



PROGRAM IN  
**Agrarian Studies**  
YALE UNIVERSITY

# Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
YALE UNIVERSITY  
SEPTEMBER 14-15, 2013

Conference Paper #16

## The New American Farmer: The Agrarian Question, Food Sovereignty and Immigrant Mexican Growers in the United States

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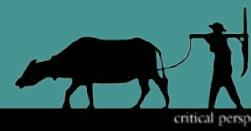
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# **The New American Farmer: The Agrarian Question, Food Sovereignty and Immigrant Mexican Growers in the United States**

**Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern**

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**Conference paper for discussion at:**

**Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue**

International Conference

September 14-15, 2013

**Convened by**

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## Abstract

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This paper draws on ethnographic research conducted in the Central Coast of California and the Northern Neck of Virginia, where a significant number of Mexican farmworkers are in the process of transitioning to small-scale family-run farm owner/operators, despite race and ethnicity based discrimination. Although they attempt to succeed as small-scale, family-run and biodiverse farmers, they face market pressures to scale up and grow less diverse crops, exemplifying the contradictions inherent in the food sovereignty movement. As dispossessed agricultural laborers turned farm owners, they challenge common notions of immigrants' role in modern agriculture, pushing the racial and ethnic boundaries of U.S. farming. This study points to new agrarian questions related to food sovereignty, labor, race, and migration.

*Note: This research is still in progress. Many of the interviews were conducted within the past two months and therefore have not yet been transcribed. Future versions will contain more detailed ethnographic information and direct quotes.*

## Introduction

Many “beginning” farmers in the United States are indigenous and mestizo Mexican immigrants, who came to the United States seeking work on others’ farms. They often come to the US with experience from farming their own land in Mexico and use this experience, as well as what they have learned as migrant workers on US farms, to transition to farming their own small-scale farms and market gardens. These farmers play an important and overlooked role in the burgeoning food sovereignty discussion, as they simultaneously reclaim the means of production for themselves, and also struggle with maintaining family-based small-scale farms. In this paper, I address the contradictions that arise in the process of Mexican workers transitioning to farm operators, in the context of establishing a more egalitarian and democratic agricultural system.

On one hand, immigrant farmers exemplify the goals of the food sovereignty movement, through which farmers and food producers challenge the global food system’s “deep inequalities in power” (Patel 2009, 670), as they transition from their position of workers to owners, claiming sovereignty over their own lives. Rather than following the day-to-day instructions of others, these farmers now have increased control over farming practices and techniques, as well as their own labor. They start their own farms with the primary goal of maintaining independence from their previous employers and their dependency on agribusiness wages, and returning to their former livelihood as farmers. In this way, they retrieve the means of food production, regaining the ability to make their own decisions

regarding food production, and reclaiming the “right to define their own food and agriculture” (Peoples Food Sovereignty Network 2002).

Additionally, many of these farmers fit the form of farming identified with the food sovereignty movement. They prefer to maintain small-scale production and do not aspire to grow their farm beyond a size that they can manage with family labor. Many use small-scale, low-input, and diversified cropping systems and prioritize growing food for their families and communities before meeting market demands. These practices are often representative of agricultural norms from immigrants’ former lives as subsistence farmers in Mexico.<sup>1</sup> Many immigrant farmers I interviewed expressed a desire to maintain this scale and farming style. They do not want to get bigger, want to continue cultivating a diverse cropping system, and do not want to hire non-family labor. For many immigrant farmers, farming is as much about a lifestyle, as it is about increasing their income.

Yet, these immigrant farmers’ quest for sovereignty is more a matter of survival than conscious resistance. Although they emulate many of the practices and values of the food sovereignty movement, they must become petty commodity producers in order to establish themselves financially in the United States and secure their place as farm operators. They are under pressure to scale up, grow less diverse crops, and hire non-family labor in order to compete in the market. As they transition to family farmers and escape their own role as laborers, they risk potentially reproducing the classically unequal class relation between workers and owners. What does it mean for food sovereignty if workers transitioning to owners must reproduce this system in order to maintain a prospering family farm and compete in the global food system?

Compared with more overtly political peasant and food sovereignty movements discussed in the literature, the farmers in this study are not explicitly resisting capitalist agriculture or current land tenure structures as a whole. Rather, they endeavor to use their agrarian experience and knowledge to escape their position as agricultural laborers and reclaim food production on their own terms, challenging an undemocratic and historically racist food system. At the same time, they struggle to maintain family-based and small-scale farms, they are faced with the possibility of reproducing the same class system they work to escape.

