3 Institutions, Standardization, and Markets: Hungry for Opportunity in US Agriculture

Following a USDA staff member in her white sedan with government plates, my research assistant and I drove our own unmarked rental car through a winding country highway. We passed corn and soybean fields, farmhouses, and a small downtown with a few local businesses. We drove up a gravel driveway and parked behind the USDA car. Trailing the staff member, a white female soil conservationist who had organized our visit, we walked unannounced onto a farm with a few acres of diverse vegetables, a farmhouse, a shed, and a hoop house. The hoop house had been financed through a grant from the USDA's NRCS, giving the staff member rights to visit to inspect the structure and property randomly for the first three years in order to validate that it is up to code and being used properly.

USDA staff in the Northern Neck of Virginia promote the hoop house, or "high tunnel," installation program to local vegetable farmers. These tunnel-shaped greenhouses allow farmers to start their seeds and get crops to market earlier in the season. The USDA covers the entire cost of the hoop house. In exchange, the farmer must agree to keep it in production for a minimum of three years, maintain meticulous records of their growing practices and finances, and allow USDA officials onto their property unannounced. This program is one of a variety of financial assistance opportunities for small- and medium-scale fruit and vegetable farmers through the NRCS and FSA. These agencies offer a variety of loans, grants, and crop insurance programs, which vary from year to year. Although the USDA targets historically discriminated against populations, including Latino/as, as part of its Socially Disadvantaged Groups Grant program for guaranteed, direct operating, and direct farm loans, not many immigrant farmers take advantage of these funds.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

The farm we visited is owned and operated by one of a small number of Mexican immigrant farmers who directly participate in a USDA-funded program. Latino/a farmers have a low rate of inclusion in USDA programs nationally. According to the census, self-identified Hispanic or Latino/a farmers utilized USDA loans and other direct assistance programs at about one-third to one-half the rate of white farmers. In 2012, the census recorded 79,807 farm operators of Hispanic/Latino origin. One hundred and sixty-five Commodity Credit Corporation loans, 3,244 Conservation Reserve, Wetlands Reserve, Farmable Wetlands, or Conservation Reserve Enhancement program payments, and 13,276 other federal farm program payments were awarded to Latino/a operators. Respectively, that indicates a 0.2, 4, and 17 percent, respectively, inclusion rate for each program. Comparatively, the census recorded 2,034,439 white farm operators in 2012. White farm operators participated in the same loan programs at a rate of 0.6, 14, and 34 percent, respectively (USDA 2014). Those included in this count are legally in the United States, and are already engaged in some way with a government or other agricultural institution. As I discussed in the last chapter, most immigrant farmers I interviewed were unaware of the census. Therefore, I would estimate their inclusion rate in these programs is actually much lower than the census data reports.

It is not only USDA programs that immigrant farmers are underutilizing. Agricultural institutions, including state resources such as university extension services, and even nonprofit organizations, such as farmers markets and organic certification groups, which are focused on supporting alternative farmers, are not as easily accessed by immigrant farmers as they are by white farmers due to the fact that their practices are often incompatible with the standardization and bureaucracy required to be properly acknowledged as well as supervised by such organizations. I show how immigrant farmers' approach to cultivating, including their lack of record keeping, aversion to paperwork, small scale of operation, and planting of diverse crops, stands in contrast to the dominant and institutionalized alternative models of US agriculture.

This chapter addresses why immigrant farmers are so unlikely to participate in agricultural institutions and assistance programs, despite their growth as a new group of farmers. In the following chapter, I continue to draw on immigrant farmer interviews in addition to focused interviews with institutional staff, including dozens of employees of the USDA, university

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

agricultural extension agencies, and other agricultural nongovernmental organizations, such as farmers markets and outreach groups. I contend that the standardization of practices and bureaucracy inherent in engaging with these organizations stands in stark opposition to the agrarian norms and practices of immigrant farmers, and acts to hinder their participation. The requirements of standardization help to maintain a racialized class boundary in US agriculture today and play a large role in preventing immigrant farmers from moving up the agricultural ladder.

It is not simply the size or scale of their farms that bars them from accessing resources such as those available from the USDA and university extension services, or taking advantage of opportunities such as local markets and certification, although that certainly limits what is available to them. As I discussed in the introductory chapter, the farmers in this study have limited formal education, literacy, and English-language skills, and therefore are exceptionally daunted by the paperwork necessary to apply for institutional support such as government grants, loans, and insurance. Language barriers and uneven formal educational experience aggravate their general wariness of government authority even further. Even nongovernmental institutions, such as farmers markets and organic certifiers, require paperwork, licensing, and standardization of sales.

Additionally, it is not routine for immigrant farmers to record and track their own farming progress and decisions in writing. In contrast, their farming knowledge tends to be documented and disseminated through word of mouth. Their own agricultural practices and ways of sharing knowledge also are not easily recorded in given forms. Their planting schedules and cultivation cycles tend to not fit the standardized format that paperwork often requires. It is this lack of translation, both linguistic and cultural, that functions to keep immigrant farmers away from government offices and other institutional spaces.

As has been the case for other farmers who do not replicate state-sanctioned or dominant forms of farming, these practices and forms of agrarian knowledge sharing may be interpreted as unscientific, or "illegible" to the state, and thus not deemed worthy of acknowledgment (Scott 1998), or in this case, acceptable for funding, or acceptance in formal agricultural markets and spaces. Similar arguments have been made specifically regarding Indo-Hispano practices in the US Southwest.While Hispano communities contribute to sustainable or regenerative agropastoral practices, their

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

land-based practices have been largely shared though customary and oral traditions, which are largely unrecognizable to the state as well as environmental advocates and researchers (Peña 1999). Many small-scale diversified crop and vegetable farmers run up against such challenges when looking for government resources and support, yet for the immigrant farmers in this study, the expectation for standardized practices are compounded with the abovementioned lack of formal education, literacy, and English-language abilities. These barriers are made worse by their distrust of US government agencies and related institutions in terms of their immigration experiences.

For undocumented farmers in particular, the process of starting their own farm business may be more than merely intimidating; it may be impossible, as their status may prohibit them from officially registering their operation. To establish a farm, an aspiring farmer must go through a lengthy process of registering their land and business with the state. In order to buy land, one must also purchase a property title. There are several layers added to these basic requirements, such as liability insurance, an operator ID under which all farm inputs get recorded (also acquired through the agriculture commissioner), Occupational Safety and Health Administration registrations, and in some states, workers' compensation. Although regulations for farming, especially those regarding chemical use and labor, are important in maintaining humane and environmentally sound conditions for workers and consumers, some have been unjustly applied and interpreted to the detriment of nonwhite immigrant farmers, particularly Hmong farmers, who utilize primarily family labor and are not easily categorized given current labor regulations (Minkoff-Zern et al. 2011; Sowerwine, Getz, and Peluso 2015). Further, for some immigrants, a perceived expectation of documented immigration states, even when not actually required, such as a USDA or other institutions' office, may create fear, preventing them from entering into such a space to begin with.

If they want access to alternative farming spaces for marketing and selling their crops, immigrant farmers' struggle in providing documentation may create an added barrier. For example, if farmers want to sell their product as certified organic, they must have an organic registration from the agriculture commissioner's office as well as organic certification (through a third party). In order to sell at certified farmers markets, they must apply for various certifications and permits, depending on their product and the

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

state they are selling in. For most of these permits, farmers must present their personal ID, tax ID, and/or social security number.

All these formal registrations require precisely the type of paperwork an undocumented person often lacks. Some use the documentation they have, such as a foreign passport or state ID card, which is available to undocumented people in some states. But for most, who do not want to use their real information due to fear of raising a red flag about their existence, especially in today's threatening political environment, they frequently rely on those with documentation to sign paperwork, take out loans, and act as legal partners for their business. Ultimately, it is not apparent as to whether legal status (or the lack thereof) strictly limits access to markets, since requirements differ by states and even specific markets' policies, and some undocumented farmers may be willing to use family members' documented status for access, while others may not. In any case, such restrictions function to increase the likelihood of immigrant farmers' exclusion from institutional settings as well as dependence on and connectedness to their family and hometown networks.

Standardization, Race, and Agricultural Institutions

The dominant industrial model promoted by the USDA, and reinforced by agricultural commodity chains, has long been problematic for small holding farmers as well as more diversified growers, regardless of race, ethnicity, or citizenship status. As Earl Butz, the secretary of agriculture under Richard Nixon, infamously told the country, farmers should "get big or get out." Butz's policies and those of the USDA leadership since have focused on supporting the large-scale production of commodity crops, corn and soy in particular, mainly through commodity price supports and crop insurance programs. These decisions are not made solely at the agency level. Agricultural policy is largely set by the US Farm Bill, which is voted on by Congress every five years. The Farm Bill sets priorities and outlines fiscal parameters for the US agricultural system as a whole. Due to large-scale lobbying and the associated influence of industrial agriculture, the Farm Bill contributes to the prioritization of large-scale industrial production, and de-prioritizes the needs of smallholders, "specialty" crop growers (mainly fruit and vegetable producers), and other diversified growers (see, among

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

others, Ahearn, Yee, and Korb 2005; Clapp 2012; Dimitri, Effland, and Conklin 2005; DuPuis 2002).

The relationship between racial exclusion and the standardization and industrialization of farming in the United States can be traced through the exclusion of people of color from farming throughout US history. As discussed in chapter 2, African American farmers in the United States, like Latino/a and other immigrant farmers of color, have been displaced from their livelihoods many times over. According to Pete Daniel (2013), systematic discrimination by the USDA contributed to black farmers' 93 percent decline from 1940 to 1974. He argues that black farmers' cultivation techniques were seen as adversarial to the modernist vision of agriculture in the 1930s. They generally operated small, subsistence-based farms, and agricultural knowledge was passed through the generations by word of mouth.

The New Deal's Agricultural Adjustment Administration worked to make the "rural countryside legible" by compiling information and statistics on farms across the nation (ibid., 9). Large farms and grid-like orderly homesteads were idealized as the form to spread modern agricultural technologies. The USDA proceeded to map, structure, and make the rural United States visible in order to ensure a transition to agrarian efficiency. Black farming operations did not fit this model of efficiency and modernism, and therefore were not considered for subsidies and grants. Due to competition from industrial farmers with government support, thousands of black farmers were dispossessed from their land over the following decades. This preferential treatment functioned in conjunction with explicit racist conduct (ibid.).

