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The Immigrant-Food Nexus

Borders, Labor, and Identity in North America

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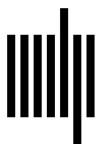
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9 Gender, Food, and Labor: Feeding Dairy Workers and Bankrolling the Dairy Industry in Upstate New York

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Introduction

Many dairy farms in New York State are located in predominantly pro-Trump counties, where “Hillary for Prison” signs line the streets along with the occasional Confederate flag. Before the 2016 presidential election, I was aware that dairy workers faced many challenges, including mobility in and out of the farms for fear of law enforcement harassment, but after the election, this already troubling landscape dramatically intensified. Two seemingly quaint little towns, the sites of my field research, increasingly became, at least to my eyes, overtly uninviting, threatening, and isolating places for immigrants to live.

Generally, dairy workers work up to 12 hours per day, performing tasks such as milking, feeding, herding, caretaking, and driving, as well as supervising other workers. Given the limited free time outside work that workers have to meet their basic needs, one of my main roles during my fieldwork was to take workers to the local Wal-Mart for groceries. Before the election, those grocery trips could last up to four hours. After the November 2016 election, the same trips would take a rushed 30 minutes because of the fear of being targeted by immigration enforcement. Nevertheless, I kept seeing the same amount of food in the houses and the same dishes being prepared; the workers were adapting to this change, becoming more self-sufficient by canning tomatoes, growing a larger amount of beans, and raising more chickens. Although these activities were present before the election, they increased substantially after it.

New York State is a leader in the US dairy industry and is the nation's largest producer of yogurt. A large segment of the workers who produce

the required milk are undocumented men from Mexico and Guatemala, living in farm housing provided by their employer and located on the farm premises (Fox et al. 2017; Hamilton and Dudley 2013). The data presented in this chapter are part of my larger work on labor relations and labor organizing among dairy workers in central New York. I started preliminary fieldwork in 2013, working with labor and advocacy organizations focusing on undocumented farmworkers. Through my advocacy and grassroots organizing work, I was able to conduct ongoing visits to over two dozen dairy farms for a period of three years. In early 2016, I selected two dairy farms as the focus of my research, where I conducted interviews with workers and farm owners. I've lived in the United States for almost ten years—for the last five years that I have been in central New York, I have spent countless hours looking for traditionally Mexican products and have failed at efforts to reproduce my *abuela's* (grandmother's) cooking. On a personal level, it was fascinating how I was suddenly able to visit geographically and socially isolated dairy farms and eat traditional Mexican food, food that never failed to make me homesick and make me feel at home at the same time.

Because of grueling work schedules and geographic isolation, male workers often are not able to take time to cook for themselves. Instead, they rely on the women living on the farms to fulfill that need, often in exchange for pay. Although the number of women who live and work at the farms is small, their presence is significant; it quickly became apparent that women's labor was a key aspect of the whole dairy production. For the last six months of my fieldwork, I shifted my focus to interviewing and conducting participant observations with as many women as I could. This chapter examines the ways in which women who live on two secluded dairy farms assume roles, primarily in the reproductive space (i.e., farm housing), that greatly impact the production space. Drawing on these six months of ethnographic research at two farms, I illuminate the role of female immigrants in providing not only food but also cultural sustenance for the workers, while at the same time filling a vital role in sustaining the functionality of dairy production more broadly by keeping workers fed and fulfilled.

I begin this chapter with an overview of the dairy industry in New York State, particularly the growth in production and manufacture of dairy products thanks to the Greek yogurt boom. I give special attention to the overall labor and living conditions of workers on dairy farms. I introduce my two field sites in terms of demographics, living arrangements, and productivity.

I then look at the ways in which women use strategies to mitigate the challenges in providing traditional food for workers as well as the pressures to provide food from workers' home countries. I provide snapshots of the lives of three women, arguing that through traditional food practices, immigrant women make it possible for workers to maintain a connection to their life back home. Simultaneously, these women are creating a new home place where workers create communities and sanctuaries away from law enforcement. Throughout, in order to illustrate how women explore different ways to re-create traditional food, I refer to Marte's concept of "food maps" as "perceptual models of how people experience their boundaries of local home through food connection" (Marte 2008, 47). I conclude that the foodways that these women provide serve as out-of-farm programs through which farmworkers can access food at no cost to the farmer (Minkoff-Zern 2014), and that these foodways serve as one of the main forces driving productivity at the farms. Under current conditions, male dairy workers decide to keep their jobs in part because of their access to traditional and comforting food, or at the very least because those foodways make the job tolerable.¹ Even though women are not referred to by anyone as workers, in reality their domestic labor is as critical as any other type of labor in making the farm function.

