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Concluding Thoughts

Julian Agyeman and Sydney Giacalone

From our first musings on the need for this edited volume, our central motivation was clear. The intersection of food, policy, and immigration was brought into particularly sharp focus after the November 2016 US presidential election, and a book linking these issues seemed to us to provide something that scholarship on food studies was lacking. Individual scholars had produced compelling and valuable research on individual topics from migrant laborers to ethnic corner stores, but these emerging inquiries into what we have characterized in this volume as the immigrant-food nexus felt like separate pieces to a broader, as yet unassembled picture.

While the chapters in this volume range substantially, they come together to link macro and micro scales: from large-scale policy conversations on immigration and food to intimate immigrant foodway narratives. To talk about immigration, we must talk about food. To talk about food, we must talk about immigration. Moreover, to talk about food, we must *listen to immigrants*. This emerging picture of the multiscalar immigrant-food nexus is pushing us, our authors, and our wider fields of study and activism to raise the need for deeper, more nuanced understandings within food scholarship and the alternative food movement. In the following sections, we discuss several of the common threads running through these chapters, threads still unraveling as we begin to pull at them, revealing knots and twists to be productively developed further.

Food System "Alternatives" Are Already Here, and Immigrants Are Leading Them

Recent attention to food as a political and social topic has consistently focused on envisioning "alternatives" to our current food system. Within

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the largely white, majority female, middle- and upper-class body of citizens most able to assert themselves visibly as "members" of the alternative food movement, there seems to be a general assumption that going against the conventional food system is a new concept, that the growing networks of "alternative" food production and consumption are novel forms of food system participation only recently imagined, attempted, and achieved.

Our volume shows this to be an overly simplistic assumption: there are and always have been a host of diverse forms of "alternative" participation within our food system, and many of the people envisioning and sustaining them are immigrants. Schmid (chapter 8) details the innovative collective strategies Mexican American women are carrying out to remain competitive within the global capitalist food economy. Passidomo and Wood (chapter 12), Alkon and Vang (chapter 13), Huang (chapter 5), and the authors of chapter 14[1] each demonstrate how immigrants are transforming the stubbornly static concepts of "local" and "authentic" foods to reveal more productive, real meanings and relationships through translocal cuisines in intercultural spaces. These authors, Minkoff-Zern and Sloat (chapter 7), and Khojasteh (chapter 4) break the mold of addressing immigrants within the food system as solely field or restaurant workers earning the minimum or a below-minimum wage, instead showing immigrants as creative farmers and business owners successfully and imaginatively (re)molding industry norms on their own terms.

These narratives represent a clarion call to food policy leaders and actors within the alternative food movement to pay more attention to those already productively and innovatively acting out alternatives through their daily practices. It is of paramount importance to recognize the gendered positionalities of many of these key actors; immigrant women take center stage in so many of these narratives. Likewise, transnational positionality is key: immigrants are using their transnational metaknowledge to conceptualize what "alternatives" within our capitalist food economy actually look like. These immigrants' forms of food system participation are in many ways more true "alternatives" than the emerging prescriptions of much of the "alternative food movement" in that they actually provide truly alternative modes of exchange and relation between people and food while also disrupting traditional power hierarchies in food leadership along gender and citizenship lines.

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Food as Performance, Joy, and Emotion

A second thread running through this volume concerns the complexity of the relationship between emotion and food. Our chapters resist the monolithic portrayal of immigrant experience with food as one of scarcity while also resisting the tokenistic portrayal of immigrant foodways as existing in a bubble of cultural celebration. Rather, we see the way food plays a vital role in the emotional experience of immigrants navigating moments of togetherness, separation, joy, fear, and determination. Ortiz Valdez (chapter 9) shows women and men on New York dairy farms experiencing joy and belonging through food at the very time they are experiencing increasing food insecurity and fear for their physical well-being due to increasing stares from locals and a heavier ICE presence. The authors of chapter 14 detail how, while dealing with depression and anxiety, Lula found comfort in the intercultural bonds she made while cooking in the CLiCK kitchen. Curtis (chapter 1) reveals how small community acts of care toward sequestered, undocumented farmworkers can be radical forms of resistance to an increasingly militaristic state. Within conditions structured to be inhospitable, even unlivable, “these embattled communities are seedbeds for the regeneration of democratic practices, energies, values and visions. And it is perhaps in such locations that the social webs critical to farmworker demands for justice are being woven” (Curtis, chapter 1).