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<sup>1</sup> Although immigrant workers and farmers may come from many geographical and class backgrounds, including past experience on industrial farms and urban areas, the farmers I discuss in this article are specifically those that were previously from rural subsistence farming regions of Mexico.

## Case Study

This article draws on one year of ethnographic field research in the Northern Central Coast of California and two months of fieldwork in the Northern Neck of Virginia. The Northern Central Coast of California includes Monterey, Salinas, and San Benito Counties, is located two hours south of the San Francisco Bay area, and includes coastal and inland areas. The Northern Neck of Virginia includes King George and Westmoreland counties, is located three hours south of Washington D.C., and also includes coastal and inland areas.

Research methods include participant observation and semi-structured interviews with immigrant farmers and those that work with programs assisting immigrant farmers.<sup>2</sup> This paper is the result of preliminary research for larger project studying Mexican immigrant farmers, which is projected to span several years, including comparative case studies in New York, Michigan and Washington states.

In California, most immigrant farmers interviewed were originally from Oaxaca, Mexico, and moved to the United States in their early adulthood. The majority identifies as Triqui or Mixteco (indigenous), immigrated in the past ten years, and are currently undocumented. Most are renting land, and some are still working as farmworkers during the day, while cultivating their own plots in the evenings. None of them spoke English, and Spanish was a second language for many.

Some were transitioning to selling for profit after a year of gardening in a small community garden. Others were students or graduates of the Agriculture and Land Based Training Association (ALBA), a training program for farmworkers and other limited resource aspiring farmers in Salinas, California.<sup>3</sup> I interviewed staff at ALBA to get a sense of transitions that have happened over the last decade as they have been training farmworkers and others to become farmers. Although the organization does not keep detailed official records on trainees' backgrounds, one staff member estimated that three quarters of ALBA students farmed for subsistence or profit in rural parts of Mexico before coming to the United States. About a third to a half of graduates go into farming after they graduate from the program.

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<sup>2</sup> All research was conducted by the author January 2010- May 2011 and June-July 2013. Interviews were conducted in Spanish and translated by the author or her research assistant. I identify the Northern Central Coast region as inclusive of Monterey, Santa Cruz, and San Benito counties. Specific locations and names will remain anonymous to protect research participants.

<sup>3</sup> There are approximately twenty other organizations doing similar work to train immigrants and refugees to farm across the country.

In Virginia, I interviewed farmers that had emigrated from the Mexican state of Jalisco and identified as mestizo. They are all part of an extended family living in the region. They are mostly documented, and have been in the United States for approximately twenty years.<sup>4</sup> Most speak minimal English and Spanish is their first language. Many of them have teenage children who speak English. They have been operating their own farms for a range of two to fifteen years.

I also interviewed staff of organizations that advocate and assist low resource and “socially disadvantaged” farmers, including The Latino Farmers and Ranchers Association, the Rural Coalition, and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), all based in Washington DC. At the USDA, I interviewed staff that work in the office of Advocacy and Outreach and the Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Program or that had worked on the Hispanic and Women Farmers and Ranchers discrimination suit and claims process.

### **Immigration and New Agrarian Questions**

In this paper, I build on geographic and sociological literature on the agrarian question and food sovereignty, encouraging agro-food scholars and activists to better incorporate issues of race, migration and labor into their understandings of changing agricultural systems. As I argue below, these farmers challenge the classical Marxian capitalist trajectory, which predicts that the dispossessed peasant farmers simply become industrial laborers. Rather, my findings show that after laboring on industrial farms, they now wish to return to the land as farmers once again. These landed peasants certainly do not constitute a barrier to capitalist development, as the original agrarian question would suggest (Kautsky 1988 [1899]). In fact, Mexican immigrant producers in California and Virginia 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 1996). This transition demonstrates the potential for the food sovereignty movement to influence social relations and power dynamics in global food production, as workers are able to move beyond their race-based positions in the agrarian capitalist system.

The US has a long history of constituting citizenship (and related rights to land and resources) through whiteness. The earliest colonists utilized social constructions of race to justify the taking of native lands and exploitation of native labor in the founding and expansion of the country (Chan 1989; Minkoff-Zern et al 2011; Matsumoto 1993; Wells 1991 and 1996). Successive groups of non-white immigrants have long been depended upon to compose the

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<sup>4</sup> Some came before the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which provided many undocumented immigrants who had arrived before 1982 with legal status.

majority of the agrarian labor force. Farmers and landowners have historically taken advantage of racialized immigrants' politically vulnerable citizenship status, be it as documented temporary workers, undocumented workers, or even documented workers with relationships in the undocumented worker community, in order to deny workers human rights and a living wage.<sup>5</sup> Today, the majority of laborers in agriculture are undocumented Latino and indigenous immigrants, from Mexico and other parts of Latin America.

