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Cultivating Food Sovereignty Where there are Few Choices

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Abstract¹

Huertas did not begin as a research project, but rather as a grassroots effort to build gardens with Latino/a migrant farm workers on rural dairies in Vermont using donated materials and time. Over four summers it has grown into a larger, more organized food access project. In 2013, 23 gardens across northern Vermont were planted, filled with herbs and vegetables that remind these workers of home. In providing access to culturally familiar, fresh produce to a highly vulnerable population, it remains contextualized within the larger intersection of the commercial dairy industry and transnational migration. In this way, it offers a compelling lens to problematize questions of food sovereignty. The farmworkers participating in the project are geographically isolated and most do not have reliable access to transportation, while living thousands of miles away from family and friends. In no way are these workers experiencing the full benefits of food sovereignty. However, by connecting farmworkers with volunteers, materials, and the permission to plant these gardens at employee housing units, *Huertas* aims to address the disparities in access to nutritious food while simultaneously bridging the barriers of isolation and social inequities. Often characterized as a “nontraditional” destination for Latino/a migration, Vermont has seen a steady increase in the number of migrant farmworkers from Mexico and Latin American countries since the late 1990s. Despite the newness of this trend, the Latino/a population in Vermont has grown 24 times faster than the overall population in the first decade of the new millennium (Baker and Chappelle 2012). As the second whitest state in the nation (trailing only Maine), these demographic changes have not gone unnoticed, and the presence of these workers reveals the hidden dynamics behind Vermont’s iconic working landscape. Currently, there are an estimated 1200 Latino/a migrant dairy workers in the state. However, these numbers are merely estimates, given that the vast majority -- roughly 90% -- of these workers are undocumented (Radel et.al. 2010). For many, migrating to the United States became the best, or indeed, the only option as rural livelihoods and smallholder agriculture have been devastated in the wake of neoliberal policies like the North American Free Trade Agreement. Now in Vermont, these workers experience a great deal of fear, isolation, and anxiety connected to their presence as “invisible workers” laboring in what has been characterized as a “carceral landscape” (McCandless 2009). This paper examines the development and future of *Huertas*, an applied food security project co-coordinated by authors of this paper. Together, we question the ways the project and its aims engage with the concept of food sovereignty. The goal of this paper is to present our applied work in progress and seek feedback on a broader ethnographic research project that is emerging simultaneously. Through discussing the ways that our work complicates the notion of food sovereignty, we aim to

¹ This paper is a work in progress, please do not share or cite without the authors’ written permission.

develop an approach to activist scholarship that contributes to the autonomy and justice of all involved.

Introduction

Often characterized as a “new” or “nontraditional” destination for Latino/a migration, the state of Vermont has seen a steady increase in the number of migrant farmworkers from Mexico and other Latin American countries since the late 1990s. Despite the newness of this trend, the Latino/a population in the state grew 24 times faster than the state’s overall population between 2000 and 2010 (Baker and Chappelle 2012). Currently, there are an estimated 1200-1500 Latino/a migrant dairy workers in Vermont and the vast majority -- roughly 90% -- of these workers, are undocumented (Radel et.al. 2010). As one of the whitest states in the nation, these demographic changes have not gone unnoticed, and the presence of these workers reveals the hidden dynamics behind Vermont’s iconic working landscape. Latino/a migrants face a perplexing conundrum in their daily lives while living in the state, as they are simultaneously invisible in their job sites and hyper-visible in public settings.

Over the last five years, the living and working conditions of Latino/a workers in Vermont’s dairy industry have become more prominent in the state’s collective consciousness following a number of high profile events. These events include the death of a young farmworker while working with heavy dairy machinery in late 2009, the detention of farmworker activists and subsequent organizing around bias-free policing policies, and recently approved legislation that grants drivers licenses to all residents, regardless of citizenship status. This growing attention to the presence of these workers took a particularly interesting turn in 2011 when Governor Peter Shumlin went on public record about his views on migrant labor. He asserted, “We have always had a policy in Vermont where we kind of look the other way as much as we can,” the governor said. “I just want to make sure that's what's we're doing.” He continued with a matter of fact observation that Vermont farms simply “can't survive without workers from outside America. It's just the way it is” (quoted in Ledbetter 2011). This statement set off a round of contentious debates that have not dissipated nearly two years later, raising difficult questions about federal and state jurisdiction given that almost the entire state falls within the 100 mile border zone subject to ongoing surveillance by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Amidst these debates, Latino/a immigrants continue to experience a great deal of fear, isolation, and anxiety due to their status in Vermont as invisible workers in what some scholars have called a “carceral countryside” (McCandless 2009).

As the state’s only land grant university, the University of Vermont (UVM) has played an active role in research, outreach, and education efforts connected to the dairy industry. However,

most of these efforts have centered upon the needs and priorities of dairy farmers and other producers in the milk commodity chain, rather than the growing Latino/a labor force. Few researchers have examined the daily lives and wellbeing of Latino/a workers in this industry, despite their role in maintaining a vital piece of the state's, and indeed, the region's agricultural economy. The year round nature of dairy-related work, unlike many other sectors of agricultural labor, presents an entirely different set of realities, opportunities, and limitations for those engaged in this industry. The experiences, needs, and resiliencies of these laborers necessitate more thorough and focused attention from scholars, service providers, and advocates for food sovereignty and food justice.

