

1 From Farmworkers to Farm Owners: An Introduction

We wanted to name it Mariposa [farm] because ... do you know the story of the monarchs? The monarch butterflies? They need to fly from Mexico to Canada, [and] some of them die crossing the border to reach Canada. ... Some of the parents die during the trip, but the children know how to come back. I think that we as Latinos have a lot in common with the butterflies because in order to be here, we have to cross the borders, and sadly, a lot of times families lose their loved ones. But their children here, the children who are born here, always have the need of knowing their parent's' roots and always go looking for it.

—Marisela

I visited Mariposa Farm on a crisp spring day in March 2016, in a moment when the raw political divisions of rural America were on public display. Northwest Washington, like most regions of the country where fruit and vegetable production are the heart of the rural economy, is home to a large Latino/a population. Mostly of Mexican heritage, some are undocumented newcomers, while others are descendants of workers who came as part of the federal bracero guest worker program of the 1950s and 1960s. Almost all initially crossed the border looking for employment in the agricultural sector. Immigrant labor is crucial to the economic stability of this region. And as this book will describe, many of these immigrants are successfully rising in the ranks of food production and starting their own family-operated farms, living what many envision as the American dream. Yet signs in support of Donald Trump, a presidential candidate whose campaign centered on vitriol targeting immigrants, and Mexican immigrants in particular, lined the edges of the winding country roads of the Cascade Mountain foothills.



Figure 1.1

Beautiful greens display by Mariposa Farm at a market in Washington State.

The paradox of a rural America as a place that simultaneously provides opportunity even as it harbors a deeply ingrained and highly contradictory nativism plays out in the stories of Mexican immigrant farmers. As the above epigraph describes, out of economic desperation many people cross borders, seeking a new life. Yet what they find is that despite struggles, they are able to reroot their lives. It is not easy to be an immigrant in the United States, especially when you can be singled out for the color of your skin, stature of your body, or language on your lips. For most, day-to-day survival is enough. But for others, the memory of a life lived on land from which they harvested for their families, and the draw to the independence of growing one's own food and tasting familiar flavors, overpowers the feelings of exhaustion and defeat. The stories told in this book are of those who defy the odds, and in doing so, show us the way that a new America can flourish, if we are to accept and support them.

The Changing Face of American Agriculture

While the majority of US farm ownership remains in the hands of US-born people who identify as white, immigrants from Mexico, who identify as indigenous or mestizo, are gaining access to land and starting their own farm businesses. Many new farmers in the United States are immigrants, who initially came to the United States looking for work on others' farms. Using prior experience farming their own land in their home countries as well as recent experiences in the United States as migrant farmworkers, they transition to working on their own small-scale farms. As many Mexican farmers shift from working as laborers in others' fields to owning and operating their own businesses, they represent the new face of a flourishing generation of farmers.

Many of these farms reflect a vision of a multiracial and ecologically sustainable food system espoused by alternative food movement advocates. While Mexican immigrant farmers are certainly not a monolithic, organized, or self-identified group among US farmers, what this book describes are trends I saw throughout the country, as I followed distinct communities of immigrant workers in their paths to transition from positions as agricultural employees to circumstances where they controlled their own time, labor, and food-growing practices. In my research, I have found that throughout the United States, there are pockets of first-generation Mexican immigrant farmers who, unlike the majority of farmers in the United States, use a combination of what have been identified as alternative farming techniques. This includes simultaneously growing multiple crops (from four to hundreds), using integrated pest management techniques, maintaining small-scale production (ranging from three to eighty acres, with most between ten and twenty), employing mostly family labor, and selling directly at farmers markets to their local communities or regional wholesale distributors. Although not all farms fit this portrait completely—many hire some nonfamily labor, sell to wholesalers and in direct markets, and are not certified organic—these practices are reflective of farming approaches that are alternative to the dominant conventional industrial agriculture model.

Immigrant farmers are filling unmet gaps in knowledge and labor as they ascend to farm ownership in an economy where more and more US-born farmers are leaving midsize and small-scale farming, and failing to pass on their businesses to their children. They are entering farming in a

moment where nearly half of all farm operators in the United States are reaching retirement age (USDA 2014). Most farmers' children are not interested in taking on the family farm, as the labor input is high while profits are low and unstable. Further, there is already a higher demand than supply for organic food products in the United States, while consumer interest in organic and sustainably grown food continues to increase.¹ Immigrant farmers are migrating with agricultural expertise and skills, particularly experience in alternative growing practices, and are meeting this acute need for interested and willing American farmers.

In this book, I argue that immigrant farmers bring their knowledge and experience of alternative farming practices across the border, and despite challenges, are actively and substantially contributing to an alternative food system envisioned by food movement actors and activists. In order to understand how and why Mexican immigrant farmers have come to and created this niche, and what social and economic factors influence their practices, I explore the following questions: Why are immigrant farmworkers starting their own farms, despite enormous challenges? What is the historic context that has determined their position in the current agrifood system? How does their race, ethnicity, and citizenship status affect their agricultural practices and agrarian identity? What does their transition from workers to owners mean for more just labor in the fields? Finally, I investigate their role in today's growing alternative agrifood movements, asking what these findings mean for scholars and activists trying to understand resistance to our industrial agriculture model and agrarian class transition on a global scale. I discuss the importance of recognizing immigrant farmers of color, and their vast and diverse knowledge for the ecological and social sustainability of our food system as a whole. Through the lens of global agrarian transition, I look at the unacknowledged centrality of race, ethnicity, and immigration to transnational changes in our food system.

