella's literacy both echoes and supplements the "person-language bond," a key feature of the bilingual child (Grosjean 1982, 198). Psycholinguist François Grosjean explains this "strong bond that exists between a person and a language" in terms of how "[i]n the eyes of the child a person is tagged with a particular language" (198). In other words, the "person-language bond" is a means employed by the bilingual child to personalize and to make concrete the abstract qualities of language by embodying them in the person she interacts with. As she develops trust and affection for Perfecto, who is tagged with Spanish, Estrella is aided in entering the world of English as well. Viramontes's textual codeswitching presents the two

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<sup>11</sup> Free indirect discourse, or "represented speech and thought," refers "to the way, in many narratives, that the reports of what a character says and thinks shifts in pronouns, adverbs, tense, and grammatical mode, as we move—or sometimes hover—between the direct narrated reproductions of these events as they occur to the character and the indirect representation of these events by the narrator" (Abrams 1985, 169). Viramontes's textual codeswitching in the representation of Perfecto's speech raises the question of whether free indirect discourse includes interlingual translation in the case of reporting a monolingual character's speech.

languages of the bilingual child as having a complementary relationship. The development of one language helps with the development of the other.

Cecilia Lawless, relying on the Heideggerian notion of language as dwelling, notes how Estrella comes to see that “[w]ords are like tools used for building places to inhabit with others” (364).<sup>12</sup> The emphasis on a constructive use of language that emerges in Estrella's experience locates linguistic agency in the act of creating a communal space of living. The bond between Estrella and Perfecto, as well as the role Spanish plays in Estrella's learning of English, suggests that this communal space will be a space where linguistic difference facilitates a deep, animated relationship to various languages and their users instead of being a deterrent to social harmony or effective communication. From this perspective, the intimate relationship between linguistic agency and political agency Viramontes presents seemingly echoes Hannah Arendt's emphasis on action and speech, or *praxis* and *lexis*, as the two human activities that constitute the realm of the political (1958, 25). The irony, however, is unmistakable as the communal space depicted in the novel is starkly outside the proper political realm in Arendt's definition. For Arendt the public sphere is the only sphere where there is “a way of life in which speech and only speech ma[kes] sense and where the central concern of all citizens [is] to talk with each other” (27). Yet Viramontes shows that the seeds of the political can be found in places and in relations not conventionally considered part of the public sphere.

### **Muted Speech and the Question of Linguistic Agency**

However, a profound skepticism of linguistic agency that pervades *Under the Feet of*

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<sup>12</sup> Moya also comments on the materiality of words but from a functionalist perspective. She says that “[b]y portraying the process of learning to read as similar to the communicative process by which an apprentice is instructed in the use of tools, Viramontes portrays the acquisition of knowledge as necessarily intersubjective and tied to the material effects that words (as tools) have on the world” (2002, 180).

*Jesus* cautions against idealizing the communal space of the migrant farm workers as a model of participatory democracy. A few critics have taken note of Viramontes's sparse use of characters' speech in *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Looking at how silence and language intermingle in Viramontes's writings, Debra Castillo and María Córdoba credit Viramontes for "deploy[ing] the multiple possibilities of silence as an effective narrative technique" (2002, 162).<sup>13</sup> Lawless and Moya have commented on Estrella's lack of enthusiasm to engage in self-revealing conversations with Alejo, who is eager to get to know her better, and her distrust in "casual conversation" (Lawless 1996, Moya 2002, 183). Both through a narrative deployment of silence and through her characters, Viramontes is careful to qualify her understanding of linguistic agency.<sup>14</sup> Viramontes's qualified view of linguistic agency can be better understood when one reads Estrella's place in English in relation to literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's understanding of the "speaking person" in the discourse of the novel. Interestingly, in portraying Estrella's acquisition of linguistic agency, Viramontes emphasizes her literacy in English as opposed to her speech, breaking down agency in language into literacy and speech. I read this as a reflection of Viramontes's attentiveness to the complicated relationship of those on the social margins with language. Despite the fact that Estrella's literacy enables her to look into the mainstream society, her place as a "speaking person" in that society is constantly undermined due to her status as a child and migrant worker.

