

Milpa and strawberries:
food justice, labor, and the place of Mexican immigrant farmers in Oregon's Willamette Valley

By

Alexander Samuel Korsunsky

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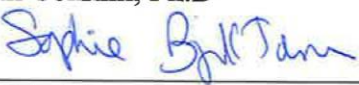
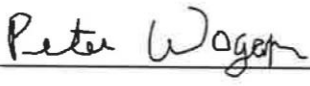
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Approved:

Date:

	03/07/2023
Norbert Ross, Ph.D.	
	03/07/23
Beth Conklin, Ph.D.	
	3/7/23
Sophie Bjork-James, Ph.D.	
	
Peter Wogan, Ph.D.	

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CHAPTER 1

A different sort of place: Oregon, agriculture, and the hope for food justice on immigrant farms

The system that brings food to Americans' plates has been thoroughly critiqued from all directions: it is ecologically unsustainable and climatically disastrous (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2022; Paudel and Crago 2021; Gomiero 2016; Li, Miao, and Khanna 2020), fails to generate an adequate living for small farmers (MacDonald 2020; MacDonald, Hoppe, and Newton 2018; Berry 1986), is built on the backs of racialized and abused migrant labor (Holmes 2013; Horton 2016; Horner and Martinez 2015), and on top of everything produces food that is often bland and unhealthy (Wilson 2013; Estabrook 2011). Among scholars, the conversation has long since moved on from simply diagnosing the innumerable problems to attempting to identify credible alternatives. This dissertation joins that conversation—specifically, the part of that conversation concerned with food justice, the notion that the current food system is defined by persistent structural inequalities, and that solutions should be sought amongst those who have been most harmed and excluded by the current system (Holt-Giménez and Wang 2011:89; Allen 2010; Cadieux and Slocum 2015; Alkon and Norgaard 2009). In the following pages, I attempt to take seriously this basic principle, asking what the food system might look like if those currently at the bottom were allowed a go at running things.

As an ethnographer I approach this not as an exercise in armchair theorizing, but by seeking out the places where such individuals and communities are already trying to make their hopes and dreams a reality. Specifically, I look to the Mexican farmworkers who form the human foundation of the US food system, and whose persistent racist mistreatment and structurally produced exploitation have been thoroughly documented (e.g. Holmes 2013; Horton 2016; López 2007; McWilliams 1969; Galarza 1964), seeking out those migrants who have managed to build their own farms, joining the ranks of Latinx—and especially Mexicano—farmers who continue to increase in number even as the overall US farm population declines (Robles, Morales, and Pisani 2020:117). I attempt to describe both *how* and *why* they farm, as well as looking to the institutions and structures that surround them, especially the food justice-oriented nonprofits that attempt to support their efforts. Responding to food justice scholars' and activists' suggestion that these populations' experiences of oppression and histories of farming predispose them towards more just and sustainable approaches (e.g. Minkoff-Zern 2019; Mazar and Mares 2020), I ask how these farmers try to create a little place for themselves in the world, what factors enable or inhibit those dreams, and above all where those dreams come from.

The question I'm trying to answer is this: how do farmers with one foot in Mexico and another in *el norte* come to farm in one way or another, to plant maize and beans or blueberries and arborvitae, to spray pesticides or to refrain? How do memories of another place—and experiences in this one—inform their ideas about how to farm? And since farming isn't just a business but a lifestyle, this raises a vital corollary: what sorts of life do these farmers want to create for themselves? Asked another way, what sorts of agricultural system are they straining towards or compelled into? As stewards of sometimes significant chunks of our shared landscape, what sorts of places, what sort of landscape, are they creating?

Farmers' options and imaginations are constructed and constrained by many factors, meaning that the questions above demand answers in both political-economic and cultural

registers. The cost of land and equipment and hired labor, and the accessibility of credit and reliable customers, set clear limitations for any farmer not blessed with outside wealth or subsidies, and examining how farmers understand and attempt to navigate these often-hostile systems is a central concern. Yet neither these factors nor farmers' individual quirks and geniuses in themselves explain why the individuals in this study attempt to farm in the first place and continue in spite of the numerous barriers they face, nor do they adequately explain farmers' practices and outlooks. Memories of rural Mexico, experiences as hired laborers in both Mexico and the western US, and—for some—the lessons offered by food justice-oriented nonprofit organizations emerged as key factors shaping farmers' practices and aspirations.

I treat these, cautiously, as cultural factors insofar as they significantly shape not the economic or ecological conditions available to farmers, but also their shared, subjective understandings of what it means to be a “good farmer” (Burton 2004; Leitschuh, Stewart, and van Riper 2022), and the decisions to which this understanding leads. Crucially, however, I argue that these cultural factors are not fixed or timeless, nor are they homogenous across the farmers considered in this study. Mexico is a big and diverse country, divided regionally and along urban-rural divides, and home to multiple large indigenous groups living alongside the mestizo majority.¹ Farmers do not necessarily agree on the details of what exactly is traditional, nor how best to live those traditions; these discrepancies are at the center of my analysis. My use of terms like culture, tradition, and Mexicanness therefore should not be understood as treating culture as some independently existing object, an authentic standard against which to judge behavior; instead, they are simply convenient labels—and ones understood and used by my interlocutors—to describe shared (though variable) sets of meanings and orientations born not only of labor experience and political-economic circumstances, but also of their upbringings, and linked by the farmers themselves to the ways of life they experienced in rural Mexico. In discussing these concepts in relation to agriculture, I emphasize how notions of culture are actively re-created and promoted by various actors, and how the ideals they inspire are flexible enough that farmers can and do approach similarly imagined lifestyles from apparently dissimilar directions. Throughout this dissertation, we will consider the ways that these factors shape the farms Mexican immigrants in Oregon build and aspire to.

Farms and farming have of course been studied in many ways: in political-economic terms as heavily structured nodes in food systems (Kautsky 1988; Guthman 2004; Allen 2004), as performance (Stone 2018; Flachs and Richards 2018), as expressions of values and ethics (Berry 1986; Beus and Dunlap 1990), as identity (Comito, Wolseth, and Morton 2013; Larmer 2016; Rissing 2013), as the means to a good life (Fischer 2014; Fischer and Benson 2006; see also Ybarra 2016; Ortner 2016). While drawing here and there on these various approaches, I emphasize one more: farming as the creation of a certain kind of *place* (Leitschuh, Stewart, and van Riper 2022). Place as a concept has been used by geographers and anthropologists to describe the way that locations take on meaning and associations to those who frequent them. A place isn't just a spot on the map, a set of coordinates or geological features; it is those things plus the human experience of dwelling in or amidst them, which “brings forth” a sense of place (Heidegger 1977; see also Casey 1996). This bringing forth occurs in collaborations and conflicts between humans and non-humans (Tsing 2012a:142; Feld 1996; Basso 1996), amidst migrations and networks and political-economic systems (Massey 2010; Massey 2004), and in the realms of memory and imagination (Santos-Granero 1998; Nora 1989). As Geertz says, “no one lives in

¹ Only one farmer in this study explicitly centers indigeneity in his self-identity, although he is not the only one with indigenous roots. This farmer and his conception of indigeneity are discussed extensively in Chapter 2.

the world in general. Everybody, even the exiled, the drifting, the diasporic, or the perpetually moving, lives in some confined and limited stretch of it—‘the world around here’” (Geertz 1996:262)

This capacity to bring together different actors, networks, and systems is what makes place such a useful concept for thinking about the farms in this study. Considering farming as placemaking offers a way to consider both the cultural and political-economic dimensions of farming, to recognize the ways in which each of these modes informs and impacts the other, and to allow space for them to rest alongside each other without demanding a single master narrative. Farmers aren’t philosophers or theorists; they might be businessmen, but that label is a poor container for their work. Their work is that of tending a particular bit of land—land whose use is almost never exclusively economic, but also wrapped up in aspirational identities, ecological ethics, gastronomic and aesthetic and recreational preferences, and countless personal and familial hopes and anxieties. In other words, place is a sort of assemblage (Latour 2005): the things places together may have little necessary relationship, may operate on different scales and timeframes, may draw on different sorts of systems and relationships, may require different forms of interpretation. This makes places inconvenient to theorize, but poses them as rich sites of investigation for ethnographers. Writing of the Corn Belt, Leitschuh et al. argue that the “meanings that define what it means to be a good farmer in an agricultural community are constructed through place-making processes. This place-making process is bi-directional, meaning that on-site farming practices influence senses of place as much as they are influenced by them. Farming creates a physical imprint of landscape features and conditions that express aspirations for a farmer’s identity, [and] serves as visible cues for others to assess the goodness of the farmer” (Leitschuh, Stewart, and van Riper 2022:418)

Farmers co-create places while simultaneously learning from the meanings embedded in the landscape they work.

This process is particularly interesting in the case of immigrant farmers, for whom the act of farming is often a link back to childhood and heritage in some other place, with its own set of possibilities and meanings that may be replicated or reimagined, forming novel juxtapositions and casting new meanings on a different landscape. In the case of the people in this study, who farm the same region—and in some cases even the exact same place—where they worked and suffered as hired farmworkers complicates things still further, casting placemaking as a form of reclamation, even resistance. Ybarra argues in her analysis of farmworker literature,

“this community’s rejection of capital’s attempt to alienate them from the land, the fact that these narratives include appreciation of the places where they live and work testifies to the farmworkers’ capacity to see the land despite capital’s attempt to render it abstract and alienating” (Ybarra 2016:122).

For immigrant farmers with past, often lengthy, experience of migrant farmwork, farming offers an opportunity not only to appreciate the land, but to develop a more lasting relationship, to make it their own.

