

2 Sharecroppers, Braceros, and “Illegals”: Racializing the Agricultural Ladder

My boss is white, and I told him, “How many whites do you see working here? It’s because of the Mexicans that you guys are at the top. If you didn’t have Mexicans, you would go down.” ... I think there are always going to be the racist folks who think we ought to just be working for them or whatever, instead of trying to have our place or own business.

—Alonso

Alonso’s entire family, including the children, worked as migrant workers when he was growing up. Although his father started the family’s farm in eastern Washington in the 1970s, Alonso continued to work for other people to make extra money until he was an adult himself and could live out his dream of operating his own farm full time. He recalled to me the experiences of his father, one of the first Mexican farmers in their region, over forty years ago:

You know, down at the warehouse selling your own produce and getting a decent grade ... because it felt, and my father also felt, that when they take a box of asparagus and grab like eight ounces, they pick it up and put it on the table. They grade that and they knock a whole percentage off the total of your weight, five hundred or six hundred pounds, or wherever you got. And my dad always felt that he wasn’t getting a fair grading like everybody else. So that became an issue for a long time. And then he would go in to make sure. ... My dad took the time to almost grade every box, and he still didn’t get a good grade. So he was like, “That’s bullshit, we are getting rigged.”

Although he and his father before him are some of the few Mexican immigrants who have been successful in starting their own farms, Alonso still recognizes the deep-seated resentment many white farmers have against his family. For people of color, transitioning to a new position in the agrarian

class hierarchy is not without struggle in the United States. This is largely due to the historical commitment of farmers and others with decision-making powers to maintain people of color in working-class positions.

In this chapter, I tie together the histories of slavery and immigration as they relate to US agrarian labor politics in order to unpack the challenges faced by Mexican American farmers in the United States today. Through a historical analysis of the relationship between race, labor, and land access in the United States, we begin to see why people of color, and Mexican immigrants in particular, struggle to advance on the so-called agricultural ladder. The ladder metaphor has come to represent agricultural opportunity for class advancement in the context of an idealized Jeffersonian or private land ethic. It is only by situating this model within the framework of race relations that the true and unequal nature of agrarian development in the United States becomes clear.

The United States has a long history of constituting full citizenship, and related rights to land and resources, through whiteness. The earliest colonists utilized social constructions of race to justify the taking of native lands and exploitation of native labor in the founding as well as expansion of the nation. The labor to establish the agrarian landscape was maintained by African slaves, who were taken from their own lands to work on US soil, followed by the work of their children and grandchildren. Once freed, African Americans were systematically denied full rights to land, mobility, and participation in the democratic process.

Since emancipation, slave descendants and immigrants have composed the majority of the agrarian labor force. Legislation and cultural exclusions have been designed to maintain a steady and available agrarian workforce composed of people of color. Immigrants and blacks have been excluded from full citizenship rights in the United States due to state-sanctioned policies, which have been reinforced by everyday experiences of racial exclusion. Those who have attempted to access their own land to farm, including nonwhite immigrant farmers, have been dispossessed of land and resources, explicitly due to their racial and citizenship status (Chan 1989; Foley 1999; Minkoff-Zern et al. 2011; Matsumoto 1993; Wells 1991, 1996).

The challenges faced by Mexican immigrants in starting their own farm operations in the United States today are intimately tied to the agrarian history of both the United States and Mexico, and the ways in which specific classes of people have been racialized, and therefore marginalized in

gaining access to land and capital over time. Farmers and landowners have historically taken advantage of Mexican immigrants' politically vulnerable citizenship status in particular, be it as documented temporary workers, undocumented workers, or even documented workers with relationships in the undocumented worker community, to deny workers human rights and a living wage (Garcia 2002; Mitchell 1996; Hahamovitch 1997; Barndt 2008).

I begin this chapter by discussing the flaws in the agricultural ladder metaphor as it intersects with an understanding of racial exclusion and discrimination in the United States. I then look at the African American experience of slave labor, sharecropping, and farm ownership as historical context for the Mexican immigrant struggle in agriculture today. I argue that black Americans were forced to stay at the lowest rungs of the ladder due to discriminatory policies and day-to-day racism. In the next section, I examine the condition of Mexican exceptionalism: how farmers and policy makers have produced an image of Mexican immigrants as temporary workers, in effect preventing them from advancing up the agricultural ladder as they are systematically blocked from establishing themselves as citizens and farmers in this country. Finally, I conclude with an analysis of the US agricultural census, and how this measure of participation in agriculture in the United States today provides glimpses of hope for immigrant advancement as well as a view into the problematic ways immigrant farmers are undercounted and overlooked.

Race and the Agricultural Ladder

The agricultural ladder is a metaphor and model used by agricultural economists, rural sociologists, and others to describe the rate and means by which unpaid farmhands and hired farmworkers have advanced to positions as farm owner-operators, particularly in the United States (see, for example, Spillman 1919; Lee 1947; Kloppenburg and Geisler 1985). Although it was widely applied, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, this theoretical model has also been critiqued for lacking empirical rigor and accuracy (Kloppenburg and Geisler 1985).