Estrella's compromised position as a "speaking person" in the novel may seem to go

<sup>13</sup> Debra Castillo, citing the Chicana critic Tey Diana Rebolledo on "the significance of language use and silence" as a key subject for contemporary Chicana writers, claims Viramontes to be the most exemplary writer in this matter (2004, 549).

<sup>14</sup> Lawless views Viramontes as being skeptical of linguistic agency, whereas Moya views her as having an understanding of language that is grounded in context. According to Moya, "the power of language resides in the contextually determined meaning that becomes actualized in the process of human communication" in the novel (2002, 183).

against Bakhtin's definition of the novel. Bakhtin says that “[t]he fundamental condition, that which makes a novel a novel, that which is responsible for its stylistic uniqueness, is *the speaking person and his discourse*” (1981, 332). Some of Bakhtin's assumptions behind the “speaking person” he proposes as central to the novel becomes clear when he discusses the preponderance of the “motif of the speaking person” in legal and ethical discourse. Demonstrated in such phrases as “the voice of the conscience” and the “inner word”, the motif of the speaking person constructs a relationship between “an ethical, legal, and political human being” capable of speech and the degree of responsibility and independence a discourse assumes (1981, 350). In other words, the ethics of a discourse is predicated on the existence of a subject whose linguistic agency is uncompromised by external constraints. The integrity of a subject's linguistic agency, when thought of in relation to the political agency of a citizen-subject, depends on the viability of the subject to occupy a position in the public sphere and to have a public presence. The absence of a “speaking person” in the stylistics of *Under the Feet of Jesus* points to the exclusion of the migrant farm workers from this sphere of public participation.<sup>15</sup> For the communal space of living imagined in Estrella's language learning to take effect as a model of participatory democracy, the question of the migrant farm workers' structural marginalization first needs to be addressed. The central ambivalence surrounding linguistic agency in the novel has much to do with the distinction between a denizen, whose private life may not necessarily be accompanied by a public life, and a citizen who is legally guaranteed a place in the public.

Viramontes illustrates the interrelations of the migrant workers' lack of public presence and their lack of linguistic agency through the figure of the baby with no mouth. The figure of the baby with no mouth that recurs in the novel is the ultimate figure of the biopolitics

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<sup>15</sup> See Shea (2003) for an examination of the exclusion of migrant workers from the public sphere in *Under the Feet of Jesus* from the vantage point of immigration laws and labor policies.

surrounding migrant labor. While Viramontes offers no direct explanation of the baby with no mouth, it can be inferred that the baby with no mouth refers to the birth defect of orofacial cleft, a birth defect associated with pesticide exposure.<sup>16</sup> At the same time the orofacial cleft exposes the subhuman labor conditions of the migrant farm workers, it symbolically registers the compromise of their linguistic agency by showing how they are deprived of the very bodily organ of speech. Building on the feminist scholarship on unequal access to the public sphere, Renato Rosaldo says that “one must consider much more than whether or not certain categories of persons are present in the public square” if one is to approach citizenship from the perspective of experiences of exclusion and marginalization (1997, 28-29). “One must consider,” he goes on to say, “categories that are visibly inscribed on the body, such as gender and race, and their consequences for full democratic participation” (1997, 29). In addition to the examples of race and gender that Rosaldo offers as bodily inscriptions of difference that potentially exclude the subjects thus marked from the polity, one can think of disabilities as another crucial factor that delimits a subject’s democratic participation.<sup>17</sup>

The way Viramontes introduces the figure of the baby with no mouth also accords with

<sup>16</sup> While there are various hypotheses about the etiology of cleft lip/palate, including both genetic and environmental factors, the association between cleft lip/palate and pesticide exposure has been brought to light since the late 1960s, a couple of decades after pesticide use became widespread in the 1940s (Gordon and Shy 1981, 213). Among epidemiologists and health scientists, the relation between birth defects and pesticide exposure is a topic that is still under debate. While there is no conclusive evidence that pesticide exposure causes birth defects, numerous studies have found an association between birth defects and pesticide exposure. For studies that associate orofacial cleft with pesticide exposure, see Gordon and Shy (1981) and Nelson, Holson, Green, and Gaylor (1979). Two essays have recently discussed *Under the Feet of Jesus* from an environmental perspective. Marilyn McEntyre (2007) examines the hazards of pesticide exposure in Viramontes’s novel alongside Cherríe Moraga’s *Heroes and Saints*. Christa Grewe-Volpp (2005) contextualizes the novel through the notion of “environmental justice” and reads the representation of the Chicano farm workers in such a context. Both McEntyre and Grewe-Volpp focus on Alejo’s victimization by the agribusiness but do not discuss the disability of the orofacial cleft. Given the increasing interest in environment and ecology in the scholarship on citizenship, including the work on “corporate citizenship” that examines corporate responsibility in sustainable development, one could also think about citizenship in *Under the Feet of Jesus* through Viramontes’s ecological awareness, rooted in Chicano labor history in California (Dobson 2003, Smith and Pangsap 2008).