Miriam Wells's (1996) research on the struggle of Mexican immigrants in California agriculture in the 1970s and 1980s confirms historic commonalities between African American and Latino/a immigrant farmers in terms of how their farming practices contrast with more standardized state-farming models. My own findings, described below, also reflect Wells's conclusions: Mexican and other Latino/a immigrants prefer to make their farming decisions independently, and find technical advice from government outsiders unsuitable to their own experiences and practices. Additionally, Wells (ibid., 138) observes that immigrants' lack of material resources and formal education to invest in their farm businesses leads them to be more dependent on particular "knowledge systems," which differentiate them from white farmers.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

Conversely, scholars have argued that the USDA has gone through periods of democratic planning and resource distribution in some regions, as shown in the work of many agency leaders and other individuals who have worked explicitly with farmers of color, especially African American farmers. Contrasting with Daniel, Jess Gilbert (2015) specifically addresses the ways that various arms of the USDA have historically engaged people of color in land-use planning and for resource distribution. Similarly, Richard Couto (1991) has shown the ways that the FSA worked with black farmers during the New Deal era to help them transition from tenant to owner. Both these studies point to the importance of recognizing variation among USDA actors and branches. As such a large government agency, there is no one consistent way that staff or leadership interacts with the public, and certainly such successes are worth noting. Unfortunately, my research demonstrates that these historical moments in the USDA have been brief, and have not sustained a comprehensive approach to democratizing land access and ownership across racial lines in the United States.

More recent research conducted by academics as well as extension and government agencies reinforce my own findings: USDA and state/university extension programs do not provide the same quality or quantity of services to Latino/a and immigrant farmers as they do to white farmers. These other studies cover states not included in my own research, such as Missouri, Nebraska, Florida, Texas, and New Mexico, and confirm what I have found: Latino/a farmers largely do not know about services and other opportunities available through government and nonprofit agencies, and if they are aware, they misunderstand the programs and requirements. All these studies also confirmed that even when government and extension professionals are conscious of such gaps in service, they do not have the needed time or budget availability to improve their outreach or training. Further, Latino/a farmers do not tend to be as well networked with agencies and organizations compared to white farmers, and staff do not know how to locate them (Lucht 2006; Martinez and Gomez 2011; Martinez-Feria 2011; Swisher, Brennan, and Shah 2006–2007; Starkweather et al. 2011). Specific to USDA services and credit, studies have found that lacking previous credit, financial records, and business plans, being intimidated by required paperwork and a lack of support to complete such paperwork, as well as loans being geared toward larger-scale farmers were additional limitations for both immigrant and US-born Latino/a farmers (Martinez and

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

Gomez 2011; Martinez-Feria 2011; Swisher, Brennan, and Shah 2006–2007; Starkweather et al. 2011).

In today's USDA, despite the generally industrial agrarian focus of current funds, there are some opportunities for small-scale farmers as well as those who have been deemed sustainable or socially disadvantaged by the agency. The Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program provides USDA-sponsored grants and outreach in each state. Moreover, the USDA conducts research and development related to regional food initiatives, such as farmers markets, which are the primary markets for the immigrant farmers included in this study. The USDA also manages the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, which supports research and outreach through regional offices as well as the Land-Grant University System. The mission of the extension services is to bring research-based information conducted in university settings to the public, with a large focus on agrarian communities. Unfortunately, like the USDA more broadly, the land-grant system along with related research and extension have been heavily critiqued for their connection to and bias toward industrial and corporate agriculture (Kloppenburg 2005; Welsh and Glenna 2006). The USDA also sponsors the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program, which includes funds and loan programs potentially available to new immigrant farmers. Yet as Adam Calo (2018) argues, this program takes a knowledge-deficient approach, attempting to teach farmers technical and entrepreneurial skills, rather than addressing the structural, race and ethnicity, and language barriers that immigrant farmers encounter. And I would further contend, as long as USDA outreach has no specific focus on immigrant and other Latino/a farmers, these farmers will not know how to go about accessing such resources, even when they are applicable.

Over the course of conducting this research, I have encountered USDA and extension staff who are actively engaged with farming communities of color, and some who specifically outreach to Mexican-born and other Latino/a immigrant farmers. These staff members' level of commitment to immigrant farmers varies based on the region and prevalence of immigrant farmers as well as resources they had available to extend. Unfortunately, these practices were not the norm, and the staff who actively pursued opportunities to work with Latino/a immigrant or other minority farmers expressed that there was a lack of structural support from their agencies in

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

that pursuit. Although there are programs targeted to sustainable or diverse growers, this information cannot reach farmers if they are not on the radar of the state in the first place. As discussed above, this kind of structural discrimination in the USDA is by no means new. By systematically targeting only white or what USDA staff call "traditional" farmers, and not addressing racialized disparities within the agency's current methods of resource distribution, the historical discrimination so well documented by Daniel (2013) and others will only continue.

Further, differential historic migration patterns oftentimes lead to unequal access to federal resources at the state and regional level for immigrant farmers. When I was able to interview regionally based USDA outreach staff, they were often aware of the immigrant farmer presence in the area as well as their absence of participation in state-funded programs. Yet engagement with and outreach to immigrant farming communities by the USDA varies greatly by region, and is usually determined by the number of bilingual staff in the regional offices. Since there is no national mandate and limited focus on hiring multilingual staff, outreach and immigrant participation depends on who applies for positions more broadly. Of course, in regions with more established Latino/a populations, there is a higher chance that there will be a Spanish-speaking staff member. But in newer immigrant communities, there is little likelihood that there will be someone who can communicate with immigrant farmers. Although all farmers should hypothetically have access to similar USDA resources and programs, given regional growing patterns, having a bilingual staff member to make those resources available and understandable is dependent on social integration between immigrants and their new communities.

In Washington State, for example, I met with two Spanish-speaking FSA officers, both of whom do significant outreach with immigrant farmers. This was the only place where I found and interviewed USDA staff who were able to communicate with monolingual Spanish-speaking immigrant farmers during my research.[1] Also in Washington State, I met with several extension agents through the Washington State University Center for Sustaining Agriculture and Natural Resources who were actively conducting research with and securing resources for Latino/a farmers specifically. In contrast, in the Northern Neck of Virginia and Hudson Valley of New York, I found no Spanish-speaking staff in the FSA or NRCS offices, despite the large presence of Mexican immigrants farming in the region. When

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

I conducted interviews in Virginia, the local university extension agent spoke minimal Spanish and helped immigrant farmers access educational materials, but said she was unable to entice them to apply for USDA funds or programs.[2]

A regionally based USDA staff member told me that there must be 10 percent participation in USDA programs in the region for bilingual forms to be made available. It is unlikely, however, that there will ever be more than 10 percent participation if the paperwork is not made available in Spanish in the first place. This catch-22 represents a structural problem within the USDA, aggravating the already-tenuous history of USDA discrimination. Although Spanish-speaking immigrants comprise the majority of the workforce on US farms, there is little support from the government in helping them transition to better-paying or more reputable positions in agriculture. The structural conditions that maintain racialized immigrants in low-income agrarian positions function to maintain white control over our food system at large.

Finally, the nongovernmental organizations I studied, such as farmers markets—although unlike agricultural governmental institutions, may prioritize alternative forms of farming—still struggle to include immigrant farmers and other farmers of color. Despite immigrants' mode of farming fitting within the framework of alternative production, which generally garners a higher selling price, the immigrant farmers are not getting the same increased share of the dollar from the organic and local farming movement compared to white farmers. Based on my interviews and observations at farmers markets in all these regions, immigrant farmers are generally less likely to be certified organic (and therefore unable to charge the price premiums associated with organic certification). Many immigrant farmers struggle to enter markets in higher-paying neighborhoods, which they find to be largely inaccessible to them.[3] Although I did meet many farmers market managers who were actively supporting the immigrant farming community, they discussed the challenges with me in helping farmers meet consumer expectations and cultural norms, rather than the other way around.

Most of the farmers I spoke with were selling primarily at farmers markets. A handful had started community-supported agriculture programs, and one was considering a u-pick, although those farmers tended to have better English and literacy skills and/or adult children to help them. Since their

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

farms are small scale, and they are cultivating a diversity of crops, they are limited to marketplaces where there is an emphasis on product variety. This restricts them to direct sales outlets such as farmers markets, or selling specialty crops in small batches to restaurants and small grocery stores. Additionally, selling directly to customers allows them to maintain a certain level of control over production without being beholden to wholesalers or other large buyers. This is a familiar way for them to grow and sell—most similar to their family practices selling in open-air markets in Mexico.

Several researchers have found that farmers markets in particular can be exclusionary to people of color, as their participants consist of well-connected communities of white farmers and consumers (Alkon 2008, 2012; Alkon and McCullen 2011; Slocum 2008). Actors who commonly participate in US farmers markets, including vendors, managers, and customers, frequently reflect a "pervasive whiteness," which permeates farmers market environments. Farmers market culture prioritizes liberal, affluent values such as making social change via purchasing power and self-improvement through healthy diets (Alkon and McCullen 2011). This research illuminates the challenges that immigrant farmers face, yet it focuses on consumer perspectives, not farmers. In this chapter, I build on such studies by providing an analysis of the experience of farmers of color. In doing so, I create a more complete picture of farmers market and broader food system inequity.

Agricultural institutions, from the USDA to farmers markets, maintain racial and ethnic disparities on a structural level. In what follows, I shed light on the ways that such institutions' processes are promoted as universally accessible or free from racial bias, despite such divides. I explore how government and nonprofit expectations of standardization largely function as gatekeepers to agricultural development and growth, notwithstanding individual and structural efforts to create inclusivity.

Lawsuits, Discrimination, and Improving Outreach

In response to a number of civil rights lawsuits against the USDA on behalf of African American, Hispanic, Native American, and female farmers over the past fifteen years, the US secretary of agriculture under President Obama, Thomas Vilsack (2009), proclaimed a "new era of civil rights" for the agency. These lawsuits targeted the USDA, documenting the ways that farmers of color have been structurally discriminated against by the

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

agency. In 1999, two class action lawsuits, *Pigford v. Glickman* and *Brewington v. Glickman*, were settled by African American farmers alleging racial discrimination by the USDA between 1981 and 1996 while applying for farm loans and assistance. The *Keepseagle v. Vilsack* case was then settled for Native American farmers who claimed discrimination by the agency between 1981 and 1999. In 2000, yet another class action suit was filed against the USDA—this time on behalf of Hispanic farmers and ranchers who were discriminated against from 1981 to 2000, also while applying for USDA loans. The USDA admitted to discrimination, and this case was settled via a claims process in which 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).

National outreach for the claims process was conducted during summer 2013 via television and radio ads. Those who claimed eligibility were meant to fill out forms online. Although lawyers were not technically needed to file a claim, the process was complicated, requiring a variety of forms and documentation. The USDA employees I spoke with said they recommended legal assistance in order to properly submit a claim. With assistance from the Farmers Legal Action Group and National Agricultural Law Center, the USDA trained lawyers to help with the claims, but individuals still had to compensate the attorneys out of pocket—an unreasonable cost for most small-scale Latino/a farmers. According to a USDA Inspector General Audit Report, the USDA received approximately 54,000 claims, yet 32,000 were considered incomplete or late. Ultimately only 3,176, less than 6 percent of all claims, were approved (Harden 2016). One media source reported that a one-line explanation was provided to farmers whose claims were not accepted: "You failed to provide sufficient documentation, or the documentation that you provided was not sufficient to meet the requirements under the framework" (Zippert 2015). As I discuss below, this statement reflects many immigrant farmers' general lack of standardization and documentation practices, which are necessary in order to be deemed legible in the eyes of the USDA.

