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A Struggle for Dignity on the Land: Living Histories of Southern Agricultural Exploitation and Farmworker Resistance in North Carolina

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**A Struggle for Dignity on the Land: Living Histories of Southern Agricultural Exploitation
and Farmworker Resistance in North Carolina**

An Honors Thesis

Presented to
The Faculty of the Program of Environmental Studies
Bates College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By
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Lewiston, Maine
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Introduction

I. Summary and Guiding Questions

In this thesis, I explore the idea of farmworker dignity as a potential form of resistance to the ongoing history of agricultural exploitation in the U.S. South. I offer accounts of the history and present-day realities of farm labor in the South, employing the dual theoretical lenses of plantation space and the space of nonexistence as tools to unearth the underlying historical power structures and lineage of labor relations in which farmworkers today are situated. An analysis of the linguistic roots of the word dignity and the ways it is invoked in various relevant contexts helps me delve deeply into the plurality of meanings, responses to history, and visions for the future that the term has been understood to carry. I draw upon interviews conducted with members of the farmworker movement in North Carolina to better understand the notion of farmworker dignity as they use it in their work. I conclude by putting the concept of farmworker dignity in conversation with the themes and continuities of agricultural labor in the South throughout time, using this dialogue to explore the nuanced subversive implications of dignity as a means of reckoning with the past to envision a more just future for agriculture in the South.

I am guided in this work by the following set of questions:

What arrangements of space and relationships of power have defined the agricultural system in the South throughout history? How might this lineage be traced into the present and mapped onto the lived experiences of farmworkers today? What is dignity understood to mean by members of the farmworker movement in North Carolina? What does farmworker dignity offer in response to the living history of agricultural exploitation in the South?

My first chapter offers a chronological examination of defining systems and institutions in the history of agricultural labor in the South. Chapter two uses a combination of survey data and information sourced from farmworkers and farmworker advocates to provide an account of farmworker lives and livelihoods in the South today. At the end of each of these chapters, I

apply my theoretical lenses of plantation space and the space of nonexistence to analyse emergent themes and continuities across agricultural systems and begin the work of tracing history onto today. In chapter three, I examine the etymological history of the word dignity, then provide an analysis of invocations of the term in classical and legal documents and in four relevant social movement contexts. These first three chapters are preceded by brief personal narratives intended to weave my own experiences and identity into the analytical work of the thesis. My fourth chapter offers an account of the history of farm labor organizing in the South, followed by an analysis of the findings of my interviews with members of the farmworker movement in North Carolina. I use the different notions of dignity meanings, dignity challenges, and dignity futures articulated in my discussion of emergent meanings and themes in chapter three to guide this analysis. In my final chapter, I revisit plantation space and the space of nonexistence, putting them in dialogue with the notions of farmworker dignity articulated by the activists I interviewed in order to illuminate the varying degrees of complicity and resistance the word dignity offers in response to the living legacy of agricultural exploitation in the South. I use this final discussion to reflect on the value of dignity as a tool for reckoning more deeply with history and imagining new solidarities and alternative futures for farmworkers in the South.

II. My Position in the Work

My first face to face encounter with the system of agricultural labor in the South took the form of a weeklong service learning trip with my ninth grade class to work with the Episcopal Farmworkers Ministry in Newton Grove, North Carolina. Though it is just over an hour from the city where I grew up, Newton Grove seemed to me an entirely different world, one of sun-bleached buildings and row upon seemingly endless row of tobacco. For all of the trip's unsettling implications of poverty tourism, I believe the leaders at EFM who helped coordinate

our weeklong stay and arranged visits to nearby farmworker camps truly meant for it to be a powerful, socially-engaged learning experience. But the reality is that I (and likely most of my middle-class suburban classmates) did not have a critical understanding of the workings of power in the world that would allow me to understand the deeply unjust system I was bearing witness too, or my own profound implication in it.

If nothing else, I took away from my experience in Newton Grove a baseline understanding that there are people with names, families, and complex stories behind the food we eat every day. Later in high school, I did an internship on a small farm owned by the parent of a friend and found a love for making things grow. I went on to work periodically during the summers on a couple of small-scale sustainable farms nearby where I grew up in Durham, North Carolina. At around the same time, I began to get involved in youth environmental and climate activism, and found my way into justice-oriented organizing spaces that profoundly shifted the way I understand the world and my position in it. It was also in these movement spaces that I first began to reckon with my identity as a Southerner and the long legacy of injustice and resilience that shapes the part of the world I call home.

Midway through my junior year of college in Maine, inspired by the global food movements I was learning about in my environmental studies classes, my rediscovery of student organizing, and a healthy dose of homesickness, I applied for a summer internship at Student Action with Farmworkers, a non-profit based in my hometown that runs a number of programs intended to bring students and farmworkers together to create positive change in the agricultural system. My summer spent working with SAF was the foundational experience that led me to the work of this thesis. My internship involved weekly legal rights outreach to farmworker camps in eastern North Carolina and participation in the organization's popular theater and documentary

programs that use arts as a way to allow students and farmworkers to share stories and life experiences with a degree of humor and vulnerability that is otherwise hard to access. I lobbied in the state legislature with inspiring farmworker organizers and immigrant rights activists, joined direct actions in solidarity with the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, and developed friendships with my fellow student-interns, many of whom grew up in farmworker families or had worked in the fields themselves.

All the while, aided by many hours spent driving between isolated farmworker camps through fields of tobacco, soy, and sweet potato, I grappled with my role in the movement as a young, white student organizer with little sense of personal connection to agriculture in the South beyond a handful of months working on small-scale, sustainable farms under conditions vastly different than what I saw that summer. Though I understood on a conceptual level that everyone who buys and eats food is implicated in systems of agricultural labor, I struggled to find clarity about my place in the movement and what my personal stake was in the movement beyond just a desire to do the right thing in the context of injustice.

The process of deciphering and articulating my answers to these questions has been an ongoing one throughout the work of this thesis. Near the end of my summer internship, I began to learn more about my family's historical relationship to agriculture in the South. I learned that nine generations back, my ancestors moved to North Carolina for the express purpose of farming sweet potatoes, the same crop that the farmworkers I did outreach with all summer were cultivating. Midway through the research process for this thesis, I found records of the plantation those same ancestors owned in Chatham, County, North Carolina, less than an hour from where I grew up. This piece of family history, one that my relatives do not so readily advertise, has helped me come to terms with my own positionality in relation to farmworker

movement and it drives the historical reckoning component of this thesis. I discovered that the people I am directly descended from took part in the brutally dehumanizing institution of plantation slavery, an institution that, as I learned through my work with SAF, laid the groundwork for the system of farm labor in the South today. The family history I uncovered this winter helps me recognize that I am profoundly implicated in the exploitive agricultural system that I spent the summer learning about; it enables me to articulate this system as the legacy of my ancestors; it drives me to face up to that history and work, from a place of clarity about my own personal connection, towards justice for those exploited by it today.

III. Area of Study

My research has two primary areas of study: North Carolina specifically, and the U.S. South as a whole. My choice to study activist notions of farmworker dignity in North Carolina rather than across the entirety of the South was based on feasibility. My existing relationships with members of the farmworker movement are almost exclusively with activists working in North Carolina. Additionally, because the interviews about farmworker dignity only represent a portion of the research I conducted for this project (the rest took the form of analysis of primary and secondary sources about dignity and farm labor in the South), I chose to narrow my sample of interviewees to a more manageable state-specific scale.

I chose to study the history and present day realities of farm labor on the scale of the South as a whole in part because that is the level of specificity available in a number of my key sources (especially the historical ones) and in part because I believe there are valid continuities to be drawn across farm labor systems and farmworker experiences throughout the region in its entirety. Given more time, I would have delved more deeply into the historical and modern day

systems of agricultural labor specific to North Carolina. I believe my arguments would be strengthened by this additional research.

In this thesis, I employ an understanding of the South as a distinctly cultural as well as geographic entity, one that is not easily contained by borders and census categories. As such, I do not articulate a definitive geographic boundary around what counts as the South. Instead, I loosely define the South as composed of the states that fought to maintain slavery during the civil war. For greater detail on the variety of different ways in which the South is represented as a category in my sources about present day agriculture in the region, see the section of chapter two entitled “Farm Labor in the South Today.” I use the terms South and Southeast interchangeably throughout my work.

It bears mentioning that throughout this thesis, I take a fluid approach to questions of place and scale. The lives and livelihoods of the farmworker community in North Carolina with whom I worked this past summer are impacted by laws and regulations that span from the level of federal legislation to specific local ordinances. Likewise their experiences are shaped by national and international economic policies, regional Southern histories and cultural scripts, state-specific laws and intimately local community norms and traditions. As such, throughout this thesis my arguments dance across various and overlapping scales and do not conform to a fixed notion of place. I do not presume that the findings of the research I conducted with members of the farmworker movement in North Carolina can be used to speak to farmworker experiences and notions of dignity across the South as a whole, but I do believe they have something valuable to bring to that conversation. I do not wish to conflate North Carolina with the entirety of the South or imply that the South is a stable, uniform category that exists in isolation from the national (and international) contexts in which it is situated. But I make the

conscious decision throughout the following chapters to not be overly meticulous about questions of scale, based on the understanding that farmworkers in North Carolina, like the structures of oppression they face and the modes of resistance they employ, exist in a whole host of geographic scales at once.

IV. Approach and Research Methods

It was during my internship with SAF that I first encountered dignity as a term in the farmworker movement. The more I heard the word used, the more I was struck by its apparent slipperiness; it seemed to mean different things to different people and across different contexts. It evoked a powerful emotional response in me, but I had trouble articulating just what the word meant, and why it held the power it did. My initial curiosity about dignity inspired the lens I use to approach this thesis, but the relationships I built during the summer and the questions it opened up for me about my own identity, family history, and relationship to the movement serve as the motivating force behind my work.

The research for this thesis was conducted during the fall of 2018 and spring of 2019, though I draw significant insight from experiences I had during the preceding summer as well. In the first three chapters, I base my arguments and analyses on information gathered from a variety of primary and secondary sources about farmworker movements, dignity, and Southern agriculture past and present. My discussion in chapter four draws upon the findings of six semi-structured interviews I conducted with members of the farmworker movement in North Carolina. For background information on the activists I interviewed, the organizations they work for, and further details about the interview process, see my section titled Interview Findings: Notions of Dignity in the North Carolina Farmworker Movement in chapter four.

V. Theoretical Framework

For my theoretical framework, I develop two primary analytical ‘spaces’: plantation space and the space of nonexistence.

Plantation Space

Plantation space is a concept I assemble from an interdisciplinary host of authors and thinkers who help me weave together a nuanced notion of the plantation as a simultaneously cultural, economic, and spatial form, one that endures today in ways both symbolic and material in the agricultural system in the Southeast. The space of nonexistence is a term I draw from the work of anthropologist Susan Bibler Coutin and adapt to shed light on the complex dynamics of violence and invisibility experienced by the predominantly migrant farm labor force in the South. Together, these spaces act as my dual lenses for reading the history and modern day realities of agricultural labor in the Southeast in conversation with the struggle for farmworker dignity. I develop these specific lenses as a means of engaging analytically both with migrant farmworkers’ situatedness in a long lineage of exploitive agriculture (hence plantation space), and their identity as immigrant laborers who are largely denied full citizenship (hence the space of nonexistence). I apply this framework in my analysis of emergent themes and experiences in chapters one and two as a means to elucidate and clarify the specific kinds of violence and dehumanization faced by agricultural laborers in the South both throughout history and today. Plantation space and the space of nonexistence reappear in my final chapter as the analytical structure that scaffolds my discussion of dignity as a potential means of resistance to the living legacy of agricultural exploitation in the South.

In order to weave together the complex, layered understanding of the plantation that makes my concept of plantation space possible, I draw upon texts from a wide range of fields

including feminist ecology, historical sociology, Black geography, and environmental humanities. Foundational to my understanding of the structure and function of the plantation is the notion of the “Plantationocene,” first articulated by Donna Haraway in a panel discussion entitled “Anthropologists are Talking – About the Anthropocene” and later developed by both Haraway and Anna Tsing in their writing and teaching.¹ In the panel discussion, Haraway offers the concept of the Plantationocene as an alternative way of conceptualizing history on a planetary scale.² In contrast to the Anthropocene, Haraway’s notion of the Plantationocene frames the inception of slave agriculture rather than the use of fossil fuels as the “key transition,” and points to the persistence of plantation-style agriculture as the defining characteristic of the modern era.³ Haraway argues that the “transportation of genomes,” including those of the people providing agricultural labor, is “crucial to the plantation.”⁴ This suggests that the plantation model is predicated on the (often forced) importation of both humans and crop plants. In this same discussion, Anna Tsing nuances the notion of the plantation by contending that the people whose labor it depends on are “abstracted in order to become resources that can be used for investment.”⁵ She indicates that this conversion of humans to “alienated resources” is exactly what has allowed for the global spread of the plantation system.⁶ Thus Haraway and Tsing, in conversation with one another, illuminate the dual importation and exploitation of human labor, complemented by the denial of personhood involved in reducing a human to a

¹ Haraway et al, “Anthropologists are Talking – About the Anthropocene,” *Ethnos*, 23

² Ibid. 22.

³ Ibid. 22.

⁴ Haraway et al, “Anthropologists are Talking – About the Anthropocene,” *Ethnos*, 23

⁵ Ibid. 23.

⁶ Ibid. 23.

resource, as necessary to the project of the plantation system. These characteristic plantation processes form the scaffold architecture of the notion of plantation space that I put forth as a part of my theoretical framework.

I draw upon authors Sophie Sapp Moore, Monique Allewaert, Pablo F. Gómez and Gregg Mitman to understand the profoundly racialized, colonial roots of the plantation and its implication in the development and spread of capitalism on a global scale. In their collectively written article “Plantation Legacies,” the authors argue that the plantation emerged in the specific context of the Caribbean at the confluence of settler colonial regimes predicated on the violent control of Black and Indigenous peoples, and “proto-capitalist economic models” based on intensive use of land, forced migrant labor, and a newly global market for commerce.⁷ Moore et al. present the plantation as a marriage of the colonial and capitalist logics, an extractive, durable model of relationship premised on the exploitation of unfree labor, the pursuit of export-based profits, and the violent maintenance of a racial order. Moore et al.’s “Plantation Legacies” is useful to my conceptualization of plantation space because I draw from it an understanding of the inherited, racialized colonial order of that space, the logic that positions the Black and Indigenous bodies of the colonized as ‘other’ as at once ripe for exploitation and in need of punishment and control. The article is also helpful because it allows me to conceive of the plantation space as a threshold through which capitalism entered global prominence, illuminating it as a space where extraction meets alienation and the fruits of their union are packaged for export and sold at a ludicrous profit.

Another important element of Moore et al.’s article is that it articulates the endurance and continuity of the plantation model through time. The authors describe the modern-day

⁷ Moore et al, “Plantation Legacies,” *Edge Effects*.

institutions and landscapes where plantation legacies “dwell,” including the prison systems of the U.S. and Brazil, and the communities of color in the Southern U.S. where hazardous environmental toxins are disproportionately dumped.⁸ My concept of plantation space expands Moore et al.’s notion of the temporal continuity of the plantation to also encompass the economy, labor structure, and physical landscape of industrial agriculture in the South.

Moore et al. are among a lineage of thinkers who have professed the persistence of the plantation throughout time and across bodies and space. In her article “Plantation Futures,” Katherine McKittrick proposes a migratory understanding of the plantation, arguing that “in agriculture, banking, and mining, in trade and tourism, and across other colonial and postcolonial spaces... a plantation logic characteristic of (but not identical to) slavery emerges in the present both ideologically and materially.”⁹ Likewise Piya Chatterjee, Monisha Das Gupta, and Richard Cullen Rath, authors of “Imperial Plantations: Past, Present, and Future Directions,” contend that the plantation is not an artifact of history but rather a living force that “haunts” much of the world today, including the “‘new’ systems of indenture and other forms of contract labor which continue to undergird the twenty-first century plantation.”¹⁰ Together, these scholars play a vital role in the development of my theoretical framework; they lay the groundwork for my conceptualization of industrial agriculture in the South as a manifestation of a plantation space that is remarkably durable across time.

“What if we acknowledged that the plantation is, as Toni Morrison writes, a space that everybody runs from but nobody stops talking about, and thus that it is a persistent but ugly blueprint of our present spatial organization that holds in it a new future?”¹¹

⁸ Moore et al. “Plantation Legacies.” *Edge Effects*

⁹ McKittrick. “Plantation Futures.” *Small Axe*. 3.

¹⁰ Chatterjee et al. “Imperial Plantations.” *Journal of Historical Sociology*. 12.

¹¹ McKittrick. “Plantation Futures.” *Small Axe*. 10.

Katherine McKittrick's words, linking past to future through the lens of the plantation, were the first to inspire me to think about the plantation in explicitly spatial terms. They lead me to question: what is the landscape of power on the plantation? How have spatial arrangements shaped the structure and function of plantation relationships? I look to the work of two geographers, Merle Prunty and Lisa B. Randle, whose writings, published over fifty years apart, help me characterize the spatiality of the plantation.

In his 1955 article on "The Renaissance of the Southern Plantation," Merle Prunty makes the argument that, over a century after emancipation, "as spatial entities the plantations are with us still."¹² He describes plantations as "occupance forms" that have been continuous in the South since long before the Civil war.¹³ Prunty characterizes the plantation as a landholding of 260 or more acres, typified by the following elements: division between laborers and management (landowners); the specialized production of a few crops; large input of cultivating power per unit area; distinctive spatial arrangement that reflects the centralized control of cultivating power; and location in a part of the South with a "plantation tradition."¹⁴

The author traces the shifts and continuities across such large agricultural landholdings in the South over time, arguing that the newly mechanized, wage-labor style or "neoplantation" agriculture that was emerging at the time of the article's publication had many parallel spatial characteristics to the Antebellum Plantation.¹⁵ One such characteristic is large, relatively flat fields that make for more efficient cultivation and harvesting and facilitate the ability of

¹² Prunty. "The Renaissance of the Southern Plantation." *Geographical Review*. 460.

¹³ *Ibid.* 460.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 460.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 482.

overseers and managers to supervise and control groups of laborers.¹⁶ This demonstrates that landowner priorities of efficient use of land for the maximization of profit and facile manager oversight to maintain control over the labor force have shaped plantation space throughout time. Additionally, Prunty suggests that on the neoplantation, laborers work in the fields in groups reminiscent of “slave gangs” and live in housing that “form[s] loosely nucleated settlements that recall the ante bellum plantation”¹⁷ He argues that landowners find this labor and housing arrangement more advantageous because it keeps workers concentrated in easily regulated spaces and minimizes the use of agriculturally viable land for housing.¹⁸ Again, landowner priorities of efficiency and control emerge as underlying factors in the architecture of plantation space. The final spatial arrangement that Prunty identifies as consistent across antebellum plantations and the mechanized neoplantation is that of landowner proximity to and hence control over cultivating power.¹⁹ He suggests that, when the primary source of cultivating power, the mule, was also a major form of transportation, the owner’s careful monitoring served as a means to regulate the mobility of their (enslaved or free) labor force.²⁰ Though agricultural cultivating power changed in form from mules to tractors and other machinery, Prunty demonstrates that it has continued to be housed nearby and easily within sight of the landowner on neoplantations.²¹ Prunty’s description of landowner control over cultivating power via spatial proximity and surveillance indicates the consistency of centralized management and carefully

¹⁶ Prunty. “The Renaissance of the Southern Plantation.” *Geographical Review*. 483.

¹⁷ Prunty. “The Renaissance of the Southern Plantation.” *Geographical Review*. 483-486.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 483.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 486.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 470.

²¹ *Ibid.* 486.

regulated laborer mobility across different temporal iterations of plantation space. Thus a careful reading of “The Renaissance of the Southern Plantation” illuminates profit-motivated efficiency, regulated laborer mobility, and landowner management, surveillance, and control over land and people as key elements of plantation space. This characterization will be useful in my application of plantation space as a lens through which to analyze the history and present-day conditions of agricultural labor in the South.

Writing over fifty years after Prunty, geographer Lisa B. Randle applies viewshed analysis, a method of interpreting GIS data to infer visibility between distinct points in a landscape, to map out the “geography of power” of historic plantation landscapes.²² Though her study “Applying the Panopticon Model to Plantation Landscapes” largely focuses on the feasibility of viewshed analysis as a method, the author offers a rich discussion of the findings and implications of past studies of the relationship between settlement patterns and dynamics of domination and surveillance on the plantation. I draw upon Randle’s synthesis of previous research in the field to expand and nuance my concept of plantation space.

In the introduction to her article, Randle situates herself within a community of scholars studying the ways in which planters used interventions in the plantation landscape to exert power and reinscribe their domination over the enslaved workforce. She offers a summary of James Delle’s research on plantations in the Negro River valley of eastern Jamaica, indicating that the location of overseers’ houses functioned as a central point of surveillance over enslaved workers much like the guard tower in Jeremy Bentham’s notion of the panopticon.²³ Randle also

²² Randle "Applying the Panopticon Model to Historic Plantation Landscapes through Viewshed Analysis." *Historical Geography*. 105.

²³ Randle "Applying the Panopticon Model to Historic Plantation Landscapes through Viewshed Analysis." *Historical Geography*. 106.

describes the work of Terrence Epperson, a geographer who employed the concept of the panopticon to a reading of the landscape at Gunston Hall and Monticello, Virginia.²⁴ In the study, Epperson posits that the owners of these two plantations, George Mason and Thomas Jefferson, intentionally structured the layout of their landholdings to make the enslaved population invisible to guests and visitors, while simultaneously using spatial interventions to render enslaved workers “seeable” to the planter and overseer.²⁵ Randle interprets Epperson’s work, highlighting this dual visibility and invisibility experienced by plantation laborers as a means by which planters reinscribed their control and domination through manipulation of space and sightlines.²⁶ The insights Randle draws from other scholars, filtered through the author’s own interpretations, offer useful contributions to my characterization of plantation space; her article both illuminates the plantation as a consciously constructed landscape and sheds light on the strategic visibility and invisibility to which plantation laborers were subjected as a means to reinforce their subjugation and facilitate overseer control.

Synthesized together, Prunty and Randle, alongside Haraway, Tsing, Chatterjee et al., Moore et al., and McKittrick, inform and make possible my articulation of plantation space as a theoretical framework. My analysis of the various authors’ works leads me to identify the following components of plantation space: importation of laborers, often by force; brutal exploitation built on the denial of personhood of the human workers; an underlying colonial logic of racial control and domination; a capitalist drive for profit; and strategic manipulation of the landscape by planters to regulate laborer mobility, centralize management over cultivating

²⁴ Randle "Applying the Panopticon Model to Historic Plantation Landscapes through Viewshed Analysis." *Historical Geography*. 106.

²⁵ Ibid. 105-6.

²⁶ Ibid. 105.

power, maximize efficiency and profit, and construct dual visibility and invisibility of laborers to maintain surveillance and reinforce subjugation. I will carry this notion of plantation space forward, implementing it, in tandem with the concept of the space of nonexistence explored below, in my analysis of dignity and farm labor in the South throughout history.

The Space of Nonexistence

I draw my other primary lens of analysis, the space of nonexistence, from Susan Bibler Coutin's chapter entitled "Illegality, Borderlands, and the Space of Nonexistence." Coutin develops the notion of a "space of nonexistence" as a means of conceptualizing the experiences of the undocumented immigrants from El Salvador with whom she conducted her research.²⁷ The author describes how legal status bars the immigrants she worked with from being recognized as fully present or human, taking an ethnographic approach to relate their experiences of a legal non-existence that is spatialized as "outside," "underground," or simply "not there."²⁸ Coutin characterizes the space of nonexistence as a "borderland," a space that "excludes people, limits rights, restricts services, and erases personhood," a "space of subjugation."²⁹

Coutin goes on to suggest that those who reside within the space of nonexistence cannot work (legally), and as such the very real labor they do provide is degraded and delegitimized.³⁰ Likewise the author argues that, when people enter the space of nonexistence, often to escape violent circumstances, they are denied the right to be with family, thereby cutting them off from

²⁷ Coutin. "Illegality, Borderlands, and the Space of Nonexistence" *Globalization under Construction: Governmentality, Law, and Identity*. 172.

²⁸ Ibid. 172.

²⁹ Ibid. 172.

³⁰ Ibid. 176.

full social personhood.³¹ Additionally, Coutin posits that, in the space of nonexistence, both social and physical mobility is severely restricted.³² Immigrants without legal documentation lack freedom of movement and risk deportation if they are apprehended. Coutin writes that “immobility, which is also a sign of death prevents full social personhood,” illuminating yet another dimension in which the space of nonexistence is profoundly dehumanizing for its inhabitants.³³ Thus devaluation of work, severing of family ties, and restricted mobility emerge as fundamental components of the space of nonexistence.

In her chapter, Coutin acknowledges that the space of nonexistence is inherently contradictory because undocumented immigrants do, of course, exist; indeed in the U.S. they provide vital labor to the very nation in which their presence is legally denied.³⁴ She suggests that there are “multiple nonexistences and... gradations of existence,” and that undocumented immigrants, alongside people who are kidnapped or killed, involved in illicit activities, or forced into hiding at threat of violence, can be understood to enter and depart existence fluidly and perhaps even occupy existence and nonexistence simultaneously.³⁵ It is exactly this paradox that I find most generative about Coutin’s concept and intend to carry forward in my adaptation and usage of the space of nonexistence as a tool in my own analysis.

To render the space of nonexistence more useful to my analysis of farmworkers in the U.S. South, I propose an expanded version of Coutin’s concept, one that includes not only undocumented immigrants but all people who, as a result of either forced or voluntary

³¹ Ibid 177.

³² Ibid. 178.

³³ Ibid. 178.

³⁴ Ibid. 173.

³⁵ Ibid. 173.

displacement, are not accorded full legal personhood in their place of residence. This broader interpretation of the space of nonexistence allows me to apply it as a lens of analysis both to the experiences of all immigrant agricultural workers, regardless of their legal status, and to the full history of farm labor in the South that began long before ‘undocumented’ held meaning as a category. Rooted in these intentions, I incorporate into my theoretical framework a reinterpretation of Coutin’s space of nonexistence as a borderland characterized by subjugation, exclusion, and limited rights and services, an inherently contradictory space in which occupants’ work is both depended on and devalued, their social ties severed, their mobility restricted, and their full personhood denied.

Synthesized together, plantation space and the space of nonexistence compose my theoretical framework, the primary lenses through which I engage in the analytical work of this thesis. Though they seem grim, even abject spaces, I elaborate them here because I believe it is crucial to wield a clear, nuanced understanding of the distinct nature and logic of the exploitation and dehumanization farm laborers in the South have faced throughout history in order to begin to explore and evaluate modes of resistance. It is important to be clear, though, that neither plantation space nor the space of nonexistence offer a complete picture of the lives and experiences of immigrants and agricultural workers. Though I detail the ways in which these conceptual spaces map onto the historical and present day conditions and lived realities of farmworkers in the South in the chapters that follow, it is critical to note that farmworkers are not and never have been passive victims in the way such an analysis might suggest. Occupants of plantation space and the space of nonexistence have always contested their power through strategies of subversion and overt resistance. It is exactly those modes of resistance that I hone in on and attempt to elucidate in my discussion of farmworker organizing and dignity in the

North Carolina farmworker movement in chapter four. I choose to adopt plantation space and the space of nonexistence as my theoretical framework and to employ them as analytical tools in my exploration of farmworker dignity because I believe they open up possibilities for liberatory thinking, new ways of imagining a future beyond agricultural exploitation in the South.

Chapter 1: A History of Agricultural Labor in the South

***Personal Reflection: Plantation Space**

Our car rounded a bend and for a moment, an opening in the tangled pine forest appeared. A wrought iron gate guarded the turnoff onto a long driveway that meandered up a gentle hill and ended in front of a white mansion with columns and a wide porch in the distance. The setting sun blazed in its many windows, giving the momentary illusion that the house was on fire. Lettering across the top of the gate caught my eye; it spelled out the name of a prominent produce farm, one of the major berry suppliers for the Eastern US. In place of the lock at the gate's opening was the oversized metal likeness of a strawberry.

The night was one of my first farmworker outreach trips. A small group of legal staff and volunteers, we had been driving down winding back roads from housing site to housing site in an effort to provide legal rights information to the farmworkers employed by the very same farm whose name was etched atop the gate. Just a few minutes' drive from the mansion on the hill, a wooden post with an address on our list of workers' housing poked out from a thick stand of trees. The workers weren't home when we visited, but their housing told a story by itself. A collection of sandals and slip-on shoes, enough for a good number of feet, were scattered outside the door of a single-wide trailer. An assortment of men's shirts and pants hung on a makeshift clothesline across the yard. The housing was in a low-lying, isolated area, hidden from the road and a few miles out from the nearest town. Through the trees behind the trailer, strawberry fields were visible, stretching off far into the distance.

June 2018

My experience on outreach this summer with the legal aid team was one of my first and most visceral encounters with the spatiality of power on an industrial-scale farming operation. The proximity of the two dwellings I saw (both bordered the same large complex of fields) rendered their disparities even more striking. Size and grandeur were not the only notable differences; the worker housing was low-lying and nearly invisible from the road, while the mansion, presumably occupied by the farm owner, sprawled atop one of the highest points in the surrounding landscape, on display and positioned as if to oversee a domain. The area around the farmworkers' trailer was draped in evidence of manual labor, while the architecture and position of the white house on the hill evoked a romantic aesthetic, a distinctly southern image of wealth and leisure. The owner's mansion calls upon what scholar Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern terms the "Agrarian Imaginary."¹ The house, and its relationship to the surrounding geography, invokes the notion of plantation space I use as a theoretical framework, and in doing so, calls upon a very partial, place-based agricultural history, one steeped in whiteness, domination, and invisible labor.

This encounter with what I understand to be a modern day embodiment of plantation space serves as an emotional touchstone for the historical investigation that is the work of this chapter. It is precisely because of the incomplete history of southern agriculture I understand the mansion on the hill to resurrect that I look to the deeper history of this place. What stories does the plantation aesthetic leave unspoken? Who labored on this land and under what conditions? What forces brought them here and bound them to this place or drove them away? What structures of power are architected into invisibility behind white columns and a thin veil of trees? How might this lineage be traced into the present and mapped onto the lived experiences of

¹ Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern. *Challenging the Agrarian Imaginary*, 89.

farmworkers today?

This chapter undertakes a chronological examination of agricultural labor in the Southeastern United States, tracing the history of this place through iterative generations of exploitive farming practices and the importation of foreign labor. The timeline is divided not into distinct historical periods, but into an approximately chronological exploration of overlapping and interweaving labor systems and power structures as follows: white indentured servitude, slave plantations, convict-lease and sharecropping under Jim Crow, twentieth century farmworker migrations, guestworker importation, and the ongoing legacy of NAFTA. The labor timeline is followed by a brief discussion of key shifts and continuities in power relations across time and space in the agricultural South. Finally, I analyze relevant components of the timeline through my theoretical framework, using the notions of plantation space and the space of nonexistence as dual lenses to help me decipher and interpret the particular forms of exploitation and dehumanization faced by farm laborers in the South throughout history. In the broader framework of my thesis as a whole, I examine the history of agricultural labor in order to unearth the connections between modern day farm labor practices and their historical roots, and to lay the foundation for my final analysis of farmworker dignity as a form of resistance to living histories of exploitation.

*“Every time we sit at a table to enjoy the fruits and grain and vegetables from
Our good earth, remember that they come from the work of men and women and
children who have been exploited for generations”*

- Cesar Chavez, Co-Founder, United Farm Workers²

I. Timeline of Agricultural Labor in the Southeast

² “United States Farmworker Factsheet”

The following chronological timeline of agriculture in the South is not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, I look to defining systems, programs, and landmark events to scaffold a basic understanding of the character and trajectory of southern agriculture and to understand its changes and continuities through time. I focus specifically on the history of labor, rather than the more extensively documented history of farm economies, crop production, or farming technologies, though these stories are all inevitably intertwined, in order to uncover a deeper, often concealed history of the lives and experiences of the people who worked the land.

My intention throughout this thesis is to foreground the perspectives of migrant farmworkers and others who have supplied farm labor in the South throughout history. However, because this chapter is intended primarily as a structural analysis of institutions and power relations, I draw upon historical and sociological accounts more so than the firsthand narratives of labor experiences that can be found in other chapters. One challenge I encountered during the research process was that of finding sources that document even a basic history of agricultural labor in the U.S. from European colonization until the present day. The two timelines that I did find were both part of informational flyers available on the website of organizations involved in farmworker advocacy. While they offer a very useful chronology, neither of the flyers contains extensive detail or analysis, nor do they focus specifically on the South. Most historical or analytical sources I found address one specific time period or labor system with sparse analysis of its relationship to the overall timeline of agriculture. This dearth of material seems to suggest that, apart from members of the farmworker movement, few scholars or historians are doing the conceptual work of linking the sequential events and moments of U.S. agricultural history and considering it as a cohesive whole. And I was unable to find a single source that documents that history in detail in the specific context of the

Southeast. That is exactly the work I hope this section might accomplish. The following timeline is a patchwork assembly of various moments and systems in southern agricultural labor compiled from the work of numerous authors, historians, and farmworker organizations; I use it to construct a cohesive, narrative understanding of changes and continuities in agriculture in the Southeast over time and to shed light on the history of labor, the deeper history that so often goes unseen.

White Labor and Indentured Servitude

A system of indentured servitude provided the principal body of labor in the earliest days of British Colonial America. People from non-wealthy backgrounds in England who sought passage to the Americas could contract their labor to a specific patron, agreeing to work for a fixed number of years in exchange for transport across the Atlantic. Once indentured, servants were entirely under the control of their patron, and their contract could be sold or traded freely to other patrons. While the work of indentured servants was often arduous and their living conditions menial, their position was critically different than that of enslaved people in that their patrons owned their labor and not their persons; at the end of their agreed upon period of indenture, servants became free.

The first documented instances of indentured servitude on British-colonized land in the Americas occurred in Virginia about a decade after the first British settlements in Jamestown.³ Historians estimate that as many as three-quarters of the white people who settled the British colony of Virginia before 1700 arrived under conditions of indenture.⁴ This significant influx of servants responded to an increasing demand for agricultural labor as colonizers sought to

³ David W. Galenson. *White Servitude in Colonial America*, 3.

⁴ David W. Galenson. *White Servitude in Colonial America*, 3.

cultivate the vast swaths of land they gained access to through the often violent displacement of indigenous peoples. Economist and historian David Galenson argues that indentured servitude laid the groundwork for slavery by establishing an economic system readily designed for export-based profits and a bound labor force. He quotes historian Eric Williams, describing “white servitude” as the “historic base” upon which the particular form of slavery that developed in British Colonial America was founded.⁵ Galenson’s arguments are useful to my inquiry in that they help me build an understanding of indentured servitude as a critical early link in the long chain of imported, exploited labor that defines the United States’ agricultural history.

Plantation Slavery

For over two hundred years, slavery played a major role in shaping the economy, society, and ecology of the Southern United States. Throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth century, enslaved people were forcibly transported from Africa across the Atlantic to fill labor shortages as the availability of indentured labor failed to keep up with the rapidly expanding American agricultural economy.⁶ The earliest recorded instance of slavery in what is now the United States was in 1619 in the British Colony of Jamestown, Virginia.⁷ Slavery as a legally-endorsed institution continued until June 19th, 1865, the day the last enslaved people of African descent in Galveston, Texas learned of their emancipation.⁸ Though this date, celebrated today in Black communities across the U.S. as “Juneteenth,” marked the end of the official,

⁵ David W. Galenson. *White Servitude in Colonial America*, 4.

⁶ Lisa Braman. "A Brief History of American Farm Labor."

⁷ National Geographic Education Staff. "A History of Slavery in the United States."

⁸ Taylor, Charles Andrew. *Juneteenth: A Celebration of Freedom*, 3.

institutionalized use of slave labor,⁹ the legacy of slavery can be traced through the subsequent systems and farm labor practices that make up the ensuing agricultural history of the southern United States.

In the South, plantations arose as the dominant form of slavery. Though plantations varied in size and structure, they were all fundamentally based on the exploitation of the unfree labor of enslaved people, many of whom had been forcibly displaced and transported to the site of the plantation in bondage. Southern plantations were managed through intensive surveillance and the often violent enforcement of a rigid social hierarchy of white supremacy.¹⁰ Individual plantations varied widely in scale, but they generally covered large swaths of agricultural land and cultivated a single cash-crop such as cotton, tobacco, or rice, that was bound for export to global markets.¹¹ Usually plantations and the enslaved people who labored on them were considered the property of a single planter or family.¹²

In his book, *The American Peasantry*, Ronald E. Seavoy provides a useful characterization of plantation social structures and practices of coercion and control. The author describes efficiency of labor exploitation as the most pressing interests of planters.¹³ Seavoy argues that the overseer, the principle means employed by planters to maintain control over enslaved workers, was their most highly valued asset.¹⁴ The author recounts the ways in which direct violence and intimidation, as well as more subtle use of preferential treatment, all

⁹ Taylor, Charles Andrew. *Juneteenth: A Celebration of Freedom*, 3-4.

¹⁰ "Plantations." In *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, 407.

¹¹ "Plantations." In *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, 408.

¹² "Plantations." In *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, 408.

¹³ Ronald E. Seavoy. *The American Peasantry*, 15.

¹⁴ Ronald E. Seavoy. *The American Peasantry*, 15.

functioned as technologies of control used by overseers and planters on the plantation complex. Seavoy draws a parallel between the socio-spatial arrangement of plantations and that of prisons, suggesting that planters found it strategic to locate housing for enslaved populations in isolated areas in order to cultivate dependency and further control enslaved people's access to resources and information without use of direct force.¹⁵ The author highlights the overt dehumanization enslaved people faced on the part of plantation owners. He references a passage from a letter written by Thomas Jefferson in which the Virginia planter discusses the foodstuffs provided for "every animal on the farm except [the enslaved workers]," suggesting an equivalency between the workers and his livestock.¹⁶ And yet, in the midst of such a brutal, coercive environment, Seavoy also indicates that enslaved people on plantations constantly practiced covert resistance by means such as religious practices and the independent cultivation of crops to sell.¹⁷ Thus the author offers a useful characterization of the pervasive strategies of surveillance and control that form the structure of the plantation complex, while highlighting the ubiquity and persistence of subversive practices employed by enslaved populations.

Drawing upon the work of Edgar Thompson, sociologist Thomas J. Durant, Jr. elaborates a framework for understanding plantations through four key components. Durant Jr. describes the plantation as in part an institution of settlement, characterized by "the ecological and demographic arrangement of a new population over a given territory."¹⁸ This highlights the role of plantation agriculture not as after-effect of British colonization of American indigenous lands, but rather as a tool strategically deployed in the process of settlement. Durant Jr. also highlights

¹⁵ Ronald E. Seavoy. *The American Peasantry*, 16.

¹⁶ Ronald E. Seavoy. *The American Peasantry*, 22.

¹⁷ Ronald E. Seavoy. *The American Peasantry*, 16-30.

¹⁸ Thomas J. Durant, Jr. "The Slave Plantation Revisited," 3.

the interwoven economic, political, and cultural components of the plantation complex, suggesting that the institution cannot be distilled down to a reductive economic model or a simple set of social norms. Durant, Jr.'s arguments, in conversation with the vivid historical characterization provided by the sources considered above, helps me formulate an understanding of the southern slave plantation as a complex assemblage of relationships, a highly social and deeply political economic institution predicated on the strict racial stratification of white supremacy.

Considered together, these historical analyses of plantation slavery allow me to identify the simultaneous isolation, coercion, and dehumanization that plantation owners deployed as tools to enhance their ability to exploit displaced, unfree labor for profit, while highlighting the prevalence of enslaved people's subversive practices of resistance.

Reconstruction and the Jim Crow Era

Many authors and historians trace the legacy of plantation slavery beyond legal emancipation and the end of the Civil War. Immediately following emancipation, the Southern states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia each established versions of a set of harsh discriminatory laws known as the Black Codes.¹⁹ These laws reflected the desperation of white southern lawmakers to control the agricultural labor force; they served to block Black land ownership and inhibit the movement of Black laborers via arbitrary vagrancy laws.²⁰ In some states, Black Codes included provisions demanding special permits for Black people to seek employment in any sector other than

¹⁹ "Black Codes." *Dictionary Plus History*.