UVM's Transdisciplinary Research Initiative defines a food system as "an interconnected web of activities, resources and people that extends across all domains involved in providing human nourishment and sustaining health, including production, processing, packaging, distribution, marketing, consumption and disposal of food. The organization of food systems reflects and responds to social, cultural, political, economic, health and environmental conditions and can be identified at multiple scales, from a household kitchen to a city, county, state or nation" (Grubinger et al. 2010). This paper seeks to operationalize this definition and draw attention to the role of labor within the food system through examining issues of food security and food sovereignty among migrant workers in Vermont's dairy industry.

Since early 2012, the authors of this paper have been collaborating on an applied food security project aimed at addressing the food needs of Latino/a migrant workers in the state. Now in its fourth year, the Huertas project (*huertas* is Spanish for kitchen garden) was propelled by Wolcott-MacCausland in her role at UVM Extension. This project was started in 2010 as an informal program to distribute seeds and plant starts to farmworkers living in rural areas of the state to increase access to more localized and culturally appropriate sources of food through planting kitchen gardens. Through connecting farmworkers with volunteers, materials, and the permission from the dairy owners to plant these gardens, Huertas aims to address disparities in access to nutritious food while simultaneously bridging the barriers of isolation and social inequalities. Through our work, we seek to amplify the agency, autonomy, and self-sufficiency of Latino/a dairy workers over the sources of their food, albeit on a small scale, by providing individuals and families the means to reconnect with their agrarian roots.

The participating farmworkers involved in the Huertas project are geographically isolated and most do not have access to personal transportation, much less public transportation. This lack of mobility entails significant consequences for accessing food, healthcare, education, and other vital services. Although these workers play a crucial role within the food system-- supporting the production of and facilitating access to milk and other dairy products-- their

ability to make choices about how and when to access those same products and other food items is severely limited by the context in which they live. Moreover, for many workers, it is the absence of food security and food sovereignty in their home countries that prompted them to migrate to the United States in search of work in the first place. Their lives in Vermont, and the underlying motivations to migrate, challenge us to reconsider what food sovereignty looks like on the ground and where the movement might be headed. Through describing what we have learned through collaborating on the Huertas project, this paper questions the ways the project and its aims contribute to and challenge the concept of food sovereignty, and how food sovereignty remains out of reach for most participating gardeners.

This paper begins by describing the broader context and history of Latino/a migrant workers in Vermont's dairy industry, outlining the small body of scholarship that addresses this population. Next, we consider the more national concerns of food security among migrant workers around the country, detailing the studies that demonstrate the striking inequalities in food access that this workforce faces. Through poignant vignettes, we then introduce our readers to a number of Huertas participants, offering their stories, and describing the impact of their participation on their household food practices and overall wellbeing. These vignettes provide the platform for an analysis of the interconnections, and the disjunctures, between our work and the movement for food sovereignty. This paper concludes through briefly outlining the ethnographic research directions that the first author will undertake over the coming years, with assistance and support from the second and third author.

Broader Context: Latino/a Migration and Vermont's Dairy Industry

In following the linkages between migration from Latin America and the devastation of rural livelihoods following the implementation of neoliberal reforms like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), understanding the transnational experiences of migrant workers presents a critical lens for examining the presence and absence of food sovereignty at multiple scales. As a result of NAFTA, scholars estimate that anywhere from 1.3 million to more than 2 million Mexican farmers were forced off their lands, pushing them into urban centers of Mexico and north of the U.S.-Mexico border (Campbell and Hendricks 2006, Patel 2007, Relinger 2010). While much has been said about the dumping of U.S. corn in Mexican markets, the impacts of the deregulation of Mexico's milk industry that was facilitated by NAFTA has received less attention. As with other agricultural sectors, these reforms served to flood the Mexican market with U.S. subsidized milk (Baumann 2013). The U.S. Dairy Export Council had a central role in lobbying for these reforms, a council that includes many dairy giants and smaller cooperatives that base their operations in Vermont. These key players are now benefitting from the labor of Latino/a migrants who had little choice in their home countries other than to move in search of work.

The dairy industry has long been central to Vermont's agrarian image and the state's agricultural economy is the most dependent on dairy production in the nation (Radel et. al. 2010). Like most agricultural sectors, the dairy industry in the state has grown increasingly industrialized since the 1950's, resulting in the consolidation of many small family farms into a smaller number of large farms with larger herds. The technologies and labor practices associated with milking have also shifted significantly, becoming more uniform, mechanized, and less amenable to small-scale family farming. Over the past several decades, the state has lost as many as 80% of its dairy farms, seeing a decrease from 11,000 dairies in the 1940s to fewer than 1000 in 2012 (Sneyd 2011). Since the economic crash of 2008, Vermont's dairy farmers have faced unprecedented financial and environmental challenges, including high feed prices, unstable milk prices, and irregular weather patterns. Transitioning to organic milk production has been helpful for some farmers, as organic milk demands a price premium over conventional. However, organic regulation does not include specific worker protections or benefits other than more limited exposure to toxic pesticides and chemical-laden feeds.