The idea of the agricultural ladder is rooted in the "agrarian myth" or "agrarian imaginary," which promotes the notion that in the United States, a country founded by hardworking individual farmers, land access

has been democratically distributed. Jack Kloppenburg and Charles Geisler (1985) argue that it is ultimately more useful when seen as an ideological model, promoting the idealized image of the small-scale US farmer. The ladder concept reinforces the idea that all individuals who work the land diligently with their own hands (with no help from slave or hired labor) have access to upward agrarian mobility.

This kind of agrarian idealism could not be further from the truth. Land-ownership was originally obtained through the pilfering of native lands. While the narrative is often espoused that land cultivated by white settlers in the United States was previously “untouched,” native lands throughout the Americas were utilized for agriculture, grazing, and other livelihood practices. Indigenous practices were in some cases even more intensive and productive than those of white farmers, yet they were not recognized as such. Native farmers and ranchers were not seen as viable agriculturalists as their practices did not produce goods for capitalist accumulation, and thus they were forced via violent means from the lands that they occupied (Buck 2001; Mann 2005).

Rather than a country built on an ethic of the democratic distribution of land, access to land, capital, and other resources to build productive agricultural businesses has been monopolized into the hands of fewer and fewer farm owner-operators since the end of the nineteenth century. This concentration of land and agrarian wealth correlates with the increased mechanization and industrialization of agriculture, and related pressure and competition to scale up operations (Buttel and Flinn 1975; Guthman 2014; Kloppenburg and Geisler 1985; Walker 2004). When one starts to account for racialized disparities in land access and owner occupancy throughout US history, the story becomes even more disproportionate.

Despite valid critiques, the agricultural ladder has been continuously used as a way to understand and justify agrarian mobility in the United States, and through this lens, minimize the focus on unequal power relations. The traditional use of the agrarian ladder model in US academic discourse recognizes the advantages of inherited access to land and other resources as well as differing access to capital among social classes, and the importance of social status within differing historical and political contexts (Lee 1947). Yet until more recent discussion by historians, social mobility in agriculture, or ascent up the ladder, has been written about as a concept hinged on hard work and tenacity, absent of a racial or gendered analysis.

In the US-based literature, it is implicitly assumed that the farmworker or potential farmer is both white and male.¹

The denial of race in more traditional discussions of agricultural economic and class ascendance has functioned to reinforce rationalizations in academic and policy-based settings of people of color as stagnant laborers in the US agricultural system (for a broader exploration of race-based challenges for immigrant farmers, see chapter 3). Further, as I argue below, such framings justify the poor treatment of racialized agricultural workers as they are portrayed as unable or unworthy of the responsibilities of becoming farm owner-operators. The historical racial divide in reference to access to land, capital, and other resources is reflective of a deeply ingrained agrarian culture that privileges the white majority. This culture has been normalized and institutionalized, ensuring a racialized landscape of land-ownership and business ownership.

Slavery, Sharecropping, and Black Ascendance Up the Ladder

To understand racialized differences with regard to land and agrarian opportunity, one must lay the groundwork by first looking at the experience of black Americans and slavery, and how this history has continued to impact their ability to farm independently. Following emancipation, many were given hope that they would finally achieve the status of landed citizen and the freedom of owning their own farm business. Unfortunately those dreams were mostly unrealized. In order to maintain access to free and available black labor, white landowners created social and institutional barriers to prevent freed slaves from accessing land. These barriers created challenges to land access for black, aspiring farmers for decades.

After Emancipation

African American farmers in the United States, like immigrant farmers of color, have been displaced from their livelihoods many times over. They were first dispossessed through the processes of capture from their homelands. As slaves, they could not legally own property, although they could acquire capital. On emancipation in 1865, slaves were promised “forty acres and a mule.” This refers to a statement made by Clinton B. Fisk, a senior officer in the federal Freedman’s Bureau during Reconstruction, who contributed to a vision of black yeomanry held by many slaves themselves. Fisk and

others claimed that freed slaves would benefit from widespread land reform following the Civil War as reparations for generations of unpaid labor. Yet land that had been claimed during the Civil War was mostly returned to its white owners rather than being redistributed to the black slaves who had worked it, as had been pledged (Cox 1958; McKenzie 1993; Williamson 1965).² Politicians in both the North and South perceived black landownership as a threat, as white landowners and other business owners saw available black labor as essential for economic productivity. In many southern states, “Black Codes” were developed specifically targeting freed slaves, including laws denying black people the right to own property or lease land, and restricting mobility. These laws were designed to maintain a restricted black workforce, which would reflect the labor system of slavery as much as possible (Cohen 1991; Flynn 1999; McKenzie 1993).

In addition to these legal restrictions in many states, after emancipation the majority of freed slaves lacked the capital or land to become true tenants or landowners. Most stayed in agriculture as laborers or sharecroppers. Sharecroppers, both black and white, farmed a specific plot of land as permitted by the landowner, in most cases with seeds, fertilizers, and other inputs provided, and using farming methods as dictated by the landowner, in exchange for a percentage of the crop as income. This was a step above their former position as a slave or wage laborer, but a far cry from having control over one’s land and labor, or being a true tenant of the land. This position on the ladder typically only existed in the South as a direct extension of slaveholding agrarian culture (Alston and Kauffman 1998).