I draw on research with Mexican immigrant farmers in the United States along with the state and nonstate actors who work with them, exploring the relationship between class transitions, race, and migration in agriculture today. I define a farmer foremost as someone who identifies themselves as a farmer (*campesino*, *ranchero*, or *agricultor*, in Spanish)—more specifically as one who currently owns their farm business, to differentiate them from a farm laborer working under an employer. Most rented the land they cultivated, although some owned it, and all performed at least some of

the manual labor on the farm. They have been operating their own farms in the United States for a range of two to twenty years, with a minority simultaneously working other jobs, some in farmwork, and others in construction. All the farmers made at least some, if not all, of their income from their own farming businesses.²

All farmers emigrated from Mexico, and identify as Latino/a or Hispanic.³ In Washington and California, many farmers interviewed also identify as Triqui or Mixteco (indigenous to Mexico).⁴ Most speak limited English, with Spanish being their first language. For some who speak indigenous languages, Spanish is also a second language. Some have English-speaking children who are teenagers or young adults, and help with translation for forms or at the market. I interviewed adult children in a few instances, sometimes in addition to their parents' interviews.

Besides the typical challenges of becoming a new farmer, which include lack of access to start-up capital, land, labor, and markets, immigrant farmers must contend with their citizenship status, race, and ethnicity as well as linguistic, literacy, and educational limitations. As immigrants, and particularly as immigrants of color, participants' experience of US citizenship varies. Many immigrant farmers are undocumented. US immigration and border policy make it nearly impossible for most farmworkers to enter the United States legally. Additionally, increased militarization at the US-Mexican border, and the resulting danger and cost of crossing the border, discourage seasonal migrations, encouraging people to develop stronger communities and secure livelihoods on one side (Holmes 2013). This increases their desire to subsist in the United States more permanently, which for those in this study means using their skills as farmers to move up the food labor chain from farmworker to farm operator. Yet undocumented farmers are ineligible for any government-sponsored agricultural support programs, such as those available through the USDA.

Although many farmers interviewed did have documents to legally live and work in the United States, their ease and opportunity in accessing land and support to farm was still significantly affected by their racialized identity. For those who are documented and therefore able to apply for government assistance, such as USDA loans, the inability to read, write, or understand the required forms necessary to become established farmers in the United States can prove challenging. Immigrant farmers' language skills, literacy abilities, and education levels vary. Most have had little, if

any, formal education, while others have completed elementary or high school, and speak some English. Yet even they are intimidated by the bureaucracy of the US agriculture system, and frequently lack the level of written organizational skills necessary to record and quantify their farming practices and apply for support.

I have found that this particular set of farmers challenges not only class, racial, and citizenship-based hierarchies in US agriculture but also exemplify how race and culture matter in the formation of agricultural practices and social relations. This book explicates immigrants' food and farming practices as a consequence of racial and citizenship-based exclusion as well as immigrants' struggle to redefine their relationship to land and cultural practice in a new country. On the one hand, they are discriminated against for their race and citizenship status, leaving them with little capital to start farming, and limited options in terms of land and market access. On the other hand, they express a preference for farming in a particular style—one where they are able to regain control over their daily labor and reproduce a specific agrarian way of life, defying linear capitalist agrarian development.

Industrial farming, including monocropping, heavy synthetic inputs, wholesale markets, and a low-paid nonfamily workforce, would make rational economic sense to immigrant farmers as perhaps the most direct path to agrarian class mobility. Yet racial exclusions constrain immigrants' options as farmers, therefore limiting them to particular forms of cultivation. All nonwhite immigrants in the United States progressing from worker to owner, including Japanese, Chinese, and Sikh farmers, have had to overcome obstacles based on not only class but also racial, ethnic, and varying degrees of citizenship status, in addition to their linguistic, literary, and educational limitations. Due to compounded marginalization by racist and classist legal structures, immigrant farmers of color have fewer financial resources, and less access to land, inputs, capital, and markets, than their white counterparts (Garcia 2002; Minkoff-Zern et al. 2011; Matsumoto 1993; Chan 1989; Wells 1996). Even when farmers of color succeed in climbing the agricultural ladder, their social positioning means that they do so with limited resources and varying levels of success.

Additionally, many immigrant farmers actively choose farming more small-scale, diverse cropping systems, with limited synthetic inputs and mostly family labor. This form of farming, although not purely subsistence, allows them to reclaim control over their own labor and livelihoods, while

also earning a cash income (see Welsh 1997). This farming approach is both a means of survival and way of resisting the dominant mode of global agricultural development, and can only be fully understood through an analysis of race, citizenship, and migration. Although these explanations might seem contradictory—with one based in limitations, and the other based in preference—these findings exemplify the complexities of present-day agricultural transitions, where racial positioning and the political economy of migration must be brought to the center of agrarian analysis.

Alternative Farming: Certifications, Standards, and Identities

There are many labels used to identify farmers who use alternative cultivation practices. Some are more clearly defined than others. “Organic,” for example, is a term regulated by the USDA as well as several third-party certifiers. “Biodynamic,” a stricter standard for ecological farming, is also strictly defined, although only by a nonprofit certifier. On the other end of the spectrum, the terms “alternative,” “local,” and “natural” have neither a certification process nor national-scale official standards. I use the term “alternative farming/production” to broadly imply that these immigrant farmers are growing in a way that does not fit within standard agro-industrial practices. I recognize this is an imperfect term, as inclusion in alternative food movements is contested, and there is no clear definition of practices.

Despite lacking standard or agreed-on definitions, there are certainly large national and global movements of actors that coalesce around these terms, or identities, some of which are conflicting and at times confrontational in their goals. Yet as David Goodman, E. Melanie DuPuis, and Michael Goodman (2012, 4) describe below, those that distinguish themselves as part of a universal alternative food movement commonly identify in opposition to the global industrial food system, which they see as largely “unsustainable”:

In their general problematic, alternative food networks and the fair trade movement have emerged in response to the glaring and multifaceted contradictions of the unsustainable industrial food system and the exploitative trading relations embedded in the global supply chains that support its growth and (expanded) reproduction. ... [A]ctivists are mapping different ways forward by creating new economic and cultural spaces for the trading, production, and consumption of food—organic, fair trade, local, quality, “slow”—whose ethical and esthetic

alternative “qualifications” distinguish them from the products conventionally supplied by international trade, mainstream food manufacturers, and supermarket chains.

