

Chapter 4

Creando un Mundo Nuevo (Creating a New World): Campesinos in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Farm workers have faced additive barriers with the pandemic and environmental issues that are exceedingly making their jobs more difficult. Coupled with the pandemic, farm workers are facing more obstacles in their everyday life. Despite these challenges, farm workers are finding ways to create organizations and advocacy avenues within their communities. Farm workers are also continuing to keep cultural practices alive and are creating communities where they migrate. These factors are resiliency factors that allow farm workers to create lives that feel meaningful and joyful to them.

INTRODUCTION

Farmworkers have been the main source for sustenance since humans first walked the earth. For instance, indigenous groups in the Americas from pre-Hispanic times developed elaborate farming techniques, many which are still in use today (Adames & Chavez-Duenas, 2017). Thousands of years later, African people were forcibly brought to the Americas, as a result of colonization and their enslavement, where

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they farmed to produce food for slave-owning families and exports to Europe and the other parts of the Americas (Adames & Chaves-Duenas, 2017). Over time, many factors have transformed farm labor in the United States (U.S.), but one interest, other than the need for sustenance, that has remained constant is keeping an accessible supply of exploitable workers to keep labor costs as cheap as possible. This chapter focuses on the experiences of the farmworker work force today, which is majority Latinx and undocumented. In particular, we call attention to the deep community networks that farmworkers have created to survive and thrive within rural communities, despite the exploitative and racist structures they face.

U.S. farmworkers are often rendered invisible in academic and media discourse. Yet, farmworkers, like the food they produce, are visible to anyone willing to pay attention. When driving through California's Central Valley on State Route 99 or in the rural U.S., generally, traces of their lives can be seen through the open umbrellas, tractors, parked cars, and towns so small that you can miss them if you blink. Their presence in this country can also be understood and felt through the fruits and vegetables they produce, which appear on kitchen tables across the country. As one author of this chapter has previously documented, the *campesinas* in the Central Valley are not so much silent or invisible as they are historically not listened to and ignored by most of U.S. society (Duran, 2022). Systems of exploitation, dating back to colonization and slavery, continue to suppress farmworkers despite their importance to every household in the U.S. (Xiuhtecutli & Shattuck, 2021).

Historic collective advocacy efforts have improved farmworkers' rights and protections. One such effort known as the Delano Grape strike in Delano, California in 1965 brought Mexican and Filipino farmworkers together and led to farmworker access to bathrooms, rest and lunch breaks, and pesticide regulations (Jordan, 2020). Despite these gains, systemic challenges for farmworkers persist. For instance, while many farmworkers have work authorization through the U.S.'s H-2A nonimmigrant visa program, others lack such authorization and are undocumented. Further, while undocumented workers are often better positioned to benefit from community support and information-sharing networks than those temporarily present through the visa program because of their long-term residence, they still face systemic barriers (Yoshikawa, 2011). Nevertheless, both groups experience structural racism and exploitative working conditions, particularly in new-destination areas, where influxes of migrant workers in recent decades have stoked anti-immigrant sentiments (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021).

While the pandemic replicated past exploitative working conditions, it allowed opportunities for a greater measure of visibility and community-building than ever before. People working on farms quickly became recognized as essential workers in the U.S. as the pandemic caused labor shortages and supply-chain issues. Farmworkers were now seen, and widely reported, as a central and integral part of the U.S. workforce. In turn, this elevated attention highlighted the labor exploitation that farmworkers in the U.S. experience (Sengupta, 2020). Elsewhere, the pandemic revealed—and exacerbated—the lack of accessibility to resources and benefits for farmworkers and their families in the U.S., especially for those who are undocumented. In response, farmworkers have organized for rights throughout the pandemic.

The rural nature of farm working communities, however, has resulted in their experiences of exploitation being understudied. Consequently, not much is known about community networks that farmworkers create to survive and thrive in rural communities to counter the exploitative and racist structures they face. Advocates working in any capacity to support farmworkers should understand and encourage these networks and other forms of resiliency, coping mechanisms, and creation of homes and communities within farm working rural communities (Duran, 2022). Reliance and development of community ties can provide critical support in helping farmworkers and their families navigate structural systems such as the medical and U.S. bureaucratic systems.

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