²⁰ Ronald E. Seavoy. *The American Peasantry*, 163.

agriculture.²¹ These laws prevented formerly enslaved people in the South from enjoying full citizenship and functioned to perpetuate the racialized system of control and agricultural labor exploitation of antebellum slavery.²² Though the Black Codes were overturned by congress in 1866 via the Civil Rights Act, states in the South soon replaced them with a new generation of discriminatory legislation that came to be known as Jim Crow.²³

In the latter part of the 19th century and on into the 20th century, a new form of institutionalized racial control known as convict-leasing was used to extract the labor of Black people in the Jim Crow South. Under this system, people convicted of even very minor crimes could be rented to individuals or companies and forced to labor without pay. Policies were put into place to restrict leasing to Black inmates, leading to a system author George J. Day deems a “functional replacement for slavery”²⁴ Systems of convict-leasing varied significantly state by state, but farms, including large-scale sugarcane and cotton plantations, often made use of this readily available source of free labor.²⁵ Convict leasing was enormously profitable for state treasuries and prison systems, as well as for the companies that leased the convicts, providing a means to build wealth off unfree Black labor.²⁶

Another principal mode of exploitation of labor in the Jim Crow South took the form of debt peonage, and its specific agricultural manifestation: sharecropping. Designed by white landowners in the South in response to the abolition of slavery, sharecropping reigned as the

²¹ *Timeline of Agricultural Labor in the US.*

²² Finkelman, Paul. "Black Codes," 254-255.

²³ "Black Codes." *Dictionary Plus History.*

²⁴ George J. Day. "Convict Leasing," 2.

²⁵ George J. Day. "Convict Leasing," 2.

²⁶ George J. Day. "Convict Leasing," 2.

dominant model for the cultivation of labor-intensive cash crops such as cotton and tobacco.²⁷ Sharecropping gets its name from the arrangement by which plantation owners would rent thirty to forty acres of land to individual tenants or families in exchange for a share of their crops.²⁸ This system required that landowners provide land, housing, food, and other living expenses on a credit that would be paid off with crops come harvest. Though a rather simple mechanism, sharecropping became a very effective tool by which white landowners, by paying very little for crops, could force tenants into inescapable cycles of debt and dependency.²⁹

Though white plantation owners in the South engaged in sharecropping arrangements with both black tenants and poor white tenants, forcing both into exploitive conditions reminiscent of indentured servitude, historian Jerry W. Ward argues that Black sharecroppers faced a unique and compound form of oppression. He posits that a deeply entrenched system of racial segregation, maintained through intimidation and violence, combined with the effective disenfranchisement of southern Black voters to intensify the exploitation faced by Black tenants in particular.³⁰ Thus racialized violence and voicelessness compounded the economic exploitation experienced by black sharecroppers and led to what Black author and educator Booker T. Washington described in 1888 as “a kind of slavery that is in one sense as bad as the slavery of antebellum days.”³¹

In his book *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South*, Pete Daniel explores the roots and impact of the agricultural system that emerged in the postbellum South. He draws parallels

²⁷ Jerry W. Ward. *The Richard Wright Encyclopedia*, 350.

²⁸ Ward. *The Richard Wright Encyclopedia*, 349

²⁹ Ward. *The Richard Wright Encyclopedia*, 349.

³⁰ Jerry W. Ward. *The Richard Wright Encyclopedia*, 350.

³¹ Pete Daniel. *The Shadow of Slavery*, ix.

to debt-based labor structures that emerged in Latin America and the Philippines as transitional systems in the context of shifting slave economies.³² Daniel's comparative analysis yields an understanding of peonage, and by extension sharecropping, as a means by which white landowners could maintain control over their tenants and withhold from them the basic rights of mobility and economic autonomy.

Put into conversation with one another, these various characterizations of agricultural labor systems and practices in the Jim Crow South illuminate certain recurrent themes. One such motif is the use of discriminatory laws and penal institutions to exert control over the agricultural labor force; another is the extraction of profit under conditions of exploitation maintained either by state force or carefully architected laborer dependence. This examination of institutions and practices in the Jim Crow South also suggests that white southern lawmakers and landowners found Black mobility and land ownership particularly threatening to the exploitive power structure they sought to maintain. The above historical investigation sheds light on the way Jim Crow era regulations and practices shaped the South's relationship to agriculture. The emergent themes and patterns bear remembering as I move to an examination of landmark events and overarching trends that defined agricultural labor in the South throughout the twentieth century and into the present day.

Farmworkers in Flux

The early part of the twentieth century saw an era of significant upheaval in agriculture across the United States. Dramatic inflation in crop prices during World War One in response to a "war boom," followed by a cycle of overproduction and an equally dramatic drop in prices

³² Daniel. *The Shadow of Slavery*, x-xi.

after the war marked the early start of the Great Depression in the agricultural South.³³ The economic hardship this brought about was redoubled in the southeast by a massive boll weevil infestation of cotton crops in the region that caused a reduction of crop yields by approximately two-thirds in the span of two years (1921-1923).³⁴ Author Cindy Hahamovitch argues that this rapid shift in crop prices played an integral role in sparking migratory labor patterns of predominantly Black agricultural workers (many former sharecroppers) who joined the growing ranks of the “permanent[ly] transient” that moved seasonally along the East Coast in search of work.³⁵ This period of economic hardship and out-migration marks the rise of seasonal farm labor employment and forced mobility for many farmworkers in and around the South; the late 1910s and early 1920s gave rise to a phenomena known as the East Coast Migrant Stream that is still considered an existent pattern in farm labor today.³⁶

This regional migratory impetus, caused by economic and environmental disasters that hit in the twenties and only worsened in effect with the stock market crash of 1929,³⁷ is also considered part of a broader exodus of Black people from the rural South to the industrial North.³⁸ This “epic movement,” known as the Great Migration (divided by some into first and second migrations), spanned from the early 1900s to 1970 and marked the massive geographic shift of Black populations in the United States from an overwhelmingly Southern, rural demographic to a largely urban group that congregated especially in northern industrial centers.³⁹

³³ Cindy Hahamovitch. *The Fruits of Their Labor*, 113

³⁴ Cindy Hahamovitch. *The Fruits of Their Labor*, 113.

³⁵ Hahamovitch. *The Fruits of Their Labor*, 113-115.

³⁶ “Regional Stream Forums”

³⁷ Hahamovitch. *The Fruits of Their Labor*, 114.

³⁸ Jerry W. Ward. *The Richard Wright Encyclopedia*, 158.

³⁹ Ward. *The Richard Wright Encyclopedia*, 158.

This great mobilization was largely in response to economic hardship and racial discrimination in the South, and reflected a dramatic drop in the number of Black people employed in agriculture.⁴⁰

To fully understand the causes and impact of the Great Migration and the rise of seasonal migrant farm labor on the east coast, it is important to consider the landmark pieces of federal legislation that shaped agriculture in the first half of the twentieth century. In the 1930s, as the nation reeled from economic collapse and the dust bowl caused dramatic shifts in agriculture in the plains, the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration put forth a number of legislative responses intended to support struggling farms. These included the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938 that subsidized farmers in the South not to plant a portion of their fields.⁴¹ Intended to increase crop values by reducing the flooding of the market, this policy backfired for farm laborers by leading to fewer jobs in agriculture, a trend that was compounded as farmers used the government money to increase mechanization in the fields.⁴²

Also in the 1930s, as Roosevelt's progressive "New Deal" policies set standards for the health, safety, and rights of industrial laborers in the United States, a motif farmworker advocates deem "agricultural exceptionalism" began to emerge.⁴³ The term speaks to a recurrent theme of the exclusion of agricultural workers from protections provided for other sectors of the workforce. Nearly all of the labor legislation passed in the 1930s, including the hugely impactful Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, exempted agricultural workers from their protections.⁴⁴ This

⁴⁰ "The Second Great Migration"

⁴¹ "The Second Great Migration"

⁴² "The Second Great Migration"

⁴³ "United States Farmworker Factsheet"

⁴⁴ *The Human Cost of Food*, 140-141.

resulted in farmworker exclusion from the following labor protections (exclusions that are still in effect today): minimum wage and child labor laws, right to overtime pay, and, perhaps most importantly, the right to collective bargaining.⁴⁵ Though some of these exemptions have since been amended on the state level or changed to include workers on large farms,⁴⁶ they have had the lasting legacy of putting farmworkers at a structural disadvantage in the workplace and causing agricultural labor conditions to lag far behind those in other protected industries.⁴⁷

The logic of agricultural exceptionalism is deeply rooted in the racialized history of agriculture in the South.⁴⁸ In order to appease southern democrats and garner support for his New Deal policies, Roosevelt accommodated the wishes of racist white lawmakers from the South who wanted to exempt agricultural work, a primarily Black occupation at that time in the South, from labor protections.⁴⁹ These legislative exemptions demonstrate the ongoing coercive influence of strategies of racial control that shaped agricultural labor throughout the twentieth century and largely still remain in effect today.

Overall, this period in the history of southern agricultural labor was marked by sweeping mobilizations and landmark legal events that served to systematically disadvantage farmworker populations. The impetus behind these developments indicates the profound degree to which racism and racial hierarchies have shaped the agricultural system in the South throughout history, with impacts reaching on into the present day.

⁴⁵ “United States Farmworker Factsheet”

⁴⁶ “United States Farmworker Factsheet”

⁴⁷ *The Human Cost of Food*, 141.

⁴⁸ *The Human Cost of Food*, 140.

⁴⁹ *The Human Cost of Food*, 143

Imported Labor and Federal Guestworker Programs

The importation of foreign labor to power the agricultural system has been a clear trend throughout history across the United States. White indentured servitude and the enslavement of Black people are two clear examples that profoundly shaped agriculture in the South, but because the Southern farm labor system does not exist in a vacuum, it is important to also recognize other immigrant groups whose presence had a significant impact on agriculture in the United States. The end of the Mexican-American war in 1848 prompted a significant trend of migrant laborers crossing the border from Mexico to seek temporary employment on farms in border states.⁵⁰ The population of Mexican-born migrant workers on Southwest and West Coast farms experienced various ebbs and flows in response to job opportunities and immigration policies, but their presence did not stretch across the nation until the implementation of federal programs later in the twentieth century.⁵¹ Beginning in the 1860s and lasting into the 1930s, Asian immigrants composed a significant portion of the agricultural workforce in California.⁵² The initial wave of Chinese workers were replaced by Japanese workers when the Chinese workers began to organize collectively.⁵³ And when Japanese workers began to organize, they were in turn replaced by Filipino workers.⁵⁴ Additionally, in the Northeast, French-Canadian and Italian immigrant populations supplied much of the agricultural labor at the turn of the twentieth century.⁵⁵ It is important to note this history of imported farm labor because, though it

⁵⁰ “Timeline of Agricultural Labor in the US”

⁵¹ “Timeline of Agricultural Labor in the US”

⁵² “Farmworkers and Immigration”

⁵³ “Farmworkers and Immigration”

⁵⁴ “Farmworkers and Immigration”

⁵⁵ “Farmworkers and Immigration”

falls largely outside the South, it serves as the backdrop, the historical context from which federal guestworker programs, programs that have had a profound impact on southern agriculture, emerged.

The first federal guestworker program, initiated during World War One in response to wartime labor shortages, contracted more than 70,000 workers from Mexico to work temporarily, usually for six months at a time, on farms in the United States.⁵⁶ The program, which was initiated in 1917 at the demand of growers, was terminated soon after the end of the war in 1921.⁵⁷ The next, and much more extensively documented federal guestworker program was known as the Bracero or “strong arm” program. In September, 1942, again in response to wartime labor shortages, the United States entered into an agreement with the Mexican government under which Mexican nationals received temporary work visas for the express purpose of seasonal agricultural labor.⁵⁸ Until the program’s expiration in 1964, more than 4.5 million Mexican laborers were brought in as bracero workers.⁵⁹ Upon its expiration, Congress chose not to renew the program after significant media exposure of the brutal conditions under which bracero workers lived and labored.⁶⁰ Farm labor during these periods was typified by minimal worker protections, low wages, and little to no enforcement of health and safety regulations. Even under the auspices of federal guestworker programs, growers were often not held accountable to contracts, and instances of wage-theft and failure to pay for return

⁵⁶ “Timeline of Agricultural Labor in the US”

⁵⁷ *The Human Cost of Food*, 115.

⁵⁸ *The Human Cost of Food*, 116.

⁵⁹ Richard B. Craig. *The Bracero Program*, ix.

⁶⁰ *The Human Cost of Food*, 116

transportation were rampant.⁶¹ Another guestworker program known as the H-2 program ran from 1952 until the mid-1980s, though it saw relatively little use until the end of the Bracero program.⁶² Even as the H-2 program began to be used more widely, the federal government tried to disincentivize employers from using it in favor of hiring domestic labor.⁶³ Attitudes towards the employment of guestworkers started to shift in the 1980s as the Department of Labor under the Ronald Reagan Administration began to weaken and stop enforcing many of the H-2 worker protections.⁶⁴ The H-2A program described at length in chapter two was born of this political moment, going into effect in June of 1987.⁶⁵ The H-2A program is yet another iteration of what quickly becomes a familiar structure of federally imported agricultural labor.

Simultaneous to these federal programs, a whole host of foreign-born laborers entered the agricultural industry on the East Coast and in the South. Immigrants from Jamaica, Barbados, and the Bahamas supplied much of the labor on sugar cane, vegetable and citrus farms in the region, while Puerto Rican workers replaced Italian immigrants in agriculture in the Northeast.⁶⁶ In the Southeast specifically, more than 100,000 World War Two prisoners of war from Europe were forced to work in agriculture.⁶⁷ Later, largely in response to labor shortages due to the Great Migration, an influx of immigrants from Latin America came to fill jobs on farms in the South. In 1986, a piece of federal legislation known as the Immigration Reform and Control act, granted legal residency status to more than three million previously undocumented immigrants,

⁶¹ *The Human Cost of Food*, 115

⁶² *The Human Cost of Food*, 116-7

⁶³ *The Human Cost of Food*, 117-8

⁶⁴ *The Human Cost of Food*, 118.

⁶⁵ *The Human Cost of Food*, 118.

⁶⁶ “Farmworkers and Immigration”

⁶⁷ “Farmworkers and Immigration”

roughly half of whom worked in agriculture.⁶⁸ Soon after, many of the newly documented residents left the agricultural industry, indicating that such work was not as desirable in the context of the broader variety of opportunities available to individuals with legal residency.⁶⁹ The jobs these workers vacated were soon filled by undocumented workers.⁷⁰ These various immigrant groups, along with all of the foreign-born workers who, throughout history, have worked on farms either by choice or by force, weave together the complex tapestry of immigrant farm labor that has defined the agricultural system in the South and in the nation as a whole.

This examination of specific programs and instances of imported farm labor illuminates a number of striking patterns. The importation of foreign-born labor emerges as a continuous theme, formally institutionalized through federal guestworker programs or more surreptitiously employed in the hiring of undocumented workers. The iterative cycling through of Asian worker populations on West Coast farms demonstrates the threat growers saw in workers becoming organized. The growers' response exemplifies the use of worker replacement by workers from a different ethnic group as a strategy to quell worker power. Overall, the time period examined in this section shows a shift towards a greater mobility of farm labor in the South, as more migrants shuttled between two or more locations or joined the East Coast Migrant Stream. Finally, the programs and labor trends examined above indicate the prominent role of the U.S. federal government and agencies such as the Department of Labor in shaping the living and working conditions of laborers through guestworker programs and enforcement of regulations. And with these observations, I move along the timeline of agricultural labor history in the South to an

⁶⁸ "Farmworkers and Immigration"

⁶⁹ "Farmworkers and Immigration"

⁷⁰ "Farmworkers and Immigration"

examination of the impact of a specific economic policy on farm labor at the turn of the twenty-first century.

The Resounding Impact of NAFTA

The final event I explore in my timeline of Agricultural Labor in the South is the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, and its impact on farm labor both in Mexico and the United States. Prompted by the Mexican Government's desire to emerge as a leader in the global economy, and the interests of both the U.S. and multilateral banks in market freedom, NAFTA marked a major step toward trade liberalization in the western hemisphere.⁷¹ At its most basic, NAFTA represents a significant opening of markets between Mexico, Canada, and the United States, one in which agricultural trade features prominently.⁷² The agreement led to the incremental opening of U.S. markets to receive Mexican exports of fruit, vegetables, beans, apples, meat and dairy products, and the opening of Mexican markets to receive U.S. sugar, cotton, and grain exports, including federally subsidized corn.⁷³

In her binational ethnography *The Farmworkers' Journey*, author Ann Aurelia López examines the impact of NAFTA on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. She describes how the trade agreement resulted in huge quantities of government-subsidized surplus corn from the U.S. flooding the market in Mexico, leaving small-scale Mexican corn farmers unable to compete.⁷⁴ López explains how NAFTA has caused rural Mexican subsistence farmers to lose their

⁷¹ Tom Barry. *Zapata's Revenge*, 65-66.

⁷² Tom Barry. *Zapata's Revenge*, 66.

⁷³ Tom Barry. *Zapata's Revenge*, 66.

⁷⁴ Ann Aurelia López, *The Farmworkers' Journey*, 191.

livelihood, forcing them to seek economic opportunity elsewhere.⁷⁵ That ‘elsewhere’ is often the United States. NAFTA continues to serve as a major push factor for Mexican immigration to the U.S. Of the two million Mexican agricultural workers put out of work by the free trade agreement, a significant (but difficult to measure) portion have crossed the border to pursue farm labor in the U.S. as undocumented immigrants.⁷⁶

Through her cross-border ethnographic work, López highlights the importance of corn and generations-old cultivation practices to traditional culture in many rural areas of Mexico, suggesting that the blow NAFTA struck against Mexican subsistence farmers has been at once economic and cultural.⁷⁷ Meanwhile, on the other side of the border, López describes how NAFTA’s market liberalizing effects have brought a period of “economic boom” to largely U.S. based transnational corporations.⁷⁸ Her rendering of the situation illuminates NAFTA as an economic arrangement in which U.S. based corporations profit off rural Mexican populations, driving those same people into farm labor in the US. Her arguments help me understand NAFTA as a new, neoliberal iteration of a familiar power dynamic of exploitation, one that continues to profoundly shape the landscape of agricultural labor in the U.S. today.

II. Power Shifts and Continuities throughout Time

The purpose of this section is to distill the findings of my historical examination into useful themes and trends ready for analysis in the following chapter. To do so, I move beyond the largely descriptive work of the timeline and begin to question: what profound changes and

⁷⁵ Ann Aurelia López, *The Farmworkers’ Journey*, 191.

⁷⁶ “Farmworkers and Immigration”

⁷⁷ Ann Aurelia López, *The Farmworkers’ Journey*, 191.

⁷⁸ Ann Aurelia López, *The Farmworkers’ Journey*, 190.

fundamental continuities mark the history of agricultural labor in the South? How have power relations and specific practices impacted the structure and quality of farmworker experiences over time?

I begin my discussion with an examination of the clearly exploitive nature of labor relations that can be traced through various forms and iterations along the entirety of the timeline. The baseline condition of lack of economic autonomy is one of the most salient, consistent traits among all the populations who have provided labor on farms. The conditions of that economic dependence – whether it was written into indenture contracts or tenant agreements in the cases of indentured servitude and sharecropping, or brutally enforced through physical bondage as in the cases of plantation slavery and convict leasing – varied greatly, and while those variations deserve consideration, it is evident that a consistent degree of laborer unfreedom permeates this history at every turn.

This theme of economic exploitation begs scrutiny of the exploiting party. Chronologically, the entity profiting most significantly from the exploitation of agricultural labor transitions from individual plantation owners, to sharecropping land-owners, to companies and state governments under the convict lease system, to individual growers, and eventually to transnational corporations under NAFTA. This suggests a strong role for private individuals in profiting off of exploitive agricultural labor practices, as well as a perhaps growing role for companies and corporations making financial gains off the back of laborers.

The exploitive economic conditions that are continuous throughout the timeline cannot be decoupled from the logic of racial control that makes itself apparent as a fundamental organizing force throughout the agricultural history of the South. Dehumanization of the racial other is consistent across systems and historical moments in every element explored after white

indentured servitude. My analysis suggests certain differences between the racialized treatment of workers of different ethnic and racial identities, and these differences deserve nuanced analysis. Anti-blackness shows itself to be particularly brutal and violent through the plantation and convict lease systems. Racism against Latin American immigrants shows a complex interplay between notions of nationality, citizenship, and race. These, as well as other forms of racism that haunt the history of southern agriculture, make clear the need for explicit interrogation of white supremacy and its role in shaping farm labor in the South today.

A complex relationship between farmworkers and mobility becomes apparent over the course of the timeline. Laborer mobility was severely restricted under indentured servitude, plantation slavery, convict lease, and sharecropping, composing a fundamental element of those workers' oppression. The development of the East Coast Migrant stream nuances this understanding, as mobility came to represent economic instability and uncertainty of employment. NAFTA further complicates my understanding of farmworker mobility by adding the component of culture-extinguishing displacement as another cause of farmworker movement.

Farmworker resistance, and the fear it causes in those exploiting them, also arises as a recurrent theme. This topic will be addressed at much greater length in chapter four, but even this broad historical analysis of labor relations makes apparent, from the plantation to the modern industrial agricultural fields, the presence of worker struggles for agency through collective action. I move next to an analysis of the timeline through the theoretical lenses of plantation space and the space of nonexistence in order to further elucidate the particular forms of exploitation and dehumanization faced by farm laborers in the South and illuminate their durability across time.

III. Plantation Space and the Space of Nonexistence in Southern Agricultural Labor

History

An examination of the history of farm labor in the South yields evidence of the presence and persistence of plantation space and the space of nonexistence across time in the Southern agricultural system. In this section I articulate that presence, detailing moments throughout the timeline that demonstrate specific characteristics of plantation space and the space of nonexistence. I do so in order to further characterize the themes and continuities described in the previous section and to prepare myself for a final analysis of farmworker dignity as a potential mode of resistance to the ongoing history of agricultural exploitation in the South.

The key elements of plantation space that I see evidenced throughout the history of agricultural labor in the South are the forceful importation of labor, the drive for efficiency and profit, an underlying colonial logic of racial control achieved by violence and exploitation, and the denial of the full personhood of the laborers. Under indentured servitude and plantation slavery, as under the Bracero, H-2 and H-2A programs, agricultural labor has consistently been provided by workers from outside of the U.S. Some of these workers were brought under conditions of bondage, while others were incentivized by economic conditions like those under NAFTA that applied a different kind of force and drove them to the U.S. in pursuit of a viable livelihood.

The proto-capitalist drive for efficiency and profit characteristic of my concept of plantation space is also apparent throughout the timeline of Southern agricultural labor. It is evident in the very structure of systems of indenture, slavery, and convict lease in which the patrons, planters, and prisons were able to accumulate wealth off the back of their unpaid labor

force. It appears in the carefully architected indebtedness of the sharecropping system, and likewise in the consistently low wages across Bracero and other guestworker programs that enabled farm owners to maximize their profits by paying as little as possible to their workers.

The plantation space's logic of racial domination permeates the timeline of agricultural history at every turn. Described in the previous section as the dehumanization of the racial other, this logic emerges in the form of violent exploitation of Black workers in the plantation, sharecropping, and convict-lease systems, and turns its vitriol primarily against Latin American immigrants under guestworker importation and NAFTA. Applying the concept of plantation space here illuminates the colonial roots of this racialized exploitation, indicating that a colonial and white-supremacist order undergirds the history of agriculture in the South.

The final element of the plantation space that is evident throughout the timeline is the denial of the full personhood of agricultural laborers. This is more of an emergent quality, enacted through a combination of the other components of plantation space (importation by force, exploitive extraction of labor for profit, and racialized dehumanization). Taken together, these examples provide plentiful evidence of the presence and persistence of plantation space throughout the history of agriculture in the South. Analyzing them through the lens of plantation space illuminates a consistent logical order woven throughout the distinct moments in my timeline. This analysis will be integral to my final discussion of struggles for farmworker dignity as a potential mode of resistance to that exploitive, dehumanizing order.

The following characteristic elements of my adapted conception of Coutin's space of nonexistence are also apparent throughout the timeline of Southern agricultural labor: restricted mobility, severed social ties, and legal exclusion from full personhood. As noted in the previous section, farm owners exerted careful control over laborer mobility throughout the systems of

indentured servitude, plantation slavery, sharecropping and convict lease. And although movement was a critical component of displaced workers' experience during the Great Depression and of guestworkers' experience under the Bracero, H-2, and H-2A programs, I argue that their lack of agency over the conditions of their movement is just as indicative of the space of non-existence as the restrictions experienced by laborers at other points along the timeline.

The social ties of farm laborers have been subject to rupture throughout the agricultural history of the South. In the times of slavery, planters used the forced separation of enslaved families as a strategy of control, using division as a means to stifle resistance. Though under notably different conditions, guestworkers and immigrant laborers have also had to endure long periods of separation from their families and communities of origin. The way severed social ties among farm laborers have been built into the various forms and systems of agriculture in the South throughout time is indicative of a consistent space of nonexistence in which farm laborers have repeatedly been barred from fulfilling the basic human need for connection and social relationship.

Lastly, I argue that the various forms of legal exclusion of agricultural workers that occur throughout the timeline construct a space of nonexistence that denies the full personhood of those workers. This is evidenced by the legal denomination of each enslaved person as three-fifths of a person under the plantation system. Lack of full legal recognition can be seen in the exclusion of agricultural workers from the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 and likewise in the disenfranchisement of Black people in the Jim Crow South and of undocumented immigrant laborers and guestworkers who are denied a pathway to citizenship. Taken together, these

instances of legal exclusion form a space of nonexistence in which farm laborers in the South have been denied full personhood throughout history.

Thus a careful analysis of the key themes and continuities in the history of agricultural labor yields ample evidence of both plantation space and the space of nonexistence. I apply these theoretical lenses not merely to prove their viability as concepts, but also to illuminate how a continuous logic of plantation space and the creation and maintenance of spaces of nonexistence have worked in tandem with one another to deny the full personhood of farm laborers throughout the history of agricultural labor in the South.

This exploration of Southern farm labor history through the lenses of plantation space and the space of nonexistence will serve as a cornerstone in my final analytical discussion of this thesis; it is in the context of this history of exploitation and denied personhood and its ongoing manifestations today that I explore the potential farmworker dignity holds as mode of radical resistance.

Chapter 2: Farmworkers and Agricultural Labor in the South

Today

***Personal Reflection: Storytelling and Solidarity**

About midway through my summer internship with Student action with Farmworkers, I made the four hour drive down to South Carolina to join one of the program's documentary workshops with a group of farmworkers who were in the area for a couple of months for the watermelon harvest. I brought with me a stack of handmade zines assembled by a group of SAF student interns that included their own photos and stories alongside autobiographical pages that the participating farmworkers had created in the first stage of the documentary project. I, alongside the other interns, was returning to give each farmworker a copy of the zines they had helped create and to assist in facilitating a dialogue between the students and workers about their distinct challenges, aspirations, and what it might look like to make change in the agricultural system.

When our group first arrived at the motel that served as the farmworkers' housing, most of them were a mile down the road at the nearest laundromat. After about an hour (and a number of trips shuttling workers back to the motel) later, we all gathered in a small motel room to share dinner and continue the documentary project. We passed out the zines. The workers showed a reserved curiosity about what we had created and we all laughed at the the awkward faces everyone was making in the group picture in the centerfold.

The conversation that ensued began with a good deal of awkward silence, but when we started talking about the challenges of farmwork and asking what caused the workers to pursue jobs in the U.S. in the first place, some of them began to open up and share about their personal experiences. Many told us they had come to the U.S. to support their families back home or to

open up opportunities for a better life. Others described the difficulty of finding a steady job in Mexico (where all of the workers we spoke with were from). One younger man told us that he was working to save up money to attend a technical school and gain an advanced degree. Another shared his interest in seeing the U.S. When we asked about their experiences so far in South Carolina, some workers expressed frustration at the monotony of the work. Others proudly showed us photos and videos of the watermelon harvest and described the sense of camaraderie they felt with the other workers. Still others spoke of loneliness and missing loved ones back home.

Our line of questioning led the workers to ask in return: what brought us to that motel room in South Carolina? What motivated each of us to work for change in the agricultural system? Members of our group shared our own stories of personal or familial experience with farmwork and immigration, and of other identities and experiences that move us to work for social justice. We began to talk about the intersections between our experiences and those of the workers. The conversation turned to solidarity and the various changes we all wanted to see in the agricultural system as it exists today. A few short hours later we were driving back along backroads overhung with Spanish moss, winding our way through the South Carolina night away from the group of workers and the crowded motel room.

* * *

Something stuck with me after that night of documentary outreach, and it is exactly that something that I hope to shed light on in this chapter. The fabric of farm labor in the U.S. today is woven of countless distinct stories and experiences; its threads are the diverse needs and aspirations of complex, imperfect people doing what they can to provide for themselves and their families under challenging conditions. This chapter is intended to lift up that plurality, the

multiplicity of farmworker identities and experiences, while sketching out the systems and structures that shape agricultural labor today. In writing this chapter, I hope to maintain the sense of the full humanity that we, workers and students, shared with one another that afternoon, while uplifting the spirit of solidarity that filled the warm, stuffy air of the South Carolina motel room.

* * *

This chapter provides an overview of farm labor in the South today and attempts to offer a glimpse of the experiences of the people who make it their livelihood. In the context of my thesis as a whole this chapter is intended both to offer a necessary contextualization for my discussion of farmworker organizing, and, when analyzed through my lenses of plantation space and the space of nonexistence, to illustrate the continuity of exploitation and dehumanization of agricultural laborers throughout history and into today. As such, this chapter plays an integral role in laying the foundations for my final analysis of farmworker dignity as a means of resistance to ongoing histories of agricultural exploitation in the South.

I begin the chapter with a brief clarification of the definitions of farm labor and farmworkers that are used in this thesis, then move into a description of the demographics of the farm labor force, drawing primarily on data and interpretations sourced from federal surveys and scholarly interpretations thereof. I next provide a characterization of agricultural labor itself, offering insight into the regional specificities of farm work in the South. I then move into a more ethnographic account of farmworker lives and livelihoods, drawing information primarily from stories, experiences and quotations gathered by farmworker activists and allies, with added insight from scholars who study agricultural labor and farmworker movements. I conclude this chapter with an analysis of farm labor in the South today through the dual lenses of plantation

space and the space of nonexistence. This final discussion enables me to situate farmworker experiences today within a much longer historical lineage of Southern agricultural exploitation, allowing me to trace continuities and shifts across time.

It is important to note that the information and stories I draw upon throughout this chapter differ in scale from statistics representing the entirety of the U.S. to more regionally specific data about the South (though the states that are understood to comprise that category vary significantly across my sources) to quotations from farmworkers specific to their experiences in North Carolina. This variability of scale is largely due to the inconsistent format and scope of the available information about farmworkers, but it is also representative of the fluid nature of my thinking about place and scale in this thesis as a whole.

I. Farmworker Demographics

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimates that 1.13 million hired farmworkers provide agricultural labor in the United States.¹ That number likely falls short of reality; precise measurements are hard to come by due to the migratory nature of farmwork and the varied legal status of workers. There is no universal definition of farm labor, but for the purposes of this investigation, I understand it to include field and greenhouse work such as tractor plowing, planting, weeding, pesticide application, irrigation and harvesting, and packing work such as sorting, weighing, waxing, and packaging crops for market or storage. Workers who labor in dairy, animal meat production, and food processing often share migration patterns and experience labor inequities similar to those faced by fieldworkers and as such can also be

¹ "Farm Labor." USDA Economic Research Service. November 08, 2018.

understood to fall under the broad category of farmworkers as well.² Available data varies regarding its inclusion of workers in the dairy, meat, and food processing industries. Unless otherwise noted, numerical and demographic information referenced in this investigation should be understood to apply only to workers laboring in specifically agricultural settings (fields and packing houses).

Farmworkers in the U.S. can be understood to fall under three main categories: migrant farmworkers, seasonal farmworkers, and guestworkers.³ Migrant farmworkers are defined as any worker primarily employed in seasonal agriculture who lives in temporary housing and has traveled at least 75 miles to find employment in the U.S. As of 2012-2014, Migrant farmworkers composed less than 20% of the total agricultural labor force, a significant drop from 58% in 1996-98.⁴ Some migrant farmworkers shuttle between two primary destinations (approximately 11% of all farmworkers), while others are known as “follow the crop” workers and move year round based on crop seasons and employment availability (4%).⁵ Seasonal farmworkers also rely upon agriculture as their primary source of employment, but unlike migrant workers they remain in the same community year round. This portion of farmworkers who are considered “settled” or non-migrant had grown to over 80% of all farmworkers as of 2012-2014, up from only 42% in 1996-98.⁶

Agricultural guestworkers, often measured as a sub-set of migrant farmworkers, make up a small but growing portion of all farmworkers. Guestworkers are foreign laborers in the U.S. on

² *The Human Cost of Food: Farmworkers' Lives, Labor, and Advocacy*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002, 3

³ *The Human Cost of Food*, 3.

⁴ "Farm Labor." USDA Economic Research Service.

⁵ "Farm Labor." USDA Economic Research Service.

⁶ "Farm Labor." USDA Economic Research Service.

temporary work visas. The federal program through which agricultural employers in the U.S. can contract foreign labor is known as the H-2A agricultural guestworker program. The number of workers contracted under the H-2A program has grown dramatically in recent years, rising from 48,000 positions in 2005 to 200,000 positions in 2017.⁷ One of the stipulations of the H-2A program is that employers must prove that they have been unable to recruit workers who are U.S. citizens. Thus the dramatic rise in contracted positions in recent years indicates either a growing shortage of domestic laborers who are willing to provide manual labor in agricultural settings or inadequate efforts to recruit domestic workers on the part of employers due to the preferability of imported labor (likely a combination of the two).⁸ H-2A workers stay in the U.S. for an average of 6.4 months and are guaranteed housing, transportation, and an hourly wage that varies on a state by state basis (ranging from \$10.63 to \$14.12 in 2018).⁹ H-2A workers are legally barred from seeking work in the U.S. beyond the job they were contracted for, in effect binding them to a single employer.¹⁰ In combination, H-2A guestworkers' short stay and their dependence on a single employer set the stage for exploitive labor conditions and present unique challenges for farmworker organizing.

The National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS), conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor, offers extensive demographic data on farmworkers. It is important to note that these survey results are by no means comprehensive; their indications must be understood as extrapolations based on the responses of a small sample of crop farmworkers from across the U.S. The most recent survey was collected in 2013-14 and gathered responses from 4,235 hired

⁷ "Farm Labor." USDA Economic Research Service.

⁸ "Farm Labor." USDA Economic Research Service. And *The Human Cost of Food*, 4.

⁹ "Farm Labor." USDA Economic Research Service.

¹⁰ *The Human Cost of Food*, 133.

farmworkers by means of face-to-face interviews.¹¹ Of workers surveyed, 68% were born in Mexico, 27% were born in the U.S., 4% were born in Central America, and the remaining 1% were born in a variety of other countries in South America, the Caribbean, Asia, and the Pacific Islands.¹² Though Mexico is still the primary nation of origin for hired farmworkers in the U.S., the portion of workers born there has dropped significantly in recent years, down from 80% in 1999-2000.¹³ As of 2013-2014, 80% of farmworkers surveyed by NAWS self-identified as Hispanic, and 5% self-identified as indigenous.¹⁴ 38% of respondents self-identified as white, 1% as American Indian or Alaska Native, 2% as Black or African-American, and 59% indicated their race as “Other.”¹⁵ 74% of farmworkers surveyed reported that the language they were most comfortable with was Spanish, 24% reported English, and the remaining 2% reported an indigenous language.¹⁶ In a self-evaluation of their English language skills, 27% of farmworkers indicated that they could not speak English at all, 43% marked “a little” or “somewhat,” and 31% said that they could speak English well.¹⁷ Survey results indicate workers’ English literacy is at comparable or lower levels than their speaking ability. Reporting on their documentation status, 31% of farmworkers indicated that they are U.S. citizens, 22% marked that they held legal work authorization, and 43% reported that they were unauthorized.¹⁸ This marks an overall growth in the number of U.S. citizens employed as hired farmworkers, up from 19% of farmworkers since

¹¹ Hernandez et al. “Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2013-2014,” i.

¹² Hernandez et al. “Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2013-2014,” i.

¹³ "Agricultural Workers Tables." National Agricultural Workers Survey.

¹⁴ Hernandez et al. “Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2013-2014,” i.

¹⁵ Hernandez et al. “Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2013-2014,” i.

¹⁶ Hernandez et al. “Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2013-2014,” ii.

¹⁷ Hernandez et al. “Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2013-2014,” ii.

¹⁸ "Agricultural Workers Tables." National Agricultural Workers Survey.

the early in 1999-2000, and a slight downward trend in undocumented workers, falling from 55% in 1999-2000.¹⁹

Additional demographic data collected by NAWS show that 72% of farmworkers surveyed identify as male and 28% identify as female.²⁰ The average age of surveyed farmworkers was 38, with 44% of workers indicating they were under 35 years of age and 14% marking 55 years or older.²¹ 63% of farmworkers surveyed were married, 29% were single, and 8% were separated, divorced, or widowed.²² The survey results showed that 57% of workers had children, and that, on average, farmworker parents had two children under the age of eighteen living with them. 39% of farmworkers indicated that they were living apart from their nuclear family members at the time of the survey.²³

The NAWS demographic data by no means describes farmworkers in all their complexity, but it does offer a basic sketch of defining elements that shape the experiences of farmworkers as a population. I include selected demographic data in my investigation of farmworkers in the U.S. today not only for descriptive purposes, but also to illuminate certain trends and defining characteristics that have major impacts on the lived experiences of workers and their families. The responses considered above indicate that farmworkers predominantly self-identify as Hispanic, a majority consider themselves non-white, and as a population, they were overwhelming born outside of the United States. In the socio-political context of the U.S.,

¹⁹ "Agricultural Workers Tables." National Agricultural Workers Survey.

²⁰ "Agricultural Workers Tables." National Agricultural Workers Survey.

²¹ Hernandez et al. "Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2013-2014," i.

²² Hernandez et al. "Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2013-2014," i.

²³ Hernandez et al. "Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2013-2014," ii.

the interconnected racial, ethnic, and national identities hired farmworkers hold lead them to be marked by racialized ethnic ‘otherness.’ This in turn impacts the treatment farmworkers receive at the hands of their employers and shapes the attitudes of lawmakers, voters, and consumers towards the people who provide the nation with food. Additionally, though more than half of the workers surveyed by NAWS hold legal citizenship or work authorization status, the significant portion of farmworkers who are undocumented leads to stereotypes and generalizations about agricultural workers as a whole. Undocumented status also makes workers uniquely vulnerable to exploitation because of their lack of access to resources and their fear of deportation.

The survey data collected by NAWS illuminates certain challenges that, though not universal among farmworkers, are common among the population as a whole. Low levels of English speaking ability are prevalent among the farmworkers surveyed and can lead to difficulty understanding and communicating with employers and accessing legal and health resources. High rates of farmworker parenthood suggest that many workers must stretch their paychecks to support children and families. The frequent occurrence of farmworkers living apart from their nuclear families warrants mental-health consideration. Also deserving attention is the significant portion of the farm labor force who identify as women, a figure that flags gender equity and gendered experiences in the fields as important issues in any examination of farmworker lives and work.

Though the NAWS statistics and the identities and experiences they highlight are useful indicators, I am wary of distilling a large, complex group of people down to a few simple metrics. As such, the census data provided above must be considered alongside farmworkers’ stories and lived experiences. Following a brief examination of the structure and logic of the agricultural system as it exists in the Southeast today, I attempt to paint a more nuanced picture

of farmworker lives and livelihoods portrayed, to the extent possible, from the perspectives of workers and their advocates.

II. Farm Labor in the South Today

Though increased technological advancement and mechanization have infiltrated many sectors of agriculture, hired farmworkers, sometimes working alongside machines, are integral in the system of farm labor that supplies consumers in the United States with fruit, vegetables, tobacco, and nursery plants.²⁴ The southeastern region of the U.S. has long played an important role in national agricultural production. Multiple, sometimes contradicting views exist regarding which lands and people actually constitute the South. Many surveys and reports on farms and farm labor vary widely in their delineation of geographic boundaries. In the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS), the Southeast region is understood to include Florida, Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, and South Carolina, while states such as North Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee and Kentucky are grouped in the same census category as the northernmost states on the East Coast.²⁵ Conversely, the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service breaks the region into multiple sub-groups labeled Appalachian I (NC and VA), Appalachian II (TN, KY, and WV), Delta (AR, MS, and LA), and the Southeast (AL, GA, and SC), while Florida stands alone as its own region. In this investigation, I use a loose notion of the South largely defined by the states that fought to maintain slavery during the civil war and informed by my own experience growing up in North Carolina and the understood cultural boundaries of who and what counted as Southern that I was exposed to.

