

## 5 Shifting the Means of Production: Food Sovereignty, Labor, and the Freedom to Farm

They took my house, my land. So I left, and I took my hands with me.

—Joaquín, an immigrant farmer from Oaxaca, now settled on California's Central Coast

When I decided to work for myself, I was working for someone else. I saw that after I worked for him for about five years, ... he was becoming successful, making a lot of money. And I stayed the same, earning \$6 an hour. ... One day I said to him, "To start, this is good. But now I see that you're just there doing nothing, and I don't make anything. I don't make money. I'm the only one working." Because I was the only employee he had. ... He had at least \$250,000 in earnings that I had made for him. And I said, "No, I'm killing myself for you. It's over. I'm going to start my own business." And that's how it happened.

—Martin

Martin, introduced in chapter 3, came to the United States when he was twenty-one from Guadalajara, and labored as a farmworker for twenty-seven years before saving enough money to start his own farm in the Northern Neck of Virginia. For him, the ability to work independently, make his own schedule, and see the products he cultivated benefit his own family made the transition to owning his own business a priority. He clearly depicts the dynamic between his former employer and himself: he provided the labor to produce the goods for market, and his boss received all the profits of his labor. Once he was able to, he shifted his position by starting his own farm, thereby reclaiming control over his own labor and the profit his work produced.

At the core of Martin's story is the process of agricultural laborers reclaiming the means of production—a process being promoted on a global

scale by actors in the movement for food sovereignty. Food sovereignty, a transnational agrarian movement rooted in the idea that food is a human right, has been instituted internationally over the past several decades by the farmer coalition La Via Campesina. Its membership spans 81 countries and 182 organizations, including over 200,000,000 self-identified peasant farmer activists (La Via Campesina 2018). Farmers and advocates identifying with the food sovereignty movement aim to transform the global food system by addressing core inequalities in food distribution and resource access from the local to the global scale, unbalanced power in the food system, gender violence, and ecologically unsustainable practices (Patel 2009; Trauger 2017; Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe 2010). The farmers interviewed for this book, although they have not specifically articulated identifying with the movement themselves, reflect many of these ideals. In this chapter, I argue that as they strive for partial autonomy from a hierarchical and exploitative labor system, and in turn gain control over their own food production and consumption, they are enacting food sovereignty as a practice in their daily lives. But as I explain, it is a version of food sovereignty riddled with restraints and contradictions.

Starting their own farm businesses allows immigrant farmers the independence to make decisions on their farms regarding their growing practices, and perhaps more important, their own daily schedules and livelihood strategies. They start their farms with the primary goal of maintaining independence from their previous employers and agribusiness wages, and returning to their former livelihoods as farmers. As many farmers discussed with me, the “freedom” to farm was significant to them in both reestablishing a food-producing livelihood and reclaiming power over their own time. Rather than following the day-to-day instructions of others, these immigrant farmers now have increased control over farming practices and techniques as well as their own labor.

Central to their autonomy are the ways that immigrant farmworkers turned farmers challenge the classic Marxian capitalist trajectory, which predicts that dispossessed peasant farmers simply become industrial laborers. By avoiding hiring nonfamily workers, many farmers are evading recreating the same capitalist class formations that they labored under as hired farmworkers themselves.<sup>1</sup> By some definitions, these farmers are representative of petty or simple commodity production, in contrast to capitalist production, which is dependent on wage or paid laborers (Goodman

and Redclift 1985). Yet these farmers certainly do not constitute a barrier to capitalist development, as previous discussions of the agrarian question would suggest (Kautsky 1988). In fact, immigrant producers in the United States provide a surprising and noteworthy example of how agriculture adapts to flows of capital, and how agricultural and capitalist relations take multiple and unexpected forms when observed closely (Henderson 1998; Wells 1984, 1996). Despite this fact, the transition from worker to owner demonstrates the potential for shifts in social relations and power dynamics in global food production, as workers are able to move beyond their race- and citizenship-based positions in the capitalist agrarian system.<sup>2</sup>

Both food sovereignty activists and agrarian studies scholars use the term “peasant” to identify farmers who are relatively autonomous from industrial agriculture. Farmers I met oftentimes used the Spanish term for the word “peasant,” “campesino/a,” to describe themselves both before and after migration. Jan Douwe van der Ploeg (2012, 2013, 2014) contends that peasant farmers are the necessary social force to further the movement for agroecological farming practices as well as the global movement for food sovereignty.<sup>3</sup> While I hesitate to directly identify the farmers in my study as peasant farmers *per se*, since they focus on commercial production and not subsistence, certainly their experiences fit the description of the ongoing struggle for autonomy from the industrial food system. As van der Ploeg (2012, 49) observes, “It might be argued that peasant farming is an ongoing struggle for autonomy—for the creation of a self-controlled resource base that allows for farming in a way that coincides with the interests, experiences and prospects of the peasant family.”

The majority of farmers interviewed were explicitly averse to engaging with social movement politics, or identifying with any politically oriented or activist group, farming or otherwise, yet their rationale and motivation to start their own farms is undeniably in line with those of the global food sovereignty movement. In particular, the desire and goal for autonomy from their agricultural employers as well as independence from the system of industrial agriculture more broadly is reflective of the food sovereignty principles of agrarian reform as well as increased democratic control over the food system (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2015; Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe 2010). As Amy Trauger (2017, 30) eloquently writes, “Food sovereignty is as much about changing systems of production as it is about something more fundamental and perhaps more ontologically threatening



**Figure 5.1**

Rufino Ventura, of Ventura Family Organic Farm, on his farm in California.

to capitalist modernity: the transformation of meaning, primarily around land, labor and exchange.”