Goodman and his colleagues also point to what is seen by many activists and academics as the contradictory nature of many alternative food movement actors and initiatives: they are identifying as alternative to an industrial system of producing food that is destructive to our environmental resources, social equality, cultural fabric, and human right to food, and yet the alternative being suggested is still capitalist in nature and therefore ultimately will reproduce many of the same problems. They suggest the “politics of alternative food system-making as a process” rather than a designation where one deems food and food-related practices as either “good” or “bad.”

Labor, in particular, is a central contradiction I have had to contend with as I look at how racialized workers reclaim the means of production in the most basic terms, gaining control over their own physical labor, while also reproducing the same labor structure as their farm businesses grow. The question of labor justice looms large and is in no way solved by workers starting their own farms, as I discuss in chapter 5. I have seen only a few examples of Mexican farmers creating a more cooperative labor structure; most farmers were adamantly averse to this idea when I brought it up. Although Mexican immigrant farmers do not solve the problem of labor injustice simply by their existence, as I explore below, I still see their persistence and growing presence as a sign of positive changes in US agriculture as a whole, both in terms of racial justice and ecological sustainability.

Following Goodman and his colleagues’ suggestion (and acknowledging the inherent messiness of labor politics on immigrant farms), I contend that alternative food movements, which have largely left out farmworkers and farmers of color (see, among others, Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Allen 2004; Gray 2013; Guthman 2014), must expand on their efforts at inclusion by utilizing a reflexive approach to alternative food movement building. To do so, farmer identities must be challenged to include farmers of color as well as bridge the divide between former workers and farm owner/operators. For this to happen, white farmers and consumers will first have to face the exclusionary nature of alternative food movements, and be willing to recognize the diversity of races and ethnicities present in farming today. Building on the diversity of alternative farmers and farming can only

function to strengthen the movement, bridging class- and race-based divides in the effort to resist corporate food regimes. In this book, I discuss the ways that immigrant farmers utilize alternative farming practices, and the relationship between their farming practices and their racial and ethnic identities, making the case for a more inclusive alternative food movement.

A Hidden Population

According to official USDA census data, the number of farms with principal operators (the person who manages the farm, not necessarily the business owner or landowner) of “Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino origin” grew from 50,592 in 2002 to 55,570 in 2007.⁵ In 2012, the number increased again, to 67,000 farms, for a 21 percent increase over five years. Of those 67,000 farm operators of Latino/a origin, the vast majority (64,439) were the primary farm business owners as well (USDA 2014).⁶ In other words, Latino/as are increasingly assuming leadership roles on farms in the United States. Even as the census shows increasing numbers, as I discuss in chapter 2, the number of Latino/a immigrant farmers is undoubtedly still undercounted by this measure due to the distrust of the government, lack of mainstream farming practices, and linguistic, cultural, and social barriers to agricultural institutions.

Related to the lack of accurate data and tracking, the existence of Mexican and other Latino/a immigrant farmers is often unknown or overlooked in day-to-day, on-the-ground USDA operations. In beginning research with immigrant farmers, I made unannounced phone calls to USDA regional headquarters across the United States in all five states included in this study, including California, Virginia, New York, Washington, and Minnesota. In each case, when I first called and asked to speak to someone who works with “Latino or Latina farmers,” the person on the end of the line responded as if I had asked about Latino/a *farmworkers*, not farm business owners. I consistently had to explain, “I am looking to speak with someone in your office who might work with immigrant *farmers*, as in farm business owners, not laborers.” Even in regions where immigrant farmers exist in significant numbers, it took substantial explanation to start a conversation in which USDA staff understood the specific group of farmers that I was interested in discussing. They were either unaware that Mexican and other immigrant farmers existed in their region, or were so accustomed to thinking of

Mexican immigrants as agricultural workers that they disregarded their encounters with immigrant farmers until probed directly.

This lack of awareness among USDA staff about Mexican and other Latino/a immigrant farmers is reflected in the scholarly literature on Latino/a as in agriculture in the United States. There is a growing body of geographic, anthropological, and sociological research on farm labor that critically engages with the politically produced vulnerability as well as exploitation of the immigrant body. This literature contributes to our understanding of historical and modern-day labor conditions in the agrifood system—an understanding that is necessary for gaining a comprehensive picture of the political economy of food production and advocating for workers' rights throughout the food system. In particular, this work investigates the relationship between the Latino/a immigrant worker and the state, providing nuanced analysis of how US national policy and immigration agencies reinforce unjust working conditions along with a racialized workforce (see, among others, Allen 2008; Brown and Getz 2008; Guthman and Brown 2016; Gray 2013; Harrison 2011; Holmes 2013; Mitchell 1996; Sbicca 2015). Yet most critical analysis of immigrant workers thus far does not include the possibility that some immigrant workers are in fact advancing in this agrarian class system. Further, there has been almost no comprehensive inquiry of how immigrant farm owners are experiencing state apparatuses.⁷

Additionally, there has been a recent proliferation of scholars researching and writing about race and agrifood systems, particularly through the lens of food justice in the United States. Such work has investigated how race matters in the context of modern-day food movements, food access, and labor hierarchies. Much of this research, as well as my own work, is grounded in the notion of racial formations. Racial formations, which occur through a process of “historically situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized” (Omi and Winant 2014, 55–56), are imposed and reinforced via power relations within the US food and agricultural system. The relationship between racial formations and agrifood systems has been discussed in the context of agricultural regulations (Minkoff-Zern 2014c), labor (Mitchell 1996; Garcia 2002; Walker 2004), inclusion in and access to markets (Alkon 2008; Slocum and Saldanha 2013; Slocum 2007), the inclusion (or lack thereof) in so-called alternative food movements (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Alkon and McCullen 2011; Allen 2004; Allen et al. 2003; Guthman 2008a, 2008b;

Harper 2010), and farmer-led US-based movements (Brent, Schiavoni, and Alonso-Fradeja 2015; Minkoff-Zern 2014a). Yet, none of this literature specifically looks at immigrant farmers and their increasing presence in US agriculture. This book makes a needed intervention, exploring how immigrant farmers interact with the state, markets, and agrarian social networks in the United States.