²⁴ *The Human Cost of Food*, 10.

²⁵ "Agricultural Workers Tables." National Agricultural Workers Survey.

The structure and underlying logic of the agricultural system in the South cannot be fully understood without consideration of the long history of imported labor and exploitation that has marked farm labor in the region since European colonization. While Chapter 1 examines that history at length, the present discussion is meant to offer a portrait of the geographic organization, economic conditions, and labor relations that define farming in the South today.

The southeastern U.S. produces a significant portion of the produce, meat, and poultry that feed the entire nation. A number of the largest poultry and hog producers operate primarily in the South, and farm-owners take advantage of the region's moderate temperatures through extensive cultivation of fresh fruits and vegetables on large farms from Florida to Virginia.²⁶ Crops grown in the region that require extensive hand labor include tobacco, Christmas trees, sweet potatoes, cucumbers, apples, bell peppers, and a variety of other fruits and vegetables, as well as plants cultivated in greenhouses and nurseries.²⁷

Historically, large plantations were the dominant agricultural form in Southern deltas and coastal plains, while small subsistence farms, owned by poor whites and later by African-Americans as well, were more common in Appalachia and other mountainous areas.²⁸ Immediately following World War Two, low commodity prices and an inability to access credit drove many farmers with less than one hundred acres out of agriculture and into the textile industry.²⁹ This prompted a widespread consolidation of agricultural landholdings across the South and led to a regional farming landscape that closely resembles plantation-style agriculture. It is important to note that, though many were pushed off their lands by economic

²⁶ *The Human Cost of Food*, 14.

²⁷ "Facts about North Carolina Farmworkers." NC Farmworker Institute, 2007.

²⁸ *The Human Cost of Food*, 13.

²⁹ *The Human Cost of Food*, 13.

circumstance, small farmers still exist in the South today, and, like farmworkers, are often disadvantaged by the large-scale agribusiness model that dominates the region.³⁰

Large farming operations have emerged as the dominant model in the South and across the nation.³¹ Some, like plantations in the Antebellum South, are owned by a single family. Others belong to larger corporations. Agricultural practices have become far more industrial in nature, often mirroring factory conditions intended to maximize production and profit for the farm owners. Because the system is designed such that farm-owners' profit margins increase with more efficient, inexpensive labor, they are incentivized to provide minimal wages and benefits for the laborers they employ. As a result of the power held by growers' associations (Farm-owners often refer to themselves as growers or farmers, effectively obscuring the factory-like operations they manage by calling upon the image of a Yeoman farmer) on the local and state level across the South, many laws and policies favor agribusiness interests over those of farmworkers.³² These policies, in concert with international trade deals (such as NAFTA, discussed at length in the following chapter) and trends towards concentration of land-ownership and the loss of small subsistence farms across Latin America, must be understood as important contributing factors that shape the lives and livelihoods of farmworkers in the U.S. South today.

III. Farmworker Lives and Livelihoods

Farmworkers in the U.S. South comprise a culturally diverse group made up of people from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences. Workers seek occupation in agriculture for

³⁰ *The Human Cost of Food*, 13-14.

³¹ *The Human Cost of Food*, 13.

³² *The Human Cost of Food*, 13.

a whole host of different reasons and bring with them a wide range of skills, knowledge, family commitments, dreams, and aspirations. Rather than distill such multiplicity of experience down to a single narrative and run the risk of reinforcing stereotypes, this section provides specific information about farmworkers' lives and livelihoods garnered from the work of farmworker advocates, incorporating the voices and perspectives of farmworkers themselves when possible. The characterization of agricultural labor conditions that follows is not intended to be exhaustive; I touch upon wages, food security, living and working conditions, and access to healthcare in order to illuminate prevalent themes such as economic exploitation and structural racism that will be revisited and analyzed at depth in further chapters.

Though each worker's story is different, pursuit of economic opportunity is a nearly universal factor that drives people to seek employment as hired farmworkers. For many of the Latin American immigrants who compose the vast majority of the farm labor force, failing economies in their countries of origin, caused at least in part by U.S. interventions and neoliberal structural adjustment programs, push them towards promises of employment and higher wages in the U.S.³³ In the words of a farmworker from Craven County, North Carolina,

*"Before the free trade agreement the harvest was well paid, especially for corn and beans. But then, free trade arrived and prices went down from there. A kilo of corn now costs a peso, and what's a peso worth? Nothing... less than a quarter."*³⁴

Once they arrive in the U.S., the jobs available to immigrant workers are often those that, due to low wages and undesirable working and living conditions, U.S. citizens are unwilling to do.³⁵ From the perspective of a grower in Sampson County, North Carolina

³³ *The Human Cost of Food*, 10.

³⁴ "Farmworkers and Immigration." North Carolina Council of Churches. 2012.

³⁵ *The Human Cost of Food*, 10-11.

*“These workers are doing work that American people will not do. We depend on farmworkers, and we can’t be in business without them.”*³⁶

It is important to note that the predominantly immigrant farm labor force’s willingness to live and work under conditions many U.S. citizens consider unfavorable does not equate to an inherent disposition towards the work or an acquiescence to its hardships; rather it is indicative of a disparity in access to economic opportunity as a result of a whole host of international socio-political factors.

Among the characteristics that drive many U.S. citizens away from farm labor are consistently low wages. Attorney and farmworker advocate Marc Linder describes farmworkers in the U.S. as “an extraordinarily low paid stratum of the working class.”³⁷ According to the results of the 2017 Farm Labor Survey, the average wage for hired farmworkers was \$13.32 per hour.³⁸ The most recent NAWS data suggests that farmworkers labor an average of 44 hours per week and, as of 2013-14, individual farmworkers’ mean and median annual incomes from agricultural employment ranged between \$15,000 and \$17,499.³⁹ In the same survey, farmworker families’ mean and median annual incomes were shown to range between \$20,000 and \$24,999.⁴⁰ These wages put many farmworker families under conditions of significant economic hardship. According to NAWS, 30% of farmworkers in 2013-14 had family incomes that fell below the poverty line.⁴¹

³⁶ “Farmworkers’ Vital Contribution to North Carolina’s Economy.” NC Farmworker Institute. 2007.

³⁷ Marc Linder. *Farm Workers and the Fair Labor Standards Act: Racial Discrimination in the New Deal, 1335*.

³⁸ “Farm Labor.” USDA Economic Research Service.

³⁹ Hernandez et al. “Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2013-2014,” iii-20.

⁴⁰ Hernandez et al. “Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2013-2014,” iii.

⁴¹ Hernandez et al. “Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2013-2014,” iii.

This economic hardship in turn results in elevated levels of food insecurity among farmworkers. Health professionals define food insecurity as a “lack of access at all times, due to economic barriers, to enough food for an active and healthy lifestyle.”⁴² According to a 2006 study that surveyed 102 adults from farmworker households in North Carolina, nearly half (47.1%) of all migrant and seasonal Latino farmworkers surveyed were classified as food insecure, including 15 survey respondents who experienced moderate to severe hunger.⁴³ The irony of their position is not lost on farmworkers. In the words of one worker from Wayne County, North Carolina,

“It’s just ridiculous that we, the ones that are feeding the whole world, are the ones that [live in such poor conditions].”⁴⁴

Food movement scholar Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern identifies low wages and racialized exploitation, rather than a lack of nutrition education, as the primary factors responsible for food insecurity among farmworkers.⁴⁵ She highlights the significant agrarian and culinary knowledge many of the farmworkers possess, emphasizing that structural barriers built into an exploitive agricultural labor system, and not lack of knowledge or motivation, are what keep many farmworkers from accessing sufficient, nutritious food.

As a further consequence of exploitive economic labor conditions, farmworkers are also subject to cyclical poverty and lack of access to land. Though many workers come to the U.S. with significant skill and experience as subsistence farmers, there are very few opportunities to

⁴² Quandt et al. "Household food security among migrant and seasonal Latino farmworkers in North Carolina," 568.

⁴³ Quandt et al. "Household food security among migrant and seasonal Latino farmworkers in North Carolina," 568.

⁴⁴ "Facts About North Carolina Farmworkers." NC Farmworker Institute, 2007.

⁴⁵ Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern. "Knowing “Good Food”: Immigrant Knowledge and the Racial Politics of Farmworker Food Insecurity."

advance or acquire training for hired farmworkers in large-scale farming operations. In the introductory chapter of *The Human Cost of Food*, scholar and farmworker advocate Charles D. Thompson, Jr. deems this phenomena the “farmworker treadmill.”⁴⁶ He uses the metaphor of a treadmill to illustrate the underlying organization of a system of farm labor that benefits farm owners and agribusiness executives and traps workers in iterative cycles of poverty and landlessness.

Also characteristic of farm labor within the current agricultural system are poor working and living conditions that can have significant deleterious effect on worker health. A report published by the U.S. Department of Labor in 2015 indicates that agriculture still ranks as one of the most dangerous industries in the nation, noting that the profession has exceptionally high rates of fatal injuries.⁴⁷ Farm labor entails many occupational hazards similar to those of an industrial workplace, including risk of musculoskeletal injury due to use of heavy machinery, hard physical labor, and repetitive motion. In addition, agricultural work presents a number of rather unique health risks, including significant exposure to pesticides, sun, heat stress, and other irritants (airborne or in the crops themselves) that can cause injury or infection to workers skin, eyes, and respiratory system.⁴⁸ Heat and sun exposure are of particular concern in hotter southern climes, and nicotine poisoning or “green tobacco sickness,” caused by prolonged contact with fresh tobacco leaves, is especially common in southern states where extensive tobacco is grown and harvested by hand.⁴⁹ Due to the highly migratory nature of agriculture in the U.S., workers often live in temporary housing and face substandard conditions that can

⁴⁶ *The Human Cost of Food*, 9.

⁴⁷ “Occupational Health and Safety Factsheet.” National Center for Farmworker Health, inc., 2018.

⁴⁸ “Occupational Health and Safety Factsheet.”

⁴⁹ “North Carolina Farmworker Health Facts.” NC Farmworker Institute, 2012.

compound the impact of occupational health concerns. Insufficient facilities for bathing and laundry, a lack of clean water, and overcrowded living quarters are relatively common in worker housing and can exacerbate existing health problems.⁵⁰

In addition to increased health risks experienced on the job and in living spaces, farmworkers also face a number of barriers to accessing appropriate medical care. Frequent job mobility, lack of access to transportation, insufficient translation services, and uninsured status are all factors that negatively impact farmworkers' access to health services.⁵¹ Even more fundamental to the problem is a widespread lack of information among farmworkers about what health resources are available. In the words of a mother and farmworker from Oxford, North Carolina,

*“Many farmworkers come for the first time, and don’t know there is a clinic, don’t know there is a health outreach worker who can help them... it’s very important, not just for one person but for the whole community”*⁵²

Alongside economic and health concerns, farmworkers and their advocates articulate a phenomenon of invisibility that impacts farm labor today. Factors such as lack of legal immigration status, and working and living in rural, isolated areas combine with grower and agribusiness interests in keeping the real conditions of farm labor secret and function to render farmworkers a uniquely unseen population. In introductory chapter of the *Human Cost of Food*, Charles D. Thompson, Jr. suggests that food corporations and grocery store chains would rather keep their consumers in the dark regarding the actual labor conditions that brings food to their

⁵⁰ “North Carolina Farmworker Health Facts.”

⁵¹ “North Carolina Farmworker Health Facts.”

⁵² “North Carolina Farmworker Health Facts.”

tables.⁵³ Thompson suggests that food corporations and employers actively work to hide the vital role farmworkers play in the agricultural system, effectively obscuring the presence of farmworkers, both in agriculture, and in the communities where they live in work. He articulates this theme as “invisible agriculture,” suggesting that farmworkers are a “hidden underpinning of the system that brings us the food we enjoy without ever appearing on the food label.”⁵⁴

Operating in tandem with invisibility, economic hardship, and physically hazardous labor conditions, ethnic and racial discrimination are very present in the lives of the primarily Latinx and immigrant members of the U.S. agricultural labor force. Ubiquitous and blatantly obvious in contemporary political rhetoric, ethnocentric nationalist sentiments and racist language and actions targeting immigrants and their families are directed with particular vitriol against people with roots in Mexico and Central America. Anthropologist Seth M. Holmes offers insight into a more subtle way racism is present in a U.S. agricultural system reliant on extensive immigrant labor. Holmes articulates a useful framework for interpreting both the harmful health impacts and the invisibility farmworkers experience as forms of racialized violence against the body. In his ethnography of migrant farmworkers in the Pacific Northwest titled *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*, Holmes argues that, as a result of perceptions of racial and ethnic difference, “the migrant body is seen as belonging in its position in the very agricultural labor hierarchy that then leads to its deterioration.”⁵⁵ He describes a deeply racist cultural process wherein migrant farmworkers are both hidden from view and coded as ‘naturally deserving of’ hazardous, physically taxing farm jobs and their ensuing health impacts. The author suggests that this

⁵³ *The Human Cost of Food*, 8.

⁵⁴ *The Human Cost of Food*, 8.

⁵⁵ Seth M. Holmes. *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*, 175.

process exemplifies a “naturalization of oppression and racism” that at once invisibilizes and condones the dire injustice present in the farm labor system in the U.S. today.

Thus economic exploitation, invisibility, and a slow, cumulative form of racialized violence against immigrant bodies can be understood to have great impact on the lives and livelihoods of farmworkers in the South and in the U.S. as a whole. Though these emergent patterns seem to portray farm work as abject, menial, dangerous, and oppressive, I by no means wish to condemn the occupation. Neither do I wish to portray farmworkers as passive victims. Instead, I hope to highlight the structural nature of the problems with the current agricultural system, to lay them bare in order to situate them within a historical lineage and better understand what it is that struggles for farmworker dignity might be seeking to resist. I move next to an analysis of the characteristics of modern day farm labor in the South described in this section through the dual analytical lenses of plantation space and the space of nonexistence.

IV. Plantation Space and the Space of Nonexistence in Southern Agriculture Today

An examination of the structures, practices, and lived experiences that characterize modern day farm labor in the South makes readily apparent the persistent presence of plantation space and the space of nonexistence from history on into today. In this section I offer a detailed account of that presence, describing the specific examples and overarching themes that evidence the subsistence of the two analytical spaces. I undertake this analysis both as a means to highlight important themes in Southern agricultural labor that are consistent across history and today, and as a preparation for my final discussion of farmworker dignity as a potential mode of resistance to that living legacy of agricultural exploitation in the South.

One of the primary characteristics of plantation space that is evident in my account of Southern farm labor today is the consistent logic of profit-oriented economic extraction from a predominantly imported labor force. This is evident in the strikingly low wages farmworkers, a predominantly immigrant population receive. Plantation space as a lens of analysis illuminates these low wages as part of a broader exploitive logic that has been consistent throughout the history of agriculture in the South.

Another element of plantation space that is readily identifiable in the Southern agricultural system today is that of an underlying logic of racial domination that lands with violence on the bodies of those who provide farm labor. Minkoff-Zern's discussion of racially-uneven food insecurity, alongside Holmes' characterization of poor farmworker health as a form of racial violence are useful in illuminating this trend. These scholars' arguments, alongside farmworker advocates' testimonies of the racist treatment farmworkers suffer at the hands of their employers, highlight the persistence of a violent racial order in the Southern agricultural system from the times of plantation slavery. And while it is critically important to acknowledge the differences between the lived experiences of enslaved Black people and those of the predominantly Latin American immigrant farm labor force today, those arguments and testimonies are useful in that they shed light on the manner in which the system of agricultural labor in the South continues to enact violence on the bodies of people who are coded as racialized 'others.'

The final component of plantation space that I find evidence of in the present day system of farm labor in the South is the carefully constructed and maintained invisibility of the people who provide that labor. This is clearly articulated in Thompson's notion of "invisible agriculture," in which growers and agricultural corporations intentionally conceal the presence of

the workers whose labor actually brings food to our grocery stores and tables. Contrastingly, farmworkers are often also subject to close surveillance by crew leaders who monitor their behavior and pace. Taken together, the carefully architected invisibility and intense supervision farmworkers experience today are indicative of the dual nature of visibility and invisibility in plantation space.

The presence of a space of nonexistence is also readily identifiable in a number of characteristics of the Southern system of farm labor today. One example of this is the legal exclusion that the predominantly immigrant farmworker population faces. Coutin's arguments suggest that, when people do not have legal documentation, as is the case with nearly half of the farm labor force, they are barred from accessing legal personhood and thus enter the space of nonexistence. My adaptation of Coutin's concept allows me to posit that even those workers who do obtain work authorization are refused full personhood and cast into a space of nonexistence when they are excluded from federal labor protections or denied a pathway to citizenship.

Further indication of the space of nonexistence is present in corporate agribusiness' denial of their dependence on farmworkers. The constructed invisibility of farm labor described earlier, alongside the broader cultural devaluation of that work evidenced by low wages and poor living conditions, stand in stark contrast to the ubiquitous consumption and dependence on the food those same workers labor to produce. This coupling of a reliance on farmworkers' labor with a denigration of the people themselves is a clear example of the dual dependence and devaluation that is characteristic of the space of nonexistence.

Thus a close interrogation of the structures, practices, and experiences that typify farm labor in the South today indicates the persistent presence of plantation space and the space of

nonexistence. This analysis is useful in that it both articulates the continuity of a number of trends in farm labor throughout history, situating the modern-day Southern agricultural system within a long lineage of exploitive farming practices, and also sheds light on the human impact of those trends and structures. In the context of my thesis as a whole, this linkage of history to today through the lived experiences of farmworkers is critically necessary because it lays out the landscape across which I venture my final analysis of farmworker dignity as a potential mode of resistance to that living history.

Chapter 3: Dignity

*Personal Reflection: Bread and Roses

“Bread and Roses”

A Poem by James Oppenheim¹

*As we go marching, marching, in the beauty of the day
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts gray
Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses
For the people hear us singing, bread and roses, bread and roses.*

*As we come marching, marching, we battle too, for men,
For they are in the struggle and together we shall win.
Our days shall not be sweated from birth until life closes,
Hearts starve as well as bodies, give us bread, but give us roses.*

*As we come marching, marching, un-numbered women dead
Go crying through our singing their ancient call for bread,
Small art and love and beauty their trudging spirits knew
Yes, it is bread we fight for, but we fight for roses, too.*

*As we go marching, marching, we're standing proud and tall.
The rising of the women means the rising of us all.
No more the drudge and idler, ten that toil where one reposes,
But a sharing of life's glories, bread and roses, bread and roses.*

One weekend during my summer internship with Student Action with Farmworkers, my father and I took a road trip to a folk music festival in upstate New York. On the long drive back down to North Carolina, we listened to an album of protest songs compiled and performed by one of the groups that had featured in the festival. One of the songs on the album, “Bread and Roses” was a musical adaptation of a James Oppenheim poem by the same title that is closely associated with a 1912 strike of hundreds of immigrant women textile workers in Lawrence, MA who allegedly carried signs reading “we want bread, and roses, too” in reference to the poem.²

¹ “Bread and Roses, by James Oppenheim.” *the chawed rosin*.

² Ibid.

The song caught something in me. Emerging out of a simple arrangement for four voices, Oppenheim’s words called out in a poetic language of collective struggle, proclaiming the basic human need for bread and roses. “Hearts starve as well as bodies,” the voices testify; the struggle against workers’ oppression is a fight for material sustenance, but it is also a fight for “art and love and beauty,” the humanity and aspirations of workers that soar far beyond the conditions of their labor.

These words landed on my ears as I was deeply submerged in a summer of advocacy and outreach with farmworker communities in North and South Carolina. They brought to mind the workers I met and marched or lobbied alongside, my fellow interns who shared stories of their families’ experiences in agricultural labor, and the words of the chants and songs that carried the most profound messages of the farmworker movement. Something in the song resonated deeply with the call I heard from farmworkers, organizers, and advocates for something beyond legal rights and improved conditions, the call for farmworkers to be recognized and celebrated in the fullness of their humanity. Though I didn’t realize it fully at the time, with some place and time to reflect on my experiences with SAF, I see that “Bread and Roses” was a spark that helped give shape to this research, it was one of many seeds that grew into my understanding of dignity as that something beyond, the art and love and beauty, the roses we fight for too.

* * *

In this chapter, I offer an in depth examination of the word dignity as it arises in a variety of contexts, both historical and contemporary, with relevance to the movement for farmworker justice in the Southeast today. I begin my analysis with an exploration of the linguistic roots and evolution of the word ‘dignity’ as a means to uncover traces of residual meaning the word carries that linger and mediate its significance today. I then examine the way the concept of dignity has

been used in the international legal arena, detailing its emergence in the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and in various national constitutions. Next, I explore invocations of the idea of dignity in a number of relevant grassroots social movements and revolutionary ideologies that have arisen in the United States and Latin America which I organize into four categories: worker dignity, immigrant dignity, dignity of food producers, and decolonial indigenous dignity. My intention with choosing examples from these particular grassroots movements is to examine dignity within contexts that touch on a number of the identities that coalesce in the farmworker movement in the Southeast, a movement by and for immigrant laborers who work in food production, many of whom have roots in indigenous communities and nearly all of whom have been impacted by the living legacy of colonization in Latin America.

In each of these varying contexts, I analyze a single text, document, or other form of messaging in which dignity features prominently in an attempt to elucidate what the word means, how it responds to the specific history and socio-political conditions from which it emerges, and what vision of the future it imagines into possibility. I hone my focus on specific invocations of dignity that emerge from the Southeastern United States, Latin America, and the liminal space of immigration between the two in keeping with Walter Mignolo's argument that the politics of the geographic "loci of enunciation" from which ideas emerge are critical to the construction of their meaning.³ I conclude the chapter by putting these various invocations of dignity in conversation with one another, offering an analysis of key emergent themes that will aid me in my subsequent analysis of dignity in the specific context of the farmworker movement in the U.S. Southeast.

³ Walter Mignolo. "The geopolitics of knowledge and the colonial difference." 63.

In the overall scope of my thesis, the purpose of this chapter is to offer concrete contextualization of an otherwise rather abstract, slippery term. The following pages are intended to anchor my discussion of dignity in what the term has historically meant and the purpose it has served in relevant social and political contexts. My intention is not to trace a direct lineage of the term from its Latin roots until today, nor is it to make claims about an absolute definition or function of dignity in social movements. Rather, I envision this chapter as an opportunity to delve deeply into the rich, complex, at times contradictory history of the word dignity as a means to map out the territory in which members of the farmworker movement tread when they use the term. My intention is to identify and decipher possible meanings and strategic uses of dignity in order to better equip myself in the process of analyzing the findings of my interviews about farmworker dignity with members of the movement.

I. Dignity Roots

The word dignity has a complex, fraught, at times seemingly contradictory history. In the following section, I examine the linguistic and historical roots of the term in order to shed light on potential hidden meanings, the etymological baggage dignity drags from its classical European origins into today. My intention is to ground my analysis of dignity in a clear understanding of the concept as it came to exist in dominant, Eurocentric discourse.

The primary meaning of dignity has evolved significantly over the course of the term's history. The word dignity in English stems from the Latin root *dignitas*, a term understood to connote status and worthiness of honor and respect in classical Roman thought.⁴ It is important to note that, under this conception of dignity, worthiness is derived from elevated rank or social

⁴ Christopher McCrudden. "Human dignity and judicial interpretation of human rights." 656.

role, and dignity is associated with exclusive notions of reputation and privilege.⁵ Historian and political theorist Josiah Ober designates this as an archaic, “meritocratic dignity” predicated on conditions of social inequality.⁶ As an extreme example of status-based dignity, political theorist Erin Daly describes an early invocation of “the dignity of mankind” found in the *Corpus Juris Civilis* in a passage that was intended to reconcile humanity with the ownership of enslaved people.⁷

Josiah Ober contrasts this with a later, intermediary evolutionary stage of the term, which he deems “civic dignity.”⁸ He suggests that such a notion of civic dignity elevates all members of a body of citizens to an equal level of status. He argues that civic dignity first emerged from classical Athens as a result of the ideals of political (if not social) equality that permeated that culture at that time. Dignity in this context, Ober posits, could be defined as “non-humiliation” and “non-infantilization;” to be dignified by this Greco-Roman notion of the word meant being acknowledged and respected by others and having a degree of autonomy in one’s choices.⁹ The author indicates that both this conception of dignity, and that denoting merit or rank, differ significantly from the notion of universal human dignity that is ubiquitous today in prominent legal documents and transnational human rights discourse.¹⁰

Ober and Daly join a host of other scholars that differentiate between classical conceptions of dignity and the notion of human dignity as a universal moral status inherent in all

⁵ Christopher McCrudden. "Human dignity and judicial interpretation of human rights." 657.

⁶ Josiah Ober. “Meritocratic and Civic Dignity in Greco-Roman Antiquity.” 54.

⁷ Erin Daly. *Dignity Rights: Courts, Constitutions, and the Worth of the Human Person*. 11.

⁸ *Ibid.* 55.

⁹ *Ibid.* 53.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 53.

people that permeates human rights discourse today.¹¹ Philosopher Remy Debes argues that this concept of a universal, moralized dignity “would surprise our modern ancestors” because of its stark divergence with earlier rank-based notions of dignity.¹² But he also indicates that the idea is not without precursors, tracing the history of a number of similar egalitarian concepts that emerged under different names in Confucian, Christian, and Islamic schools of thought.¹³ Christopher McCrudden argues that a broader idea of *dignitas* as an inherent quality possessed by all humans by virtue of their humanness can be seen in certain pieces of classical Roman writing, especially in the work of Cicero.¹⁴ The author posits that, under this conception of dignity, humans are defined in opposition to animals and their rationality and transcendence of mere “sensual pleasure” is understood to be the characteristic that endows all humans with dignity.¹⁵ Here, human dignity can be seen to emerge as a quality that is deemed innate in all people and is predicated on human capacity for reason and superiority to animals. As McCrudden continues to trace the lineage of this concept of dignity from classical Rome onwards in history, he notes that later eighteenth century assertions of universal dignity were linked to notions of individuality, associated with the autonomy of each individual to decide their own destiny.¹⁶

Taken together, these scholars suggest that dignity has had a long, multifaceted history

¹¹ Josiah Ober. “Meritocratic and Civic Dignity in Greco-Roman Antiquity.” 55, Remy Debes. *Dignity: A History*. Rosen, Michael. *Dignity: Its History and Meaning*. Christopher McCrudden. “Human dignity and judicial interpretation of human rights.”

¹²Remy Debes. “Introduction.” in *Dignity: A History*.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ McCrudden. “Human dignity...” 657.

¹⁵Ibid. 657.

¹⁶ Ibid. 660.

characterized by contrasting, at times contradictory meanings. Dignity surfaces at once as a marker of differential social status, as an ideal of political equality based in social recognition and non-humiliation, and as a universal human quality derived from our individuality and difference from animals. A historical inquiry into the word's roots illuminate dignity's hefty epistemological baggage. This chronological examination of the term and its emergence within classical European political discourse reveal a set of conflicting meanings that form the scaffold structure of dignity, a skeletal framework that I argue must be laid bare to fully understand the word's meaning and function today.¹⁷

I move next to a brief history and characterization of dignity as it is used in international law.

II. Legal Dignity

In the following section, I examine the rise of dignity as a prominent term in legal discourse and documents around the world. I use the *United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights* as a point of reference, offering an analysis of dignity as it appears in that document to shed light on the meaning and valence of dominant notions of dignity that are widely recognized and referenced today. This section will serve as a contextual backdrop and at

¹⁷ It is important to note here that the farmworker movement in which I situate my analysis of dignity is a bilingual movement, and uses of the Spanish word dignidad are every bit as common as that of dignity in English. From what I have seen, the two words seem to be very consistent translations of one another across invocations in the farmworker movement. They share a latin root and a similar bifurcated meaning (dignidad, like dignity can denote rank and status or refer to a universal quality shared by all people). I struggled to find sources that differentiated between the two words' meanings or the ways they have evolved distinctly in disparate socio-political contexts, but it is important to acknowledge that the words likely carry subtly different connotations and different legacies of use in the two languages. While I do not discuss the distinctions between dignity and dignidad at length in this chapter, it would be a fascinating site for future research!

times a point of friction or outright conflict for the subsequent sections on dignity in subaltern social movements that are the heart of this chapter.

Dignity is a rather recent player to enter the arena of political discourse; until the twentieth century, it was not conceived of as a legal right. The first mention of dignity in a legal charter of any kind was in the Mexican constitution of 1917.¹⁸ Remy Debes suggests that even this formal use of the term was reminiscent of classical assertions of merit and status and did not carry the full moralizing weight associated with dignity in human rights discourse today.¹⁹ Debes argues that it was only in 1948 with the establishment of the *Universal Declaration* that the concept of dignity as an innate human quality entered the world stage in a politically meaningful way.²⁰ From that point forward, dignity has been featured to varying degrees in the constitutions of 162 countries around the globe.²¹

In the years following its entrance into international legal discourse, dignity has sparked extensive controversy. Politicians and philosophers have noted its elasticity as a concept, with some voicing concern that it may serve as no more than an “empty vessel,” a placeholder for other rights that has attained an alarming degree of prominence in international legal documents.²² Harsher critics such as Ronald Dworkin and Man Yee Karen Lee have deemed dignity “debased with flabby overuse” or without “concrete meaning or consistent way of being defined” (respectively).²³ Conversely, other scholars of the term such as Erin Daly have argued

¹⁸ Remy Debes. “Introduction” in *Dignity: A History*

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Remy Debes. “Introduction” in *Dignity: A History*

²¹ Shulztiner & Carmi. “Human dignity in national constitutions...” 464.

²² Ibid. 4.

²³ Daly. *Dignity Rights...* 3.

that it is “no more amorphous or subject to interpretive personal whim than any other constitutional provision,” and that its variation across cultural contexts reflects distinct local political values and needs.²⁴ Dignity “means *something*, but not everything,” Daly claims, “and what it does mean is important.”²⁵ I look to the *Universal Declaration*, and to invocations of dignity in its pages in order to tease out what that important meaning, if it in fact exists, might be.

First adopted by the General Assembly of the freshly established United Nations on December 10th, 1948, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* includes the word dignity a total of five times, including twice in the document’s preamble.²⁶ The opening sentence of the declaration proclaims that the “inherent dignity and... the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”²⁷ This frames dignity both as an innate quality belonging to all humans, and as a force working in partnership with equal rights to make possible freedom, justice and peace on a global scale. The General Assembly goes on to affirm their belief in what they term “fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women.”²⁸ This reference suggests an understanding of dignity that is compatible with, but not equivalent to individual human worth. It implies a notion of dignity that is at once in harmony with concrete human rights and also offers something distinct or additional, such that it merits a distinct reference in the same sentence. This second mention of the term also positions dignity as

²⁴ Daly. *Dignity Rights...* 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 5.

²⁶ United Nations General Assembly. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 1.

aligned with the project of gender equality. Viewed together, the two references to dignity in the preamble of the *Universal Declaration* suggest that it is a concept the document's creators understand to be consistent with the aims of the proposed regime of human rights, but more an inherent quality than a right in and of itself. The declaration reveals a certain ambivalence as to whether dignity applies on the level of the individual (suggested by "dignity... of the human person") or the collective (implied by its embeddedness in discussion of "the human family"). Finally, the General Assembly reveals their conception of dignity to be in stride with the project of bringing equality to a relationship characterized by domination (of men over women), and to be central to the creation of a more just, peaceful, free world.

Dignity is also referenced in Articles 1, 22, and 23 of the *Universal Declaration*. Article 1 states that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."²⁹ This invocation of the term serves to reinforce the inherent, universal notion of dignity that was evidenced in the preamble, again positioning it as something distinct from, but working in concert with rights. This use of the word also links it to notions of freedom and equality as conditions into which all humans are born.

In Article 22, dignity is referenced again in a passage that expounds the universal right to social security.³⁰ This article declares that "everyone" is entitled to national and international support in the pursuit of "the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality."³¹ This passage again suggests that dignity relies upon and is made possible by certain rights, characterizing them as economic, social and

²⁹ United Nations General Assembly. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." 2.

³⁰ Ibid. 6.

³¹ Ibid. 6.

cultural. The term is also linked with the “free development” of personality, positioning dignity as aligned with the enlightenment project of individual self-actualization. This reference to dignity as both a universal quality and an individual pursuit serves to reinforce earlier indications of the *Universal Declaration*’s ambivalence about whether dignity applies on the level of the individual or collective, or perhaps both simultaneously. It is also important to note that Article 22 condenses a notion of social security that “everyone” is entitled to into the singular, masculine possessive “his.”³² Though commonplace for its time, this grammatical move reinforces a patriarchal norm that elevates the masculine to a position of dominance, positioning maleness as a category that is understood to contain or speak for “everyone.” This seems at odds with the document’s earlier assertion of the equal rights of men and women, revealing a level of contradiction in regards to dignity’s relationship to equality.

Article 23 is the *Universal Declaration* clause that establishes the right to work and articulates certain workers’ rights.³³ The third section of the article reads: “Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity.”³⁴ Thus dignity is portrayed (again) as an inherent human quality, one that merits certain material conditions which individuals (again deemed masculine) achieve for their families through justly compensated labor. By means of its inclusion within Article 23, dignity is linked to the other rights established in the passage, including the rights to “free choice of employment,” “just and favourable conditions of work,” “protection against unemployment,” “equal pay for equal work” without discrimination, and “the right to form and to join trade

³² United Nations General Assembly. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." 6.

³³ Ibid. 6.

³⁴ Ibid. 6.

unions.”³⁵ Thus the final usage of the word dignity in the *Universal Declaration* frames work as something necessary to make dignity possible and locates dignity as an important element of the broader rights of workers. This passage serves as evidence that dignity has been a part of the conversation about labor from the very first usage of the term in a global forum. The intimate relationship between dignity and work will be explored at greater length in a subsequent section of this chapter.

In order to further understand the intended function of dignity as it is invoked in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, I look to the historical socio-political moment the document emerged from. The *Universal Declaration* was drafted in 1948, shortly after the end of World War Two. Political philosopher Johannes Morsink describes the war as the primary “catalyst” for the document’s creation, though he notes that Latin American socialism, the Cold War, and the Women’s Lobby were also contributing factors.³⁶ Various delegates who participated in the drafting of the *Universal Declaration* framed it as a direct response to the horrors of the Holocaust and of the war. A representative from Lebanon named Charles Malik suggested that the *Universal Declaration* “was inspired by opposition to the barbarous doctrines of Nazism and fascism”³⁷ René Cassin from France framed the document as an urgently necessary component of “humanity’s protest against oppression.”³⁸ Count Henry Carton de Wiart from Belgium referenced dignity explicitly, remarking that “the essential merit of the Declaration was to emphasize the high dignity of the human person after the outrages to which

³⁵ United Nations General Assembly. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." 6.

³⁶ Morsink, Johannes. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Origins, Drafting, and Intent*. 36.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 36.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 37.

men and women had been exposed during the recent war”³⁹ Morsink indicates that the creators of the *Universal Declaration* intended it as a protection against “the horrors of a new war,” as “the maximum possible safeguard” against an event like the Holocaust occurring again.⁴⁰ As such, the *Universal Declaration*, and by extension the concept of dignity it contains within can be understood as direct responses to the “horrors,” “outrages,” and “oppression” of World War Two and the Holocaust, which include but are not limited to genocide, religious oppression, the rise of a totalitarian fascist state, and atomic warfare. Thus dignity, as a central pillar of the *Universal Declaration*, carries the promise, or at least imagined purpose, of restoring that which the Holocaust and the war denied or violated.

This concludes my examination of dignity within dominant international legal discourse. I draw from this exploration an understanding of dignity as a highly elastic legal concept whose significance and purpose have varied over time and across different national and political contexts. Delving into the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, I excavate an understanding of dignity as a quality inherent in all people on account of their humanness. I find evidence in the document for a conception of dignity as at once reliant upon and extending beyond concrete rights. I interpret dignity as fundamentally intertwined with the lofty political projects of freedom, justice, peace, and equality, though the sexist language with which it is expressed in the document suggests that the word still carries traces of its historical exclusive connotations. I unearth evidence of a close relationship between dignity and labor, one that will be explored at greater depth in a later section of this chapter. My exploration also indicates a rather ambivalent stance among the creators of the *Universal Declaration* regarding whether dignity applies to the

³⁹ Morsink, Johannes. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Origins, Drafting, and Intent*. 37.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 36.

“human family” as a collective whole, or just to each individual member. Finally, my analysis of the historical context from which the Universal Declaration emerged yields an understanding of dignity as a core element of an international attempt to resist and defend against the specific forms of violence and oppression inflicted on a global scale by the Holocaust and the Second World War

I transition now to an exploration of dignity in relevant grassroots social movements and subaltern political ideologies.

III. Worker Dignity

To begin my investigation of dignity in grassroots movements for social justice, I look to understand the meaning and function of the term as it has been invoked by the labor movement in the United States. I explore the term’s use in the U.S. labor movement because it is one of a long lineage of organizing traditions whose strategy and messaging the farmworker movement has drawn upon both historically and today. My intention is not to prove that the two movements operate under an equivalent notion of dignity, but rather to tease out a set of context-specific meanings the word has held within labor organizing in order to inform my subsequent analysis of dignity in the farmworker movement. In this section, I hone my focus to a specific use of the word dignity at the 1968 sanitation workers strike in Memphis, Tennessee. I analyze this particular example because it emerges from the Southeast during the Civil Rights era, offering insight into what dignity has meant and can mean within a racialized southern labor organizing context.⁴¹

⁴¹ My argument here is that such a context has many parallels to (as well as a few key distinctions from) the farmworker movement in the Southeast today that organizes for justice for the predominantly Latinx and immigrant farm labor force in the region.

A cursory search of the websites and news archives of prominent unions and labor rights organizations such as AFSCME and the AFL-CIO, reveals that dignity is a commonly used term in the labor movement today and has been for decades. A narrower focus on a singular invocation of the word on a sign carried by a protester at the Memphis sanitation workers strike (pictured below) allows me to distill a clear sense of the meaning and function of dignity in this specific labor organizing context, as well as the history it responds to and the future it imagines for laborers in the Southeast.



Protestors Walking the Picket Line at the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike⁴²

⁴² *Sanitation Strike Protestors*, 1968, photograph, Tennessee4me.org, duplicated with permission from the Special Collections Department, University Libraries, University of Memphis, http://www.tn4me.org/article.cfm/a_id/119/minor_id/32/major_id/11/era_id/8

In February of 1968, following the deaths of Echol Cole and Robert Walker, two Black sanitation workers who were killed on the job by malfunctioning equipment, sanitation workers across the city of Memphis, Tennessee launched a momentous strike.⁴³ In an act of protest that gained national attention and garnered support from prominent civil rights leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1,300 AFSCME affiliated sanitation workers walked out of their jobs, calling for an end to racist abuse, abhorrent working conditions, and discriminatory treatment by the city of Memphis.⁴⁴ The photo above features a number of protesters in Memphis, who may or may not be sanitation workers themselves, walking the picket line during the 1968 strike.⁴⁵ One of the protestors holds a sign that reads “Dignity and Decency for our Sanitation Workers.” I look to the words of the sign as well as the context (both pictured and not pictured) within which the protester’s statement is situated, to elucidate the potential meaning, function, historical response and imagined future held in this particular invocation of dignity.

On the protester’s sign, the call for dignity is accompanied one for “decency,” suggesting that the two are complimentary, though not quite equivalent concepts. This pairing frames dignity as the way in which a person or group is treated by others. If a parallel between the two words is assumed, the sign can be interpreted to indicate that dignity is a basic thing that, like decency, should reasonably be afforded to all people. And yet, the inclusion of both words on the sign suggests that dignity is not exactly the same as decency, that perhaps it denotes a form of treatment that goes in some way beyond being treated with basic human courtesy.

