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The Immigrant-Food Nexus: Borders, Labor, and Identity in North America

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7 Labor and Legibility: Mexican Immigrant Farmers and Resource Access at the US Department of Agriculture

Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern and Sea Sloat

Introduction

Following a US Department of Agriculture (USDA) staff member in her white sedan with government plates, we drove our own unmarked rental car along a winding country highway. We passed corn and soybean fields, farmhouses, and a small downtown with a few local businesses. We drove up a gravel driveway and parked behind the USDA car. Trailing the staff member, a white female soil conservationist, we walked unannounced onto a farm with a few acres of diverse vegetables, a farmhouse, a shed, and a hoop house. The hoop house had been financed through a grant from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), giving the staff member rights to visit and inspect the structure and property randomly for the first three years in order to validate that it is code compliant and being used properly.

The farm we visited is owned and operated by a Mexican immigrant farmer, one of a small number of immigrant farmers who directly participate in a USDA-funded program. USDA staff in the Northern Neck of Virginia promote the hoop house, or "high tunnel," installation program to local vegetable farmers. These tunnel-shaped greenhouses allow farmers to start their seeds and get their crops to market earlier in the season. The USDA covers the entire cost of the hoop house. In exchange, the farmer must agree to keep it in production for a minimum of three years, maintain meticulous records of their growing practices and finances, and allow USDA officials onto their property unannounced. This program is one of a variety of financial assistance opportunities for small- and medium-scale fruit and vegetable farmers through the USDA's NRCS and Farm Service Agency (FSA) (Farm Service Agency 2015).

Despite the fact that Latino/a farmers are a growing presence among new farmers in the United States, they have a low rate of inclusion in USDA programs nationally.¹ According to official USDA agricultural census data, self-defined Latino/a farmers utilized USDA loans and other direct assistance programs at about one-third to one-half the rate of white farmers. The number of farms with principal operators of “Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino origin” grew from 50,592 in 2002 to 55,570 in 2007. In 2012, the number increased again to 67,000 farms, a 21% increase over five years, with Latinos making up 3% of all principal operators.² Of those 67,000 Latino/a farm operators, the vast majority (64,439) were the primary farm business owners as well. In contrast, during the same period, the population of white principal operators fell 5% and overall the number of farmers dropped 4% (USDA 2014). As many Latino/a farmers transition from working as laborers in others’ fields to positions as farm owners and operators, they, along with other farmers of color, represent the new face of a flourishing generation of farmers.

This chapter addresses why immigrant farmers are so unlikely to participate in USDA direct financial assistance programs, despite immigrant farmers’ growth as a new group of farmers and particularly as a group that the USDA declares they want to support. We contend that the standardization of practices and bureaucracy inherent in receiving USDA assistance stands in stark opposition to the agrarian norms and practices of immigrant farmers and hinders their participation in USDA opportunities. The requirements of standardization help to maintain a racialized class boundary in US agriculture today, playing a large role in preventing immigrant farmers from moving up the agricultural ladder. While monitoring and recording farmers’ activities is necessary at some level for the USDA to assure that funds are used appropriately, the extent to which farmers are asked to track activities and comply with standardization is impossible for most immigrant farmers. Furthermore, if their different practices and limited literacy and linguistic abilities are not considered, these farmers will never be able to take full advantage of the programs they so desperately need to succeed.

Between 1997 and 2000, four separate lawsuits targeted the USDA for racial and gender-based discrimination, particularly in FSA loan programs. In response to these suits, the US secretary of agriculture during the Obama administration, Thomas J. Vilsack, proclaimed a “new era of civil rights” in a memorandum to all USDA employees. In this memo, he announced an

overhaul of the equal employment opportunity, civil rights, and program delivery processes at the agency, with the intent to “ensure fair treatment of all employees and applicants” (Vilsack 2009).³