While the majority of US farm ownership remains white, while most laborers are mestizo and indigenous immigrants from Mexico or Central America, the growing presence of non-white immigrant farmers and other farmers of color forces us to question whether farming must and will always reaffirm historical race and citizenship relations. There were 55,5570 farms whose principal operators were of "Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino origin" in the United States in 2007. This number grew from 50,592 in 2002 (USDA 2007).<sup>6</sup> Yet, due to a compounded marginalization by racialized and classist legal structures, non-white immigrant farmers of color have fewer financial resources and less access to land, inputs, and capital than their white counterparts. In many cases, non-white immigrant farmers have been explicitly dispossessed of land and resources, due to their racial and citizenship status (Chan 1989; Minkoff-Zern et al 2011; Matsumoto 1993; Wells 1991 and 1996).

Kautsky (1988 [1899]) defined the classic agrarian question, asking: where do peasants fit into Marx's picture of the capitalist mode of production and progression to socialism? He asserts that the small farm is not only an impediment to the development of a fully capitalist system, but also that it behooves government and industry leaders to maintain small farms, as struggling peasants provide industry with a proletariat that will not revolt. In the research I describe below, the farmers discussed were originally dispossessed peasants from the global South, and are now struggling as immigrant agricultural laborers in the global North. Ironically, these immigrant farmers are part of a great migration of farmers from Latin America that have been dispossessed from their land by international food dumping, agricultural trade policies, and local land disputes, all a result of global patterns of agrarian inequality. These policies have been cited as a root cause of global food insecurity and the motivation for calls for food sovereignty (McMichael 2011, Patel 2009). Instead of presenting a barrier to the development of capitalist agriculture, they have been victims of such development. As these farmers reclaim their agricultural experience and shift roles within capitalist agriculture from laborer to small-

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<sup>5</sup> As an example, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Asian immigrants were allowed entry to the US so they could be utilized for labor in California agriculture, while full citizenship and land rights were denied on the basis of their race (Chan 1989; Minkoff-Zern et al 2011; Matsumoto 1993).

<sup>6</sup> These numbers do not tell us how many are first generation immigrants. This number is out of 2,204,792 total principal operators (USDA 2007).

scale farmer, scholars of the agrarian question must grapple with this challenge to our notions of agrarian structure.

Since Kautsky first made his claim concerning small-scale producers, many scholars have taken up his challenge to understand these contradictions in Marx's original conception of the peasantry (See Chayanov (1966 [1919]), Bernstein (2004; 2006; 1996), Byers (1977; 1986), Goodman and Watts (1997), Henderson (1998), and Mann (1990), among others). Bernstein (2006) argues that the agrarian question, in particular the agrarian question of capital, is no longer relevant, as the majority of the global peasantry has disappeared. He claims that an agrarian question, specifically of labor, is no longer related to a question of the peasantry, and is separate from its historic connotation with capital. He makes the case that small farmers today are not peasants, but instead, petty commodity producers, and should be termed as such.

In contrast to claims that the agrarian question of capital has been resolved, other scholars argue that the peasantry is not disappearing, but in fact, reappearing and remaking itself in striking ways (Ploeg 2010; Ploeg et al 2008; Goodman and Watts 1997; McMichael 1997; McMichael 2006). Rather than being reduced to historical notions of linear capitalist development, McMichael (2009) argues that the peasantry today "rejects the temporality of capitalist modernity that regards peasants as pre-modern, and the spatiality that removes and divides humans from nature" (478). As Miriam Wells' (1996) classic study demonstrates, the strawberry industry on California's central coast actually reversed the typical Marxian trajectory, shifting in the 1960s towards sharecropping, a purportedly pre-capitalist mode of production. These are not merely academic debates: recent global shifts in power over land and other resources (Borras, McMichael, and Scoones 2010) make clear that farming in today's world is more complex and uneven than ever before.