⁴³ DeNeen L. Brown. “‘I Am a Man’: The Ugly Memphis Sanitation Workers’ Strike That Led to MLK’s Assassination.” *The Washington Post*.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ “Sanitation Strike Protesters” *University of Memphis Special Collections*

The specific designation of who the protester's call for "dignity and decency" corresponds to also yields insight into dignity's meaning and purpose in this labor movement context. The sign refers to the rightful recipients of dignified, decent treatment as "our sanitation workers." Thus the sanitation workers, who are understood to be a single, united entity, are claimed as belonging to the same group as the audience of the protester's sign, and by merit of that belonging, they are framed as deserving dignity. This reference to "our sanitation workers" demonstrates a distinctly collective understanding of dignity as something that is merited not individually but by an aggregate group. It also illuminates an intimate relationship between dignity and belonging in which being a part of 'us' justifies treatment with dignity. The protester's use of the word "our" can also be interpreted as a recognition of the dependence of the city of Memphis on the striking sanitation workers. In this way the sign can be understood to uplift the vital necessity of the labor that the sanitation workers perform, positioning dignity as an accomplice in the project of visibilizing and honoring the work of manual laborers.

The context of the protest within which the sign-holder is situated likewise offers insight into the meaning and function of dignity in this particular usage of the word. The protester's call for dignity emerges as one voice among many in a coordinated direct action organized in response to what journalist and union leader Michael Avant refers to as the "degrading, unsafe, plantation-style working environment" to which Memphis sanitation workers were subjected.⁴⁶ Thus dignity is invoked as a direct response to the conditions the strikers were protesting, framing the concept as counter to, perhaps even the antithesis of, racist discrimination and

⁴⁶ Michael Avant. "Workplace Dignity Struggles Persist 50 Years after Tragic Deaths." *The San Diego Union-Tribune*.

degrading, dangerous working conditions that Avant specifically likens to those of plantation agriculture.

Also critical to an analysis of this invocation of dignity by the Memphis protester are the other messages and social dynamics of the march that are not pictured within the photo above. A number of the most iconic images that appear in an online search of the words “Memphis sanitation strike” feature groups of Black men standing shoulder to shoulder carrying identical signs that read “I AM A MAN” in large, bold print. These signs explicitly claim the full humanity of the striking sanitation workers, suggesting that the wrong that the protesters are responding to is the dehumanization enacted upon sanitation workers by means of racial discrimination and unsafe working conditions. Thus a call for worker dignity voiced by the same body of protestors that declare “I AM A MAN” indicates that dignity, as invoked by Memphis strikers in 1968, aligns closely with the project of reclaiming the humanity of those who have faced racial discrimination and a dangerous workplace environment.

The other category of iconic photo that immediately surfaces in an online image search of the Memphis sanitation strike is one of protesters marching in a single-file picket line surrounded on all sides by heavily armed U.S. military personnel, some on the ground and others riding in armored tanks, with their guns closely trained on the strikers. This blatant display of extreme military force in response to an evidently peaceful protest is indicative of the degree to which the demands of the protesters were perceived by the U.S. government as a threat. Such images throw the revolutionary stakes of the Memphis sanitation strike into stark relief. They indicate that the protest, and by extension the striker’s call for dignity, represented a radical challenge to a the status quo in the Civil Rights era South, a formidable act of resistance that threatened a regional socio-political reality deeply rooted in histories of racial violence and brutal

exploitation. Thus a careful analysis of the Memphis sanitation strike protester's sign elucidates the nuanced meaning and revolutionary implications of workers' dignity in a distinctly Southern context.

IV. Immigrant Dignity

In order to further nuance and contextualize my understanding of dignity as a concept within grassroots social movements, I explore the idea as it is invoked in the contemporary immigrant rights movement in the Southeastern United States. To do so, I analyse the Southeast Immigrant Rights Network (SEIRN)'s use of the term dignity, specifically as it appears on the page titled *Our Mission, Vision and Principles* on the coalition's website. I employ a careful examination of SEIRN's usage of the word on their website as a means to glean an understanding of the meaning, function, response to history and vision for the future expressed by this particular articulation of the dignity of immigrants in the U.S. Southeast.

The Southeast Immigrant Rights Network is a coalition of 29 different immigrant-led grassroots organizations joined by a number of other local, state, and regional groups that collaborate to "lift the voice and leadership of immigrant communities in the Southeast"⁴⁷ SEIRN's publicly accessible, bilingual website includes a page on the coalition's mission, vision, and principles in which the word dignity features prominently.⁴⁸ The coalition's vision statement includes a specific reference to dignity:

*SEIRN envisions a shared struggle between the immigrant community and other marginalized communities to build a movement that transforms the Southeast into a place that respects the dignity and the human rights of all.*⁴⁹

⁴⁷ "Welcome!" *Southeast Immigrant Rights Network*. 2017

⁴⁸ "Our Mission, Vision and Principles." *Southeast Immigrant Rights Network*. 2017.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

In this invocation of the term, dignity takes on a familiar role as an ally of universal human rights, a condition or quality that all people are rightfully entitled to on account of our humanness. By using the term “transforms,” the document’s authors characterize the Southeast as a region that has lacked dignity for all, both historically and today. The passage identifies the the immigrant community, alongside other marginalized groups, as those to whom full dignity is not currently, and has not historically been afforded in the Southeast.

The subsequent segment of the webpage details SEIRN’s guiding principles. Within them, dignity is explicitly mentioned four times.⁵⁰ The first stated principle reads:

*We believe in the dignity and fundamental human rights of all people, regardless of immigration status, national origin, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, gender identity, language, disability, political or social beliefs, economic status, or any other distinction.*⁵¹

This passage affirms an interpretation of dignity as a condition or quality, again aligned with “fundamental human rights,” that should be, but is not in actuality conferred equally to all people. The extensive list of identity categories implies that such categories have been and continue to be the basis for differential access to dignity. This passage illuminates a universal dignity that is deserved by people of all identities as a facet of SEIRN’s vision for a just and transformed South.

The second principle on SEIRN’s website also contains a reference to dignity.

We affirm that the struggle for immigrant rights in the South is part of the historical context and ongoing legacy of racism in this region. We honor the past struggles of African Americans and Native Americans which paved the way for us

⁵⁰ "Our Mission, Vision and Principles." Southeast Immigrant Rights Network. 2017.

⁵¹ Ibid.

*and join them and others in a shared struggle for justice and dignity for everyone.*⁵²

This excerpt frames dignity as a form of resistance to the living legacy of racism in the South. The document's authors explicitly articulate dignity as a core purpose of shared struggles for justice in the region, depicting it as a point of unity around which coalitions may be built.

A third passage from the "Our Principles" segment of SEIRN's website further elucidates the coalition's conception of dignity. It reads:

*We celebrate the richness and complexities of our communities and commit to creating a space where people's full identities are embraced. We also understand that attacks against any of us are harmful to all of us, and we stand firmly against any of these attacks against our dignity and fundamental rights.*⁵³

This passage again frames dignity as a quality or condition that is at once connected to fundamental rights and offers something distinct from them. Here, the authors implicitly link dignity to people's ability to express and embrace their full identities. They offer a profoundly collective understanding of dignity. By suggesting that "attacks against our dignity" that harm any of us are harmful to all of us, this excerpt from SEIRN's guiding principles characterizes dignity as something held in relationship, a cord in a tightly interwoven network of mutuality.

The fourth and final mention of dignity in SEIRN's guiding principles can be found in the following passage:

We believe that to transform the South into a region that upholds the rights and dignity of immigrants as well as everyone else, we must build a movement that includes everybody---immigrants and allies, groups who focus on immigrant rights and groups who do immigration work within a broader context, organizations who

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ "Our Mission, Vision and Principles." Southeast Immigrant Rights Network. 2017.

*focus on a single strategy and those who employ multiple ones.*⁵⁴

This excerpt rehashes a previously established vision for a dignity that is deserved by all, regardless of identity. The wording makes explicit the coalition's view that, in the South specifically, immigrant dignity is intimately bound with the dignity of all other groups and people. This frames the work of "transform[ing] the South" into a place where immigrant dignity is upheld as a distinctly collective project.⁵⁵

Though the final passage of SEIRN's statement of principles does not reference dignity explicitly, it still offers useful insight into the meaning of the term as it is used by the coalition.

*We lift up the voices and leadership of grassroots immigrant communities, particularly those who are most marginalized because of immigration status, age, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, gender identity, language, disability, economic status, geographic isolation or any other reason.*⁵⁶

Considered in the context of a coalition that holds "dignity and the human rights of all" as core to its vision for the future, this excerpt from SEIRN's guiding principles implicates the work of lifting up marginalized voices and leadership as a crucial strategy in making that vision a reality. This in turn highlights an important, mutualistic relationship between dignity and voice. Thus a careful review of the Southeast Immigrant Rights Network's vision statement and guiding principles elucidates a nuanced, profoundly collective conception of dignity as well as a clear vision of a future for dignity in a just, transformed South.

V. Dignity of Food Producers

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ "Our Mission, Vision and Principles." Southeast Immigrant Rights Network. 2017.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Continuing my investigation of dignity in grassroots movements relevant to the farmworker movement in the Southeast today, I analyze the way the word is used in the international movement for food sovereignty. I choose to include this section based on the premise that, in addition to many farmworkers' in the U.S. Southeast status as immigrant laborers, the content of their labor merits consideration. Farmworkers are our primary food providers. They feed the people of the Southeast and beyond. This connects them to a long lineage of social struggle dedicated to defending the lives and livelihoods of people across the globe who labor to produce the food that feeds the world. The international movement for food sovereignty is exactly one such movement.

In the following section I explore the meaning, function, response to history, and vision for the future of the term dignity as it is used in a document known as the *Declaration of Nyéléni*. I hone in specifically on the *Declaration of Nyéléni* because it offers a particularly concise, powerful articulation of the purpose, context and vision of the global movement for food sovereignty and a clear indication of the role of dignity within it. I also examine this specific document because one of the major contributing organizations that participated in its creation is La Via Campesina, a self-described “international peasant’s movement” with significant representation and leadership of food producers and activists from Latin America and the United States.⁵⁷ As such I trust that the voices and interests of small scale food producers and farmworkers from Latin America and the U.S. are equitably represented in the *Declaration of Nyéléni* alongside those of farmers, peasants, fisherpeople, environmentalists, and indigenous peoples from around the world.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ “The International Peasant’s Voice,” *La Via Campesina*.

⁵⁸ “Declaration of Nyéléni,” *Nyéléni 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty*, 8.

The *Declaration of Nyéléni* is a collectively drafted document that represents the voices of over 500 food producers from eighty different countries.⁵⁹ The declaration emerged from a summit held in Nyéléni Village, Sélingué, Mali in February of 2007 that brought together leaders and representatives from communities and organizations around the world that work for food sovereignty.⁶⁰ The document defines food sovereignty as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.”⁶¹ The authors posit that a movement for food sovereignty must necessarily center the voices and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food rather than the interests of profit or global markets.⁶² The declaration makes very clear the stakes, political stance, and vision for the future of the movement for food sovereignty, articulating them concisely in passages entitled “What are we fighting for?” “What are we fighting against?” and “What can and will we do about it?”⁶³

The *Declaration of Nyéléni* contains only one explicit reference to dignity, but the implications of the document’s single invocation of the term are resounding. The word dignity appears in the “What are we fighting for” section of the declaration.⁶⁴ The passage declares that the global movement for food sovereignty fights for “a world where... all peoples in each of our countries are able to live with dignity, earn a living wage for their labour and have the opportunity to remain in their homes.”⁶⁵ This invocation contains a familiar characterization of

⁵⁹ Ibid. 8.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 6.

⁶¹ “Declaration of Nyéléni,” *Nyéléni 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty*. 9.

⁶² Ibid. 9.

⁶³ “Declaration of Nyéléni,” *Nyéléni 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty*. 9-11.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 9.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 9.

dignity as a universal right, one that is merited by people of all nations. The use of the plural ‘peoples’ as opposed to the singular ‘people’ indicates a distinctly collective (rather than individualist) notion of the scale at which dignity applies. The reference to a “living wage” links dignity directly to the fair compensation of labor, also suggesting that for food producers to live with dignity, the work of food production must provide a viable livelihood. The final line of this excerpt from the declaration articulates dignity in opposition to forced displacement. Yet the phrasing of “the opportunity to remain in their homes” does not morally bind food producers to stay in one place. Likewise it leaves room for laborers to define their own notion of ‘home.’ This illuminates the free, unforced mobility of laborers and their right to self-determine their own sense of home, as elemental components of their capacity to live with dignity within the international movement for food sovereignty’s conception of the term.

Notably, the above passage from the *Declaration of Nyéléni* invokes dignity as a vital element of its constituent authors’ vision for the future. This positions their notion of dignity as squarely aligned with the overall political stance of the declaration and implicates it in the various subversive projects the document outlines. As such, a life with dignity for food producers can be interpreted as predicated on the “right to territory and self-determination for our peoples” that the declaration’s authors affirm as a core principle of their movement.⁶⁶ Similarly, the dignity of food producers is positioned in direct opposition to the “Imperialism, neo-liberalism, neo-colonialism and patriarchy,” that the movement for food sovereignty fights against.⁶⁷ Likewise dignity can be understood as fundamentally antagonistic to “Wars, conflicts, occupations, economic blockades, famines, forced displacement of people and confiscation of

⁶⁶ “Declaration of Nyéléni,” *Nyéléni 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty* 9.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 10.

their land, and all forces and governments that cause and support them.”⁶⁸ The “What can and will we do about it” section of the *Declaration of Nyéléni* suggests that food sovereignty, and by extension life with dignity for food producers, will be achieved by building a collective movement, one characterized by “forging alliances” and “supporting each others’ struggles,” a movement that recognizes that “every struggle, in any part of the world for food sovereignty, is our struggle.”⁶⁹ These excerpts implicate dignity for food producers in a distinctly collective struggle, suggesting that dignity for any and dignity for all are profoundly interdependent projects. Thus a close examination of the dignity of food producers as articulated in the Declaration of Nyéléni illuminates a notion of dignity that stands in stark opposition to imperialism and neoliberalism and is intimately related to the self-determination and freedom of mobility of the people who feed the world.

VI. Decolonial Indigenous Dignity

A consideration of dignity as it is used by radical social movements would be grievously incomplete without due attention paid to the concept as it has been invoked by indigenous peoples and indigenous-led movements against colonization and neocolonial structures and practices. In this section, I continue my exploration of counter-hegemonic invocations of dignity by honing in on the significance and function of the term as it is used within Zapatismo, the political ideology of the Mexican Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN).⁷⁰ I analyze mentions of dignity within a document known as *La Sexta Declaración de la Selva Lacandona*

⁶⁸ Ibid. 10.

⁶⁹ “Declaration of Nyéléni,” *Nyéléni 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty*. 11.

⁷⁰ Translation: Zapatista Army of National Liberation (mine)

(*La Sexta*), drawing upon writings from a prominent leader of the Zapatista uprising known as Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos to further elucidate the significance of the term as it is referenced within Zapatismo.⁷¹

I choose to include an examination of Zapatista notions of dignity in this chapter largely because it offers an exceptionally lucid, powerful articulation of the term that makes its revolutionary stakes clear. My choice is again grounded in Mignolo's notion of "loci of enunciation;" I analyze dignity within Zapatismo because it is a revolutionary ideology that emerged from similar geographic, material and cultural conditions as a majority of the farmworkers I interacted with this summer who largely came from or had family roots in rural agricultural communities in Mexico. I do not wish to assume the political beliefs or affiliations of farmworkers in the U.S. Southeast. Rather, I posit that the fact that Zapatismo arose in resistance to the very same neoliberal political and economic conditions (namely NAFTA) that pushed so many farmworkers to seek employment in the U.S. marks it as a movement worthy of consideration in the present investigation. In the rest of this section, I look to the specific invocations of dignity within the pages of *La Sexta* as well as references to the concept in a letter penned by Subcomandante Marcos in order to analyze what the term can be understood to mean, how it functions, what political moment it responds to, and what future it imagines into possibility.

The Zapatistas are a political movement composed primarily of Mexican indigenous peoples of Ch'ol, Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Tojolobal, Mam, and Zoque descent that erupted onto the national and global political stage on January 1st, 1994 through a carefully coordinated armed

⁷¹ Translation: The Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle (mine)

uprising in six different cities in the Mexican state of Chiapas.⁷² The insurgency was strategically timed as a response to the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), but the group frames its anti-capitalist, decolonial political agenda more broadly as resistance to over five hundred years of colonial domination that lives on today in the form of privatization, land dispossession, and cultural oppression.⁷³ In the years following the 1994 uprising, the Zapatistas have established a number of autonomous communities in the mountains of Southern Mexico that emphasize peaceful collective living, land recuperation, horizontal governance, gender equity, grassroots education and healthcare.⁷⁴ The movement has also built relations of allyship with organizations and peoples around the world who are fighting against capitalism and neoliberalism.⁷⁵ Zapatismo, the worldview or ideology of the Zapatista movement, is defined by the group's Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee as follows:

“Zapatismo is not a new political ideology, or a rehash of old ideologies. Zapatismo is nothing, it does not exist. It only serves as a bridge, to cross from one side, to the other. So everyone fits within Zapatismo, everyone who wants to cross from one side, to the other. There are no universal recipes, lines, strategies, tactics, laws, rules, or slogans. There is only a desire – to build a better world, that is, a new world.”⁷⁶

One of the clearest, most in-depth articulations of the Zapatista cause can be found in a document entitled *La Sexta Declaración de la Selva Lacandona (La Sexta)*. Dignity is a prominent concept within Zapatismo, and I look to the multiple invocations of the word within

⁷² “Zapatismo.” *Global Social Theory*.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ “Zapatismo.” *Global Social Theory*.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

La Sexta in order to tease out an understanding of what the Zapatistas understand it to mean and do.

La Sexta contains five explicit uses of the terms “digna” and “dignidad” which are translated in the English version of the document as “dignified” and “dignity” respectively.⁷⁷ The opening sentence of *La Sexta* reads “This is our simple word which seeks to touch the hearts of humble and simple people like ourselves, but people who are also, like ourselves, dignified and rebel.”⁷⁸ Later on the document, in a section entitled “What We Are,” reference is made to a 2001 Zapatista campaign known as the “march for indigenous dignity.”⁷⁹ In a subsequent section entitled “Where We Are Now,” the declaration’s authors describe how the young people who were only children during the initial 1994 Zapatista insurgency have since been “trained in the rebel dignity lifted up by their elders throughout these 12 years of war.”⁸⁰ Later, in a section titled “How We See Our Country Which is Mexico,” the authors express joy and solidarity with other Mexican people “who do not put up with things, who do not surrender, who do not sell out. Who are dignified.”⁸¹ The final reference to dignity is in the penultimate section entitled “What We Want to Do.” It is mentioned in a message to the “brothers and sisters of Social Europe, that which is dignified and rebel,” communicating that “[they] are not alone.”⁸²

These invocations of dignity or the quality of being dignified in *La Sexta* offer insight into what the concept means to the Zapatistas and how it can be understood to function within

⁷⁷ “Sexta Declaración de la Selva Lacandona”/“Sixth Declaration of the Selva Lacandona.” *Enlace Zapatista*.

⁷⁸ “Sixth Declaration...” *Enlace Zapatista*.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

their movement. Three of the five references to dignity are paired with or qualified by the word “rebel” suggesting that the Zapatista notion of dignity is closely associated with the revolutionary, insurgent nature of their movement. Dignity is portrayed as a way of being in the world that is intimately intertwined with, though not exactly equivalent to, the act of rebellion. The historical socio-political context that Zapatismo articulates itself in resistance to (five hundred years of colonial domination and ongoing oppression at the hands of neoliberalism and capitalism) frames the movement’s notion of dignity as an accomplice in a radically decolonial and anti-capitalist political project. The reference in *La Sexta* to the “march for indigenous dignity” indicates that dignity for the Zapatistas is something that must be fought for, something that can be claimed through collective demonstration and protest. This invocation suggests that dignity is something that indigenous peoples in particular deserve, something to which they are denied full access by the conditions and practices the march protests. The third reference to dignity in *La Sexta* portrays dignity as a practice or a form of knowledge that requires training and can be passed down from movement elders to younger members. This passage also situates dignity within the specific context of war, articulating it as a value that can (or perhaps must) be lifted up in times of violent conflict. The last two invocations of dignity within *La Sexta* portray dignity as a quality shared by people, in Mexico and “Social Europe” respectively, that the Zapatistas seek to be in solidarity with. Here dignity is again paired with a rebellious spirit, and more explicitly in the passage about Mexican peoples, with the refusal to “put up with things,” to “surrender,” or to “sell out.”⁸³ These uses of the word illuminate dignity as a vessel for solidarity, a shared quality with the potential to unite people from distinct cultures and geographies in a common struggle. Finally, a constant across all the references to dignity in *La*

⁸³ “Sixth Declaration...” *Enlace Zapatista*.

Sexta is the fundamentally collective level at which it is understood to apply. Dignity is framed throughout the document as quality or practice of peoples and communities rather than individuals. Thus an analysis of the various mentions of dignity in *La Sexta* yields a nuanced understanding of what dignity means and does for the Zapatista movement.

A passage from a letter written by Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, one of the political and military leaders of the EZLN, further elucidates the meaning and function of dignity within the Zapatista movement and ideology.⁸⁴ The passage reads:

*The indigenous peoples who support our just cause have decided to resist without surrender, without accepting the alms with which the supreme government hopes to buy them. And they have decided this because they have made theirs a word which is not understood with the head, which cannot be studied or memorized. It is a word which is lived with the heart, a word which is felt deep inside your chest And which makes men and women proud of belonging to the human race. This word is DIGNITY. Respect for ourselves, for our right to be better, or right to struggle for what we believe in, our right to live and die according to our ideals. Dignity cannot be studied, you live it or it dies, it aches inside you and teaches you how to walk. Dignity is that international homeland which we forget many times.*⁸⁵

I interpret the purpose of dignity as it is articulated in this passage to be essentially congruent with that expressed in *La Sexta*: to foster solidarity and collective resistance to capitalism and ongoing colonial oppression. I see Marcos' letter as a valuable text for analysis because it helps me gain purchase on what exactly dignity *is* and *means* for the Zapatista movement.

The passage from Marcos' letter offers an expansive, complex portrayal of dignity. He emphasizes that dignity for the Zapatistas is not an idea that can be studied or known, but rather

⁸⁴ It is important to note that Marcos himself is not indigenous. He is from a middle class, urban background, but has been one of the most prominent voices of the Zapatista movement from its inception. I consciously chose to use *La Sexta*, a document written collectively by the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee rather than one of Marcos' many written works as the primary document for my analysis of dignity within Zapatismo. I include this passage from a letter written by Marcos to Eric Jauffret in 1995 as a supplement to this analysis because I believe it offers an especially lucid and powerful explication of the term.

⁸⁵ "Dignity cannot be studied, you live it or it dies" *The Struggle Site*.

a confluence of feeling and action. Marcos' writing dances between singular and collective, framing dignity as an internal quality that is lived and felt by a universal "you," as a pride at belonging to "the human race," a sense of self-respect on a collective level. Like the authors of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Marcos invokes the language of rights in his consideration of dignity. But his understanding of what rights dignity confers differs strikingly from the international legal accord. The insurgent leader suggests that dignity means the right to struggle, the right to challenge unjust power, and to live (and die) by our values.

Marcos portrays dignity as a feeling that "teaches you how to walk," a source of motivation and a guiding principle for the movement. His insistence that "dignity cannot be studied, you live it or it dies" indicates that, for the Zapatistas, dignity is a living thing, a way of being rather than an idea, a quality that must be cultivated through action and struggle or it will be lost. The irony of Marcos' statement in the context of this thesis is not lost on me. His words serve as a reminder of the limits of any academic consideration of dignity, a suggestion that the full meaning of the word cannot be grasped through analysis, but must be lived and felt.

Marcos' words reaffirm my commitment to consider dignity as inextricable from the social and political context of its invocation, not a mere concept but a word that responds to history and elicits action. Finally, Marcos' description of dignity as "that international homeland we forget many times" echoes the close relationship between dignity and solidarity conveyed in *La Sexta*. This passage frames dignity as something we all belong to, a value or way of being that, once remembered, holds the potential for a solidarity that transcends borders.

Thus an exploration of dignity within Zapatismo yields a dynamic, embodied, and fundamentally revolutionary understanding of the concept. My analysis of *La Sexta* and Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos' letter illuminate Zapatista "rebel dignity" as a radically anti-

colonial and anti-capitalist project, a collective value that must be remembered and lived out, as well as a nexus for collaborative struggle and solidarity. This investigation of dignity within an indigenous social movement from Mexico adds color and texture to the mosaic of different meanings and functions of dignity, offering a useful contextual perspective for my analysis of dignity within the Farmworker movement in the Southeast.

VII. Emergent Meanings and Themes

For my comparative analysis of dignity across the varying contexts examined above, I use a series of questions to put the different invocations of the word in conversation with one another. They are: What does dignity mean and to whom does it apply? What historical context does dignity respond to or resist? And what future does dignity envision? Following this discussion I articulate key themes and implications that will be useful to my exploration of dignity in the specific context of the farmworker movement in the Southeast.

What does dignity mean and to whom does it apply?

The disparate uses of dignity examined in the preceding sections offer starkly contrasting responses to this question. I distill four distinct strains of meaning from the various movements and documents.⁸⁶ The first, which only really appears in the meritocratic classical European usage of the term, is dignity as status deserving of differential treatment. This meaning is important to flag because, though it did not appear to resurface in my analyses of legal dignity and dignity within relevant social movements, it is still present in the epistemological baggage the term carries that mediates the way a given audience might understand it. The second strand

⁸⁶ though there is significant variation within each strain, I find it useful to articulate them in terms of their commonalities

of meaning I distill out from the examples scrutinized above is that of life with dignity as a condition deserved by all people that merits protection from harm. I also conceptualize this notion of dignity as ‘rights plus something more.’ Though ‘harm’ is construed differently across the distinct examples, I see this as the most prevalent conception of dignity across the different contexts I explore; it is evident throughout the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, present in the Memphis sanitation strike protester’s call for safer, less degrading working conditions, apparent in SEIRN’s belief in the “dignity and fundamental human rights” of all people,⁸⁷ and visible in the way the *Declaration of Nyéléni* construes dignity as fair pay and in opposition to forced displacement. Notably, this second notion of the word construes dignity as something gained through treatment by others. The third notion of the word that I identify is that of dignity as mutuality, a relational tie that binds people across identity and location in a common struggle for liberation. This form of dignity surfaces in SEIRN’s assertion that attacks on anyone’s dignity are attacks on all of our dignity. I also see this notion of dignity clearly voiced in the Zapatista conception of dignity as an “international homeland.”⁸⁸ The final notion of dignity I distill out from the examples examined in this chapter is that of dignity as a fire within, an inherent internal quality that inspires revolutionary action. This understanding of dignity is most readily apparent in the Zapatista concept of “rebel dignity,”⁸⁹ but I see traces of it in the way that dignity is put into practice through acts of protest and resistance in the other social movements. Thus dignity can be shown to carry a number of distinct meanings that may at times overlap and coexist within the same movement or invocation of the word.

⁸⁷ "Our Mission, Vision and Principles." Southeast Immigrant Rights Network. 2017.

⁸⁸ “Dignity cannot be studied, you live it or it dies” *The Struggle Site*.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

In response to the latter half of my question ‘to whom does [dignity] apply?’ a few distinct polarities emerge. Perhaps most obvious is the distinction between the meritocratic notion of dignity that applies only to those of a certain rank or status and the universal notion of dignity that permeates all the other invocations of the word explored in this chapter and portrays dignity as a universal quality or right deserved by all people. The only slight exception to this universal understanding of dignity in the legal and social movement contexts I examine is the moments when the right to dignity is expressed through masculinist language such as in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* use of ‘his’ to mean all people or the Memphis strikers’ signs that read “I AM A MAN.” Such language, though it contains liberatory intentions, tacitly implies that dignity is something deserved more fully by men than by people of other genders. Another point, or perhaps continuum of dissidence that emerges from these various invocations of dignity is whether dignity is understood to apply on the level of the individual or the collective. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, though it uses broad, sweeping language that frames dignity as a something to which everyone is entitled, ultimately advocates dignity as a part of the project of personal self-actualization, belying a fundamentally individual notion of the word’s application. Opposingly, SEIRN and the international movement for food sovereignty seem to operate under a distinctly collective understanding of dignity as something that is a quality or condition of ‘peoples’ and ‘communities’ rather than individuals. More in the center of the continuum, the examples I explore of workers’ dignity in the Memphis strike and the Zapatista concept of dignity suggest more of an interplay between the individual and the collective, both demonstrating claims to dignity that are made both on the level of the collective (dignity for sanitation workers and indigenous peoples as collective entities) and on the level of the singular individual (dignity claimed by stating “I AM A MAN,” and the internal rebel dignity

that “aches inside you and teaches you how to walk”).⁹⁰ These examples demonstrate the nuanced overlaps and distinctions between the ways these invocations of dignity across varying contexts construe the word’s meaning and the scope at which it applies.

What historical context does dignity respond to or resist?

Each of the different uses of the term dignity examined in this chapter invoke the word in direct response or opposition to a particular event or socio-political context. These responses can be consolidated and articulated in the following four ways:

1. Dignity as resistance to social and political equality, a means by which those of a certain power or rank justify their position (classical European meritocratic dignity)
2. Dignity as resistance to war, genocide, religious oppression, and totalitarian fascism (legal dignity in the UDHR)
3. Dignity as resistance to imperialism, neoliberalism, and neocolonialism (decolonial indigenous dignity and dignity of food producers)
4. Dignity as resistance to the specific legacy of racism in the U.S. South (workers’ dignity and immigrant dignity)

These four emergent articulations of dignity in response to history indicate the profound elasticity of the term. They also suggest an intimate relationship between dignity and the political moment in which it is invoked, showing that its meaning is deeply influenced by the social context from which it emerges. This framework of analyzing dignity as a response to its

⁹⁰ “Dignity cannot be studied, you live it or it dies” *The Struggle Site*.

historical moment also yields detailed characterizations of the relationship between dignity and two political contexts very relevant to farmworker organizing in the Southeast: that of neocolonial, neoliberal trade policies, and that of racist exploitation in the South. These characterizations will be very useful in my final analysis of the relationship between dignity as it is invoked by the farmworker movement in the southeast and the specific history of agricultural exploitation in the region.

What future does dignity envision?

Each of the invocations of dignity explored in this chapter contain within them distinct visions for the future that are rooted in the historical and political moment that dignity is articulated as a response to. From the meritocratic, classical European use of the word I intuit a vision for a future of continued social inequality, the maintenance of systems of differential rank, and in the extreme, the perpetuation of a system of human enslavement. From the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, I parse out a vision of future with dignity as one absent of war and genocide in which every person is ensured social security and the pursuit of individual self-actualization. The different grassroots social movements I explore contain diverse, at times overlapping and intertwined visions for a future of dignity. I distill them into the following primary themes:

A future in which...

1. All laborers and marginalized peoples are treated with humanity and can embrace the fullness of their identities.
2. All workers, immigrants, and specifically those who produce the world's food have collective self-determination, voice, and freedom of mobility

3. The labor of food production is a viable livelihood
4. The U.S. South is transformed into a just and welcoming place for all peoples
5. All peoples are liberated from colonization and oppression

The elastic and expansive nature of the word dignity (to the point of outright contradiction!) is again evidenced by the wide range of possible futures envisioned by different invocations of the term. I will use these characterizations of the imagined futures dignity can convey, as well as the distilled meanings and responses to historical context explored in this chapter, to inform my analysis of dignity as it is invoked in the farmworker movement in North Carolina today.

Chapter 4: Farmworker Organizing and Farmworker Dignity

In any consideration of the history and present day realities of farm labor in the U.S. South, it is critical to recognize and uplift the ongoing legacy of farmworker struggles to improve their lives and livelihoods and bring justice to the agricultural system. In the context of exploitive labor conditions, farmworkers are far from passive victims; the people whose labor provides this nation with food have a long history of claiming their humanity and asserting their agency through protest, strategic alliance building, and organized collective action. Indeed, movements of agricultural laborers and their allies throughout history have led to the greatest improvements and protections in the lives of farmworkers today.¹

In this chapter, I hone in on farm labor organizing, both in the context of North Carolina and in the South as a whole, as means to lift up that long legacy of farmworker agency. I focus primarily on the results of the interviews I conducted with six different members of the farmworker movement in North Carolina on the topic of farmworker dignity. The conceptions of dignity from various relevant historical, legal, and social movement contexts that are explored in the previous chapter are integral to my discussion of the findings of my interviews. The emergent meanings and themes I articulate in the final section of chapter three provide a blueprint for my discussion of dignity as it is understood and advocated by members of the farmworker movement in North Carolina today.

In an attempt to situate the work of my interviewees within the broader scope of agricultural workers' movements and strategies of resistance throughout history, I begin the chapter with a chronological account of farm labor organizing in the U.S. with particular

¹ Thompson & Wiggins. *The Human Cost of Food*. 275.

attention to movements and actions based in the Southeast. This narrative timeline is followed by a brief discussion of key themes and tactics across different farmworker movements throughout time that is intended to illuminate trends and help me gain my bearings in my discussion of my interview results. Next, I draw upon my qualitative interviews, in conjunction with my own experiences and observations from my summer fieldwork, to map out the landscape of the farmworker movement in North Carolina today. After a brief description of my six interviewees, I move into a narrative account of the findings of my interviews about farmworker dignity. This section is organized into the following subsections: Dignity Meanings, Dignity Challenges, and Dignity Futures.² In each subsection, I examine relevant excerpts from the interviewees' responses to my questions, putting them in conversation with the different notions of dignity explored in chapter three as a means to further elucidate their meaning and broader implications. I conclude with a concise synopsis of the meanings, challenges and imagined futures of farmworker dignity as it is expressed by my interviewees, consolidating the discussion of my findings into a succinct format to be used in my final analysis in chapter five.

This chapter builds on the work of the three that come before it. It adds a necessary corollary strand of history, that of farm labor organizing, to the timeline of agricultural history discussed in chapter one. It offers a characterization of the ways in which farmworker organizers and advocates in North Carolina respond to the conditions of farm labor today that are described in detail in chapter two. It draws heavily upon chapter three's discussion of dignity in relevant contexts to better illuminate the meaning, limitations, and potential of farmworker dignity as it is

² These three subsections roughly correspond to the guiding questions in my analysis of dignity in relevant contexts from chapter three: What does dignity mean and to whom does it apply? What historical context does dignity respond to or resist? And, What future does dignity envision? (Respectively). As such, the emergent themes from each guiding question in chapter three are revisited and used as a point of reference in the discussions of each corresponding subsection in this chapter.

expressed by my interviewees. In the context of my thesis as a whole, this chapter sheds light on the specific notion of dignity employed by farmworker activists in North Carolina, thereby laying the final foundation for my analysis of farmworker dignity as a response to the ongoing history of agricultural exploitation in the South, a potential means of resistance to plantation space and the space of nonexistence.

I. A History of Farmworker Organizing in the U.S.

In this section, I give a chronological account of farmworker organizing in the U.S. (highlighting events and campaigns that took place specifically in the Southeast) followed by a brief discussion of themes and patterns across farmworker movements throughout time. In the scope of my thesis as a whole, this section is important because it describes a vital corollary history that is intimately intertwined with the history of farm labor itself, illuminating the ongoing legacy of farmworker agency and struggles against injustice. Additionally, the characterization of the farmworker movement in North Carolina contextualizes the results from my interviews and maps out the terrain in which I situate my analysis of farmworker dignity.

“Those who oppose our cause are rich and powerful, and they have many allies in high places. We are poor. Our allies are few. But we have something the rich do not own. We have our own bodies and spirits and the justice of our cause as our weapons.”

César Chávez, Farm Labor Organizer³

From the earliest times of slavery in the Americas, agricultural workers have been resisting the power of those who seek to exploit them. Oral traditions document that crops such as rice, okra, and sweet potatoes were first introduced into the Americas by enslaved women

³ Thompson & Wiggins. *The Human Cost of Food*. 260.

who wove them into their hair upon capture in Africa as a way of safeguarding traditional livelihoods in the face of violent, unknown change.⁴ This sequestration of seeds can be understood as a profoundly foresighted and deliberate effort by enslaved African women to make possible the survival of their people and food traditions under the brutal regime of plantation slavery.

Martial resistance was another means by which farm laborers organized and fought against exploitation and dehumanization. In 1663, Black enslaved people joined forces with white indentured servants in the first recorded slave revolt to take place in the lands that would come to be known as the United States.⁵ Enslaved people continued to organize uprisings and armed rebellions until the institution of slavery was legally abolished, with at least 250 slave revolts recorded by the end of the Civil War in 1865.⁶

These revolts were often met by harsh violence and heightened oversight and control. As such, enslaved people also employed other, more subtle methods of resistance. By cultivating their own crops to sell, many enslaved people were able to obtain a degree of economic independence.⁷ Religious practices served as another means by which enslaved populations nurtured resilience and resisted domination.⁸

As the exploitation of unfree agricultural labor in the South shifted with the abolition of slavery, so too did the organizing strategies of those laborers. In the early years of Reconstruction, formerly enslaved Black people used their newly won right to vote to push for

⁴ Penniman."Uprooting Racism in the Food System"; Olugbala. "Farming While Black"; Carney. "With Grains in Her Hair,"

⁵ "Slave Rebellions." *History*.

⁶ "Slave Rebellions." *History*.

⁷ Ronald E. Seavoy. *The American Peasantry*, 16-30.

⁸ Ronald E. Seavoy. *The American Peasantry*, 16-30.

land redistribution, minimum wage laws, and free public education, forming alliances with the more radical branch of the republican party to increase their political impact.⁹ This upswing in Southern Black political agency was met with fierce opposition by the white supremacist power structures in the South and soon Jim Crow laws were established that established a new regime of exploitation and discrimination against Black agricultural laborers.¹⁰ Even under these oppressive conditions, the primarily Black farm labor force did not cease to organize and fight for better living and working conditions. In the early 1900s with the start of World War One (and continuing throughout the great migration), many Black Americans working on farms claimed autonomy over their own lives by moving north to fill newly available industrial jobs.¹¹ Those who stayed behind took advantage of the relative scarcity of workers who could be brought in to replace them and organized for higher wages and more favorable conditions.¹²

In the 1930s, in response to New Deal agricultural policies that unfairly subsidized landowners and disadvantaged tenant sharecroppers, farm laborers in the South formed a new political organization.¹³ The Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) organized sharecroppers across Arkansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Mississippi, and Tennessee.¹⁴ An interracial union, the STFU had as many as 25,000 members at the height of its campaigning,¹⁵ including Black and

⁹ Thompson & Wiggins. *The Human Cost of Food*. 250.

¹⁰ Ibid. 250-251.

¹¹ Thompson & Wiggins. *The Human Cost of Food*. 252.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Mooney & Majka. "Farmers' and Farmworkers' Movements: Social Protest in American Agriculture." *Social Movements Past and Present*. 80.

¹⁴ Thompson & Wiggins. *The Human Cost of Food*. 253.

¹⁵ Ibid.

white sharecroppers, and Native Americans who had been forcibly pushed off their lands.¹⁶ The STFU was led by experienced socialist organizers, school teachers, and rural ministers, and pushed for enhanced union bargaining power, increased legal protections, and access to land-ownership for its members.¹⁷ The STFU's primary organizing tactics were collective bargaining, public relations, and political appeals; they employed strikes, protest, and demonstrations in the face of violent, antagonistic plantation owners to garner public awareness and support for their cause.¹⁸ Labor historians Patrick Mooney and Theo Majka argue that this strategic use of visibility, alongside other organizing tactics used by the STFU bear significant resemblance to the strategies employed by the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, suggesting that leaders of the latter may well have drawn inspiration and tactical insight from the former.¹⁹

In the 1940s and '50s, the power of the STFU was significantly abated by increased agricultural mechanization and direct federal subsidies that incentivized growers to purchase tractors, cotton harvesters, and other farming equipment that replaced the manual labor of workers.²⁰ In spite of these adverse conditions, agricultural workers continued to organize in the South. They did so with particular force in the Delta region under the Mississippi Farm Labor Union.²¹ Movement leaders like Fannie Lou Hamer highlighted the intertwined nature of agricultural exploitation and Black people's lack of civil rights.²² The fight for full citizenship

¹⁶ Mooney & Majka. "Farmers' and Farmworkers' Movements:" 84.