In theory, immigrant farmers represent this transformation of meaning, land, and labor. The trend and preference among immigrant farmers toward family labor instead of hired labor represents both a strong form of resistance to a purely capitalist labor structure and a key point of tension as some farms struggle to make ends meet economically. This resistance is representative of the larger movement of farmers and eaters who are pushing for a more democratically controlled and less exploitative food system, while contending with the constraints of current global food markets.

Yet as business owners, they are actively engaging with a capitalist system, and subject to market pressures to replicate the same industrial practices and workplace injustices that they once labored under. As many immigrant farmers have already scaled up and begun to hire nonfamily labor, they are stuck in the same labor and class hierarchies that they attempted to escape, only now they are on the other end of the relationship as employers. They are struggling to maintain these practices as they are pressured to grow their business in order to compete with other producers in their region, as well as globally, forcing some farmers to transition to a more industrial farming approach. As I demonstrate below, the potential for transforming the racial and ethnic makeup of agrarian labor relations is limited by current market constraints.

In this chapter, I address these contradictions as farmers grapple with maintaining family labor in the context of a highly competitive and global agricultural market. Using food sovereignty as a frame to understand their juxtaposition to the industrial food system, I look into the inherent contradictions in immigrant farmers' condition as both resisters and reproducers of a particular kind of capitalist agrarian structure, and the nuances of their role in the food system. I discuss the challenges inherent in shifting class positions, and what these mean for the broader labor politics of this transition. To fully appreciate the formation of their agrarian perspectives and class standing, I start with a brief history of agrarianism and land concentration, distribution, and reform in Mexico.

### **Land Reform, Dispossession, and the Rise and Fall of the *Ejido***

Owning a farm business engenders specific political and personal meaning for former peasant farmers and farmworkers, who have been deprived of the ability to survive off their land. Unlike most white farmers in the United States, Mexican immigrant farmers have been historically dispossessed from their land and resources through the ongoing processes of colonialism, international development, and globalization (McMichael 2013). Their position as racialized workers did not begin when they crossed the border into the United States; it has a much deeper history rooted in colonial dispossession and transnational agrifood policy. Despite this history, an important shift is occurring in agrarian class and race politics in the United States. Albeit at a small scale, immigrants are reclaiming control over their

own labor, land, and the power to produce sustenance for themselves, their families, their community, and the larger consumer market. As I discuss in the following section, it is imperative to recognize the historic and geographic context of this change to fully appreciate its social importance.

From the time of European conquest through the relatively recent signing of NAFTA, outside forces have usurped land and labor from the native and peasant populations of Mexico, the ancestors of the immigrant farmers interviewed for this book. This historic and continued removal of native and peasant people from arable land has directly impacted the flow of immigrants across the border looking for work in the United States today.<sup>4</sup>

Colonial expansion and the process of the global dispossession of peasants from their land and resources began when Spanish conquistadores invaded the region later called Mexico in the early sixteenth century. Despite recorded forms of landownership and organized land tenure, they frequently treated indigenous lands as vacant, occupying them for their own use and employing a system of forced native labor.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, due to contact with Europeans, indigenous communities lost large numbers of people due to health epidemics throughout the colonial period, oftentimes leading land to be unused or vacant, leaving it vulnerable to claims by Spaniards. While native populations began to recover in numbers in the seventeenth century, they lacked the political and economic power to reclaim land that had belonged to their ancestors. Through the process of progressive land loss and reduced land access, native people were largely stripped of their ability to provide for themselves, resulting in the need for wage work, either on Spanish-owned haciendas, or via migration to other regions or cities (Altman, Cline, and Pescador 2003; Borah 1983; Cline 1986; Lockhart 1969).

Several centuries after initial colonial contact, indigenous landholding was further stripped away through the process of declaring Mexican nationhood. Although the war for Mexican independence from 1810 to 1821 was initiated on behalf of the poor, it was also rooted in a push for a more individualist ideology around landownership. Before independence from Spain, both the Catholic Church and indigenous communities held land in communal or institutional ownership. Under the Spanish Crown, indigenous communities that still held communal land had their land rights somewhat legally protected. After Mexico gained independence in 1821, that protection was lost, leaving such communities even more vulnerable to seizure of their land by powerful elites (Brading 1991; Harvey 2000).

Despite indigenous loss of communal land rights, the guerrilla factions that won the war for independence remained entrenched in a broader long-term struggle for peasant land rights. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the concentration of lands and power of the hacienda owners only increased, leaving a country of dispossessed peasants ready to fight for land access. Hacienda expansion during this period was complex and varied by region. Generally, the flat lowland areas were more profitable for expansion, whereas the central and southern highland regions were less ecologically desirable for such colonization. Many indigenous communities were able to resist foreign agrarian development in these areas (Assies 2008).