Asking what sorts of places farmers create and hope to create draws together many different sorts of question onto a single patch of ground, and the answers I find are not simple. Far from practicing a single unified approach to farming representing some reversion to a ‘traditional’ Mexican agriculture, the farmers I describe in the following chapters vary widely in their approach on nearly all dimensions except for a nearly universally shared lack of capital in comparison to their Anglo neighbors. They also report quite different experiences of agriculture

in their home communities; beyond common experiences cultivating a handful of key crops (corn and beans), their accounts do not point to a single coherent Mexican agricultural tradition to which they could all return, even if they wanted to. These farmers' placemaking projects do not lead them to create a uniform and broadly recognizable Mexican immigrant farm clearly distinguishable from the surrounding landscape²—although there are distinctive types of places built by certain subsets of farmers, most notably those with nonprofit ties. Yet despite this variation, I also offer evidence that farmers do carry a certain set of shared values and visions of a desired agrarian lifestyle that, though deeply informed by labor experiences and nonprofit interventions, is traceable (and traced by the farmers themselves) to their early lives in rural Mexico.

As a group, the farmers in this study treat their work not only as a business, but more centrally as the means to a life of independence, hard work outdoors, the ability to grow good food for themselves and those close to them. Though these traits suggest a *potential* amenability among these farmers to the political prescriptions proposed by food justice activists, my findings show that neither farming technique, crop mix, nor business model appears to be the subject of a pronounced or generalizable cultural preference. Instead, commonalities among the placemaking projects of the Willamette Valley's Mexican farmers operate on the level of purpose: the places they construct may look quite different, but they serve as means to a shared end.

In this this chapter, I lay the groundwork for this exploration, beginning with a history of the place where this study took place: western Oregon's Willamette Valley, the place where I grew up and that I still consider home, an agricultural landscape deeply marked by white supremacy in both its relatively recent history of colonization, and in the past century's deep reliance on politically marginalized Mexican immigrant labor. Once firmly situated at the study site, I turn to the literature on immigrant farmers and farmworkers, with a special interest in writings on food justice and food sovereignty, two closely related social movements and analytical frames that respond to the general critique of 'conventional' agroindustry by centering the experiences, needs, and desires of those most harmed by the current food system in attempting to imagine an alternative.

Though these movements constitute valuable contributes to the conversation on agricultural alternatives, I argue that they have often relied on a concept of culture that is too stable and solid, a problem reinforced by their tendency to focus on activists and nonprofits. I propose study of immigrant farmers must give greater attention to understanding the significant

² As detailed in my review of the literature, below, I focus on Mexican immigrant farmers because of this population's unique relevance to food justice theorizing as a window into the potential desires and capacities of immigrant farmworkers to remake the food system. In other words, although my study population is defined in ethnic/national terms, this interest follows from the organization of US and Oregon agriculture along such lines, rather than being primarily motivated by an interest in ethnic/national differences as such. I make no claim that the practices, aspirations, or motivations I describe are unique to this population; in fact, I would be surprised if many other farmers did not share many of the characteristics I discuss. For example, in my discussion of independent farmers (Chapter 4), I contend that these farmers closely model their work on the practices of their former Anglo employers. Certain differences between Mexicano farmers and their Anglo peers are identifiable: the farmers in this study seem to generally operate on a smaller scale, with less formal education and less access to USDA and Extension resources, and are concentrated in labor-intensive rather than capital-intensive industries. However, since the purpose of this study is to understand how current and (especially) former farmworkers form agricultural aspirations, it is neither here nor there if those aspirations are shared by other populations. Detailed comparisons between Mexican immigrant farmers and other farming populations are therefore beyond the scope of this study, and data on non-Mexicano farmers was collected primarily from the literature, with first-hand information collected only incidentally.

variation in farming approaches that exists within this population, and that this variation can be productively understood by examining the sorts of placemaking projects that these farmers undertake. I conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of my methodologies and personal background with my fieldsite, and an overview of this dissertation's structure.

The place and the past

In *Islands and Beaches*, Denning writes of the colonization of a certain Pacific island, “It is a story of how the name of their land, Te Henua, became the Marquesas and how that naming for a distant, immemorable viceroy of Peru became a bloody christening” (Denning 1980:16). For Denning, place is made and remade; it was not merely the native society that was shattered and transformed through colonization, but Te Henua itself ceased to exist, replaced with the Marquesas, a new place at the same coordinates and with the same mountains and beaches. My field site, Oregon's Willamette Valley, has undergone similarly radical transformations in the past two centuries, from oak and camas savannahs maintained by the native Kalapuya to an imagined all-white agrarian utopia to racially stratified agroindustry, proliferating hobby farms, and growing cities. Though my research is contemporary, I review this history of the place not only to provide some color and context to what follows, but also to highlight two key themes: first, the manner in which new arrivals can make new places, altering both meaning and agroecological makeup; and second, to emphasize the centrality of white supremacy as an enduring force shaping Oregon's physical and social landscape. Together these facts frame the significance of my research questions and findings.

Western Oregon's Willamette Valley, fertile and temperate, interminably wet and grey in winters, dry and (until recently) not too hot in summers, follows the Willamette River's 187-mile course north from Eugene, through my hometown of Salem, to its confluence with the Columbia at Portland. The valley, held to the west by the low, lush Coastal Range and to the east by the high volcanic Cascades, is the traditional homeland of the Kalapuya, traces of whose historically documented firing practices (Christy and Alverson 2011; Towle 1982:73) can be dated back at least 5000 years (Walsh et al. 2010). Under Kalapuya stewardship, the valley was maintained as an abundant and diverse ecosystem. Though not practicing agriculture in a strict sense, their regular burning protected the oak savanna from rising undergrowth and the deep shade of Douglas fir, creating a park-like landscape open enough to encourage deer and camas, a flowering bulb whose beds the Kalapuya maintained with their burning (Boag 1992).

The first whites—American, British, and French—arrived around the turn of the 19th century, first trappers and traders and then farmers, a trickle and then a flood (Jetté 2006; Barber 2019; Boag 1992). They found the natives—decimated by epidemics—offered minimal armed resistance (Robbins 1998:194; Boyd 1999). The prize at the end of the Oregon Trail, the Willamette Valley's fertility and abundant water offered clear promise for agriculture, promising potential emigrants a sort of Eden where the “soil...produces well without the application of manure... In no country in the world, may the husbandman look forward with more assurance to the reward of his toil” (Gibson 1985:128; see also Oliphant and Kendall 1935). Oregon farmers, reported the *New York Herald Tribune*, “live very much the same, in all respects, as our farmers at home, with the exception of not being obliged to labor half as much” (Gibson 1985:141), while boosters

“told of wheat which it was possible to raise in Oregon, and pictured in glowing terms the richness of the soil and the climate, and then with a little twinkle of humor said ‘and they do say, gentlemen, they do say, the pigs are running about under the great acorn trees, round and fat, and already cooked, with knives and forks sticking in them so that you can cut off a slice’” (Bright 1951:252).

This abundant agricultural production, of course, came at the expense of the landscape the Kalapuya had tended. Pigs feasted on the Kalapuyas’ camas and acorns; sheep and cattle decimated native grasses, which were soon replaced by invasive weeds; eventually, the farmers fenced the prairies, ditched and drained the wetlands, logged the woodlands, and stopped the seasonal burning, allowing fast-growing conifers to shade out the lovely oaks wherever they remained (Bunting 1995).

Territorial and federal government did their part to make Oregon country an appealing destination for would-be white settlers. The 1850 Donation Land Claim Act offered the most generous land grant program in US history, 320 acres to white and “‘half-breed’ Indian” men and 640 acres for married couples (Coleman 2019:414). With such opportunities the white settler society that emerged in the Willamette Valley was relatively conservative, family-oriented, and internally egalitarian (May 1994), in contrast to the more turbulent, transient, and male-dominated “‘wage-workers’ frontier” of the mining, timber, and ranching regions of the West (Schwantes 1987; Robbins 1988). The Kalapuya, meanwhile, were destroyed as an independent political entity, dispossessed of their lands, and confined along with neighboring tribes at the Grand Ronde and Siletz reservations, while Oregon’s foundations as a white supremacist settler-colonial society (Barber 2019; Eisenberg 2022) were cemented in the notorious 1844 and 1849 laws barring Black settlement (McClintock 1995:121–123)

This, then, is the foundation of Oregon in its modern form, and of Oregon agriculture: the rapid seizure of native land and its mass redistribution to white settlers. As this dissertation progresses and we return time and again to the problem of land access and affordability, it is worth remembering this basic fact: the current agricultural regime’s rather shallow roots rest on a government program of free land grants explicitly designed to produce an agrarian society of white property owners.

To a significant extent, this white supremacist project succeeded. By the 1890s the Willamette Valley transformed from a pioneer society largely oriented towards subsistence agriculture into a well-established node in wider commercial networks (May 1994; Boag 1992; Robbins 1997). Nevertheless, the structure of agriculture remained less consolidated than in California, and followed only very partially in California’s heavy reliance on a racialized rural farm workforce. Chinese and later Japanese workers did fill a niche at the bottom of the rural labor hierarchy—and these immigrants and their descendants in went on to establish successful farms and orchards (Tamura 1993; Liestman 1998:23; Katagiri 2019)—and accounts of the hop harvest in particular recount the arrival of Native workers from both nearby reservations and as far as British Columbia (Kopp 2011:247; Lallier-Baron 2014:93; see also Leavelle 1998:438–9). However, as late 1880, while the Census showed that approximately 10% of the state’s workforce consisted of non-family hired farm labor, that remained less than one quarter of all agricultural workers (US Census Bureau 1883:768). The majority of farm work, in other words, was still being done by the nearly exclusively white population of landowning farmers and their family.