¹⁷ Mooney & Majka. "Farmers' and Farmworkers' Movements:" 84.

¹⁸ Mooney & Majka. "Farmers' and Farmworkers' Movements:" 85.

¹⁹ Ibid. 88-89.

²⁰ Thompson & Wiggins. *The Human Cost of Food*. 255.

²¹ Thompson & Wiggins. *The Human Cost of Food*. 255.

²² Ibid. 255.

and for the right to vote emerged yet again in farm labor history as pivotal to the struggle for justice for agricultural workers.

While a radical movement for Black liberation took the South (and the country) by storm in the 1950s and '60s, a farmworker movement took form on the west coast, escalating and gaining national visibility. Farm labor organizing during this time responded to an increasingly capitalist model of food production in which large-scale agricultural operations that employed hundreds or thousands of wage laborers began to dominate the farming landscape.²³ This agri-business model was especially prominent in California, the state where one of the most prominent and influential movements for farmworker justice took place. The United Farmworkers (UFW) is a name that garners recognition in many households across the country, and the extraordinary effort and coordination that defined the UFW movement deserves consideration here.

In the early 1960s, Dolores Huerta and César Chávez, two Mexican American community organizers from the California based Community Service Organization (CSO) co-founded a group in Delano, California that would come to be known as the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA).²⁴ The NFWA worked to unionize the local farmworker communities and improve living conditions, focusing their efforts on those who were in the area on a year round basis to build a stable union base.²⁵ Huerta, Chávez and their fellow activists used relationship building and input from community members as the foundation of their organizing platform, including both men and women in their work and adhering closely to

²³ Thompson & Wiggins. *The Human Cost of Food*. . 255

²⁴ Thompson & Wiggins. *The Human Cost of Food*. 255-6.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 256.

principles of nonviolence.²⁶ A primary tactic the union used to build worker power was going from door to door registering workers to vote.²⁷

In September of 1965, the predominantly Filipino members of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) called a strike in the grape fields of Coachella Valley.²⁸ Dolores Huerta, who was also a part of AWOC, played a pivotal role in convincing the NFWA to support the grape strike.²⁹ The strikers made use of the consumer boycott as a tactic to put economic pressure on wealthy farm owners to sign contracts that would ensure immediate improvements to the conditions in the fields, seeking out support from truck drivers, dock workers, and potential grape buyers alike to block the supply chain at every link.³⁰ Strikers and organizers were met with threats, unwarranted arrest, and violent abuse,³¹ as well as resistance from well funded agribusiness through the courts.³² The union, representing a coalition of Mexican-American and Filipino workers, renamed itself United Farm Workers' Organizing Committee (UFWOC) which was eventually simplified to UFW.³³ Many student activists from groups such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) or the Congress Of Racial Equality (CORE) supported the boycott, volunteering in solidarity with the striking farmworkers.³⁴

²⁶ *Dolores*. Directed by Peter Bratt.

²⁷ *Ibid*.

²⁸ Thompson & Wiggins. *The Human Cost of Food*. 261.

²⁹ *Ibid*. 261

³⁰ *Ibid*. 264.

³¹ *Dolores*. Directed by Peter Bratt.

³² Thompson & Wiggins. *The Human Cost of Food*. 261.

³³ *Ibid*. 264-266.

³⁴ *Ibid*. 263.

After five years of tireless strikes, consumer education, and organized protest, the UFW achieved a major victory: on July 29th, 1970, they succeeded in bringing agribusiness leaders to the table to sign contracts for close to 30,000 workers in the grape industry.³⁵ These contracts included a marked increase in wages, the formation of a union hiring hall, and the implementation of far stricter constraints on the use of pesticides.³⁶ Following this momentous victory, the UFW continued organizing, but faced a host of challenges in its ongoing work. Farm owners mounted a legal counter-offensive and two union members were killed by anti-union violence.³⁷ The UFW experienced significant tension among its leadership in the post-strike years, and suffered a particularly great loss when Larry Itliong and Philip Vera Cruz, two of the original AWOC leaders, left the group.³⁸ Though it has faced significant setbacks through the years, including the death of César Chávez in 1993,³⁹ the UFW continues organizing to this day, both in California and in collaboration with other unions and farmworker groups across the nation.⁴⁰ Though it is based on the opposite coast under regionally distinct politics and conditions, I include this account of the United Farm Workers movement because it has, without question, had a significant impact on farm labor organizing in the Southeast and continues to serve as a source of inspiration for the organizers and activists that carry forward that work in a Southern context today.

More recently in the Southeast, two farm labor campaigns have made significant progress

³⁵ Thompson & Wiggins. *The Human Cost of Food*. 266.

³⁶ Ibid. 267.

³⁷ Ibid. 267.

³⁸ Thompson & Wiggins. *The Human Cost of Food*. 267.

³⁹ Mooney & Majka. "Farmers' and Farmworkers' Movements..." 150.

⁴⁰ "United Farm Workers." *UFW*.

in securing rights and protections for farmworkers in the region. In 1998, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), a farmworker union that originated in the 1960s in Ohio, began organizing with cucumber workers in North Carolina.⁴¹ After a five year boycott of Mt. Olive Pickles, FLOC secured a major union contract that included farmworkers across the state working not only in cucumbers but in sweet potatoes, Christmas trees, and tobacco too.⁴² In Florida, a group known as the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) began organizing with tomato pickers in 1993.⁴³ In 2011, the CIW launched a program called the Fair Food Program that binds participating retail buyers such as Subway, Whole Foods, and Walmart to only purchasing tomatoes from farms that meet the union-dictated Fair Food Standards.⁴⁴ The CIW has made particularly effective use of tactics of consumer engagement throughout the ongoing process of pressuring retailers to sign on the Fair Food Program.⁴⁵ Both FLOC and CIW continue to organize today in the South and on a national level as well.

It is important to note that, while the movements addressed here may be the largest scale or most visible examples of farm labor organizing, even in the absence of a union or coordinated campaign, instances of more informal, localized farmworker resistance to unjust labor conditions abound. In his research conducted among agricultural laborers in the South, anthropologist David Griffith indicates that most of the farmworkers he spoke to related some experience of challenging authority and resisting unjust working conditions, either individually or in

⁴¹ "About FLOC." Farm Labor Organizing Committee AFL-CIO.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ "About CIW." Coalition of Immokalee Workers.

⁴⁴ "About CIW." Coalition of Immokalee Workers.

⁴⁵ Minkoff-Zern, Laura-Anne. "Challenging the Agrarian Imaginary..."

coordination with their fellow workers.⁴⁶ This highlights the ubiquity of farmworker resistance, even beyond the scope of the more widely recognized labor campaigns.

II. Farmworker Organizing Themes and Strategies

Throughout the history of farm labor resistance in the U.S., a number of consistent themes emerge. Analyzing the actions of farm owners and those with power in the agricultural system from the times of slavery until today, it becomes clear that one of the primary ways in which they maintained the oppression and exploitation of farm laborers was by barring workers' access to land ownership and full citizenship (often marked by the right to vote). Likewise growers and agribusiness interests throughout time have sought to control and disempower the farm labor force by means of intimidation, violent force, and tactics meant to disrupt worker unity such as anti-union legislation and targeting the leaders of organized resistance. The violence and voracity of these tactics demonstrate that farmworker voice, unity, and access to land and the accompanying independence it brings, are perceived as dire threats by those who have sought to profit off an exploitive system of farm labor.

In response to these forces of opposition, the consistent use of certain strategies by farm labor movements becomes apparent over time. From the early years of Reconstruction to the UFW strikes in California, the struggle for access to the vote has emerged as cornerstone of farmworker organizing platforms, highlighting its importance as a means of gaining voice and full citizenship. Similarly, collective bargaining and the strategic use of protest to garner visibility become evident as two of the primary means by which agricultural laborers have successfully bettered their lot. And from the earliest revolts of enslaved laborers in the 1600s to

⁴⁶ Griffith, David. "Challenges to Farmworker Organizing in the South." 25.

the Southern Tenant Farmers Union to the UFW strikes, forming coalitions across lines of race becomes apparent as a strategy by which workers have built broader bases of support and more effective networks of resistance. In more recent years, as evidenced by the UFW strike, the FLOC boycott, and the CIW's Fair Food Program, the education and incorporation of consumers has revealed itself to be a useful strategy to put pressure on those with power in an increasingly capitalist agricultural system. Finally, the early accounts of enslaved peoples' subversive forms of resilience, taken together with Griffith's findings of pervasive informal resistance among farmworkers in the South today, suggest that the struggle for justice for agricultural workers extends well beyond the scope of the major movements and mobilizations, taking a myriad of subtly defiant forms. Thus a discussion of farmworker organizing throughout time allows me to unearth key trends that have marked the history of farm labor in the South (and the nation as a whole). It illuminates the ubiquity of farmworker struggles for agency and justice and provides a necessary contextual backdrop for my discussion of farmworker dignity in North Carolina.

III. The Farmworker Movement in North Carolina

In this section I offer a characterization of the farmworker movement in North Carolina drawn both from my own observations and field experiences from the summer of 2018 and from the findings of my interviews. I provide an overview of the movement as a whole, characterize the different types of organizations and coalitions and the distinct roles they play, and describe the two organizations and six affiliated staff members and interns with whom I conducted my interviews.

In my research, I adopt a broad understanding of the North Carolina farmworker movement as made up of all organizations, groups, and individuals based in the state of North

Carolina whose primary focus is to support and advocate the rights and wellbeing of farmworkers. The key members of the North Carolina farmworker movement that I identified over the course of my field experiences during the summer include unions, non-profits, migrant health and education programs, legal agencies, workers centers, community centers, and allied consumer groups. A number of coalitions exist between (and beyond) these various organizations, facilitating local and statewide collaboration and connecting them to broader movements for social justice.

Of the different types of organizations and programs I encountered during my summer internship, migrant health and migrant education programs seemed to be the most numerous. Though distinct in nature, these two kinds of organizations both take a direct service approach to supporting North Carolina farmworker populations, offering programs and clinics that aim to address some of the most pressing day-to-day needs of farmworkers in the state. Often the staff members of migrant health and migrant education programs conduct regular outreach at farmworker camps and housing to make their services as accessible as possible.

Legal agencies are also an important component of the North Carolina farmworker movement, providing support for workers' who are victims of wage theft or whose contracts have otherwise been violated. Some of these agencies also conduct regular outreach to farmworker populations to make their services more accessible and to monitor for growers who are not providing adequate amenities or treating their workers according to legal regulations. One such agency that I encountered during my summer internship was the Farmworker Unit at Legal Aid of North Carolina. Though they are barred from engaging in advocacy, organizing, or campaign work, legal agencies provide vital support for farmworker rights in North Carolina.

Community centers are another type of organization that play an important role in the North Carolina farmworker movement. Sometimes rooted in faith traditions or affiliated with a specific church, community centers offer spaces for cultural events and community gatherings and provide programming and trainings for farmworkers and their families. The Episcopal Farmworkers Ministry (EFM) in Newton Grove, North Carolina is an example of a faith-based community center whose mission it is to support the local farmworker population. EFM organizes and distributes clothes and supplies to farmworkers, assists with transportation to local clinics and services, organizes a recreational soccer league, and offers trainings intended to empower farmworkers. Though their programs may not be explicitly political or campaign-oriented, community centers like EFM attend to a wide variety of farmworker needs and often contribute to broader initiatives aimed at changing the agricultural system as a whole.

Groups of non-farmworker allies are also actively involved in the political campaign side of the farmworker movement. These groups are made up of non-farmworkers who align with the goals of the movement and organize direct actions and protests to galvanize consumer support in solidarity with farmworkers. An example of such a group I encountered during my work this summer is the Triangle Friends of Farmworkers based in the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill area of North Carolina.

Unions, workers centers, and social justice-oriented non-profits are integral to the farmworker movement on a national level, and North Carolina is no exception. These organizations are often the ones with most explicitly political agenda, and, incidentally, are also the ones that I saw using the notion of dignity most frequently. The primary union I encountered in my work this summer was the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), mentioned earlier in the chapter in reference to the boycott of Mt. Olive Pickles they orchestrated in the late 1990s

and early 2000s. FLOC continues to organize for farmworker rights and collective bargaining power in North Carolina today, as I saw firsthand when I participated in one of their direct actions protesting the sale of VUSE e-cigarettes. The union has organized a boycott of VUSE because the company sources their tobacco from Reynolds American, a corporation that buys tobacco cultivated and harvested by farmworkers in North Carolina but refuses to negotiate a contract with FLOC. I contacted organizers from FLOC and expressed interest in meeting with them for my research but was unable to schedule any interviews. Another union that was mentioned by one of my interviewees is the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) that organizes primarily with hog and poultry workers in eastern North Carolina. The examples of workers centers and social justice non-profits in the North Carolina farmworker movement that I am most familiar with are the Western North Carolina Workers Center and Student Action with Farmworkers, the two organizations whose staff members and interns I interviewed. A more detailed description of those organizations and their role in the movement is offered in the following section, but it is important to note here that farmworker unions and groups like Student Action with Farmworkers and the Western North Carolina Workers Center are the ones whose values, vision, and organizing strategies I perceive to align most closely with the themes and strategies of other farmworker movements outlined in the previous section of this chapter. During my work this summer, and again in my interviews, I saw members of such organizations self-identify as a part of the long lineage of farmworker organizing in a way that distinguishes them from other groups and individuals that take a more legal, community oriented, or direct service approach.

Coalitions across farmworker organizations and other allied groups and individuals are an important way that distinct entities within the movement mobilize more effective campaigns and

collaborate with people working for related social justice issues. A few of the coalitions that were mentioned in my interviews were the Farmworker Advocacy Network (a group that does just what their name suggests), El Colectivo (a statewide immigrant rights group), and Adelante (a group that advocates access to higher education for immigrant youth). One of my interviewees from Student Action with Farmworkers also indicated that they collaborate with Raising Wages NC, the Southeast Immigrant Rights Network and the AFL-CIO. During my internship this summer, I also encountered instances of collaboration between farmworker organizations and environmental justice groups, as well as groups that work for the rights and wellbeing of small-scale farmers who are often disadvantaged by the same corporate agribusiness system that exploits farmworkers.

It is important to note that only a portion of the individuals and organizations that I describe as comprising the farmworker movement directly engage in the kind of labor organizing and direct action campaigns chronicled in my account of farmworker movements throughout history. Others focus more on the legal rights, health, education, and spiritual nurturance of state's farmworker population. Though all the different types of organizations and programs described above provide vital support for farmworkers in North Carolina, for my research on farmworker dignity, I focus more narrowly on the work of those who are most directly involved in grassroots organizing and campaigns with a vision for making change in the agricultural system as a whole.

IV. Interview Findings: Notions of Dignity in the North Carolina Farmworker Movement

Having contextualized farmworker organizing in North Carolina, I move next to a discussion of the findings of my qualitative interviews with activists from Student Action with

Farmworkers and the Western North Carolina Workers Center about notions of farmworker dignity. In this section, I offer a brief description of my research methods, followed by a characterization of the six individuals with whom I conducted my interviews and the two organizations with which they are all affiliated. I then move into my analysis of the results themselves. For this discussion, I use the emergent meanings and themes garnered from my examination of dignity in relevant contexts in chapter three as a loose guiding framework for my interpretation. The notions of farmworker dignity that emerge in this discussion of my interview results will be at the core of my final analysis of farmworker dignity as a mode of resistance to the living history of agricultural exploitation in the South.

Organizations

The two organizations whose staff I conducted my interviews with are the Western North Carolina Workers Center (the Workers Center) and Student Action with Farmworkers (SAF). I describe each of them in detail below. My rationale for choosing to interview these organizations was that, of the various different farmworker organizations I interacted with and met representatives from during my summer internship, these two, alongside the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), seemed to be most directly involved in labor organizing. During my internship, I noticed the word dignity invoked most frequently in protests, artwork, and publications associated with labor campaigns, and as such I identified SAF, FLOC, and the Workers Center as organizations whose staff would likely have particularly robust perspectives on the idea of farmworker dignity. Scheduling interviews at SAF was a relatively easy process because of the personal relationships I developed with the staff while working there, and I conducted four interviews with four different staff members. It proved to be more of a challenge to set up conversations with the other two organizations. With help from a couple of my

supervisors at SAF, I was able to identify and get in contact with potential interviewees from both FLOC and the Workers Center. Although I was never able to schedule an interview with anyone from FLOC, I did have success scheduling two interviews with people who currently or at one point worked at the Workers Center, both of whom I had met during my summer internship. Each of my interviewees and their relationship to farm labor and the farmworker movement is described after the following brief background on SAF and the Workers Center.

Student Action with Farmworkers

SAF is a non-profit based in Durham, North Carolina whose mission is to “bring students and farmworkers together to learn about each other’s lives, share resources and skills, improve conditions for farmworkers, and build diverse coalitions working for social change.”⁴⁷ The organization was officially incorporated in 1992, but it builds on a history of collaboration between local students and farmworkers that dates back to the 1970s and a summer-long Migrant Project of Duke University students led by Dr. Robert Coles and Professor Bruce Payne.⁴⁸ The primary focus of the organization’s work are its three student internship and fellowship programs, a leadership development and college access program for local youth from farmworker families, and a grassroots organizing campaign. SAF programs connect students with farmworkers in North and South Carolina, using documentary arts and popular theater as tools for education and relationship-building. In addition to these programs, SAF is a part of a number of coalitions and broader networks that address issues relevant to the lives and livelihoods of farmworkers in the Carolinas, including the Farmworker Advocacy Network, Adelante, El Colectivo, Raising Wages NC, the Southeast Immigrant Rights Network, and the

⁴⁷ “Vision, Mission & Goals.” Student Action with Farmworkers.

⁴⁸ “History and Accomplishments.” Student Action with Farmworkers.

AFL-CIO. The last line of the organization’s vision statement reads: “One day, all farmworkers will have dignity in their work and livelihood. People United Will Never Be Defeated!”⁴⁹

The Western North Carolina Workers Center

Established in 2002 in Morganton, North Carolina, the Western North Carolina Workers Center has the mission of “develop[ing] leadership among workers through organizing and education to resolve issues of labor rights and promote fair working conditions in Western North Carolina.”⁵⁰

The Workers Center primarily serves laborers and families from the local Guatemalan immigrant community, running programs and trainings on wage theft, workplace health and safety, and women’s empowerment.⁵¹ The Workers Center uses educational trainings, grassroots organizing, and political advocacy as strategies to improve the home and work lives of local workers, many of whom are employed in poultry and food-processing plants.⁵² The Workers Center collaborates with local churches and faith groups, as well as others advocating for immigrant and workers’ rights. The cover page of the organization’s website features a photo of protestors holding a sign that reads: “Dignidad y Respeto para los Trabajadores Avícolas Case Farms - Dignity and Respect 4 Workers”⁵³

*Interviewees*⁵⁴

⁴⁹ “Vision, Mission & Goals.” Student Action with Farmworkers.

⁵⁰ “Home.” Western North Carolina Workers Center.

⁵¹ “Our Programs.” Western North Carolina Workers Center.

⁵² “Our Programs.” Western North Carolina Workers Center.

⁵³ “Home.” Western North Carolina Workers Center.

⁵⁴ Interviewees are described in the order in which our interviews occurred. I reference each interviewee by their first name for the sake of simplicity and as an effort not to single out an interviewee who requested to only be referred to by first name. I intentionally limited the demographic information gathered in my interviews to questions about my interviewees’ personal experience with or relationship to farm labor and the capacity in which they have been a part of the farmworker movement. I did this because I did not wish for my analysis to delve too

Victoria

Victoria first joined the farmworker movement in 2018 through SAF's summer-long student internship program called Into the Fields. Her eight week placement during that summer was at the Workers Center, where she conducted outreach to inform workers and their families about trainings, helped with popular education style trainings on workplace health and safety, and lead a training on domestic violence. Victoria has never been a farmworker, and though she told me her grandparents were farmworkers, she usually does not identify as coming from a farmworker background. Of my six interviewees, Victoria was the only one who was a bit hesitant to identify as a member of the farmworker movement in the Southeast. She told me that she definitely identified as such during her Into the Fields internship, but that she has not done much work with the movement since completing the program. "I'm hesitant to claim that identity if I'm not actively working in the movement right now" she told me, referring to her current position in the movement as an "outside advocate."

Melinda

Melinda is the executive director at SAF. She began her work with the organization as a student intern in 1993 with a placement at the Episcopal Farmworkers Ministry. Melinda worked part time with the North Carolina Farmworkers project part time during graduate school, then to work at SAF, first as the Into the Fields program assistant, then as program director, and eventually as executive director, a position she has held since 1996. Melinda comes from a farming and sharecropping background. She grew up in the Mississippi Delta where both sides of her family

deeply into the realm of which people of what identities hold different conceptions of farmworker dignity. Though that would be an interesting topic for further research, it is decidedly beyond the scope of the analysis I attempt to do here.

were sharecroppers and picked cotton. Melinda also told me that she does not usually identify as coming from a farmworker background, but she acknowledged that her family is deeply embedded in the agricultural history of the South. During our interview, Melinda enthusiastically identified herself as a member of the farmworker movement in the Southeast

Joanna

Joanna is the communication arts director at SAF. She first got involved with the organization as a student intern in 1996 and has been in her current position for the past ten years. Her work at SAF involves handling all print and online publications, coordinating documentary work, and coordinating the organization's alumni program. Joanna has never worked as a farmworker, but she told me that her grandparents owned a small farm and her grandmother worked in poultry her whole life to pay the bills. "I didn't always think of that as a farmworker background," she said in our interview, "but now I do." Joanna self-identifies as a member of the farmworker movement in the Southeast.

Ramón

Ramón is the program director of the Into the Fields program at SAF. He first got involved with the farmworker movement through a student internship with SAF and went on to work with the United Food and Commercial Workers and Jobs with Justice before returning to SAF in his current position, which he has held for seven years. Ramón described his primary role in the farmworker movement as that of a grassroots organizer, but that in recent years he has done more work behind the scenes with planning workshops and seeking out resources for student programs. Ramón told me that he has worked in the fields as a farmworker, but never for a living. He identifies as coming from a farmworker background because of his personal and

family connection to farming in Mexico where he used to work in the fields with his father and grandfather. Though none of his immediate family members currently work as farmworkers, Ramón told me that both his parents and some of his siblings have worked in agriculture, and his father and a few siblings also worked at a meat-packing plant. Ramón does not currently identify as a farmworker but he loves to garden and be intentional about where his food comes from. In our interview, he told me that he strongly identifies as a member of the farmworker movement in the Southeast.

Bianca

Bianca is the grassroots organizer at SAF. She began working with the organization as a student intern and then was hired on in her current position which she has held for the past year and a half. Bianca told me that her primary involvement in the farmworker movement has been with SAF but that her work as the grassroots organizer has allowed her to collaborate with a number of different organizations in the movement. Bianca has never worked as a farmworker, but identifies as coming from a farmworker background and shared that her father used to work as a farmworker. In our interview, Bianca self-identified as a member of the farmworker movement in the Southeast.

Bacilio

Bacilio is on the staff of the Workers Center in the role of community organizer. He has worked there for the past eight years, and prior to that he volunteered for a labor union. Bacilio's current position at the Workers Center involves working directly with the community to organize a grassroots base. In our interview, Bacilio told me that he is from an indigenous family of Mayan descent that worked in the fields in Guatemala, and that he identifies strongly with this

farmworker background. He also shared that he worked on farms for a year when he first came to the U.S. in 2001, and then for a poultry plant in Morganton for two years after moving there in 2006. During our conversation, Bacilio self-identified as a member of the farmworker movement in the Southeast.

Methods of Research and Analysis

My primary research was conducted over the course of three months during the winter of 2018-2019 and took the form of six semi-structured qualitative interviews. Each interview was between forty-five minutes and an hour and a half in length. I conducted three of the interviews in person at the Student Action with Farmworkers office in Durham, North Carolina and conducted the remaining three over the phone. Due to the long-distance nature of a number of the interviews, I was not able to take audio recordings and instead jotted down as many notes as I could while my interviewees were speaking. I returned to the notes immediately after the interviews were completed to fill in the gaps and write out responses that approximated what my interviewees had said with as much detail and accuracy as possible. Out of a desire to maintain a consistent research process and format, I opted to record the in-person interviews manually in the same manner. After each interview, I emailed a copy of my typed transcript back to the interviewee and asked for any revisions or changes they would like me to make. After incorporating any feedback I received to their satisfaction, I sent interviewees a copy of the finalized transcripts and obtained their consent to use and disclose their responses in my research. Complete copies of all transcripts and consent forms can be found in the appendices. One of my interviewees was more comfortable communicating in Spanish, so I translated my interview questions and consent form and conducted the entire interview process in Spanish. That interviewee's responses are included in my discussion of results in the language that they

were originally communicated to me in an attempt to convey his perspective as authentically as possible. I coded and organized each of the six transcripts with the help of the software program NVivo. All italicized passages in the Interview Results section are direct quotes from my transcripts and are preceded by the name of the interviewee who said them.

In the following section, I offer a narrative analysis of the findings of my interviews. I do not approach this discussion with the intention of trying to prove something about the farmworker movement in North Carolina or to make generalizations about what dignity must mean to all members of that movement. I am not interested in analyzing the specific linguistic choices of the activists I spoke with or counting the number of times the word dignity was mentioned in their responses. In fact, I discard the notion of these activists being the ‘subjects’ of my research altogether. Rather, I choose to approach them as producers of knowledge, people whose life experiences furnish them with perspectives that offer valuable insight into the multiplicity of different understandings of dignity that are present in the farmworker movement in the Southeast. I conceive of my interviewees, who all self-identified (at least during the time of their work with SAF and the Workers Center) as members of the farmworker movement in the Southeast, as embedded within that movement, but by no means representative of its entirety. In the discussion that follows, I do my best to represent the perspectives of the people I interviewed fairly and accurately in order to shed a light on the plurality of different possible meanings, challenges, and potential futures contained within the notion of farmworker dignity as it is understood by a selection of farmworker activists in North Carolina.

Interview Results

In this section, I provide a narrative account of the findings of my six qualitative interviews with members of the farmworker movement in North Carolina. To parse out the

different meanings, challenges, and futures contained within my interviewees' responses, I use the various conceptions of the term unearthed in my discussion of emergent meanings and themes in chapter three as points of reference to orient me in the analysis. But even as I draw upon notions of dignity invoked in relevant contexts, I do not limit my interpretation of the interview responses to those meanings, choosing to instead leave space for alternative understandings and implementations of the term to emerge from the words of the farmworker advocates I interviewed.

i. Dignity Meanings

Of the four conceptions of dignity I identified across classical, legal, and social movement uses of the term, three were readily apparent in the responses of my interviews. The one I did not find evidence of was the meritocratic notion of dignity as status or rank. Even though it never came up in my interviews, I believe this understanding of the term will still be relevant to my final analysis of the potential of dignity as a mode of resistance to agricultural exploitation, if only as a point of caution that illuminates the dubious etymological baggage the word carries. The second emergent conception I identify in chapter three is that of life with dignity as a condition that is deserved by all people and entails fair treatment, protection from harm, and being valued by those around you. I also conceive of this notion of dignity as 'rights plus something more.' Numerous responses to my interview questions from all six of my interviewees reflect this understanding of dignity, including the following:

Joanna:

"I think dignity is about how [farmworkers] show up and can be who they are. It is dependent on the living and working conditions. It's difficult to think about how your work is dignified if someone is oppressing you or if your wages are stolen. It's about how to be free on your own to do the work."

“People talk about dignity as something they want but feel that they’re not getting. They talk about interpersonal interactions with growers and people in the community. About just wanting to be treated with dignity and wanting to be valued for the really important work they’re doing and not understanding why that work isn’t treated with dignity.”

“It is such a primary thing, a human need to be treated with dignity.”

Melinda:

“I think dignity includes a sense of being valued.”

“[Dignity] involves one’s work being considered important and valued by others.”

“I’m surmising here, since I’ve never asked workers explicitly what dignity means to them. It seems connected to human rights.”

“I think of [dignity] as pretty comprehensive, a broad term rather than a narrow one. I see it as interchangeable with the term ‘just conditions’”

“I see [dignity] as a real working class stance that comes from ‘we’re not being treated fairly.’ It seems like it is just manual labor that isn’t understood to have dignity.”

Bacilio:

“Cada persona lo tiene, su propia dignidad. Otras personas deben de respetarla.”

“Para mi la dignidad es algo espiritual. Toda persona debe de tenerlo, sea blanca, o morena, o brown. No importa de dónde vienen, de cual país son, cada persona tiene una dignidad.”

Ramón:

“One food processing worker told me, ‘I just want to be treated with respect. Yes the work is hard and we have to do lot of cuts, but If I could just have respect, have dignity. If I could just do my job.’ Sometimes I would ask ‘don’t you think it would work better if everyone asked for a raise together?’ They would say a manager treats them badly, giving them unfair jobs. ‘I just want to be treated well.’ It’s an issue of how somebody treats you.”

“some [farmworkers] might feel that dignity means not getting cheated or screwed.”

“Workers say this is not fair, that they wanted to be treated with respect, or treated as a human. To me, those words are talking about dignity.”

Victoria:

“I think dignity means being treated with empathy, in a compassionate way because of being human.”

“I think the Case Farms protests were in a way responding to a lack of dignity. The working conditions are bad at the poultry plant. The line speed is very fast, workers sometimes get injured or even lose limbs. Workers who go to a supervisor to report a complaint or an injury often get ignored. This shows a lack of empathy or respect for workers rights. The demands of the protests... were basically to ‘treat these people like people and not machines.’”

Bianca:

“[Dignity is] about how people look at farmworkers living their daily life. How they are treated when they drive by in a bus or go to the grocery store. It’s about how people see them.”

“It blows my mind that the whole farmworker movement happened, and is still happening because it doesn’t occur to people that workers are their equals. People don’t see them as equals. Dignity would mean people seeing the industry workforce see as equals.”

These examples demonstrate the prevalence among the activists I spoke to of a notion of dignity as a condition deserving fair treatment on the job and in daily life. They also add nuance to my understanding of what dignified treatment might mean for farmworkers, suggesting that it is intimately intertwined both with conditions on the job and the presence or lack of respect workers feel from the surrounding community. Dignity emerges from my interviewees’ words as connected to not having one’s wages stolen, and to not being put in harm’s way on the job. Melinda indicated that she sees it as a specifically “working class stance,” suggesting that it carries a particular connection to manual labor. Ramón and Victoria both equated this kind of dignity with humanness or being a person, not a machine. I interpret this as reinforcement of the universality with which they believe dignity should apply.

The third meaning of dignity I articulate in chapter three, that of dignity as mutuality, a relational bond that unites people of different identities in a common struggle for liberation, was not as immediately apparent, but still present in the responses of the activists I interviewed. One example of this was in Bacilio's use of the word "hermandad" or to describe what a world with dignity for farmworkers would look like.

Bacilio:

"Personalmente, creo que si llegase un día en que todo el mundo entienda la dignidad de todo, será un mundo más humano, de hermandad. También más espiritual, conectado al ser creador."

I see further evidence of this relational notion of dignity in Joanna's response to the same question:

Joanna:

"It would be a world in which... farmworkers and the surrounding community feel like they are wholly a part of the community."

Ramón also articulated a notion of dignity as a fundamentally relational concept, something that is achieved by building connections and solidarity. When I asked how he measures success in the struggle for farmworker dignity, he responded:

Ramón:

"Here's one example. When I was a SAF intern, I met Bacilio. He used to work at the plant, then worked elsewhere. I asked him to participate in the documentary project. Years later, we were working together. I can't say [dignity] was measured by the workers at the plant getting a union contract, but now I have a friend and contact doing this work with me. Small wins. I measure it by the personal connections. Hearing workers feeling empowered to stand up for their rights, demanding to get paid. I haven't seen many big wins. I just don't know. You have to trust that you're planting a seed. With interns and the fellowship program, I've been surprised by students who seemed quiet or

shy. We'll hear from them much later and they are passionate and super involved in social justice work. I try not to measure."

Likewise, in another response in her interview, Joanna suggested that dignity is present in the process of relationship building:

Joanna:

"A huge one for me is storytelling and relationship building. That is the way we see dignity show up the most."

Taken together, these interview excerpts indicate that at least three of the activists I spoke with understand dignity as a relational process, one that involves belonging to and being a part of a broader community. Bacilio, Joanna, and Ramón also introduce alternative elements of dignity that my reading of dignity in chapter three did not uncover. In his response, Bacilio suggests that dignity for him is linked to that which is spiritual and involves being more connected to "el ser creador." Ramón indicates that working for dignity entails building relationships that help make possible alliances and political action. His use of the metaphor of a seed, which also appeared in one of Bacilio's earlier responses, is notable because it demonstrates a notion of dignity as something that grows, something we can nurture in one another but eventually have to trust that it will blossom. Joanna's words suggests an understanding of dignity as connected to telling one's one story. A similar notion arises in one of Ramón's responses:

Ramón:

"The history of agriculture is so deep. People have always been exploited, held against their will, in slavery, getting mistreated and killed. We need to change the narrative. That means hearing stories of workers. Dignity."

Together, Joanna and Ramón’s responses elucidate an intimate relationship between farmworker voice and dignity, suggesting that workers sharing their own stories can lead to greater farmworker dignity. Ramón’s words indicate that farmworker stories have the potential to “change the narrative” of exploitation, mistreatment, and death that he identifies as inherent in the history of agriculture. This narrative shift, he posits, would further farmworker dignity.

The final notion of dignity I articulate in my discussion of emergent meanings and themes in chapter three is that of dignity as a fire within that motivates radical action. The metaphor used by Bacilio and Ramón of dignity as a seed is the most striking evidence of this notion of dignity. I also see elements of this understanding show up in other parts of my interview findings in one of two ways. The first is in moments when the activists I spoke to framed dignity as wholly or partly composed of pride or an internal sense of worth. Examples of this appear frequently in my interviews. They include the following:

Bianca:

“I think dignity is... being able to find pride in aspects of your life. In regards to farmwork or just work in general, I think it’s about feeling pride in your work. Feeling that your work is worthy -- both worthiness in yourself and worthiness in acceptance from others.”

Bacilio:

“El ser humano. Todos somos humanos. Pero el ser es la parte única. El ser como una semilla. Allí cabe la dignidad. Nadie es más que una persona. Por eso se tiene que respetar la dignidad de cada ser humano.”

Joanna:

“Thinking about dignity in general, I can’t separate it from pride. It’s a way you hold yourself. A way you show up in the world and are able to be yourself. There is so much it is influenced by. You don’t have total control. I think Dignity comes from yourself but is influenced by the way you’re treated by others too.”

Melinda:

“I see two main components of dignity. One that has to do with pride and personally valuing your own work. The other part has to do with other people valuing you, as well as the conditions you are living and working in. Sometimes you don’t have much control over the second part.”

These excerpts show a strong correlation between many of the activists’ understandings of dignity and the notion of pride in oneself and one’s own work. Bianca, Joanna, and Melinda also indicate that pride is often dependent on the way we are treated by those around us, suggesting that the two distinct conceptions of dignity as a way of being treated and a sense of self-worth I identify in chapter three might be more intertwined and interdependent than I imagined.

The second way I see the notion of dignity as the fire within all people that inspires action is most clearly articulated in a single excerpt from my interview with Bacilio.

Bacilio:

“Con los trabajadores, hoy en dia estamos tratando de educar. Tal vez ‘educar’ no es la palabra correcta, porque todos tenemos una educación de nuestra familia. Pero sí, educamos los trabajadores en el derecho de su propia dignidad. Que entiendan su propia dignidad. Que se defiendan a su propia dignidad para que no sea apropiada por los autoridades o por el patrón. Educamos para que sepan como es luchar cada uno por su propia dignidad.”

In this response, Bacilio links dignity to action, indicating that he and his fellow staff members at the Workers Center try to instill in workers both a sense of their own value and of the need to defend it. His words suggest that dignity entails struggle. This framing of the term is consistent with the notion that I saw emerge in the various social movement contexts examined in chapter three of the claim to dignity by oppressed or exploited people as an act of protest. Bacilio’s articulation of dignity also indicates that there are certain entities, such as the boss or the

authorities, that workers must resist in order to fully live into their dignity. This provides a fluid transition to the next subsection in which I explore barriers to dignity as they are identified by the members of the farmworker movement I interviewed.

ii. Dignity Challenges

In my discussion of emergent meanings and themes of dignity across classical, legal, and social movement contexts in chapter three, one of the questions that guides my analysis is: what historical context does dignity respond to or resist? I apply that question here to the responses of my interviewees, expanding it to also include any current systems or conditions that they indicate serve as barriers to farmworker dignity. I use the four notions of ‘dignity as resistance to...’ articulated in chapter three to guide my analysis of the dignity challenges expressed in my interviews. In doing so, I try to maintain an openness to nuanced specificities or entirely alternative notions of dignity challenges that may arise in my interview findings.

The first two notions of ‘dignity as resistance to...’ that I identify in chapter three did not seem to be present in the way my interviewees conceive of the term. The first, ‘dignity as resistance to social and political equality, a means by which those of a certain power or rank justify their position,’ was present in the classic, meritocratic concept of dignity. I found no evidence whatsoever of this understanding of dignity in the responses of my interviewees, which I interpret to be indicative of the sharp divergence in the word’s meaning, a fault line across which there is very little blending or mixing of meaning. The second notion of ‘dignity as resistance to war, genocide, religious oppression, and totalitarian fascism’ from my chapter three discussion was most visible in the UDHR’s invocation of dignity in direct response to the holocaust. The only moment I heard one of these particular forms of violence mentioned was in

Bacilio's description of what made his family leave their village in Guatemala, what eventually drove him to seek employment at farms and poultry plants in the U.S.:

Bacilio:

“Vengo de una familia indígena, trabajadores del campo. Antes cultivamos de todo en mi comunidad, pero con la guerra en Guatemala en los años 80, tuvimos que irnos a la ciudad. El ejército vendría al campo mucho y tuvimos que irnos a la ciudad.”

Though Bacilio articulates clearly that his life and experience as a farmworker have been marked by war, he did not bring up that history in our discussion of dignity. None of my other interviewees brought up war, and no mention was made of genocide, religious oppression, or fascism. I interpret this not as a point of conflict between their understanding of dignity and that which is articulated in the UDHR, but rather as an indication of the profoundly context-dependent nature of the word. The farmworkers in North Carolina that my interviewees work closely with largely do not face war, genocide, religious oppression, or outright fascism on the job or in their living spaces. While the situation in some farmworkers' countries of origin that drove them to seek out farmwork in the U.S. may include one or more of those specific forms of violence, the fact that my interviewees did not mention them suggests that those violences are not directly present in the context the activists conceive of farmworker dignity as a response to.

The third notion of 'dignity as resistance to imperialism, neoliberalism, and neocolonialism' that emerged in my discussion in chapter three was readily apparent in the responses of the activists I spoke to. An understanding of capitalism as an impediment to dignity arose in three of my interviews. This is evidenced by Joanna, Melinda, and Bacilio's responses when I asked what primary obstacles they saw to a world in which farmworkers have dignity:

Bacilio:

“Pienso que un obstáculo principal es la economía. Y la globalización mundial de la economía. Nada más piensan en el dinero, y en disfrutar la vida. No piensan en la dignidad del trabajador. Por ejemplo, si vamos a un restaurante de lujo, y estamos disfrutando los platos ricos, no pensamos en el trabajador, no hay una meditación en de dónde viene la comida. En cuantos lágrimas, cuánto dolor se ha causado al trabajador. Lo que necesitamos es una concientización de la humanidad.”

Melinda:

“I would say the overall political shift in the country. The way that immigrants are being denigrated publicly. The fact that leadership on a national level really isn't sympathetic, which trickles down to a state level as well. Also, the overall corporatization of the government. When corporations and the government are meshed and start to bleed into each other, they lose a sense of the social contract. I don't want a government for profit and not the protection and wellbeing of the people.”

Joanna:

“Anti-immigrant sentiment and the capitalist world we live in. For the entire history of this country, it has always been about how do the ruling powers get the most for the least from the workers. Why is this workforce always treated without dignity? Why am I sitting here in an office, while people are out working in the fields? How did that happen? Historically things have always been this way. I don't see it changing. This is true of any profession in capitalism. It's about getting the most from the least, controlling power, keeping power. I see it getting worse. Inequality. CEOs making tons more. Who's in the government, funded by outside sources -- it leaches down into anti-immigrant systems in which people feeling pitted against each other.”