Immigrants use food as a way to perform their transnational identities and ongoing relationships with faraway people and places. With the increasing trauma felt by immigrant families in the United States today—family separation and indefinite detention at the border continue as we write this—these performances through food reveal themselves as a way immigrants are practicing radical self-care. To truly take on immigrant food nexus within food system studies and reform, activists and policymakers must directly recognize mental health as an area of paramount importance in conversations about what food means in the daily lived experiences of immigrants.

Culturally “Appropriate” Food Is Complex

Recent food scholarship holds up access to culturally appropriate foods as one of the highest ideals in food system thinking. While this volume likewise celebrates culturally meaningful foods and the benefits they provide

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to immigrant communities, many of these chapters push us to complicate the simplistic idealization of the concept.

Within scholarship and policy initiatives on access to culturally appropriate foods, there is often evidence of a white spatial imaginary:[2] "neutral" (read: white) foods are taken as the most common and accessible foods, while "other" foods (read: foods associated with people of color) are taken as the exception, the exotic or authentic but not the usual or commonplace.

Several of our chapters disrupt what may be better described as a spatioculinary imaginary. In Passidomo and Wood's chapter, Argentina, the owner of La Sabrosita Bakery, states, "Here in Richmond, I don't think we missed any of the food from our country. We looked for other foods just to have a variation but any food that we want to have is here because I see it here in the bakery." In a historically southern city where it may seem logical to assume the Latinx community would have difficulty accessing Latinx foods, Argentina paints a picture of abundance of access and intercultural relationships formed through her El Salvadoran recipes. Likewise, Alkon and Vang, Khojasteh, and the authors of chapter 14 demonstrate scenes and relationships saturated with culturally meaningful foods that are not exotic or a rare find but rather the normal everyday way food is experienced and performed.

These chapters also ask us to question exactly what culturally appropriate food is, who defines it, and where one may find it. Common narratives within the alternative food movement and more critical scholarly and political initiatives include the assumption that these foods are made from "traditional" ingredients, found in small ethnic corner stores or grown at home, and not the "standard" ingredients popular in either big box stores or popular alternative points of sale, such as urban farmers markets. These common narratives prove to be a limiting and often false way to understand what constitutes cultural foodways in many immigrants' lives. Ortiz Valdez shows that the point of sale that makes chorizo, queso fresco, and corn husks accessible to women on rural New York dairy farms is not some ethnic market or local vendor but instead the Wal-Mart international aisle. The authors of chapter 14 show hybridity in the classification of "traditional" foods within everyday food economies: kale, apples, and vegan cheese become "Mexi-gan" quesadillas. Several authors show how food can take on cultural meaning by way of the techniques and labor put into making it: women follow Guatemalan steps of plucking a chicken in New York (Ortiz Valdez), and a lasagna becomes Hmong through the hands that make

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it (Alkon and Vang). In this way, hybridity and adaptation both fuel and deepen the rich meanings of immigrant foodways just as importantly as tradition and connection to past homes and lives.

Finally, these chapters reveal that immigrants' access to culturally appropriate foodways is embedded within complicated power hierarchies. Joassart-Marcelli and Bosco (chapter 3) detail how ethnic food is taking on both meanings of community belonging and meanings of foodie status and tokenized authenticity within gentrification. The analyses of Linton (chapter 10) and Minkoff-Zern and Sloat provide historical contexts to how US and Canadian narratives of immigrant farmers and the foods they cultivate—even within "inclusive" government programs—have always racialized, exoticized, and labeled immigrants and their foodways as "other," and continue to do so. Ortiz Valdez asks us to consider these historical power hierarchies within current anti-immigrant sentiment: how can we acknowledge the mental health benefits farmworkers and their families gain from access to culturally meaningful food, but also acknowledge that the context of this access is increasingly secluding this already marginalized community onto the farm?

Conversations about Immigration, Food, and Change

It is important that we remain wary of the assertion that the current climate of anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiment is particularly "new" or will certainly inspire progressive action toward change. Minkoff-Zern and Sloat, Curtis, and Linton add to the already significant body of literature on the ways food has always been a racial project, a tool through which colonialism, racism, and xenophobia operate. Neubert (chapter 2) provides a particularly timely analysis of these dynamics at play today, urging us to question how the concepts of agricultural success, environmental protection, and thriving food economies have been and continue to be mobilized as coded concepts embedded with racial hierarchies of labor and power over a community's self-determination.

With this context in mind, what lessons can we take from this volume that may help these conversations lead to real forms of change rather than perpetuating temporary attention and continued structural, physical, and emotional violence toward immigrants?