Although some Latino/a farmers will be reimbursed through the claims process for profits lost, most were not made aware of the claims process or their right to file as part of the suit. According to agents at regional FSA offices in Washington State, they were given a script response to anyone inquiring about the process locally, and the outreach to farmers was

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

NOTICE TO HISPANIC AND/OR WOMEN FARMERS OR RANCHERS

COMPENSATION FOR CLAIMS OF DISCRIMINATION

If you believe that the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) improperly denied farm loan benefits to you between 1981 and 2000 because you are Hispanic, or because you are female, you may be eligible to apply for compensation.
This means you may be eligible if:

1. you sought a farm loan or farm-loan servicing during that period; and
2. the loan was denied, provided late, approved for a lesser amount than requested, or approved with restrictive conditions, or USDA failed to provide an appropriate loan service; and
3. you believe these actions were based on your being Hispanic, or your being female.

If you want to register your name to receive a claims packet, you can call the Farmer and Rancher Call Center at 1-888-508-4429 or access the following website: www.farmerclaims.gov

In 2011, a claims administrator will begin mailing claims packages to those who have requested one through the Call Center or website. The claims package will have detailed information about the eligibility and claims process.

For guidance, you may contact a lawyer or other legal services provider in your community.

If you are currently represented by counsel regarding allegations of discrimination or in a lawsuit claiming discrimination, you should contact your counsel regarding this claims process.

USDA Cannot Provide Legal Advice to You.

USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

Figure 3.1
Notice posted in USDA local offices to outreach to farmers regarding the Hispanic and women farmers and ranchers discrimination claims process.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

contracted out to a private firm.[4] When I asked their counterparts in Virginia and New York about outreach, they told me that they had flyers in the office, but no one had applied. These are the same offices where they told me Latino/a farmers rarely visit. Of the farmers I interviewed, most stated they had never applied for USDA funds or entered its offices, thereby making the claims process irrelevant in rectifying the type of structural discrimination they may have faced.

Those who experienced discrimination after 2000 were not able to submit a claim. Even at the federal level, where the secretary of agriculture at the time of the claims process maintained they were ushering in a "new era" at the USDA, a former federal staff member at the USDA's Socially Disadvantaged Farmer and Rancher Program expressed to me that most of the changes to address discrimination are equivalent to offering "coffee and donuts" rather than dealing with the roots of the problem. In her opinion, the USDA's claims of making institutional change to combat historic discrimination are merely rhetoric put in place to improve the agency's image. The program does not provide technical assistance that farmers really need:

> "Here, have a cookie and some coffee; honest, we'll give you a loan." But then they leave. And actually, "No honest, we won't give you a loan," because nobody actually stopped eating the donut and the coffee, and figured out how to get financed, because that would be hard work. … "Here's information about the USDA. Hey, by the way, the USDA doesn't discriminate anymore. And we really hope that when you come to our office, you'll meet someone who looks like you and treats you with respect, and if they don't, here's your civil rights." But not, "So let's sit down with your tax return now."

In her opinion, although there is a genuine intention of creating more racially just programs from the top levels of the administration (or there was, during her time there under the Vilsack administration), in effect, the USDA's claims of making institutional change to combat historic discrimination are merely oratory performance. She argues that to improve opportunities for disadvantaged farmers, they need technical assistance with their finances. For immigrants who have experience working in the fields, but do not have a background in business or a family member to teach them, technical skills, such as bookkeeping and business planning, tend to be the primary constraints to maintaining a functioning business.

Although the claims process is evidence of an effort to improve race relations at the federal level, discrimination often occurs in local offices.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

Local-level discrimination is rarely addressed in the national USDA headquarters. Of the immigrant farmers I interviewed who grow using alternative methods, only a handful have successfully used USDA programs. Of the diverse crop producers, two had grants for hoop houses from the NRCS, and one had crop insurance, secured through his local USDA's Risk Management Agency (RMA) office.[5] Those with hoop house grants have used them to extend their growing season in Virginia, although this has been a struggle due to the lengthy application paperwork and requirement for growing practices to be continually tracked.

Martin, a farmer in Virginia, applied for a hoop house and had been accepted into the program, but at the time of our last interview, had yet to receive the funds. He is originally from Guadalajara, Mexico, where his family still owns agricultural land. He came to the United States when he was twenty-one years old. Once he arrived in the United States, he spent twenty-seven years working in agriculture before saving the money to start his own farm. When we met, he had been operating his own farm for three years. He emphasized the importance of his family's help and labor in keeping the farm profitable.

Martin's daughter, Claudia, discussed their experience trying to get access to hoop house funding. Claudia was educated in the United States, and speaks and writes in perfect English—a valuable skill for her family in terms of accessing potential resources. After not getting funding on her first try, she started questioning why her family's farm didn't receive aid when other farmers around her did:

> I went to the local NRCS office to ask about funds for building a hoop house. They told me in the office that they did not currently have funds, so I couldn't apply. … [Later, I told] this to a [white] customer at the market who had worked for the USDA. She told me they should still take my application. The customer contacted the office for me, and they then told me to come in and to get an application. In the meantime, I noticed that other [white] neighbors were receiving the funding, while I was turned away. I applied, and we eventually [were approved for] the funding, although we are still waiting for it to go through.

When I asked if he thought there was discrimination against immigrant or Latino/a farmers, Diego, a farmer in California, explained that he believes that USDA officials don't think immigrants will follow through with their plans.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

> Well honestly, yes. They've always looked at us with that label, "He is a foreigner, his accent …" They always push you aside, especially when you go to organizations like [the] USDA … because they want a plan, yes? Let's just say that the government sends money for agriculture for some counties. And then you arrive, and since you are new and there are other farmers who know how the system works, they know quickly what they have to do.

Diego expresses the belief that because there are other farmers with more established relationships with the USDA, the staff will choose to work with them over a newcomer, who they are unsure about. The notion of a "plan" is one that came up in conversations with farmers and organizational staff alike throughout my research. Immigrant farmers are less likely to record and track their progress, and government agencies and nonprofits need such records or plans in order to work with farmers, as evidence of their past and projected success.[6] I met Alejandro at a farmers market in a northern suburb of Seattle. A heavyset, middle-aged man, he has been farming in Washington State for over a decade and now mentors many younger immigrant farmers. Alejandro came to the United States in 1978 from Colima, Mexico, where he learned how to farm from his family and still owns agricultural land. Before owning and operating his own farm in the United States, he worked in grape and orange harvests up and down the West Coast. Alejandro recounted changes he has observed over the past several decades for immigrant farmers, not just in Washington State, but in places like California.

Although he is documented and owns his land, Alejandro feels that because many immigrants are undocumented, USDA staff are biased against any immigrant or Latino/a when they walk into an agency office. "There are many Latinos without papers," says Alejandro, "and there can be discrimination because of that." In his view, because some immigrants are unable to produce the necessary documents to work with the agency, staff will assume any immigrant is a waste of their time, without knowing their immigration status.

The same former federal USDA staff member reaffirmed this kind of racial discrimination at local offices: "Now some of what happens today, when there is actually overt racism, it's still not as overt. It's more like, 'Oh, your forms aren't complete.' And they'll hold [nonwhite] persons' forms to higher scrutiny than they would a white person's forms."

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

Of course, not all immigrants feel that they are discriminated against. Antonia, a farmer in Virginia, grew up in Tamaulipas, Mexico, where she learned to farm with her family. Living in a border state, Antonia migrated back and forth to the United States with her family from an early age. When she was eighteen years old, she and her family decided to stay and work in agriculture full time. In the early 1990s, Antonia and her husband started their own business, renting farmland. At the time of our interview, they were in the process of getting a loan through the FSA so they could finally purchase the land they farm on. Antonia, who speaks English well, noted that she received a lot of help when she looked into getting a loan from the USDA: "When I filled out the application for the FSA, she helped me a lot, the lady in Fredericksburg. … She helped me go through all the paperwork—what I needed to fax her or bring her by. It was easy. Because she helped me a lot. And she told us that there were a lot of programs for Hispanic females. She looked into what categories I qualified for."

Antonia added that her challenge in getting resources was less about the individuals working in the offices and more about structural limitations, such as literacy, which I discuss more in the section below.

Other farmers described experiences that they felt were discriminatory in looking for traditional bank loans. Ricardo, an established farmer in Virginia, learned to farm during his childhood in Michoacán, Mexico, where he and his family still own land. When Ricardo came to the United States, he worked as a laborer on multiple farms up and down the East Coast before settling in the Northern Neck region of Virginia. At the time of our interview, he had owned his farm business for almost seven years. Ricardo discussed his challenges in accessing a bank loan to expand his farm:

> I've seen a lot of [white] people who go and ask for help, and they [the bank] give it to them, but they don't give it to us. This year, I put in a lot of applications to buy land, and they will put it under the desk and never look at it. Sometimes I would go and ask about it, and they'll tell me that they didn't look at it. I told them they better give it back to me. I went to other banks with my application. … They never even saw it. I already paid for my land, I just wanted to add more, but they didn't even look at it. I did feel discriminated against; they didn't even look at it.

He expressed that because of the fact that he is clearly a Latino immigrant, the loan officers assumed he would not be applicable for a loan and did not consider his application, despite the fact that he is financially eligible.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

Norma, an established farmer in California, has owned her farming operation for over twenty years. After immigrating to California from the Mexican state of Guerrero in 1986, she spent almost a decade picking produce in the Salinas Valley. In 1994, she was one of the first graduates of ALBA's new farmer training program. She is now somewhat of an icon in the organic farming world in California, widely known as the first immigrant Latina farmworker to start her own certified organic farm in the state. She also founded a nonprofit to help other immigrant farmers acquire organic certification and apply for support programs. Despite these accomplishments, when I interviewed her, she still had not succeeded in getting USDA assistance herself. She explained her experience visiting her local offices, telling me, "If you go to an agency and you are a Latina person, and you are a woman, and you don't speak the language, and you don't have money, and you are going to an agency of the federal government and you want to find someone to speak your language, how do you say this? … The government doesn't want to help you. It doesn't want to have a person who speaks your language."

As she remarks, immigrants are made to feel belittled—that their place is working in the fields, not in the government offices or management positions on a farm. David is also a well-established certified organic farmer in California, having graduated from the ALBA program at the same time as Norma. He brought up the discrimination that he experienced at the USDA offices before I even inquired. David stated that when he went to his local FSA office, they seemed biased toward white farmers who have owned their businesses longer, and have more developed business and planting plans as well as proof of their sales. He got the feeling they wanted him to leave and were uninterested in investing time in him.