Despite this proclamation and the fact that their numbers are growing, immigrant farmers to this day are not extended the same opportunities as other farmers, because their practices are often incompatible with the standardization and bureaucracy required to be properly acknowledged and supervised by the USDA. Their direct market approach, planting of diverse crops, reliance on family labor, and lack of record keeping stand in contrast to the dominant model of US industrial agriculture.⁴

It is not simply the size or scale of their farms that bars them from accessing USDA resources, although that certainly limits what is available to them. The farmers in this study have limited formal education, literacy, and English-language skills, and are therefore exceptionally daunted by the paperwork necessary for government grants, loans, and insurance applications. Additionally, it is not routine for immigrant farmers to record and track their own farming progress and decisions in writing. In contrast, their farming knowledge tends to be documented and disseminated through word of mouth. As has been the case for other farmers who do not replicate state-sanctioned or dominant forms of farming, these practices and forms of agrarian knowledge sharing may be interpreted as “unscientific” or “illegible” to the state and therefore not deemed worthy of acknowledgment (Scott 1998) or, in this case, acceptable for funding. Many small-scale diversified crop and vegetable farmers run up against the same challenges when looking for government resources, yet for the immigrant farmers in this study, the expectation for standardized practices is compounded with the above-mentioned lack of formal education, literacy, and language abilities. These barriers are made worse by workers’ distrust of US government agencies as a result of their immigration experiences.

There is a growing body of geographical, anthropological, and sociological research on farm labor that critically engages with the politically produced vulnerability and exploitation of the immigrant body. This literature contributes to our understanding of historical and modern-day labor conditions in the agrifood system, which is necessary to gain a comprehensive picture of the political economy of food production and advocate for workers’ rights throughout the food system. In particular, this work investigates the relationship between the immigrant worker and the state,

providing a nuanced analysis of how US national policy and immigration agencies reinforce unjust working conditions and a racialized workforce (see Allen 2008; Brown and Getz 2008; Guthman and Brown 2015; Gray 2013; Holmes 2013; Mitchell 1996; Sbicca 2015; and many others). However, critical analysis of Latino/a workers thus far does not include the possibility that some immigrant workers are in fact advancing in this agrarian class system. Furthermore, there has been almost no comprehensive inquiry into how immigrant farm owners are experiencing state apparatuses. The research presented in this chapter makes this needed intervention, exploring how immigrant farmers interact with the state through their engagement, or lack thereof, with the USDA.

This chapter is based on semistructured interviews between 2011 and 2016 with over 70 immigrant farmers in Washington, Minnesota, California, Virginia, and New York, as well as 47 interviews with staff in government and nonprofit programs who work with immigrant farmers. Almost all farmers emigrated from Mexico, and all identify as Latino/a or Hispanic. They are a mix of resident aliens, naturalized citizens, and undocumented immigrants who have been in the United States for a range of 4 to 25 years. Most speak limited English, and Spanish is their first language, although for some even Spanish is a second language.⁵

All farmers in this study own their farm business, differentiating them from a farm laborer working under an employer. The farmers have been operating their own farms for 2 to 20 years. They all farm on a relatively small scale, on plots ranging from 3 to 80 acres, with most between 10 and 20 acres. The majority practice some form of integrated pest management with low chemical input or organic cultivation, growing diverse crops using mostly family labor. Most farmers prioritized direct sales, specifically farmers markets. Some, particularly in California, could not enter into direct markets because of market saturation and had no option but to sell to produce brokers. Almost all farmers interviewed expressed a desire to maintain this farming style and to remain living on or near the land they cultivate.

These practices contrast with the dominant industrial model most commonly promoted by the USDA. The industrial agriculture model has long been problematic for smallholder farmers as well as more diversified growers, regardless of race, ethnicity, or citizenship status. Earl Butz, secretary of agriculture in the Nixon administration, was known for his mantra, "Get big or get out" (Scholar 1973). Butz's policies, and those of the USDA

leadership since, have focused on supporting the large-scale production of commodity crops, corn and soy in particular, mainly through commodity price support and crop insurance programs. These decisions are not made only at the agency level. US agricultural policy is largely set by the United States Farm Bill, which is voted on by Congress every five years. By setting priorities and outlining fiscal parameters, the Farm Bill contributes to the prioritization of large-scale industrial production and deprioritizes the needs of smallholders, “specialty” crop growers (mainly fruit and vegetable producers), and other diversified growers (see Ahearn, Yee, and Korb 2005; Clapp and Fuchs 2012; Dimitri, Efland, and Conklin 2005; DuPuis 2002; among others).