The argument that capitalism has benefited from workers' social reproduction outside of the boundaries of the working day is certainly not new (see Kasmir 2008). However, this chapter aims to make an empirical contribution to how this phenomenon presents itself in dairy farms in upstate New York. This research echoes other scholars' rejection of the assumption that the kitchen, or farm housing for that matter, is merely a place of women's oppression (Abarca 2006). However, the gendered politics of domesticity mean that at times the women themselves do not see themselves as "true" workers (i.e., on the payroll) and often think of farmers as *buena gente* (good people) who let them live on the farm for free. I hope that the insight into these women's lives shows the ways they exercise agency in providing traditional cooking and helps us understand their labor within the food system in ways that resist the gendered manual/domestic labor hierarchy that I, along with fellow scholars Mary Elizabeth Schmid (chapter 8) and Catarina Passidomo and Sara Wood (chapter 12) in this volume, are complicating.

It's Official, New York Loves Dairy

The National Agricultural Workers Survey estimated that in 2014 at least 47% of farmworkers in the United States were unauthorized immigrants and 73% were foreign born (US Department of Labor 2016). This dependence is the outcome of a combination of factors, including neoliberal policies in the United States and Central America, international trade agreements, and historical and contemporary state-sponsored violence (Green 2011). These factors have produced both low-wage agricultural jobs in the United States and a surplus of cheap and expendable labor from Latin America (Green 2011, 368). This is a workforce that encounters daily conditions of intense and growing precariousness, including low wages, lack of legal protections, intensified work hours, and inferior-quality housing. Studies show that in farm camps across the country, migrant farmworkers tend to reside in houses marked by overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and remoteness from health clinics, grocery stores, and public transportation (Benson 2008, 2011; Cartwright 2011; Holmes 2011, 2013; Quesada, Hart, and Bourgoi 2011; Saxton 2013).

A decline in consumption of fluid milk (Farm Credit East Knowledge Exchange 2015) and an increase in consumer demands for other dairy products have created a “yogurt gold rush” in New York State, increasing overall milk production and making New York the nation’s largest producer of yogurt (Office of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo 2013). New York’s yogurt industry started growing in 2007, when companies such as Chobani opened plants across the state (Cornell Cooperative Extension Harvest New York 2015).

Approximately 47,000 migrant farmworkers and their families arrive in New York State annually, some of them to work on dairy farms (BOCES Geneseo Migrant Center 2012). This labor force toils under precarious conditions, including exclusion from important legal protections because of their occupational and documentary status, 12-hour work shifts, dilapidated housing, exposure to toxins, surveillance, separation from their home communities, and harassment by federal and state police.² Because dairy farms adhere to a nonseasonal 24/7 production process, the precarious conditions faced seasonally by other migrant workers are encountered year-round by most dairy workers.

Producing and Reproducing on a Dairy Farm

Farm housing is a term and condition of employment. Housing farmworkers for work that is mostly seasonal (e.g., harvesting apples, potatoes, and berries) ensures that the farms are provided with an adequate supply of labor (Occupational Safety and Health Administration 2014). Even though dairy production is not seasonal agriculture, most dairy farmers provide housing for their workers (Fox et al. 2017). Farm housing is subject to regulation and inspection under the 2011 Agriculture and Markets Law and must also meet the Department of Health codes for migrant worker housing (New York Department of Health 2011). However, inadequate housing conditions are typical, including unsanitary conditions, lack of basic utilities, and overcrowding (NFWM 2014).