<sup>17</sup> Disability in *Under the Feet of Jesus* is crucially related to both race and gender. The racialization of migrant labor likewise makes the pesticide-associated disability a racialized disability. As it is a congenital disability that reflects the mother’s labor conditions, orofacial cleft in the novel is also crucially linked to gender.

the public invisibility of the migrant farm workers. The reader encounters the mysterious reference to the baby with no mouth first through Estrella's fear of giving birth to one. To her friend from the labor camp, Maxine, who suggests that they go swimming in the ditch, Estrella expresses reservation: "You think 'cause of the water our babies are gonna come out with no mouth or something?" (33). Her reservation is explained as originating from what she overheard—"Estrella had heard through the grapevine about the water, and knew Big Mac the Foreman lied about the pesticides not spilling into the ditch" (32)—but the content of what she heard and the speaker of that information remain unclear as rumor becomes the route through which information travels in the community of the migrant farm workers. In the absence of any public route of communication that will alert the migrant workers of the hazards of their working and living conditions, the cause of orofacial cleft is at times attributed to superstition. For example, Estrella's mother, Petra, seemingly attributes the disability to the eclipse, a common superstition among Mexican migrant farm workers, when she prohibits Estrella from going out on the night of the eclipse.<sup>18</sup> In the world of the novel, the migrant farm workers' awareness of the disability is based on rumor and superstition. The opacity surrounding the references to the baby with no mouth suggests the limited access to information and its distribution on the part of the migrant laborers. In so far as their access to knowledge is limited, the linguistic agency of the migrant farm workers to speak about the disability is likewise limited. What kind of linguistic agency, then, is left in *Under the Feet of Jesus*?

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<sup>18</sup> Annette Maestas and Joan Erikson show that eclipse, while it is not a cause of disability as often cited by Mexican immigrant mothers as the mother's *susto* (stress or anxiety), is still cited by the immigrant mothers as a cause of disability.

## Recasting Citizenship

A cautious answer to this weighty question can be found in the relation between Petra and Estrella, a relationship that is characterized through bilingualism. While she warns Estrella of giving birth to a disabled baby if she is caught in the eclipse, Petra is well aware that the disability is linked to pesticide exposure: “Petra thought of the lima bean in her, the bean floating in the night of her belly, bursting a root with each breath. Would the child be born without a mouth, would the poisons of the fields harden in its tiny little veins?” (125). The vague fear that Estrella harbors of giving birth to a baby with disability becomes more immediate in Petra’s case as she worries about the influence of the pesticide on her unborn baby. Matrilineality acquires special meaning in this situation where the mother’s living and working conditions have a direct influence on her children to the extent of predetermining their bodily condition at birth. Yet if the inheritance of the conditions of labor mediated by the mother’s body establishes a matrilineal bond between Estrella and Petra, Estrella’s relationship with the mother tongue adds another dimension to this bond.

An exploration of the “muted bilingualism” in the novel brings out the bilingual bond Viramontes presents between Estrella and Petra. The phrase “muted bilingualism” is employed by Debra Castillo and María Córdoba to explain the bilingual effects of Viramontes’s writings which are largely in English (2002, 164). Borrowing from Juan Flores and George Yúdice’s contention that “even for the most monolingual of Latinos, the “other” language looms constantly as a potential resource,” Castillo and Córdoba suggest that Viramontes’s English-dominant texts can be mined for their subtle use of Mexican Spanish, a “spiky/spicky language” that calls to attention the thorns in the language that can be used to hurt others or to defend oneself (2002, qtd. in 164, 165). A “muted bilingualism,” however can also be detected in the

novel's bilingual representation of its characters' speech. The Spanish in Viramontes's representation of some of the characters' speech is a signpost for the reader that Estrella's world is a bilingual world of Spanish and English. However, the full extent of this world's bilingualism—who is English dominant and who is monolingual in Spanish as well as how the two languages mix—remains muted for the most part. Viramontes's bilingual representation of speech where she codeswitches between Spanish and English carefully tests the viability of bilingualism in mediating the world of the migrant farm workers to a largely English-speaking audience.