In regions with no bilingual staff, USDA employees informed me that few immigrant farmers enter their offices, although the "local," "traditional," or white farmers usually come and ask for what they need. At the NRCS in Virginia, I was told,

> They don't know about the cover crop program, they don't know about the high tunnel program if it doesn't go to their mailbox. Because I don't see them at all, unless I go to their farm. They don't come in here unless they hear about the program from their neighbor, or brother, or sister, or something. They just don't walk in here like most of my clients do. They're [white farmers] in here all the time. They're calling all the time, "Can you help me get funded?" And they [immigrant farmers] never do that.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

In New York State, the FSA agent was aware of the needs of the immigrant farming community. He lamented the FSA's limitations as an office to outreach to immigrant farmers, and faulted his agency's slim budget for contacting new and minority farmers,

> We obviously have, like most federal governments, limited budgets for doing certain things such as outreach, so the primary tools that we have available to us are email listservs, which you have to be signed up to get, and then newsletters, which are mailed out to and targeted toward producers whom we currently know about. So if you've never come into our office, if you've never signed up for any of our listings, chances are you've not heard of us or the services we offer. So that is the biggest limitation that we have in our outreach efforts. … Ideally, we'd love to have a budget that allowed us to go out to farmers markets in the area on every Sunday or Saturday, but you know, we just don't have resources for that.

It is clear from offices that work closely with immigrant farmers that their outreach specifically to the Spanish-speaking immigrant community has had to be intentional and concerted. Ostrom, introduced in the preceding chapter, is the director of the Small Farm Program for Washington State University. In her work at the center, she has committed herself to doing outreach to Latino/a farmers specifically:

> I've gotten grants over the years to try to make that, we call it a "welcoming space," a bilingual space. We have to reeducate them [extension staff] and reeducate them because they are like, "Why don't any of them come?" Well, we have to go and do all this outreach, we have to explain, they need to know somebody there. So [the incubator] Viva Farms has been great; they always have that person there, they have Kate or Robert who the farmers are friends with. … You have to do the outreach, you have to do the extra calling, you have to have your flyers, you have to call people.

She reaffirms the need for outreach, and refers to the collaborative relationship between regional extension staff and the local farm incubator program, Viva Farms. As she makes clear, immigrant farmers, and others who are not usually welcome in government and/or mainstream agricultural spaces as farmers, will not seek out the resources that are available to them. Those who manage the resources need to actively find them.

Ostrom has developed a program for small farmers in Washington State that specifically focuses on Spanish-speaking farmers. Although she is committed to fund-raising and outreach to help them develop their business and get extension support, she sees many challenges that differ from those of white beginning farmers in terms of providing that support:

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

> Just getting to educational programs when you have problems with transportation and childcare, working full time with someone else, when you don't control your schedule. It's hard for them to say, "Oh, I have a class on Tuesday and I can't make it to work." So those kinds of challenges. They don't know how to write the applications, they don't know how to make business plans. We spend a lot of time in developing record keeping, application forms, big challenges.

Ultimately, she argues, to successfully outreach to the immigrant community, extension and other service providers need consistent bilingual staff, and institutional support where they are able to build relationships. Ostrom explains that it is more than just a temporary linguistic translation; rather, it's about building a strong link between the agency and the community of farmers that they wish to reach. "I thought that they really need the bilingual staff, but it was about the relationship in the community," observes Ostrom. "If you just hire people in this grant and that grant, they don't know people."

Yet the way extension is structured, expectations for agents are based on the number of farmers they meet with and revenue those farmers bring in, which creates an additional challenge to extending needed support to immigrants, since it takes time to build trust and the networks in their communities. As Ostrom explains, "We have to convince our administrators that it is all right to spend more time with fewer farmers. With the incubator program—they will look at those numbers and then will be like, 'Well that's only seven farmers, and they're not even their own farms yet, and you've already put all this time in and money.' So the metrics they're using, they don't work well for small farms because they're measuring how many acres of production, they're measuring how many farmers."

Comments from the bilingual USDA staff members in Washington State reflected Ostrom's arguments regarding the importance of relationship building to reach immigrant farmers. Both emphasized that the work they do with the immigrant community is dependent on their own social networks as well as the trust they have been able to build with the farmworker community over time. José Limon, the son of a farmworker turned farmer who now works as a senior farm loan officer at the FSA office in Wenatchee, Washington, told me that "it takes the relationships. … I think that's because if they know you, if they know your family, or it is in the community, they are more likely to trust if they know somebody. … I'm not just going to come in; they're probably going to ask some questions before."

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

Crispin Garza is an FSA loan specialist in Yakima County. As far as he is aware, he and José are the only Spanish-speaking USDA employees in Washington State. He told me that before he came to work at the USDA twenty-seven years ago, there were no Latino/as employed in the office, and there was a definite language barrier. No Mexicans came to the office, he said. "They were afraid to talk to the Anglos." He reiterated the importance of word of mouth and community relationships in developing these professional relationships and opportunities for farmers. From his perspective, to build trust in the nonwhite immigrant community, even among those who are documented, there must be continued institutional support, as many are skeptical of the US government and white people in general.

Although both Crispin and José were born in the United States, they are children of migrant farmworkers and also have experience working in the fields themselves during their youth. Both of them provide translation to immigrant farmers daily, yet this service is not part of their job description, and as Crispin explained, "I provide free translation services to the agency." He also expressed disappointment at the lack of commitment from the agency to consistently hire bilingual staff on a state or national level.

These assessments were echoed by Gabrielle Rovegno, who has worked with the immigrant farming community in Virginia for several years. Rovegno originally connected with the Latino/a farming community as an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer. Her position took her to the Washington, DC, area to work in the Crossroads Community Food Network as its microenterprise and community kitchen coordinator. The organization manages a farmers market in the Langley Heights neighborhood of Maryland, right next to the DC border, and is expressly focused on helping ensure food security for the low-income Latino/a immigrant community that lives there. Along with managing the market and creating programs to increase food affordability, Crossroads also works closely with the vendors to support their businesses, including many immigrant farmers from the Northern Neck of Virginia. It was at this market that I met several of the farmers I interviewed and visited in Virginia. In this position, Rovegno started outreach to immigrant farmers through farm visits and training programs, working with many of the same farmers interviewed for this book. She currently works at another DC-area nonprofit called EcoCity Farms as a farm training coordinator, continuing her role doing outreach in the

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

region, where she has also become a business partner with one of the farms included in this study.

As an outreach coordinator, she noted the farmers' lack of record keeping and promotional materials as well as their limited access to USDA and extension resources. She organized workshops to pinpoint their needs and troubleshoot solutions. When I spoke with her, one of the largest problems Rovegno identified was the need for one-on-one mentoring along with the development of personal relationships between extension and farmers. Through her position, she created a visual English/Spanish insect guide for farmers (see Rovegno 2016), seeing it as "the first step in trying to get more Hispanic/Latino farmers engaged/assured that there are culturally appropriate resources for them, and then ensuring GAP [Good Agricultural Practices certification], pesticide training, etc., is offered in Spanish." There are plans for the guide to be used by regional extension agents and sustainable agriculture groups. Additionally, Crossroads is organizing multiple all-Spanish instructional field days on integrated pest management practices across the region—the first of their kind in the area.

Another organization creating important and useful materials for Spanish-speaking farmers is the National Center for Appropriate Technology through its ATTRA Sustainable Agriculture Program. The ATTRA program creates Spanish-language resources, such as fact sheets on organic production, soil management, and crop rotation. The center also has bilingual Spanish-speaking staff and a Spanish-language hotline.[7] It is largely funded through the USDA's Rural Business Cooperative Service, providing a good example of state resources being used for creating a more inclusive agricultural system on a national scale.

To move forward from a sordid history of race relations in US agricultural institutions, more genuine efforts at outreach must become the norm. Of course, in the current political moment, increased funding as well as interest in immigrants and people of color in agriculture cannot be expected from government institutions at the federal level. Yet the path toward inclusion is a long one, and these lessons will be learned and progress will be made as long as immigrant farmers continue to make their presence known. As I argue in the concluding chapters, by creating a more inclusive alternative food and farming movement more broadly, we can apply pressure to such institutions to change over time.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

Paperwork and Standardization

As mentioned previously, most immigrant farmers have had little formal education, and their literary and English-language skills vary. Many have completed elementary school, and some have completed high school—all in Spanish. While all farmers interviewed speak some English, many only speak enough to get by at a farmers market, and not much more. Their limited abilities in reading and writing, especially in English, add to their struggles in navigating the bureaucracy of the US agriculture system.

When farmers were asked what they think the greatest challenge is for immigrant farmers accessing government or other programs, including organic certification, most mentioned the paperwork. As far as working with the USDA, this discomfort stems from a general distrust of the US government, coupled with the fact that most immigrant farmers have limited English skills as well as reading and writing abilities even in their native language. As can be expected from any government institution, the USDA requires extensive paperwork before, during, and after taking advantage of its loans, grants, or insurance options. Although white farmers may also be resistant to paperwork and general bureaucracy, the fact that most farmers we interviewed did not have an education past middle school, means they are lacking the literacy skills necessary to fill out the required paperwork in any language. For many, this means they may never enter the door of an organization to inquire about opportunities due to feelings of intimidation. For others, lacking English language and literacy proficiency may be the ultimate reason they stall in the process, and thus fail to obtain the grant, loan, or insurance package.

Although some USDA forms are available online in Spanish, finding them is difficult and availability is inconsistent. Further, online availability has become even sparser during the past several years, since the advent of the Trump administration. While the NRCS national site was reasonably user friendly for Spanish speakers when I last checked, with a page specifically dedicated to the forms in Spanish, including Spanish instructions to access the forms, other agency forms and information are harder to come by for non-English speakers, and some have become less available since 2016.[8] On the FSA website, nothing is currently available in Spanish, unless you look in its "Archived Fact Sheets," where some information dating from 2014 to

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

2016 could be found. Even before these documents became archived, one had to go through an exhaustive search to find the translated information. To find them, the user had to go to the FSA main site, and find the link to FSA "Fact Sheets" under the "Newsroom" link, which is listened under the "FSA Home" site. The whole search had to be done in English. One then had to choose from a drop-down menu in English to get the translated links. Even then, only a small fraction of all available English documents were available translated. Currently, no updated forms are available in Spanish on the federal FSA site.[9]

Without Spanish-speaking outreach abilities, most farmers never hear about the programs available. When asked about the USDA, the farmers interviewed were unaware of opportunities accessible to them. FSA loans are designed for farmers who struggle with traditional bank loans and are meant to be a farmers' first line of credit. Although the farmers interviewed frequently told me they were unable to get access to credit from regular banks, they were unaware that USDA loan programs existed for these reasons specifically. Irma, a farmer in Virginia, relayed this lack of awareness: "The truth is that I don't know what they [the USDA] have. … We were told that in Warsaw [Virginia], in the department of environment, where the applications are, that one can fill something out so that they can give you a big greenhouse. I only learned about it this year, however. I just didn't know."