Of these three excerpts, Bacilio's comments draw the clearest link between a globalized capitalist economy and obstruction to dignity. His words suggest that what is needed to overcome barriers to dignity is a “una concientización de la humanidad,” indicating that the forces that restrain dignity impact the way we think, or perhaps the ways we don't think, about the arrangements of power in the world around us. Both Melinda and Joanna reference barriers to dignity on a more national level, highlighting the harm that is caused by an intertwining of the U.S. government and corporate economic interests. Both of the activists' statements draw a link

between capitalism and anti-immigrant discrimination. This illuminates their understanding of capitalism (and its obstruction of dignity) as fundamentally interwoven with racist and xenophobic cultural paradigms. Joanna also articulates these obstructions to dignity as historically situated within a long lineage of worker exploitation by people in power. A similarly historicized conception of dignity challenges arises in two of my other interviews as well. Two of my interviewees demonstrated this in their discussion of impediments to farmworker dignity:

Ramón:

“The history of agriculture is so deep. People have always been exploited, held against their will, in slavery, getting mistreated and killed.”

Bianca:

“The agricultural system could definitely change if it wanted to. But it’s the way they’ve always been. Historically, farmwork has always been an exploited field of work, especially in the Southeast. There’s not universal agreement on this, but I personally believe reparations would be great. Giving back to past exploited farmworkers, beginning to make amends. I’m not sure if it should be by the government or somebody else, but I think descendants of slaves should get paid. To begin to make things right, and not just brush it under the rug like always.”

This understanding of the unjust history of farm labor in the South as a barrier to farmworker dignity is profoundly relevant to my overarching exploration in this thesis. I call attention to it here in part because it will play an important role in my final analysis, and in part because it shows that farmworker dignity, as conceived of by the activists I spoke with, responds not only to poor conditions and unjust structures in farm labor today, but also to a long, regionally specific history of racialized worker exploitation and oppression. Bianca’s words also offer an additional insight of potential strategies by which that history might be resisted, implicating monetary reparations to the descendants of enslaved people as a potent means by which

farmworker dignity (conceived of on a broader, multigenerational level) might be restored in the South.

Bianca's words also indicate an alignment with the final notion of what dignity responds to that I articulate in chapter three: 'dignity as resistance to the specific legacy of racism in the U.S. South.' The excerpted passage from Bianca's interview situates her understanding of dignity and what it resists as explicitly embedded in the history of racialized exploitation in the Southeast. Though none of my other interviewees reference the South specifically in their discussion of barriers to dignity, a number of them did speak to racism and xenophobia as critical obstacles to a world in which farmworkers have full dignity. The excerpts from Melinda and Joanna's interviews that draw a connection between capitalism and anti-immigrant sentiments are evidence of this. Further examples include:

Victoria:

"[Farmworker dignity] is very intersectional with sexism and racism and xenophobia."

"[A primary obstacle to a world with full dignity for farmworkers is] the current administration. Also a major anti-racist culture shift needs to happen first. I saw people getting extra flack for being brown. It is one thing if you are a poor white farm or poultry worker, and entirely another if you are a poor Mexican or Guatemalan farm or poultry worker."

Joanna:

"In terms of advocacy with outside groups, one challenge is that there is so much anti-immigrant sentiment."

Bianca:

*"I think dignity is tied to the racial aspects of the type of work that farmwork is. In one documentary project, *La Vida Diaria*, a worker says something like "nos miran como si fuéramos nadie." It's about how people look at farmworkers living their daily life. How they are treated when they drive by in a bus or go to the grocery store. It's about how*

people see them. I'm from a small agricultural town. Growing up, I had friends that weren't farmworkers and weren't Mexican. Sometimes they would say things like "we can't go to the grocery store on Sunday because that's when the Mexicans will be there." They would poke fun at the workers, and throw around racial slurs. It was connected to the work, connected to when workers had time off, what they were wearing. When farmworkers say dignity, I think it's tied to the racial and negative connotations of the work."

Bacilio:

"[La dignidad] es un valor grande. El valor de los trabajadores, del ser humano. El valor de las mujeres. Hemos visto mucha desigualdad entre las mujeres y los hombres. Hay una actitud fuerte de machismo en las familias, en las autoridades y en el gobierno. Esa actitud ha desarrollado por mucho tiempo, durante siglos en que el mayor parte de los empleados son hombres, el mayor parte del gobierno son hombres. Por muchos años se han dado más oportunidades para salir adelante a los hombres, y eso resulta en desigualdad. Patriarcado. Nuestro trabajo es cortar esta actitud de miles de años. Creemos que la dignidad de la mujer sí vale mucho."

Taken together, these interview excerpts highlight interwoven racism and xenophobic anti-immigrant sentiment as critical barriers to farmworker dignity in the South as it is conceived by the activists I spoke to. Victoria and Bacilio also specifically call attention to sexism as an additional threat to farmworker dignity that is interwoven with the other systems of oppression farmworkers face.

A number of other notions of dignity challenges arose in my interviews that did not readily map onto the forms of 'dignity as resistance to...' articulated in chapter three. One of these is an understanding of internalized oppression as a barrier to farmworker dignity, evidenced by the following interview excerpts:

Victoria:

"A lot of the workers and families are constantly fed this direct or indirect message that they are not full human beings. It is hard to rally support when that is happening."

“I think progress comes in two parts. The first part is getting someone to genuinely believe they are worthy of being treated with dignity. The second is to get them to believe it so much that they will tell other people that they are worthy.”

Melinda:

“There are definitely barriers to workers feeling comfortable speaking for themselves, especially when they have been in this system for a long time. SAF’s work tries to push against the grain of workers’ internalized oppression and the resignation to feeling powerless that can come of a long time spent in survival mode, just trying to get through.”

Bacilio:

“Más que nada, el obstáculo que vemos es que mucha gente no llega a entender que es la dignidad. Muchos trabajadores desconocen la dignidad. A la gente política, no les importa la dignidad. A los dueños del campo o de la fábrica, no le interesan la dignidad. Le interesan la economía, el dinero y los beneficios de cada fábrica.”

These references to internalized oppression as a barrier to dignity are consistent with the dual notion of dignity as both internal (worth) and external (treatment) analyzed in the dignity meanings section of this analysis. Bacilio’s words also highlight another barrier to dignity that arose across a number of my interviews: that of differences in values between farmworkers and their advocates, and the people who hold power in the agricultural system. Further examples of this sentiment are apparent in the following excerpts:

Melinda:

“I also don’t know if dignity is something employers, corporations, and policy makers actually care about. I would say they don’t, based on what I see... If we tried to talk about dignity with employers and members of the farm bureau, they probably would just think we’re talking crazy.”

Joanna:

“Some legislators agree that of course all workers deserve dignified conditions. Others say they picked tobacco when they were little, that it was good for their character, that they didn’t need care or praise, and neither should today’s farmworkers.”

Bacilio:

“Pienso que la gente política creen que están destinados para trabajar con el gobierno. Saben exacto lo que es la dignidad. Pero no es el mismo papel del trabajador. El político tiene un corazón que no es tan dulce, tan suave, entiende la dignidad, pero su papel no es de una persona sensible. Ellos tienen un corazón más duro. Están pensando más en las reglas del gobierno.”

An additional disparity between the farmworker movement and those with power in the agricultural system that my interviewees identified as a barrier to dignity was that of resources.

These three excerpts articulate this perspective especially clearly:

Melinda:

“Another barrier [to farmworker dignity] is the huge difference in resources between what SAF has and what the employers and corporations that are working to maintain the system have.”

Ramón:

“When I was an organizer, I saw that people in power, who we’re trying to organize against, have so many more resources.”

“There are many challenges. The biggest challenge is how unbalanced the resources are when it comes to changing legislation or laws. Corporations and agribusiness, people at the top benefitting from the work of farmworkers have so much money, power, and control. We are an organization that has less than ten staff, doing outreach and providing legal resources. It could bankrupt an organization to go through a legal battle.”

Viewed together, these perspectives suggest that dignity, in the specific context of farm labor in the Southeast, is significantly obstructed by a disparity in both resources and values between

those who fight for the rights and wellbeing of farmworkers and those with power and influence in the agricultural system today.

Another challenge to dignity that was articulated in one of my interviews was that of farmworker separation from their families. Though only one activist expressed it directly (others mentioned families as a source of inspiration or concern for farmworkers), I highlight this barrier because it was one I heard voiced numerous times during my own outreach work with farmworkers this summer. This dignity challenge is made clear by the following passage:

Joanna:

“Talking to workers, they talk about the things we all care about. The number one thing is missing their families. Of course they want breaks and good wages, and change in those areas would be success, but they are not always workers’ primary concern. Holding these spaces where people can talk about their families, that feels like success.”

Lastly, the logistics and geographic arrangement of farm labor in the South emerged in my conversations with activists as a major hindrance to the strategies their organizations employ to work for farmworker dignity. This is exemplified in the following statements:

Bianca:

“First of all, being able to work more directly with farmworkers is a challenge, since we’re based out of Durham. Farmworkers are often so isolated. When we’re trying to reach them after work it’s hard because schedules can fluctuate based on the harvest or the weather forecast.”

Joanna:

“It’s really hard to build relationships with the same group of workers over time. We do what we can to have focus groups, to hear from workers, through our documentary and theater programs. We ask the workers ‘What’s important to you? What do you want to see change?’ We could do more if we were able to work with a group of farmworker leaders over time, letting them lead the work more... it’s hard to make that happen because workers are not here over the long term.”

“Then access is another challenge. Sometimes growers don’t want us there. Workers lack of control over their own lives which makes it hard.”

In these excerpts, Bianca and Joanna articulate certain structural elements of the agricultural system in the South today (the geographic isolation of farms, lack of worker control over work schedules and guests, and the temporary, seasonal nature of the work) as barriers to the organizing work they do for farmworker dignity. I flag these particular passages as important both because they illuminate dignity challenges that are very specific to farm labor and because they allude to the impact of spatial arrangements of agriculture in a way that will be useful in my concluding analysis of farmworker dignity as a potential mode of resistance to plantation space and the space of nonexistence. I move next to an analysis of the dignity futures expressed by the activists I spoke to.

iii. Dignity Futures

The final category I use to analyze the findings of my interviews with members of the farmworker movement is dignity futures. In this subsection, I explore the different visions for the future that are contained within the notions of farmworker dignity expressed by the activists I spoke with. I draw upon the five possible futures identified in the emergent meanings and themes section of chapter three, using them as a loose framework to guide my analysis. In my discussion of dignity futures, I rely heavily on the activists’ responses to my interview question that asked ‘in your eyes, what would a world in which full dignity for farmworkers was achieved look like?’ Though many of the interview excerpts considered in this subsection have already been referenced in my discussion of dignity meanings and dignity challenges, I include them again here to clarify my arguments.

The first dignity future I consider is that of ‘all laborers and marginalized peoples are treated with humanity and can embrace the fullness of their identities.’ This vision for the future was readily apparent in the responses of the activists I spoke with. I see it reflected in the following passages:

Ramón:

“[Dignity would mean] peace of mind. Having peace, feeling respected, feeling that you can be your full self. Working together in a fair environment.”

Bacilio:

“Personalmente, creo que si llegase un día en que todo el mundo entienda la dignidad de todo, será un mundo más humano, de hermandad. También más espiritual, conectado al ser creador.”

Victoria:

“People are judged based on the degree of education required for their job. Working in a poultry plant does not require a high level of education so it is considered a dumb job. That would not be a thing in the ideal world. There is a stigma that all a worker does is pick tomatoes -- all you do is your job. In that world, people would be judged for their character, not for the job they do.”

Joanna:

“[A world with full dignity for farmworkers would be] a world in which “farmworker” didn’t have to be a primary descriptor. If people were just Don Francisco, not “a farmworker from North Carolina.” If farmwork could be a part of who they are but didn’t determine how they are seen in the community. Or that how they are seen is a good thing. ‘This is my neighbor, my kid’s friend.’

Taken together, these excerpts highlight farmworkers having the ability to be their full selves and being treated as humans as an important component of a dignified future. Victoria and Joanna

further characterize that fully human treatment as farmworkers not being solely defined by the work they do, but instead by their character or their place within the community.

The next dignity future I examine is the one I articulate in chapter three as ‘all workers, immigrants, and specifically those who produce the world’s food have collective self-determination, voice, and freedom of mobility.’ This vision of a dignified future was harder to find in the responses of my interviewees, but I saw the freedom of mobility component in the following passage from my interview with Melinda:

Melinda:

“Today is International Migrants Day and it makes me think about how migration can work for workers, so that they can move freely for work, with or without their families as they choose. Also so that they can stay, and not have to migrate for work.”

“I’ve been thinking about the intersection between immigration and labor and the role for dignity in that. How much is it bleeding into the language around immigrant rights? Dignity for the migrant caravan vs. dignity for Smithfield workers.”

With these statements, Melinda makes clear that farmworker agency in migration is an important part of the way she conceives of dignity. Her words contain a vision for a world in which farmworkers not only are free to migrate but also able to stay and to have choice in the conditions of their movement. In this way, I interpret Melinda’s statements to implicitly endorse a form of farmworker self-determination as necessary to a world of full dignity for farmworkers.

Though none of my interviewees directly addressed the question of voice in their description of an ideal world in which farmworkers have dignity, I interpret it as an implicit value in the following passage from my interview with Joanna in which she describes how SAF works for farmworker dignity:

Joanna:

“The primary piece is that initial relationship building between student and worker. The secondary piece is sharing those stories, not just us listing problems and solutions, but instead letting workers tell their own stories, and letting that guide how people understand what the issues are, what workers want, and what they believe in. I think that works towards dignity.”

I see the concept of worker voice surface again in this excerpt:

Ramón:

“The history of agriculture is so deep. People have always been exploited, held against their will, in slavery, getting mistreated and killed. We need to change the narrative. That means hearing stories of workers. Dignity.”

Here Ramón frames the stories of farmworkers as the defining characteristic of a future with a changed narrative that works toward dignity by challenges the history of agricultural exploitation.

The next vision of a dignified future articulated in my discussion of emergent meanings and themes in chapter three is one in which ‘The labor of food production is a viable livelihood.’ I see this dignity future reflected clearly in Ramón’s response to my question about what a world with full dignity for farmworkers would look like:

Ramón:

“for me personally, this goes back to my connection to agricultural land and family. I would be happy doing farmwork, working outside on the land with plants. If anybody could do that and say that and be happy about it, that would be that world for me. If somebody who went to school was in debt could say “I’m going to be a farmworker and get paid enough and have benefits.” I think about it a lot. To me it’s always thinking through my parents. If my dad had gotten paid more, would he still be there? Would he have gotten other opportunities?”

Ramón's statement indicates that, in his vision of a dignified future for farmworkers, the work of farm labor would provide a viable economic livelihood. This complements the dignity future articulated earlier in this subsection in which farmworkers are not solely defined by their work, suggesting that a future with full dignity for farmworkers might entail a shift in both in how the workers and the work itself are valued.

The next dignity future from chapter three that I analyze here is the one in which 'the U.S. South is transformed into a just and welcoming place for all peoples.' Most of my interviewees did not mention the South specifically in their responses about a world with full dignity for farmworkers. But Bianca's response, referenced once already in this discussion, contains evidence of this vision for the future:

Bianca:

"Historically, farmwork has always been an exploited field of work, especially in the Southeast. There's not universal agreement on this, but I personally believe reparations would be great. Giving back to past exploited farmworkers, beginning to make amends. I'm not sure if it should be by the government or somebody else, but I think descendants of slaves should get paid. To begin to make things right, and not just brush it under the rug like always."

This passage from my conversation with Bianca contain a vision of dignity in the South as one in which the histories of exploitation enacted by the agricultural system must be addressed.

Though she does not express this future in the same broad terms as those I identify in my discussion from chapter three, Bianca's words are significant in that they offer insight into a specific strategy by which the "transformation of the South" might be put in motion.

I was unable to find an explicit mention of the final dignity future from my chapter three discussion in which 'all peoples are liberated from colonization and oppression' in the responses of my interviewees. I interpret this not as an indication that the activists I interviewed do not

share this vision for the future, but rather that they think it and articulate it in more specific, concrete terms. I see evidence of this more concrete vision of a liberated dignity future in the following statements:

Melinda:

“Union contracts try to concretize dignity for workers. If they have these specific things, they can work with dignity.”

Victoria:

“I feel like a first step would be getting people to know there are actual legal rights, actual laws to be followed. And making sure that laws are followed as they are written currently. There also need to be more laws to ensure safety. Programs like the Fair Food program where corporations sign up and are accountable to certain standards are important too.”

Bianca:

“In the current situation, I think dignity would mean ensuring a safe workplace, proper training and protection from sun exposure and pesticide exposure. Guaranteeing breaks and union contracts.”

Ramón:

“I could name all the things that always come up. That farmworkers be paid fairly for what they produce, have access to breaks and health services, that they not have to work under the sun without protection and be exposed to pesticides.”

Joanna:

“People ask about what we’re really working for. Is the answer more mechanized production? I think the answer includes things like a living wage, the ability to take breaks, and health care. And dignity is also important.”

These statements show that the activists I spoke to envision a future in which farmworker liberation from oppression is achieved through concrete strategies to improve living and working

conditions and enhance workers' collective bargaining power. Though none of them specifically name the liberation of all peoples as a component of their vision for farmworker dignity, I argue that these passages contain specific, tactical expressions of an aligned dignity future.

This marks the end of my discussion of the dignity meanings, challenges, and futures contained within my interview results. I conclude this chapter with a brief synthesis of the different perspectives on dignity explored in this discussion, laying the final groundwork necessary for my analysis of farmworker dignity, as it is invoked by members of the farmworker movement in North Carolina, as a potential form of resistance to the history of agricultural exploitation in the South.

V. Synopsis of Interview Findings

In their responses to my interview questions, the activists I spoke with articulate a variety of interconnected and overlapping meanings, challenges, and futures for farmworker dignity. I offer a synopsis of the key themes of these responses here, illuminating their parallels and divergences from the conceptions of dignity present in the classical, legal, and social movement invocations of the term discussed in chapter three. This section is intended to map out the nuanced specificities of farmworker dignity as it is understood by the members of the North Carolina farmworker movement that I interviewed. My goal is not to establish a singular definition of the term or even to assert a conclusive set of dignity meanings, challenges and futures. Rather, I hope to shed light on a plurality of different possible understandings of dignity, its barriers, and its vision for the future that are present in the farmworker movement in North Carolina today. In the context of the overarching arguments of my thesis, this section is meant to illustrate a multiplicity of farmworker dignities, as expressed by activists working on

farmworker issues in the South, in order make possible my final analysis of the specific ways and extent to which those notions of dignity offer resistance to the region's living history of agricultural exploitation.

The numerous dignity meanings that emerge in my discussion of the activists' responses to my interview questions both reflect and extend beyond the notions of dignity I explored in chapter three. My analysis of my interview findings yielded no evidence of the meritocratic notion of dignity as a mark of status or rank, suggesting a stark divergence between the term's classical roots and the ways it is understood by members of the North Carolina farmworker movement. My findings showed ample evidence of dignity framed as fair treatment and being valued by the surrounding community. The activists who demonstrated this understanding of dignity added a degree of nuance, demonstrating that, in their various conceptions of the term, dignity is deserved universally, carries a distinctly working class connotation, and is contingent upon treatment as a human (not a machine). My interview findings also indicate that the concept of dignity as mutuality or a relational bond that promotes solidarity is present in the perspectives of at least a couple of the activists I spoke to. Two of my interviewees indicated this understanding of dignity in their emphasis on relationship building and storytelling as integral to the work their organizations do to further farmworker dignity. The notion of dignity as a fire within that motivates action was also evident in a number of my interviewees' responses. I saw this most clearly in the various descriptions of dignity as a sense of self-worth, pride in oneself and in one's work. Numerous times this conception of dignity as self-worth was articulated alongside dignity as a form of treatment, illuminating a dual internal and external nature of dignity as it is conceived of by the activists I spoke with.

The dignity challenges that emerged in my interview findings were variably compatible with those I identified in my examination of dignity in relevant contexts. Again I saw no evidence of the meritocratic sense of dignity as a response to conditions of political equality. Neither did I find examples of dignity conceived of as a form of resistance to war, genocide, religious oppression, or fascism. I did not interpret this second dearth of examples as evidence of a different understanding of the term, but more so as indicative of the distinct context in which it is being invoked (war, genocide, etc are not immediate concerns of the activists I spoke to). I did find ample evidence of dignity conceptualized as antithetical to a capitalist economy and value system. The passages from my interviews that demonstrated this notion of dignity also added a layer of nuance, indicating that the capitalist structures that inhibit dignity for the farmworker populations they work with are embedded in a long legacy of worker exploitation and are deeply racialized as well. I likewise found a number of examples of racism, xenophobia, and sexism articulated explicitly as barriers to dignity, including a statement from one activist who positioned dignity in opposition to the legacy of farm labor exploitation in the South. This activist also highlighted reparations to enslaved peoples as a potential strategy to further farmworker dignity. Additional dignity challenges beyond those I identified in chapter three that were articulated by my interviewees include the following: internalized oppression, discrepancies in values and resources between farmworker advocates and those with power in the agricultural system, farmworker separation from their families, and the logistical challenges associated with the geographic isolation of farms and lack of farmworker agency.

The dignity futures imagined by the activists I spoke with matched fairly well with the visions for a dignified future that I identified in my discussion of emergent meanings and themes in chapter three, offering additional insight and specificity as to what those futures might mean

more concretely for farmworkers in the South. I found numerous references in my interview responses to a dignified future for farmworkers as one in which they are treated with full humanity, judged not by the work they perform but by their character or relationships. In one of my interviewees' words, I saw a vision for dignity that depended on farmworkers having self-determination over their own movement. Other activists highlighted storytelling and the lifting up of farmworker voices as key strategies in achieving a more dignified future. One of my interviewees spoke directly to a transformation of farm labor into a more economically viable livelihood as an integral component of a world with greater dignity for farmworkers. I interpreted this to suggest that not only farmworkers, but their labor too, must be valued for a dignified future to be achieved. Another dignity future I saw evidence of in one of my interviewee responses was that of a transformed South in which the history of agricultural exploitation and racial oppression has been redressed. The final vision for a more dignified future I articulated in chapter three, one in which all peoples are liberated from colonization and oppression, was hard to find explicitly mentioned in my interview responses. I interpreted it as implicitly present in the concrete steps activists highlighted, such as a living wage, safe and healthy working conditions, and union contracts, as means by which a dignified future for farmworkers in the South might be achieved.

The findings of my interviews are critically important to the work of this thesis as a whole because they demonstrate what dignity can mean, resist, and imagine into possibility in the specific context of the farmworker movement in North Carolina. Equipped thus with a nuanced understanding of dignity as it is invoked by the activists I spoke with, I move next to my final analytical chapter to put this understanding of farmworker dignity in conversation with the history and present-day reality of agricultural exploitation in the South.

Conclusion: Farmworker Dignity in Resistance

What does farmworker dignity offer in response to the living history of agricultural exploitation in the South? To what extent and in what capacity does it resist this still present past? What does it leave unchallenged? What does all this mean for the farmworker movement in the South today?

These questions guide my concluding analysis. In this chapter, I put the multifaceted understanding of dignity distilled from my interviews in chapter four in conversation with the history and ongoing reality of agricultural exploitation in the South explored in chapters one and two. In this dialogue, my analytical lenses of plantation space and the space of nonexistence play the role of interlocutors. I revisit these spaces, mapping out the continuities between past and present systems of agricultural labor that they allow me to see. I then draw upon the plurality of dignity meanings, challenges, and futures articulated by the members of the North Carolina farmworker movement that I interviewed, identifying the different degrees and forms of resistance and complicity they present to plantation space and the space of nonexistence. I initially conceived of this dialogue between farmworker dignity and Southern agricultural labor as a means to evaluate the strengths and limitations of dignity as a strategic concept in the farmworker movement in North Carolina. But the ongoing, imperfect learning process of this thesis has led me to approach my final analysis differently. I look to this conclusion instead as an opportunity to think through, alongside, and beyond the concept of farmworker dignity, wielding it as a tool to reckon deeply with the violent history of the part of the world I call home and to imagine alternative futures for agricultural labor in the South.

My discussions of plantation space in chapters one and two allow me to illuminate a number of continuities across agriculture in the South from the times of the first indentured servants through today. Plantation space is apparent in past and present agriculture in the South through the use of forcibly imported labor, though the mechanism of force shifted over time from

direct enslavement to economically-driven displacement. Plantation space is evident in the orientation towards profit that appears at every period along my timeline and endures today, engendering exploitive, extractive labor conditions. Plantation space can be seen in the colonial logic of racial control and domination made manifest by the regimes of anti-blackness and anti-immigrant racism that have shaped successive generations of agriculture in the South. Plantation space is made manifest throughout time in the simultaneous worker invisibility and surveillance that has characterized farms in the South from slavery until today. And lastly, plantation space allows me to articulate the denial of the full personhood of farmworkers as an emergent quality of agricultural labor in the South throughout time.

The conceptions of farmworker dignity expressed by the activists I interviewed offer varying degrees of resistance to the logic of plantation space. One of my interviewees articulated a vision of farmworker dignity as connected to workers' ability to migrate as they choose or stay in their country of origin free of coercion. I understand the activist's words to hint at an understanding of dignity that is aligned with the struggle for workers' self-determination over their own mobility. Though such a notion of farmworker dignity was only mentioned once, and not developed very thoroughly, I argue that it contains within it the seeds of resistance to the forced importation of farm labor that typifies plantation space.

A number of the activists I spoke with invoked farmworker dignity as contingent upon workers being treated as full people. One of my interviewees stated this explicitly as an assertion that workers should not be treated like machines, locating their deservingness of dignity in the very fact of their humanity. This notion of dignity as deservingness of just treatment was complemented by other articulations of the term as a form of pride or self-worth. Taken together, these conceptions of dignity stand in stark opposition to the treatment workers receive

under the exploitive labor system characteristic of plantation space, a system that reduces people to resources for extraction and prioritizes efficiency and profit over the livelihood and wellbeing of its workers. I interpret this as an instance in which my interviewees' understanding of dignity offers direct resistance to plantation space.

In my interviews, I heard numerous references to racism, xenophobia, and sexism conceived of as barriers to full dignity for farmworkers. I interpret these sentiments as indicators of an understanding of farmworker dignity as fundamentally antithetical to systems of discrimination and oppression. This reading of my interview findings leads me to believe that when members of the farmworker movement articulate a racist, anti-immigrant cultural paradigm as one of the primary obstacles to their vision for dignity for farmworkers, they position themselves in resistance to plantation space and the racialized violence it has wrought through agriculture in the South.

An element of plantation space that my interviewee's notions of farmworker dignity seem to leave unchallenged is that of the colonial roots of the current agricultural system in the South. One of the most generative parts of my investigation of plantation space is the way it enables me to trace histories of European conquest and domination of the Americas into specific practices and arrangements of space in Southern agriculture today. This ongoing history was not present in the way my interviewees articulated farmworker dignity. I by no means wish to fault them for this; those histories architect their own erasure in ways that are not easy to resist. Rather, I identify active critical engagement with the colonial logic of plantation space that still undergirds the extractive, racialized mode of domination present in agriculture today as a potential point of growth that could make dignity a more powerful tool in the farmworker movement in the Southeast.

My exploration of the space of nonexistence in chapters one and two helps me articulate a number of continuous patterns across agriculture past and present in the South. The space of nonexistence is undeniably present in the legacy of legal exclusion of farm laborers that bars them from full access to citizenship, voice, and belonging. It is likewise apparent in the rupture of social ties necessary to sustain an agricultural system built on the importation of foreign laborers from the times of indenture and slavery through modern day federal guestworker programs. Finally, the space of nonexistence can be seen in the constructed invisibility of farm labor and the workers who perform it, an intentional arrangement on the part of those with power in the agricultural system that has enabled them to maintain a relationship of denied dependence with workers throughout iterative generations of farm labor in the South.

The notions of farmworker dignity expressed by the activists I interviewed challenge this space of nonexistence in nuanced, imperfect ways. Among my interview responses, I saw a pervasive understanding of dignity as a category that asserts the full personhood (and deservingness of treatment as such) of the individual or group to which it is applied. I see this conceptualization of farmworker dignity as a form of dual internal and external valuation as a potent rejection of the denial of legal and social personhood that characterizes the space of nonexistence. Thus I read a significant potential for resistance to the harmful exclusion wrought by the space of nonexistence into my interviewees' conception of dignity as pride and inherent worthiness of fair treatment.

One of the activists I spoke with shared that his vision for farmworker dignity entails the valuation, not just of farmworkers, but of farm labor itself. He portrayed dignity as aligned with the project of increasing the economic viability of agricultural work as a livelihood as well as the social value it is understood to carry. I see this as an articulation of dignity that stands in stark

opposition to the structures of denied dependence on farm labor that characterize the space of nonexistence, and in doing so resists its dehumanizing logic. Putting the concepts in conversation in this way also begs a further question: what future for farmworker dignity is made possible if, in addition to the economic viability of farm labor, workers' own valuation of the work (and by association their skills, knowledge, and experience from doing it) are centered and lifted up as a mode of resistance to the space of nonexistence?

The final invocation of farmworker dignity that I put into conversation with the space of nonexistence is the one implicit in a number of my interviewees' statements about storytelling and relationship building as key strategies they employ to work towards farmworker dignity. Implied in the activists' words I distinguish a notion of dignity as self-representation and belonging, notions of the term that I see as contradictory to a space of nonexistence that severs social ties, and cuts its occupants off from a sense of community. Even as it so resists the isolating order of nonexistence, I understand this framing of the term to call for a more radical implementation that was never quite articulated by the activists I spoke to: that of dignity as a co-conspirator with solidarity, a project intimately intertwined with the work of cultivating mutuality for the purpose of collective liberation. Such a notion of dignity would not only reassert belonging for those relegated to the space of nonexistence. It would also actively challenge the disempowerment and erasure of nonexistence by harnessing those reclaimed social ties in the work of resistance.

Thus farmworker dignity, examined in dialogue with plantation space and the space of nonexistence, reveals itself to offer a nuanced, imperfect form of resistance to the ongoing history of agricultural exploitation in the South. Taken together, these snatches of conversation between dignity and my two analytical spaces show that the word is already doing important

work in the farmworker movement in North Carolina: it functions as a distinctly malleable term that is effectively harnessed by the organizers I spoke with to help them position themselves and their work in resistance to a number of key components of Southern farm labor injustice both past and present.

My discussion also sheds light on possibilities for more radical interpretations of dignity and opens up the question of potential solidarities. Applied together, plantation space and the space of nonexistence help me illuminate that deep critical engagement with the colonial logic that underpins agriculture in the South, centering farmworker self-determination over migration, and lifting up the importance of farmworkers' valuation of their own work, would all enable the movement to wield farmworker dignity with greater subversive power. My two analytical spaces also make possible the imagining of new solidarities by grounding the farmworker movement in a relationship of mutuality with other contemporary struggles that resist the same historical patterns and logics as they live on through other structures and institutions. This dialogue between farmworker dignity, plantation space, and the space of nonexistence positions the farmworker movement in the South in solidarity with the work of decolonization, prison abolition, food sovereignty, legal and social enfranchisement of undocumented people, payment of reparations to the descendants of enslaved people, the creation of pathways to farmworker land ownership, and all other liberatory projects that resist manifestations of the logic of plantation space and the space of nonexistence.

If I had to identify one salient, emergent quality of dignity drawn from my interviews and my exploration of the term in classical, legal, and social movement contexts, that quality would be its profound adaptability to the distinct contexts in which it is invoked. Considered here, that adaptability leads me to venture the conclusion that perhaps the power of dignity as a concept

within the farmworker movement in the Southeast is the degree to which it enables deep engagement with the social and historical context in which that movement is embedded and makes possible the imagination of alternative futures. This, in turn, suggests that, to fully tap into the power of farmworker dignity as concept, the movement must grow towards the deep historical reckoning and imaginative work that dignity as a way for framing farmworker issues makes possible.

* * *

Thus I conclude my exploration of farmworker dignity. Critical engagement with the history and modern day realities of agricultural labor in the Southeast allows me to delve deeply into the context that farmworker dignity emerges in response to. An exploration of the roots of the word dignity, alongside its meaning, historical context, and vision for the future in various relevant legal and social movement contexts enables me to articulate distinct themes and continuities across the word's different invocations and helps me map out the terrain in which farmworker activists tread when they make use of the term. My interviews with members of the farmworker movement and my careful analysis of the distinct and overlapping meanings, challenges, and futures present in their understandings of dignity allow me to shed light on the term as it is invoked in a specific microcosm of the farmworker movement in the Southeast. Finally, putting these distinct strains of my research in conversation with one another through the lens of my dual analytical framework of plantation space and the space of nonexistence allows for a generative discussion of farmworker dignity as a form of resistance to the living history of agricultural exploitation in the South. My final analysis reveals the nuanced subversive implications of farmworker dignity and illuminates deep historical reckoning and new possible solidarities that might enable the farmworker movement to wield dignity to its most radical,

liberatory potential. Lastly, my concluding discussion helps me realize that the greatest value of this project was never in its evaluation of dignity as a strategy in the farmworker movement. Rather, farmworker dignity serves as useful tool that enables me to reckon deeply with the complex history of violence and resilience in the part of the world I call home, to trace it onto today, to explore the work of others committed to resisting that history, and to put all these perspectives in conversation with one another and illuminate points of solidarity that tie the farmworker movement into a broader struggle for a just, transformed South.

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Appendices

Interview Questions

Person Interviewed:

Date:

Time:

Preliminary Statements:

- These questions are for my senior thesis in Environmental Studies about farmworker dignity
- Please only answer questions you feel comfortable responding to
- I will keep any piece of information confidential that you want me to. If you let me know before, during, or after saying it, I will delete it or not write it down, or will keep it anonymous in my writing depending on your preference
- Is it ok if I take notes on what you say?
- Do you have any time constraints for the interview today?

Interview Questions:

1. What is your name? Are you OK with me using your name in my project, or would you prefer I use a pseudonym or refer to you anonymously?
2. Are you or have you ever been a farmworker?
3. Do you come from a farmworker family or background?
4. What farmworker serving organization(s) have you worked with or for?
5. What was/is your role at the organization(s) you worked for? How long were you/have you been there?
6. Do you identify as a member of the farmworker movement in the Southeast?
7. What does dignity mean to you?
8. Does the organization you work(ed) for use the term dignity explicitly in their communications, publications, or programming? If so, where and how?
9. Have you heard the term dignity used by the farmworkers (and/or meat and food processing workers) your organization works with?
10. If so, what do you think it means to them?
11. Does your organization work with other populations besides farmworkers? (For ex. through lobbying, awareness raising, direct action work etc.)
12. What do you think dignity means to the audience of your organizing efforts?
13. Does your organization hold farmworker dignity as a value or a goal? Explicitly or more implicitly?
14. If so, how, specifically, does your organization work for farmworker dignity?
15. What obstacles or challenges does your organization face in this work?
16. How do you measure progress? What do failure and success look like?
17. Does your organization work in coalitions or partnerships with other organizations in the Farmworker movement? If so, what organizations or kinds of organizations?

18. Do you believe the other organizations also hold farmworker dignity as a value in their work?
19. Do you think they operate under the same understanding of dignity as your organization?
20. Are there other important elements of migrant farmworker dignity that you believe your organization does not address in its work?
21. In your eyes, what would a world in which full dignity for farmworkers was achieved look like?
22. What primary obstacles do you see to that world becoming a reality?
23. Has your understanding of farmworker dignity changed over time?
24. Is there anything else I should know about migrant farmworker dignity or about your organization?

Preguntas de Entrevista

Entrevista con:

Fecha:

Hora:

Palabras preliminares:

- Estas preguntas corresponden a mi proyecto de tesis sobre la dignidad de los trabajadores del campo. El proyecto está diseñado para cumplir los requisitos del programa de Estudios Medioambientales en Bates College.
- No tiene que responder a ninguna pregunta incómoda o cuya respuesta sea privada
- Mantendré la confidencialidad de cualquier dato o respuesta que Ud. no quiere que yo comparta. Si me avise antes o después de decir algo sensible, lo no escribiré, lo eliminaré de mis apuntes, o lo mantendré anónimo en mi informe, de acuerdo con su preferencia
- ¿Está bien si yo tome apuntes a mano sobre lo que Ud. dice?
- Después de la entrevista, le mandaré una transcripción de mis apuntes de entrevista y un formulario de consentimiento. Tiene la oportunidad de eliminar, añadir, o cambiar cualquier dato o respuesta en mi transcripción. Por favor, revise la transcripción antes de firmar y devolver el formulario de consentimiento. Solo incluiré la información de esta transcripción revisada en mi informe.
- ¿Tiene alguna limitación de tiempo para nuestra entrevista hoy día? Normalmente las entrevistas duran más o menos una hora, pero si Ud. tiene alguna limitación puede ser más corta.
- ¿Tiene alguna pregunta o duda?

Preguntas de Investigación:

1. ¿Cómo se llama? ¿Está bien si use su nombre completo en mi informe o preferiría que use un seudónimo o que refiera a Ud. de forma anónima?
2. ¿Ud. es, o ha sido en algún tiempo un trabajador agrícola o avícola?
3. ¿Viene Ud. de una familia de trabajadores agrícolas o avícolas o de origen campesina?
4. ¿Por cuántos años ha trabajado con trabajadores agrícolas o avícolas ? ¿Con cuáles organizaciones?
5. ¿Cuáles puestos ha ocupado con aquellas organizaciones?
6. ¿Se identifica como miembro del movimiento para los derechos de los trabajadores del campo en el Sureste?
7. ¿Qué significa para Ud. “la dignidad”?
8. ¿La(s) organización(es) con la(s) cual(es) Ud. ha trabajado sí usa(n) el término “la dignidad” en sus comunicaciones, publicaciones y programas? ¿o no lo usa(n)? ¿Dónde y cómo usa(n) “la dignidad”?
9. ¿Ha escuchado la palabra “dignidad” usado por trabajadores agrícolas o avícolas en su organización?
10. ¿Qué cree que significa “la dignidad” para aquellos trabajadores?
11. ¿Su organización trabaja con otras poblaciones además de trabajadores? (Por ejemplo, el cabildeo, esfuerzos de crear conciencia pública, acciones y protestas)

12. ¿Qué cree Ud. que significa “la dignidad” para aquellos públicos?
13. ¿Es un valor de su organización la dignidad de los trabajadores agrícolas y avícolas? ¿Es un valor explícito o más implícito?
14. Si es un valor ¿Cómo trabaja su organización para realizarlo?
15. ¿Cuáles obstáculos o desafíos se enfrentan en este trabajo? (la lucha por la dignidad)
16. ¿Cómo se mide el progreso? ¿Cómo se ve el fracaso y el éxito?
17. ¿Trabaja su organización en coalición o alianza con otras organizaciones del movimiento para los derechos de los trabajadores del campo? ¿Cuáles?
18. ¿Cree Ud. que aquellas organizaciones también valoran la dignidad de los trabajadores agrícolas y avícolas?
19. ¿Cree que “la dignidad” tiene el mismo significado para ellos o cree que tiene un sentido distinto?
20. ¿Cree que hay elementos importantes de la dignidad de los trabajadores agrícolas y avícolas que su organización no aborda en su trabajo?
21. Desde su perspectiva, ¿Cómo se vería un mundo en el cual se haya realizado la dignidad completa para los trabajadores agrícolas y avícolas?
22. ¿Cuáles obstáculos principales cree Ud. que impiden la realización de aquello mundo?
23. ¿Ha cambiado a lo largo del tiempo su entendimiento de la dignidad?
24. ¿Hay algo más que debería saber yo sobre la dignidad de los trabajadores agrícolas y avícolas o sobre su organización?

Consent Forms

Consent Form: Interview about Farmworker Dignity

I, BIANCA OLIVARES (full name) hereby give permission for Erin Hazlett-Norman to use the information I provide in this interview for a written senior thesis project in Environmental Studies. I understand that the researcher took written notes during my interview. I have received a copy of the written transcript from my interview and have revised the responses and information contained therein to my satisfaction. I understand that only information recorded in the revised transcript will be used in the final written report. I understand that I will receive an electronic copy of the written report upon its completion, and will be given the opportunity to request changes prior to the report's final submission. I understand that the final written report will be read by the project's research advisor and members of the Bates College Honors Committee. I understand that, upon completion, the written report will be uploaded to SCARAB, the Bates College online repository for scholarly work by students, faculty, and staff. I understand that, unless an embargo is put on the written report, it will be accessible online to the public.