Loss of indigenous and peasant land, and the poverty that it caused among the majority of the Mexican population, eventually came to a boiling point. The Mexican Revolution of 1910–1920 was largely a response to this widespread unrest and inequality, which had come to a climax under the thirty-five-year rule of president Porfirio Díaz. Under Díaz, haciendas were further consolidated and an agro-export economy was established, including the sale of millions of reportedly unused hectares to US companies. During this time, 87 percent of rural land was held by 0.2 percent of the landowners (ibid.).

Peasant leaders, most famously, Emilio Zapata and Francisco “Pancho” Villa, fought for land redistribution as one of the primary goals of the revolution. Zapata rallied under the slogans *Tierra y libertad* (land and liberty) and *La tierra es de quien la trabaja* (the land belongs to those who work it). They struggled for the return of hacienda lands to landless peasants, although the call for a return to communal landholdings was not universal throughout the country (ibid.). While Article 27 of the 1917 Mexican Constitution directly called for the dividing of haciendas and the redistribution of property to the landless, it was not until President Lázaro Cárdenas passed the 1934 Agrarian Code that significant land reform came to pass. Major progress began in 1935. Cárdenas worked with peasant groups to dismantle the hacienda system, redistributing over 20 million hectares through the development and institutionalization of the *ejido*, or communal land, system. By 1940, almost half of all arable land was part of the ejido sector. By the 1980s, around 28,000 ejidos, including 3.5 million agrarian worker-owners, had been created through agrarian reform. These holdings, while communally held and restricted in terms of sale to private

individuals, were not strictly for subsistence production. Ejidos produced food for commercial sale as well as for their own community-owner consumption (ibid.; Keen and Haynes 2012).

The dividing of lands was not universal, though, and some powerful large-scale private landowners continued to coexist alongside the communal land structure, creating a stark economic divide. Although under Cárdenas the ejidos were supported through credit, price guarantees, and infrastructure, in the long run, the parcels of the ejido system proved too small and of too poor quality for many producers to economically survive. Once political favor returned to the side of private landownership, smallholder ejidos struggled to compete with industrial agrarian export production. This ultimately led to a bifurcation of rural spaces and the rural economy between the communal ejido holdings and highly intensive private commercial production. Though the ejido holdings grew progressively through the 1980s, not all *ejiditarios* were able to make a living from the land. Much of the redistributed land was not arable or productive, and many supplemented their income as wageworkers in agriculture and other sectors, including by migrating to the United States. Some ejido lands were rented out for profit as people no longer wanted to farm it themselves (Assies 2008).

Although some scholars have argued that the history of the common ejido experience has forged an identity of resistance to global free market forces and a communal land ethic (Eisenstadt 2009; Teubal 2009), through my interviews I found that immigrant farmers have a mixed interest in communal farming. Of the small number committed to cooperative farming, they tend to have work experience outside farm labor, and usually in some kind of social movement organizing. For most, when I asked about working with other immigrants, farmworkers, or even family members outside their nuclear family, as co-owners of land or businesses, they had an immediate and direct response that they preferred to work alone. Some cited failed experiences working on communal projects in Mexico and in the United States, although none addressed the ejido system directly.

The ejido project was formally ended in 1991 by President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, who reformed the Mexican Constitution's Article 27, which had obligated the government to redistribute land, and limited the division of ejido lands or sale to private owners or nonlaborers. Instead, under



the justification of increasing productivity and flows of capital, President Salinas worked toward strengthening individual property rights and engaging Mexico further in the global neoliberal economy. Reforming Article 27 meant that foreign and private investors could now purchase ejido lands, reversing protections for Mexican smallholder landownership and peasant livelihoods. In addition to doing away with government land distribution objectives, the president further liberalized Mexico's agrarian sector, cutting state-funded subsidies, guaranteed prices for crops, and crop insurance (Assies 2008; Nock 2000; Teubal 2009; Vázquez-Castillo 2004).

Despite these shifts in policy, the transition from communal to private ownership has been slow, given that ejido owners have traditionally had few opportunities for income outside the agricultural sector, and most ejido lands have limited viability for commercial production, while the lands continue to have social and economic significance, thereby outweighing the appeal of individual tenure. Additionally, although the program was formally ended, some ejidos still exist without formal government sanctions.

The final push in undoing communal land tenure and peasants' ability to subsist off the land came with a transnational agreement between Mexico, the United States, and Canada. In 1994, overlapping with the final dismantling of the ejido system, President Salinas signed NAFTA. This arrangement further solidified the liberalization of the Mexican agrarian economy and prioritization of global free trade, resulting in massive migration to the United States.<sup>6</sup>

By reducing barriers to trade and tariffs on imports from the United States, NAFTA allowed the agricultural economy to be deluged by foodstuffs key to the Mexican agrarian economy. The cheap production of maize (corn) and beans by US farmers subsidized by the US government flooded the local markets, making it impossible for small-scale Mexican farmers to compete. NAFTA acted as a powerful linchpin in the already-changing Mexican rural landscape from that of mixed commercial and subsistence production to heavy export production. Unemployment and increased rural poverty among small-scale farmers were direct consequences of the agreement (Martin 2003). In particular, out-migration has been highest from Mexico's corn-producing regions (Nadal 2002). Immediately following the signing of NAFTA, corn prices in Mexico fell \$160 per ton. At the same time, imports of US corn to Mexico increased by twenty times their previous level. Over

that same period, the number of Mexican corn producers declined by one-third of its pre-1994 level (Relinger 2010).