Agrarian questions, including those of land, labor and capital, are therefore continually important for those who wish to understand the future of agriculture as a food producing practice and social livelihood. The notion of food sovereignty follows these agrarian questions, challenging monopolized control over the means of global food production. Those involved in the movement for food sovereignty see food, land and water as human rights and argue for a full democratization of the food system (Patel 2009; Holt-Giménez and Patel 2012). The case study below cannot be described by any existing discussion of the agrarian question, as immigrant farmers straddle the line between agricultural laborers, peasant farmers, and petty commodity producers. This provides an opportunity to rethink agrarian questions of land, capital, and labor as we conceive of a possible movement for food sovereignty.

I argue that immigrant workers, who have been dispossessed from their land by the global system of corporate agribusiness system, are primed to challenge the currently undemocratic global food system by reclaiming land and their own labor and farming their own food once again. Additionally, they confront traditional race and ethnicity based class hierarchies in agriculture, creating an opening for US farming to incorporate people from a larger diversity of racialized backgrounds. Yet, these farmers struggle with the need to compete in the marketplace, as they try to maintain small scale and diverse farms, based on solely family labor. This article makes an intervention in the literature on the agrarian question and food sovereignty, addressing the contradictions that arise as we work to acknowledge the many ways workers and farmers are challenging and recreating the current food system.

### **Challenging Race, Class and Citizenship Based Agrarian Hierarchies**

In the case of immigrant farmworkers who wish to start farming, their race, ethnicity and citizenship status, in addition to their linguistic, literary and educational limitations, can strongly inhibit their ability to farm. The total number is hard to document, but estimates range from one half to three quarters of the national farmworker population that are undocumented (Bon Apetit and The United Farmworkers 2011). US immigration and border policy makes it nearly impossible for most farmworkers to enter the United States legally. Additionally, increased militarization at the US-Mexico border, and the resulting danger and cost of crossing the border, discourages seasonal migrations, and encourages people to develop stronger communities and livelihoods on one side. This increases their desire to find a way to subsist in the US more permanently, which for many, means using their skills as farmers to move up the food chain from farmworker to farm operator. Undocumented farmers are also ineligible for any government sponsored agricultural support programs, such as those available through the USDA.

Although regulations for farming, especially those regarding chemical use and labor, are important in maintaining humane and environmentally sound conditions for workers and consumers, some have been unjustly applied and interpreted to the detriment of non-white immigrant farmers (Minkoff-Zern et al 2011). In order to transition from laborer to grower, an aspiring farmer must go through a lengthy process of registering their land and business with the state. For undocumented farmers in particular, these processes may be more than merely intimidating; they may be impossible, as their status may prohibit them from officially registering their operation. If one wants to be registered to sell their product as organic, they must have an organic registration from the agriculture commissioner's office. In order to sell at certified farmers markets, they must also get a Certified Producer's Certificate through the commissioner. For most of these permits you must present your personal ID, tax ID and/ or

social security number. There are several layers added to these basic requirements, such as liability insurance, organic certification (through a third party), an operator ID through which all farm inputs get recorded (also acquired through the agriculture commissioner), and worker's compensation/OSHA registrations. In order to buy land one must also purchase a property title. All of these formal registrations require precisely the type of documentation an undocumented person lacks.

For those that are documented and able to apply for USDA assistance, not being able to read, write, or understand the required forms necessary to become established farmers in the United States can prove very challenging. Among immigrants that wish to farm, their language skills, literacy, and education level varies. For some, Spanish is a second language and they have had very little, if any, formal education. Others have completed elementary school, or even high school, and speak some English as well. Often immigrants that wish to transition from farm labor to farm operator have limited reading, writing and business skills and struggle to navigate the bureaucracy of the US agriculture system.

Further, farmers of color have been discriminated against by the state in the form of inequitable practices by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). In 2000, a class action suit was filed against the USDA on behalf of Hispanic Farmers and Ranchers that were discriminated against from 1981 to 2000 while applying for USDA loans. The USDA admitted to discrimination and this case is currently being settled via a claims process, where farmers are eligible to receive from \$50,000 to \$250,000 based on the evidence they submit (Hispanic and Women Farmers 2013; Martinez and Gomez 2011). National outreach for the claims process was conducted during the summer of 2013, via television and radio ads. Those who believe they are eligible are able to fill out forms online. Although they do not technically need a lawyer to file a claim, the process is complicated, and required a variety of forms and documentation. USDA employees I spoke with said they recommended legal assistance in order to properly submit a claim. The USDA, with the assistance of the legal nonprofit, The Lawyer Legal Action Group, worked to train and create a list of lawyers to help with the claims, but individuals still had to pay the lawyers out of their own pocket, a cost unreasonable to most small scale Hispanic farmers. It is yet to be determined how many farmers submitted claims and how many will succeed at receiving reimbursement.