I Do
 Do not


Request that an embargo of _____ year(s) be placed on the written report, so that the information contained therein will not be widely available until _____.

I request that I be referred to by

My name (as given in the interview)
 The following pseudonym: _____
 Anonymously

in the final written report.

I will receive a copy of the final written report upon my request. Neither Erin Hazlett-Norman nor Bates College will publish any of my information without my consent.

 _____ Signature

2/5/19 _____ Date

BIANCA @ SAF-UNITE.ORG _____ Email

914-660-3660 _____ Phone Number

Consent Form: Interview about Farmworker Dignity

I, Joanna Welborn (full name) hereby give permission for Erin Hazlett-Norman to use the information I provide in this interview for a written senior thesis project in Environmental Studies. I understand that the researcher took written notes during my interview. I have received a copy of the written transcript from my interview and have revised the responses and information contained therein to my satisfaction. I understand that only information recorded in the revised transcript will be used in the final written report. I understand that I will receive an electronic copy of the written report upon its completion, and will be given the opportunity to request changes prior to the report's final submission. I understand that the final written report will be read by the project's research advisor and members of the Bates College Honors Committee. I understand that, upon completion, the written report will be uploaded to SCARAB, the Bates College online repository for scholarly work by students, faculty, and staff. I understand that, unless an embargo is put on the written report, it will be accessible online to the public.

I Do
 Do not

Request that an embargo of _____ year(s) be placed on the written report, so that the information contained therein will not be widely available until _____.

I request that I be referred to by

My name (as given in the interview)
 The following pseudonym: _____
 Anonymously

in the final written report.

I will receive a copy of the final written report upon my request. Neither Erin Hazlett-Norman nor Bates College will publish any of my information without my consent.

Joanna Welborn Signature

2/7/19 Date

joanna.welborn@duke.edu Email

919-660-3693 Phone Number

Consent Form: Interview about Farmworker Dignity

I, Melinda Faye Wiggins (full name) hereby give permission for Erin Hazlett-Norman to use the information I provide in this interview for a written senior thesis project in Environmental Studies. I understand that the researcher took written notes during my interview. I have received a copy of the written transcript from my interview and have revised the responses and information contained therein to my satisfaction. I understand that only information recorded in the revised transcript will be used in the final written report. I understand that I will receive an electronic copy of the written report upon its completion, and will be given the opportunity to request changes prior to the report's final submission. I understand that the final written report will be read by the project's research advisor and members of the Bates College Honors Committee. I understand that, upon completion, the written report will be uploaded to SCARAB, the Bates College online repository for scholarly work by students, faculty, and staff. I understand that, unless an embargo is put on the written report, it will be accessible online to the public.

I Do
 Do not

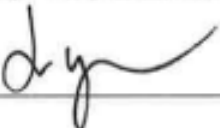
Request that an embargo of _____ year(s) be placed on the written report, so that the information contained therein will not be widely available until _____.

I request that I be referred to by

My name (as given in the interview)
 The following pseudonym: _____
 Anonymously

in the final written report.

I will receive a copy of the final written report upon my request. Neither Erin Hazlett-Norman nor Bates College will publish any of my information without my consent.

 Signature

2/5/11 Date

mwiggin@duke.edu Email

919-660-3616 Phone Number

Consent Form: Interview about Farmworker Dignity

I, Ramón Zepeda (full name) hereby give permission for Erin Hazlett-Norman to use the information I provide in this interview for a written senior thesis project in Environmental Studies. I understand that the researcher took written notes during my interview. I have received a copy of the written transcript from my interview and have revised the responses and information contained therein to my satisfaction. I understand that only information recorded in the revised transcript will be used in the final written report. I understand that I will receive an electronic copy of the written report upon its completion, and will be given the opportunity to request changes prior to the report's final submission. I understand that the final written report will be read by the project's research advisor and members of the Bates College Honors Committee. I understand that, upon completion, the written report will be uploaded to SCARAB, the Bates College online repository for scholarly work by students, faculty, and staff. I understand that, unless an embargo is put on the written report, it will be accessible online to the public.

I Do
 Do not

Request that an embargo of _____ year(s) be placed on the written report, so that the information contained therein will not be widely available until _____.

I request that I be referred to by

My name (as given in the interview)
 The following pseudonym: _____
 Anonymously

in the final written report.

I will receive a copy of the final written report upon my request. Neither Erin Hazlett-Norman nor Bates College will publish any of my information without my consent.

 Signature

2/14/19 Date

ramon.zepeda@duke.edu Email

919-660-0704 Phone Number

Consent Form: Interview about Farmworker Dignity

I, Chinyere Victoria Nwankudu (full name) hereby give permission for Erin Hazlett-Norman to use the information I provide in this interview for a written senior thesis project in Environmental Studies. I understand that the researcher took written notes during my interview. I have received a copy of the written transcript from my interview and have revised the responses and information contained therein to my satisfaction. I understand that only information recorded in the revised transcript will be used in the final written report. I understand that I will receive an electronic copy of the written report upon its completion, and will be given the opportunity to request changes prior to the report's final submission. I understand that the final written report will be read by the project's research advisor and members of the Bates College Honors Committee. I understand that, upon completion, the written report will be uploaded to SCARAB, the Bates College online repository for scholarly work by students, faculty, and staff. I understand that, unless an embargo is put on the written report, it will be accessible online to the public.

I Do
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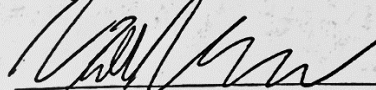
Request that an embargo of _____ year(s) be placed on the written report, so that the information contained therein will not be widely available until _____.

I request that I be referred to by

My name (as given in the interview)
 The following pseudonym: _____
 Anonymously

in the final written report.

I will receive a copy of the final written report upon my request. Neither Erin Hazlett-Norman nor Bates College will publish any of my information without my consent.

 Signature

02/06/2019 Date

c.v.nwankudu@gmail.com Email

(843) 206-9092 Phone Number

Formulario de Consentimiento: Entrevista sobre la Dignidad de los Trabajadores Agrícolas

Yo, Ronald Bacilio Castro (nombre completo) doy mi consentimiento para que Erin Hazlett-Norman use la información que he proporcionado en esta entrevista para su proyecto escrito de tesis para su carrera en Estudios Medioambientales. Entiendo que la investigadora tomó apuntes durante mi entrevista. He recibido una copia de la transcripción escrita de mi entrevista y he revisado las respuestas y la información contenida dentro hasta que me satisfaga. Entiendo que solo aquella información que sea parte de la transcripción revisada será usada en el informe final. Entiendo que recibiré una copia electrónica del informe escrito cuando se termina, y que tendré la oportunidad de solicitar cambios antes de la entrega final del informe. Entiendo que el informe final será leído por la asesora de la investigadora y por los miembros del comité de honores académicos en Bates College. Entiendo que el informe final será subido a SCARAB, el repositorio en línea para trabajo académico hecho por estudiantes, profesores, y empleados de Bates College. Entiendo que, a menos que el informe sea embargado, será abierto al público en línea.

Yo Sí
 No

Pido que un embargo de _____ año(s) sea aplicado al informe final, para que la información contenida dentro no será disponible al público hasta pueden pasar a la disposición del público el tiempo que sea necesario.

Yo quiero que se me llame por

Mi nombre (como lo dí en la entrevista)
 El subsiguiente seudónimo _____
 De forma anónimo

en el informe final.

Recibiré una copia del informe final si la solicite. Ni Erin Hazlett-Norman ni Bates College publicarán nada de mi información sin mi consentimiento.

Ronald Bacilio Castro Firma

03/08/2019 Fecha

robacy440@hotmail.com Correo Electrónico

(828) 432-5080 Número de Teléfono

Interview Transcripts

Interview with Bianca

Conducted over the phone

1:30pm on January 25th, 2019

Preliminary Statements:

- These questions are for my senior thesis in Environmental Studies about farmworker dignity
- Please only answer questions you feel comfortable responding to
- I will keep any piece of information confidential that you want me to. If you let me know before, during, or after saying it, I will delete it or not write it down, or will keep it anonymous in my writing depending on your preference
- Is it ok if I take notes on what you say?
- I'll send you a copy of my notes when I've finished transcribing them, give you a chance to change or remove anything you'd like to, and only use the revised version for my writing
- I'll send you a copy of an interview consent form along with the transcript of my notes, and will only include information you share with your consent.
- Do you have any time constraints for the interview today?

Interview Questions:

1. What is your name? Are you OK with me using your name in my project, or would you prefer I use a pseudonym or refer to you anonymously?

I'm ok with you using my name. You can call me Bianca. I guess I'd prefer you keep it to just the first name.

2. Are you or have you ever been a farmworker?

No.

3. Do you come from a farmworker family or background?

Yes.

4. What farmworker serving organization(s) have you worked with or for?

I've worked with Student Action with Farmworkers primarily. Through them I've also worked with other organizations.

5. What was/is your role at the organization(s) you worked for? How long were you/have you been there?

I'm the Grassroots Organizer. I've been at SAF as a staff member for about a year and six months, and then as an intern for another year before that. So I guess a total of about two and a half years.

6. Do you identify as a member of the farmworker movement in the Southeast?

Yes.

7. What does dignity mean to you?

I think dignity is being able to live your life without stigma around what you do. Being able to find pride in aspects of your life. In regards to farmwork or just work in general, I think it's about feeling pride in your work. Feeling that your work is worthy -- both worthiness in yourself and worthiness in acceptance from others.

8. Does the organization you work(ed) for use the term dignity explicitly in their communications, publications, or programming? If so, where and how?

Yes. I see it a lot in our documentary work. Sometimes it comes directly from farmworkers. Other times it's in our communications, listserves, annual reports, and all the different messages we send out.

9. Have you heard the term dignity used by the farmworkers (and/or meat and food processing workers) your organization works with?

I haven't heard it in person, but I've seen it in some of our past documentary work. I've also seen it written in evaluations we get back from farmworkers when we do outreach.

10. If so, what do you think it means to them?

I think dignity is tied to the racial aspects of the type of work that farmwork is. In one documentary project, La Vida Diaria, a worker says something like "nos miran como si fuéramos nadie." It's about how people look at farmworkers living their daily life. How they are treated when they drive by in a bus or go to the grocery store. It's about how people see them. I'm from a small agricultural town. Growing up, I had friends that weren't farmworkers and weren't Mexican. Sometimes they would say things like "we can't go to the grocery store on Sunday because that's when the Mexicans will be there." They would poke fun at the workers, and throw around racial slurs. It was connected to the work, connected to when workers had time off, what they were wearing. When farmworkers say dignity, I think it's tied to the racial and negative connotations of the work.

11. Does your organization work with other populations besides farmworkers? (For ex. through lobbying, awareness raising, direct action work etc.)

Yes. We work with students. Those students can be any race, it varies in our programs. We also work with community members in general.

12. What do you think dignity means to the audience of your organizing efforts?

Yeah, I think it would be for workers to feel pride in their work. It also depends on the people. White people might not have to carry that weight of representing their whole race in the way that farmworkers and other people of color do. I think the general audience would associate it with pride, that workers should feel pride in what they do. And they should! It should be dignified work, since they're the ones who feed everybody.

13. Does your organization hold farmworker dignity as a value or a goal? Explicitly or more implicitly?

Yes and yes. And it's explicit, dignity is actually in our vision on the SAF website in the part that says "one day, all farmworkers will have dignity in their work and livelihood"

14. If so, how, specifically, does your organization work for farmworker dignity?

Firstly, by doing documentary work and sharing it with the public, adding that element of humanity to the workers. Also by spreading facts and factsheets about the workforce. I think we try to show how farmwork really is not that different from any other blue collar job, while highlighting unjust conditions that are specific to the farm industry. We emphasize that we're all human and we're all being oppressed. None of us are free. And we try to spread knowledge and empower students, especially students from farmworker families, to reclaim that narrative and feel proud.

15. What obstacles or challenges does your organization face in this work?

First of all, being able to work more directly with farmworkers is a challenge, since we're based out of Durham. Farmworkers are often so isolated. When we're trying to reach them after work it's hard because schedules can fluctuate based on the harvest or the weather forecast. Maybe some of that can't be avoided. Another challenge is having an audience that is receptive to the message. People see our work as political, even when all we're doing is stating facts. I think the general public doesn't honor experiences in the same way people in social justice circles do.

16. How do you measure progress? What do failure and success look like?

I'm not entirely sure how I measure it personally. SAF does have a matrix, a big plan with short term, medium term, and long term goals. The short term part is about assessing what our goals are and as a staff trying to reach individual goals. Same for the medium and long term. Long term goals are more like getting legislation passed to get farmworkers overtime wages or other protections or a union contract. They can still be specific but they are more of the big things we work towards.

17. Does your organization work in coalitions or partnerships with other organizations in the Farmworker movement? If so, what organizations or kinds of organizations?

Yes. SAF helped establish the Farmworker Advocacy Network and the Adelante Coalition. FAN is comprised of a lot of organization. They vary a lot, but they are all workers' rights or farmworker organizations. This coalition meets up to find ways to best support workers in NC. We do this by hosting events like the farmworker institute, by sharing resources, and keeping each other updated about issues in our local communities. We share good things too. Recently, one organization heard from workers that there was one grower who paid for wifi for his

workers. This got the whole network thinking about how get growers to pay for wifi across the state. Adelante works with immigrants and students, working for justice in the education system. The coalition's main focus is working to get in-state tuition for undocumented students. SAF also works with other farmworker organizations like the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and the United Farmworkers.

18. Do you believe the other organizations also hold farmworker dignity as a value in their work?

Yes. I know FLOC has a slogan that says "Fair Day's Pay for a Fair Day's Work. They're big thing is getting a union contract so that workers can be their own voice. I think that's how they define dignity. Fair work, fair compensation. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers also uses dignity. They organized the fair food program. They're trying to get workers a seat at the table and a way to report issues through a hotline so that they can feel empowered doing their work.

19. Do you think they operate under the same understanding of dignity as your organization?

I think the root of it is the same, but it is a little different. I guess it's the same, but the way different organizations word the definition is different. FLOC wants a union contract, and CIW has the fair food program. Their definition of dignity shifts based on the specific farmworker needs in Florida versus in North Carolina. It shifts a little bit but overall the foundation is the same.

20. Are there other important elements of migrant farmworker dignity that you believe your organization does not address in its work?

Nobody's perfect. I can't think of anything immediately. We try to debunk myths. We share experiences that farmworkers share and are ok with us sharing, but we can't really make anything else up. So no, not to my knowledge.

21. In your eyes, what would a world in which full dignity for farmworkers was achieved look like?

Definitely no negative stigma. Like the example I gave from growing up. Being able to do the work and being honored for feeding so many people. Not being taken advantage of while at work. That part is an effect of bigger system. The agricultural system could definitely change if

it wanted to. But it's the way they've always been. Historically, farmwork has always been an exploited field of work, especially in the Southeast. There's not universal agreement on this, but I personally believe reparations would be great. Giving back to past exploited farmworkers, beginning to make amends. I'm not sure if it should be by the government or somebody else, but I think descendants of slaves should get paid. To begin to make things right, and not just brush it under the rug like always. There's definitely not general agreement on that. But I think it would be fair. In the current situation, I think dignity would mean ensuring a safe workplace, proper training and protection from sun exposure and pesticide exposure. Guaranteeing breaks and union contracts. Those things should be offered by employers just because they are decent people. It blows my mind that the whole farmworker movement happened, and is still happening because it doesn't occur to people that workers are their equals. People don't see them as equals. Dignity would mean people seeing the the industry workforce see as equals.

22. What primary obstacles do you see to that world becoming a reality?

One thing is the lack of general agreement on the way things are right now. A little while ago we boosted a facebook post and it turned into big controversy. People could see it who were outside our circle of members. We didn't even think it was that political. It just said that farmworkers make a certain wage. It was just a person saying how much money they make. And it recieved so much backlash. It was so basic. It wasn't explicitly political. People said things like "these people don't have to come here, they're not tied to farmwork." I've experienced that on my own facebook page too. So one obstacle is people just being receptive to the message. And the second is the lack of education about the topic. I think that part is connected to underfunded public schools, which just highlights for me how all our struggles are one. I really feel for educators who are in a tough situation, just trying to help students pass standardized tests. But then the outcome is that people don't know the history of agriculture, and why farmworkers are still being exploited.

23. Has your understanding of farmworker dignity changed over time?

I guess it has changed in that I didn't think about it at all before. I grew up in rural town, and would see farmworkers all the time. I knew that this was a reality. But I didn't think about it. I just accepted things as they were. It wasn't until college and working with SAF that I realized that there's language for my experiences and for those of others. Racism and exploitive systems, capitalism, I starting recognizing all of these things, seeing them in my daily life and in the world. I went from not thinking about it, not knowing it existed, to now being aware of and recognizing the unfairness.

24. Is there anything else I should know about migrant farmworker dignity or about your organization?

I don't think so. I guess when I share my story, I tell people that my dad was a farmworker but that he doesn't really talk about it. I've heard other people say that too. I wonder if that has to do with the dignity piece of it.

Interview with Joanna Welborn

Conducted in person at Student Action with Farmworkers Office

9:30am on December 20th, 2018

Preliminary Statements:

- These questions are for my senior thesis in Environmental Studies about farmworker dignity
- Please only answer questions you feel comfortable responding to
- I will keep any piece of information confidential that you want me to. If you let me know before, during, or after saying it, I will delete it or not write it down, or will keep it anonymous in my writing depending on your preference
- Is it ok if I take notes on what you say?

Definitely

- Do you have any time constraints for the interview today?

Not really

Interview Questions:

1. What is your name? Are you OK with me using your name in my project, or would you prefer I use a pseudonym or refer to you anonymously?

Joanna Welborn. You can use my name.

2. Are you or have you ever been a farmworker?

No.

3. Do you come from a farmworker family or background?

Yeah a little bit. My grandmother worked in poultry her whole life. My grandparents owned a small farm in Wilkesboro, but they couldn't make enough money that way so she worked for Holly Farms (I think it's Tyson now) inspecting chickens for 20 years. I didn't always think of that as a farmworker background, but now I do. Poultry and food-processing is part of what we

consider under the category of farmwork. There are some important similarities in working conditions.

4. What farmworker serving organization(s) have you worked with or for?

Student Action with Farmworkers. I've worked here for the last 10 years. I guess my placement as a SAF intern also counts. During the summer of 1996 I worked in Ashe county. My placement was working with the school system to do migrant education in their summer camp program. There wasn't really a formal name for it.

5. What was/is your role at the organization(s) you worked for? How long were you/have you been there?

At SAF I am the communication arts director. I handle all of our print and online publications, I coordinate our documentary work and co-coordinate our alumni program.

6. Do you identify as a member of the farmworker movement in the Southeast?

Yes.

7. What does dignity mean to you?

I love this idea. I feel like I don't have my ideas fully flushed out. Thinking about dignity in general, I can't separate it from pride. It's a way you hold yourself. A way you show up in the world and are able to be yourself. There is so much it is influenced by. You don't have total control. I think Dignity comes from yourself but is influenced by the way you're treated by others too. It's a very hard word to define. I would be interested to hear what other people say. It's a thing you know but is harder to put into words.

8. Does the organization you work(ed) for use the term dignity explicitly in their communications, publications, or programming? If so, where and how?

Yeah, some. We use 'dignity' and 'dignified' a little bit. We think about it with dignified working conditions. We always talk about how farmwork is not bad work. It is degraded and demeaned. But our perspective is that it is about the conditions you do the work in. Especially through our

documentary work we hear people say they love farmwork. I think dignity is about how they show up and can be who they are. It is dependent on the living and working conditions. It's difficult to think about how your work is dignified if someone is oppressing you or if your wages are stolen. It's about how to be free on your own to do the work. There is so much control in the way farmworkers are treated, where they live and where they work. I really think of dignity and freedom together. It's about where you're working and living and what the conditions are. It is incredible to see, despite those circumstances, people find moments and ways of making their living spaces more like home, or if not more like home, finding fun moments at work. Making what they can of it. The idea is definitely present in the "Harvest of Dignity" campaign that we work on with FAN that we launched in 2010 with the film. We haven't been pushing that material as much recently, but we used it a lot. It is primarily about safe places to live and work, and stronger enforcement of existing laws. With these things there can be more dignified work. I think it is also in our vision. People ask about what we're really working for. Is the answer more mechanized production? I think the answer includes things like a living wage, the ability to take breaks, and health care. And dignity is also important. It's in our vision statement. "One day, all farmworkers will have dignity in their work and livelihood."

9. Have you heard the term dignity used by the farmworkers (and/or meat and food processing workers) your organization works with?

I'm trying to think if I've heard the word itself used. I think so. I feel like I've heard it show up in lots of ways. I've heard people talk about feeling proud of the work and how they learned it, how its a skill to learn, how their father or cousin or brother taught them. Maybe they weren't good at it when they first got here, but they learned. They talk about pride at making something grow. And about not understanding why the work is demeaned. They are putting food on tables. I think the idea of dignity is present when they talk about how they feel while working in the fields. I think of that quote from our documentary work about "feeling free in the fields." I think the idea is there when they talk about which crops they love to work with. One woman talked about working in peas, the long rows, and loving that. One man showed a student photos on his phone for an hour of farmwork he had done that he was proud of. I'm not sure if they use the word dignity. I think some of our Zines have it. I bet they do. I'm trying to think if any of the hand maps have dignity in them. I'm almost positive one of them does, I would just have to find it.

10. If so, what do you think it means to them?

Let me think. I think it does connect with this idea of how others treat you. When I've heard it from people it has mostly been in one on one interactions. People talk about dignity as something they want but feel that they're not getting. They talk about interpersonal interactions with growers and people in the community. About just wanting to be treated with dignity and

wanting to be valued for the really important work they're doing and not understanding why that work isn't treated with dignity.

11. Does your organization work with other populations besides farmworkers? (For ex. through lobbying, awareness raising, direct action work etc.)

Yeah. We work with students obviously. We do grassroots organizing and support farmworker led campaigns. We lobby at the legislature. We also do education and awareness raising about who farmworkers are and how to take action.

12. What do you think dignity means to the audience of your organizing efforts?

Is dignity a controversial word? I think it might be when it's connected to work. It's such a basic need that we have. To be respected, treated with respect. It's interesting what people react to -- things that don't seem provocative but then are. I haven't seen people react specifically to the word dignity. But SAF boosted one of our Facebook posts about raising wages and the importance of a living wage. It included a photo and a quote. It was a pretty benign quote from a farmworker about how much money she made, and how much she had to pay for things. She was speaking from her own experience. Usually only our supporters see our stuff. But the boost put our post out to something like 10,000 people. People were attacking it. Everything was taken as fake news. People said it was a lie, that we made it up. It wasn't. The quote was from 2010, so the wages aren't quite like today and we were transparent about that. It was so interesting that people were attacking this quote that seemed so benign. People were saying 'I did this kind of work' or 'my neighbor does this work.' 'People shouldn't get more than I did.' 'We pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps.' You just have to do it, even if you don't like it.' It seemed like this individualist thing. 'People won't cater to your needs.' I wonder how people would react if it was a big public thing. People seem to get the message in one to one interactions. Although, lobbying legislators is all over the place. Some legislators agree that of course all workers deserve dignified conditions. Others say they picked tobacco when they were little, that it was good for their character, that they didn't need care or praise, and neither should today's farmworkers.

13. Does your organization hold farmworker dignity as a value or a goal? Explicitly or more implicitly?

We do. It is present as a feeling as well as something the staff at SAF talk about. We all have pretty much the same values. Even if dignity is not always explicit internally, it is definitely a value that we all have. I go back to our vision statement in talking to new audiences. People ask

'what is the goal, what is the one campaign you want to win?' This is the foundational thing, as well as all the concrete things we also want. The foundation is for farmworkers to have dignity, then other things go along with that. Valuing the work and the workers. Why does it have to be that people say 'well no one else would do the work, of course we have to have immigrants'? It's not true. Why are people willing to let one group of people do what other group won't? It's not ok. How do we make it something that is ok? Farmwork is how we live. Farmworkers are growing the food we're eating. We can't live without it. We need to treat farmwork with dignity and respect.

14. If so, how, specifically, does your organization work for farmworker dignity?

A huge one for me is storytelling and relationship building. That is the way we see dignity show up the most. Through our documentary program, students spend more time with workers than they do while on outreach. Workers have said it is a powerful experience to be heard. Students want to hear their stories. They don't get that very much, and often feel isolated. Most of our oral history work has looked like a couple of students talking with a worker or their family, hearing their story and sharing about themselves. Part of our mission is farmworkers and students learning about each other's lives. Relationships are really core to that. They are core to how we organize, work for better conditions, and how people will feel empowered and heard. In the participant surveys we get back from farmworkers, they say that it is amazing to have spaces to talk to each other. The documentary work is participatory. It involves sharing experiences and hearing about similar values and experiences. We hear from the farmworkers about different themes. Work is one. We asked 'what does farmwork mean to you?' The intention is to not just hear an outside perspective of what farmwork is -- hot days in the sun, poor wages -- but to truly hear from the workers themselves. And sharing it too. The primary piece is that initial relationship building between student and worker. The secondary piece is sharing those stories, not just us listing problems and solutions, but instead letting workers tell their own stories, and letting that guide how people understand what the issues are, what workers want, and what they believe in. I think that works towards dignity. One piece I like about our documentary work is that we always give something back to workers to take with them. To take back to their families. Sometimes that's a zine that they can use to show 'this is where I was, this is what I was doing.' Our theater program takes photos to give people. There is something about having a concrete symbol of their work here, something to show people and families.

15. What obstacles or challenges does your organization face in this work?

There are a lot of logistical obstacles. You know what the documentary work is like. There is a lot of logistical planning involved because farmworkers are often migratory and we can't work with the same workers every time. Every season there are new workers which makes it hard to

build relationships. The degree of trust that you need to establish is hard to do in two visits over the course of one summer. We have come up with lots of strategies, but sometimes I do imagine what it would be like to work with a group over time, developing relationships over time. Another logistical challenge is that workers don't have control over their schedules. They don't control the timing of the things they need to get done like laundry, cooking, and talking to families. Then access is another challenge. Sometimes growers don't want us there. Workers lack of control over their own lives which makes it hard. In terms of advocacy with outside groups, one challenge is that there is so much anti-immigrant sentiment. We mostly talk to people who are supportive but in the long term are we seeing change and it is super difficult.

16. How do you measure progress? What do failure and success look like?

I think it has been helpful to have surveys, to hear from workers how specific projects are helpful or not, what they get out of them. But that kind of survey is also difficult. The workers want to make you feel good. You can tell with the documentary work when at least people have had a good experience. That is how I gauge it. In documentary sessions we try to get through a lot of things -- making zines together, asking questions, doing a popular education discussion -- but this summer, even if we didn't finish, you could hear in the room that it was important to share stories. That felt successful. Are relationships being built? Are people feeling heard and empowered? Those things are hard to measure objectively. Seeing and hearing how people feel, it's not scientific. And it's different for different audiences. Are students coming to actions? Are they signing up for our programs? For legislators: I want you to support this bill or not support this bill. Failure and success look pretty different for who you're talking to. Talking to workers, they talk about the things we all care about. The number one thing is missing their families. Of course they want breaks and good wages, and change in those areas would be success, but they are not always workers' primary concern. Holding these spaces where people can talk about their families, that feels like success. Failure would be saying 'no we have to stick to this agenda.' Not honoring people's needs, that would feel like failure to me.

17. Does your organization work in coalitions or partnerships with other organizations in the Farmworker movement? If so, what organizations or kinds of organizations?

Yeah. SAF is part of the Farmworker Advocacy Network, a statewide network working for better conditions for workers. We are also part of the Adelante Coalition, which is also a statewide group, that does educational equity work. We also have tons of partnerships with sponsoring organizations that host interns. We co-coordinate the farmworker institute that brings groups together for trainings and to learn from each other.

18. Do you believe the other organizations also hold farmworker dignity as a value in their work?

Yeah, definitely. I've worked more with FAN than the other groups. I'm not sure about Adelante. It seems like kind of a core value.

19. Do you think they operate under the same understanding of dignity as your organization?

That's a good question. I don't know if I can answer it. I don't know all the groups. Adelante is more loose. It is not just farmworker groups -- also latinx groups. Everybody probably has different understandings of dignity, different levels of where they see its importance.

20. Are there other important elements of migrant farmworker dignity that you believe your organization does not address in its work?

I'm sure there are. Let me think of what they would be. It goes back to obstacles. It's really hard to build relationships with the same group of workers over time. We do what we can to have focus groups, to hear from workers, through our documentary and theater programs. We ask the workers 'What's important to you? What do you want to see change?' We could do more if we were able to work with a group of farmworker leaders over time, letting them lead the work more. It's a value that we all hold, and are always struggling with. It's hard to make that happen because workers are not here over the long term. With our board, we have tried to have a majority farmworker board. Now we have a majority farmworker alumni board. It would make a big difference, letting them guide the work and better share what dignity in farm work means to them.

21. In your eyes, what would a world in which full dignity for farmworkers was achieved look like?

I think It would be... maybe this is cheesy... a world in which we all appreciate what farmworkers do. I want to use the word dignified. It would be a world in which farm work is a job people hold in esteem and value, in which farmworkers and the surrounding community feel like they are wholly a part of the community. A world in which "farmworker" didn't have to be a primary descriptor. If people were just Don Francisco, not "a farmworker from North Carolina." If farmwork could be a part of who they are but didn't determine how they are seen in the community. Or that how they are seen is a good thing. 'This is my neighbor, my kid's friend.'

22. What primary obstacles do you see to that world becoming a reality?

Anti-immigrant sentiment and the capitalist world we live in. For the entire history of this country, it has always been about how do the ruling powers get the most for the least from the workers. Why is this workforce always treated without dignity? Why am I sitting here in an office, while people are out working in the fields? How did that happen? Historically things have always been this way. I don't see it changing. This is true of any profession in capitalism. It's about getting the most from the least, controlling power, keeping power. I see it getting worse. Inequality. CEOs making tons more. Who's in the government, funded by outside sources -- it leaches down into anti-immigrant systems in which people feeling pitted against each other. Us vs. Them, instead of trying to change oppression from the top.

23. Has your understanding of farmworker dignity changed over time?

Yeah. I think I've come to more of an understanding of it. I've always believed in it. I've identified as working class my whole life. My dad's family growing up was really struggling. I've always believed in workers rights. I've learned through documentary work and talking to farmworkers individually. It is such a primary thing, a human need to be treated with dignity. People talk more about that than specific issues of pesticides or heat stress. It makes sense that that is the primary human desire. What has changed my understanding is connecting with people more, seeing the dignity in them, learning about what's important to them, and hearing the things they love about farmwork. That is something striking. People don't know that some workers really do like the work, they would like it if it was just under dignified conditions.

24. Is there anything else I should know about migrant farmworker dignity or about your organization?

What students think about dignity is important. A lot of the students we work with come from farmworker families, though they may not have done farm work themselves. It's really emotional. It was true in my family too. It's almost like you care about dignity more for your parents. When our students tell stories at orientation, they aren't talking about themselves. They want their parents to be treated with dignity. That's a hard part about DREAMer movement -- there is such a focus on the kids, that they haven't done anything wrong. But parents haven't done anything wrong either. They come trying to bring their families adelante. Workers care about their kids, kids care about their parents. For them to be treated the way that they are is really hard. And another thing that is connected to that. If you're a parent, maybe farm work is what you've done your whole life. Kids are always being told to 'Go to school to get out of farmwork and make us proud.' That's why farmwork should be dignified. It's such difficult work and so

important. It's the ultimate contribution. Why can't that be valued? It's not ok for people to look back and think they didn't do something with their lives when they helped feed the whole country. I'd be interested to hear from a student from a farmworker family, to hear what a child thinks about their parents' work.

Interview with Melinda Wiggins

Conducted in person at Student Action with Farmworkers Office

9:30am on December 18th, 2018

Interview Questions:

1. What is your name? Are you OK with me using your name in my project, or would you prefer I use a pseudonym or refer to you anonymously?

Melinda Wiggins. It is OK for you to use my name.

2. Are you or have you ever been a farmworker?

No.

3. Do you come from a farmworker family or background?

I come from a sharecropping and farming background. I don't usually say I'm from a farmworker background, because I think there are some pretty important differences. I grew up in the Mississippi Delta. My dad and his family were sharecroppers. My mom's family were sharecroppers too, but she never worked as one. My grandparents owned a farm. Both sides of my family picked cotton.

4. What farmworker serving organization(s) have you worked with or for?

I started as an intern for Student Action with Farmworkers with a placement at the Episcopal Farmworkers Ministry. I worked for the North Carolina Farmworkers Project part time during grad school. I returned to SAF for another summer and then was hired on in a permanent position.

5. What was/is your role at the organization(s) you worked for? How long were you/have you been there?

I started as an 'Into the Fields' intern with SAF for the summer of 1993 when I was in graduate school. The next summer I was hired as the program assistant for the summer internship, and then was offered a permanent position as the program director of Into the Fields. In 1996 I became the executive director of SAF and that is the role I have had ever since.

6. Do you identify as a member of the farmworker movement in the Southeast?

Oh yeah.

7. What does dignity mean to you?

That's a hard one. I think dignity includes a sense of being valued. I think about it a lot in the context of work. Workers' dignity. Dignified working conditions. It involves one's work being considered important and valued by others. And it also means having a personal sense of pride, of being proud of one's own work. Those are two important parts dignity -- how people feel about their own work and how their work is perceived by others. I think there is often a lot of discrepancy between the two. Being valued is the hard part.

8. Does the organization you work(ed) for use the term dignity explicitly in their communications, publications, or programming? If so, where and how?

Yes, I believe so. I've never done a word search, but I think it shows up in some of SAF's documentary materials and publications. We definitely talk about it orally, especially when we're talking about systemic change. I think of it as pretty comprehensive, a broad term rather than a narrow one. I see it as interchangeable with the term 'just conditions' It might show up in the context of 'we seek a world where farmworkers have dignity in their work. Are treated with dignity. Have dignity. Work with dignity.' I don't hear it as much when we talk about health or education. Our partners who do work in migrant education and health services are more focused on access. Improving farmworker access to necessary services. The partners we work with that are focused on organizing, unions, and legal rights, groups like Legal Aid of NC and FLOC, their work is more about farmworkers having access to dignified work, not just services. I think those groups are operating under a different worldview or point of reference.

9. Have you heard the term dignity used by the farmworkers (and/or meat and food processing workers) your organization works with?

Yes. I think I've heard it used in a similar context. I feel like I've often heard it used when workers give testimony about their situation and articulate what they're asking from allies. They talk about wanting a job with dignity, about asking for dignified treatment, and thinking they deserve dignity.

10. If so, what do you think it means to them?

I'm surmising here, since I've never asked workers explicitly what dignity means to them. It seems connected to human rights. I've heard workers talk about human rights, and sometimes it seems like they think they have more rights than they actually do legally. This might come from assumptions they have about how workers are supposed to be treated and valued here. It might come from a warped concept of the US as a place that is great in regards to labor issues. I also think human rights might be perceived differently in different countries. I have heard workers speak as though they have an inalienable right to human rights and dignity. 'Of course our work should be valued, we're harvesting the food people eat.' Then there is this disconnect when that doesn't match up with their experience in the US.

11. Does your organization work with other populations besides farmworkers? (For ex. through lobbying, awareness raising, direct action work etc.)

Yes. Students and farmworkers are our principle audience. We also work with their communities, as well as people of faith and policy makers.

12. What do you think dignity means to the audience of your organizing efforts?

I think it probably varies. It may mean different things to students we work with from different socioeconomic backgrounds. I come from a working class family. I grew up hearing about my family not being treated well and not being valued in their work. I think my sense of dignity and its connection to work comes from that experience. That's what I bring to SAF. I came here to work for workers rights. It is my lens for reading all of SAF's work. I see that as a real working class stance that comes from 'we're not being treated fairly.' It seems like it is just manual labor that isn't understood to have dignity. Professionals certainly voice concerns and organize, but I only notice manual labor being denigrated in this way. I see dignity as a class-based union concept. Policy makers don't talk much about dignity. People of faith don't seem to use it that much either.

13. Does your organization hold farmworker dignity as a value or a goal? Explicitly or more implicitly?

It's not in our mission statement, but it may be in our vision statement.

14. If so, how, specifically, does your organization work for farmworker dignity?

Through our partnerships with organizing groups. Whether that be placing an intern at the Western North Carolina Workers Center or marching with FLOC. I think the concept of dignity is also present in our legislative campaigns that have more comprehensive agendas. It also seems relevant to our work with Legal Aid and their focus on guaranteeing farmworkers

protection under the law and ensuring their ability to address grievances. I think the value of dignity is also present in our documentary and theater outreach programs. The concept of popular education and popular theater seems very connected to the idea of claiming your own dignity and practicing that. 'I have pride in my own work.' Our documentary projects give farmworkers the chance to speak for themselves and voice their own lives. I think it is important to differentiate between the distinct parts of dignity. I see two main components of dignity. One that has to do with pride and personally valuing your own work. The other part has to do with other people valuing you, as well as the conditions you are living and working in. Sometimes you don't have much control over the second part.

15. What obstacles or challenges does your organization face in this work?

There are definitely barriers to workers feeling comfortable speaking for themselves, especially when they have been in this system for a long time. SAF's work tries to push against the grain of workers' internalized oppression and the resignation to feeling powerless that can come of a long time spent in survival mode, just trying to get through. Another barrier is the huge difference in resources between what SAF has and what the employers and corporations that are working to maintain the system have. Employers sometimes make comparisons to farmworkers' home countries. Like 'have you seen where they live in Mexico?' Suggesting that work in the US is better than where the workers came from. This is a false comparison. Better based on what standards? Not in terms of being closer to their families. Not in terms of speaking and understanding the language in their country of employment. During slavery, folks probably didn't say that slavery was better than where slaves came from as they do say that farmworking conditions are better than where current migrant workers are coming from. I think the opposition truly doesn't think farmworkers live in undignified conditions. I also don't know if dignity is something employers, corporations, and policy makers actually care about. I would say they don't, based on what I see. If that concept isn't part of their worldview, if it comes from a different class-based experience than what they know... can you have empathy for an experience you've never felt? This makes me question how translatable dignity is as a concept. Maybe it's not a messaging thing that works. If we tried to talk about dignity with employers and members of the farm bureau, they probably would just think we're talking crazy. If we have no shared concept of what dignity is, how important it is, I think they would just laugh at us. Union contracts try to concretize dignity for workers. If they have these specific things, they can work with dignity. That's why it is such a broad term.

16. How do you measure progress? What do failure and success look like?

One progress I've noted is that more farmworkers seem to be speaking publicly than before. There always are workers ready to share their experiences. This is different than 25 years ago. Another concrete success is that there is a union contract through FLOC that covers farmworkers in this state. Smithfield workers have a union contract too, through the United

Food and Commercial Workers. I'm not sure if I would call this failure, but in a coalition SAF used to be a part of, we had to push for farmworkers to be included in the campaign for a living wage. The fact that they were left out in the first place feels bad. It feels like a continued exemption. Members of the coalition raised concerns that they didn't think legislation would pass if it included farmworkers. Do we have to start there? I understand if they eventually get excluded by our opposition, but it feels bad for farmworkers to be excluded by the the left. SAF is now part of a new coalition called Raising Wages NC that includes farmworkers in their efforts to increase wages.

17. Does your organization work in coalitions or partnerships with other organizations in the Farmworker movement? If so, what organizations or kinds of organizations?

Yes. SAF is part of the Farmworker Advocacy Network. We are also a member of El Colectivo, which works for immigrant rights, and Adelante, which works for immigrant access to education. We also work in collaboration with the Southeast Immigrant Rights Network. There are more people doing immigrant rights work right now. But we are a workers rights organization that works with immigrant workers. That's why we also collaborate with Raising Wages NC and the AFL-CIO.

18. Do you believe the other organizations also hold farmworker dignity as a value in their work?

I think the organizing groups do, but other groups do not. On a national scale, I think Farmworker Justice does. The Rural Migrant Ministry too. Maybe groups that do solidarity work.