Immigrant Farmers and Their Supporters

Over the course of five years, with the support of eight research assistants, including undergraduate and graduate students from Goucher College and Syracuse University, I interviewed over seventy immigrant farmers in five distinct regions of the United States. Semistructured interviews with farmers took place at their farms, homes, and farmers markets. I also conducted participant observation at farms and farmers markets where Latino/a farmers were prevalent as well as attended a six-month training course for new farmers that was geared toward immigrant farmworkers. To meet farmers, I attended relevant conferences and markets where immigrant farmers sell their goods. I also met farmers through other immigrant farmers, farmer training/incubator organizations, extension agents, USDA staff, farmers market managers, and other groups that outreach to immigrant farmers. Most interviews with farmers were in Spanish, and were transcribed and translated by myself or a student research assistant.

In addition to farmers, I interviewed people who interacted with and outreached to Mexican and immigrant farmers as part of their jobs. This includes twenty-seven employees of nonstate or not-for-profit programs, six university extension agents, and fourteen USDA staff members. In some cases, I was also able to observe them during interactions with farmers. Through these interviews and observations, I was able to gain a broader perspective on what kinds of challenges and opportunities immigrant farmers face, particularly in terms of access to land and markets, federal and state resources, certification programs, and regional agricultural networks and associations.

The interviews at nonprofit programs included individuals who advocate for and work with immigrant and other low-resource farmers, including staff at farm incubators and training programs, food hubs, produce brokerages, marketing collectives, farmers market management, and industry

commissions. Many of these organizations are explicitly focused on helping the Latino/a immigrant community advance in agricultural careers and food system opportunities in their regions, such as the Minneapolis-based Latino Economic Development Center and Sunnyside Transformation of Yakima Valley in Washington State. Staff at these organizations spoke with me about creating market opportunities for immigrant farmers, and assisting them with business, language, and literacy skills. When I met with representatives from farmer training and incubator programs, they similarly emphasized market access as well as business and language skills, but were also focused on helping farmers with land access and adjusting to farming techniques suited to the regions. Farmers market managers were not as directly invested in the success of Latino/a farmers, and some even exhibited their own bias against them. Yet all the market managers worked closely with immigrant farmers and had become personally interested in seeing them succeed, albeit at varying levels. They discussed going on farm visits, helping them with their marketing, signage, and packaging, and assisting them with certification and market-required paperwork as well as the ways they struggled in competing with their white counterparts.

On a national level, I met with organizations such as the Rural Coalition and the National Latino Farmer and Ranchers Trade Association that lobby on behalf of immigrant and Latino/a farmers. Drawing on their agrarian policy advocacy work, they were able to speak to the discrimination that farmers are experiencing across the country and in particular their treatment at the USDA, which is the subject of chapter 3.

Government employees included extension and outreach agents from land-grant universities and USDA agents/staff members. Extension and outreach agents from state universities who specialize in small farms generally had a good sense of the immigrant farming community. They are often the first line of entry for farmers to access markets, land, training programs, and grants, especially in areas where there is no farm training or incubator program. In New York, Washington, and Virginia, university extension introduced me to many of the farmers I later interviewed. At the USDA, I met with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Service Agency (FSA) at the local and state levels, when available. They discussed what resources were available to farmers, and their offices' level of outreach to the local immigrant farming community, including their limitations related to outreach.

On the federal level, I interviewed staff members who work in the Office of Advocacy and Outreach with the Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Program. I also interviewed staff members who worked on the USDA's Hispanic Farmers and Ranchers discrimination suit and claims process. In 2000, a class action suit was filed against the USDA on behalf of Hispanic farmers and ranchers who were discriminated against from 1981 to 2000 while applying for USDA loans. The USDA admitted to discrimination, and this case was settled via a claims process, where farmers were eligible to receive from \$50,000 to \$250,000 (Hispanic and Women Farmers and Ranchers Claims and Resolution Process 2012; Martinez and Gomez 2011). Staff discussed with me how this process worked and what it means for Latino/a farmers today.

Through this set of interviews and meetings, I gained a bird's-eye view of what Mexican immigrant farmers are up against as well as what opportunities and support systems are in place to help them succeed. Of course, it was through speaking to farmers themselves that I heard the most moving stories and personalized perspectives on how they plow the paths they are creating. By listening to individuals in open-ended interviews as well as taking time to walk farmers' lands and see their crops, kitchen tables, and marketplaces, I was able to grasp a sense of people's lived experiences as immigrant farmers in the United States today. Certainly, there are limitations to doing interview-based research. While I conducted over one hundred interviews in total, it is difficult to create a thorough quantitative analysis of them given that each discussion took its own form, and in these meetings, stories were privileged over checking boxes.⁸ Below I explore the differing geographic spaces they are working in, with their varied challenges and prospects, and the route I took into each of these regions.

Finding Sites and Meeting Farmers

The geographically diverse case studies included in this book provide a sample of distinct clusters of Mexican immigrant farmers in the United States. Large numbers of immigrants migrate to these areas, as they contain a high percentage of fruit and vegetable farms, requiring a large labor force. As farmworkers transition to growers, they also tend to concentrate on fruit and vegetable production, in part because the capital required to enter the

market is lower for fruits and vegetables than other crops.⁹ These regions provide access to urban markets for direct produce sales as well, which I have found immigrant growers prefer due to the ability to sell smaller amounts of diverse products with less bureaucracy, as I discuss more in chapter 3. Three out of five of the regions had farmer training programs and/or farm business incubator projects, which had a purposeful emphasis on immigrant farmers, and helped farmers learn cultivation techniques and business skills for farming in the United States as well as assisted them in land and market acquisition. These regions are distinct in that they vary in their seasonality, the size of the general Latino/a immigrant population, and the length of time the immigrant communities have been established in the region.