Although some people of Latino and Hispanic decent will be reimbursed for profits lost through the claims process, most are not aware of the claims process or their rights to file as part of the suit. Those that experienced discrimination after 2000 are also not able to submit a claim. Even at the federal level, where the secretary of agriculture, Tom Vilsak, has claimed to be ushering in a "new era" at the USDA, another employee expressed that most of the changes to address

discrimination are equivalent to offering “coffee and donuts,” rather than getting to the root of the problem. In her opinion, the USDA’s claims of making institutional change to combat historic discrimination are merely rhetoric put in place to improve the agency’s image.

Although the claims process is evidence of an effort to improve race relations at the federal level, according to one former USDA employee, and some of the farmers I interviewed, discrimination often occurs in local offices. Local-level discrimination is rarely addressed in the national USDA offices. Of all the farmers I interviewed only two had attempted to receive services from the USDA. One farmer, who has 60 acres in production, was the only farmer I interviewed who had crop insurance, which he had secured through his local USDA Risk Management Agency office in Virginia. It took three trips to the offices to get the proper paperwork filled out. He does not read nor write and found the process intimidating and frustrating, as well as time consuming, beyond what he felt he could afford. Another established Latina farmer did not succeed in getting USDA help, although she had visited her local offices. She told me,

If you go an agency and you are a Latino person and you are a woman and you don’t speak the language, and you don’t have money, and you are going to an agency of the federal government and you want to find someone to speak your language, how do you say this? ...The government doesn’t want to help you. They don’t want to have a person that speaks your language.

As she explains, immigrants are made to feel their place is working in the fields, not in the offices of the government or in the management positions on a farm. Although mestizo and indigenous immigrants comprise the majority of the work force on US farms, there is little support from the US government in helping them to transition to a better paying or more reputable position in agriculture.

In addition to the challenges discussed above, for many low resource immigrants that wish to farm for themselves often work double duty in the fields; as laborers during the day and at their own plots at night. For immigrants that are undocumented and have low levels of formal education and English language skills, farm labor may be their only opportunity to save money to start their own farm, leaving them no option but to labor very long days to get their farm started. This is a particular challenge as they are tired from physical labor and must find spare time to cultivate their own field after their day job ends. One farmer describes this condition,

Yes, it is a little bit difficult to do all of this [start a business], because I have double work. I have work during the day and then in the afternoon I go to my own ranch... Yes,

it is tiring, but I want to do it, I will work hard... Sometimes one has to work many hours at one's job, and all day you are in your work and then at your land. This changes, sometimes you have to go at night and you can't see there. It changes the work, it is not very difficult, but yes, it is not easy either.

One farmer found that when his previous employers were angry when they learned he was starting his own farm. He had managed their farm for twenty-seven years, yet they were not supportive of his transition and started talking badly about him to other farmers. He started selling his own produce at the same market where he had sold on behalf of his white employer for almost thirty years, since his employer decided to stop going to the market and focus on wholesale. He found the other vendors were not tolerant of a Mexican farmer selling his own produce at the market. Two white farmers tried to get him ousted from the market, which he believes was motived by jealousy and racial discrimination,

I have had clients there for 25, 30 years. Regularly, for years, they have bought from me. I bring 200, 300 watermelons in the truck and I sell it all. They [other vendors] brought 70, and they couldn't sell them. It made them mad and they wanted me kicked out. The next year two white women tried to get me expelled because I sold a lot. So the people [his customers] started to help me, so they couldn't run me out.

These examples show how immigrant workers transitioning to farmers come up against institutional and individual forms of discrimination as they struggle to challenge agrarian social hierarchies. Transitioning from worker to owner in the United States currently requires facing challenges based on not only one's class position, but also one's racial, ethnic and citizenship status. This process of transition exemplifies the call for democratizing the food system made by food sovereignty activists. By nature of their subordinated status, and their actions to overcome this position, workers-turned-owners, are actively challenging the power structure in today's agrifood hierarchy. However, as I discuss in the section below, this transition also exemplifies the contradictions inherent to the food sovereignty movement's vision for a more democratic and just global agricultural system.