From over three years of fieldwork, I can attest to the overall poor and hazardous living and working conditions of dairy workers in New York that other scholarly works have explored (Gray 2016; Sexsmith 2017). Workers live near their workplace, with no need for transportation to get to their jobs. All the dairy farms I visited are located far from health clinics, churches, and grocery stores. The lack of public transportation leads workers to depend on private car services to leave the farms at least once a week to buy groceries, go to church, and so forth. Isolation, fear of deportation, not being able to speak English, harassment by immigration and police officers, and having no means of transportation accentuate the segregation and confinement of this population. Dairy workers report high anxiety and depression symptoms because of, among other things, their social isolation (Fox et al. 2017; Sexsmith 2017), yet leaving the farm is risky behavior. There have been several cases of workers detained by the State Police while they were passengers in private transportation vehicles.³

Dairy farm owners in New York have reported challenges and struggles themselves (Hamilton and Dudley 2013). Finding local labor has become more and more difficult, and smaller farms have started consolidating.⁴ To maintain and accelerate production, farmers continue to hire immigrant farmworkers willing to work under these conditions.⁵ In order to keep their labor force stable, farmers have to resort to different strategies. I argue that one of these strategies is to allow women to live on the farm, often without working in the milking parlors, so they can clean the houses, occasionally cover shifts, serve as company for the workers, and cook. According to the

women on the farms, this practice is relatively new; workers' anecdotes suggest that it started in the late 1990s. Providing male workers access to traditional food serves two purposes: it serves as a tool to keep them from quitting their jobs, and it keeps them safe by not having them take the risk of leaving the farm to get food.

Fox Farm and Valley Farm are similar in many ways but significantly different in others. Both are located in central New York, have between 1,200 and 1,500 cows, and employ 11 to 15 immigrant workers—mostly men from Guatemala and Mexico. Both provide overcrowded farm housing with a high ratio of workers to utilities and do not charge rent or utilities to workers, not an uncommon practice among dairy farms. Both farms have hazardous working conditions, such as lack of protective equipment when working with chemicals, exposed wires in the barns, and other dangers, and a working day of 10 to sometimes 16 hours. Finally, workers at both farms must abide by certain living restrictions that make it hard to access food, imposed by the farmer in order to protect their workforce (e.g., not leaving the farm in groups of three or more and not being allowed to have a car), and by the changing political environment, which has made cooking on-site all the more essential.

Feeding Dairy Workers

By focusing on the narratives of three women living on the farms, I offer examples of the limitations and challenges that these women must overcome to fulfill their roles. On both farms, male workers pay the women for the food they cook for them⁶; however, the farm owners do not compensate the women. Through these narratives, I illustrate how farm owners derive significant stability in their workforce in exchange for the labor of the women.

Bertha

Bertha⁷ used to work at Fox Farm. There are four separate living spaces shared by a total of 12 children,⁸ including two babies and one passing as an adult and thus able to work. Fox Farm is also home to nine women: two full-time workers, three part-time workers, and four spouses or family members who stay at home and don't work at the parlor.

Bertha is originally from Guatemala. She worked at Fox Farm for over five years before she married a white US-born supervisor from that same farm. After they married, Bertha stopped working on the farm and moved to a town 20 minutes away, but she started working in one of the farm-houses, cooking for at least 12 workers every day. Bertha and her two small children arrive at the farm at 6:00 a.m., when her husband starts his shift. Bertha spends almost 12 hours at her sister Belen's house. Belen is one of the nine women living at Fox Farm. She has three kids, and her husband works at the farm. Bertha takes care of the four-year-old child of Manuela, one of the two women who work in the barns. In addition, whenever Valentina, the other female worker, is called into work, she drops her newborn baby off with Bertha for the day. In a given day, Bertha must take care of five children, sometimes with the help of her sister, and cook food for at least 12 workers, enough for 36 plates.⁹

Each worker pays Bertha \$150 to \$180 per week for three daily dishes. They arrived around nine in the morning to get their first meal. Some workers stay in Bertha's kitchen and have their food there, others bring it to the farm, and others just take it home for whenever they get a chance to eat. I often participated in the eating as well. At the beginning, I felt guilty for eating her food because she never accepted any payment from me, but it quickly became clear that not doing so would be disrespectful.

Bertha often struggles to think of different dishes to cook. She said to me, "I just don't know what else to cook. I already did mole, I already did menudo... what else can I do?" I asked her, "Does it really matter what you cook? Isn't it good enough that you make Mexican and Guatemalan food?" Every time she answered me with the same gravity: "Can you imagine if after working all this time they come and get the same food that I gave them yesterday? They pay too good money for that."