I began this course of inquiry as part of my dissertation research as a graduate student at the University of California at Berkeley in 2011. My dissertation research looked at the condition and contradictions of farmworker food insecurity along California's Central Coast, investigating how farmworkers coped with lacking access to adequate food and nutrition. As an outsider to the farmworker community, I was initially surprised by how many farmworkers I interviewed were in the process of starting their own gardens and farms. Yet when I further reflected on this, it made a lot of sense. The workers I interviewed came from agrarian backgrounds and were skilled at many elements of farm labor, not just the repetitive tasks they were assigned as workers in California's industrial agriculture system. Further, they longed for the foods they missed from back home as well as the time spent cultivating land with family, which dramatically differed from the piecemeal assignments they fulfilled in their daily work on large-scale monocropped fields as pickers and packers.

Although most of these farmworkers were early in the process of starting farms, taking farmer business training courses, renting their first plots of land, or just beginning to sell crops grown in a community garden, I saw the ways they were succeeding, despite an extremely uphill battle. When I started discussing the presence of farmworkers turned farmers with labor advocates, agrarian scholars, white farmers, and others with broad knowledge of the agriculture industry, most thought what I was seeing made up a small group, and had no confidence in these farmers' ability to succeed, given financial, cultural, linguistic, and citizenship-based obstacles. Their doubt was in part what motivated me to pursue this research. From

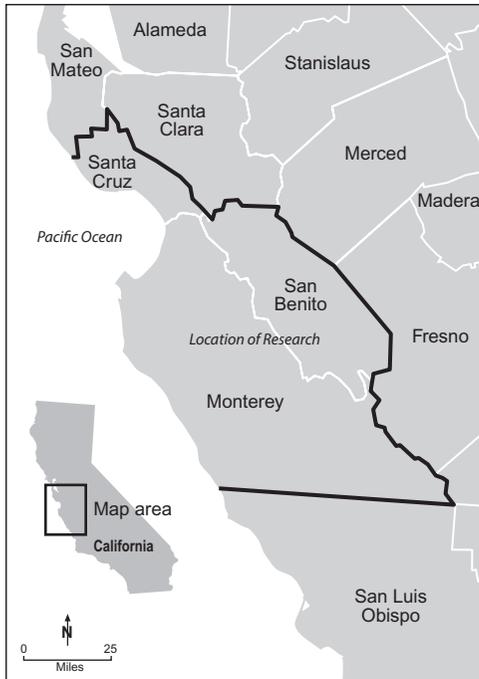


Figure 1.2

Map of California region of research.

what I was observing, there was a larger group than most outsiders could imagine, and these farmers were not going to give up easily.

With geographic market access to the San Francisco Bay Area and surrounding wealthy cities, rich and well-drained soil, and a year-round productive climate, the northern Central Coast seems like an ideal place to start a new produce farm. This region is popular for aspiring and beginning farmers, especially the commonly young, white, college-educated graduates of the University of California at Santa Cruz's apprenticeship program in agroecology and sustainable food systems. Yet farming in this region can be challenging, even for beginning farmers who have resources and capital with which to start. In terms of succeeding at farming for profit, the competition is stiff, with saturated markets in the prosperous urban areas.

Contrary to its image as a haven for local and organic food, the region is actually dominated by conventional strawberry and lettuce growing, which has prevailed for decades. It is in these conventional fields that most

immigrant farmers begin and eventually work their way out to start small organic farms. The Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA) training program is geared toward farmworkers and other limited-resource aspiring farmers in Salinas, California.¹⁰ It is through this training program, which includes a six-month course as well as access to rented land and machinery after graduation, that many immigrant farmers get a foothold in this competitive market.

Most of the immigrant farmers I met in California had participated in this program, which has existed for about twenty years and has had a large influence on the ascendance of farmworkers to farm ownership in

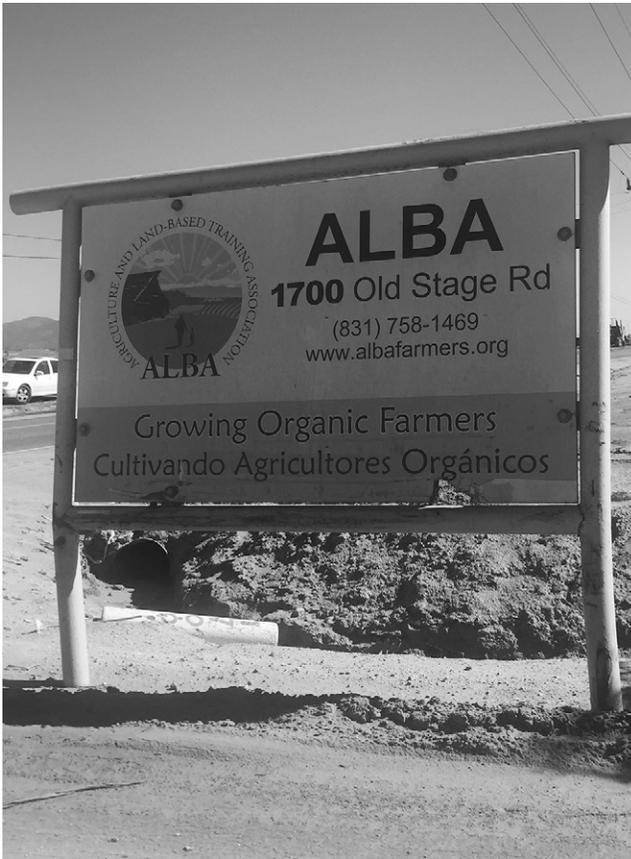


Figure 1.3
Sign at the entrance to ALBA.

the area. The organization promotes organic methods as well as diversified production, and assists farmers with obtaining organic certification, which is reflected in the practices of the farmers I interviewed. Although direct marketing is the preference of many of these farmers, entry for new farmers into farmers markets with high-paying customers is difficult, and newer farmers in this area sell primarily to produce brokers.