### **Contradictions in Food Sovereignty**

In addition to challenging race and class based social hierarchies, most of the farmers I interviewed expressed a desire to maintain a form of farming similar to those identified by the global food sovereignty movement, including growing biodiverse crops on a small-scale, using little or no synthetic inputs or genetically modified seeds, prioritizing feeding their families before meeting market demands, avoiding hiring non-family labor, and putting those that labor

to produce food in control of the food and farming system (People's Food Sovereignty Forum Final Report 2010). Although of course they are not representative of all immigrant farmers or workers transitioning to farmers, I found that in both regions, the farmers I met had these common goals. As many told me, their farm in the US is part of trying to recreate a "*recuerdo*" or memory of their former lifestyle in Mexico. To them, farming creates the opportunity to live off the land once again.

One farmer told me that she found life in the United States, "Very very ugly... Each person stays in their own house. There is no time. People live by their watch and there is a lot of stress." In contrast, on her farm, "It is a little bit like Mexico. It makes me feel the same. It is not the same exactly, but more free. In the city there is more pressure." She explained that on her farm she had the crop varieties she liked to eat in Mexico, could see views of her fields from her windows, and spent her days cultivating food for her family, which all made her feel closer to her home and family she left in Jalisco.

The farms I visited ranged from a small market garden (three acres) to the largest farm (sixty acres), with most varying between ten to twenty acres. When I asked farmers how large they wanted their farm to grow, they repeatedly expressed that they didn't want to get too large. Often times those that were between ten and forty acres stated they didn't want to grow any larger. Part of this related to lifestyle – they were working as hard as they could to make ends meet and did not see scaling up as a goal. Additionally, all the farmers I interviewed were struggling to sell the produce they already grew. Instead of aspiring to develop in size, they desired to find more markets for what they were already growing.

In California's Northern Central Coast, where land prices are very expensive, few immigrant farmers were able to live on the land they were cultivating. Most were renting land, either from the ALBA farm incubator program, or other farmers, and commuting fifteen minutes to an hour to their plot. In contrast, in Virginia, where land prices are more affordable, almost all the farmers had bought land and were living where they were farming. This was the goal for all the immigrant farmers I interviewed – to live and farm in the same place. It was important to then to raise their children on a homestead and teach them to grow food, as they were taught in Mexico. Although not all desired for their children to take over their farm operation, many saw farming as a good profession for their children, if they were interested. On the farms with teenagers or children in their twenties, most of the children were working on the farm full-time, and in many cases they were in charge of promotion and selling at markets. After watching their parents struggle to transition from farmworkers to small business owners, many of the adult aged children of farm owners expressed that they wanted to help their parents' businesses grow.

All the farmers I interviewed were growing diverse crop mixes, similar to the fields they cultivated when subsistence farming in Mexico. They were producing a mix of fruits and vegetables, covering the spectrum of food demanded by farmers' market customers. This included Latin American specialty herbs like *mora* and *chipoline*, produce varieties preferred by US food aficionados, such as heirloom tomatoes and little gem lettuces, as well as crops requested by other immigrant communities, such as Chinese long beans and eggplant varieties.

Their growing techniques include a mix of those learned working in the US and those from their home country. Although they discussed their farms as a place to remember or a way to return to their lifestyle before immigrating, they have had to learn new farming techniques in order to adjust to new climates, markets, and generally different farming conditions in the US. Many of the farmers, particularly those from very rural parts of Oaxaca, learned to farm with tractors and other machinery only after they immigrated. Some of the farmers in California received a grant based on their indigenous identity, to start a market garden, and through this grant were expected to grow without machinery. They had to argue with the granting institution to use the funds to rent a tractor – after many years doing manual labor they were interested in saving time and energy with a tractor.

One beginning farmer, a recent ALBA graduate from Oaxaca, completed his second year farming his own plot while also maintaining his day job as a laborer on a larger organic farm. He told me he combines techniques from Mexico with those he has learned in California,

Sometimes I use techniques from Mexico also, like when I plant beans from Oaxaca, I tie them up on sticks or wood, like guide for them to grow on, also the green beans, many times, sometimes... I plant cilantro, beets, everything... green beans. Often I use techniques from Mexico and California, I use both to plant. I mix them both.

Maintaining a specific form and process on their farm, one that somewhat replicated their livelihood in Mexico, is a way they establish sovereignty over their own consumption and larger food system.

Most of the farmers I spoke with sold primarily at farmers markets' due to the crops being harvested changing weekly on their farms. Being that their farms are small-scale and they are cultivating a diversity of crops, they are limited to selling in places where there is an emphasis on product variety. This restricts them to direct markets such as farmers markets or to selling specialty crops in small batches to restaurants and small grocery stores. None had started a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program yet, although some had discussed it. In order

to sell to larger wholesale distributors they would have to grow a more consistent amount of fewer products, which none of the farmers were interested in doing.