Across the U.S dairy industry, hiring Latino/a workers has become more commonplace alongside the mounting financial challenges of farming, and Wisconsin, California, and upstate New York have all seen similar demographic changes in the dairy workforce as Vermont (Radel et. al. 2010). As Radel and colleagues note, "The year-round presence of undocumented Mexican migrant labor, often at lower hourly wages than citizen workers, facilitates the ability of the dairy farms to continue operations and therefore directly enables the maintenance of the pastoral Vermont landscape" (2010: 190). Currently, there are an estimated 1200-1500 Latino/a migrant workers in Vermont's dairy industry, with the majority of these workers living on or immediately next to the dairy operation itself. As of 2005, as many as two-thirds of Vermont's dairies employed migrant laborers, with at least half of the state's milk being produced by these workers (Radel et. al. 2010, Baker and Chappelle 2012). Based on their study of Spanish-speaking workers on 293 dairies in New York, Vermont, and Pennsylvania, Jenkins and colleagues (2009) predict that within five years the majority of the dairy workforce in these states would be Spanish-speaking. These demographic changes will undoubtedly entail additional changes in service provisioning within the programs, agencies, and retail outlets that provide food, healthcare, and other basic needs to Vermont's residents.

What is unique about migrant labor in the dairy industry is that unlike most other agricultural sectors, dairy work is year-round work, rather than following seasonal schedules of planting and harvesting. Because of this, dairy workers are excluded from federal seasonal work policies, such as the H2-A visa program that brings apple pickers from Jamaica into Vermont and other states that depend upon orchard production. This differential access to authorized work in the

US food industry is reflective of the contradictions embedded within agri-food commodity chains. Organizations like the Food Chain Workers Alliance and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers have documented and challenged these contradictions, drawing attention to the fact that food-related jobs, from production through disposal, are often filled by workers with limited access to the benefits and protections associated with U.S. citizenship.

The majority (91%) of Latino/a workers in Vermont's dairy industry have arrived from Southern Mexico including the states of Chiapas, Tabasco, Veracruz, and Guerrero, though there are also workers from countries in Central America, namely Guatemala (8%). Most, if not all, of these workers can trace their ethnic heritage to indigenous groups, including the Maya, Zapotec, and Mixtec. Spanish is the predominant language spoken among Latino/a dairy workers, though it has also become evident that many workers switch between and combine Spanish and indigenous languages, especially in communicating with family members back home. While the majority of migrant workers in Vermont's dairies are men, a steady number of women are now living, and sometimes working, on these farms, and their average length of stay has gradually increased over time. However, as Radel and colleagues underscore, farm owners often view the presence of women on dairies as problematic. This is due to the substandard housing that many workers are provided, the fact that women are often not viewed as capable workers in barns with heavy machinery, and the notion held by some farmers that women, if they become pregnant, would call attention to the presence of undocumented workers, disrupting work arrangements with potential detentions and deportations.

In Vermont as well as in neighboring states, the food practices, needs, and preferences of Latino/a migrant workers remain understudied. The most relevant research for the project at hand is recent work that has examined the physical and mental health of Latino/a migrant workers in Vermont (Baker and Chappelle 2012). In their work surveying 120 Latino workers between 2009 and 2011, Baker and Chappelle found that a significant amount of these workers, 93% of whom were male, experienced anxiety and depression linked to isolation and fear of immigration enforcement, in addition to the physical pain linked to hard manual labor. About half of workers surveyed reported being in excellent or very good health, but overall, significant barriers prevented these workers from utilizing health services when it became necessary. These barriers were identified as a fear of immigration enforcement, language barriers, and limited access to transportation. Although working primarily in milking barns, widely understood to be the hazardous part of dairy work, workers surveyed earned a median wage of \$7.75 per hour. All were living on-farm, and most had utilities provided. Noteworthy is the high mobility of these workers, 50% had worked on their current farm for less than a year, and only 8% had worked there for more than 3 years. These findings provide some basic understandings

of the working and living conditions of migrant workers in the state to for accomplishing our project's aims and objectives.

In a comparative study examining outmigration from the state of Yucatan, Mexico and in-migration to the state of the Vermont, Radel et al. (2010) add an important transnational framework to the study of migrant workers in the regional dairy industry. In particular, these researchers are interested in the impact of environmental change on migration patterns. Based on semi-structured interviews with 12 migrant workers (10 men, 2 women) conducted over several years, in addition to interviews with service providers and farmers, these researchers argue that migrant workers are becoming an increasingly important part of Vermont's agricultural economy. However, because the great majority of these workers are undocumented, farmers have a vested interest in keeping these workers invisible. Key to this argument is the role of gender and how this impacts labor recruitment. With women comprising only 10% of the number of estimated farmworkers in the state, there are clear preferences for male workers and farm owners often view the presence of women as "highly problematic".