By the 1910s, at least a handful of Mexican workers began arriving in the Northwest’s agricultural valleys, including the Willamette, actively recruited from the Southwest or drawn by

word of mouth (Gamboa 1990:5-6), although they were few in number and seem not to have established lasting communities or institutions. Still, historical records do not show anything like the stark racialization of contemporary farm labor. Major harvests, like hops, drew significantly on local white labor pools, including city dwellers like out-of-school teachers and students, who flooded into labor camps to make extra money and play at rural life (Kopp 2011; Helphand 2020; Lallier-Baron 2014:91–94). Even today, when explaining my research to older Anglos who grew up in western Oregon, I am often met with childhood recollections of spending summers working on berry or vegetable farms.

In 1943 the generally white, local structure of Oregon’s agricultural labor force definitively shifted, marking the beginnings of next great transformation in the Oregon agricultural landscape. This transformation, signaled by the arrival of the first Bracero guestworkers, is of course one that differs deeply from that caused by Anglo settlement in the early and mid-19th century. Mexican and later Mexican American migrants joined rather than displacing established residents, taking up a place at the bottom of the social hierarchy rather than the top. Though in each case government played a key role in the change, the Braceros, like the undocumented immigrants who would follow them, were treated as laboring bodies rather than citizens, and their arrival entailed no radical remaking of property relations or environmental regimes. Nevertheless, these new arrivals and their successors over the following 80 years began another reshaping of Oregon agriculture, and of Oregon as a place. Their arrival marked a turn away from any dream of Oregon as a commonwealth of white settler equality, stamping the entire working landscape with racial hierarchy not in the form of absences, but persistent—though often invisible (Korsunsky 2020a)—inequalities in power and ownership. It also began a long process—one with whose flowers my ethnography is concerned—of Mexicano³ migrants making new claims to the land, inscribing new meanings, and finding new purposes in this place.

Even before Pearl Harbor, the growing war industries—including major new shipyards in Portland, Tacoma, and Seattle—had already inspired fears of labor shortage across the Northwest as early as the summer of 1941, with schools closing and businesses urged to curtail their hours to free up workers for the fields (Gamboa 1990:24). America’s entry into the Second World War, the swelling war industries and mass enlistment of working-age men, and growers’ fears of a disastrous farm labor shortage⁴ led to the Bracero Program, an agreement between the US and

³ A note regarding terminology: generally speaking, I use “Mexican” to refer specifically to people who were born or raised in Mexico, while referring to people of Mexican ancestry who were born or raised in the US as Mexican American; I reserve “Chicana/o” for discussions of a specific historical moment—namely, the Chicana/o Movement of the 1960s and ‘70s. I avoid Hispanic and Latino/a/x except when referencing a broader population including individuals with roots beyond Mexico. Instead, when speaking of both Mexicans and Mexican Americans, I opt for Mexicanos. While unfortunately gendered, this is the term that I have perhaps heard most frequently from my interlocutors, and one that has been used for the same purpose in the English-language literature (Gonzales-Berry and Mendoza 2010; Weise 2015; Garcia 2005). While no term is entirely unproblematic, I prefer Mexicano not only for its concision but also because when used in English it offers a term that sidesteps the border and citizenship as the core marker of identity while also conveying an important sense of commonality that seems vital in a community in which parents may be Mexican and children Mexican American; as Gloria Anzaldúa’s writes, “We distinguish between *mexicanos del otro lado* and *mexicanos de este lado*. Deep in our hearts we believe that being Mexican has nothing to do with which country one lives in. Being Mexican is a state of soul—not one of mind, not one of citizenship” (Anzaldúa 1987:84).

⁴ As Calavita notes, growers had already been pushing for something like the Bracero program even prior to the outbreak of war, and the ultimate program seemed tailor made to please them (Calavita 1996:19–23), suggesting that

Mexican states to send guest workers north. Oregon public opinion, however, was broadly skeptical, as expressed in a June 1943 *Monmouth Herald* article: “Local authorities as well as people generally are opposed to bringing in Mexican labor... except as a last resort... it is believe that our own people are patriotic enough and anxious to lend assistance to the great task facing us this season” (quoted in Gonzales-Berry and Mendoza 2010:34).

Despite these concerns, farmers demanded labor, and the Braceros came. The white public’s fears appear not to have been realized, and in July 1943 the *Salem Statesman* opined, “reports from all over the state were the Mexicans employed are uniformly good. The men are chosen from the farming region of Mexico, are friendly and cooperative, and their work is very satisfactory” (quoted in Gonzales-Berry and Mendoza 2010:35). However, even these relatively positive receptions were premised on “the often explicit expectation that these people were not considered members of the community nor anticipated to become so... Mexicans would remain temporary, landless laborers, returnable to sender” (Ogden 2005:146). And more broadly, as Erasmo Gamboa writes in his seminal history of the program in the region,

“No sooner had the Mexicans begun to arrive in the Northwest than the farmers began to disregard their contracts. This made the work experience of the great majority of the braceros only slightly better than that of servile labor... [However] this prevailing stereotype of braceros as docile, undemanding, and incapable of organizing themselves to press for better working conditions does not hold true in the Northwest, where braceros were constantly on strike, and this made the region unique among other parts of the country” (Gamboa 1990:74–75).

Although braceros, required as a condition of their contracts to return to Mexico at the end of the season, were never meant to form a permanent population in host communities, this was not to be. In some cases, bracero “skips” deserted, finding better jobs under the table at neighboring farms; others overstayed their contracts, or used their new knowledge and connections to return without documentation to the farms at which they had labored (Ngai 2003:147–153). Although the program ended in most of the country, including Oregon,⁵ in 1947, it launched the beginning of a durable shift in Oregon farm labor. In the following decade, in addition to the now-undocumented ex-Braceros, Tejanos⁶ seeking relief from the acute racism they faced at home became an increasingly important component of the farm workforce (García 2017:246–7; Sprunger 2015:284; see also Rodriguez 2011). Drawn to the region by labor recruiters, they quickly discovered that conditions were far less attractive they had been sold: difficult and dirty labor, long hours, and cramped and often unsanitary accommodations (Sprunger 2014:51–52). As ethnic outsiders in a state that in 1960 was still 97.9% white (US Census Bureau 1960), they also encountered difficulties ranging from social alienation in public schools to difficulties finding familiar food; as late as 1967, when a Tejano family bought a home in Forest Grove, TV news sent a crew to interview their Anglo neighbors about how they felt having Mexicans next door (Sprunger 2014:14).

Initially seasonal migrants, by the late 1950s Tejanos had begun to settle in the Northwest on a permanent basis, forming the first permanent Latinx communities in towns like Independence, Gervais, Cornelius, and Woodburn, as well as in eastern Washington’s Yakima

rather than a necessity, the war may instead have offered a convenient pretext for farmers to secure a long-desired supply of cheap and controllable labor.

⁵ With the exception of Jackson, Hood River, and Umatilla counties, which continued to use Bracero labor into the 1950s and, in the case of Jackson County, until the program’s official expiration in 1964 (Cordia 2019:154).

⁶ Mexican Americans from Texas.

Valley (Gonzales-Berry and Mendoza 2010:54–70; Stephen 2007:84–86; Estrada 2017:80–81). By the early 1970s, over 95% of Oregon farmworkers were Mexican or Mexican American (Stephen 2001:8). Over the following decade, Tejanos established much of the basic community infrastructure for the Latinx community, including specialty shops and community organizations (Sprunger 2015:278; Maldonado 2005:227–228), actively welcoming newer arrivals and laying the foundations for Latinx and farmworker political organization in the region, (Sprunger 2015:281).

Progressive churches and the state legislature had been raising concerns about farm labor conditions since at least 1955 (Stephen 2001:10), but these efforts were white-led, emphasizing the benefits of improved conditions for farmers' ability to attract skilled workers (Sprunger 2014:64). The first migrant-focused nonprofit, the Valley Migrant League, attracted significant War on Poverty funding, but Mexican Americans were excluded from decision-making until 1968, when a junior Tejano worker named Sonny Montes presented the Valley Migrant League with a list of demands for internal reform to give Mexican American staffers and farmworkers more power within the organization (May 2011:94–98). Mexicanos took control of the organization in 1970 (Stephen 2001:10). In contrast to the sporadic outbreaks of labor unrest during the Bracero era, from this point on a Mexicano farmworker movement would be a permanent presence in the Willamette Valley, and would serve as a generative force at the center of broader migrant and Latinx politics.

Over this same period, the now-established Tejano community was beginning to move up and out of farm labor, or into more desirable positions as managers and labor contractors (Gonzales-Berry and Mendoza 2010:56–72; Maldonado 2005). In their place came an increasing number of Mexican migrants, often undocumented (Gonzales-Berry and Mendoza 2010:73–75; Stephen 2007:86–88). Mexican American farmworkers had already faced low wages and racism; deportability “rendered undocumented labor a distinctly disposable commodity” (De Genova 2002:438), vulnerable to countless abuses and indignities and especially appealing as laborers. Though different in form than the more orderly Bracero program, the US immigration system continued to serve the same purpose: “Foreign labor is desired, but the persons in whom it is embodied are not desired. The immigration policies of ‘receiving nations’ can be seen as expressions of this contradiction and as attempts to solve it” (Kearney 1991:58).

As with the Tejanos, these new migrants arrived largely as seasonal farmworkers and many continued to work in the fields even as they began to settle on a permanent basis (Stephen 2007:87–88; Gonzales-Berry and Mendoza 2010:72–75; see also Palerm 1999). This process was ironically sped along by the tighter border enforcement provided by the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), as migrants were increasingly reluctant to risk the increasingly perilous and expensive border crossing (Striffler 2005:107; see also De León 2015). In response to increasingly aggressive immigration enforcement, community leaders including former United Farm Workers organizer Cipriano Ferrel and Ramon Ramirez, who had helped coordinate the UFW grape boycott in Seattle, joined Larry Kleinman, a white Jewish lawyer, to cofound cofounded the Willamette Valley Immigration Project (Sifuentez 2016:59–62). Based in Woodburn, WVIP provided legal clinics and education, helping with visas and freeing immigrants detained in INS raids (Sifuentez 2016:77–78). However, by the early 1980s, members were tired of constantly being on the defensive, reacting to the latest anti-immigrant policies or round of detentions; they also recognized that undocumented migrants' problems extended well beyond the legal realm, and that many of the gravest issues facing their constituents were located in the workplace. They had long harbored the ambition of starting a

farmworker union, and it seemed that the time had arrived (Sifuentez 2016:81; Stephen 2001:12).