Yet, all farmers I interviewed expressed challenges to maintaining the scale and form they desired. In a marketplace that demands uniformity and large-scale production, most of the farmers I interviewed were struggling to find enough direct markets to sell too. The most lucrative farmers' markets are saturated with mixed crop and vegetable growers and will not take in more vendors with similar products. Although they are surviving at the scale and style of farming they preferred, they all expressed frustration at a lack of outlets to sell their produce. None of the farmers I spoke with expressed that they were considering a shift away from growing diverse crops, yet most were finding it difficult to sell all the produce they grew. Markets were the most commonly cited limiting factor in their farm businesses surviving.

Most struggled with marketing their farm in general, as they lacked the language and technological skills to brand their farm and garner the attention that many white owned small-scale farms do. The most successful farm I saw in terms of marketing was in Virginia where the twenty year old daughter of the farmers, who had been educated in the United States and was fluent in English, has started a facebook page and website for the farm. She also made sure they had attractive signage and business cards at the markets. She posts recipes and promotions online and is working on creating a client base that will support them at markets. Most of the other farms did not have anyone to do this kind of promotion, and struggled with fostering a client base and highlighting their farms among the other vendors at the markets.

In addition to growing small scale and diverse crops, all the farmers I interviewed were committed to growing using mostly organic inputs. Many of the farmers involved in this study are coming from backgrounds of subsistence farming, from some of the most rural parts of Mexico, where they used minimal off farm inputs and often saved seeds each year. Although none were certified organic, most told me they used little to no synthetic inputs. When asked why they did this, many told me it was more "natural" or "healthy." Some grew with low synthetic inputs because they could not afford them. Others expressed that after working in the fields in the United States they no longer wanted to be exposed to the pesticides and herbicides they had worked with in others' fields. Being that they hire almost strictly family labor, maintaining a healthy atmosphere on the farm is important to them. Their children are on the farm in the summers and after school and they did not want to see them exposed to harmful chemicals.

Their experience growing organically before immigrating provides many immigrant farmers with the knowledge to start as organic farmers by default. As one farmer told me,

Its funny, I am telling people all the time that my parents and my brothers, I have six brothers in Mexico, they are organic too, but they don't know that. They are organic because they don't have resources to buy fertilizers and all that.

Many said they are interested in getting certified organic but do not have the resources to go through the certification process. Others do not own the land they are growing on and cannot confirm that the land has not been cultivated using synthetic additives in recent years, which is required for certification. Furthermore, they do not want to invest in improving land where they are unsure of their tenure. Others are simply intimidated by the paperwork involved in the certification process.

Additionally, many of the farmers prioritize producing food for consumption over food for the market. This priority comes from their background as subsistence farmers and their desire to provide healthy and diverse diets for their families and communities, something often missing from their lives post migration. All immigrant farmers I interviewed stated that feeding their families the produce they grew was their priority over selling on the market. Of those that were just starting to farm small market gardens, they were unsure how much of their product they would sell in their first year of production. They would first make sure their families were fed and then see what was left for the market.

One farmer said, "For me, we eat it because we have a lot of products. They are for eating, and if they are really good, then we can sell them." Another farmer, who was growing a mix of native Latin American herbs and other crops common to the his traditional Oaxacan diet told me,

First to eat and we can see, if people want these plants [Mexican varieties], we can sell or teach them how to cook them, if Americans want to eat them too.

Even the most successful farmers I met with said making sure their family was well fed by their crops was their primary motivation for farming, while selling in the market came second. One more established farmer told me,

In reality, if we are to conserve our health, our bodies, and our children's bodies so they don't have obesity when they are young, is to return to cooking. Return again to our diet, to eat greens, squash, corn, seasonal fruits. I feel that it is time for change, time to do this.

Finally, almost all the farms I visited hired strictly family labor. Most of the farm business owners were a couple, who employed their teenaged or grown children and sometimes a sibling or cousin. Oftentimes more family would come and help during a particularly busy part of the harvest season. Many told me they would like to keep it that way – they did not want to work to find outside labor or manage the complications of hiring strangers.