Additionally, as farmers were forced to compete with cheap commodities from the United States and Canada, many started using synthetic pesticides and fertilizers for the first time. Carlos, a farmer in New York introduced in chapter 4, recounted, "It's funny, you know, where we're from at least, we didn't get introduced to commercial fertilizer and chemicals until NAFTA." As I discuss in the previous chapter, Carlos lamented his family's use of synthetic additions and loss of more traditional farming practices, which he blames on the competition from US imports.

NAFTA also created new spaces for continued foreign investment in tourism and industry. This foreign funding, which came largely from the United States, fueled the opening of factories employing low-wage Mexican labor. These foreign developments perpetuated the displacement of the ejido system by urbanizing the countryside, replacing food-producing rural livelihoods with industries whose profits were not reinvested in the local regions (Vázquez-Castillo 2004). This shift has caused a massive migration of former peasant farmers, generally from the south to the north of Mexico as well as across the border to the United States, looking for work in industrial agriculture, manufacturing, and service industries.

Many farmers I interviewed noted how the depressed rural economy in Mexico pressured them to look outside their hometowns and states to other regions and eventually across the border for work. While most farmers did not mention NAFTA directly, they spoke about poverty more generally, and the challenges of farming with low resources and high competition. This rural poverty, creating an impossible context to successfully farm and feed one's family, has led to the disempowerment of peasant farmers and a mass exodus of farmers from Mexico to the United States looking for work as laborers in the fields.

After leaving their own communities, culture, and lands, immigrant laborers migrate to the United States to work in agriculture and other industries, under often-exploitative conditions. They bring these experiences of displacement, migration, and labor with them as they start their own farms and become new farmers. As they break through the racialized and hierarchical structure of US farming, it is this experience as immigrants and workers that motivates them to find a new place on the aforementioned agricultural ladder. It is also this experience that positions them as potential

actors in resisting dominant agrifood power structures as they bring a distinct connection to land as well their own agrarian knowledge and labor with them to the United States.

### **Self-Direction, Freedom, and the Love of Farming**

For farmers I interviewed, food production and a connection to the land is a tradition that has spanned generations. As evidenced from the Mexican history detailed in the section above, the peasant class in Mexico has spent hundreds of years resisting its dispossession from its land-based livelihoods. I have found that this resistance has never stopped, although for immigrants in the United States, it takes on a different form as they work toward reclaiming land and labor across geographic and cultural divisions.

Farming is not an economically rational choice for those wishing to go into business. The work is temporal. The profits are based on increasingly erratic weather patterns, and the learning curve and investment in improving the land are steep. Instead, for the immigrant farmers I interviewed, the decision to farm was about a particular kind of freedom—a freedom to control one's time and labor, and also to live in a way that is more connected to agrarian values. Farmers' search for this freedom connects their lives in the United States to their previous ones in Mexico. In their eyes, they never stopped being farmers; instead, they were temporarily disconnected from the resources or means to practice farming. As scholars of the food sovereignty movement have identified, it is this connection to food production as a livelihood and cultural practice that differentiates this agrifood movement from industrial agriculture or standard agribusiness (Patel 2009).

The drive for independence was an overwhelming motivation among farmers in my research. Although farmers lose the relative stability of a paycheck, they gain the ability to determine their own activities and schedule, in addition to increased control over their families' food access. This finding reflects Wells's study of Mexican workers turned strawberry growers and sharecroppers in the 1970s and 1980s. In her work, Wells (1984, 18) found that the possibility of "self-direction" was a huge motivating factor for starting their businesses.

The concept of a stable income is relative for farmworkers. Their actual income as new farmers in the United States varies, although most say they

are still struggling financially. Farmers told me they do not make much more in take-home income than they did as farmworkers, and some say they actually make less. The majority of farmers interviewed had formerly worked as seasonal workers, meaning they were hired by a farm owner or contractor by the season, providing them no long-term financial stability. Some moved from region to region with harvest cycles, while others stayed in one area and pieced together other jobs for the winter. At the very least, though, those hired by honest employers could trust that if they worked a full day, they would be paid for it.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, as owners of their own farms, there is no guarantee they will sell their product, or that a drought or plague won't wipe out their crop.

Trinidad, a mixed fruit and vegetable farmer, immigrated from Jalisco to Virginia about thirty years ago. He owns approximately sixty acres, which he acquired slowly throughout the years. His farm was one of the largest in my study. Trinidad has been farming his own land for almost twenty years with his wife, children, and elderly parents. When I asked him about the financial instability of owning a farm, he described the experience: "You're not guaranteed money at the end of the week. You could work pretty much sixty hours a week, and then at the end of the week you're like, 'Where's my money?'"

The sacrifice of a relatively stable income is obviously a huge risk to take, especially for those who have little or no financial cushion. Yet as they leave behind their day jobs and their small but more dependable income, they gain a sense of independence and freedom from the daily grind of a hired worker.