Many times, I ate with one or two workers at the table while Bertha started cleaning up. I asked workers what they would do without Bertha, given their long work hours. Their answers didn't vary much. Armando, who works the night shift, said laughing, "I probably wouldn't eat [otherwise]... [It] is nice to wake up and come to the kitchen and have food that tastes like it used to." Another worker, Antonio, said, "One day I'll take you to the farm and you'll see the crap that the *gueros* have in that fridge, it's all Hot Pockets and blue drinks! That's all what the Americans eat! I mean, I

eat that sometimes, but only when I'm really hungry. I wouldn't be able to *durar* (to last) without Doña Bertha." At various times I saw Salvador, who lives next door, come and get his weekly tortillas from Bertha. He pays her \$60 per week and also provides a kilo of *maseca* for her. He almost never talked to me, but every time I saw him pick up his order, Bertha told me, "Imagine, how can he work *a gusto* if he doesn't have his tortillas?"

To a large extent, Bertha is able to be self-sufficient. She has her own house with her husband 20 minutes from Fox Farm. There she is able to make these foods by growing corn, tomatoes, onions, and beans, raising chickens, and she has a couple of goats. She also had approximately 50 jars with tomatoes to make her own salsa. These independent food-growing practices constitute Bertha's foodmap. Every week she asked me to bring her meat in bulk from the stores in Syracuse. I always asked her to come with me, but she never did, saying, "I don't have time. Where would I leave the kids?" Bertha and her family have their own car, so she does not hire *raiteros*, the people (usually US citizens) who drive workers in and out of the farm to the store or different appointments¹⁰; however, a trip to Syracuse would definitely set back Bertha's day.

In terms of economic gain, Bertha doesn't earn much from the food. According to Bertha, if she sold a plate for \$15, her earnings would only be \$5. "I don't do it for the money. ... I do other things for money, like child-care, selling phone cards. ... But the food is a different thing, the workers need the food," she explained. I asked Bertha if she knew what the farm owner thought of her selling food to his workers. She answered, "I know he likes it. He tells my husband. It is a good thing I do it, because he is very good people and lets us be here all day, so my husband doesn't have to worry about it. He also lets my siblings work here. ... He lets us [the women and children who do not work at the farm] live here for free, so the least I can do is to feed people." I asked Bertha what would happen if she didn't show up one day. She laughed it off and said, "The whole farm would shut down." This is certainly a valid prediction; without Bertha, up to four workers¹¹ would have to stay home taking care of their kids and wouldn't be able to show up to work. What seems to be even more alarming to Bertha, however, is that the workers would not eat properly: "Many workers will have to eat whatever leftovers they had from the day before, or to eat the awful food the *gueros* buy at the Dollar Store nearby."

Bertha's main role, then, is to prepare homemade food for the workers and to care for the workers' children, two paramount activities that in many ways ensure not only the dairy production but also the safety of the labor force. There thus emerges a clear contradiction in Bertha's description of her labor. According to her, the farmer likes that she cooks, and sees the benefit to his workers from this, but at the same time he is doing them (particularly Bertha's husband) a favor by letting Bertha stay on the farm all day for free and even letting her and her family benefit from selling her food. In a way, Bertha's perception devalues her own labor while at the same time recognizing that the farm owner relies on women like her to keep the business afloat. Because this contradiction is not unique to Bertha, I'll return to address it in-depth later in the chapter.

Camila and Estela

Camila and her husband, Eber, live at Fox Farm. Eber is one of the "best workers at the farm," according to Camila. They have their own living space, which they share with their three children, her sister Estela, and Estela's daughter. Camila and Estela are both undocumented, and neither works at the farm. Camila's family is not related to anyone in the other houses, so they often feel isolated from everyone else. They say, "It's just us here. We don't cause problems. Sometimes people here don't like us, but we try to keep to ourselves."

After their children leave for school, Camila prepares Eber's breakfast. A typical breakfast includes beans, eggs, and chorizo. As soon as Eber leaves, Camila and Estela start cooking again to prepare food either for the five children in the house, for themselves, to sell to two workers on the farm, for selling at a church event, or to take a trip to the nearby farms to sell to workers there.