Despite the fact that immigrant Mexican farmers are challenging class and race based hierarchies in agriculture and prioritizing small-scale, diverse, and low input agricultural practices, in order to survive financially, they must compete in the marketplace and this means it may be hard for some farms to survive growing at the scale and style they prefer. They feel the pressure to homogenize their crops in order to sell to larger scale buyers as they struggle to find local direct markets. The question of labor is always looming, as most would prefer to not hire outside their families, yet if they are to survive, which may mean to getting bigger, they may also have to start to hire some non-family labor.

The scale and form of these family run farms seems to fit the ideals and goals of the food sovereignty movement, yet their ability to maintain their farms is in jeopardy as they struggle to find markets and compete. The hope that they can remain family operated and continue to produce diverse crops will depend on their ability to find more direct markets and new ways to creatively sell their produce. The feat of starting a small family-run farm in the United States as immigrants and former farmworkers struggling to avoid large scale mono-cropped agriculture both defies the odds of farming in a US system that discriminates against non-white farmers and exemplifies the challenges of creating a democratic and sustainable food future.

## Conclusion

Immigrant farmers, whether they remain in the US or return to their home country, exemplify the complications in the notion of food sovereignty. Establishing a farm is a survival strategy, and a way to recreate life as they knew it before becoming laborers in the global migrant stream. They are farmers who have left their homes and are attempting to reconstruct agrarian livelihoods. As laborers transitioning back to growing, immigrant farmers are a unique group of farmers, finding ways to maintain small-scale family-run farms, and growing food for their communities as well as the market. In order to survive financially, these farmers will eventually need to make tough decisions concerning their scale and farming techniques, as well as their hiring practices. They may have no choice but to reproduce the same unjust labor system that they were victim to as underpaid and exploited labor, in order to compete with other farmers and make their farm viable.

Further, immigrant farmers are struggling to succeed in a food system where their identity, in addition to their class position, makes their chances of owning a farm very limited. These farmers, who do not fit the historical imagine of a successful family farmer in the US, are creating openings for farmers of color and other non-traditional farmers in the US. By making brown-skinned farmers visible at farmers' markets, in USDA offices, and other agricultural venues, they are normalizing the face of the non-white farmers, often in very politically conservative regions of the country.

This research challenges the existing literature on food sovereignty and peasant movements in that we must rethink how inclusions or exclusions are framed, and what this means for solidarity between local and global movements for small farmer rights and viability. Immigrant farmers in the US do not fit the mold formed by the current literature in that they are not actively or consciously identifying with peasant or food sovereignty movements, yet there is potential for them to be included in movement work. They exemplify the resilience of farmers and point to the need for agrarian researchers and activists to think about transnational people, as well as transnational politics, if a global agrarian movement is to coalesce and power dynamics in global agriculture are to be shifted.

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# FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

## Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has — as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework — barged into global agrarian discourse over the last two decades. Since then, it has inspired and mobilized diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways by various groups and individuals. Indeed, it is a concept that is broadly defined as the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. As such it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, biofuels, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labor migration, the feeding of volatile cities, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights.

Sponsored by the [Program in Agrarian Studies](#) at Yale University and the [Journal of Peasant Studies](#), and co-organized by [Food First Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies \(ICAS\)](#) and the [International Institute of Social Studies \(ISS\)](#) in The Hague, as well as the Amsterdam-based [Transnational Institute \(TNI\)](#), the conference “Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue” will be held at Yale University on September 14–15, 2013. The event will bring together leading scholars and political activists who are advocates of and sympathetic to the idea of food sovereignty, as well as those who are skeptical to the concept of food sovereignty to foster a critical and productive dialogue on the issue. The purpose of the meeting is to examine what food sovereignty might mean, how it might be variously construed, and what policies (e.g. of land use, commodity policy, and food subsidies) it implies. Moreover, such a dialogue aims at exploring whether the subject of food sovereignty has an “intellectual future” in critical agrarian studies and, if so, on what terms.

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[Dr. Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern](#) is a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Environmental Studies at Goucher College. She broadly explores the interactions between food and racial justice, rural development, and transnational environmental and agricultural policy. Her dissertation investigated farmworker food insecurity in California, with a focus on indigenous immigrant gardeners and farmers from Oaxaca, Mexico. Her current research builds on her dissertation, where she found that a significant population of farmworkers and other first generation immigrants and refugees to the US aspire to be small-scale farmers. In this work, she explores immigrant and refugee farmers’ role in agrarian change in the United States today. She has a BA from Cornell University in Sustainable Agriculture and Development and PhD in Geography from University of California, Berkeley.