Sara and her husband, Ernesto, both introduced in chapter 4, rent land from Viva Farms, the nonprofit incubator farming organization in Washington's Skagit Valley introduced in the first chapter. The couple grows strawberries and raspberries for regional farmers markets, and corn and beans for their own family's consumption. Sara echoed Ricardo's sentiment above. Her experience as a worker and the opportunity for the freedom to create her own timeline was a motivating factor for starting her own business. "If you are a worker, you have a set schedule," she explains. "When you are an owner, you have to come earlier, but you can leave whenever you want. For me, it is very good to be a business owner, not to have schedule, and not having to say that you have to leave and have the manager



**Figure 5.2**  
Senaida Vela of Arado Farm next to her raspberry bushes in Washington State.

be mad at you. Sometimes, if you need to go to the doctor, the people in charge don't want to let you go."

Yet farmworkers need not stay in agriculture in order to own their own business. Even nonimmigrant farmers struggle economically in an industry known to be unforgiving to small business owners. In each interview I asked farmers, "Why farming? Why not some other kind of business where it is easier to make a living?" I was consistently reminded that for these farmers, cultivating food was something more important than a moneymaking enterprise. The choice to start a farm instead of another kind of operation

is an intentional one, with deep meaning for those who choose it. While Sara and Ricardo only grow a few crops for market, their access to land where they choose to grow crops for their own consumption means that their family not only has improved food security but also increased control over the source and quality of that food, reflecting key food sovereignty principles. For the farmers I interviewed, the practices of growing their own food in addition to food for sale, while using their chosen approaches, was what made farming worth it.

Sara's husband, Ernesto, explained the connection between his experience as a farmer and farmworker to his business today. "I think that we who love the fields, we came from the fields. I think, personally, that's what attracts us—we know how to do it, we have practice, we can adapt, we get to know the products, we get the opportunity to have experience."

As I discussed in the last chapter, beyond knowing how to farm, immigrant farmers' experience as small-scale farmers in Mexico plays a major role in their farming decisions in the United States, particularly the motivation to stay in agriculture rather than move on to another profession. Although others acknowledge the desire to move away from farming, as Victoria, introduced in chapter 4, explains, after leaving and trying other things, many return to a land-based livelihood. "That always happens in farming, you know? You grew up on a farm, and then when you move to the States, you get tired of working on farms. I've seen this a lot. They take a little break and they always come back to where they started. So I think that happened to me."

Of course, for many, staying in agriculture simply makes the most sense. They have always worked in agriculture and know growing food better than anything else. José, a Virginia farmer mentioned in previous chapters, told me, "Why? Because we're back to the same. ... We didn't study. We could do something else, but this is what we know how to do and we like it. I like it. And ... I like to do it. For fun? No. To live, for my parents, to spend, to eat."

Returning to farming as a producer, after being a worker, allows him to reclaim the labor he has always done. It is simultaneously practical, based on his skills and knowledge base, and part of fulfilling his identity as a farmer.

Diego is a middle-aged farmer who lives in a house on five acres of rented land on the Central Coast of California. I asked him why he didn't

simply grow strawberries, the most profitable regional crop, like most other farmers in the area. He responded, “They do it for the money, I do it for the freedom.” Diego related his choice to grow a diversity of crops to the “freedom” of farming. As a former farmworker struggling to establish a plot of land, the ability to make his own choices as to how to utilize his own labor was reflected in practices that represent his past experience in contrast to those being dictated to him. This kind of autonomy and “freedom” is a driving force behind the ideals of food sovereignty: the notion that farmers should once again be empowered to control their own labor and decision making.

Victoria proudly describes the variety of plants she grows as well as her practice of saving seeds. By saving seeds year to year for planting, she maintains agrobiodiversity as well as avoids purchasing seeds from industrial agricultural companies.

I have two kinds of Chinese broccoli, cauliflowers, mustard, different kinds of lettuce. I have many different kinds of stuff. In Mexico, people use epazote, a plant called *ruda*, *apali*, *peicha*, and all of that. A lot of people look for me because of that. A lot of people know me and they look for me because they know that I have different stuff. ... Sometimes, Asian people bring me seeds. They tell me to leave one or two plants so they can produce seeds, and I can plant again next year, and that's what I do. I save different kinds of seeds. I don't even have them labeled because I'm the only one who knows it. My husband doesn't know anything.

Seed saving exemplifies a key tenant of food sovereignty: to keep a closed resource loop as much as possible in order to reduce dependence on agribusiness firms, therefore democratizing control over the food system. The industrial food system ties farmers to particular practices, crops, and market relationships. By seeking sovereignty over their food production and consumption, immigrant farmers are empowered to make their own decisions concerning what crop varieties to plant and eat. While they are limited in how much they can afford to disengage from industrial-scale agribusiness as a whole, they are still engaging in creating oppositional agrarian spaces (Trauger 2017).

Mateo, a farmer in California introduced in chapter 4, acknowledged that no matter how much experience one has, farming is always a struggle. Yet, at the end of the day, he told me, it is important to love what you do and feel committed to the practice. Mateo was part of one of the first graduating classes from ALBA and is focused on making a profit, but is clear





**Figure 5.3**  
Dried beans sold by a Latino/a farmer at a farmers market in California.

that concentrating on income has to be in balance with a way of life that fulfills his farming goals. “I like the life [of a farmer]. I don’t necessarily recommend it. You have to love agriculture. You need to love farming more than you love money. One of the first things is that you have to love this. You can’t do it for the money—that is part of farming. You get married two times—you are married to farming. You have to love it.”