In what follows, we discuss how particular USDA practices, programs, and expectations are unsuited to immigrant farmers’ ways of cultivation. In addition to linguistic and cultural norms related to bureaucracy, paperwork, and communication, their farming practices are not typical of most commercial farmers in the United States, as they fit what might be deemed a more alternative farming approach. From the ways they plan for their season to the specific crops they grow, our research has shown that Latino/a immigrant farmers are not producing food in a way that conforms to the industrial agrarian model understood by the USDA, therefore making state resources inaccessible and limiting farmers’ potential economic success.

Citizenship, Race, and Legibility

The United States has a long history of constituting citizenship—and related rights to land and resources—through whiteness. Racial formations, which occur through a process of “historically situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized” (Omi and Winant 1994, 55–56), are imposed and reinforced via power relations within the US food and agriculture system. Previous groups of immigrants and farmers of color have been excluded from full citizenship rights in the United States because of state-sanctioned policies, which are reinforced through daily experiences of racialized exclusion. Nonwhite immigrant farmers have been explicitly dispossessed of land and capital, in many cases because of their racial and citizenship status (Chan 1989; Foley 1997; Matsumoto 1993; Minkoff-Zern et al. 2011; Wells 1991, 1996). These processes have succeeded in creating agricultural racial formations, resulting in the

ownership and operation of US farms remaining under primarily white control.

The unjust and uneven consequences of agricultural racial formations are not limited to immigrants; there is a long and well-recorded history of discrimination against US-born farmers of color, particularly African American and Native American farmers (see Clearfield 1994; Daniel 2013; Gilbert, Sharp, and Felin 2002; Grim 1996; Payne 1991; Ponder 1971; Simon 1993; and many others). This discrimination has ranged from overtly racist treatment at local and federal USDA offices to deficient literacy assistance, legal counsel, and advertisement of available opportunities to help nonwhite farmers access and maintain their land and markets (Gilbert, Sharp, and Felin 2002).

Daniel (2013) draws on Scott's legibility argument to explain USDA discrimination against black farmers in the civil rights era, providing historical context within which to understand USDA policy and practice today. African American farmers in the United States, like Mexican and other immigrant farmers of color, have been displaced from their livelihoods many times over. This displacement occurred historically through the capture and enslavement of their ancestors from their homelands, and more recently as landowners and tenant farmers who faced systematic discrimination by the USDA. During the New Deal era, large farms and gridlike orderly homesteads were idealized as the form for spreading modern agricultural technologies. Black farming operations did not fit this model of efficiency and modernism, and therefore were not considered for subsidies and grants, contributing to the 93% decline in the number of black farmers from 1940 to 1974 (Daniel 2013).

Conversely, scholars have argued that the USDA has a history of democratic planning and resource distribution, as shown in the work of many agency leaders and other individuals who have worked explicitly with farmers of color, African American farmers in particular (Couto 1991; Gilbert 2015). These arguments directly conflict with Scott's monolithic description of the state. As such a large government agency, there is no single consistent way staff or leadership interacts with the public. Despite the generally industrial focus of USDA funds, there are USDA opportunities for small-scale farmers as well as for those who have been deemed sustainable or socially disadvantaged by the agency. These include the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program and other research

and development related to local food initiatives, such as farmers markets, which are the primary markets for the immigrant farmers included in this study.