Even those who speak nearly perfect English still find the forms intimidating. One immigrant farmer, who has obtained US citizenship, told me, "I tried in the past to get a small operating loan. And I didn't feel confident enough to fill out the application by myself because there were a lot of questions I didn't know." Since attempting to apply for her first USDA loan, as described above, she has since applied for another loan, which she successfully secured with the assistance of the local FSA staff. Yet the level of confidence needed to walk into a government office where a huge stack of paperwork awaits is unrealistic for most, especially when understood in the context of the tense relationship between most rural Latino/a immigrants and the state given their histories of immigration. Although many of the farmer participants in this study are documented, some got their legal paperwork after crossing the border illegally in the early 1980s. They are all part of larger immigrant families and communities, which include both documented and undocumented individuals. If even one family member

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

or housemate is undocumented, this may create a barrier for a farmer in engaging with government agencies for fear of putting that person on the increasingly aggressive deportation radar.

In the rare cases where immigrant farmers do succeed in getting USDA assistance, it is not necessarily an experience they would recommend to others in their same position given the barriers, time, and human resources they must expend to complete the process. José came to the United States twenty-eight years ago when he was fourteen. He immediately started working in agriculture. Even though he learned to farm in Mexico, José attributes much of his farming experience to his early years picking oranges in Florida and strawberries in New York. José has sixty acres in production and was the only farmer I interviewed who had crop insurance, which he secured through his local USDA's RMA office in Virginia. It took him three trips to the offices to get the proper paperwork filled out. He does not read nor write well in English, and found the process intimidating and frustrating. It was also time consuming, beyond what he felt he could afford. As the owner-operator of a family-run business, his physical presence was needed on his farm.

Brett Melone is the director of lending at California FarmLink, an organization that helps beginning farmers access land and financial resources. Approximately 70 percent of FarmLink's borrowers are Latino/a. In reference to RMA loans, he told me,

> While the RMA subsidizes the federal crop insurance program, crop insurance actually must be purchased through a private insurance agent, which creates an additional barrier for immigrant farmers. I have been told by RMA staff that they cannot provide names of appropriate agents [either those who write policies for Whole Farm Revenue Protection, a particular type of crop insurance that is designed for diversified operations, or those who speak Spanish]. You are basically on your own to ask other farmers or use the ineffective search tool on the RMA website to find an agent who meets your needs.

The fact that paperwork and the related language barrier are the greatest impediments to aid for immigrant farmers is well understood by USDA staff in these counties. A USDA employee in Virginia explains,

> Most of our [immigrant] producers—[we] used to have some come in the office. They don't come in anymore. I think it's English. Because we had one who couldn't speak English, and he would always bring his son in here. And then the forms. We have some forms that are in Spanish, but most of our forms aren't. I

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

> think it's … where they're used to dealing with more cash than a lot of paperwork. I think they find the paperwork a little overwhelming.

In addition to noting that the written forms themselves are a technical challenge, she highlights that immigrant farmers are not used to operating in bureaucratic environments. They are not accustomed to excessive paperwork from their experience as farmers in Mexico or farmworkers in the United States. This requirement can be the first barrier to entry for immigrant farmers. On seeing such a requirement, and the lack of available cultural and linguistic translation, they feel the offices are not a welcoming place for them and cease attempting to work with the agency, further limiting their access to available and appropriate resources for agrarian class advancement.

Even after the initial application for participation in a program is filed, there can be a large amount of follow-up paperwork over a long period of time. For example, to participate in the hoop house program, one farmer told us, "What you have to do is keep a log of how much you spent, what you're getting out of it, and your profit out of it. So that's something that we had to do." Another farmer who participated in the program said, "They were very strict and limited to certain stuff [that we could plant]. … It's very complicated paperwork." They were both grateful for the program support but expressed that the paperwork was an extra burden on top of their already-busy schedules. Those who did use USDA programs also noted that their children, who are often born and educated in the United States, were typically responsible for filing this paperwork. The farmers' children were most comfortable with the language and the formalities of crop documentation, which their parents struggle to navigate. For those farmers without grown or teenage children to help with the paperwork, participation in such programs was an even greater barrier.

Robert, an FSA employee in the Hudson Valley who was introduced in chapter 2, concurred with what immigrant producers told me: "That is a challenge. There are lots of producers out there that have poor records of production, plantings, and things like that. We can work with them and try to work through those problems, but they need to, at the end of the day, come up with something that they can sort of justify."

As James C. Scott (1998) describes, the requirements of the state frequently function to reduce diverse ways of knowing and interacting

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

with space as well as the environment. Such analysis rings true here, as immigrant farmers' ways of interpreting and tracking their own agricultural knowledge do not fit into the neat categories created by the agency, and therefore have limited legitimacy from a state perspective.

As Robert explains further, in order to get a loan or insurance, farmers need to hand over specific records of their farming practices. "The 'NAP' program, which is that crop insurance program, requires you to give us records each year of your acreage that you plant as well as your production that you get from that. So you need to come into the office, say exactly this is what I have planted, how many acres and where, and then you have to give us production to support that also."

While such records might be a reasonable request from the perspective of someone deciding who to give a loan or insurance package to, it may be the final obstacle that keeps immigrant farmers from getting such kinds of support. As their practices are not deemed legitimate by the state due to their inability to fit into and record their farming in the specific ways required, they are further limited in their access to resources, and more distance is thus created between them and the very agency meant to help them get their business established. Farmers themselves explain this disconnect below.

Rodolfo, an orchardist in Washington State, is originally from Guerrero. His father participated in the Bracero Program, staying in the United States after his position ended. Rodolfo started working in fruit-packing warehouses during his youth and continued to work in the fields for other farmers as an adult. Twelve years before we met, he had started his own farming operation. Rodolfo explains that paperwork is not intuitive to those who have been doing field work for most of their lives. While they are experienced in the technicalities of farming, filling out forms is a different and more challenging task. "It is a very drastic change if you are used to doing the [farm] work. It's easier to do the [farm] work than to be in charge of paperwork." Similarly, Ricardo, in Virginia, says that he just can't find the time to learn the process and ensure the paperwork has been filled out correctly. He is needed on the farm, and that is where he would rather be, although he knows getting institutional support would help his business. "We've been trying to go and get some stuff, because I know they'll help us. But it's been … too much paperwork, too much involvement," he tells me. "You know, all these meetings and stuff to go through it."

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

Rovegno, the VISTA employee doing outreach in Virginia, discusses how she helped translate forms for immigrant growers. First, she notes, as a translator, it was difficult to find the appropriate words in Spanish:

> The National Agricultural Library's glossary uses words that are used at the highest levels of academia both in English and Spanish. UC Davis's glossary lacks many words of insects and weeds present in the Mid-Atlantic, and often has the wrong picture next to the insect name, failing to give me confidence in those translations. The most comprehensive glossary to be found was made by the US Forest Service in 1988. Many of the words reflect Mexican origin, though many farmers were not accustomed to using the words listed. This led me to compile a list of all the technical words I needed and seek input for the translation in Spanish from over ten contributors from five Spanish-speaking countries. (Rovegno 2016, 7)

Further, she found that it was not just language translation that was needed but cultural translation as well. In order for immigrant farmers to accept and process information regarding regulations and farm management practices, a peer-to-peer approach worked better than a standard classroom setting. As Rovegno (ibid., 9) described it, "To keep the farmers engaged and seen as the experts, almost the entirety of the pictures used in the presentations were taken on one of the Crossroads farmers' farms. For every picture, the farmer would have the opportunity to explain to the rest of the class what practice was being highlighted. This promoted engagement in the presentation and increased the farmer's self-esteem."

With little to no formal educational experience, but lifelong experience as experts in the fields, she found that they responded to a flipped classroom approach. In order for outreach to be successful, she had to first acknowledge the linguistic barriers, as well as the different experiences in communication and learning styles, based on years of experiential versus classroom-based learning. It was only after making these changes that she could start to present information on new projects, grants, loans, and other forms of institutional support.

Kate Selting Smith, of Washington State University and Skagit County Extension, encourages farmers to apply for USDA support. As she explains, it is not only a language or linguistic barrier, it is the broader idea of tracking and quantifying your growing, which challenges farmers who have never learned to monitor their own farming in this way. "It's not the barrier of just filling out the forms," she comments. "The barrier is also the implementation of it. It's just a different concept, and if you haven't gone through business training … trying to figure out how to explain it [is hard]."

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

For undocumented farmers, paperwork creates a more definite obstacle. As I discussed in the introduction to this section, to be a verified business owner and sell produce legally, be it to a third party or directly at a market, one must fill out a variety of forms and provide identifying information. Nathan Harkleroad, the education program manager at ALBA in California, shared the limitations he sees undocumented farmers face in terms of loan and support access. "People are afraid to actively pursue those kinds of services because they don't want to be high on the radar, so they might be reluctant to," remarks Harkleroad. "And then there's certain things they won't qualify for, because they're only available to people who have legal residency."

Ostrom talked about the fears that many immigrant farmers who work with the Small Farms Center in Washington State face as undocumented farmers with regard to paperwork: "We still have a lot of problems with documentation and ICE. … It is still a constant obstacle and worry, and a challenge—a big challenge you think about every single time you have to fill out a document."

Acknowledging that a lot of local farmers are undocumented, she pointed out some of the structural issues for them entering government offices and accessing resources, such as the USDA or extension. As Ostrom put it, "Especially in the extension offices, [the problem] is that they have their offices in the court office, and they have undocumented people. That is not going to work. … That's where the county government is. It's the property of the county, so it is logical from an economic standpoint; plenty of the extension offices are in the courthouse."

The fact that extension offices may be located in a government building along with a court house or another government establishment may make economic sense, as she explains, but for undocumented farmers, this will undoubtedly prevent them from ever entering the doors. Such fear has been analyzed by other scholars of immigrant agriculturalists' lives in the United States, as the perception of unsafe spaces for undocumented workers is pervasive in the immigrant community, constantly preventing them from accessing resources from food to health care (Mares, Wolcott-MacCausland, and Mazar 2017; Sexsmith 2017).

This fear is not unfounded, as Don McMoran, the director of Washington State University Skagit County Extension, describes his own concerns and regrets regarding some of the outreach they have done with undocumented farmers. "There was one undocumented [farmer] who was deported

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

a few years ago. I felt kind of responsible because, number one, we didn't check, and number two, we are putting them in the face of our community," McMoran says, "and that puts them kind of out there to be a target in my mind."

Although he continued to state that he was unsure that it was farming that made the farmer vulnerable, he was concerned that by owning his own business, instead of blending in as another worker, that it had made him a target for authorities. Melone, of California FarmLink, concurred that although extending resources to immigrant farmers is essential to their success, he struggles with the fact that when they are discriminated against, they cannot safely stand up for themselves due to fear. As Melone comments, "Helping farmers access resources, as is my day-to-day work, can be a double-edged sword, in my experience. Undocumented and even documented farmers who have gone through the trouble of accessing programs of different sorts, and they feel they haven't been treated fairly, don't feel they have recourse to defend their rights, which feels tragic, criminal." The tragedy he describes is that even when farmers go through the hoops of accessing resources, when they face discrimination based on their identity or assumed identity, it can halt the process of ultimately getting such needed support.