19. Do you think they operate under the same understanding of dignity as your organization?

I don't know. I guess I would assume so, especially with the organizing and workers rights groups. "Dignity in the Workplace" is shared language. It is common vernacular in organizing.

20. Are there other important elements of migrant farmworker dignity that you believe your organization does not address in its work?

SAF does not negotiate contracts. We are in solidarity with groups that do, but we do not directly organize around labor contracts.

21. In your eyes, what would a world in which full dignity for farmworkers was achieved look like?

Today is International Migrants Day and it makes me think about how migration can work for workers, so that they can move freely for work, with or without their families as they choose. Also so that they can stay, and not have to migrate for work. I think that world would have to include a safe workplace, a healthy, positive workplace, a living wage, paid time off, and healthcare. There was a study done at Wake Forest that you may want to look into. The researchers looked at discrepancies in worker safety at different workplaces. They noticed that the difference between the safer and less-safe workplaces was not based on differences in the physical working conditions. Instead it had to do with the presence of what workers called “a climate of safety.” Workers felt safer. It was all about little things that the managers or supervisors would do. They listened when workers had complaints. They treated them with dignity. As humans. As equals. They made them feel listened to, like their voices mattered. And that was what actually resulted in a safer workplace. I want farmworkers to have all the concrete things, but also to feel valued in the workplace. Because they are. I think there is a major culture change needed for that to happen.

22. What primary obstacles do you see to that world becoming a reality?

In addition to what we’ve already talked about, I would say the overall political shift in the country. The way that immigrants are being denigrated publicly. The fact that leadership on a national level really isn’t sympathetic, which trickles down to a state level as well. Also, the overall corporatization of the government. When corporations and the government are meshed and start to bleed into each other, they lose a sense of the social contract. I don’t want a government for profit and not the protection and wellbeing of the people. Those are really different values.

23. Has your understanding of farmworker dignity changed over time?

I don’t know.

24. Is there anything else I should know about migrant farmworker dignity or about your organization?

I’ve been thinking about the intersection between immigration and labor and the role for dignity in that. How much is it bleeding into the language around immigrant rights? Dignity for the migrant caravan vs. dignity for Smithfield workers.

Interview with Ramón Zepeda

Conducted in person at Student Action with Farmworkers Office

10:30 am on January 3rd, 2019

Preliminary Statements:

- These questions are for my senior thesis in Environmental Studies about farmworker dignity
- Please only answer questions you feel comfortable responding to
- I will keep any piece of information confidential that you want me to. If you let me know before, during, or after saying it, I will delete it or not write it down, or will keep it anonymous in my writing depending on your preference
- Is it ok if I take notes on what you say?
Yes
- I plan to write up a transcription of what you say (full sentences) and send it to you to make changes or add things -- does google docs work?
Yes
- I will send along a consent form ASAP
- Do you have any time constraints for the interview today?
Not really -- just finishing by noon would be good

Interview Questions:

1. What is your name? Are you OK with me using your name in my project, or would you prefer I use a pseudonym or refer to you anonymously?

Ramón Zepeda. You can use my name.

2. Are you or have you ever been a farmworker?

Yeah, I have worked in the fields. For me it has always been a personal family connection. I used to work with my grandpa and father in the farm back in Mexico. My dad and mom and some of my siblings have worked in agriculture in the U.S. but I haven't done farm work myself for a living. I helped my dad. I guess my most relevant, meaningful connection is through my dad's experiences in fields in California. He also worked in a meat-packing plant. And some of my siblings did too. And now I work for SAF, an organization working to support farmworker campaigns. I have the opportunity to mentor and do trainings for young people. Many of them

are from farmworker families, others are not. Now I work mostly from the advocacy side. I don't claim that I'm a farmworker but I love gardening. I'm conscious about food and where it comes from. I think a lot about the connections like you were talking about, where people and the environment come together. How does it impact people and the environment when we need food?

3. Do you come from a farmworker family or background?

Yeah. I still have a lot of family members that work in agriculture back in Mexico and some in the U.S. Nobody in my immediate family works in the fields, but they used to, and are still very connected to that.

4. What farmworker serving organization(s) have you worked with or for?

SAF is the main one. I've also worked for the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, UFCW. They mainly work with hog and poultry workers. That community faces the same working conditions and similar labor and immigration issues to farmworkers. Those are the 2 main organizations I've worked for in NC. I worked for another nonprofit in DC organizing day laborers. I saw similarities in working conditions, wage theft, and immigration issues. Some workers said they would do farm work at other times of the year. Those are the most relevant work experiences I have. I also did some mentoring with migrant education for a short period of time in Hoke county, in a school setting. That was not organizing. It was more like service providing and education.

5. What was/is your role at the organization(s) you worked for? How long were you/have you been there?

One word that comes up is organizer. I've done a little bit of everything, always with the goal of supporting workers. Farmworkers are a community that faces certain issues. I used to do a lot of translating and provide rides. I would talk to workers about issues, and about whether people were ready to come together to take action. I worked for UFCW and with Jobs with Justice. I worked with UFCW for 4.5 years, including while I was at school. I worked at Jobs With Justice for just a short time. I have been at SAF for 7 years. I shifted to directing a program, designing experiences for people who are like me when I was an intern. I now direct the Into the Fields program. I work with students, coordinate trainings, bring guest speakers, plan actions, and participate in FLOC pickets, all with the goal of teaching and mentoring. At my other jobs, the goal was a little different. Now I work mostly with students and workers. At UFCW I would talk to a lot of consumers about conditions at the Tarheel Smithfield plant. I would pass out flyers at

the grocery store. The company would not negotiate a contract. We kept hearing from workers in the community about line speed, injury, and tough conditions. My work involved advocacy and raising consumer awareness. At SAF now my role is more behind the scenes. This is both good and bad. I am used to being on the ground, knocking on doors, playing soccer, doing theater, and giving know your rights presentations. Now I do more behind the scenes, learning how an organization works and writing grants. There is a need to continue to do this work, but to do that, resources are needed. With planning out workshops, there is a need to be intentional. Think about all the intersections -- it's something I'm still learning. Issues that overlap. It's so easy to look at the issues divided. Sometimes we don't think about all the intersections, how we're all connected and effected. Maybe that's also been a role --- being intentional about what will make an impact for everyone. I still don't know the answer.

6. Do you identify as a member of the farmworker movement in the Southeast?

Yes. Definitely. At SAF I sometimes almost feel surreal. People look up to SAF -- our programs and research and action steps and trainings. SAF has a strong reputation with other farmworkers and organizations and students. Sometimes I have to keep reminding myself of that. It feels like a lot of responsibility. It's at the core of what inspired me to go into union organizing. Before I did the internship. I had a lot of connection to the work, through family members and my parents. They didn't question how much they were paid, for example, and considered themselves lucky to have a job, especially as new immigrants. As a SAF intern, I started to question all those things. How much are farmworkers paid compared to others? What happens to people when they get injured? If their paycheck is short? It showed me something I knew was a part of me -- when something doesn't feel right, I have to do something. I began to learn the tools to organizing. Nobody in my family did organizing before. Through SAF and organizing, and now as a mentor, I am still learning how much of an impact it can make on a person to visit a camp or spend a summer as an intern. It can be life-changing. At SAF we're very intentional about supporting campaigns and working to change laws. Sometimes our work is more about responses to bad things that happen. I often wish we had more time or resources.

7. What does dignity mean to you?

I don't want to define the word but what I've noticed is that dignity is priceless. One example is how dignity has showed up in my experience. When I did union organizing, the stories we heard when we visited people from a certain workplace were often 'people in this department are having trouble with line speed, hand injury, and other departments are having issues with pay. We see patterns and keep them in mind. Sometimes if I was nervous in a conversation with a farmworker, I would bring up things other workers had said. Sometimes I would get the response of 'I'm not sure' or 'leave me alone to work.' One food processing worker told me, 'I just want to be treated with respect. Yes the work is hard and we have to do lot of cuts, but If I could just

have respect, have dignity. If I could just do my job.' Sometimes I would ask 'don't you think it would work better if everyone asked for a raise together?' They would say a manager treats them badly, giving them unfair jobs. 'I just want to be treated well.' It's an issue of how somebody treats you. Dignity to me is just something that could mean something to everybody. Peace of mind. Having peace, feeling respected, feeling that you can be your full self. Working together in a fair environment. Something I've seen in my work with SAF -- in a leadership position with partners and trainings -- is that I have to be flexible, and expand my understanding of what dignity means to everyone else. I have this focus on organizing but for other people it might mean being able to get married, to have a family, to not get discriminated against. I don't want to define it. Dignity is priceless. Everybody knows their own situation. Some people are ok with line speed. Pretty much everybody could use a raise. I'm still learning, and I'm really curious to hear what you find out in your research.

8. Does the organization you work(ed) for use the term dignity explicitly in their communications, publications, or programming? If so, where and how?

SAF is very involved with the FAN coalition, a group whose big campaign for a while was called 'Harvest of Dignity.' I say 'was' because a lot more resources were directed towards putting together the documentary. After that, the campaign was screening and consumer awareness, and trying to impact laws and talk to lawmakers. Dignity is definitely in other materials. In SAF's factsheets, dignity is a word that comes up a lot. It is how we try to frame our work. It is also in our arts, through our documentary and theater messaging and work. In other organizations I think dignity is a word that also gets used a lot, but not as much as at SAF. At UFCW, part of the the mission was having a voice in the job, represented by being part of the union. At SAF in organizing with workers I've heard dignity used more. At Smithfield, we used a slogan about 'being a witness to justice.' DC jobs with justice had a very specific campaign for the short time I was there. It was a wage theft campaign, trying to train and provide resources to a lot of day laborers who were not getting paid. I hear dignity used at SAF more than other places, but everyone uses it. It has to do with labor organizing, farmworker outreach and social justice.

9. Have you heard the term dignity used by the farmworkers (and/or meat and food processing workers) your organization works with?

I think there were a couple of times the word dignity was mentioned to me that were shocking to me. I don't think it is used a lot. Farmworkers use other words that mean that. Workers say this is not fair, that they wanted to be treated with respect, or treated as a human. To me, those words are talking about dignity. Sometimes it is easier to talk about random things to get to the real issue. I haven't really heard farmworkers use dignity specifically. When I have, I've been kind of shocked. Other people focus on the speed of the line or on injuries. People know when a

situation is unfair, when they are being mistreated, not being paid for their work, aren't allowed to take breaks, or being sprayed. People know what is wrong. But they have a situation in life that holds them back. They could be undocumented. They might need to feed their family, or feel intimidated. Even saying dignity is a big step. More often I'll hear -- unfortunately -- that everything is ok. If I was working in that plant line I would say something, do something, but there is something in that person's life that keeps them from speaking up. With SAF I don't do as much outreach I used to do everyday. SAF is once a month with more in summer with site visits and theater. Theater makes it more personal, less intimidating to have those conversations. We bring a play with a funny way of presenting real situations and a variety of different outcomes and possible situations. In those settings workers are more ready to be relaxed in talking about real things like globalization or risking lives to cross the border. With humor or something to break the ice, people are more likely to open up and talk about things in their life that lack dignity. Then they talk about dignity. Not everybody I talk to is like dignity, dignity, dignity.

10. If so, what do you think it means to them?

It's like what I was saying earlier -- just being treated as a human, treated with respect, feeling valued. A lot of times it's the opposite, workers feel they face discrimination. When dignity is brought up it's about feeling respected or valued.

11. Does your organization work with other populations besides farmworkers? (For ex. through lobbying, awareness raising, direct action work etc.)

We work with consumers, raising awareness. Also with lawmakers. If I'm talking to agencies in charge of enforcement, I bring up stories. Sometimes workers share testimonies. We work with other kinds of workers and unions and industries -- that speaks to the intersectionality of things. Because we don't have unlimited resources, we have to choose where we can spend our time. We still work with broader issues. Other organizations try to be part of a bigger network. One example is the HKonJ march. UFCW brings workers, SAF participates. Going to a march like that, there are other organizations doing important work, and together we make a comprehensive agenda. SAF tends to focus on farmworkers and food workers. We also collaborates with organizations that focus on Black Lives Matter, issues with pesticides, and gender issues. We are part of the broader movement for social justice. We need to talk to each other as social justice organizations. We need to talk to lawmakers, and to blind consumers. I'm also a blind consumer. I don't know what dignity is, or how to bring it to everyone. That's a challenge with every organization. How do you get people to care about the people who packaged this bacon? Another group other organizations try to work with is faith groups, religious organizations that work for social justice issues. Especially for farmworkers, the Church many times is a safe place, especially with immigration raids. That's something I saw with the Smithfield workers. There was a raid, workers were taken from plant, people where

freaked out, families were separated. People came to the church to learn about their rights and get legal advice. They wouldn't have come to the office of the union, or to a government agency. They felt like the church was a safe place. SAF tries to work with a lot of rural churches. The Episcopal Farmworker Ministry is a strong partnership. Other organizations use those connections. SAF works with students too. That's one of the things that keeps me here. I remember what it was like for me. After my Saf internship, I realized this was something I could do for a living. Students are at that stage in their life, they could decide on a career, a life path. I'm sure there are more groups too.

12. What do you think dignity means to the audience of your organizing efforts?

That's a hard question because I can't speak for other people. I don't know. Everybody is in a different situation. When it is close to home, it is easy to say I want dignity. When I do presentations, I don't know what dignity means to people in the room. Popular education in itself can bring dignity to a room of people. It's cool to hear when people share, it makes it more real for everybody else. They don't have to explain what that means to them. What I notice is that people do care about fairness. I'm optimistic that people care. We have so many things presented to us all the time that get lost. When I was an organizer, I saw that people in power, who we're trying to organize against, have so many more resources. Anti-union campaigns. Talking to a worker, they would be intimidated because of anti-union videos, thinking "what is really good for me?" It's almost like a game. Some companies would give workers a raise to get the union to go away. It's hard to say what people think about dignity because some people might feel that dignity means not getting cheated or screwed. It's a hard question. Like you said about its roots in "dignified." That word is interesting.

13. Does your organization hold farmworker dignity as a value or a goal? Explicitly or more implicitly?

I think we do at SAF because we hold it as a goal. It's in our values and in our organizational chart. It's part of our long term goals, though I wish it was short term. It didn't start with SAF, many workers and organizations have been organizing for dignity, treatment as human, respect. For SAF, its at the core of what we do. A lot of our work is about sharing stories, people being able to share who they are, show a different face to farmwork, not just dirty, beaten hands picking your vegetables. Families with aspirations, artists, musicians. At SAF the way we do programs, we bring students and workers together and create a space where everybody can be their full selves. As time goes on, we'll see how things change. SAF does a pretty good job of revisiting goals, working with the board and doing five year strategic planning. We're always thinking about changes. One summer, we might have a entirely new experience. We're very flexible, which speaks to how SAF keeps that concept of dignity always present. We talk about it a lot in our materials and presentations. With SAF and others, SAF has been at the forefront

with bringing together all the different connections. You can see that in the anti-oppression/pro-equity trainings that SAF does. I didn't see that with UFCW. SAF talks a lot about language justice, training on interpreting. There's a difference between word-by-word correct translation and creating a space where workers feel comfortable sharing and asking questions. At SAF, I see more intentionality. SAF has always done things with the goal of dignity. We're not perfect, but we're flexible.

14. If so, how, specifically, does your organization work for farmworker dignity?

Through popular education and dismantling oppression. Those were foreign to me before I started working with SAF. It's the opposite experience everywhere else. Like at school. Popular education switches that around and says that everyone is an expert. It changes the conversation. That's the way the organization works toward dignity. Using arts, culturally appropriate stuff like the theater project. We can always bring factsheets but how do you impact somebody who may not read or write? That's another way seen I've seen SAF and other organizations approach the work. We can't just do a powerpoint. Its an exchange.

15. What obstacles or challenges does your organization face in this work?

There are many challenges. The biggest challenge is how unbalanced the resources are when it comes to changing legislation or laws. Corporations and agribusiness, people at the top benefitting from the work of farmworkers have so much money, power, and control. We are an organization that has less than ten staff, doing outreach and providing legal resources. It could bankrupt an organization to go through a legal battle. Beyond that, it is so easy to have miscommunication. Communication is a challenge. Being able to listen to people's real issues, what will really motivate people to act. How do we communicate and support each other so the community can rise together. It also has to do with resources. So many things.

16. How do you measure progress? What do failure and success look like?

I don't know. I think you just have to trust. Trust yourself, trust people. I've been surprised too. Here's one example. When I was a SAF intern, I met Bacilio. He used to work at the plant, then worked elsewhere. I asked him to participate in the documentary project. Years later, we were working together. I can't say it was measured by the workers at the plant getting a union contract, but now I have a friend and contact doing this work with me. Small wins. I measure it by the personal connections. Hearing workers feeling empowered to stand up for their rights, demanding to get paid. I haven't seen many big wins. I just don't know. You have to trust that you're planting a seed. With interns and the fellowship program, I've been surprised by students

who seemed quiet or shy. We'll hear from them much later and they are passionate and super involved in social justice work. I try not to measure.

17. Does your organization work in coalitions or partnerships with other organizations in the Farmworker movement? If so, what organizations or kinds of organizations?

Yes, the ones I talked about before.

18. Do you believe the other organizations also hold farmworker dignity as a value in their work?

Not all in the same way. Some organizations just have different cultures, different approaches, different barriers to resources and participation. Like if they're in a very rural area. Some organizations can't do advocacy or use the word organizing because of their funding restrictions. Some don't have resources for bilingual staff, or can't travel far. At SAF, we get a lot of former interns to work here. In other organizations the focus is more on reaching more people to get access to health information and checkups so more workers are getting taken care of. This is not to downplay the work of other organizations. We work with many partners. They might seem to want to do things a certain way, but the more we get to know each other it becomes clear they do care. It really varies.

19. Do you think they operate under the same understanding of dignity as your organization?

Not quite the same. Some do.

20. Are there other important elements of migrant farmworker dignity that you believe your organization does not address in its work?

Yeah, I think there is a lot of room for improvement. We use our timeline and a lot of our resources to talk about the history of farmwork. That is something we've named and want to do more of. We also want to add diversity to the programs. We want to attract more African Americans to the programs. And people from California who know the different laws they have there. We could do more to focus on organizing. That's something we could learn on and grow to do more of. A lot of the focus is on leadership development to continue to build a movement. There are some things we could do more of, but we don't have resources or capacity. It would be great to partner with other organizations for placements for students who don't have Spanish

skills but come from the background we're looking for. More interns would be great, but we would need more staff. We also have to keep ourselves limited.

21. In your eyes, what would a world in which full dignity for farmworkers was achieved look like?

I could name all the things that always come up. That farmworkers be paid fairly for what they produce, have access to breaks and health services, that they not have to work under the sun without protection and be exposed to pesticides. But for me personally, this goes back to my connection to agricultural land and family. I would be happy doing farmwork, working outside on the land with plants. If anybody could do that and say that and be happy about it, that would be that world for me. If somebody who went to school was in debt could say "I'm going to be a farmworker and get paid enough and have benefits." I think about it a lot. To me it's always thinking through my parents. If my dad had gotten paid more, would he still be there? Would he have gotten other opportunities?

22. What primary obstacles do you see to that world becoming a reality?

We're trained to see that more education means better pay. Even now, for people who are against raising the minimum wage to a living wage, their argument is that people getting paid minimum wage are not skilled workers. Why should somebody get paid \$15 dollars an hour for flipping burgers. Their work is not valued, in the same way that people don't value the work of the people who pick our food. The history of agriculture is so deep. People have always been exploited, held against their will, in slavery, getting mistreated and killed. We need to change the narrative. That means hearing stories of workers. Dignity.

23. Has your understanding of farmworker dignity changed over time?

I think so, yeah. Before doing a SAF program, I didn't question or analyze the system. I didn't think about the history. The more that I learn, the more my perspective changes. It keeps changing, I still have more to learn.

24. Is there anything else I should know about migrant farmworker dignity or about your organization?

I think that's all.

Interview with Victoria Nwankudu

Conducted over phone call

8pm on December 2nd, 2018

Preliminary Statements:

- These questions are for my senior thesis Environmental Studies about farmworker dignity
- Please only answer questions you feel comfortable responding to
- I will keep any piece of information confidential that you want me to. If you let me know before, during, or after saying it, I will delete it or not write it down, or will keep it anonymous in my writing depending on your preference
- Is it ok if I take notes on what you say?
Yes
- Do you have any time constraints for the interview today?
No

At the start of our conversation (before I began asking questions) Victoria said:

Just a disclaimer, most of the people I worked with did not work on farms or with produce. Most of them worked at a poultry plant or in construction. So I'm not sure if they technically count as farmworkers.

I told her that was ok and that the definition of farmworkers I'm using in my research includes meat, poultry and food processing workers too.

Interview Questions:

1. What is your name? (as you would like it to appear in my writing)

Victoria Nwankudu.

2. Are you OK with me using your name in my project, or would you prefer I use a pseudonym or refer to you anonymously?

Yes. It is ok if you use my name in your writing

3. Are you or have you ever been a farmworker?

No I am not, nor have I ever been a farmworker

4. Do you come from a farmworker family or background?

No. Technically my grandparents were kind of farmworkers, but I usually say that I am not from a farmworker background

5. What farmworker serving organization(s) have you worked with or for?

Student Action with Farmworkers (SAF) and the Western North Carolina Workers Center (WNCWC)

6. What was/is your role at the organization(s) you worked for? How long were you/have you been there?

At SAF I was an intern through the 10 week Into-the-Fields program in the summer of 2018. My 8 week placement during that summer was at the WNCWC. I was a "community organizer."

My work consisted of:

- *Outreach to bring people to events such as regular health and safety trainings for local workers and their families*
- *Leading a domestic violence training at the WNCWC for women*
- *Helping with popular education style trainings where workers would draw their workplace, identify dangers with stickers, and discuss how to stay safe. Sometimes there were similar trainings with stay-at-home moms where they would draw their homes and locate risks or dangers and discuss solutions.*

Who did you do outreach with? What population(s) were the trainings for?

I did outreach mostly with the working class Guatemalan immigrant community located in and around Morganton, North Carolina. Many of these people were poultry plant workers at the nearby Case Farms plant located on the outskirts of Morganton. Others were construction workers or stay-at-home mothers.

7. Do you identify as a member of the farmworker movement in the Southeast?

“I think so.” I definitely did my internship with SAF, but I haven’t done much work on farmworker issues since. I’m hesitant to claim that identity if I’m not actively working in the movement right now. I would say I’m an “outside advocate.”

8. What does dignity mean to you?

I think dignity means being treated with empathy, in a compassionate way because of being human

9. Does the organization you work(ed) for use the term dignity explicitly in their communications, publications, or programming? If so, where and how?

SAF definitely does. I heard it a number of times in our intern training sessions, the staff were always talking about it, I’ve seen it in the materials on the SAF website. The WNCWC does not, or at least not explicitly.

10. Have you heard the term dignity used by the farmworkers (and/or meat and food processing workers) your organization works with?

Personally, I have not. But in the preparation for the documentary project I participated in that summer with SAF, I saw it referenced in quotes from farmworkers in Zines made by previous cohorts of SAF interns.

11. If so, what do you think it means to them?

At the WNCWC, during different types of trainings and family retreats, or at special mothers and fathers day events, there was a lot of conversation about 'taking care of ourselves because we deserve to live healthy lives just like everybody else.' The staff at the WNCWC was intentional about providing child care so that women could pay attention at trainings such as the domestic violence workshop. There was an effort made to make women feel special and respected because they may not feel that all the time. There was often talk of 'we're going to have a nice dinner because y'all deserve it.' No one ever used the word dignity, but "the theme was explicitly stated."

12. Does your organization work with other populations besides farmworkers? (For ex. through lobbying, awareness raising, direct action work etc.)

The WNCWC was involved in a campaign to get IDs for undocumented people based on an informal agreement with individual schools, hospitals, and law enforcement that they would recognize those IDs. This involved attending Morganton City Council Meetings. The WNCWC has also helped lead a number of protests against the Case Farms poultry plant. Overall though, a majority of the WNCWC's work was inward facing, directed towards the local immigrant worker community.

13. What do you think dignity means to the audience of your organizing efforts?

At the City Council Meeting I attended, law enforcement officers talked about creating a community where everybody feels safe (though I might argue with some of their policies). They said that they don't want undocumented people to feel unsafe asking for help in emergencies, and that they wanted to ease tensions between law enforcement and undocumented community. I think the Case Farms protests were in a way responding to a lack of dignity. The working conditions are bad at the poultry plant. The line speed is very fast, workers sometimes get injured or even lose limbs. Workers who go to a supervisor to report a complaint or an injury often get ignored. This shows a lack of empathy or respect for workers rights. The demands of the protests (which I never attended -- they occur annually or biannually) were basically to "treat these people like people and not machines."

14. Does your organization hold farmworker dignity as a value or a goal? Explicitly or more implicitly?

Yes

15. If so, how, specifically, does your organization work for farmworker dignity?

I guess the WNCWC does work for farmworker dignity through the health and safety trainings. Even if they don't use these specific words, their mindset is 'if your jobs aren't going to treat you with dignity, then we will equip you to treat yourself with dignity.' They do this by sharing knowledge of immigration laws, information about what employers are and are not allowed to do, as well as what they are obligated to do. They also encourage workers and families to keep up with their health.

16. What obstacles or challenges does your organization face in this work?

They do face challenges. I can't see them getting in trouble with the local law enforcement because they are in dialogue on such a regular basis. There is sometimes pushback from abusive or alcoholic spouses on issues covered in domestic violence and women's trainings. A big challenge is that sometimes people get tired of going to event after event. Many of the trainings and information sessions are repetitive. The challenge of the WNCWC's work is imparting knowledge for the workers' own good without telling them what their own good is. Also, keeping them interested enough to come back.

17. How do you measure progress? What do failure and success look like?

I think progress comes in two parts. The first part is getting someone to genuinely believe they are worthy of being treated with dignity. The second is to get them to believe it so much that they will tell other people that they are worthy. These things are both very hard, especially the second one. I don't think work for farmworker dignity can be considered a failure as long as you don't encroach on people's agency or do them any harm. Especially if some service is being offered that actually improves the workers' lives, and intentions are in the right place then the work isn't a failure.

What do you think makes progress so hard?

A lot of the workers and families are constantly fed this direct or indirect message that they are full human beings. It is hard to rally support when that is happening. In the case of trainings I helped with at the WNCWC, when everyone is telling them they are not full human beings and it is just two random college kids saying the opposite, it is hard to combat that message. Part of it is about numbers, and a sense that the whole world is against us. And the probability of being able to change somebody's perspective or position gets a lot harder with that imbalance of

numbers. And then for them to go out and share the message with other people? I think the influence of each party goes down with each step.

18. Does your organization work in coalitions or partnerships with other organizations in the Farmworker movement? If so, what organizations or kinds of organizations?

The WNCWC was trying to establish a partnership with Options, a local women's crisis center. They have partnerships with local churches. The biggest hispanic Catholic church in the area has a close alliance with the WNCWC because almost all the Guatemalan immigrants who attend trainings and events also go to that church. The WNCWC also works with local interfaith organizations. The WNCWC is currently housed in a church where they pay rent and get to use a lot of the church's resources. They also have ties with OXFAM, a big organization that works for worker dignity in general.

19. Do you believe the other organizations also hold farmworker dignity as a value in their work?

I don't want to overstep because I'm not a member of those churches or organizations. My sense of the general message of Catholic hispanic church is that they aim to teach the gospel and impart christian values. A huge part of that is everyone is equal in God's eyes. So I think dignity comes through their message in that way. (that comes through in the message). OXFAM is explicitly all about workers' dignity. Interfaith also seem to hold dignity as a value but less explicitly. Their work is about lifting everybody up to be on an equal playing field.

20. Do you think they operate under the same understanding of dignity as your organization?

Yes, mostly, Oxfam did a big report on working conditions at poultry plants in the Southeast. When I heard them speak at a conference, it seemed like they were advocating for the same things as the WNCWC. The work of the interfaith groups is more about making the community better for oppressed people in general.

21. In your eyes, what would a world in which full dignity for farmworkers was achieved look like?

Before working with SAF, I didn't know anything about farmworker rights. I had this assumption that I wanted to help, that it sucks that farmworkers are being treated badly, that it's

not right, but I questioned if it was reasonable to aim for better treatment. I remember reading a bunch of know-your rights-pamphlets about rights that I didn't even know about. Like that signs have to be posted so workers know if a field has just been sprayed with pesticides. Or that information about risks and safety that is posted has to be written in the workers' language. I feel like a first step would be getting people to know there are actual legal rights, actual laws to be followed. And making sure that laws are followed as they are written currently. There also need to be more laws to ensure safety. Programs like the Fair Food program where corporations sign up and are accountable to certain standards are important too. Also this issue is very intersectional with sexism and racism and xenophobia. People are judged based on the degree of education required for their job. Working in a poultry plant does not require a high level of education so it is considered a dumb job. That would not be a thing in the ideal world. There is a stigma that all a worker does is pick tomatoes -- all you do is your job. In that world, people would be judged for their character, not for the job they do.

22. What primary obstacles do you see to that world becoming a reality?

The current administration. Also a major anti-racist culture shift needs to happen first. I saw people getting extra flack for being brown. It is one thing if you are a poor white farm or poultry worker, and entirely another if you are a poor Mexican or Guatemalan farm or poultry worker. The current weak legal framework is another obstacle. Also women fall through the cracks in a lot of existing advocacy. Another problem, that I don't think will go away is that the rising focus on technology -- the view that the more tech-y and educated you are, the better of a person you are -- contributes to the stigma around education.

23. Has your understanding of farmworker dignity changed over time?

Yes. It strengthened while working at the WNCWC. It is one thing to say we should treat people with empathy and compassion because they are human, and another thing to actually do it in practice. Until you actually meet the people, you can't really put it into practice. It's only a mindset or a theory. It was a very different thing for me to say 'I need to treat maria with kindness because she is fully human.' It's like taking the ideas from paper and putting them into practice

24. Is there anything else I should know about migrant farmworker dignity or about your organization?

I don't think so -- that was everything!

Entrevista con: Bacilio Castro

Fecha: 1/26/19

Hora: 3:00pm

Palabras preliminares:

- Estas preguntas corresponden a mi proyecto de tesis sobre la dignidad de los trabajadores del campo. El proyecto está diseñado para cumplir los requisitos del programa de Estudios Medioambientales en Bates College.
- No tiene que responder a ninguna pregunta incómoda o cuya respuesta sea privada
- Mantendré la confidencialidad de cualquier dato o respuesta que Ud. no quiere que yo comparta. Si me avise antes o después de decir algo sensible, lo no escribiré, lo eliminaré de mis apuntes, o lo mantendré anónimo en mi informe, de acuerdo con su preferencia
- ¿Está bien si yo tome apuntes a mano sobre lo que Ud. dice?
Sí, está bien.
- Después de la entrevista, le mandaré una transcripción de mis apuntes de entrevista y un formulario de consentimiento. Tiene la oportunidad de eliminar, añadir, o cambiar cualquier dato o respuesta en mi transcripción. Por favor, revise la transcripción antes de firmar y devolver el formulario de consentimiento. Solo incluiré la información de esta transcripción revisada en mi informe.
- ¿Tiene alguna limitación de tiempo para nuestra entrevista hoy día? Normalmente las entrevistas duran más o menos una hora, pero si Ud. tiene alguna limitación puede ser más corta.
30-45 minutos sería ideal
- ¿Tiene alguna pregunta o duda?
No

Preguntas de Entrevista:

1. ¿Cómo se llama? ¿Está bien si use su nombre completo en mi informe o preferiría que use un seudónimo o que refiera a Ud. de forma anónima?

Sí, puedes usar mi nombre. Me llamo Bacilio Castro.

2. ¿Ud. es, o ha sido en algún tiempo un trabajador agrícola o avícola?

Sí. Cuando llegué acá en 2001, cuando llegue por la primera vez en los estados unidos, comencé a trabajar en el campo, sembrando fresa, cosechando chiles, tomate y squash. Trabajé por un año, y después regresé para mi país. En 2006 regrese de nuevo para trabajar en la pollera en Morganton. Solo trabajé en la pollera unas dos años, y luego me involucré en el movimiento laboral. Estuve voluntario con el centro de trabajadores por cinco años, ya luego me convertí en staff en una posición de part-time. Todos somos part-time en el centro. Me pagan por 30 horas a la semana pero yo trabajo más que 40.

3. ¿Viene Ud. de una familia de trabajadores agrícolas o de origen campesina?

Sí. Yo soy Guatemalteco. Vengo de una familia indígena, trabajadores del campo. Antes cultivamos de todo en mi comunidad, pero con la guerra en Guatemala en los años 80, tuvimos que irnos a la ciudad. El ejército vendría al campo mucho y tuvimos que irnos a la ciudad. Soy campesino indígena Maya.

4. ¿Por cuántos años ha trabajado con trabajadores del campo? ¿Con cuáles organizaciones?

Ya tengo como ocho años trabajando con el centro de trabajadores. Anteriormente, era voluntario con un sindicato, no recibí pago.

5. ¿Cuáles puestos ha ocupado con aquellas organizaciones?

Comencé como voluntario. Luego me hice parte de la mesa directiva, y despues parte del staff. Mi trabajo ahora es trabajar directamente con la comunidad como organizador de base. Soy organizador comunitario.

6. ¿Se identifica como miembro del movimiento para los derechos de los trabajadores del campo en el Sureste?

Sí.

7. ¿Qué significa para Ud. “la dignidad”?

Bueno, para mi, la palabra dignidad es algo muy profundo. Para mi es un respeto. Cada persona lo tiene, su propia dignidad. Otras personas deben de respetarla. Para mi la dignidad es algo espiritual. Toda persona debe de tenerlo, sea blanca, o morena, o brown. No importa de donde viene, de cual país son, cada persona tiene una dignidad.

8. ¿Su organización usa el término “dignidad” en sus comunicaciones, publicaciones y programas? ¿o no lo usa? ¿Dónde y cómo usa “la dignidad”?

Sí, lo usamos constantemente. Les decimos a los trabajadores que la dignidad de un trabajador debe ser respetado dondequiera que estemos.

9. ¿Ha escuchado la palabra “dignidad” usado por trabajadores en su organización?

Sí. Yo trabajo con la comunidad Guatemalteca. La mayoría de los trabajadores en la pollera son mujeres, y son mujeres indígenas. Desafortunadamente, la mayor parte de ellas son inalfabetos, y no saben la palabra dignidad. Cuando hablamos con ellas sobre la dignidad, decimos que es parte de una persona, es un sentimiento. Decimos que los patrones deben de respetar la dignidad de los trabajadores.

10. ¿Qué cree que significa “la dignidad” para aquellos trabajadores? ¿Es distinto o es lo mismo?

Sí, es lo mismo

11. ¿Su organización trabaja con otras poblaciones además de trabajadores? (Por ejemplo, el cabildeo, esfuerzos de crear conciencia pública, acciones y protestas)

Bueno, el Centro se enfoque más en organizar a los trabajadores directamente. Casi no hay tiempo para otros proyectos. Todos trabajamos part-time. Yo siempre he sido un activista durante mi niñez. Soy el unico del staff que ha participado en el cabildeo, en la desobediencia civil, o en otros acciones. Soy parte del movimiento social.

12. ¿Qué cree Ud. que significa “la dignidad” para aquellos públicos?

Yo pienso que ellos tienen la misma idea. Pero pienso que la gente política creen que están destinados para trabajar con el gobierno. Saben exacto lo que es la dignidad. Pero no es el mismo papel del trabajador. El político tiene un corazón que no es tan dulce, tan suave, entiende la dignidad, pero su papel no es de una persona sensible. Ellos tienen un corazón más duro. Están pensando más en las reglas del gobierno.

13. ¿Es un valor de su organización la dignidad de los trabajadores agrícolas y avícolas? ¿Es un valor explícito o más implícito?

Sí, es un valor grande. El valor de los trabajadores, del ser humano. El valor de las mujeres. Hemos visto mucha desigualdad entre las mujeres y los hombres. Hay una actitud fuerte de machismo en las familias, en las autoridades y en el gobierno. Esa actitud ha desarrollado por mucho tiempo, durante siglos en que el mayor parte de los empleados son hombres, el mayor parte del gobierno son hombres. Por muchos años se han dado más oportunidades para salir adelante a los hombres, y eso resulta en desigualdad. Patriarcado. Nuestro trabajo es cortar esta actitud de miles de años. Creemos que la dignidad de la mujer sí vale mucho.

14. Si la dignidad es un valor ¿Cómo trabaja su organización para realizarlo?

No tenemos un proyecto precisamente. Nada más que siempre tenemos presente que cada persona es único. El ser humano. Todos somos humanos. Pero el ser es la parte única. El ser como una semilla. Allí cabe la dignidad. Nadie es más que una persona. Por eso se tiene que respetar la dignidad de cada ser humano.

15. ¿Cuáles obstáculos o desafíos se enfrentan en este trabajo? (la lucha por la dignidad)

Más que nada, el obstáculo que vemos es que mucha gente no llega a entender que es la dignidad. Muchos trabajadores desconocen la dignidad. A la gente política, no les importa la dignidad. A los dueños del campo o de la fábrica, no le interesan la dignidad. Le interesan la economía, el dinero y los beneficios de cada fábrica.

16. ¿Cómo se mide el progreso? ¿Cómo se ve el fracaso y el éxito?

Con los trabajadores, hoy en día estamos tratando de educar. Tal vez 'educar' no es la palabra correcta, porque todos tenemos una educación de nuestra familia. Pero sí, educamos los trabajadores en el derecho de su propia dignidad. Que entiendan su propia dignidad. Que se

defienda a su propia dignidad para que no sea apropiada por las autoridades o por el patrón. Educamos para que sepan como es luchar cada uno por su propia dignidad.

17. ¿Trabaja su organización en coalición o alianza con otras organizaciones del movimiento para los derechos de los trabajadores del campo? ¿Cuáles?

Sí, trabajamos con otras organizaciones que trabajan para que se defienda los derechos de los inmigrantes. El centro se enfoque más en los derechos de los trabajadores.

18. ¿Cree Ud. que aquellas organizaciones también valoran la dignidad de los trabajadores agrícolas y avícolas?

Sí. Todos reconocen la importancia.

19. ¿Cree que “la dignidad” tiene el mismo significado para ellos o cree que tiene un sentido distinto?

Sí, también lo mismo.

20. ¿Cree que hay elementos importantes de la dignidad de los trabajadores agrícolas y avícolas que su organización no aborda en su trabajo?

Yo pienso que sí estamos de acuerdo con la dignidad. Siempre tocamos este tema en cada reunión.

21. Desde su perspectiva, ¿Cómo se vería un mundo en el cual se haya realizado la dignidad completa para los trabajadores agrícolas y avícolas?

Personalmente, creo que si llegase un día en que todo el mundo entienda la dignidad de todo, será un mundo más humano, de hermandad. También más espiritual, conectado al ser creador.

22. ¿Cuáles obstáculos principales cree Ud. que impiden la realización de aquello mundo?

Pienso que un obstáculo principal es la economía. Y la globalización mundial de la economía. Nada más piensan en el dinero, y en disfrutar la vida. No piensan en la dignidad del trabajador. Por ejemplo, si vamos a un restaurante de lujo, y estamos disfrutando los platos ricos, no pensamos en el trabajador, no hay una meditación en de dónde viene la comida. En cuantos lágrimas, cuánto dolor se ha causado al trabajador. Lo que necesitamos es una concientización de la humanidad.

23. ¿Ha cambiado a lo largo del tiempo su entendimiento de la dignidad?

Sí, ha cambiado en el tiempo que estoy involucrado en el movimiento. Entiendo más completamente que es la dignidad. Respeto más mi propia dignidad, y la dignidad de las otras personas.

24. ¿Hay algo más que debería saber yo sobre la dignidad de los trabajadores agrícolas y avícolas o sobre su organización?

Creo que es todo. El centro de trabajadores trate de educar a los trabajadores para crear un liderazgo en los trabajadores. Creemos en el valor de cada trabajador, que cada trabajador puede resolver su problema, y con sus compañeros, crear un movimiento. Creemos que el poder esta dentro de los trabajadores. El centro cree en el poder de los trabajadores cuando se organizan en el trabajo. Con los estudiantes de SAF, está bien trabajar con las clínicas, pero creo que es muy importante trabajar directamente con los trabajadores. Escuchar sus problemas y ideas de ellos mismos. Así que está bien trabajar con las clínicas, pero muy importante organizar.