In an examination of the growth of the Spanish-speaking workforce in New York, Pennsylvania and Vermont, Jenkins, Stack, and colleagues conducted telephone surveys with 293 farms every month over a 21-month period in these three states (Stack et. al. 2006). These researchers paid particular attention to questions of scale through examining how the size of the Spanish-speaking workforce differed depending on the size of the farm, finding a greater increase of the Spanish-speaking population in bigger farms versus small farms. Large farms (300 cows or more) were more likely to have at least one Spanish-speaking employee (67.4%) compared to 14.5% for small farms (fewer than 300 cows). According to this trend, the study predicts that in five years 95.1% of large farms and 26.6% of small farms will have at least one Spanish-speaking employee. This data grounds their conclusion that across the board, the majority of the workforces on large farms will be Spanish-speaking within 5 years.

In what is perhaps the most comprehensive survey on Latino/a workers in the regional dairy industry, Maloney and Grusenmeyer (2005) aim to create a demographic profile of workers in the state of New York and understand how they perceive their employment situation. Based on interviews with 111 workers on 60 farms, these researchers found that overall, workers tended to be young (84% were 30 or younger), almost exclusively male, and did not tend to be highly formally educated (51% had attended only primary school). Workers also switched jobs frequently and 73% had been on their current farm for less than two years. Like in Vermont, a great majority (91%) was provided housing, and relevant to the study at hand, 74% had space

for a garden, usually provided by the employer. However, 22% reported that meeting basic needs (including food) was a significant challenge.

Collectively, these studies provide essential background data on the size, distribution, and challenges that migrant workers encounter in the regional dairy industry, in addition to some of the factors that lend to their resiliency. Through our applied work connected to the Huertas project and through future applied ethnographic research led by the first author, the authors of this paper seek to better understand, and hopefully mitigate, the tensions between a reliance on a Latino/a workforce in Vermont's dairy industry and the immigration reform impasse at the federal level. These competing forces entail significant food sovereignty and food security concerns for Latino/a dairy workers and illuminate the more fundamental contradictions embedded in our current food and agricultural systems.

Food Insecurity Concerns Among Latino/a Migrant Workers

While there has long been interest in examining the causes and consequences of food insecurity within the U.S., less emphasis has been placed on understanding how Latino/a farmworkers access food or how they negotiate the presence or absence of food in the household. Data on farmworker food access and food security in the New England region is sparse and no data are available on the incidence of food in/security among migrant dairy workers in the state of Vermont. However, researchers in other areas of the country have repeatedly documented the severity of food insecurity and other inequalities in food access among farmworkers, focusing mostly upon seasonal workers in states with long histories of Latino/a migration (Borre et.al. 2010, Brown and Getz 2011, Cason et. al. 2006, Essa 2001, Harrison et. al. 2007, Kilanowski and Moore 2010, Kresge and Eastman 2010, Minkoff-Zern 2012, Moos 2008, Quandt et. al. 2004, Sano et. al. 2011, Villarejo et. al. 2000, Weigel et. al. 2007, Wirth et. al. 2007). Collectively, these studies reveal that the incidence of food insecurity among farmworkers ranges between 3 and 4 times the current national average (which now hovers between 14-15%), with a disproportionate number of households experiencing "very low food security with hunger". Many of these studies come from the fields of medicine, nursing, nutrition, and public health, and provide a baseline understanding of the incidence of food security using a variety of tested quantitative instruments.

Of these studies, four in particular are relevant for the Huertas project and the connected food security study. Brown and Getz (2011) base their analysis of farmworker food insecurity in central California upon data gathered through the Fresno Farmworker Security Assessment, paying particular attention to the factors that create hunger, including capital accumulation, immigration politics, labor relationships, and neoliberal trade policies. A total of 454 farmworkers were interviewed using the Household Food Security Survey Module,

supplemented with data collected through focus groups. Of the respondents, 45% were food insecure, including 11% experiencing food insecurity with hunger. While this methodology is not unique in food insecurity research, their piece is instructive as it views hunger and food security not as natural phenomena, but rather as products of systematic inequalities. This analysis is informed by coupling the results from the assessment with Brown's long-term qualitative research among farmworkers in California's central coast. In another piece based upon this same data set, Wirth et al. (2007) add further depth to these findings, including data that proved that the prevalence of hunger was lower in the summer months and that overall, factors that were associated with food security included income, documentation status, migration status, accompaniment status (whether someone was living with a spouse and/or children), and the utilization of food stamps.