In order to convert from worker to farmer, immigrants must successfully navigate entrenched racial, social, and political borders. Despite discrimination and obstacles related to language, literacy, and documentation status, some immigrant farmers are beating the odds, and in the process, re-creating a new and promising sense of place and home. These multiple forms of displacement underlay their deep commitment to an agrarian profession and livelihood, and quest to carve out a social as well as physical place they can call their own.

Growing Practices, Agrodiversity, and Institutional Resources

If a visitor knows where to look, they might be able to tell an immigrants' field in Virginia from their neighbors' field. In contrast to the monocropped, uniform rows of wheat and corn, which line most of the sides of country highways in this region, the immigrants' fields include huge varieties of produce, each row different from the next. Among the cultivated crops, plants such as purslane (also known as *verdolaga* or pigweed), seen as a

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

common weed by US-born farmers, are left to grow between the rows. Farmers harvest purslane for their Latino/a customers and themselves to consume in soups and stews. Juxtaposing the perfectly managed rows of grain, grown by mid-scale white farmers, and kept meticulously free of wild plants with pest-resistant, genetically modified seeds and regular doses of pesticides, the immigrant farmers' fields show signs of agroecological variety. These growing practices are harder to quantify and monitor by existing standards, and ultimately make it more difficult for immigrant farmers to fit into the boxes created by USDA programs, as discussed above. I pursue the disconnects between alternative and agroecological methods of growing and the state, and the need for more inclusive methods for valuing diverse agricultural systems, more in the conclusion to this chapter.

As I explore in more depth in chapter 5, all farmers interviewed saw starting their own farm as a way to regain independence over their daily lives and labor in the face of their limited material wealth as well as political standing. In contrast to their experiences as farmworkers, they have the ability to choose when to rise, what to plant, and how to pick their crops, as long as they operate a productive farm. Cultivating using practices that reflect their own experience reasserts immigrant farmers' control over their own labor, reflecting the global movement for food sovereignty among farmers. To protect this autonomy, many of the farmers I spoke with shied away from interactions with the state, where they may be subjected to standardizing their practices to match a particular form of farming.

And yet their choice to cultivate diverse cropping systems, which work well for direct markets and reflect their own experiences as farmers before immigration, are not supported by the programs made available to them in USDA regional offices. For example, the NRCS office in Virginia's Northern Neck region offers a cover crop assistance program subsidized through state funds. As the staff from the local office explained, this program is not tailored to the needs of diversified fruit and vegetable farmers:

> I also offer this cover crop program for them. That program is through … it's a state program. But most of them—the cover crop has to stay on the land, between certain planting dates and certain dates that you have to destroy. And that date, the destroyer date is after. Because they start planting around February first; the beginning of February they start discing their land, preparing their land. And that cover crop has to stay on there until the middle of March. And that's not good for vegetable farmers at all because they need that time, they need that land. When it's ready to go, they're ready to go.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

Figure 3.2
Diverse summer squash and cucumber varieties grown on a Latino/a farm in Virginia.

When I asked the staff person if the cover crops work better for the grain farmers, she told me, “Yes, I have offered several times. I go out there and just try to push the program. And they say no, it’s just not good for them because of the rules and regulations of the cover crop program.”

This illustration of poor seasonal fit with available NRCS programs could be equally true for any fruit or vegetable farmer in the region. Yet for immigrant farmers, who have fewer farming options due to their limited access to capital investment, land, and markets, this misalignment reinforces an existing inequality for already-disenfranchised farmers.

In another example, in order to participate in the hoop house program, in addition to being subject to random visits and providing a detailed log of what was planted, how much was spent, and how much profit was made, farmers must plant particular crops according to USDA guidelines. Farmers must prepare and adhere to an operation and maintenance plan, which includes particular instructions as to proper irrigation and planting practices as well as erosion control. This plan has to be reviewed and approved

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

by an NRCS official. While the few farmers who participate in the program did not express frustration at these requirements, others stayed away from government offices because they did not want to have to answer to outside authorities. One farmer who chose to participate in the hoop house program conveyed both gratitude and frustration, saying, "We were planting tomatoes, because they're very particular. They [the USDA] want certain stuff. You can't go ahead and do anything you want with them [the hoop houses]. … And it's good help. I'm not saying it doesn't help, but we've managed to come so far on our own."

While the farmer appreciates the financial assistance, she also questions if the planting restrictions are worth the support. The requirement for standardization feels like a relinquishment of some part of her agrarian autonomy or the ability to make all farming decisions as she wishes. Even for those who succeed in securing state resources, they seem unsure about the decision to work within certain rules and regulations. Yet it is not only government institutions such as the USDA that expect a certain level of standardization for farmer participation. As I discuss below, markets, even farmers markets, which are meant to benefit small-scale growers with diversified crops, can be challenging places for immigrant farmers to enter and gain acceptance.

Market Discrimination

Farmers markets provide farmers with the most direct link to consumers as well as spaces where they can network and socialize with other farmers and food providers. Markets are also generally supportive for farmers who grow diverse crops at varying scales and want to avoid losing profit to intermediary purchasers. Farmers markets should be the ideal outlet for immigrant farmers, who grow a variety of crops in relatively small amounts, and due to language and literacy restrictions, struggle when working with more bureaucratic institutions. Yet like other institutional agrarian spaces in the United States, they often reinforce opportunities for farmers with privilege, while leaving out new farmers of color.

Despite challenges to entry, access, and cultural acceptance, farmers markets were still the most commonly cited places that farmers I met sell their produce. It is in farmers markets where I was first introduced to many of the farmers I later visited and interviewed. Immigrant farmers recounted

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

how these open-air spaces, filled with dozens of produce, meat, bakery, beverage, and prepared-food vendors, were reminiscent of markets where they sold and shopped back in Mexico, providing a familiarity and sense of home, which I explore more in chapter 4. Such markets allow many of them an opportunity to directly meet customers as well as market unique and diverse crops in small quantities. Throughout this research, I spoke to farmers about their experiences selling in markets, and to market managers, other nonimmigrant farmers who sold alongside them, and a few middlepersons, companies, and farmers that rented cooler space for farmers who sell wholesale.

As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, many scholars have found that farmers markets can be exclusionary to people of color, as their participants consist of well-connected communities of white farmers and consumers (Alkon and McCullen 2011; Slocum 2007). Such research is unsurprising given my own findings, where market managers are often aware of the cultural expectations of primarily white consumers, and even when they are sympathetic to the needs of immigrant farmers, emphasized the ways that farmers of color can make their own practices more amenable to such consumers. In the section that follows, I discuss multiple ways that immigrant farmers are de-prioritized and forced to struggle in the context of the growing farmers market movement, including gaining entrance and meeting market regulations, and ultimately what it means when they look for alternative routes through wholesale vendors.

Gaining Entrance to Farming Communities

Although many farmers were generally content with their experience selling at farmers markets, others, especially those on the West Coast, struggled to gain entrance. In California in particular, markets are notoriously saturated in large cities, where the customer base is able to spend more money, creating an increasingly profitable venture for farmers. Many immigrant farmers simply cannot gain entry to the most profitable markets due to market saturation. Farmers with spots at these markets tend to be part of a network of farmers with a longer history of selling in the region or that offer something new that customers have not seen before. Typically, vendor spots for farmers with fresh, diverse produce are already filled, mostly with white farmers who have held these spaces for decades. In places where the competition to entry is less stiff and immigrant farmers were successfully

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

selling, I heard stories of blatant discrimination from white farmers, who seemingly felt threatened by the presence of farmworkers turned farmers. White farmers are oftentimes part of communities made up of multiple generations of established farming families. While they may be open to immigrants coming to their regions to perform much-needed labor on their farms, some are uncomfortable seeing them move up the ranks to farm ownership, as is evidenced in the stories told by farmers below.

I drove an hour and a half from Saint Paul to visit Samuel's farm, passing dozens of small lakes and worn-looking red barns nestled among hilly green pastures. Samuel, a farmer of mixed vegetables, is a leader in the immigrant farming community in Minnesota. He works not only on his own farm but is also as an adviser for other farmers through the Latino Economic Development Center in the Twin Cities. Samuel explains that "it's very difficult to be in a market that has been controlled by whites for generations. All of a sudden to show up as Latino, with this face … is very difficult." As Samuel makes clear, as immigrants of color, he and his fellow farmers stand out from the other vendors, and they are aware of their social difference as they try to connect with consumers and other farmers at markets.

Beyond institutional forms of discrimination, farmers told stories of individual racialized aggressions by other farmers and customers, thereby constraining their potential profitability and business growth. Farmers often feel unwelcome in the primarily white farming community. In the 1980s, Jesus was one of the first immigrant orchardists in Washington State. He came from Mexico to work in the orchards, with barely a grade school education and no ability to speak English. He now owns dozens of acres and has been farming in the same community for over thirty years. Jesus told me that "there are farmers who have to spend years fighting preconceived notions of Latino farmers. Once they see that you are just another guy with a family and kids, and they see that you participate in sports and everything, just like the next guy. With a little bit of time, you get accepted in the community."

He was positive about the transition to a more inclusive environment for immigrants in his region. In his community, immigrant farmers have been establishing themselves for several decades. In other immigrant farming communities where they are less familiar to their neighbors, I heard less positive stories. Gerardo started farming when he was seven years old with his grandfather in Oaxaca, Mexico. He came to the United States when he

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

was twelve years old with his family. He has owned his own farm in California for the past two years. Unique among my research participants, Gerardo has a college degree. Despite his formal education, he still feels that other farmers do not take him seriously. When asked about how other farmers in his community treat him, Gerardo put it this way, "There will be people who will put you down, but what is more important is if you let them push you down. Because they will look at you like, 'I'm better than you.' A lot of people will say, 'He is this or he is that because we are not from the same race.'"

Although he takes personal responsibility for overcoming such prejudice, others were more forthright in the challenges such preconceived notions created for them. Martin, who farms in Virginia and was introduced earlier, stated that his previous employers were angry when they learned he was starting his own farm. He had managed their farm for twenty-seven years, yet they were not supportive of his transition and started talking badly about him to other farmers. He began selling his own produce at the same market where he had sold on behalf of his white employers for almost thirty years. He only did so after his former employers decided to stop going to the market and focus on wholesale. He found the other vendors were not tolerant of a Mexican farmer selling his own produce at the market.[10] Two white farmers tried to get him ousted from the market—an act that he believes was motivated by jealousy and racial discrimination:

> I have had clients there for twenty-five, thirty years. Regularly, for years, they have bought from me [when I was selling for my former employer]. I bring two hundred, three hundred watermelons in the truck and I sell them all. [The other vendors] brought seventy, and they couldn't sell them. It made them mad, and they wanted me kicked out. The next year, two white women tried to get me expelled because I sold a lot. So the people [my customers] started to help me, so they couldn't run me out.