ALBA graduates are certainly not the only Mexican or immigrant farmers in the region, though, as many second- and third-generation Mexicans have entered conventional strawberry production too. The California Strawberry Commission (2014) reports that 85 percent of strawberry growers in the state are now of Latino/a or Asian descent, and the commission recently elected its first Latina chair. As the industry faces attacks from consumers and activist groups for poor labor practices along with increased, controversial pesticide use, it proudly promotes this immigrant population to create a new image for the crop. I did not interview these farmers, as they are primarily second- and third-generation immigrants, yet they do provide a particular kind of counterpoint to the trends I am seeing, as I discuss more in chapter 6.¹¹

When I moved to the East Coast for a postdoctoral position at Goucher College in Baltimore, Maryland, I started seeking out immigrant farmers in my area. Due to my proximity to Washington, DC, I looked into federally funded immigrant and refugee programs, with offices in the nation's capital. I learned about the Refugee Agricultural Partnership Program, sponsored through the Office of Refugee Resettlement, and was able to meet with the director at the time, Larry Laverentz. He confirmed my speculation: Mexican immigrant farmers are everywhere, if you know how to find them. He sent me to the regional farmers markets, where market managers connected me with a sizable community of Latino/a farmers on the Northern Neck of Virginia who traveled weekly to the DC area to sell their products.

Situated between the Potomac and Rappahannock Rivers, the Northern Neck is one of three peninsulas (or "necks") that jut out into the Chesapeake Bay. The "Neck" is representative of a pattern of out-migration throughout the rural South. As white agrarian communities struggle to retain their youth, new immigrant populations are ascending both culturally and economically (Kasarda and Johnson 2006; Zandt 2014). This migration of white youth is an opportunity for immigrant farmers to enter the agricultural market.

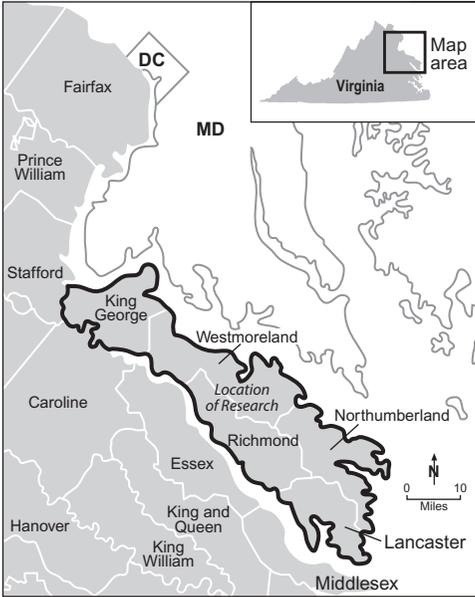


Figure 1.4
Map of Virginia region of research.

There are approximately thirty immigrant families farming on the Neck, almost all part of an extended family from Jalisco, Mexico. Although most of the area is cultivated by corn, wheat, and soybean growers, immigrant farmers represent one-half to two-thirds of the fruit and vegetable farmers on the northern peninsula, according to estimates by farmers themselves as well as local USDA and extension staff. These farmers mostly sell directly to customers at markets in Washington, DC, and the nearby suburbs in northern Virginia. There is no farmer training program in this region, and the immigrant farmer population has sprung up by its own volition, as multiple generations of Mexican immigrants came here following the East Coast berry harvest. It is easier to start farming here than in California, as water is more plentiful, land is more affordable and easy to access, and markets for direct produce sales are less saturated. Although these farmers are not certified organic, they are still growing diversified crops, and using low-spray and integrated pest management techniques.

As my own career progressed, and I moved locations, finally to central New York, where I currently work at Syracuse University, I looked for

the same kind of local farming population in my proximity. Due to the dominance of the dairy industry and high start-up costs to purchase the required infrastructure, there are few Mexican or other Latino/a farmers in the region. Instead, I explored a research site in the Hudson Valley, an agricultural zone with more prevalent fruit and vegetable production as well as better access to direct markets in New York City.

In the Hudson Valley, I met farmers through the FARMroots' Beginning Farmer Program, an aspiring farmer training program organized by a farmers market association based in New York City. Focused on "sustainable farming," the program was created in 2000 as a partnership between Greenmarket and Cornell Cooperative Extension to support new farmers in New York City, the Hudson Valley and Catskill regions, and New Jersey and northeastern Pennsylvania. At its inception, the program focused on the immigrant population in the region, helping new farmers access land and resources, although it has broadened its mission since. As the program is based under the larger umbrella of a farmers market organization, most farmers I met in this region were selling directly to customers at markets in New York City.

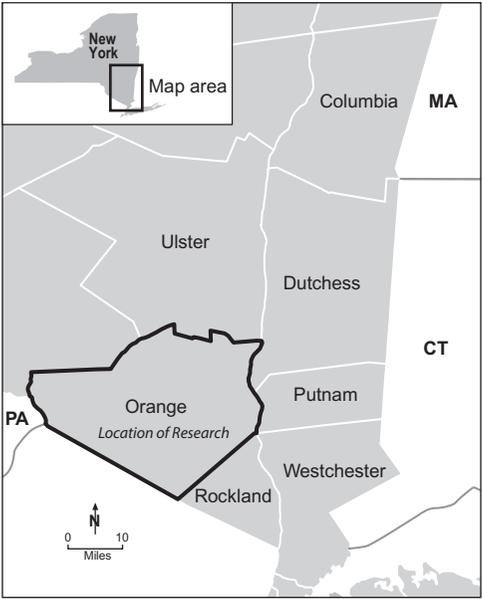


Figure 1.5
Map of New York State region of research.

Many of the farmers in this program found land to rent in the “black dirt” region of the Hudson Valley, which got its name from its dark and fertile soil, a remnant of a glacial lake and regular flooding of the adjacent Wallkill River. Until recently, it was a popular area for onion farming, with good access to New York City markets, and soil that was particularly favorable to the crop. Onions were cultivated by Polish and German immigrants and their descendants through the twentieth century. Today, with incoming pressures from agritourism, and the proximity of the area to New York City as a second-home destination, combined with the fact that the onion market has shifted, the area is struggling to maintain its agricultural backbone. I found immigrant farmers growing on land nestled between larger farms and estates, sometimes in the middle of others’ fields, wherever they could get hold of property. This small group of Latino/a farmers are recent inhabitants of the region, which does not have as long an established history of Latino/a immigrant community as the other areas in the study. Not fitting with the local farming culture of monocropped rows as well as heavily sprayed and weedless fields, these farmers were often targeted by locals for their “messy” cultivation strategies and seen as unwelcome outsiders.