The bilingual bond Viramontes creates between Estrella and Petra exemplifies the effects of the novel's muted bilingualism as a way of insisting that the readers think about the significance of a world that is Spanish heavy, and hence, outside their zone of linguistic familiarity. Viramontes's use of bilingualism in the exchange between Estrella and Petra comes out most prominently in her description of a raid by the border police. To a palpably agitated Estrella who cannot articulate the cause of her agitation—"Someone's trying to get me" (61)—the mother tells her that the cause of her anxiety is a sudden raid by the border police, La Migra, trying to pick out illegal workers and deport them. As Estrella picks up the pry bar as a means of protecting herself in the face of the imminent threat, the mother tells her to stop running: "Yo ya no voy a correr. No puedo más" (62). As in the earlier case of Perfecto's speech, the mix of Spanish and English in the transcription of Petra's speech points more to the novel's internal translation than to Petra's actual speech. But in addition to this the bilingualism in Petra's last words in this scene brings out how Estrella's identity cannot be fully grasped in Spanish or in English but can only be configured through a mix of the two languages: "Tell them que tienes una madre aquí. You are not an orphan, and she pointed a red finger to the earth, Aquí" (63). The

emphatic use of Spanish asserts Estrella's belonging in a land where she was born and where her mother has toiled. The two prominent ways of according citizenship, by birthplace (*jus soli*) and by parentage (*jus sanguinis*), are recreated in Petra's statement as Estrella's claim on citizenship comes to depend not on the citizenship status of the mother but on the mother's labor that roots them both in America (Bhabha 2003, 55). Spanish is transplanted to American soil through the bilingualism of Petra's words, and Estrella's belonging comes to be anchored in both Spanish and English.<sup>19</sup>

While the bilingualism of the above exchange affirms Estrella's identity, it is still a "muted bilingualism" in that the social conditions of Estrella's bilingualism remain unchanged. "Don't run scared," Petra says to Estrella, "You stay there and look them in the eye . . . If they stop you, if they try to pull you into the green vans, you tell them the birth certificates are under the feet of Jesus" (63). With the phrase "under the feet of Jesus" Petra simultaneously evokes the location of Estrella's birth certificate under the Jesus statue she keeps and cherishes and the moral claim to citizenship Estrella has. At once trying to instill in Estrella a sense of entitlement, Petra also acknowledges the failure of the political and legal system to recognize and protect its citizenry and the people living within the bounds of the nation-state. As a document of Estrella's entitlement to the rights of a citizen, the birth certificate references the political and legal system of which Estrella is a part. However, an ethical and religious frame takes the place of the political and legal frame as the Jesus statue, rather than the birth certificate, is foregrounded in Petra's appeal to Estrella. The religious humility expressed in the trope of prostrating at the feet

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<sup>19</sup> Based on her study of migrant children, Jacqueline Bhabha says that "[b]ecause of widespread official failure to take into account the rights and interests of children of the family, a parent's precarious immigration status can completely undermine a child's sense of security and belonging" (2007, 208). Petra's bilingual pronouncement of Estrella's belonging in America is an attempt on the part of the mother to reassure her child that her relationship with the mother supports, and not undermines, her belonging in a seemingly hostile society.

of Jesus elevates the moral claim of Estrella's citizenship above the legal claim.