I asked Camila why she wasn't regularly selling food to the workers on this farm like Bertha was. She said that Bertha was already doing that and that she and Estela did not want to cause any problems. Camila and Estela do sell food to the workers on the day that Bertha doesn't cook. When Estela first arrived at the farm (approximately two years ago), she started cooking for Victor, one of the workers, but had to stop because of a disagreement regarding money. "He said that he paid me, but he didn't, and he sometimes came to get his food when he knew I was alone. I don't like that," she

explained. Estela's sentiment echoes the larger issues of power dynamics between men and women at the farms, as well as the sexual harassment that women experience. Power dynamics and harassment are issues that are an intrinsic part of women's everyday life at the farm, dynamics that while not focused on within this chapter, warrant significant attention in current food and labor scholarship.

As part of this research, I was able to conduct fieldwork in Mexico and to visit Camila's and Estela's families in Guatemala. It was during that trip that I met Estela, before she arrived in the United States. I stayed long enough to observe the ways in which she and her family cooked. We made tamales and tortillas, and killed and deboned chickens, the same as I did with Camila and Estela at the farm in the United States. The similarities of these food practices make them truly transnational, even though neither woman ever articulated them as such. Whether in Guatemala or New York, they followed their set steps when killing chickens: first, pulling the neck out really hard so you would kill it with one stroke; second, dipping it in hot water for exactly five seconds, just enough to make the feathers soft without beginning to cook the meat. Through multisited ethnography, I was able to observe how culturally specific practices carried across nations are a way to experience and re-create their home (i.e., foodmaps), which are an example of what Mares calls "powerful ways to enact one's cultural identity and sustain connections with families and communities who remain on the other side of the border" (Mares 2012, 35).

As opposed to Bertha, who never let me help her, Camila was very willing to receive help. Once, Estela and Camila were preparing chickens they sold to a Pentecostal church. I offered to come and help. I plucked a total of three chickens in the same time each of them plucked ten. Given that I slowed the food production every time, I often quit the process and instead sat down, drank coffee, and asked questions.

One of their main sources of income is to go to the nearby farms and sell tamales. When I asked Camila why tamales, she laughed and answered, "What am I going to do? Hamburgers? They would throw it in my face." She also said the tamales are easy to carry and that they remind the workers of home, so they will pay good money for them.¹² When I asked whether the farmers let her come in, she said, "Of course they let me in, they have no women there."

I attended a church retreat hosted at Valley Farm,¹³ where Estela and Camila provided 50 chickens and several pounds of beans, plus hundreds of tortillas for approximately one hundred people, a large proportion of the central New York immigrant dairy workers and their families. One of the pastors told me that they usually hire women from dairy farms to do the cooking. He continued, "I don't know what we would do without them. A lot of people see the church in general as their family, so these events are really important. We need to make people feel like they are back in Guatemala, and the food helps." It is clear that the food here is more than simple convenience or satisfying a craving; Camila and Estela's cooking plays a central role in the community's yearning for home and in shaping their lives in the United States (Mares 2012).

I was often amazed to find things like chorizo, queso fresco, and corn husks in Camila's kitchen. I asked her, "Where did you get this stuff? I always look for them in Syracuse and I never find it." She laughed and said, "Wal-Mart! You are not really looking, Fabiola." She was right. I started to pay more attention to the "international aisle" at the Wal-Mart and started to see mole, *maseca*, and other products that other stores in Syracuse do not carry.

Camila and Eber have a truck that they bought under the farmer's name. They occasionally use it to get groceries, but often I was the one who brought Camila to the nearest Wal-Mart, to save time. Before the 2016 election, it was rare for her to ask me to drive her, but whenever I did we would spend up to three hours in the store, walking around, comparing prices, and running errands for other people. After January 2017, Camila started asking me more often to bring her to the store because she didn't feel comfortable driving herself anymore, saying, "I think there is a lot more police now after Trump won. ... I saw on Facebook that ICE is in the Wal-Mart parking lot every now and again." As a result of this fear that both Camila and Estela experience because of their risk of being deported, the trips to the store went from taking three hours before the election to sometimes as quick as 30 minutes since then.