The last two sites, or case studies, to be included in my project were in northwestern and central Washington and southeastern Minnesota. I traveled to each of these sites after meeting someone who worked with immigrant farming communities at conferences where I presented my work on farmworker turned farmer communities. My contact in Washington was Colleen Donovan, who works with the Washington State University Extension, and my contact in Minnesota was Alexander Liebman, a graduate student at the University of Minnesota. In each case, they approached me after my presentation to tell me that they were seeing the same trends in their area and that I should come talk with people there. I followed these leads and was thrilled to see the thriving groups of immigrant farmers, working with the same challenges and taking on such similar kinds of agrarian practices as in California, Virginia, and New York.

Immigrant farmers in northwestern Washington also benefit from a farmer training and incubator program. The program, Viva Farms, is specifically focused on training the local farmworker population to fill what the organizers see as gaps in the local agricultural workforce, as the region’s white farmers retire. Similar to California’s northern Central Coast, the area



Figure 1.6
Map of Washington State region of research.

is well known for its berry production. Given its scenic location between the Cascade Range and Puget Sound, with a mild year-round climate, northwestern Washington's agricultural region is at constant threat of residential development. Maintaining a thriving agricultural economy is a challenge, and American Farmland Trust designated the region the fifth most threatened agricultural area in the nation. With rich soils and good access to Seattle-area markets, which are less saturated than those in California down the coast, northwestern Washington is a somewhat-welcoming place for immigrants to enter the market. Most farmers I interviewed here focused on direct markets, primarily farmers markets and restaurant sales.

Additionally, Mexican immigrants have been in the area for many generations, dating back to the Bracero Program. Similar to California, Washington also has a sizable group of Mexican farmers who do not fit the alternative farming mold. In addition to the alternative farmers in northwestern Washington, I interviewed six first-generation immigrant

orchardists in central Washington who had each bought a conventional fruit orchard from their previous employer. They do not use the description of growing techniques discussed in this book as closely as the diversified growers who make up the majority of the study. This immigrant farming population, although statistically significant based on state-level USDA reports, are an anomaly according to my national study. In these cases, the workers must be documented in order to access federal loans, which are necessary given the high capital inputs required to operate these farms. They also buy the farms at below-market rates and are dependent on the goodwill of their employers to sell to them. This is not to say they do not have a place in my analysis; I discuss their situation in more detail in chapter 6. Throughout the book, however, I refer primarily to the diversified growers who make up the majority of my interview population.

Southeast Minnesota, my final case study, had the least in common with the other regions I visited. Generally a commodity crop region, where most of the agricultural land is planted in corn and soy, the Latino/a population is more populous in urban areas. Yet there is some fruit and vegetable production, and where there is produce, there are farmworkers. In this region, the Latino Economic Development Center, an urban organization, identified a niche for Latino/a growers as part of its larger mission to help Latino/as in Minnesota become successful business owners and local community leaders. Seeing how many of their community members had agricultural experience from their home countries and their employment in the United States, they have made agriculture part of their central focus and have begun to help interested members find land in the area. It has been a struggle economically, as they are still new to understanding the local agricultural market. Many of the farmers they work with sell through a cooperative marketing collective, which concentrates on immigrant farmers. They have also teamed up with local food hubs and other organizations that assist them in finding facilities for washing and packing as well as avenues to market their products. Given that farmers are coming together around an urban hub rather than a rural one, as is the case in the other sites, the farms are more spread out across the state, with one farm located far to the northwest of the others.

While these case studies are in no way comprehensive of all of the Latino/a immigrant farmers successfully cultivating in the United States, and I have surely left out some very significant regions, I believe by looking

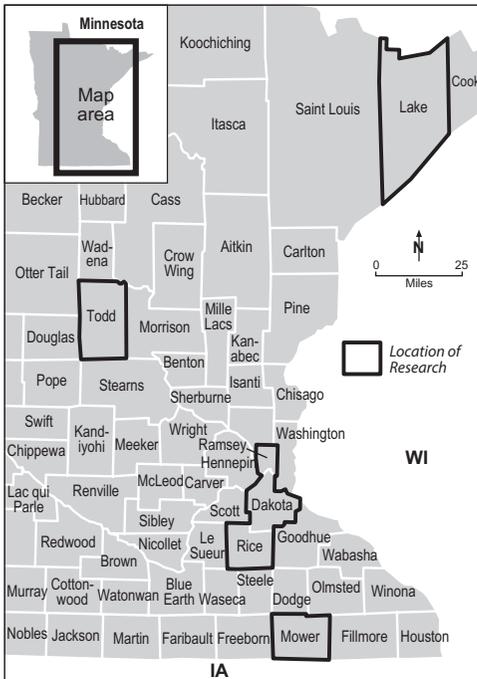


Figure 1.7
Map of Minnesota region of research.

at these five distinct areas of production, I have been able to capture an idea of the challenges and possibilities for immigrant farmers today.

A Few Notes on Method and Procedure

The sites I examined and people I interviewed for this study were chosen in part as a measure of convenience, based on my personal location at the time, and in part in relation to individuals I met along the way, and where they helped me make connections—a snowball sampling of regions and people. Additionally, with the exception of the farmers I started working with during my dissertation in California and have continuing relationships with over many years, I was only able to meet, observe, and interview most farmers once or twice for a few hours, at their farm, and for some, at the market as well. The downside is that I wasn’t able to build a relationship separate from the individual who introduced me, and so to be fair, that

could have skewed what kind of information they shared with me. Alternately, the benefit is that I was able to interview many farmers and develop a broad sense of this worker-to-owner transition on a national scale.