Additionally, in our research we encountered USDA staff who are actively engaged with farming communities of color and some who specifically focus on immigrant and/or Latino/a farmers. Unfortunately, these practices were not the norm, and the staff who actively pursue opportunities to work with Latino/a immigrant or socially disadvantaged farmers expressed that there was a lack of structural support from the agency in that pursuit. Although there are USDA programs targeted to sustainable or diverse growers, this information cannot reach the farmers if they are not on the radar of the state in the first place.

The existence of immigrant farmers is often unknown or overlooked in day-to-day, on the ground USDA operations. In beginning our research with immigrant farmers, the first author made cold phone calls to USDA regional headquarters in five states across the United States: Virginia, New York, California, Minnesota, and Washington. In each case, when the author first called and asked to speak to someone who works with “immigrant farmers,” the person on the end of the line responded as if the caller had asked about *farmworkers*, not farm business owners. The author consistently had to explain, “I am looking to speak with someone in your office that might work with immigrant *farmers*, as in farm business owners, not laborers.” Even in regions where immigrant farmers exist in significant numbers, it took substantial explanation to start a conversation where USDA staff understood the specific group of farmers the author was interested in discussing. Staff were either unaware that Mexican immigrant farmers existed in their region or were so accustomed to thinking of Latino/a immigrants as agricultural workers that they disregarded their encounters with immigrant farmers until probed directly.

Even when Latino/a or other farmers of color do succeed in making it in the door of a USDA office, they have experienced rampant discrimination based on their racial identity, as evidenced by several lawsuits against the agency. In 1999, a class action lawsuit was settled by black farmers alleging racial discrimination by the USDA between 1981 and 1996 while applying for farm loans and assistance. In 2000, another class action suit was filed against the USDA on behalf of Hispanic farmers and ranchers who were discriminated against from 1981 to 2000, also while applying for USDA loans.

The USDA admitted to discrimination, and this case is currently being settled via a claims process where farmers are eligible to receive from \$50,000 to \$250,000 (Hispanic and Women Farmers and Ranchers Claims and Resolution Process 2012; Martinez and Gomez 2011). According to our contact with the Office of General Counsel at the USDA, the claims administrator received over 50,000 claims. The USDA approved 14.4% of the claims, while the rest were rejected. The USDA provided a one-line explanation to farmers whose claims were not accepted: “You failed to provide sufficient documentation, or the documentation that you provided was not sufficient to meet the requirements under the Framework” (Zippert 2015). As we will discuss, this statement reflects many immigrant farmers’ general lack of standardization and documentation practices, which, we argue, are necessary in order to be deemed legible in the eyes of the USDA.

As is demonstrated by the growing numbers of immigrant farmers, those under pressure to conform often continue to create alternative agrarian spaces. Research by Wells (1996) on the struggle of Mexican immigrants in California agriculture in the 1970s and 1980s illustrates the ways Mexican farmers’ practices have been persisting in this context. Her study reflects our own findings that Mexican immigrants prefer to make their farming decisions independently and find technical advice from governmental outsiders unsuitable to their own experiences and practices. Additionally, Wells observes that immigrants’ lack of material resources and formal education to invest in their farm businesses leads them to be more dependent on their personal social networks and previous farm experience, which differentiates them from white farmers, who are more likely to learn from university and marketing guidelines.

This chapter thus advances literature on immigration and racial discrimination in agriculture, shedding light on how the USDA’s processes are promoted as universally accessible or color-blind while they in fact maintain racial and ethnic divides in agriculture. Applying the notion of illegibility to the practices of immigrant farmers, we explore how government expectations of modernization largely function as gatekeepers to agricultural development and growth, despite individual and structural efforts to create inclusivity. In the case of immigrants, farmers marginalized by state authorities are still rising in number and drawing on their own agrarian knowledge and norms to preserve their agrifood traditions and lifestyles. These farmers are cultivating in a way that contributes to local economies

and ecosystems, as well as creating a more culturally diverse populace of US farm owners. Although they are currently making their businesses work, many function on the edge of economic stability. Without government support and acknowledgment of these differences in agrarian practice, their livelihoods and farm businesses may not survive in the long term.