The exchange between Petra and Estrella shows the complications in Estrella's belonging. It is something that needs to be negotiated both in Spanish and in English and something that pertains to both a legal notion of belonging as well as an ethical one. I suggest that Viramontes, instead of presenting Estrella's dual belonging as a solution to the problems of migrant farm workers' public invisibility and social exclusion that she explores in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, uses it as the starting point for imagining a cultural citizenship that emerges from an embattled social margin. This can be seen most distinctly in the ending of the novel which shows Estrella's critical awakening and her being moved to action as she desperately tries to find medical aid for Alejo. Having persuaded Perfecto to take Alejo to the clinic by bartering her services to help Perfecto take down the barn, Estrella is left in charge of the situation as she is the only person who can speak both English and Spanish besides the sick Alejo. Estrella tries to mediate the vast gap separating the English-speaking nurse's middle-class world and her Spanish-speaking family's world of migrant labor, but the task is daunting. The technical translation between Spanish and English does not help the situation much since the gap between the two worlds is not just a linguistic gap but a gap between the communal, barter system of her family and the money economy of which the nurse is a part. With the last of the family's money deposited in the clinic's money box and left without any gas money for the trip to the hospital, Estrella is struck with the injustice of the situation: "The oil was made from their bones, and it was their bones that kept the nurse's car from not halting on the highway, kept her on her way to Daisyfield to pick up her boys at six . . . Why couldn't the nurse see that? Estrella had figured it out: the nurse owed them as much as they owed her" (148).

Having realized a method of calculating debt and credit that corresponds to her lived

experience, Estrella picks up the crowbar from the car and returns to the clinic. She only needs a few words this time to communicate to the nurse what she wants as she slams the crowbar down on the nurse's desk, sending the paraphernalia of the nurse's neatly organized middle-class world—pictures of her children, the decorative porcelain cat, and the coffee mug—flying:

She felt like two Estrellas. One was a silent phantom who obediently marked a circle with a stick around the bungalow as the mother had requested, while the other held the crowbar and the money. The money felt wet and ugly and sweaty like the swamp between her legs. (150)

Viramontes ascribes on Estrella a *Spaltung* the moment she claims the agency to act.<sup>20</sup> Estrella's splitting into a good subject who recognizes and submits to authority and a bad subject who defies authority captures the dichotomous logic that creates complications in Estrella's belonging to both Spanish and English, to both the legal notion of citizenship and the ethical one. Estrella's *Spaltung* registers the discrepancy she recognizes in the behavior asked of her and the action she must undertake to fulfill her responsibilities based on ties of affection. Instead of showing Estrella as helplessly caught between the good subject and the bad subject, Viramontes makes Estrella's ties of affection become the instinctual basis for a social awareness that allows her to act against the interdictions of her social and familial upbringing.

This critical awareness may be the kernel of a new approach to cultural citizenship in *Under the Feet of Jesus*. While it is not inhibited by dual belonging, Estrella's newly found critical awareness is deeply informed by the complications of dual belonging. In the car on their way to the hospital, Estrella points out the irony of the agency she has momentarily claimed: "You talk and talk and talk to them and they ignore you. But you pick up a crowbar and break the

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<sup>20</sup> In Freudian psychoanalysis, *Spaltung* refers to the "coexistence at the heart of the ego of two psychical attitudes toward external reality in so far as this stands in the way of an instinctual demand," especially in fetishism and psychoses. Outside Freud, however, it has a longer history in psychiatry and is used in reference to a wider range of phenomena including split personality and double conscience (Laplanche and Pontalis 1974, 427).

pictures of their children, and all of a sudden they listen real fast" (151). The statement Estrella made with the crowbar ironically echoes the scene of her initiation into literacy. Feeling the pry bar in her grip and realizing its power as a tool had been instrumental in her learning to read (26). While she once let the primary function of the pry bar to lead her to its secondary function as a signifier of power, Estrella is forced to go back to the primary function of the tools in the toolbox. But her dual belonging, stemming from her relationship to both the mother tongue and the public language, is a reminder that agency, for Estrella, remains in the space between the primary and the secondary functions of the pry bar.

*Under the Feet of Jesus* poignantly addresses the inadequacy of the legal and normative understanding of citizenship to account for the practices of citizenship and the articulations of belonging for Estrella and the community of migrant farm workers that she is part of. Viramontes turns this insufficiency to creative and critical use by locating an alternative understanding of citizenship in the figure of the migrant bilingual child whose bilingual articulation of belonging goes beyond suggesting her affiliation with two languages to affirm her place in the communities where the two languages are spoken. While there is no easy answer to how the structural inequality that underwrites the relationship between the community of Spanish speakers and the community of English speakers in the novel can be redressed, Estrella's continuous negotiations between the two languages of her world serve as a starting point for dialectically re-imagining citizenship.

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