Over time, a small portion of black sharecroppers ascended to the position of a “true tenant,” paying rent either in the form of a set number of crops or cash. Yet once they became tenant farmers, they had a much smaller chance to advance to landownership than their white tenant counterparts. Structural and individual cases of overt racism kept many black tenants from even trying to access their own land (Stine 1990). In addition to lacking access to capital and resources to purchase land and farming inputs, after emancipation there was a mass migration of black people from the rural South to cities as well as northern and western states in search of nonagrarian lives, and different opportunities for work and community.

It is also important to note that the number of black farmers who worked as sharecroppers versus those who rented land as actual share or cash tenants is hard to decipher in the period after emancipation as the US

agricultural census did not distinguish between the two until after 1920 (Alston and Kauffman 1998). Some historians argue that the number of true tenants and black farm operators (versus sharecroppers) during this time was actually much higher than the census reveals (McKenzie 1993).

Notwithstanding sharecropping as the norm, among those who stayed in agriculture, some black tenants eventually saved enough capital to purchase their own land. By the end of the nineteenth century, 25 percent of black farm operators in the United States owned the land that they farmed (Alston and Kauffman 1998). Despite disadvantages in accessing land, former black slaves and later wage laborers, similar to the immigrant farmworkers of today, had experience farming, gardening, and marketing for their employers, giving them an agricultural knowledge base from which to draw when attempting to go out on their own and start commercial farms. In particular areas, especially in the cotton and rice-growing regions of the deep South, former slaves were especially successful by creatively accessing land at lower rates if their owners had not paid taxes during the war or by collectively pooling resources to purchase land (Van Sant 2016).

Civil Rights Era

After a short-lived increase in black farm ownership from 1900 through 1920, however, when black-owned farms reached their height of 925,000, a steady decline began in black farm business ownership and land tenure.³ This decrease has been attributed to overt threats of racial violence and discrimination, rising urban job opportunities, and increasing mechanization. Since black farmers had less access to either capital to invest in new machinery or the larger plots of land necessary to compete in an increasingly industrialized agriculture system than did their white counterparts, they were not able to maintain a competitive level of production. Additionally, black farmers have been squeezed out by the state, experiencing overtly racist treatment at USDA offices and differential opportunities than those offered to their white counterparts. These inequalities were partially addressed in 1999 by the class action lawsuits *Pigford v. Glickman* and *Brewington v. Glickman* (Daniel 2013; Gilbert, Sharp and Felin 2002; Grim 1996; Payne 1991; Ponder 1971; Schweninger 1989; Simon 1993; Van Sant 2016).⁴

In addition to racial biases as well as economic and cultural boundaries to class ascendance, black farmers posed a challenge to white landowners as their advancement up the ladder signified the loss of a dependable pool

of cheap labor. Despite white farmers' attempts to maintain this labor force, black agricultural workers eventually migrated out of the rural South for industrial and urban jobs in bigger, more northern cities. They were largely replaced by Mexican and other Latin American immigrant workers, brought in through explicit international labor agreements and manufactured immigrant streams, as I will discuss in the next section.

Black agriculturalists' largely unsuccessful transition from slave to landowner and farm operator set the racialized backdrop for a mostly Mexican workforce to replace them, and to eventually contend with similar challenges around their racialized agrarian class positioning. The institutional challenges for black farmers to ascend the agricultural ladder created a cultural and institutional norm in which farmers in the United States are normalized as white, and workers are normalized as people of color. The limitations black farmers have faced over time reinforce an environment where Mexicans and other nonwhite immigrant workers and aspiring farmers struggle to advance economically and culturally in US agriculture.

Mexican Exceptionalism: The Creation of a Racialized, Temporary Workforce

Mexican immigrants, much like former slaves and their descendants, have faced race-related challenges to advancing up the so-called agricultural ladder. Analogous to black agricultural laborers, they have had to contend with being politically and culturally categorized as workers rather than owners in the US agrarian laborer-to-owner hierarchy. This institutionalized hierarchy has systematically benefited white landowners and business owners. For the most part, white farmers have successfully maintained Mexican immigrants' working class position in rural areas, laboring and living in a continuous state of poverty. US industrial growers have consistently benefited from policies that enable them to employ and underpay Mexican-born workers, while ensuring they are denied the same rights and opportunities for upward mobility as US-born white workers. In this section, I discuss some of the moments in US-Mexican relations that have broadly established the conditions Mexican immigrant farmers endure today.

The exact boundaries of the US-Mexican border were contested for many years, particularly along the US-Texas perimeter—a dispute that led to the

Mexican-American War of 1846–1848. For people native to the Americas, on both sides of the political boundary, the border literally crossed them, as the saying goes. Most, if not all, Mexican immigrants whom I interviewed are of some part native heritage, with some identifying specifically as indigenous. The fact that they have been identified as native to one country yet as illegal or foreign in another, based on a politically defined boundary with little relevance to their actual ancestry, is an irony not lost on them.

Conversely, many people born in Mexico are light skinned and often claim to be of Spanish/European lineage, identifying as white themselves. Yet Mexicans have long been recognized as nonwhite by US white-identifying citizens, no matter the color of their skin, as a way to differentiate and categorize them as lower status in the intersecting US racial and class hierarchies. As Neal Foley's (1999) work on agrarian class hierarchies in early twentieth-century Texas shows, Mexicans were seen as a clear economic and cultural threat to US-born whites, and racialized as closer equals to blacks than whites. This racialization provided a justification for landowners to limit Mexican workers' and sharecroppers' available credit and autonomy, therefore restricting their ability to ascend to tenant or landowner status.