Time, Labor, and Spatial Control

If a visitor knows where to look, they might be able to tell an immigrant's field from their neighbor's. In contrast to the monocrop, uniform rows of wheat and corn that line most of the side of country highways in the Northern Neck of Virginia, Latino/a immigrants' fields tend to include huge varieties of produce, each row different from the next. Among the cultivated crops, plants such as *purslane* (also known as *verdolaga* or pigweed)—seen as a common weed by US-born farmers—are left to grow between the rows. Farmers in this region harvest such plants for their Latino/a customers and themselves to consume in soups and stews. Juxtaposing the perfectly managed rows of grain grown by midscale white farmers and kept meticulously free of wild plants by regular doses of pesticides and pest-resistant genetically modified seeds, the immigrant farmers' fields show signs of agroecological variety.

All farmers interviewed saw starting their own farm as a way to regain independence in their daily lives and labor in the face of their limited material wealth and political standing. In contrast to their experience as farmworkers, they have the ability to choose when to rise, what to plant, and how to pick their crops, as long as they operate a productive farm. Cultivation using practices that reflect their own experience reasserts immigrant farmers' control over their own labor. To protect this autonomy, many of the farmers we spoke with shied away from interactions with the state where they may be subjected to standardizing their practices to match a particular form of farming.

Each farmer interviewed has a unique story, but they all share the common experience of previously working as farm laborers. One Mexican farmer living in Virginia recounted his journey of starting his own business, which provides insight into why immigrant farmers place such importance on maintaining independence:

When I decided to work for myself, I was working for someone else. I saw that after I worked for him for about five years, and he was becoming successful, making a lot of money. And I stayed the same, earning six dollars an hour. ... One day

I said to him, "To start, this is good. But now I see that you're just there doing nothing, and I don't make anything. I don't make money. I'm the only one working." Because I was the only employee he had. ... He had at least two hundred, five hundred thousand dollars in earnings that I had made for him. And I said, "No, I'm killing myself for you. It's over. I'm going to start my own business." And that's how it happened.

This farmer, without access to standard bank loans because of his lack of a well-documented income history and related low credit score, started a farm by saving his small earnings. This was mirrored by all other farmers in this study, whose access to loans was scant. Beginning by renting a small plot and slowly saving enough to buy land, they started with almost nothing in terms of capital investment and depended on their experience, knowledge, self-exploitation, and family labor to advance their business.

Immigrant farmers' personal histories of exploitation as workers motivate them to seek more control over their daily activities and decision-making power concerning their land. All the farmers we spoke with relayed the physical and emotional challenges of farming: consecutive months of intensive labor, often 12 hours a day, seven days a week. They expressed that not being assured a paycheck at the end of the week is a precarious way to live. One farmer explained, "Here we live just from the land. There's no one paying us \$8 an hour. There's no one paying us." As independent business owners, they are subject to the unpredictability of the market. As farmers, they are additionally vulnerable to uncertain weather and climate conditions. Overwhelmingly, though, the satisfaction that comes with making their own decisions keeps them farming, regardless of the struggles. As one farmer shared, "I feel happy that it's *my* business, that we can make our own decisions." Even in the most difficult times, the desire to maintain control over one's labor and growing practices transcends the daily obstacles of small-scale farming.

On their farms and in their businesses, farmers avoid cultivation systems imposed on them by outsiders, be they wholesalers who would tell them what to plant and how much (in order to secure a market) or government officials whose programs require particular crops and techniques to qualify for assistance, such as in the cover crop and hoop house programs. All the farmers interviewed plant diverse fruits and vegetables, an important strategy for selling directly to customers at farmers markets, their primary outlet for sales. Some noted that they sold to their extended community as well,

as part of a more informal market. Rarely did we hear of them selling to restaurants or local stores; luxury crop buyers usually go with more socially connected and better-marketed white farmers, and contracts with large grocery chains go through a wholesale purchaser, requiring larger quantities than they grow. In most regions, they are able to avoid selling through a middleman or outlets that would require reducing their diversity or standardizing their practices. Growing diverse crops also often reflects their previous farming experience in Mexico and Central America, although climate, markets, crop varieties, and other resource availability differ greatly.