When I asked Mateo why he grows mixed vegetables instead of berries, like the majority of farmers in his region, he responded similarly to Diego above. It is more than an economic venture; it is also about a way of living—a theme I explored more in chapter 4. He told me, “It is more expensive to grow strawberries, more labor. Vegetables are a more open market—people eat more of them. It costs less, less stress, less technical [than berries]. Vegetables are more peaceful, it is less pressure. Less difficult for me. I earn less for vegetables, but it is a better life for me.”

While profit is important, spending his time growing food in a way that feels satisfying is a large part of why he stays in agriculture. It is not simply





**Figure 5.4**

Diverse varieties of greens on a Latino/a farm in Virginia's "Black Dirt" region.

a business, but also a way of life. Now that he has control over his own labor and time, he wants to spend it in a way that feels valuable to him, not only to reproduce the same system he labored in as a farmworker. This reclaiming of his own time and labor along with agricultural space represents a shift away from an imposed industrial food system, and toward one where immigrants and workers are deciding what to produce as well as consume. As he points out, though, the way he chooses to farm can require more labor, and that labor is often expected of farmers' families and close community. The complexities of labor and tensions between capitalist and alternative forms of production is the topic to which I now turn.

### Tensions of Labor, Scale, and Sustainability

As I have discussed throughout this book, immigrant farmers in this study generally prefer to maintain mid- to small-scale production, including diverse crop systems, and direct and local sales of their products. For immigrant farmers, maintaining a relatively small-scale farm and avoiding industrial growing techniques, such as monocropping and nonorganic inputs, is clearly related to sustaining a primarily family-based workforce. As I reviewed in chapter 4, the choice to not use noxious pesticides and insecticides was partially motivated by the fact that they regularly have family present on the farm. Conversely, it is only by remaining smaller scale that they can avoid hiring nonfamily labor.

Wells's (1996) research shows that Mexican farmers in the United States (in comparison to Japanese and white farmers) were more likely to emphasize the importance of family labor as a key to farming success. She credits this difference largely to Mexican farmers' lack of economic resources and the simultaneous wealth of available family labor. Close family networks are a form of social capital that immigrants hold, in contrast to economic capital. Her findings build on Alexander Chayanov's work (1986), arguing that family labor is crucial to the traditional peasant economy. I saw similar reasoning for hiring family over nonfamily labor, as relatives were available to them, and family connectivity was a cultural value that they aimed to reinforce on their farms.

Family labor, however, does not imply an inherently better or more equitable labor system, and by no means ensures labor justice on the farm. Research has shown that smaller-scale and organic production similarly do not guarantee farm equality (Shreck, Getz, and Feenstra 2006). Family relations vary, and unequal gender relations can be amplified in a family business, particularly an agricultural one (Feldman and Welsh 1995; Reed et al. 1999; Riley 2009). While some farms' laborers consisted of a married couple and their children, others included cousins, siblings, or parents of the farmers. As in any family situation, I can only assume there were tensions between family members concerning the division of labor and material goods. Although I did not interview individual members of the same family alone (I did interview many couples together), nor did I ask directly about gendered divisions of labor or sharing of profits, I commonly observed shared homes, meals, vehicles, and other material resources

among family members. Unlike hired labor, family members were typically not paid hourly wages, and farm resources were considered those belonging to the farmer and their families, and treated as such.

Some farmers interviewed hire nonfamily workers at busy times in the season. Others are starting to feel the pressure to scale up as they struggle to find local markets. Another group of immigrant farmers, as I discussed earlier, already farm using more conventional practices and regularly hire nonfamily work crews. For those who already hire nonfamily laborers, they employ other immigrants from the regions they migrated from, such as Jalisco and Michoacán, while others hire newer immigrants from more southerly Mexican states (more heavily populated by indigenous people), such as Oaxaca and Chiapas.<sup>8</sup> Frequently, employees were from a mix of states and regions, as the worker population largely reflected the general immigrant streams in various locations of the United States.

As for how they may or may not replicate their own labor conditions when, or if, they scale up their farm production and hire nonfamily labor, it is hard to extrapolate. Although many farmers were willing to let me talk to their workers, be they family or hired labor, I was not in a position to get a fully transparent perspective from those laborers, who were introduced to me by their boss. From their own perspectives as employers, immigrant farmers asserted that given their experiences as workers, they treat their hired labor well, and better than they were treated. Many argued that this was due to their understanding of what it is like to be in the employees' position.

Samuel, a farmer in Minnesota mentioned in chapter 3, is married, but his wife and four teenage children are still living in Mexico, so he employs his brother as well as a few other hired laborers. "One of the most significant expenses here in the United States is labor. It is not that we don't want to pay people, but we need to have a big operation to be able to pay them. You end up doing most of it with the help of friends and family." Samuel was clear about the need to respect and recognize the contributions of those who work for him, yet honest about his limitations in paying them well for the time they provided, saying, "I think that when you start from the bottom, you understand the problems and the process. I think that it is important to realize that if you grew up in the fields, you know the conditions. You also know when people treated you good or bad. You need to treat your workers well; they are the ones who are helping you."