Although Mexican immigrants have been categorized as nonwhite, it has also been argued that they are different than other racialized groups of immigrant workers to the United States, as I discuss below. In order to preserve their worker status and prevent them from accessing land, politicians and farmers have invoked the geographic proximity of Mexico to make a case that unlike other immigrants to the United States, they are able and wish to return to their home country rather than establish a life in the US. It has been claimed that Mexican immigrants do not pose the same risk as other immigrants to the economy and "American" rural culture, because at the end of the season they will return to their home country and communities. This argument has been used to further justify the qualification of Mexican immigrants as workers only. As a racialized and immigrant agrarian workforce, they do not qualify for the same rights as US-born workers, and certainly are not afforded equal access to land and other resources. Their categorization as temporary laborers further complicates their challenges in being accepted into rural communities as landowners and permanent residents.

To understand the state of Mexican farmers and agricultural workers in the United States today, we must return to history for context. In the sections that follow, I outline the policies that have produced an image of Mexican immigrant workers as both necessary and illegal. What becomes clear through this historical analysis are the ways that Mexican workers have been framed as exceptional from other immigrants in their impermanence in the United States, and therefore not lasting or ascending on the agricultural ladder of class advancement.

World War I Era

The case of Mexican immigrants' exceptionalism begins during World War I, a time period during which Mexican immigrants were prioritized over others seeking to migrate to the US, given that their stay would only be temporary. Mexicans and other Latin Americans were singled out from other immigrants in 1917, when the first comprehensive immigration law in the United States was passed by Congress. Congress passed this act in the context of the war as a means to restrict anyone who was perceived as a threat to US security. In addition to instating a literacy test and raising the "head tax," the price of the tax paid by new immigrants, the act restricted immigration by anyone from the "Asiatic Barred Zone." The zone included any person from a country that was on or adjacent to Asia but was "not owned by the U.S.," with the exception of Japanese and Filipinos (Tucker and Creller 2007). This act provided no restrictions on immigrants from the rest of the Americas, and in the midst of this new anti-immigrant legislation, the US Department of Labor directed an order to bring in temporary Mexican workers and families for six months, without them having to pay head taxes or passing literary clauses. Despite a growing culture of xenophobia in the United States at the time, Mexican workers were prioritized for entry, while other immigrants' admittance was being limited.

In 1924, a new immigration bill was passed, and it included the National Origins Act as well as the Asian Exclusions Act. This federal law restricted the number of immigrants who could be admitted to the United States to 2 percent of the number of people from that country who were already living in the United States as of the 1890 census, and was specifically designed to target southern and eastern Europeans, particularly Italian and Jewish immigrants. Additionally, it severely limited the immigration of Africans, and outright banned the immigration of Asians and Arabs. According to

the US Department of State, Office of the Historian (2017), the purpose of the act was "to preserve the ideal of American homogeneity." Moreover, in the early twentieth century, a series of acts called the Alien Land Laws were passed in over a dozen states. The main purpose of these laws was to exclude Asian immigrants from holding land as well as force practicing farmers off land that they were already cultivating (Matsumoto 1993).

The National Origins Act sparked a massive debate between hard-line immigration restrictionists, who argued for more class- and citizenship-based immigration limitations, and antirestrictionists, who did not want to see immigration further limited. Antirestrictionists included those who benefited from immigrant labor, such as cotton growers, ranchers, and farmers. Historian Kathleen Mapes has shown the ways that these agriculturalists intervened in congressional hearings regarding Mexican labor specifically. Farmers argued that Mexican workers were a "special class of labor" that would never settle permanently, and "could be called in and exported at will" (Mapes 2004, 68). Mapes analyzes the testimony of midwestern sugar beet farmers who contended that Mexican workers were not only *not* a threat as permanent community residents but furthermore would never succeed at challenging the racial hierarchy of US farming as they knew it—they simply were not skilled enough to start farms on their own. She writes, "To address fears that once in rural areas Mexicans might climb the agricultural ladder, some Midwestern witnesses insisted that though Mexicans were especially suited for unskilled farm labor, they would never compete with skilled farm laborers or attempt to buy land and begin farming on their own. As evidence, a farmer from Minnesota, F. H. Ross, told Congress, 'I do not believe that there is any Mexican who is ever going to own a farm'" (ibid., 7).

The justification for continuing to allow Mexican workers entry to the country was further supported by farmers who believed that not only were Mexicans naturally "unskilled" but also that the future of white family farming in the United States depended on their racialized labor.

The flip side of this "new world" of agriculture was that Mexican workers would have no "agricultural ladder." Sugar industrialists and farmers justified the lack of opportunity for the newest agricultural workers by turning to racist assumptions. Since Mexicans as a "race" were already "degraded," employing them to work in the fields where opportunities for advancement were few, and mobility was always physical and not financial, did not contradict the Jeffersonian ideal but made it possible in a new world of industrial agriculture. (ibid., 10)

This argument reflects the case made by white landowners during the period after emancipation regarding limiting prospects for black workers and sharecroppers. Agricultural employers believed that denying workers of color opportunities for advancement was a necessary condition for maintaining white family farming as they knew it. The antirestrictionists ultimately won, and Latin American immigration was not limited by the act. Mexican immigrants continued to cross the border, filling labor gaps on US farms.

