

The Land of My Consciousness

by NANCY A. PRECIADO RODRIGUEZ

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IN 1953, JUAN RULFO, one of the most renowned Latin American writers of the twentieth century, published *El llano en llamas* (*The Burning Plain*), a collection of realistic short stories about rural life in the land of his childhood in Jalisco, Mexico.

Almost sixty years after Rulfo's publication, this daughter of *campesinos ejidatarios* also has decided to write about the land of her childhood. For many, Rulfo's burning plain is a geographical and imagined space that emerged from the literary discourse, but for me it has become the land of my consciousness.

I am the daughter of *campesinos* in Mexico and farmworkers in the U.S., who were forced to migrate as the result of a system of more than 500 years of exploitation, humiliation, and elimination. I have twenty-four years of experience living development under a capitalistic, neoliberal, or "modern" context in Mexico and in the U.S. In other words, I am a member of *los de abajo* (those at the bottom). The oral stories of humiliation, exploitation, and death, too common for us, have constructed my pessimistic reality and utopian ideology.

However, it was during the summer of 2011 and winter of 2012 in my return as "researcher" that my voice finally had the legitimacy conferred upon it by its manufacturers, that is, the intellectuals. In this article, you will learn that my "research" experience is our struggle for survival. I write from a particular position, and I will continue to write in this way as long as our conditions of oppression exist. My academic education may solve my personal problem of survival, but my personal problem will remain unsolved as long as it is not solved for *los de abajo*. The story you are about to read is the story of our new conquest, which takes place in the communities of the *llano en llamas*.

The Story of Our New Colonization

In his short story "Nos han dado la tierra" ("They Have Given Us the Land"), Rulfo relates the stories of *campesinos* and their land struggles after the agrarian reform. In my story, "Nos han quitado la tierra" ("They Have Taken Our Land"), I will provide a summary of my "research" experience, which describes the appropriation by colonization of the burning plain, a region whose primary colonizers are the *invernaderos* (greenhouse tomato producers) and the mining industry.

This story began with trying to understand how the *invernaderos* have changed the livelihoods of *campesinos* in my community, Tonaya, and of the *jornaleros* (migrant workers). My conversations with the people of Tonaya revealed that a very small proportion of the population is employed by the *invernaderos*. The reason is simple: hard work for low wages. In addition, most of the population is subjugated by the *caciques* of the town, those who are buying and renting territory for the production of agave used for the tequila industry. As I continued to "research" communities with closer proximity to the *invernaderos*, I entered into the region known as the *llano en llamas* where the *invernaderos* are located. At their labor camps, I heard the stories of the migrant *jornaleros*, primarily indigenous, who for survival have engaged in contract labor and are the main workforce of the *invernaderos*. I sat down in houses with a single room shared by two or three families and listened to the stories of their *jornalero* children and their lack of alternatives to contract labor. I was given the best lesson in economics by a *jornalera* and her family who told me, "On a good day I earn an average of 100 pesos a day; a chicken costs 80 pesos and tortillas are 20 pesos a kilo. You tell me if you consider this a 'decent wage'?" The company, however, continues to brag about paying their workers twice the minimum wage (minimum wage in Mexico is approximately \$5 a day). The stories of the *jornaleros* made me realize that the current power structure at the *llano en llamas* is the same as during our initial colonization. Instead of chains, however, this new power structure uses modern methods such as the "corporate social responsibility" discourse, which is nothing more than the crumbs of a modern system that does not solve the problem of the oppressed, but placates them and consequently silences their outcry. This is the "vivir mejor" (live better) discourse of the Mexican state or its oligarchy. It is not "vivir bien" (live well) or "el buen vivir" (a life concept that roughly translates to collective well-being). It is simply providing its labor force with enough resources to keep them alive.

For the local communities, the *invernadero* has become a social agent that maintains general control of the social realities of the people in the communities. In addition to regulating the people's lives via "employment opportunities," they control natural resources

such as water. The communities that are tired of the historical false promises made by the government guaranteeing access to water have, via the *ejidatarios*, started negotiations with the company Bioparques de Occidente S.A. de C.V. in an attempt to increase access to water for domestic use. Currently, they obtain water for domestic use only once a week, and their alternative access to water is a polluted river that they use to irrigate their plants and crops. In this sense the communities of the *llano en llamas* and the migrant laborers are employing the concept of *uno no muerde la mano del que te alimenta, aunque sea la misma mano que te golpea* (you do not bite the hand that feeds you, even if this is the same hand that hits you), or hegemony in Gramscian terms.

“¡Diles que no me maten!” (“Tell Them Not to Kill Me!”) and “Es que somos muy pobres” (“It’s Because We Are Very Poor”) are not simply the titles of works by Juan Rulfo, but the reality for us, the people of Tonaya, and our struggle to protect our natural resources. On July 21, 2011, I attended a community gathering and listened to the people of Tonaya demand the immediate closure of the mine *Minera Metalúrgica Tapalpa S.A. de C.V.*, because the pollution of the river has caused the death of cattle and the loss of crops. I also heard mine workers from Chiquilistlan discuss the poverty that forces them to protect an income of 900 pesos a week. It was the events following the plebiscite, however, that revealed not only what Anibal Quijano calls a colonialism without a colonial administration, but also the reality reflected in Rulfo’s title “¡Diles que no me maten!” “Tell them not to kill me” is the silent outcry of the people in Tonaya, where the movement against the mine has ceased because of public intimidation and death threats to community activists. Despite my privileged status as a foreign researcher, I have been denied access to information about the mine from federal, state, and local institutions. The reasons given are that the information is “nonexistent” or it has been classified as confidential to avoid generating “problems that might destabilize the established procedure.” The local government simply argues that the mine is not in our territory. They did, however, provide me with questionable lab tests indicating that the river is no longer contaminated, but I have yet to receive results



My father shows me the difference between our traditional maize (right) and the hybrid version.



Type of housing provided by some *invernaderos* for workers.

from the lab tests that CONAGUA made during a toxic discharge from the mine into the river. The more telling response of the Mexican government toward the local movement, however, was to attack a community activist, who was publicly silenced and assaulted when he refuted claims by local and state official that the river is clean. Soon thereafter the documentary *Agua: El Verdadero Tesoro* (*Water: The True Treasure*) about the mining

conflict was mysteriously removed from the Internet. Despite the removal of the documentary and threats against community activists, the message of the campesinos to the Mexican government continues to be *queremos vivir y queremos vivir bien* (we want to live and we want to live well). ☀

Nancy A. Preciado Rodriguez is in the master’s program in Latin American Studies.