Basing their work in California's Salinas Valley, Kresge and Eastman (2010) report findings from surveys of migrant workers on food security issues, vegetable and fruit consumption, and expressed interest in growing their own food and obtaining nutrition education. Additionally, these researchers conducted key informant interviews with stakeholders and public officials about the feasibility of developing alternative projects to increase farmworker food security, including developing community gardens and creating access farmland for household food production. This study found that 66% of migrant farmworkers were food insecure, 39% had used food stamps, and 37% were already growing fruits or vegetables. Of those who were not growing their own food, 71% were interested in doing so. This study is significant because it goes beyond quantitative measures of food insecurity to identify the strategies that farmworker households engage to access food and the desire to pursue alternative strategies in accessing and preparing foods. It also gauges the receptiveness within institutions in the food system to provide the resources needed for these alternatives.

Based upon ethnographic work in the Northern Central Coast of California, Minkoff-Zern (2012) adds an essential perspective to this body of scholarship, arguing against the assumption that dietary health issues result from a lack of knowledge about procuring and preparing healthy foods. Rather, she claims that these views represent a limited view held by food assistance providers, ignoring both the nutritional and agricultural knowledge held by farmworkers and larger systemic issues that limit farmworkers' access to food including structural racism and classism. The majority of the workers interviewed by Minkoff-Zern were indigenous Oaxacans who had arrived in the past ten years and were involved in a community gardening initiative. This study's theoretical and methodological orientations are helpful given its attention to unpacking the ways that structural inequalities are embedded and perpetuated within the food system and illuminating the diverse knowledge systems that immigrants bring with them into the United States.

Finally, guided by an ecological framework, Sano et al. (2011) examine how low-income rural Latino/a immigrant families attempt to meet their food needs, describing both their successes and failures. This analysis is based on ten in-depth interviews conducted with Latina mothers over three years in California, Michigan, Iowa and Oregon, and is drawn from a larger study on rural households. The study found that higher rates of food security were associated with higher incomes, better financial management skills, legal documentation status, stable employment, available social support, and access to health insurance and home ownership. While these findings are not surprising, the ecological model that the study employs is useful in its description of the various systems that the mothers engage in feeding their families- ranging from microsystemic factors within the household to macrosystemic factors like federal laws and policies.

Together, these studies provide a useful theoretical and methodological platform upon which to build a long-term applied study of the food practices of Latino/a migrant workers in Vermont integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches. A key difference between the project at hand and these existing projects is that Mares' study (described in more detail in the conclusion to this paper) will take place in a geographic and social context very different from areas like California that have long histories of Latino/a migration. These different contexts will necessarily entail differences in the scale and scope of resource provisioning and food access. Also key is the unique framework that an applied anthropological orientation will offer to the first author of this paper, integrating a holistic perspective that is guided both by long-term commitments to the field and the need to produce useful data and findings.

The living conditions of Latino/a farmworkers in Vermont's border counties raise challenging questions about how to address food security concerns for this population, let alone potential pathways to food sovereignty. When compared to crop farmworkers nationwide, the average dairy worker in Northern Vermont has more financial means but is access poor, mostly due to significant mobility barriers. The lack of personal transportation and access to public transportation is limiting but more so is a realistic fear that visiting a food access point such as a local grocery store, farmers market, or food shelf could result in detention and ultimately deportation. From this fear, a food access system has developed that reinforces a power dynamic between employers and employees, depends on previously acquired knowledge about available food products, and creates opportunities for home food delivery vendors to prey on and greatly profit from high demand without recourse.

A 2010 survey by the second author revealed that out of 53 Latino farmworker participants in a Vermont border county, only 3.7% of workers report that they go into the community to

purchase food. The remaining 96.3% rely on either someone from the farm (employer, family of employer, coworker, or manager) or someone off farm that the employer pays to purchase on their behalf. Forty-five percent of workers report they do not know what type of food is available in the supermarket. Field observations reveal that most farm owners purchase food on their employees' behalf every two weeks. A Spanish-English food list with basic items is the most common mode of communication about food purchases and farmworkers say they tend to ask for the same food every time. Occasionally, the farmworkers report that the busy schedules of their employers results in irregular trips to the grocery store. Many farmworkers depend on the home food delivery vendors, pizza delivery, or other "rideros" to fill in the gaps between the larger bi-weekly food purchases. Learning about these inconsistent food sources, and the limited choices over what this population is able to consume, the second author of this paper became particularly interested in ways to improve access to fresh and familiar foods. This became the underlying motivating for developing the Huertas project.

Huertas: Towards Food Sovereignty One Garden at a Time?

In collaborating on the Huertas project, the authors of this paper have worked with Latino/a farmworkers across three counties in Vermont over the past 19 months, gaining a better understanding of the challenges that they face in accessing healthy, culturally familiar, and affordable food year round and the working and living conditions they encounter. In our efforts to prioritize the food preferences of the dairy workers with whom we work, we have realized the importance of beginning a dialogue early in the spring to gain a better understanding of the preferred selection of culturally familiar vegetables and herbs for each participating farm. These vegetables have ranged from the everyday staples easily found in US grocery stores like tomatoes, carrots, and onions to more culturally familiar herbs like *epazote*, *hierba buena*, and varieties of *chiles* used in preparing various Mexican dishes.