Immigration debates throughout the last century have perpetuated the notion that Mexican immigrants do not wish to stay in the United States, particularly as such debates have intersected with policies regarding agricultural labor. As Mapes (*ibid.*, 72) observes, “The argument that Mexicans would not assimilate or adopt U.S. citizenship was developed into a racist theory that Mexicans were naturally drawn back to Mexico.” Ensuring a racialized and easily controlled workforce for industrial agriculture became a consistently invoked assertion for allowing Mexicans entry to the United States, without extending an option for citizenship and related rights.

Bracero Era

The policy of allowing entry but restricting permanent residence was institutionalized in the 1940s through the Bracero Program. In order to guarantee an agrarian workforce from Mexico, the Bracero Program was established through a set of accords between the United States and Mexico in 1942. The program allowed Mexican workers to legally cross the border to work in US agribusiness on a temporary basis. This diplomatic agreement was developed to address the labor shortages created by World War II on the US side, and deep-seated poverty on the Mexican side. This policy solidified the patterns of migration that have continued from Mexico to the United States, both legally and illegally, ever since.

More than two million Mexican workers came to labor in the United States as part of the Bracero Program, until it was eliminated in 1964. Specific employers contracted workers to do a particular job as part of the agreement. There was no opportunity for changing jobs if the workers was unsatisfied, abused, or found the job expectations unreasonable. The Mexican government paid workers, but only once they completed their contract and returned home. Costs, such as transportation, housing, and food, were deducted from their pay. Some growers tricked workers out of their

pay, telling them they could stay longer and then reporting employees to deportation authorities so they didn't have to pay the workers at the end of the season. Bracero workers were regularly denied their full pay on return. Eventually, in 2007, the Mexican government offered "cash assistance" payments of \$3,700 to former braceros, who for decades had claimed payment fraud. Of course, by then few workers could be tracked down, and many were no longer alive (Mitchell 2012; Mize and Swords 2010).

As the program continued past the wartime era of labor shortage, braceros were strategically used to undercut wages and rights demanded by domestically born workers. This created a tension in which many US-born workers and union organizers saw braceros as a threat to their livelihoods and organizing abilities. Ultimately, the presence of the braceros over the course of more than two decades helped shape the economic and cultural structures of US agriculture, especially in the highly industrial fields of California. These structures have created an economic expectation that growers should be able to underpay and exploit the labor of workers. Further, it created a cultural expectation that because those workers are foreign-born and racialized Mexicans, they do not need to be paid or treated as well as US citizens, and should be grateful for the work (Mitchell 2012). This historical tension underpins much of the negativity targeted at Mexican immigrants by economically disempowered and underemployed US citizens today, despite the fact that domestic workers have shown that they will not take available jobs in agricultural labor, given the current wages and conditions (Clemens 2013; Powell 2012).

Yet even in the midst of this massive binational labor agreement, some in the United States were already waging war against "illegal" Mexicans, who they did not want to see enter the United States under any circumstances. In many states, including Texas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Montana, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Wyoming, the anti-Mexican sentiment and sanctioned discrimination was so strong, in fact, that the Mexican government prevented braceros from working in those states for the first several years of the agreement. The government was concerned that the workers would not be protected from racially discriminatory practices.

Anti-Mexican sentiment grew alongside the constant industry demand for cheap immigrant labor, with this contradiction entrenching itself in the fabric of rural areas. In 1954, the first federal program designed to explicitly target and deport Mexican immigrants was put into place. During Operation

Wetback (the official name), the Immigration and Naturalization Service actively deported 1.3 million people, mostly undocumented, but also some legal temporary workers as well as US citizens of Mexican descent.⁵ Most of these immigrants had followed the migrant streams established through the Bracero Program, which was running at its peak during the course of this mass repatriation project (Mize and Swords 2010).

Operation Wetback was the first massive drive to actively deport undocumented and even documented Mexicans from the United States. It was also the first time that a public relations campaign was used to target Mexicans, branding them as “illegal.” The US attorney general at the time, Howard Brownell, and a former lieutenant general, Joseph Swing, hired to run the project, constructed a mass media campaign, sending out regular press releases, and controlling media coverage regarding the success of the deportations and messages supporting the Immigration and Naturalization Service’s motives. The creation of a divide between US-born citizens and Mexican immigrants as well as those of Mexican descent has persisted to this day in political discourse and media coverage of immigration debates, constructing a narrative of Mexican people in the United States as illegal, and less deserving of rights to citizenship, land, and class mobility (Bacon 2008; Mize and Swords 2010).

Additionally, Operation Wetback was the first call to militarize the US-Mexican border, which the attorney general labeled as out of control, employing military professionals to manage the situation. Many of the current border control practices were established during this time, such as regular sweeps and roundups of found crossers using military equipment, orchestrated by the US Border Patrol and local officials. It was during this period that the construction of a “wall,” or chain-link fence, along parts of the border was first proposed (Mize and Swords 2010). The militarization of the border has, of course, continued too, and the construction of a wall along the border has been one of the most contentious issues of Trump’s presidential campaign and administration.