Of course, entrepreneurs do not typically cheer on their competition. At the markets where these farmers sell, there are dozens of farmers selling at a range of prices. Immigrants do not stand out as the lowest sellers or particularly different than the other vendors—other than their race and nationality, and somewhat-larger variety of produce, with some additional Latin American varieties. In the case of immigrant farmers, the negative reactions are rooted in a suspicion of outsiders in a white farm-operator community. A university extension agent in Virginia affirmed this type of

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

discrimination against "newcomers," entrenched in a general mistrust of a new group of farmers they do not know. "They're good growers, and I think, pretty successful," notes this agent. "And I think that can cause other farmers to be jealous. Not necessarily in the area, but across the board at a market. And I think a lot of fingers get pointed. And I think that the things that people say they do. … The biggest thing a lot of times is that there's mistrust, in terms of if they're actually growing what they saying they're growing; that's probably the biggest."

Arguably, "jealousy" of new, nonwhite farmers is related to the fact that white farmers are used to immigrants working for rather than selling alongside them. It therefore makes sense that some would feel threatened and reactive to Latino/a farmers' class advancements. The sense that white farmers are somehow threatened or experiencing a disadvantage, as compared to immigrant farmers, is a trend observed by Melone, with California FarmLink, as well. "Over the years I've heard complaints from established white farmers, that farmers who participate in incubator and training programs, and have people advocating on their behalf, are getting land at reduced rates and unfair advantages," explains Melone. "Meanwhile, these same people don't acknowledge the family support they received in starting their farm, accessing markets, inheriting their land, etc."

As Melone points out, while established farmers focus on the resources, limited as they are, being allocated to immigrant farmers, they are disregarding their own advantages, such as inherited land and family support. Further, as I discuss below, white farmers tend to be given the benefit of the doubt regarding their marketing and growing practices, while immigrant farmers are more likely to be targeted for violating market rules, not only by other farmers who might feel economically threatened, but by seemingly neutral market managers.

Discrimination through Market Regulation

Another way immigrant farmers are held back from success in local markets is through farmers market regulations. The agent quoted above is referencing the requirement at most farmers markets for vendors to only sell what they grow, not resell from other farmers, stores, or brokers. Although requirements are not standardized across states, regions, or market organizations, markets regularly have regional or distance-based requirements to ensure products are being produced on a local scale. The umbrella organizations

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

that manage markets are usually nonprofit groups, overseeing multiple markets in one region. Many of them have market managers who conduct site visits and check that producers are actually growing what they sell.

Immigrant farmers cited stories of direct discrimination by markets managers. A farmer in Virginia, Bertha, who is originally from Oaxaca, described racialized targeting by market managers unequivocally: “Even if they [my customers] point the finger at the gringos, they come inspect the Hispanics. Even if they’re the clients who are complaining, they all come the same. … So if someone complains about a gringo, they come inspect us. And they say that the gringos have everything [in order], and to all of us, they give us a paper to see if we have everything [that we say we have]. We know it’s all lies, but what are we going to do? … Yes, especially if it’s a gringo [complaining], they only inspect the Hispanics.”

Although most white farmers are honestly growing and selling from their own farms, they are also more likely to be given the benefit of the doubt than immigrant farmers. Adam Sanders, an immigrant and refugee

Figure 3.3
Diverse crops sold by a Latino/a farmer at a farmers market in Washington State.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

advocate, was my initial connection to many of the farmers I interviewed in California. He worked closely with a group of Triqui farmworkers (indigenous to Mexico) on the Central Coast of California to help them start a community garden to ensure their food security. Sanders later assisted many of them through the bureaucracy of starting their own farms and accessing markets. He worked as a broker for many of them, bringing their produce to the city to connect them with markets, as they did not speak English or have access to long-distance transportation. He also explained the ways that more established white farmers seemed to break the rules. Through their many years of market experience, Sanders said, white farmers were able to gain further advantages by repackaging other growers' produce:

> You get these bigger farms with these big tables and all this beautiful variety, and if they're buying well over half that stuff from small farmers, it doesn't represent the true cost. If they were growing that themselves, their profit would not be as high, and so that's how they're getting money and profitability. And when other people were coming in and selling their own stuff. … But most people do it, the bigger stands do it, and people don't realize that. I saw it from the inside, and it's really disappointing.

While I cannot verify that this is standard practice, Sanders is making an important point that when white farmers break rules, they are assumed innocent, while immigrant farmers are assumed guilty, reflecting the observations made by immigrant farmers themselves.

In my many meetings with farmers market managers who work at markets heavily populated by immigrant farmers, they expressed frustration in their efforts to ensure that all farmers abide by market rules. They recognize that misunderstandings are common, yet in my interviews, even well-intentioned managers reinforced farmers' suspicions that they oftentimes assumed that newcomers to the market were less likely to follow market regulations. Most did not speak fluent Spanish themselves, and had to communicate through farmers' children or other translators, when available. Due to linguistic and cultural barriers, they were unable to communicate directly with many immigrant farmers, and therefore unable to ask detailed or difficult questions about their growing practices. Likewise, because of these barriers, farmers were not given equal opportunities to explain their products. Most managers spoke with me about this divide, and the ways they were actively trying to bridge gaps in communication and education. Examples include having regulations for farmers translated into Spanish

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

as well as helping immigrant farmers with signage and other forms of advertising.

Ostrom, from Washington State extension, works directly with market managers. Much of her work focuses on helping managers become more culturally sensitive so as to bridge the linguistic divide between managers and farmers, and make markets more generally accessible to immigrant farmers. Yet she recognizes these divides are still common, and thinks they lead to regular miscommunications and misunderstandings between market managers and immigrant farmers. "Even the farmers markets, how do managers treat people there?" Ostrom asks. "I feel like they're not getting along. Is it because the farmers are mostly trying not to follow rules? Or they're just not understanding each other?"

While it may be a point of miscommunication between immigrant farmers and nonimmigrant managers, this does not dispel the fact that managers unfairly assume that immigrants are breaking market rules, particularly that of bringing in produce they did not grow themselves. This suspicion on the part of managers is directly related to the fact that markets are predominantly populated by white vendors and customers, creating a sense that nonwhite farmers are out of place. Market managers were open in addressing farmers' inequalities, but most have a long way to go to face their racial bias head-on. In the meantime, immigrant farmers are being put to more stringent tests to stay active in markets and under more pressure to prove their legitimacy in the eyes of market authorities.

Other Market Options

Despite all their best intentions, many immigrant farmers are not able to economically survive the farmers market competition. The most lucrative farmers markets are saturated with mixed-crop and vegetable growers, and will not take in more vendors with similar products. Some farmers who started out growing more diverse crops for direct markets have had to switch to less diverse wholesale production after struggling to gain entry to farmers markets already saturated with vegetable growers. To sell to larger wholesale distributors, farmers have to grow a more consistent amount of fewer products. In order to make a profit at selling a few crops to wholesalers versus a diversity to direct markets, scaling up becomes an imperative. In California in particular, many immigrant farmers were working on breaking into wholesale markets, including selling to third-party brokers as

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

well as other direct markets, such as restaurants and retailers. These kinds of markets present their own challenges for immigrant farmers. Some of these are standard to any farmer selling wholesale, such as the cost of storage and large-scale coolers, and the lost profit to middlepersons. Wholesalers expect a consistent quality and large quantity, in contrast to farmers market consumers who are generally more content with less consistent and uniform crops, and are willing to pay more for local and certified organic or sustainably grown produce.

Yet for some, reducing diversity and scaling up has been their only option. Even farmers in regions with easier entry to direct markets were finding it difficult to sell all the produce they grew. Markets were the most commonly cited limiting factor to their farm businesses' survival.

For new immigrant farmers, those who are struggling to adjust to a new culture, the aggressive and competitive marketing necessary to secure high-end customers outside farmers markets is beyond what they are able to successfully take on. Sanders, who spent a year brokering produce for mostly indigenous immigrant farmers, saw culture as an almost-larger boundary than language:

> Who's able to actually make the money are those people who are willing to break out of the shadows. And there are a few of them, but it's hard. … And a lot of it, especially in the Oaxacan culture, is the politeness. And in produce, I found out you've got to be calling people on the phone, and if someone's yelling at somebody else, you've got to yell back at them. You've got to push; you've got to send pictures constantly and know what the prices are every day. So it's not even an English thing. There are a lot of people born and raised here who speak English and couldn't do it. It's highly stressful to do wholesale produce.

Just as with farmers markets, of course, the farmers must leave the farm and drive many hours to bring their produce to customers. For many, especially those who are undocumented, travel can be intimidating. Additionally, for many immigrant farmers, the attraction to farming is the connection to the land itself; regardless of documentation status, they would prefer to stay home and not to travel.[11] Sanders elaborates: "But it's the fear of driving, the need of connecting with the farm. … And what we had wanted to do was—I offered many, many times to cross-train people and invited them to drive with me on my route, especially the kids. ... But in some families, there's this hesitation to do that, and they just want to be on the farm."

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

Despite these structural challenges, some farmers, even recent immigrants with no formal education, overcome cultural barriers and fear. As I have shown throughout the book, what immigrant farmers all share is their resilience and ability to overcome extreme barriers to creating a landed life in the United States. Against all odds, they are continuously proving their skills and commitment, and fulfilling their dreams of an agrarian livelihood. Sanders describes one of the more successful farmers he worked with in California:

> Part of it was his partner who pushes him, and she says, "Look, I'm not afraid to be calling people; you're great at farming. You take care of the farming, and I'll do this." But see, before he'd even finished ALBA, he got his labels, he got them [organically] certified by CCOF. He got his food safety certification. He made these big beautiful labels he put on everything with all the correct information, kept it updated according to the laws, which you know changed, and now you have to put more information on your sticker. … He would ask the questions and push. And they're not afraid to go to a printer in Watsonville, and walk in the door and say, "I need you to make me ten thousand of these." They're not afraid to do that.

As Sanders makes clear, the boundaries to enter markets for immigrant growers are high, but not impossible to overcome. Not only do they need to face overt racial discrimination, the related challenges of language and culture create more subtle challenges as they work to develop a customer base. Further, as farmers trying to enter both wholesale and direct markets, many immigrants struggle with attracting and connecting with customers. It is an additional challenge to market their businesses, as they lack the linguistic and technological skills to brand their farms and garner attention on the same level as white-owned, direct-market farms. Famers who are able to market their products successfully tend to have entered the United States at a younger age, or have US-raised children who are fluent in English and more immersed in US culture. These farmers can more easily engage in social media and branding schemes. It is easier for them to have attractive and accurate signage and business cards at the markets as well as post recipes and promotions online. While several of the farms excelled at this kind of promotion, most lacked the human resources and experience, struggling to foster a client base and branding in order to stand out among the other farms in their region.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

In both farmers markets and wholesale, their differences as immigrants and farmers of color become clear as they struggle with acceptance from other farmers as well as marketing their business in spaces where they are treated suspiciously and without merit. In farming communities and food spaces, which are defined as default color-blind places, whiteness acts as a boundary, keeping farmers from being accepted, and being given preference or the benefit of the doubt when compared with other farmers. These boundaries keep immigrant farmers from advancing economically, maintaining agrarian ethnic and racial disparities.