According to Camila, she "borrows" the space outside her house to raise chickens and to plant beans. Not unlike Bertha, Camila and Estela have some access to self-sustained food practices; however, nearby stores are their main source of food. Not unlike Bertha, neither Estela nor Camila consider

the farm owner as benefiting from their cooking or their presence. “The farmer is very nice,” Camila said. “He is very good to us. He lets us live here for free. He lets us have our kids here. He lets us sell food to the workers whenever workers need it [meaning when Bertha takes a day off]. How does he benefit from that? In no way at all. Eber goes to work happy because he has his belly full of beans and knows that he is going to come back to some nice food and a clean house.” I asked her once what would happen if she wasn’t allowed to live on the farm. She said, “Eber [is] the farmer’s best worker. He would quit.”

Inez

Inez is one of the two worker’s spouses who live at Valley Farm. She lives there with her husband, Martin, and their two kids. In contrast to Fox Farm, there are only six women and three children living at Valley Farm. Two women work full-time caring for calves, two of them are spouses, and one is the mother of a worker. There are a total of 11 immigrant workers, including the two female workers, living in three buildings, separated into four living spaces.

Inez’s six-year-old goes to school, and her three-year-old stays home with Inez while Martin goes to work at 6:00 a.m. She cooks breakfast at around 5:00 a.m. just for her family and then starts cooking for other workers. Inez is the only woman who sells food to workers. She cooks for seven workers who according to her “are too tired after work to cook for themselves.” She doesn’t have to cook for more because the other workers have either a spouse, mother, or sister living with them.

Valley Farm is in an area with a high presence of Border Patrol officers, where there have been several cases of State Police cooperation with immigration enforcement to detain people. By providing food for the workers, Inez solves the problem of food access while also providing a way for workers to claim a sense of place in a foreign and increasingly aggressive place (Mares 2012). I often saw a worker named Ruben coming and getting his food from Inez. One day he made a joke about having to eat the same thing he ate a few days ago, “Inez, again, *caldo de pollo*? Didn’t you make this a couple of days ago?,” he asked. Inez laughed and brushed it off with a hand gesture. I asked Ruben if he preferred hotdogs and hamburgers instead. He laughed and said, “No way! *Caldo de pollo* twice a week is not too bad.” One night, I told Martin how lucky he was to have tortillas with every

meal—that *tortillerias* are one of the things I missed most about home. He responded, “To be honest with you, I don’t even think about it. I mean, I like it, but it doesn’t even occur to me that there will be no tortillas.”

Every other day at around 8:00 a.m., a vendor named Manuel comes over with a van filled with Mexican and Goya¹⁴ products. Manuel travels from farm to farm to sell products he gets from New York City or Boston; his mobile van is one of the main ways Inez is able to create her own food-map. There are some specialty products that the women, particularly Inez, buy from him. “You just can’t get these anywhere,” Inez told me often. Whenever I had the luck to be there when Manuel arrived, Inez usually treated me to a bag of Rancheritos chips and a Jarritos soda. I never felt comfortable taking them because of the high markup,¹⁵ but Inez always insisted. I asked her, “Why do you buy stuff that you can find in other stores and that he sells so expensive?” She answered, “It beats leaving the farm. Can you imagine? What if they [border patrol/ICE] catch me? What if they take me away from my kids and my husband? Too much risk, that’s why Manuel comes.” I asked Manuel why he went to the trouble of visiting all these farms instead of opening a local store. He said, “[This practice] is better for business...two reasons why I come here: workers don’t have the time to go to the store, they work a lot of hours; and workers are afraid to leave the farm.” I did not ask Manuel directly about his immigration status, but given his comments, I assume that he does not run the same risk of deportation.

As opposed to Bertha and Camila, Inez and her family have no opportunity to plant their own crops and no means of transportation, so she relies heavily on *raiteros*, who charge her around \$50 for a 20-minute trip to the store. Sometimes she would ask favors from the other workers who went to the store, although she would rarely ask me to bring her or to pick up things for her. “I don’t want to bother you,” she said many times.

Inez was the only person who told me specifically how the farm owner depends on her to keep workers there. Inez, not unlike Bertha and Camila (who supports Estela), lives largely off her partner’s income. Inez told me that she doesn’t really make any money when she cooks for the workers. “Listen, I’m going to be honest with you. This does not make me any money,” she said. I asked her why she does it then, and she responded, “The farm owner lets women stay in the houses so his workers have someone to cook for them....He told me that the guys used to leave because they had nobody to cook for them. He started asking

his workers why so many people left. They told him that [it was] because they couldn't cook for themselves. So, since the eighties the farmer started letting women and spouses living here so the workers would stay. This farm cannot be without women. ... That's how they hire people here. They look for young males, but even better if they have a wife."