Post-Bracero Era

Although the Bracero Program ended in 1964, Mexican workers have continued to dominate the US agricultural industry, albeit with little increase in worker protections or rights, and in an increasingly hostile environment to immigrants. They have remained a vulnerable workforce, both as a largely

undocumented immigrant population and group of workers excepted from labor laws. These economic and cultural challenges have led to a stagnant position on the ladder to farm ownership for most Mexican agricultural workers today.

From the end of the Bracero Program until the 1980s, little was done to legally address the regular hiring of undocumented workers in agriculture. Then, in 1986, President Ronald Reagan signed the IRCA, which followed the contradictory tradition in the United States of both abetting the structural conditions encouraging low-paid immigrant labor and criminalizing the people who perform it. On the one hand, the IRCA designated a 50 percent increase in border control and made it explicitly illegal for employers to knowingly employ undocumented workers, and therefore effectively made it illegal for those workers to be employed. On the other hand, the act gave amnesty to over one million "Special Agricultural Workers"—people who could prove they had worked in the United States for over sixty days between May 1985 and May 1986. For the first time, the IRCA made it an explicit crime to be hired in the United States without legal citizenship or working papers. Following this notion of the necessary yet illegal worker, the US government sent Mexican immigrants the message, "We don't want you to cross the border illegally, but we know you are here, and if you already work here, you can stay." While creating contradictory policy for agricultural workers, it did nothing to address the long-established patterns of migration from Mexican to US fields, or the economically dependent relationship that US policy had historically created.

Given both the perception of Mexican immigrants as somehow different from other workers and their dominance in agricultural labor in the United States, it is somewhat unsurprising that the laws to protect them are also exceptional from other labor laws and protections. Farm labor is one of few occupations exempt from the federal Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which established a minimum wage, forty-hour workweek, and overtime pay, and prohibited child labor. Farmworkers are not included in most state minimum wage and work hours limitations, with the exceptions of California, Oregon, and Washington. Farmworkers were also excluded from the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, which guarantees the rights of private sector employees to join a union and engage in collective bargaining. This is with the exception of California and, very recently, New York. In California, farmworkers fought for and won that right in 1975

after a prolonged effort by the United Farm Workers. They are now covered under the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act. In New York, a dairy worker, Crispin Hernandez, recently filed and won a lawsuit arguing that by being denied the right to organize and collectively bargain, farmworkers were being denied rights guaranteed by the state's constitution. Yet even when laws do exist to protect workers, research has shown that they are routinely ignored by employers and not enforced by relevant authorities (Gray 2013). As a racialized and hidden workforce, farm labor has been structurally stripped of the same rights as other workers in the United States.

Anthropologist Seth Holmes, in his in-depth ethnographic study with Mixtec and Triqui immigrants, discusses the interrelated ethnic and labor hierarchies that exist on family owned berry farms in the Skagit Valley of Washington, one of the regions I also researched for this book. He depicts multiple layers of farm hierarchies, with third-generation Japanese immigrant farm owners and white farm executives at the top, and indigenous berry pickers at the bottom. Farm structures and policies as well as economic, linguistic, and cultural divides all function to segregate owners, administrators, crop managers, field supervisors, and checkers, who are mostly white, and US-born Latino/as from undocumented indigenous immigrants, who do the majority of the hard labor and live in poverty conditions on the farm. These social and economic divisions reinforce the notion that the smaller-statured and darker-skinned indigenous immigrants are less "civilized," and not worthy of respect or career advancement (Holmes 2013). These segregations and conditions are common on US farms, as studies of farm labor across regions can account for (Fox et al. 2017; Hahamovitch 1997; Mares 2019; Mines, Nichols, and Runsten 2010; Minkoff-Zern 2014a, 2014b). Such ethnic and citizenship-based divisions also cement workers in their underpaid status on farms, preventing them from advancing to the role of farm owner.

Rather than support increases to wages that would make agricultural labor a desirable profession for domestically born workers, the agricultural lobby and politicians in rural regions of the country continue to fight for increases in guest worker programs. The H2A seasonal worker visa program is specifically for agricultural workers, continuing a Bracero era approach to limiting workers to a particular employer for a restricted period of time. Similar to the bracero laborers, as visiting workers, they have no right to change jobs and labor organizing is nearly unheard of. The agricultural lobby continually reasserts the H2A program as a win-win situation for

farmers and workers alike, alluding to the condescending argument that Mexicans only want to come to the United States to work and then prefer to go home. This justification for temporary and guest worker programs is being endorsed heavily by industry today, as it feels vulnerable under a presidential administration that is overtly hostile to the Mexican immigrants on whom it depends.⁶

Through this political process of simultaneously bringing in and also forcefully deporting workers, Mexican immigrants have been constructed as illegal, removable, and ultimately temporary. Rather than seen as the backbone of US agriculture and the potential hope for the continuance of family farming, Mexican immigrants have been constantly held back as they struggle to obtain the right to work and live in the United States, attempting to become embedded into agrarian communities and cultures. The construction of Mexican immigrants as illegal and forever foreign, while also economically necessary as laborers, creates a condition in which their ascendance up the agricultural ladder is fraught with structural racial discrimination and economic hardship. Yet as this book shows, many have fought against these incredible odds to make their vision a reality. In the section below, I look to census data to understand where and in what kinds of agriculture Latino/as, as a broader group of farmers, are succeeding, focusing on the ways that many immigrant farmers are being left out of official counts.