Based on this outreach, the third author solicited donations from local greenhouses and farmers in early 2012 and the purchasing of supplies, seeds and transplants for the gardens as part of an undergraduate internship experience. A second undergraduate student coordinator assisted with these efforts in 2013. These donations include seeds for various herbs and vegetables that have been brought back with a Burlington area farmer from her travels in Oaxaca, Mexico and other donations from supportive businesses and farmers. Volunteers from UVM and the broader community have been matched with specific farms to do two outreach visits; plot planning and preparation in the late spring as well as a planting day in the early summer. Part of what made our programmatic efforts over the last two growing seasons different from previous years was a more sustained effort to plan follow-up site visits and group events to link up gardeners and share the bounty of what the gardens produced. In 2012 we planted more than 20 gardens while working with dozens of community volunteers and local

greenhouses and farms, and in 2013, a total of 25 gardens were planted. What is unique about Huertas is that the gardens are all located on land owned by dairy farmers given that most Latino farmworkers are living on the farms where they work and would not be able to access community garden plots due to a lack of transportation and fear of law enforcement.

The authors of this paper are committed to sharing the stories of the gardeners with whom we work and in this paper, we seek to illuminate the distinctions and correlations between the notions of food security and food sovereignty as they play out on the ground. What follows is a description of some of the gardens we have helped to start based on site visits over the last two summers, with the caveat that these stories have all been gathered through the applied work of Huertas, not as part of a formal research project. Through sharing the stories of four households involved with the project, we seek to inform some broader claims about the food security issues facing migrant workers and the strategies that workers and their families employ to access food. These households include nuclear families united by marriage, cohabitating men working together on the same farm, and homes with a married couple cohabitating with other workers from the same farm. In the vignettes below, we use pseudonyms when referring to the individuals involved in the project.

Since early 2012, the authors of this paper have regularly visited with farmworkers, planning and preparing garden beds, witnessing the births of calves, deciding the best place to plant tomatoes, and hauling away pounds and pounds of squash that had transformed overnight from *calabicitas* to *calabazones*. In late May of 2012, the first and third author met with three young men working at a farm just across the hill from the Canadian border. At this farm, we worked with Ernesto, Lorenzo, and Raul, all from southern Mexico, to remove the rocks and weeds from their garden plot, a sizeable area of land in between the calving barn and the apartment where they resided. Two of these men had been involved in the gardening project the previous year, and wanted to expand the garden –now partially overrun with strawberry plants – to include more space for tomatoes, *chiles*, and onions so that Ernesto, the designated chef of the house had more fresh produce to use in his cooking. Returning a few weeks later with plant starts, seeds, and two volunteers, we quickly transformed the space into a hopeful garden full of *tomatillos*, *chiles de agua*, and onion sets amidst the mooing of a very large Holstein in the midst of giving birth.

After being so involved with this garden, and after learning more about the journeys of these men from Mexico to the United States, we were disappointed to hear later that summer that the majority of these plants died following a particularly hot and dry week. When we inquired about why this had happened, we learned that the upkeep of the garden, namely watering, had become increasingly difficult in the hot weather, especially as the workers prioritized caring for

the thirsty cows. Although this attempt was not so successful, we delivered some additional seeds for fast growing late summer crops as some form of consolation.

Despite the previous year's growing challenges, the men were determined to participate again in 2013. Volunteers once again visited and assisted with plot preparation and then a month later with the planting of the garden. The men arrived at a mid-summer harvest celebration this year with peppers and zucchinis from a flourishing garden as seen through pictures they have posted on Facebook and shared with the second author. This sense of pride cultivated through the gardens is something that we have seen again and again in our work, and is one of the many benefits of the project. For most individuals involved with Huertas, the garden is one of the few spaces where they may relax, connect with food practices that remind them of home, and create beauty in their environment.

Fortunately for our morale, the fate of this first garden was a unique case and the remaining gardens planted in 2012 were all much more successful. In mid-August of last year, the first and third author set aside two full days for site visits to learn more about how the gardens were doing and to see if any additional materials or information were needed. Before we set out for the day, the second author warned us, half-jokingly, that we would need to make sure the car was empty to carry all of the produce that would be gifted us as we made our visits. This warning turned out to be deliciously accurate, as we soon found ourselves the lucky recipients of pounds and pounds of extra veggies, most of them coming from the garden of Tomás.

Tomás, a longtime friend of the second author and her family, is an older farmworker who has spent a total of 24 years in the United States. Until arriving on a Vermont dairy farm 11 years ago, he traveled back and forth frequently between jobs working on large vegetable farms of lettuce, cabbage, cauliflower, and beets while in the United States and tending to his "*maiz y frijoles*" (corn and beans) while at home in Mexico. While he reminisces frequently about caring for his land and crops in Mexico, until connecting to Huertas three years ago, he had never had a garden in the United States.