Building on the trust established by WVIP, the new union, Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (Tree-planters and Farmworkers United of the Northwest, or PCUN), was officially founded in 1985. However, despite the new organizational form, immigration issues remained central, especially with IRCA's Special Agricultural Workers program offering amnesty and a path to legal permanent residency for undocumented farmworkers. PCUN almost immediately began to publicize the program, eventually helping over 1,300 migrants in Woodburn and the surrounding mid-Valley apply for amnesty, swelling their membership (Stephen 2001) and—as I learned in my interviews—winning lifelong gratitude from many of those they helped.

A full summary of PCUN's development over the succeeding decades is neither necessary nor appropriate here; the organization and its history have been well documented (Sifuentez 2016; Stephen 2001; Stephen 2003)—almost certainly better documented than any other Mexican or Mexican American organization in Oregon. From its founding to the present, PCUN has engaged in a variety of projects, including continuing advocacy and basic service provision for undocumented migrants, and a variety of unionization campaigns and strikes—although it has had little success in winning long-term union contracts for workers. More successful have been efforts to develop an organizational infrastructure to represent the Latinx and immigrant population of the mid-Valley, spinning off nine sister organizations, including a youth group, a women's group, a radio station with programming in Spanish and several Indigenous languages, a parent's association, and more, all closely linked and going by the common name Alianza Poder; one of these organizations, CAPACES Leadership Institute, will feature prominently in the following chapter.

While PCUN leadership continues to identify the organization as a union, and its Woodburn headquarters is adorned in Chicano Movement art and images of Cesar Chavez and other movement heroes, its operations have largely become those of the political nonprofits and advocacy organizations with which it is a regular partner in Oregon state politics, door-knocking, lobbying legislators, and even managing campaigns for Latinx candidates. As of this writing in fall 2022, PCUN-backed candidates control a majority of the city council and school board in Woodburn, the Salem-Keizer school board, and a PCUN-backed Latina immigrant from a farmworker family represents Woodburn in the state legislature. Many of PCUN's most significant recent victories—a planned phase-out of the neurotoxic pesticide chlorpyrifos,⁷ new safety rules to protect workers from heatwaves and wildfire smoke (Van Wing 2022), a strengthening of Oregon's sanctuary law, and enabling undocumented migrants to obtain Oregon drivers licenses—have been won at the ballot box, in the legislature, and through administrative rulemaking, rather than via labor organizing or mass mobilization.

It is dangerously easy to conflate the history of a movement and its institutional forms with the history of a population. While PCUN is central to any history of Mexicans in Oregon agriculture—or indeed in wider political life in the state—its growth and evolution is just one component of a wider story of growing rootedness, organization, and institution-building that has been underway since at least the 1950s. Where Oregon's Mexican population was once nearly synonymous with migrant farm laborers, Mexicans and Mexican Americans (along with significantly smaller numbers of Central Americans and other Latinxs) now comprise 13.9% of the state's population (US Census Bureau 2020). In my hometown, Latinxs—79% of whom are

⁷ I worked with the PCUN political team on this campaign, researching the literature on chlorpyrifos and preparing talking points and memos for use in lobbying and publicity.

Mexicanos (US Census Bureau 2021)—now make up 45% of the public school students (Northwest Regional Education Service District n.d.), and small and not-so-small Mexicano businesses have proliferated (Wogan 2017; Maldonado and Maldonado 2017; see also Pisani and Perez 2020:40). The shift documented in this dissertation, of Mexican immigrant farmworkers becoming farmers, reflects this wider transformation.

The increasing stability of this now well-rooted community has transformed—albeit patchily—Oregon’s character as a place. The largest majority-Latinx city in the state, Woodburn runs ahead of these trends, undergoing what Maldonado and Maldonado describe as “Mexicanization,” a trend whose implications they examine in the realms of Woodburn’s demographics, religious life, public school system, and the growing dominance of Latinx-owned and -oriented businesses in the city’s downtown (Maldonado and Maldonado 2017). This transformation is made visible in the faces you pass on the street and the languages spoken in shops and restaurants and classrooms, in the proliferation of Spanish language signage—often prominently referencing specific hometowns in Michoacan or Oaxaca—and in the “construction of a downtown city park fashioned after the traditional Mexican plaza” (Maldonado and Maldonado 2017:208; see also Davis 2000:51–57), complete with improbable palm trees.



Figure 1. The plaza in downtown Woodburn. Photo by the author.

This Mexicanization is not limited to Woodburn, but is transforming many parts of the United States beyond the ‘traditional’ migrant-receiving communities of the Southwest

(Albarracín 2016; Striffler 2005:135–154). As Jerry García⁸ writes, “Aztlán⁹ is not off in some distant mythical place far-removed from our lived experience. Aztlán exists in places like Quincy, Seattle, and Yakima, Washington; Woodburn, Portland, and Mt. Angel, Oregon... and other regions of the northern borderlands” (García 2017:258; see also Anzaldúa 1987). Though far from the literal border, these places have become a borderland, “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (Anzaldúa 1987:25), and the farmers in this study—like their broader communities—live “transborder lives” astride “legal, racial, ethnic, class, gender, colonial, cultural, and regional borders” (Stephen 2007:34) as well as national ones.

Borderlands are places of hybridity and violent separation, and these changes, unsurprisingly, have not been universally welcomed. Some Anglos felt that Woodburn’s “plaza was constructed for Mexicans only... [their] sense of loss or exclusion expressed a notion of ethnic parallel existence that was not to be bridged” (Maldonado and Maldonado 2017:217). Racist and anti-immigrant backlash has made itself known, as in much of the United States, in the form of ubiquitous Trump signs seen especially along rural roads and in small towns, in an attempt to overturn Oregon’s sanctuary bill (Wilson 2018), and in regular racist flare-ups around the state (e.g. Richards 2021). The construction and transformation of places is always a contested process, and “landscapes never have a single meaning; there always exists the possibility of different readings. Neither the production nor reading of landscapes is ever ‘innocent.’ Both are political” (Duncan 1990:182). Writing of a Yakima Valley town that has undergone shifts similar to those of the Willamette Valley, Villanueva asks, “Is there room... for an expanded sense of community and a broader depiction of its multicultural history, or will the town function as two distinct communities, living side by side, but without a shared sense of place?” (Villanueva 2005:196). The farms and nonprofit initiatives described in this project suggest the beginnings of an answer to this question, placemaking projects both distinctively Oregonian and with unmistakable roots stretched far to the south. Whether these projects come to redefine a broader Oregonian sense of place, or whether they continue to be confined at the margins, remains to be seen.

Literature review

I begin this review of the literature with a brief summary of the numerous critiques lobbed at the conventional food system before laying out the basic tenants of the alternative food movement, which seeks to define food not as a mere commodity but as a social, cultural, and ecological good. The most popular iterations of alternative food have been rightly critiqued for their depoliticized, neoliberal approach that prioritizes individual consumption habits and fails to address the systemic racism that defines both land ownership and agricultural labor in the US. Drawing connections to wider debates on the role and significance of enacted alternatives as a form of change-making, I continue to examine the food justice critique of both conventional and ‘mainstream alternative’ agriculture as insufficiently political and lacking in structural analysis

⁸ Not that Jerry Garcia, alas.

⁹ This term refers to the mythical Aztec homeland, traditionally believed to have been somewhere to the north of Tenochtitlan/Mexico City. In the US, especially during the Chicano/a movement, the term was often used to refer to the Southwestern states conquered from Mexico in 1848, as a way to assert a form of Chicana/o indigeneity to the US (del Castillo and de Leon 1997:127; García 2017:3).

of the role of race and racism. While embracing this critique, I argue that food justice has too often tended to reify notions of community and culture, failing to adequately conceptualize culture's changeability and flexibility, and calling for an approach to immigrant agriculture that builds on the food justice analysis while more fully recognizing the variability of immigrant agriculture projects and the motivations that underlie them.

Some problems with the conventional food system, and a stab at something different

Critiques of the 'conventional' industrial food system are now familiar to most Americans, having thoroughly permeated culture through concerns for disappearing family farmers, popular books (Pollan 2006; Barber 2015; Lappé and Lappé 2003), and the proliferation of organic and local foods and the mainstreaming of "foodie" culture (Johnston and Baumann 2010). The problems with the dominant system are manifest and multifarious, documented by multiple overlapping literatures. Broadly speaking, these issues can be sorted into four broad categories:

- The long term of agribusiness consolidation and concomitant loss of small and midsize family farms and hollowing out of rural communities and deskilling of farmers (Berry 1986; Goldschmidt 1947; Goldschmidt 1978). This system is deeply entrenched in both the public and private sectors, including through productivist federal subsidies (Bruckner 2016; Ramey 2014); trade agreements which dump surpluses in foreign markets with disastrous implications for local farmers (Otero 2011; Murphy and Hansen-Kuhn 2020); the USDA and state Extension services focused on white farmers and conventional large-scale agribusiness (Minkoff-Zern and Sloat 2020; Graddy-Lovelace 2017; Collins and Mueller 2016; Colasanti, Wright, and Reau 2009); and the consolidation of buyers and of suppliers able to dictate terms to farmers, which together with the input- and capital-intensive nature of the system, trap growers on a technological treadmill and in debt, limiting their ability to adopt more ecologically sustainable practices (Houser and Stuart 2020; Striffler 2005; Schewe and Stuart 2017).
- The multiple intersecting ecological crises with roots in the food system, including the industry's contributions and vulnerability to climate change (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2022; Lobell et al. 2013; Dangal et al. 2017; Clark et al. 2020), the loss of fertile topsoil vital for future agricultural production (Gomiero 2016; Larsen, Thaler, and Yu 2020; Thaler, Larsen, and Yu 2021), and dangerous biodiversity loss and ecological simplification (Li, Miao, and Khanna 2020; Raven and Wagner 2021; Stanton, Morrissey, and Clark 2018; Reilly et al. 2020; Thrupp 2000). Failure to modify the way agriculture is conducted risks further aggravating these ecological problems, and threatens to destabilize the increasingly globalized and interconnected food system.
- Consumer disconnect from food production has been linked to poor nutritional habits and poor health, and industrially-produced food is often criticized as nutritionally deficient, socially alienating, and not particularly delicious (Stuckler and Nestle 2012; Estabrook 2011; Patel 2012:268–297; Gaddis and Coplen 2018).
- a long history of scholarship and muckraking journalism detailing the shamefully exploitative, dangerous, degrading, and racialized nature farm labor conditions, generally with an emphasis on migrant laborers (McWilliams 1942; Galarza 1964; McWilliams 1969; Martin and Martin 1994; Horton 2016; Holmes 2013; Benson 2011). This includes

sub-literatures recounting the inadequacy of farmworker housing (Harrison 1995; Nelson 2007; Quandt et al. 2013; Forbes 2007), systemic pesticide exposure as an environmental justice issue persistently ignored by regulatory bureaucracies (Barbour and Guthman 2018; Harrison 2008b; Harrison 2008a; Harrison 2014; Pulido and Peña 1998), the challenges and occasional victories of labor organizing (Stephen 2001; Benson 2010; Fink 2003; Seif 2008; Cozzens 2015; Marquis 2017), and the cruel irony that so many farmworkers struggle to access adequate food for themselves and their families (Grauel and Chambers 2014; Mazar and Mares 2020).

Taken as a whole, these critiques represent an integrated and astonishingly broad assault on the input-intensive, production-oriented food system that emerged in the Green Revolution, promising an efficient, scientific solution to the ancient problems of famine and food insecurity. But what is to take its place?

‘Alternative’ agriculture is a broad category that, as its name suggests, is often united more by its opposition to ‘conventional’ agriculture than any inherently or universally shared qualities. Nevertheless, it is possible to characterize certain commonalities. Juxtaposing alternative and conventional agriculture, Beus and Dunlap suggest that the difference is not just practical but paradigmatic, stemming from different understandings of what farming is for and how to understand success. They sum these differences up in a series of oppositions:

centralization vs. decentralization; dependence vs. independence; competition vs. community; domination of nature vs. harmony with nature; specialization vs. diversity; exploitation vs. restraint; labor as drudgery vs. labor as a source of meaning (Beus and Dunlap 1990).

Fundamentally, proponents of alternative agriculture argue that the conventional focus on profit- and production-maximization should be replaced with a more diverse set of values—what Lyson refers to as “civic agriculture”—that treat agriculture as a public good, “as engines of local economic development... integrally related to the social and cultural fabric of the community. Fundamentally, civic agriculture represents a broad-based movement to democratize the agriculture and food system” (Lyson 2007:19).

In its popular formulations—most famously articulated in the best-selling *Omnivore’s Dilemma*—the alternative food movement argues for a food ideal in which eaters know “almost everything there was to know about its [food’s] provenance and its price... the true cost of this food, the precise sacrifice of time and energy and life it had entailed... Perhaps the perfect meal is one that’s been fully [ecologically and socially] paid for... a meal eaten in full consciousness of what it took to make it” (Pollan 2006:409).

Pollan acknowledges that such a meal is more an ideal than an achievable day-to-day reality, writing of his own perfect meal as a sort of “ritual” (Pollan 2006:410). Nevertheless, it is a tidy guide to the direction the alternative food movement has taken, at least from the consumer end, where eating local and buying organic food direct from producers via farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) subscriptions are core tenets. These practices fit with the sort of producers Pollan and his ilk elevate to the heroes of the movement: local, direct-to-consumer distribution best support small and mid-sized production and diversified crops, which often overlap with organic and other comparable ecologically-oriented production techniques (Ostrom 2007; Gillespie et al. 2007; Hoffman 2007). While such farmers are in many respects at a distinct disadvantage relative to their larger peers, marks of distinction like localness, organic certification, heirloom varieties, and the mere fact of appearing at a picturesque farmers market, offered by the hands that grew them, enable farmers to charge the premium prices necessary to

support their production style (Johnston and Baumann 2010:140–160; Jones 2015; Guthman 2004:111–116; Jordan 2007).

This sort of alternative agriculture has much to recommend it. Organic agriculture is less likely than conventional agriculture to poison its workers, and can have a less deleterious impact on wildlife and waterways. Local food systems are more likely to resist disruptions to global supply chains, building resilience that is likely prove important in the face of climate change (Altieri et al. 2015; Thilmany et al. 2021; Furman et al. 2014). Eating local is one means to reduce food-miles, and therefore carbon emissions (Van Passel 2013). The community built around farmers markets seems to offer a potential antidote to the increasing isolation and alienation of American society (Gillespie et al. 2007; Johnson 2013). The food offered at these markets *is* frequently higher quality and tastier than that offered in supermarkets. Yet the food systems scholarship of recent decades is replete with critiques of what might be termed the ‘mainstream alternative’ food movement, with himself Pollan serving as a frequent punching bag (e.g. Guthman 2008:436; DeLind 2011).

The mainstream alternative food movement’s recommendation for how to achieve change can, in its barest essence, be boiled down to the slogan: ‘vote with your fork,’ or put otherwise, ‘vote with your wallet.’ Critical scholars have sharply critiqued this as a neoliberal vision, substituting virtuous individual behavior for collective action, and consumers for political subjects, while leaving workers out altogether (Guthman and Brown 2016). Because the existing regulatory apparatus seats the financial viability of the organic industry on the ability to charge a premium (Guthman 2004), this version of a food movement is inherently exclusive, limited to those with the money (and time) to shop at farmers markets or Whole Foods and pay top dollar for local, organic products. Such activities are widely coded as white, contributing to the significant difficulties met by well-intentioned efforts to bring such food to people of color (Guthman 2008; Alkon and McCullen 2011; Pilgeram 2012; Slocum 2007). Furthermore, the small local farms celebrated as foodie heroes may not be desirable employers, with farmworkers often finding advantages in working for large-scale employers (Gray 2014; Buck, Getz, and Guthman 1997:9). This version of the alternative food movement therefore would appear, whatever its virtues, to be built atop a serious contradiction: largely limited to farmers rather than workers, and to affluent white consumers, alternative food begins to lose its oppositional character, and the improved production techniques it advocates cease to be a threat to the system but instead are smoothly incorporated as just another capitalizable mark of distinction.

A wider theoretical debate

This paradox points to a wider theoretical question: to what extent can meaningful social change or transformation be wrought through the construction of parallel systems or minor utopias? When is such work prefigurative, when is it a privileged retreat, and when does it merely provide fresh ground for capital to colonize, new forms of distinction through which to extract premium rents? This question is not unique to studies of the food system, but agriculture has long been the site of debates as to the meaning and potential of non-capitalist modes of production that articulate with capitalist markets and systems. These debates offer no definitive resolution, but I suggest that they indicate the limitations of *mere alterity*. A space may be animated by non-capitalist internal logics, but unless it is tied into a concerted effort to change

not just the content but the rules of the wider system it is unlikely to affect a broader transformation, as is the case of the mainstream alternative movement outlined above.

Mainstream alternative food advocates, though readily identifying structural causes in, for instance, federal corn subsidies, solutions often dwell on the need to relearn our tastes, to abandon habits of speed and convenience and embrace slowness and localism (Pollan 2006; Berry 1986). When the enemy is understood as globalizing, homogenizing, capitalism, this appeal makes a great deal of intuitive sense. And yet, as Harvey argues, despite general understandings of capitalism as hyper-mobile, the capitalist quest for monopolies can easily exploit “claims to uniqueness and authenticity” (Harvey 2002:98). He asks,

“If claims to uniqueness, authenticity, particularity and speciality underlie the ability to capture monopoly rents, then on what better terrain is it possible to make such claims than in the field of historically constituted cultural artefacts and practices and special environmental characteristics (including, of course, the built, social and cultural environments)?” (Harvey 2002:103)

Even places and forms of cultural specificity specifically constituted through their opposition to globalizing capital (Harvey 2002:108), and practices and commodities defined by their non-scalability can be incorporated into capitalist value chains as opportunities for profit (Tsing 2015; Tsing 2012b). And, as Guthman finds in her definitive account of the California organics industry, this is almost precisely what has happened, with organics increasingly “conventionalized,” and a boom in organic production leading to big profits for a shrinking handful of players while the original social movement character of the industry remains marginal (Guthman 2004).

But is this cooption of difference inevitable, or merely a reflection of the particular regulatory regime that structures American organic agriculture? This is a key question, and one with resonance not only in agriculture but across all spheres where one might hope for social change. Are small experiments in alterity seeds that might someday supplant the dominant system, or simply utopic escapes, evasions of the real task of directly attacking the dominant system at scale? For Gibson-Graham, this is the wrong question; they ask instead “how do we begin to see this monolithic and homogeneous Capitalism... as a fantasy of wholeness” (Gibson-Graham 2006:260). Rather than a singular totality, with all life and economic activity existing “under capitalism,” they instead propose that that such rhetoric obscures the surprisingly diverse forms of economic activity that already populate the economy. Many forms of alternative agriculture—including, perhaps, some of those critiqued above—would seem to fall within this diversity: economic activity motivated by far more than profit maximization, operating in networks structured by aspirations of environmental and social healing rather than rational economic calculation. These economic spaces may not be sufficient to overthrow the dominant system, but, Gibson-Graham suggest, they should be regarded not just as prefigurations but as actually existing alternatives worthy in their own right.