The Agricultural Census and the Missing Numbers

The US Census of Agriculture is administered by the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) of the USDA every five years, with the goal of recording all farms and ranches in the United States. Based on this reporting, farm groups lobby for money and other resources, agricultural policies are determined, and rural priorities are established. According to the census, while the majority of US farm ownership remains white, Latino/a farmers are rising in the ranks of farm ownership and operation on a national scale. Among farmers who identify as being of "Spanish, Latino, or Hispanic" origin, there was a 21 percent increase between 2007 and 2012 among principal farm operators. In contrast, the principal operators of the total number of farms, Latino/a farmers included, declined 4 percent over this time period.⁷

Additionally, and in concurrence with my own qualitative research, the census shows that Latino/a-operated farms are disproportionately smaller

in acreage and lower in sales than other farms. Fifty-eight percent of Hispanic farms were smaller than fifty acres, as compared to 39 percent of the total farms. Their land is also more likely to be rented. Further, they are more likely to not have internet access and work at least part time at an off-farm job (USDA 2014).

In states where Latino/a farmers have a larger recorded presence, such as California and Washington (and therefore are easier to draw conclusions about via census data), they disproportionately cultivated vegetables and melons, fruit and nut trees, flowers, and plant starts (greenhouse/nursery), as compared with animals, grains, tobacco, cotton, or sugar (ibid.). The census does not distinguish between immigrants and nonimmigrants, so these numbers do not reflect my own research population precisely. Yet the census is the only comprehensive data comparing farmers across all states and regions, and can demonstrate trends in growing practices for context. As I discuss below, my more concentrated regional and interview-based research shows that most immigrant Latino/a farmers do not answer the agricultural census survey, leaving gaps in our knowledge concerning their population numbers and growing practices.

Although the census shows an undeniable growth in Latino/Hispanic farmers, I argue that Latino/a immigrants are generally being undercounted in these numbers, and nonwhite Latino/as (indigenous or mestizo) are not being counted at all. The census is a self-reported questionnaire, and although it is required by law that farmers respond, there is no enforcement, so many who receive the questionnaire by mail simply ignore it. In immigrant farmers' cases, this could be due to a lack of literacy or English-language skills, or aversion to filling out government documents for fear of being deported.

Most farmers are initially identified by NASS through landownership or rental agreements. They are also identified through previous contact with the USDA if they have applied for loans, insurance, or received other kinds of support. Additionally, other agrarian institutions such as university extension services, nonprofit organizations, and farmers markets may share farmer contact info with NASS to help it find growers. There is also follow-up by census staff members to check on accuracy, and they supplement self-reporting with a land-based survey. NASS employees double check numbers by knocking on doors and doing interviews.

The off-the-grid approach that many immigrant farmers take to farming makes it difficult for census staff to identify and count these farmers. Almost none of the farmers I interviewed had ever heard of the agricultural census. They farm on mostly rented land, often under informal agreements, and rarely live on the farm or have paperwork documenting their land rental agreements. Even those who do own their land, usually do not live on the same property where they farm. In my discussions with staff members at NASS, university extension services, and the USDA, who all do some level of outreach to Hispanic/Latino populations for the survey, they confirmed that they have increased outreach to all farming groups deemed as "socially disadvantaged" in recent years. Yet they also agreed that the farmers discussed in this study are still underrepresented in the census.

In my conversation with Christopher Mertz, the director of the NASS Northwest Regional Field Office, he told me that he was aware of Spanish-speaking staff involved in the data collection process in New Mexico and Washington. He mentioned that there could be Spanish-speaking staff in other states as well, but could not confirm it. The presence of Spanish-speaking staff was usually the result of farming organizations in these regions actively seeking more resources for Latino/a farmers. He added that even despite this additional outreach, "We get plenty of feedback that they are undercounting certain populations. Definitely, we don't get them all. It's a sample."

Mertz explained the process of collecting farmer data and challenges of getting farmers counted who are out of the USDA's general networks. In the northwest region, NASS reaches out to organizations that work with nontraditional farmers more directly. Of course, these organizations must exist for NASS to access their networks, so in regions where no such organization is present, the problem is even greater. As Mertz observes,

It is a challenge to capture [their numbers in the census] if they don't work with farm programs and are not part of farm organizations. We work with organizations that do work with them, like Viva Farms. We were looking at the names of the farmers they work with, and the plan for next census is to work with them. ... Sometimes we have problems because organizations don't want to give the names of farmers. ... We try to find names and sources any way we can. We try to account for farm incubators as well. We are always developing our lists.

He noted that it is especially difficult to count farmers who rent land using informal arrangements: “That acreage is accounted for by the farm owner.” He added that in his region, he believes the numbers are becoming increasingly more accurate, yet it is still hard to know who they are missing, adding, “I think we are doing a better job of counting and finding these people. ... But some people enter agriculture and leave before we can ever count them.”