I was surprised at how candid the farmer was with her, but Inez did not seem surprised by this. For Inez, the farmer's honesty was necessary for her to fulfill her role at the farm. I told Inez, "It's like you are a worker on the farm too." "I am not. I don't milk cows or anything," she responded.

Traditionally, farm labor organizers and scholarship on agricultural labor have overlooked the issues female farmworkers face. Though some authors have certainly highlighted the role of female farmworkers in the labor movement (see Rose 2008), there is still a large disparity within this literature regarding the roles of male and female labor leaders. Based on the stories presented in this chapter, it seems that a similar mistake occurs within the actual workplace: confining women to traditionally female-defined work, such as reproductive work, reinforces traditional gender relations that perpetuate vulnerability. According to Keiko Budech, studies have also shown that these women face a number of inequalities outside the domestic sphere, such as the gendered effects of pesticide exposure, sexual harassment in the fields, and domestic violence (Budech 2014,17).

As stated earlier, these gendered inequalities are not the main focus of this chapter; however, it would be a mistake not to mention that these women face several vulnerabilities that perpetuate the existing oppressive systems rooted in agricultural labor. It is not my intention to present these women as passive beings unaware of their own exploitative conditions. However, I believe that their gendered vulnerability plays a role in keeping them from seeing themselves as workers, or at least to talk about themselves as workers with me. Future research would benefit from gender-focused analysis of the reproductive work of women living on farms.

Challenges and Limitations: "It Is Hard for Us to Go and Buy Food"

Researchers who study the homemaking process adopted by undocumented immigrants identify limited income and access to quality affordable housing as the two main constraints for these populations (Hadjiyanni 2014). Access to traditional food, and even food in general, is an additional

challenge for dairy workers trying to find a place to call home and create a sense of belonging.

Both farms discussed here have housing restrictions imposed by the farmer, such as not being allowed to drive together to buy groceries (or anywhere for that matter), at least not more than three workers together. One farmer reasoned, "If immigration stops the car, it would be worse if they take more workers instead of if they only take one or two." As troublesome as this sounds, the farmer's logic is not wrong: there have been numerous examples of local police detaining passengers on their way to church, on their way to and from a city park, and going to the store. During my research, I felt the tension every time I took people in my car. On those trips, I saw everyone as a possible threat. Anyone could call immigration at any time. Even though everybody living at the farm knows the risk they take by leaving the farm, often I felt that my role was to protect them, to use my green card and my driver's license as tools when interacting with law enforcement. I have extensive training on what to do if I get stopped by a police agent; however, every time I saw a state trooper or Border Patrol agent, those horror stories came to mind. Given my own immigration status, I often did not trust myself to handle a situation in which the workers were protected.

Relying on a *raitero* is also risky behavior. A few months ago, there was an incident at Fox Farm where a *raitero* got into an argument with Bertha and ended up calling the USCIS, causing ICE agents to arrive at the farm. When that happened, most workers ran to hide in the woods. Fortunately, ICE did not arrest anybody, and nobody was reprimanded, but as a result, that *raitero* is not allowed to come back to the farm, and farm owners have become stricter with their housing rules.

Navigating stores like Wal-Mart is not easy either. Bertha is the only participant discussed here with enough English proficiency to go to the store by herself. Camila and Estela have trouble with language and have low levels of literacy in their own language, not to mention the unwelcome looks from the local, primarily white population.

Even though women have little capital and resources, social or otherwise, including the limited availability of traditional ingredients, they still fulfill their roles. Women create their own foodmaps as they map out the multiple locations they need to navigate in order to feel at home (Marte 2008, 47). The women presented in this chapter are constantly recreating

their own foodmaps by exploring and creating actual places to access ingredients and traditional foods, whether it is their own backyard, the mobile van, or the international aisle at Wal-Mart. These three women have different access to food, but all have to navigate their foodmaps in order to create senses of place and home for themselves and the workers. Somehow, within all the limitations they face, women at the farm get the ingredients they need to make things “taste like home.”