As Mares and Mazar entered the trailer that he shares with two other men, Tomás quickly pushed into our hands three large bags of frozen wild blackberries that he had picked in anticipation of our visit. After scooting us through the trailer, bags in hand, we were stunned to see the large garden that spanned almost the full length of the home. We were even more taken aback when we learned that the amazing garden in which we were standing was just one of four gardens that he tended around the property. Over the next 45 minutes, as we followed him around the garden with our outreach questionnaire, he proceeded to fill bags and bags of tomatoes, ground cherries, herbs, winter squash, corn, and zucchini that he insisted we take

home because, as he explained, he was alone and could not possibly eat it all. After making it clear that he and his housemates largely took care of their own food needs and preparation, we also learned that he regularly shares food with the wife of the farm owner (in fact, she is quite jealous of his garden), and even packages up produce to send to his children who are now living in various states in the eastern and southeastern US. Throughout the fall, we got to know Tomás, and his culinary skills, much better through several community celebrations centered on bringing gardeners together.

While visiting to determine this year's growing list, Tomás requested green peppers despite having shared previously that neither he nor his co-workers eat them. When pressed about why he wanted to grow them, he replied that there were many vegetables that he did not like to eat, but that he knew many of his visitors liked to eat them and wanted to make sure he could give them vegetables they liked. At a recent visit, the authors wondered why it he had not grown a garden previously given his extensive agricultural experience and enthusiasm for growing. Tomás replied that until he was approached by Huertas he never even thought planting a garden was a possibility. Despite having a tremendous wealth of agricultural knowledge and experience, he faced significant challenges in accessing seeds and other necessary materials needed for his garden, a connection that has been successfully established through participating in the project. After this brief discussion, he quickly returned to the tour of his garden, pointing out the sunflowers and "*flor de viuda*" (widow flowers) he had planted around the perimeter of the garden and the dry beans he had sent for from his family in Mexico. During the walk, he stopped by the corn and requested a photograph; he wanted to send his kids pictures of the garden as it grew throughout the summer. Again, the sense of pride and creative expression that is cultivated through these gardens becomes clear, as is the desire to share this beauty with others.

During these site visits, what has been the most striking to the first author are the challenging daily lives of women, especially women with very young children, who are living at these dairies. One woman we visited, Lourdes, lives with her young daughter and husband, along with several other workers at a farm very close to the border. Lourdes's story is especially poignant given how participating in the gardening program has given her and her daughter an outlet for creativity, experiencing the outdoors, and cultivating fresh food that has deep cultural resonance. Prior to becoming involved in the project, Lourdes explained that at one point, she had not left her apartment for more than two months because there simply was not anywhere enjoyable to go. This apartment, tucked behind a makeshift farm office, has a small kitchen and sleeping quarters for the workers, and little else. In early conversations with Mazar and Wolcott-MacCausland, she was particularly curious about whether other mothers lived on the dairy farms near her. Wolcott-MacCausland explained that there were in fact several women

living in close proximity, but given the high degree of isolation they all experience, Lourdes had never met them. One of the primary goals of the Huertas project is to break down these barriers of isolation through organizing food-centered events where families may get to know each other and share in familiar foodways while they are thousands of miles away from home. These events will be described in more detail later in this paper.

Being so close to the border, Lourdes lives in continual fear of being seen by border enforcement, and therefore when planning this garden, we had to take extra care that it was out of sight from the road that loops around the barn and their housing unit. On other farms further away from the border, this was not as much of a concern. To get to the raised beds, Lourdes and her daughter put on their rubber boots and muck their way through the milking parlor and then the cow barn, wading through inches of animal waste to arrive at a sunny area tucked between two sections of a free stall barn and bunker silos that store the majority of the cow feed. Despite these conditions, Lourdes explained to us with a wide smile on her face that the garden has given her and her daughter a reason to get outside, often as much as three or four times a day, and reconnect with dishes like *chile relLENos* that she prepares with the produce that she is growing with her own hands. Throughout the winter she added dried herbs from the garden to flavor her dishes and has saved seeds to replant the herbs this year. Her garden continues to be one of the most productive we have seen and over the last year, she and her husband have made special efforts to construct raised bed borders and extend the overall footprint of the garden. In the late spring of 2013, the first author returned with another volunteer to prepare and plant alongside Lourdes. What was particularly noteworthy and surprising was Lourdes' firm refusal to plant any flowers, feeling that they would take up valuable space that could otherwise be filled with edible plants. In this way, she is demonstrating her autonomy over the use of her space, even amidst the challenging conditions and fear in which she lives.

Preparing meals that resemble those from home is something that Juana, another participant in the Huertas Program, appreciates about her garden. As a new gardener, Juana's success growing food this past summer was impressive, especially given that the farm owner periodically cut off the water supply to Juana's home during the hottest period of the summer, in order to redirect it to the cows in the barn. Juana lives with her two small boys, her husband, and a few other men in a small manufactured home, and it falls to her to prepare meals for the entire extended household made up of kin and non-kin. As with Lourdes, cultivating food in her garden has given her an opportunity to get outside and recreate some of the meals that she misses from home. Although she complained about the fact that her husband and the other men in the house didn't have enough appreciation for vegetables, she continued to find new ways of sneaking them in to the meals she prepared. Since our site visit, the third author has

returned to visit with Juana several times, including one day when they prepared mole from scratch with freshly slaughtered chicken. In addition to being able to grow otherwise difficult to find produce that reminds families of home and encourages outdoor activities, both Lourdes and Juana proudly discuss the financial benefits of their gardening efforts. At different points of the summer, they have reported that they have not purchased cilantro, lettuce, carrots, or tomatoes for long periods of time. They not only can produce what they want to eat but once ready for harvest, can choose, without relying on anyone else but themselves, what vegetables they want to pick and eat day by day.