As he explains, from his former experience as a hired worker, he takes seriously his own dependence on his laborers and aims to be a better employer. Rodolfo, an orchardist in Washington mentioned in chapter 3, made a similar argument. Unlike many immigrant farmers, he has experience working in cities as well as on farms, and speaks English proficiently. He was able to buy his land after many years working on orchards in the region. He also maintained that his experience as a worker leads him to treat his workers better.

When you are an owner, you have to pay somebody to do the job. When you are a worker, you have in your head that no one is going to be better than you, and you have an idea of how much you want to make in a day. You know what you expect from each worker, [and] you can treat the workers better if you are an owner. ... We've been lucky that the people who help keep coming back season after season, and I think it's because we treat them well. ... We offer them drinks like Gatorade or sodas during their breaks, and that makes people happy. During the season, we make like a family party because it's the same people. I think that because we were workers and because we would have like for people to treat us like that, we treat workers well.

As Rodolfo states, he believes that because they have experience as workers, they are inclined to treat their own workers better. Many even pride themselves on their treatment of workers. Since they are also immigrants and speak the same language as their workers, unlike many other employers, they see themselves as more understanding of workers' needs.

Antonio immigrated in 2001 from Puebla to the Hudson Valley. Antonio learned how to farm from his grandfather and father in Mexico, and credits growing up on his family's farm as his primary training in agriculture. Since 2009, Antonio has been renting his land from a neighboring larger-scale farm and grows mostly for farmers markets as well as a few wholesalers. He farms primarily with his wife and one of their aunts, who also lives with them. They hire a few nonfamily workers. "A couple of people come when they have time." He describes their situation: "They are working, but I am not trying to push them like you have to finish this. You know, take your time. They can take a little break or drink water, use the restroom, do whatever you have to do. ... Some guys who I talk to, you know, I am Mexican/Latino, so I talk to them, and they say they [other employers] have them like slaves."

Actions like offering water, giving breaks, or hosting a party might sound like small gestures or trite offerings of friendliness to gain the loyalty of

workers. Certainly, it is not unique among farmers for immigrant employers to make efforts to build their personal relationships with their workers. Yet it is common for farmworkers to have worked under conditions where basic labor laws such as providing water breaks were not enforced. Antonio, quoted above, described the wage theft that is common in his region. He told me that although the minimum wage “now is eight plus. Most of the people [farmers], they don’t like to pay \$9, whatever the minimum is. They pay you \$5.15.”<sup>9</sup> Clearly the changes they are making are not revolutionary, nor are they significantly challenging owner-worker relations. Yet as employers, they see themselves as providing their employees a better work environment and decent, or at least legal, wages.

For many, being friends with their workers was a point of pride. Gerardo, a recent immigrant from Oaxaca who was introduced in chapter 3, farms in California. He talked of respect for his workers and the ways in which he valued their opinions on things from appropriate weather for working to the daily farm schedule. “I feel so happy because my workers feel comfortable with me, they feel like really open, we share opinions, and I asked them things like, ‘What do you guys think about the weather? Is it too hot? What do you guys think about working these hours?’ I work with them because even if they are workers, they have something to say, and you have to respect their opinions.”

Because of their smaller scale, farmers are generally working alongside any workers they have hired. Even on the largest farms I visited, the farmers prided themselves on being in the fields with their workers on a daily basis. Jesus, a farmer who owns orchards in central Washington and was first introduced in chapter 3, describes the difference between his own work practices and those of US-born farmers, and how being an immigrant and former farmworker affects his relationship with his workers:

Most of the first-generation [immigrant] farmers are over there looking at things, making sure they are done the right way, the way they’re supposed to. The guys who have been there for a long time or who inherit it, they don’t seem to care one way or the other, they just want that income to keep coming. ... A lot of the farmers who are not out there, they don’t care about a relationship with the workers, they just come and tell their manager things, and that’s it. They go and do whatever they do during the day.

He even pointed out that when he is working with the crew, he will be mistaken for a worker himself. He laughed as he told me the story of being

unrecognizable as the boss to new employees since he blends in with the other workers due to his race.

A lot of times, maybe half a dozen times, we get new workers, and we get people to help us all the time transporting equipment, and this and that. ... There was a guy taking equipment back and forward, and doing other things. After the fourth day, a couple of the guys who came to help us work asked the guy who I had as the boss [crew manager]: "How come the owner doesn't come in?" The guy said, "What do you mean, he doesn't come in?" "Yeah, he just comes and goes in the truck and never stops." "He is not the owner; he is just a worker. The owner is this one." That has happened half a dozen times. ... They think I'm just part of the crew.

Farmers' perceptions of their relationship to their employees varies, though, as some admit that camaraderie with their workers is more about strategy than friendship. I met Alonso, a stout middle-aged man, at a farmers market outside Seattle. His entire family, including the children, worked as migrant workers when he was growing up. His father started their farm in eastern Washington in the 1970s, although Alonso continued to work off the family farm to make extra money until he was an adult himself. When I asked how he thought his relationship with his workers differs from employers without his experience, he told me, "I think it is probably a totally different relationship. First, being Mexican and getting minority workers to work with me, I try to make all my workers my friends—that's the key if you want them to care. You can tell them, 'Hey that's not going to work. Or do this.' Being friends with you, makes it better. I think my relationship with them is better than, I would say, an employer who has sixty or seventy guys out there who he doesn't even know."