Farmers' diverse crops range from standard farmers market produce such as kale and heirloom tomatoes to less common products such as peanuts and purple potatoes. In addition to ones well known to American customers, they also plant Latin American crop varieties. Many farmers grow and sell herbs such as *pápalo* and *chipilin*, *pipián* (a squash variety), *tomatillos*, and hot *chiles*, which are hard to find in many parts of the United States. However, these choices to cultivate diverse crops, which work well for direct markets and reflect their own experience as farmers preimmigration, are not typically supported by the USDA programs made available to them in their local offices. For example, the regional office in the Northern Neck region of Virginia offers a cover crop assistance program, subsidized through state funds. But as the staff member from the local NRCS office told us, this program is not tailored to their needs as diversified fruit and vegetable farmers:

I also offer this cover crop program for them. That program is through...it's a state program. But most of them—the cover crop has to stay on the land, between certain planting dates and certain dates that you have to destroy. And that date, the destroyer date is after. Because they start planting around February first: the beginning of February they start discing their land, preparing their land. And that cover crop has to stay on there until the middle of March. And that's not good for vegetable farmers at all because they need that time, they need that land. When it's ready to go, they're ready to go.

“So the cover crops work better for the grain farmers?,” we asked:

Yes. I have offered several times. I go out there and just try to push the program. And they say no, it's just not good for them because of the rules and regulations of the cover crop program.

This example of poor seasonal fit with available NRCS programs could be equally true for any fruit or vegetable farmer in the region. Yet, for immigrant farmers, who have fewer farming options because of their limited

access to capital investment, land, and markets, this misalignment reinforces an existing inequality for already disenfranchised farmers.

Another example of this misalignment is the hoop house program. In addition to being subject to random visits and having to provide a detailed log of what is planted, how much was spent, and how much profit was made, farmers must also plant particular crops according to USDA guidelines in order to participate. Farmers must prepare and adhere to an operation and maintenance plan that includes particular instructions as to proper irrigation and planting practices and erosion control. This plan has to be reviewed and approved by an NRCS official. One farmer who chose to participate in the hoop house program conveyed both gratitude and frustration: "We were planting tomatoes, because they're very particular. They [the USDA] want certain stuff. You can't go ahead and do anything you want with them [the hoop houses]. ... And it's good help. I'm not saying it doesn't help, but we've managed to come so far on our own."

While the farmer expressed appreciation for the financial assistance, she also questioned whether the planting restrictions were worth the support. The requirement for standardization feels like a relinquishment of some part of her agrarian autonomy or the ability to make all farming decisions as she wishes. Even for those who succeed in securing state resources, they seem unsure about the decision to work within certain rules and regulations.

As can be expected from any government institution, the USDA requires extensive paperwork before, during, and after taking advantage of their loans, grants, or insurance options. When farmers were asked what they think the greatest challenge is for Latino/a farmers accessing USDA programs, most mentioned the paperwork. Although white farmers may also be resistant to paperwork and general bureaucracy, the fact that most farmers we interviewed did not have an education past middle school means they are lacking the literacy skills necessary to fill out the required paperwork in any language. Because of intimidation, most will never enter the door of the USDA to inquire about opportunities. For others, it may be the ultimate reason they stall in the process and fail to obtain the grant, loan, or insurance package.