Nor should their limited scale, islands of alterity in a sea of business-as-usual, necessarily disqualify these alternatives. Some may indeed be mere hobbies or unserious daydreams, but according to Tsing the modern obsession with ‘scaling-up’ may in itself be part of the problem:

“Scalability is possible only if project elements do not form transformative relationships that might change the project as elements are added. But transformative relationships are the medium for the emergence of diversity. Scalability projects banish meaningful diversity, which is to say, diversity that might change things” (Tsing 2012b:507).

She argues that we need to pay “attention to the mounting pile of ruins that scalability leaves behind. Nonscalability theory makes it possible to see how scalability uses articulations with nonscalable forms even as it denies or erases them” (Tsing 2012b:506). Like Gibson-Graham, Tsing points out that even presumed monolithic structures are, if examined at the roots, often built on articulations with other more diverse systems—and that those diverse systems and relationships hold the possibility for change not as the wholesale replacement of one system with another, but rather with the blossoming of countless modest alternatives.

This articulation of capitalist and non-capitalist systems within the agricultural sphere is certainly nothing new, having long been a central part of the old Marxist debate on “the Agrarian Question,” which sought to understand the reasons for peasant persistence in the face of growing capitalist agriculture, and the future of these small farmers. Perhaps the most famous entry in this literature is that Karl Kautsky, who argued that for peasants, “[I]and is not a means for providing a profit or ground-rent, but for providing, through the medium of labour, the means for the peasants existence” (Kautsky 1988:170). In other words, peasant farmers differ from capitalists not only in scale but also in kind, pursuing different ends by different means. This may resemble contemporary descriptions of alternative agriculture as motivated by factors beyond the economic, but for Kautsky this is nothing to be celebrated; he describes instead the ways in which the bare subsistence provided by peasant agriculture enables them to persist in crushing poverty while

“no longer appear[ing] on the market for commodities as *sellers of foodstuffs*, but as sellers of *labour-power*, and buyers of *foodstuffs*. The small farm ceases to compete with large farms: in fact... it fosters and supports them by providing wage-labourers and a market for their produce.” (Kautsky 1988).

In other words, for Kautsky, the capitalist agriculture of turn-of-the-century Germany was indeed entangled at the root with older, non-capitalist forms—but this entanglement is best understood as a sort of parasitism “which allows the [peasant] survivors to enjoy what is in fact merely an illusory existence” (Kautsky 1988:183) as they become increasingly proletarianized.

Considering US and Mexican agriculture as parts of a closely linked system, Kautsky’s analysis reads as a prescient vision of the recent role of Mexican *campesino* communities as a remittance-dependent provider of labor to US and Mexican agroindustry. It also captures important dynamics within US agriculture. Teresa Figueroa Sánchez’s account of Mexican immigrant sharecroppers paints of a picture of seemingly independent small growers whose non-capitalist features (especially reliance on gendered family labor) creates conditions of extreme self-exploitation demanded by the California strawberry industry’s astronomical ground-rents (Sánchez 2013; Sánchez 2002; see also Wells 1996).

Yet there are more optimistic readings available. Writing of the pre-revolutionary Russian peasantry, Chayanov found a system of production based “not on a capitalist form, but on the completely different form of a nonwage family economic unit” (Chayanov 1966:1). In this system, Chayanov describes producers motivated not by the desire for capital accumulation, nor by quantitative calculations of any sort, but rather by a subjective calculus in which “the degree of self-exploitation is determined by a peculiar equilibrium between family demand satisfaction and the drudgery of labor itself” (Chayanov 1966:4). Though clearly in important respects subordinated, the peasantry Chayanov describes is not merely subsumed into capitalist markets, but instead articulate with them to a limited degree, with the extent of engagement determined according to logics native to his theorized peasant mode of production. Such interpretations find

at least limited support in more recent accounts of Mexican peasant engagements with waged labor and cash crops (González 2001; Pozas 1971).

These are not the sort of questions that can be answered the abstract. If capitalism and globalization both homogenize and particularize, then difference cannot in itself be understood as a challenge or even a boundary. As Kasmir and Gill argue, it is not enough to offer “descriptive notions of difference and multiplicity that eschew explanation” (Kasmir and Gill 2018:365); rather we must attend “to the making and unmaking of diverse assemblages of power-laden social relationships, the intense and often violent, space-making struggles that shape their rise and decline, and the conflicting claims to authority that drive contending projects of rule” (Gill and Kasmir 2016:91). At times in the past century, non-capitalist small producers have constituted a force for profound change, most obviously in the great peasant revolutions of the 20th century (Wolf 1999), but also in mass movements like La Via Campesina (Desmarais 2007); at other times and in other places, noncapitalist production has served a role more akin to that pessimistically characterized by Kautsky.

Rather than fully embracing non-capitalist heterogeneity or rejecting it as a false hope, I follow Gill and Kasmir’s eminently anthropological conclusion that what is needed is close-up examination of particular places and struggles. Thus, while deploying the conventional/alternative divide as a crudely useful shorthand, I emphasize that it is inadequate to our purpose of understanding the nature of Mexicano agriculture in Oregon, and to evaluating its potential. Instead, I return again to the importance of placemaking as conceptual tool for gathering together different sorts of projects and activities and structures, analyzing them on their own terms and in their own contexts. The question to be asked is not, “is this conventional or alternative?” but rather “what sort of place is this? What happens here?”

Food justice and food sovereignty

In response to the shortcomings of the mainstream alternative movement, both academics and activists have worked to develop an *alternative* alternative food movement, one that centers social and environmental justice, prioritizes marginalized and racialized communities, and understands the problem of the food system to be fundamentally political one. The various efforts in this direction most often fall under the labels food justice and food sovereignty. These analyses are vital, yet they can also suffer from an overemphasis on activists rather than ordinary farmers, leading them to stray dangerously close to cultural essentialism, often falling into the ‘alternative-or-not?’ trap outlined above. I draw heavily on food justice and food sovereignty critiques, but argue that this must be supplemented with wider readings on the motivations of non-activist farmers, and by more sophisticated and processual readings of culture and tradition.

A substantial segment of the food justice scholarship is critical. The majority of my above critique of Pollan and all those he represents is drawn from food justice sources, most notably the inadequacy of the consumer-centered, neoliberal focus on individual consumption, and the new emphasis on racism as a central food system issue. Rather than presuming that consumer, labor, and environmental concerns are naturally allied, these scholars point out the ways in which romantic agrarian portrayals of organic certification (Guthman 2013; Guthman 2004), local eating (Gray 2014; Allen 2010), farm education (Flora et al. 2012), and even certain forms of activism (Guthman and Brown 2016) center white consumers’ preferences while failing to address brown workers’ needs.

Rather than heroic farmers and conscientious consumers, these scholars argue, historically marginalized poor and working-class communities of color should be centered as the protagonists of food justice. This includes, on the consumer side, residents of so-called “food deserts”—a term critiqued as naturalizing the inaccessibility of food, and increasingly supplanted in food justice circles with the term “food apartheid” (Sbicca 2012:461)—and, on the production end, farmworkers and various other food chain workers, including farmers, who “understand firsthand the dangers of working with pesticides and see the health and environmental benefits of growing organic” (Sandoval and Rodine 2020:164). This scholarship, therefore, is largely concerned with analyzing a variety of food justice initiatives, including markets (Alkon 2008; Sbicca 2012; Alkon and Mares 2012) and gardens (Mazar and Mares 2020; Minkoff-Zern 2012)—settings not altogether different from those centered by the mainstream food movement, although serving (and typically operated by) people of color.

Food justice fits smoothly with another, closely related framework: food sovereignty. Originating in producer and peasant movements in the Global South, most notably La Via Campesina, food sovereignty shares many of the same basic principles as food justice, though generally with a greater emphasis on producers rather than consumers and a more prominent emphasis on resistance to neoliberal trade policies. It was most famously and definitively articulated in the 2007 Nyéléni Declaration issued by the international Forum for Food Sovereignty:

“Food sovereignty is 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. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations... Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations. (NGO/CSO Forum for Food Sovereignty 2007)

In recent years, the language of food sovereignty has increasingly permeated the more radical edges of the US alternative food movement and related scholarship. A few scholars have sought to differentiate the two, treating food sovereignty as the more radical program (Clendenning, Dressler, and Richards 2016; Holt-Giménez and Wang 2011:90; Alkon and Mares 2012); others seem content to acknowledge that, despite different genealogies, the two frameworks are fundamentally similar (Cadieux and Slocum 2015). In any event, such differences as may exist between the two should matter little to anyone but a historian of the two movements, and no one I encountered in the field expressed a particular attachment to either term over the other. For the remainder of this paper, I will generally use food justice as the general term, while reserving food sovereignty in reference to more production-oriented and internationalist formations; however, the distinctions implied are, for the most part, minor.

Food justice and food sovereignty are inherently social concepts, and it should be unsurprising that the literature on these themes tends to emphasize organized collective efforts rather than the loosely and informally networked mass of individual or family projects and lives to which most farms, workers, and immigrants belong. Nonprofit food justice initiatives—including farm incubators (Calo and De Master 2016) and community gardens (Flora et al. 2012; Mares 2018; Alkon and Mares 2012), as well as more political efforts such as anti-pesticide campaigns and union drives (Seif 2008; Madrigal 2017; Saxton 2015)—are major themes in scholarly accounts of immigrant food and farming. This tendency echoes the similar over-

emphasis on organizations, activists, and formal initiatives in the literature on Oregon's Mexicano and farmworker communities outlined above.