Organic Certification

Similar to regulations and standards at farmers markets, the organic label, possibly the most well-recognized qualification for alternative farmers, can be a barrier for immigrant farmers gaining access to the full economic benefits of their growing practices. As I have mentioned in other chapters, most of the immigrant farmers I interviewed grow using minimal or no synthetic additives, and have experience with practices such as composting and building soil as well as other farming practices considered as "sustainable." Yet many are not certified as organic. Several who are not certified expressed interest in the process, but do not have the resources to pay for the certification process or are intimidated by the paperwork involved, and thus are not able to advertise as "certified organic." For those who do not own all the land they are growing on, it is difficult to confirm that the land has not been cultivated using synthetic additives in recent years—a requirement for certification. Furthermore, they do not want to invest in improving land where they are unsure of their tenure.

Julie Guthman (2014) discusses the institutional and racialized boundaries to organic certification in her book *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California*. She looks at the history of organic certification as it reflects the broader history of stronger institutional and government support for white farmers as well as those with more land and resources. Guthman argues that standardizing and the scientification of certification benefits larger and more industrial-style farmers, rather than smaller-scale and more diverse, resource-poor farmers, such as farmers of color. Additionally, she explains that since smaller-scale farmers, who are selling primarily to direct markets, have more contact with consumers, they

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

have less incentive to prove they are organic and therefore less motivation for certification than larger-scale farmers.

I heard over and over again from farmers that getting certified is costly and less optimal for those who rent their farmland, since the certification of the land takes three years and cannot be transferred by a farmer to another property. As soil building without synthetic additives requires more labor, it is also an investment in the future of the property—again, not a wise economic decision for renters, who may or may not stay on the land after the process is complete.

Some farmers recognized the advantage of certification, but discussed the paperwork and lack of literacy as their primary boundary. Manuel, who is from Oaxaca, learned how to farm from his parents and has little formal education. He currently farms in the state of Washington. It was clear that not having certification was not for lack of interest but rather a lack of funds and the ability to fill out the paperwork. "I would like to do it. … I think that by registering as organic, more doors will open," says Manuel. "They can't just buy your product because they don't know how you're growing. I tell my daughters to help me [with the paperwork for certification], but they are focused on their studies."

Many farmers acknowledged that they are already doing the extra labor of organic farming, yet they cannot justify the expense and time to do the paperwork. Marisela works on a certified organic farm in Washington State during the day as a laborer and comes back to work with her husband in the evenings on their own rented land. She knows what organic certification takes and believes in its value, but they cannot afford to go through the process. She told me, "It is better to be organic, but at the same time is more paperwork and is another expense." Ricardo, introduced above, simply said, "We looked into it. Money is the issue."

In the context of farmer discrimination and opportunity, organic certification is another way that institutional structures prevent immigrant farmers from receiving the same benefits as more established, larger-scale, or US-born farmers. Organic certification, for better or worse, has become the nationally and universally recognized standard for how the average consumer identifies sustainable farming. When immigrant farmers cannot access the advantage of marketing themselves as such, they lose out on potential revenue and advancement.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

Toward a New Era of Inclusion

In this chapter, I review both the structural and individual ways that immigrant farmers are left behind in accessing institutional resources and networks. From the federal government to neighborhood farmers markets, Latino/a immigrant farmers are not extended the same opportunities as white farmers. This inequality only furthers the existing divides in capital, markets, and land necessary for farmers to survive in today's increasingly competitive agricultural economy.

As I have discussed, the USDA is the headquarters for claims of discrimination as well as the most appropriate location for overcoming structural racial injustice. Although the USDA is not the only institutional boundary for Latino/a immigrant farmers, nor the only place improvements can and should be made, it is the only state institution that claims to provide economic opportunities for rural communities and agricultural producers of the United States. While there are many entrepreneurial and nonprofit ventures that focus on advancement for and training of small farmers, farmers of color, and immigrant farmers, those are often working on shoestring budgets, with varying levels of accountability to their clients, and have limited access to resources and markets themselves. The USDA supports many of these projects, including farmers markets and organic certification groups, through grants and other institutional backing; therefore addressing structural discrimination at the USDA must be a focus of improvement if services are going to reach farmers of all racial and ethnic backgrounds in a just manner.

Under Vilsack's guidance, the USDA took several steps toward a new vision of equality at the federal level. From 2009 until 2016, it provided civil rights trainings to employees, established the Office of Advocacy and Outreach to aid beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers, and claimed to work toward resolving civil rights lawsuits inherited from previous administrations. The department vowed to be an equal opportunity employer and create a workforce that "represents the full diversity of America" (USDA-OASCR 2015).

This was all under the Obama administration. As I was completing the fieldwork for this project, Trump was elected president, and Sonny Perdue, an agribusiness executive who took a strong anti-immigrant stance as the governor of Georgia, was sworn in as the secretary of agriculture. On a

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

national level, we are seeing massive cuts in government spending, which on a regional and local scale means further cuts in funding to extension, grants, staff, and staff trainings, such as those that could be used to improve the racial exclusion of immigrant farmers from institutions, opportunities, and programs. While it is too early to know exactly how such reforms under the new administration will unfold for farmers exactly, projections do not look good. After the election, I attempted to follow up with staff at the USDA inquiring about what they thought the new administration would mean for immigrants and other farmers of color. Requests for feedback were either declined or not answered. While my inquiry was not exhaustive, I can imagine most staff still employed by the USDA are not looking to critique the administration from their current positions.

Unfortunately, even during the previous administration, I found that despite claims of increased racial equality from the federal offices of the USDA, little change was being made on the ground in local and regional offices to directly help Latino/a immigrants overcome obstacles in order to transition from the role of farmworker to farmer in the United States. The processes of monitoring and standardization, as currently required by USDA programs, exacerbate the racial exclusion of immigrant farmers from state programs and, ultimately, the advantages that other farmers receive. This uneven rural development must be understood in the context of the historical relationship between immigrants and the state as well as the lived experiences of those struggling within a system where their practices are not deemed readable. Today's immigrant farmers follow this pattern of racialized others being left out of a system where some practices are deemed legible and thus legitimate, and others are not. If anything, change has gone in the wrong direction. Government programs have the potential to provide wraparound services that could include immigrant farmers in planning, markets, and other institutions, which could potentially benefit them, but such programs are chronically underfunded and currently having their budget further decimated.

In recent years, and as a result of the lawsuits mentioned above, the USDA has devoted new funding to support farmers identified as socially disadvantaged, such as minority farmers, Latino/a farmers included. As previously mentioned, programs that are developed for the specific needs of diversified fruit and vegetable or specialty crop growers already exist within the USDA. The FSA also offers microloan programs designed for

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

"nontraditional" farmers that require less paperwork and could be helpful for Latino/a immigrants as they transition to farm ownership. Additionally, the Minority and Socially Disadvantaged Farmers Assistance office has been established within the FSA with the express purpose of assisting farmers such as those who participated in this study. Despite critique, many of the farmers described in this book have indirectly benefited from the support of local and direct-market initiatives funded by the agency. These programs are a great start to making government-supported programs available to immigrant growers. Regrettably, due to social divides along with language and educational barriers, these programs are unknown to those most in need of assistance.

Further, programs that support new and beginning farmers as well as organic and direct-market programs are only funded through temporary measures. Even more established and bipartisan programs are vulnerable to political swings, especially in our current political moment, as they require reinstatement by the Farm Bill.

Of course, some paperwork and state monitoring are necessary for programs to function and farmers to be held accountable. I do not suggest that these procedures can or should be simply abolished. Rather, these processes must be streamlined to take account of differences in growing practices, linguistic and literacy capabilities, and the need for farmers to maintain autonomy on multiple levels, if they are to build the trust that is so sorely lacking. Programs should be amended to account for differential growing seasons for diverse crops. While not a structural or universally beneficial fix, technologies such as camera phones could be better utilized for documentation purposes in contrast to lengthy written paperwork—an idea suggested to me by Marie Ullrich, a Vegetable Specialist with Cornell Cooperative Extension in New York. In all my discussions with USDA and other outreach staff members, there was an interest in these changes being made to accommodate "nontraditional" farmers in the United States.

Specifically, mainstream agricultural research and education models that are not appropriate for many immigrant farmers, who lack may formal education and English skills, and who also may not be farming using conventional or industrial methods, need to be adjusted to meet farmers where they are (Ostrom, Cha, and Flores 2010; Rovegno 2016). Various institutions like Washington State University's Small Farms Program and Virginia Tech's extension services in the Northern Neck have partnered

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

Figure 3.4
Posters in English and Spanish advertising a small farmer and rancher training organized by Washington State University's Small Farm Program.

with nonprofits to help enhance their ability to translate, train staff, and develop culturally appropriate educational tools and resources. Examples like these must be replicated and pushed up the chain of command within the federal offices and with decision makers. It is in these programs that the disconnects between the state's expectation of conventional growing and white farming culture and alternative, agroecological, and nonwhite practices and cultures are being addressed. There is an enormous need for more inclusive methods and approaches such as these in order to properly value as well as support diverse agricultural systems.

Immigrant farmers are challenging historical racial legacies in farming in the United States, despite the odds, and persisting in new markets and climates that are seemingly unattainable. The USDA has the opportunity to support their growth as farmers, but in order for programs and funding to reach the most financially disadvantaged beginning farmers, the agency must do more to recognize the challenges that immigrant farmers experience in the current system. A productive first step in addressing the long-standing fear of state authority is certainly the recognition of its existence, yet more

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

must be done to truly make services and financial support available. To start with, USDA staff in local offices need better support for linguistic and cultural translations, and outreach must focus on making farmers feel safe and included. This support must be available consistently throughout the United States, and not just in offices where farmers are already participating. For this to happen, awareness must improve more broadly at the national level where decisions are made, such as in the Farm Bill debates. Individuals at the local level are powerless if federal leadership does not make concrete changes to procedures and funding streams to support these changes. To truly transition to a new age of civil rights, political leadership and leadership at the USDA must look closely at local conditions and challenges that individual groups of socially disadvantaged farmers face, and make clear and grounded changes to include them.

This chapter highlights immigrant farmer encounters with institutional and individual discrimination, which for many is a day-to-day struggle. These experiences mark immigrant farmers' class transition from worker to owner as deeply embedded in racial and citizenship-based politics. Despite these struggles, they continue to progress in challenging agrarian social hierarchies. In the following chapters, I explore what motivates immigrant farmworkers to persist in their quest for farm ownership, the forms that their farms take, and the specific practices that they choose to employ.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/270740/9780262355841_caq.pdf by guest on 28 January 2023