Most farmers never looked into USDA programs like these, because of their suspicion of the government and government officials. This discomfort was compounded by their inability to navigate state bureaucracy,

compounded by the language barrier. Regionally based USDA staff are often aware of the Latino/a farmer presence in their areas and lack of participation in programs. They discussed with us the ways they attempted to outreach to them, yet they were limited if they did not have a Spanish-speaking staff in their offices. In Virginia, a USDA staff member told us that there must be 10% participation in USDA programs in the region in order for bilingual forms to be made available. However, it is unlikely that there will ever be more than 10% participation if the paperwork is not made available in Spanish in the first place. This catch-22 is one example of the ways in which raced and classed inequality is structurally maintained at the USDA, aggravating the already tenuous history of USDA discrimination.

Without Spanish-speaking outreach abilities, most farmers never hear about the programs available. When asked about the USDA, most farmers interviewed were unaware of opportunities accessible to them. USDA FSA loans are designed for farmers who struggle with traditional bank loans and are meant to be a farmer's first line of credit. Although many farmers interviewed told us they were unable to get access to credit from regular banks, they were unaware that USDA loan programs existed for this reason specifically. Even those who spoke nearly perfect English found the forms intimidating. One immigrant farmer, who has obtained US citizenship, told us, "I tried in the past to get a small operating loan. And I didn't feel confident enough to fill out the application by myself because there were a lot of questions I didn't know." Since attempting to apply for her first USDA loan, this farmer has since applied for another loan, which she successfully secured with the assistance of the local FSA staff. Yet the level of confidence needed to walk into a government office where a huge stack of paperwork awaits is unrealistic for most. This expectation is especially difficult when understood in the context of the tense relationship between most rural Latino/a immigrants and the state, given their histories of immigration and the current rise of anti-immigrant sentiment in US politics.

The fact that paperwork and the related language barrier is the greatest impediment to aid for immigrant farmers is well understood by USDA staff in these counties. One local USDA staff member explained, "Most of our [Latino/a] producers used to come in the office. They don't come in anymore. I think it's English. Because we had one that couldn't speak English, and he would always bring his son in here. And then the forms. We

have some forms that are in Spanish, but most of our forms aren't. I think it's... where they're used to dealing with more cash than a lot of paperwork. I think they find the paperwork a little overwhelming."

In addition to noting that the written forms themselves are a technical challenge, she highlighted that immigrant farmers are not accustomed to operating in bureaucratic environments. Even if the forms were in Spanish, their limited formal education makes the process of filling out paperwork extremely daunting. Ultimately, the paperwork and related language barrier is a reflection of the broader structural challenge of fitting immigrant farmers' diverse and nonconforming agrarian practices into standardized boxes. As we discuss, for immigrant farmers to move beyond these barriers and thrive in the challenging world of US farming, historically racist legacies and present-day racialized forms of exclusion must be accounted for, and government agencies must begin significant and structural change.

Toward a New Era of Inclusion

Under Vilsack's guidance, the USDA took several steps working toward a new vision of equality at the federal level. Since 2009, it has provided civil rights training to employees, established the Office of Advocacy and Outreach to aid beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers, and claims to be working toward resolving civil rights lawsuits inherited from previous administrations. The department also vowed to be an equal opportunity employer and create a workforce that "represents the full diversity of America" (USDA 2015).

This was all under President Obama's administration. As we were completing fieldwork, Donald Trump was elected president and Sonny Perdue, an agribusiness executive who took a strong anti-immigrant stance as the governor of Georgia, was sworn in as the secretary of agriculture. On a national level, we are seeing massive cuts in government spending, meaning further cuts on a regional and local scale in funding to university extension offices, grants, staff, and staff training, such as funds that could be used to improve racial inclusion of immigrant farmers in institutions, opportunities, and programs. While it is too early to know exactly how such reforms under the new administration will unfold for farmers in the long run, projections do not look positive. After the election, we followed up with staff at the USDA to inquire about what they thought the new administration would mean

for immigrants and other farmers of color. Requests for feedback were either declined or not answered. While our inquiry was not exhaustive, we can imagine most staff still employed by the USDA are not looking to critique the administration from their current positions.