Unlike most of the gardeners with whom we have worked, Juana had little experience growing her own food before becoming involved in Huertas. Despite this, she has thrown herself into the project with both feet, growing flowers and vegetables that she regularly shares with other workers and with the three authors whenever she gets a chance. Whether it is fresh salsa or a bouquet of recently picked flowers, Juana has developed a firm sense of pride in her ability to create something from the ground where she resides. Despite this personal growth, her autonomy and sense of pride is rooted to land that she does not own, a connection that remains tenuous and seemingly impermanent.

In the late summer of both 2012 and 2013, as the gardens were bursting with produce, we have planned several fiestas to bring many of these gardeners together and to celebrate and share the literal fruits of our labor. Over a large gas-fired stove at the second author's family farm, all of the individuals described in these vignettes have come together to share homemade tortillas, prepare and can fresh salsas and blackberry jam, and use up some of the baseball-bat-sized *calabacita* in zucchini cakes. We have done this all with the goal of building a sense of commensality and community that is often missing from the daily lives of these workers. In a small way, these events have challenged the isolation that is produced by and reproduces Vermont's rural working landscape. In these fiestas and in the gardens themselves, we see the glimmers of sovereignty and autonomy over the sources and diversity of foods these individuals are consuming.

In the conviction to replant a failed garden, the snapshot of a man and his corn, the rejection of planting flowers in favor of vegetables, or the firm commitment to provide healthy foods for one's husband and children, these individuals claim a sense of agency and pride in a borderland region that is often far from welcoming. These individual efforts, and the broader objectives of the Huertas project, call into question the complicated dynamics of how food security efforts play out on the ground and the challenges of working towards food sovereignty in an environment that is beset by so few choices. In previous work co-authored with Alison Alkon, the first author of this paper has written about the distinctions between the movement for

food sovereignty and other food movements, and the ways that the radical visions of the food sovereignty movement are limited by the pervasive neoliberal propensities of US food movements (Mares and Alkon 2011, Alkon and Mares 2012).

Within the Huertas project, questions of food security and food access are of central concern, but it is not mere calories or nutrients that we are aiming to provide. Rather, in working alongside individuals like Juana, Tomás, Lourdes, Ernesto, Lorenzo, and Raul, we seek to expand the choices that socially marginalized individuals have over how to source their food and what kinds of foods are available close to home. While the *chile* or corn plants they cultivate are just one small contribution to the household's food supply, as these stories demonstrate, the meaning of these plants goes deeper than their nutritional value to more fundamental issues of self-sufficiency and sustaining ties to cultural identity.

The global movement for food sovereignty, as outlined in the Declaration of Nyelini, envisions a world where "...all peoples, nations and states are able to determine their own food producing systems and policies that provide every one of us with good quality, adequate, affordable, healthy and culturally appropriate food" and where access to food, and the means to produce it, are guaranteed as basic human rights (Forum for Food Sovereignty 2007). The authors of this paper wholeheartedly believe in this vision, but also recognize that working towards food sovereignty is a slow and difficult process. In the case of our work in Vermont's dairy industry, we are fully cognizant that the gardens we help to plant are not the final step in this process, but with any hope, they are some small beginning.

Conclusion: Future Directions

As we continue to move forward with our applied efforts to expand the Huertas project to other regions of the state and other seasons of the year, the first author will also embark upon a multi-year ethnographic study that engages a mixed-methods approach guided by the longitudinal and holistic commitments afforded by the field of cultural anthropology. This study seeks to better understand the broader food security concerns and food practices among Latino/a dairy workers in the state of Vermont and how these practices are reworked and reshaped through the processes of migration and settlement. It is hoped that the individuals involved in Huertas will contribute their perspectives and experiences to this study, in addition to those individuals who, for one reason or another, are not involved. In seeking these stories, this study aims to shed new light on the survival strategies of one of the most vulnerable and yet, resilient populations in the United States; connecting questions of agency and structure that have long fascinated anthropologists and other social scientists.

Both this proposed study and the Huertas project are especially relevant and timely given ongoing debates around immigration reform that are unfolding in the United States and the increasing attention to the role of labor within food and agricultural systems. Vermont presents a novel site to examine these trajectories given the state's strong agricultural identity, its unique migration patterns and histories, and its proximity to federal border enforcement and security efforts. Yet, to truly understand the relationships between this project and the broader questions of food sovereignty, it is essential to not stop at the state's borders, but rather follow the stories of laborers from the milking parlor in rural Vermont to the rural villages and swelling urban centers of Latin America. Through our shared work, we are committed to following this path.

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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.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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