As I note elsewhere (Korsunsky 2020b), this tendency reflects in part the fact food justice scholars are overwhelmingly—perhaps universally—sympathetic to the cause. While scholars may criticize specific efforts at food justice (e.g. Flora et al. 2012; Alkon and Mares 2012), or argue for some more radical formulation (Peña 2017), I have not found any example of scholarship in which the author disagrees about the importance or necessity of the general principles. A great many are active participants in food justice initiatives, and research projects are often conducted in conjunction with nonprofits or other activist partners and with the intention of advancing their aims (e.g. Saxton 2015; Levkoe, Brem-Wilson, and Anderson 2019; Levkoe et al. 2016; Stephen et al. 2006).

On the whole, the norm of activism and collaborative methods in food justice scholarship is a healthy one, a welcome departure from the historic anthropological tendency to extract career-making data on communities of color while offering little of use in return (Deloria 1969; Smith 1999). However, it also potentially troublesome—not so much for the potential for bias in scholars' representations of their chosen subjects as in their limited choice of subjects. Renato Rosaldo once imagined a "*Handbook for Young Anthropologists* that advises: go to India for hierarchy, New Guinea for pollution, Oceania for adoption, Africa for unilineal descent, and so on across the globe" (Rosaldo 1988:78–79). I would add, community gardens, farmers markets, and nonprofit offices for food justice. This reflects in part personal preferences (it's nice to study with people whose aims you share, and whose actions you regard as admirable), in part the activist norm (as an anthropologist hoping to make yourself useful, your best bet is to join up with some existing community organization), and in part simple convenience (nonprofits have media presence and websites and reliably answer the phone; farmers, for the most part, do not). Even such excellent research as Minkoff-Zern's *The New American Farmer* relies heavily on nonprofits and similar institutions as key access brokers (Minkoff-Zern 2019:14–22). This is fine in any individual study, but when scaled across the literature becomes problematic. Simply put, food justice scholars spend an enormous amount of time with a minority of activists and organizations who have every reason to represent themselves as the representatives of their communities, and relatively little time with the great unaffiliated majority.

Though most scholars are savvy enough to note the shortcomings of the initiatives they describe, the literature *in aggregate* nevertheless tends to perpetuate the activists' self-conception as community representatives through the sheer repetitive emphasis on nonprofits as the site of food justice. References to "community efforts," "community groups," "community-based practitioners" (Levkoe et al. 2016:139–140) abound, colloquial language that easily slips into an implicit acceptance of activists and nonprofits as authentic representatives for some wider population (see e.g. Madrigal 2017; Caruso 2014). There is troublingly little questioning of what, exactly, a 'community' is or how its defined, leaving it, in Raymond Williams' words,

"the warmly persuasive word used to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships. What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization (*state, nation, society, etc.*) it seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term" (Williams 1983:76).

Underexplored, too, is the question of whether a majority of the supposed protagonists of food justice actually support its aims.

Activists and professional nonprofit workers—often speaking the same progressive idiom as their scholars—acutely describe systemic injustices, and identify experiences of these systems the source of a proclivity towards food justice among this or that racialized or immigrant population. This is one of the major questions posed by my research: *do* these experiences lead immigrant Mexican farmers to embrace food justice ideals and practices, and if so under what circumstances? To what extent do food justice organizations simply amplify and enable tendencies arrived at independently, as a result of life experience—or, on the other hand, to what extent do they train participants to conceptualize their experiences in a new way, providing not just new skills and language, but actively cultivating a new set of tastes and values, and producing subjects whose perspectives on food and agriculture differ significantly from their peers? Answering these questions will require stepping beyond the comfortable world of nonprofits and their networks, and seriously engaging those farmers who do not participate in these programs.

Culture as a question

In addition to experiences of oppression and exploitation, advocates and scholars also point to cultural factors driving this or that community's proclivity to food justice. In the case of Mexican immigrant farmworkers and farmers, this culturalizing tendency begins with accurate observation that many originate in rural communities, and the fact that a generation of migrant farmworkers in the US was composed of smallholders directly displaced by the price shock unleashed by NAFTA. While cultural factors are certainly relevant to agricultural decision-making (Salamon 1985; Hoelle 2014; González 2001), the tendency in food justice writing to take 'community' for granted is often mirrored in an overly static understanding of culture and tradition. Before treating cultural preferences as an explanation for agricultural behavior, I suggest that it is necessary to more closely examine how farming traditions come into being, evolve, and hybridize. In other words, culture should be treated as a question, something dynamic and contextual, rather than a consistent set of values.

The cultural emphasis in accounts of immigrant agriculture is ubiquitous, generally emphasizing an undifferentiated, apparently timeless tradition as the inspiration for alternative practices. In one typical account, an immigrant farmer is described as “enjoy[ing] the rural lifestyle because ‘it reminds [her] of being in Mexico where [her] family lived an agricultural lifestyle for generations.’ She has now physically and culturally replicated that rural lifestyle” (Sandoval and Rodine 2020:165); in another, the authors write that farmers and gardeners “preferred to give any surplus production... to family and friends rather than selling the excess. They were more concerned about cementing social ties (building social capital) than they were about earning the modest amount of cash that sale of surplus produce would bring” (Flora et al. 2012:126). Minkoff-Zern writes that her interlocutors’ “reasons to farm are more reflective of farmers who identify with peasant movements globally, than of industrial growers and farm owners” (Minkoff-Zern 2018:402). In the conclusion to their edited volume on immigrants and food, Agyeman and Giacalone write “there seems to be a general assumption that going against the conventional food system is a new concept... [but] there are and always have been” many forms of alternative participation in the food system, and many of the people leading those systems are immigrants (Agyeman and Giacalone 2020:300). Mazar and Mares write that

“reciprocity, generosity, community, and stewardship are fundamental to the reasons why Tomás enjoyed planting a garden. His personal philosophy on food was that it should always be shared. Coming from a small village in Mexico, Tomás had a vast amount of knowledge about food production” (Mazar and Mares 2020:56).

In each of these cases, farmers and gardeners are also seeking income, access to food, and an alternative to negative experiences with pesticides—but culture is presented as a key factor, a ready-made alternative template.

Even in conjunction with material conditions of vulnerability and exploitation in the US, the emphasis on tradition demands complication. There is no doubt that there is a deep and well-attested history of sophisticated and cosmologically-significant agroecological knowledge in Mexico and Central America, especially in the indigenous communities of the south, and ties to land and the centrality of corn farming in particular are central features of the ethnography of the Mexican peasantry (González 2001; Barrera-Bassols and Toledo 2005; D’Alessandro and González Cabañas 2017; Ford and Nigh 2010). But Mexican agriculture has also been thoroughly disrupted and remade by both modern technology and neoliberal trade. Sonnenfeld describes Mexico as “the birthplaces of the modern ‘Green Revolution’,” with massive increases in yield occurring from 1940-65, and significant environmental blowback arriving by the 1970s (Sonnenfeld 1992:28).

This change occurred not just on big commercial farms, but also in peasant communities, where growing populations, government support, and increased integration into the wider economy led to intensification of production, the abandonment of practices like intercropping and fallowing, and the over-use of fertilizers and pesticides (Sonnenfeld 1992). Peasant communities in rural Mexico have had long histories of migration and agroindustrial wage labor (Mines and Massey 1985; Stephen 2007). Despite the costs of this system, López finds that “most farmers in Mexico and farmworker interviewees [in the US] view their traditional practices as being *atrasados* (backward) and perceive U.S. agriculture as being *avanzada* (advanced) and modern” (López 2007:204). Elsewhere in Mexico, novel crops gradually been embraced as “traditional” (González 2001). None of these transformations in Mexican agriculture over the past 80+ years disqualify the possibility that agrarian traditions *can* offer sustainable and civic-minded agricultural templates to immigrant farmers, but they do militate against a simplistic, romantic reading of Mexican agriculture and tradition as fixed, timeless, and unchanging. As Minkoff-Zern explains in her nuanced account of Triqui and Mixtec migrants’ strategic deployments of indigeneity,

“static notions of indigeneity... assume place-based practices developed in isolation from agro-industrial systems. Against this tendency to see indigeneity as a deep-historical, congenital attribute of certain populations, new solidarities taking shape... exemplify the ways in which indigeneity is formed in dynamic relation to agricultural places and practices, which are in a state of change for garden participants” (Minkoff-Zern 2012:381; see also Littaye 2015:148)

The same could be said of immigrant farmers and agricultural workers more generally. Historical experiences and cultural traditions cannot be assumed to be either monolithic or stable. The role and even the meaning of culture are questions to be asked, not givens to be assumed.

Attention to the dynamic history of Mexican agriculture as well as to its deep roots, and to changing understandings of what constitutes tradition are of utmost importance. As I note in a previous work (Korsunsky 2020b), the transfer of a frustrated hope for a genuinely transformative alternative agriculture onto migrants—especially displaced peasants and

indigenous peoples—must be read in light of Anthropology’s historic obsession with exotic, potentially utopian Others (Said 1989; Trouillot 2003:14–20). Michael Kearney describes how “the peasant” replaced tribal peoples as the discipline’s preeminent Other in the latter half of the 20th Century, written as underdeveloped and premodern even when so-called ‘traditional’ practices were clearly articulated with or produced by wider, distinctly contemporary political economies (Kearney 1996). Increasingly, immigrants are placed into anthropology’s “savage slot” (Silverstein 2005; see also Trouillot 2003). If food justice scholars are to avoid replicating the romantic errors of the past, we must pay close attention to the “internal differentiation of subjects” (Kearney 1996:7) – and especially to groups or individuals within this population who do not share food sovereignty perspectives (Steckley 2016; Li 2015; Edelman et al. 2014:919).