Yet closer relationships also create new challenges. As employers who share similar class backgrounds, experiences, and language, and are often in the same social networks as their employees, they struggle with how to determine boundaries. Rodolfo puts it this way,

It's difficult when you don't know how to distinguish friendship from work. Most workers are our friends. We have established a friendship, but they've started to distinguish when the friendship ends and when the work begins. You have to be more concrete on what you want and establish boundaries "I started paying you, and unfortunately you are my worker. You'll be my friend when I stop paying you." You can do that. Those who don't understand that, they are still my friends, but they don't work for me anymore.

Others were more direct about the fact that treating their workers well was more about the general procedure of doing business legally. Miguel, a Washington farmer originally from Oaxaca who was introduced in chapter 4, never completed elementary school. His oldest son, who was educated in the United States, now manages the business and marketing of his farm. Most of his farm work is done by family labor. He has seven adult children who all are part of the business in some way. But during the harvest season, he hires some nonfamily employees. He says this of his relationship with them: "If somebody breaks their foot, somebody gets injured by a tractor or a machine, that's also difficult. That's why I organize meetings with the people who are working with me. I talk to them about being careful. 'Take your time. Be careful when cars come near. Take breaks even if I'm not here.' Because the law is the law."

Miguel was honest that although he wanted to be kind and generous with his workers, he also feels obligated to do so by the law. In that way, he is like any other employer: following the rules regarding employee treatment is important to sustaining his business, and is not just a matter of being kind or generous.

Unfortunately, given their limited profits as small-scale farmers with limited access to markets, they are constrained in their ability to provide higher wages and benefits, such as health care and sick leave. Even with the best intentions, should they be assumed, immigrant farmers are caught in the same economic system as other farmers, competing with global industrial production and struggling to make ends meet. Andres in California describes feeling stuck in his position as an employer who would like to do more, but can't because of his limited profits.

I didn't like how they treated me in my other job; they wanted me to always move fast, and they didn't pay well. Here, I tried to help them as much as I can. Sometimes I can't help them a lot because I'm not earning much, but I try to do my best. Sometimes just by bringing water or soda, you make them happy. That is something that I saw at my previous job, because they didn't bring me like a soda or anything. I see that sometimes when you bring them something, they are very grateful. Sometimes I make a barbeque. I try to help them in what I can.

Certainly, moving up the ladder from farmworker to farm owner does not solve the problem of labor exploitation or structural inequality in any way. Although farmers may want to treat their workers better than they

were treated, they are challenged by the same market squeezes and struggle to profit as other farmers.

## Conclusion

Repossessing their own labor and the means to produce food empowers workers, as they strive to advance their class status against enormous odds. As I have discussed in this chapter, immigrant farmers have roots in peasant and indigenous communities in Mexico, who have been struggling against the process of dispossession from their land for centuries. For those who have relocated to the United States, starting their own farm is a process of reclaiming the means of production, their own labor, and some form of sovereignty over the food system, albeit on a small scale.

Reclaiming food production for immigrant farmers includes prioritizing family involvement on the farm, as farming is as much about a way of life as it is a business. Those who have succeeded in re-creating the traditional version of the family farm prioritize food consumption and a safe environment for their loved ones, as I discussed in earlier chapters. Those priorities, along with their stated goals of finding independence and freedom from industrial agricultural spaces as well as practices, reflect the core principles of the food sovereignty movement, which may offer potential opportunities for broader alliances and engagements among immigrant farmers and other formerly dispossessed groups of farmers.

Yet contrary to the ideals of the food sovereignty movement, and the stated personal values of the farmers themselves, economic realities may force them to reproduce their own labored experience by hiring nonfamily workers full or part time. Although their experience as workers informs their relationship with and understanding of the workers they hire, it in no way guarantees improved wages and benefits for workers or a more just food system overall. As one farmer made clear when I asked him if more immigrants owning farms would change the circumstances for workers, it simply “depends on the farmer. There are Mexicans who feel sorry for their workers and will pay them well, but not all of us have the same feelings. There are farmers who are going to say, ‘I don’t care about people, it’s just work and that’s it.’”

As far as shifting class relations, the workers who are able to start their own farms and join the owner class are just as vulnerable to market



pressures to save on labor costs as any other farmer. Agrarian capitalism creates a labor hierarchy, and although immigrant farmers challenge this hierarchy from the perspective of race, ethnicity, and citizenship, as long as they are competing in the global food marketplace, they are not in a position to structurally resist it. While immigrant farmers are good examples of cracks in the deeply racialized and class-based agrarian system today, they are still forced to reproduce this system to survive.

In order for a sustained resistance to these structures to change the daily pressures farmers feel, the broader alternative farming community, including farmers, activists, and consumers, must recognize the particular challenges that immigrant farmers face. Potentially the conceptual umbrella of food sovereignty could provide a structure to support immigrant farmers in the context of such challenges. If such a movement is to make deeper structural change to our food system, particularly in the United States, practical solutions must include creating incentives for white farmers to pass on agricultural land to their workers, strengthening market access for smaller-scale and more agroecologically focused farmers, and creating ways to make farming more profitable without squeezing workers even further. Without such systematic changes and strong alliances to specifically support them, it is unclear how immigrants and other farmers of color will maintain their small-scale and alternative practices—a topic I address in the conclusion.