Robert, a staff member who works in the USDA’s FSA office in the Hudson Valley region of New York, explained his office’s role in census outreach:



Figure 2.1

Sabino Flores of Flores Farm with Kate Selting Smith, who works with Viva Farms as part of the Northwest Small and Latino Farm Support Program at Washington State University’s School of Environment and Skagit County Extension.

"We get the pamphlets. ... If you don't come in, you're not going to see that then. Sometimes even our guys who are getting a call about it might not answer or take the time to really do it. ... Even our traditional farmers don't respond to it."

When I asked directly about the census including Latino/a farmers, he stated that to his knowledge, "very, very little" of them were counted. As I found in my interviews with immigrant farmers themselves, as Robert assumes, most would never have heard of it.

Marcy Ostrom directs the Small Farm Program for Washington State University, housed in the Center for Sustaining Natural Resources. She has committed much of her career to researching the needs of small-scale Latino/a farmers in her region, and finding the best ways to outreach and address their problems as small farmers.⁸ In discussing her extension work with Latino/a farmers in her region, she explained how her staff got involved with agricultural census data collection outreach:

The ag census was not showing any or very few [Latino/a farmers], and I was with [a colleague] who kept saying that they had a list of 150 Latino-owned small farms. I went to my extension chair and said, 'Do you know any of these farms?' And they said no. So it is a bigger problem than the Latino farms. It's about small farms. So that's how I started getting involved in this. They were invisible, and people who went to look for them started going to churches and soccer fields, and giving trainings for farmworkers and asking how many people have their own farm. This was in 2005. He showed me a list of 250 Latino-owned farms. ... I actually sent his list to the agricultural census, and they hired him as a numerator, so it got better. It was still missing a lot.

Additionally, as I discuss in more depth in chapter 3, given their histories of immigration and relationship to US government agencies, many immigrant farmers are resistant to fill out government paperwork. When I asked Mertz, from NASS, about the reluctance of certain groups of farmers, especially immigrants, to fill out paperwork, he confirmed their hesitancy: "We get that from every segment of the ag population, especially if they are undocumented. By law we can't share individual information even to other USDA agencies. ... Our confidentiality rules have been around forever. There's a lot of education to that. Many people are unaware that this research helps [them access resources]." While Mertz notes that the confidentiality of responses is bound by law, it is difficult for immigrants to trust a government agency, particularly in a moment when

they have been so vilified by the US presidential administration. Further, he notes that the benefits of the census are largely unknown to immigrant communities.

To further complicate how immigrants might be counted by the census, should they choose to respond, Hispanic/Latino is considered an ethnicity, not a race, by the survey. If they check to be identified as of “Spanish, Latino, or Hispanic” origin, they must also choose a “race,” which includes the options American Indian or Alaska native, Asian, black or African American, native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or white. None of these are representative of the farmers I interviewed, who are mostly brown skinned. Although almost all are of at least partial native Mexican descent, they do not identify with the term “American Indian.” Mertz, at the census, agreed that the options for ethnic and racial identification are flawed: “Yes, it’s difficult [the ethnicity/ race question]. Some answer ‘other’ or just don’t finish filling it out. It’s not really great. They don’t answer it how it’s supposed to be. I typically don’t give them advice. Someone might not answer that entire question. We will try to pull previously reported information to fill in missing data. ... We can’t change that category; it comes from a higher level of government.”

Despite these issues, the census is still the only comprehensive national agricultural data that exists, and provides context for racial and ethnic shifts occurring in US agriculture. Additionally, the census is incredibly important for farmers, especially those who are economically and socially disadvantaged, in order to gain access to resources. As Mertz notes, “These numbers help organizations get funding for their programs. The Center for Latino Farmers go to DC and ask for more funding based on high Latino farmers numbers via the census.”

It’s pertinent that Latino/a farmers’ existence is properly accounted for, as the census is crucial to resource access. Resources such as targeted non-profit support, outreach, and grants can only be specified for immigrant and other Latino/a farmers from the federal and state government if they are counted. Yet as I describe above, my interviews showed that many of the most vulnerable farmers are not accounted for in this survey. This is one more way that the agricultural ladder functionally leaves immigrants and other farmers of color off its top rungs, as they are not seen and provided for as part of the nation’s farm-operating class.

Conclusion

Levi Van Sant (2016, 197) aptly explains these uneven rural histories through the notion of plantation geographies, or "the regional reproduction of racial hierarchy through the white monopolization of land and attendant claims to agrarian citizenship. The resulting social formation is shaped by improvement projects that firmly articulate whiteness (understood as a normative and unexamined racial identity) and agricultural governance." These processes have succeeded in creating regionalized agricultural racial formations, the end result being that the ownership and operation of US farms remains in primarily white hands (Minkoff-Zern et al. 2011). Even when farmers of color succeed in climbing the so-called agricultural ladder, their social positioning means that they do so with limited resources and varying level of success.

As my own research regarding the agricultural census shows, immigrant and other Latino/a farmers continue to be left out of national counts. This means they are not being recognized for their role in the food system and in particular, as farmers of color, creating new kinds of spaces and practices in the US food system. As I discuss in the next chapter, this lack of recognition is representative of a larger system of discrimination that immigrant farmers are currently facing. While they are thriving in many ways, present-day struggles, as rooted in historical inequalities, continue to create a racialized barrier to entry for many farmers.