Making Dairy Labor Cheap and Keeping the Labor Force Safe

Male workers constantly emphasize the significance of eating Mexican or Guatemalan food. A worker from Valley Farm told me, “You see, we cannot go home, right? We miss it. ... It’s good to eat food from home. It makes me happy, although sometimes it makes me sad. It makes me miss my family more, but I get over it.” As the makers of this food, the women’s stories captured in this chapter show how they themselves must overcome challenges and concentrated efforts to sustain “culturally meaningful practices” through food (Mares 2012, 36) and in doing so maintain dairy production moving forward.

The women do not find selling food to be a lucrative business, but they often expressed pride and a sense of duty in cooking for people, making it clear in their statements that they know the significance of their contributions to the farms. All the women knew that I thought the owner benefited a lot from their presence and labor. They all felt flattered by my assumptions, and sometimes they agreed with me and sometimes they did not, often within a single conversation. Following acknowledgment of the benefit they provided the farm, I often heard contradictory comments such as, “The farmer is really nice; he allows us to have our own *huertas*,” “[we] live here for free even though we are not workers; he is doing us a favor,” and “He lets us make business here by selling our food without charging us anything.”

In order to have their labor force subsist, the farmers utilize the women’s role in the reproduction space, an argument put to the forefront by scholars of the twentieth century as a way to develop further Karl Marx’s limited analysis of the role of women in the production process (Federici 2010). However, in addition to the notion presented by Marx, in this case the farmer benefits in two ways. First, his workers not only subsist but are also happy reminiscing about home, which in turn makes them stay longer at the farm.

Second, without having to venture outside the farm to look for traditional food, his workers are safe and they get the food at home, costing the farm owner almost nothing.¹⁶ The food that the women provide can be thought of as examples of what Minkoff-Zern calls “programs that allow farmworkers to access food,” such as food banks or lunch programs, “which ultimately function to subsidize farmworker exploitation” (Minkoff-Zern 2014, 97).

These stories show how the ramification of women’s role on the farms is dialectical: on the one hand, it subsidizes workers’ exploitation, and on the other it protects workers from greater risk and provides them with not only comfort and community but also joy and emotional relief (Gimenes-Minasse 2016, 95) to both men and women who are inhabiting marginalized and isolated spaces. In some ways, these women are aware that the owners are engaged in a codependent exchange with them, creating the conditions of possibility (stoves, kitchens, where to live, etc.) for this re-creation of home and relative protection in exchange for their labor and sacrificed spatial independence. In times of increasing vulnerability, a complicated relationship is forming: culturally appropriate food offers farmworker women and men indulgence, opportunities to socialize, physical comfort, and nostalgia, and for the farmers, it offers a safety net.

Notes

1. Women play different roles at the farm, providing food as part of the reproductive labor is just one of them.
2. The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) excludes industries for which the work has historically been performed by racial minorities, such as agricultural workers. In New York State, farmworkers do not have the right to overtime pay, weekly days off, or collective bargaining.
3. See <http://progressive.org/dispatches/immigrants-face-the-death-of-a-dream-by-james-goodman-180206/> and <https://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/news/2017/03/24/arrests-follow-overnight-protests-at-boarder-patrol-station-in-irondequoit/99572000/>.
4. A trend that started in the 1980s across the country (Sexsmith 2017).
5. Dairy farms don’t qualify for temporary visa programs like H-2A. However, at the time this chapter was written, there was a Senate proposal to give dairy farms access to such temporary work visas.
6. With the exception of the women’s partners.

7. All farms and people mentioned in this chapter are given a pseudonym.
8. Children do not work at the farm but live there because they are sons and daughters of workers.
9. Three meals for 12 workers.
10. A 30-minute trip to Syracuse usually cost approximately \$100.
11. Belen, Valentina, and Manuela.
12. Around \$3 per tamale.
13. Fox Farm and Valley Farm are 30 minutes apart.
14. Brand of Latin American foods sold in many Latin American countries and in the United States.
15. For example, a 1.5-liter bottle of Jarritos costs around \$3.50 at Wal-Mart, but Manuel sells it at \$5.00.
16. Farmers do not pay the women for their work; however, by allowing them to live at the houses at no cost, they provide them with utilities and equipment needed for cooking (i.e., gas, electricity, stoves, cooking utensils, etc.).

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