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Research on the Immigrant and the Employer

With the increasing importance of critical scholarship on immigration, this volume points to a research area that deserves particular attention: immigrants and their employers. Several of our authors point to how recent anti-immigrant sentiment and policy has thrown these relationships into new territory. Ortiz Valdez presents a growing reality on many US farms; anti-immigrant policies and ICE violence force immigrant laborers to stay further confined on the farm and force their employers to implement new ways of keeping their laborers on the farm, increasing the paternalistic relationship they have to these people but also becoming increasingly dependent on their choice to stay. Dentzman and Mindes (chapter 6) show that with increasing herbicide resistance, grain farmers are grappling with the increasing shortage of immigrant laborers in the United States, which previously was an issue felt less by the grain industry than its fresh fruit and vegetable counterparts. Minkoff-Zern and Sloat, Schmid, Joassart-Marcelli and Bosco, Khojasteh, and Passidomo and Wood all discuss situations in which employers are themselves immigrants, hiring workers that include other immigrants.

With the recent rise of anti-immigrant sentiment, policies, and enforcement tactics, it is critical to study the relationships between immigrants and employers to assess how the industries that rely on immigrant labor respond to this political climate. Will this be in the ways they historically have—behind closed doors, through lobbying, and nearly always in order to continue to subsidize their profits through immigrant labor and cultural capital, or in ways that speak to newly humanizing alliances, such as the Restaurant Opportunities Center United (ROCU), which advocates for “high road” policies, resulting in employers speaking vocally for the rights of immigrants’ presence, fair payment, and protections in the United States and Canada?

Tangible Policy Implications

Our authors point to tangible policy implications that may push for these new types of alliances. Joassart-Marcelli and Bosco, and Khojasteh, tell stories of the intertwined relationship between urban gentrification and capitalized immigrant foodways. Khojasteh expertly points to a gap that this shows in many cities’ recent assertions of themselves as “sanctuary cities”: simply protecting immigrants from ICE actions through the sanctuary city

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label, mayors are being reactive rather than proactive in considering what the immigrant experience is or could be in their city. Taking an immigrant-food nexus perspective, we might ask these cities, "So you're a sanctuary city, but are you actually a sanctuary?" The immigrant-food nexus speaks to how generative the area of food could be for mayors to enact progressive policies (such as immigrant use of abandoned land and agricultural spaces, and support for ROCU) that proactively build the belonging of immigrants into the city's political and economic conversations and spaces.

Ostenso, Dring, and Wittman (chapter 11) point to the key to making these types of policies a reality in both US and Canadian contexts: food policy actors must recognize that a racial justice lens is fundamental, not supplemental, to their mission for food system change. Despite the vagueness on food and farming in recent US proposals such as the Green New Deal, we see numerous possibilities for progressive policies here: prioritize the voices and decisions of immigrant representatives in planning decisions on current and new local food centers such as farmers markets or city events (see Joassart-Marcelli and Bosco, and Khojasteh); bolster immigrant farmers' ability to capitalize on the local food economy by explicitly including the concept of translocal food in city and business local food narratives (see Schmid; Huang; Linton; Passidomo and Wood; Alkon and Vang; and the authors of chapter 14); expand available support for immigrant farmers and businesses with the express purpose of reducing barriers to their success embedded within national, state, and local bureaucracy (see Minkoff-Zern and Sloat; Schmid; and Linton); and finally, build state and city support for organizations that are already doing work in this area, such as ROCU, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, and immigrant-focused law groups. This should include the use of current popular local and sustainable food platforms to assert that immigrants' rights to *belong* and *thrive* are fundamental to what food system reform can *become*: a vital and growing part of a larger movement for environmental, racial, and economic justice.

Volume Summary

Throughout this volume, we have sought to show how a focus on immigration policy and immigrant foodways must be prioritized by the alternative food movement, food scholars, and policymakers. We have likewise shown that national conversations on immigration must become informed on the

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intersectionalities between this policy arena and all areas of food, from the field, to the restaurant, to the home. Our authors show the importance of humanizing, multiscalar, and comprehensive scholarship that resists the tired binaries that reify so many false narratives and incomplete understandings plaguing current conversations about the “place” of immigrants within our nations. Through ground-up narratives coming out of the immigrant-food nexus, we hope to catalyze more productive and transformative conversations.

Concluding Thoughts

1. These authors have asked to remain anonymous in solidarity with the immigrant participants of this volume, many of whom must remain nameless for their security.

2. Lipsitz’s theorization of the white spatial imaginary details the ways in which white Americans understand place based on years of living in illegally segregated spaces, creating a worldview that idealizes homogeneity and remains ignorant of the histories of discrimination and structural racism that have created such segregation (Lipsitz 1998).

Reference

Lipsitz, George. 1998. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

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The Immigrant-Food Nexus

Borders, Labor, and Identity in North America

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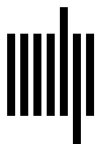

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