And finally, I'd like to offer a reflection on my methodology and decision to maintain the anonymity of farmers. The farmers interviewed are a mix of resident aliens, naturalized citizens, and undocumented immigrants who have been in the United States for a range of four to twenty-five years. Most of the farmers who are documented came before the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, which provided legal status to undocumented immigrants who arrived before 1982. I never asked directly about farmers' documentation status, but through the telling of their stories, I could often discern whether participants were documented or not. Because this information makes them potentially vulnerable research participants, at risk of deportation, throughout most of the research process I made the assumption that they would want to be kept anonymous. As part of receiving the permission to conduct research through the institutional review boards at the various universities where I have been affiliated, I stated that immigrant participants' personal information would be kept confidential. This was meant to provide protection for the participants.

Yet as my research continued, I found that many farmers did not want to remain anonymous. As small business owners, they wanted their names used and sought to promote their farms. Even undocumented farmers, who volunteered their immigration status, asked me to use their real name. Only while conducting the final leg of research did I fully realize how many farmers actually wished to be recognized by name. This could have resulted from the fact that only toward the end of the study did I introduce the project by stating that I was writing a book. I believe the notion of a book grounds the project for participants in that there is to be a tangible and shareable outcome of the interviews rather than the vague notion of "research." In the last year of my research, I changed my process with the institutional review board, giving participants the option to have their name used or to be anonymous. Then as I began writing this book, Trump was elected president and brought in an administration that claims to be committed to purging the United States of all undocumented immigrants. Given this current state of affairs, I ultimately chose to keep all immigrants' names anonymous, documented or not, so as to create the most possible protection. This decision has been a difficult one, since some

farmers were clear that I should use their names. But when those interviews were conducted, we were living in another era for immigrants in the United States, and I do not want to assume they would feel the same if I asked them the same question regarding their identity today.¹²

Book Organization

In chapter 2, “Sharecroppers, Braceros, and ‘Illegals’: Racializing the Agricultural Ladder,” I look at the intellectual history of structural discrimination against farm laborers in the United States, and how this history has set the groundwork for the challenges that immigrant farmers and other farmers of color face in advancing economically and socially in US agriculture today. From the institution of slavery to domestic and international policies such as the Bracero Program and North American Trade Agreement (NAFTA), people of color have been relegated to an economically and socially disadvantaged role in US agriculture. Concurrently, white farmers have been awarded privileges that give them advantages in establishing landownership as well as accessing capital and markets. I bring this history up to date with a discussion of the treatment and expectations for immigrants currently laboring in agricultural communities and spaces. Utilizing the commonly cited metaphor of the agricultural ladder, this chapter establishes a base for understanding the particular challenges that Latino/a immigrant farmers face today.

“Institutions, Standardization, and Markets: Hungry for Opportunity in US Agriculture,” the third chapter, investigates how Latino/a immigrant farmers navigate USDA programs, university extension services, and other agricultural opportunities, which often necessitate standardizing farming practices and accepting bureaucracy for participation. This chapter shows how Latino/a immigrant farmers’ agrarian norms and practices are at odds with institutional requirements for agrarian standardization. I argue that immigrant farming practices and racialized identities are frequently unseen by, and illegible to, the state, university, and other research opportunities as well as alternative food institutions and marketplaces. This disjuncture leads to the increased racial exclusion of immigrant farmers from conventional and alternative agrarian opportunities today. Most agrarian-based organizations and institutions have failed to acknowledge this schism between rural Latino/a immigrants, the state, and agricultural institutions, thereby

inhibiting a meaningful transition in the fields and continuing a legacy of unequal access to agrarian opportunities for nonwhite immigrant farmers.

In the fourth chapter, "Food, Identity, and Agricultural Practice: Re-creating Home through the Family Farm," Latino/a farmers' ability to reclaim land and succeed as farmers in the United States is constantly being defined as well as redefined in relation to racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic hierarchies. This chapter employs the complex notions of home, identity, and place to understand how and why immigrant farmworkers are farming in the United States, despite particular challenges based on their racial and ethnic social positioning. I argue that the rationale and motivation of immigrant farmers in the United States can only be understood through the lens of identity, as their challenges as well as motivations are unique to their racialized and ethnic social status. I discuss both alternative and conventional farming practices embraced by immigrant farmers, looking at how these approaches compare as they strive to build an agrarian livelihood. In this chapter, I show the ways these farmers are re-creating a new sense of home through cultivation and consumption practices, ultimately proposing that it is these connections to an agrarian identity that keep them farming, despite the difficulties.

In chapter 5, "Shifting the Means of Production: Food Sovereignty, Labor, and the Freedom to Farm," I discuss immigrant farmers' drive for autonomy from their former bosses, and what their success might mean for the future of agrarian class relations. I look at the ways that their accomplishments as small-scale and diversified farmers fit within the global movement for food sovereignty from industrial food system, despite their aversion to engaging with social movement politics. I also address the contradictions these farms represent in terms of agricultural labor inequality, as immigrant farmers epitomize both a racial and ethnic transition in US agriculture, and the limitations to reforming a historically unjust class system. And I examine what this racial and ethnic transition in farming means for larger questions of global agrarian transition.

Finally, in chapter 6, "The Rain Falls for Every Farmer: Growing Ecological and Social Diversity," I turn to the more pragmatic task of presenting suggestions for USDA, university extension, and alternative food movement practice and policy. Exploring how policy makers and social movement actors can best support immigrant farmers, I incorporate these recommendations with a critical analysis of identity politics within

US food movements. I look closely at Latino/a immigrant farming practices, arguing that although they farm using practices that are deemed sustainable or ecological by alternative food movement standards, the alternative food movement has not yet recognized their increasing potential for contributing to the agroecological knowledge base on US farms. I make the case for a deeper look into who is included and excluded from alternative farming movements and spaces, and importance of creating new opportunities for immigrant farmers of color as part of these social networks and markets.