Unfortunately, even during the Obama administration, we found that despite claims of increased racial equality from the federal offices of the USDA, little change on the ground was being made in local and regional offices to directly help Latino/a immigrants overcome obstacles in order to transition from the role of farmworker to farmer in the United States. The processes of monitoring and standardization, as currently required by USDA programs, exacerbate the racial exclusion of immigrant farmers from state programs and ultimately from the advantages other farmers receive. This uneven rural development must be understood in the context of the historical relationship between Latino/a immigrants and the state as well as through the lived experiences of those struggling within a system where their practices are not deemed readable. Today's Latino/a immigrant farmers follow in this pattern of racialized others being left out of a system where predominantly white practices are deemed legible, and therefore legitimate, and predominantly brown and black practices are not.

As previously mentioned, programs that are developed for the specific needs of diversified fruit and vegetable, or specialty crop, growers already exist within the USDA. There are also microloan programs available through the FSA that are designed for "nontraditional" farmers. These require less paperwork and could be greatly helpful for Latino/a immigrants as they transition to farm ownership. Additionally, an Office of Minority and Socially Disadvantaged Farmers Assistance (MSDA) has been established within the FSA with the express purpose of assisting farmers such as those who participated in this study. These programs are a great start toward making government-supported programs available to immigrant growers. Regrettably, because of social divides and language and educational barriers, these programs are unknown to those most in need of assistance.

We do not claim that the USDA is the only institutional boundary for immigrant farmers or the only place where improvements can and should be made. Immigrant farmers struggle with access to capital, outreach and access to markets, general business skills, and many other management practices. While there are many entrepreneurial and nonprofit ventures that focus on advancement for and training of small farmers, farmers of

color, and immigrant farmers, they are often working on shoestring budgets, with varying levels of accountability to their clients, and have limited access to resources and markets themselves. The USDA is the only state institution that claims to provide economic opportunities for rural communities and agricultural producers of the United States.

Immigrant farmers are challenging the historical racialized legacies of farming in the United States despite the odds and are persisting in new markets and climates that are seemingly unattainable. This chapter asks researchers and critical theorists to better recognize the perseverance of nonwhite farmers in order to build on our understanding of agricultural transitions and racial formations. As critical food scholars, we recommend that other food scholars and scholar-activists reframe their research and writing concerning immigrants of color from work that focuses on their immigrants' victimization to work that emphasizes their active role in creating sustainable food system change (in this volume, see Schmid, chapter 8; Passidomo and Wood, chapter 12; and Situational Strangers, chapter 14).

The USDA has the opportunity to support immigrant farmers' growth, but in order for programs and funding to reach the most financially disadvantaged beginning farmers, the agency must do more to recognize the challenges immigrant farmers experience in the current system. The state and civil society are by no means separate entities, and many within the USDA are actively working to create reforms to address its history of racism, but until these institutional norms are challenged, farmers of color and immigrant farmers in particular will continue to struggle with agrarian class mobility and with land and food-producing industries that remain primarily in white hands.

Notes

This chapter has been adapted from an article published in the journal *Agriculture and Human Values* 34(3): 631–643 (2017). Parts of this chapter can also be found in *The New American Farmer: Immigration, Race, and the Struggle for Sustainability* by Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019).

1. Although we completely support the transition to using the gender-inclusive Latinx instead of Latino/a, we use Latino/a, as that was the term most often used by participants in identifying themselves.
2. These numbers do not tell us how many are first-generation immigrants. The number of operators that were also owners before 2012 is not available.

3. Lawsuits include the *Pigford v. Glickman* and *Brewington v. Glickman* class action lawsuits for African American farmers, the *Keepseagle v. Vilsack* settlement for Native American farmers, and the Hispanic Farmers and Ranchers and Female Farmers and Ranchers claims processes.

4. We are not claiming that family labor is inherently a better system or more equitable, only that it is evidence of a particular form of farming (see Feldman and Welsh 1995; Reed et al. 1999; Riley 2009).

5. In Washington and California, many farmers interviewed identify as Triqui or Mixteco (indigenous to Mexico).

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