In the case of this study, considering internal differentiation means turning attention to those farmers whose practices fail to conform to food justice expectations and who receive little attention in the food justice literature. These inconvenient actors include chemical-intensive Mexican immigrant strawberry farmers (Sánchez 2002; Sánchez 2013; Wells 1996:114–136), immigrant farmers and labor contractors who exploit their *paisanos* (Wells 1996:194–213; Horton 2016:82–84; Sarathy 2012:65), and the conventional orchardists who Minkoff-Zern thoroughly documents but who nevertheless fall out of her wider thesis (Minkoff-Zern 2019). It also means attending to motivations and conceptions that may not fit easily within the conventional-alternative spectrum, as in Haenn’s description of Mexican campesino internal migrants’ valuing of “the environment [as] a place of work” (Haenn 1999), and recalling that the ‘heritage’ food traditions that food justice advocates aim to preserve are themselves are constructed and contested on a transnational landscape, a

“process that (i) enables a range of actors to assign new values... [to heritage foods] by constructing narratives of the past; (ii) reinforces notions of peasant essentialism and its presumed values through nostalgia for pre-capitalist modes of production; and (iii) facilitates the appropriation of notions of authenticity and identity which promote the interests of various actors” (Littaye 2015:145).

Such reinventions of heritage foods and growing practices can entail major reworkings of migrant identities, as in the case of migrant communities that come to newly embrace an indigenous identity not claimed by their relatives back home (Littaye 2015:148; see also Minkoff-Zern 2012).

Incorporating such farmers into our analysis is an opportunity to engage the literature on agricultural values and decision-making beyond the relatively narrow realm of explicitly alternative growers. This literature, unsurprisingly, finds that despite the ecological costliness of their practices, conventional farmers are neither ignorant boors nor calculating capitalists (Lynne, Shonkwiler, and Rola 1988; Chapman, Satterfield, and Chan 2019), but actors attempting to navigate challenging political-economic circumstances in the effort to eke out a good life on the land (Fischer 2014), a term that Ybarra defines in her study of Chicana/o literature as

“embrac[ing] the values of simplicity, sustenance, dignity, and respect... [these values] function to preserve mutually healthy relations among individuals and communities. The values in goodlife writing implicitly integrate the natural environment as part of the community, and thus cultivate a life-sustaining ecology for humans.”

The meanings of these terms, however, are necessarily subjectively and contextually defined. Farmers’ conceptions of their role in the landscape therefore reflect economic and socio-political constraints and even as they drive decision-making in those areas where farmers are

comparatively free to choose (Vuillot et al. 2016), and are heavily influenced by knowledge shared among localized networks of trusted peers (Parks 2022).

The traits that give meaning to farmers' work are largely tangential to—but potentially concordant with—both alternative and conventional practices. Thus, in the agro-industrial heartland of Iowa, growers' assertion that “we feed the world” “provides an airtight justification for and defense of large-scale, high yield grain production. In making this defense, this script offers conventional grain producers language with which to explain and honor their livelihoods” (Rissing 2021:477; see also Comito, Wolseth, and Morton 2013). In Illinois, farmers' own “definitions of the successful farmer all value such traditionally agrarian attributes as stewardship, concern for family and, to a lesser extent, community involvement” (Walter 1997:55); in England, farmers understand independence as a core value (Emery 2015) and see an aesthetically tidy farm as a key marker of good farming (Burton 2004; Burton and Paragahawewa 2011). And though farmers' value systems and discourses can reinforce socially and ecologically harmful practices (Rissing 2021; Emery 2015; Walter 1995), they nevertheless show that conventional farmers are not merely carried along by inertia, nor crudely calculating rationality, but possess their own set of values that render their work socially—and not just economically—meaningful.

As will be discussed in detail in chapters 4 and 5, Mexican immigrant farmers I encountered in the Willamette Valley are far from uniform in their technical and entrepreneurial approaches to agriculture, differences not readily explained by ethno-linguistic or geographical origins. Thus, rather than positing culture as an *explanation* for why rural Mexican immigrants turn to a particular package of practices often at odds with mainstream agriculture, it is more appropriate to ask *how* and *under what circumstances* immigrants recall or reinvent specific cultural resources (like heirloom seeds or planting ceremonies), how they come to embrace new approaches and practices, and how their views of what constitute a good life and appropriate agriculture inform, accommodate, and adapt to new social and material circumstances.

Unknotting continuities and transformations in identity and cultural practice is an especially prominent question in studies of migrant populations (Appadurai 1996; Brettell and Sargent 2006). Pre-migration experiences can prepare migrants to engage in labor struggle, and migrants' “very distance from the host culture may... [serve] as the basis of unity” (Fink 2003:150; see also Asbed 2007:7–8), but this unity must often contend with the countervailing force of home-country divisions, whether ethno-linguistic or political (Fink 2003:151; Holmes 2013:84–86)—and in either case, “cultural *continuity* will only take us so far... immigrants themselves were quick to note important changes both in their everyday lives and in their longer-term accommodations to a new social order” (Fink 2003:152).

These complexities are subtly mapped by Littaye, who traces the roles of Mexican peasants, a migrant-led initiative in the US, and international nonprofits in elevating pinole¹⁰ to the status of internationally recognized “heritage food”:

“Though sparked by the pressures of living in a foreign land, the heritagisation of pinole sprung from migrants' desires to reclaim their indigenous roots, a process that was driven by Ozolcanian natives, outside of Ozolco.” (Littaye 2015:147).

Littaye argues that “heritagization...is an uneven process arising from an interplay of a plurality of actors at different scales (micro and macro) in diverse geographical locations... local, translocal and global actors play an active role” (Littaye 2015:152), and even when collaborating

¹⁰ “Made of toasted and ground kernels of corn with sugar, cinnamon or vanilla, it is usually prepared as a hot drink by adding water or milk and can also be eaten directly in its powdery form” (Littaye 2015:144).

on a shared project, migrant communities can find themselves at odds with their neighbors back home. Migrants may set out to lovingly conserve their culture in a new land, and they may succeed—but in the process, they find themselves transformed, even as their absence and remittances remake their communities of origin (Lopez 2015; Chu 2006; Sarat 2013).

Combining these theoretical insights with the above critique of food justice scholars' overly narrow focus on activists and nonprofits points us towards a new set of questions—the questions that will be explored in this dissertation, namely: how do immigrant farmers arrive at particular sets of values, practices, and aspirations? How do memories of home interact with labor experiences in the US, the messages and opportunities provided by nonprofits, and the material possibilities and limitations of the agricultural system to inform farmers' agrarian projects? Note that this is not a question about alternativeness or its absence. Rather than simply classifying farmers as alternative or not, as traditional or not, as food justice or not, I suggest that a better approach will be to thickly examine the sorts of *places* farmers create—the ecological, aesthetic, commercial, and affective qualities they value and attempt to cultivate.

With these perspectives in mind, this dissertation makes two primary contributions to the literature on Mexican immigrant agriculture, and to food justice and the study of agriculture—with, I hope, implications for wider conversations on the nature of culture, tradition, and their relationship with political-economic structures in the lives of working people. First, on an empirical level, this project is unusual (although not unique—see Wells 1996; Sánchez 2013) within the American food justice literature in incorporating immigrant farmers—or indeed other farmers of color—*unaffiliated* with any nonprofit or other institution as a central component of my analysis. Secondly, and drawing on this new ethnographic material, I argue that the ties between culture and approaches to farming have often been overly simplified in ways that reflect nonprofit discourses while neglecting the divergent practices of unaffiliated farmers, for whom labor experiences form a central site of agricultural learning. This learning goes well beyond the rather narrow sort of negative lessons often asserted in food justice literature (Sandoval and Rodine 2020). Far from rejecting the techniques of their former employers, the farmers I encountered often explicitly model their practices on that of their former employers, whether conventional or organic.

My emphasis on labor as a site for positive learning, and my related denaturalization of nonprofit food justice discourses, is not a rejection of the role of culture and tradition in agriculture. Both nonprofit-affiliated and independent farmers originate in rural Mexico, draw explicit connections between their agrarian upbringings and their current work, and engage in placemaking practices explicitly recalling and recreating elements of Mexican campesino lifestyles in Oregon (*a la* Sandoval and Rodine 2020). However, while the centrality of labor to identity, the planting of distinctively Mexican foods for family consumption, and a preference for outdoor and autonomous labor were nearly universal themes, there was no similar unity of views on agricultural practices—except within the orbit of nonprofits. In other words, while farmers' understanding and use of culture seem to point to a particular vision of the agrarian good life, the places they create to support their desired lifestyle can range widely along the conventional-alternative spectrum. While my evidence supports the proposition that these farmers' backgrounds make them *potentially* amenable to food justice projects, it also shows that food justice politics cannot be presumed as an automatic or even particularly widespread response to the migrant experience. Rather than transparently reflecting migrant preferences, therefore, food justice nonprofits should instead be understood to be actively engaged in

cultivating them, and engaging in a project to construct a set of agroecological practices and understandings as a core part of Latina/o immigrant identity.

Me in the field

Academic genre conventions, with the theory piled up in the front for your skimming convenience, can make it seem as if research is born from cool-headed critiques of the literature, that in the beginning there was theory and the rest flows from there. We continue to write this way even though anthropologists have long agreed that ethnographic work cannot be objective, and that both social position and personal disposition deeply inform our research choices and interpretations (Critchfield 1978; Weinberger 1992; Smith 1999; Shostak 1981). If methodologically “[e]verything I asked about—and everything I did not ask about, everything I let pass—potentially had an effect” (Wogan 2017:58), and if ethnography is not a transparent representation of reality, but something more or less artfully constructed, a literary genre (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Behar 2003:16–17), then it is worth situating myself as the author and explaining how I went about this research.

I was raised in Salem, Oregon and lived there until I left for college. Thereafter, though often living away, I always considered Oregon home and returned as often as possible. A mad scramble to find housing in my junior year of college found me in living in Farm House, surrounded by crunchy hippies with an enthusiasm for kale, fermentation, and food miles. Though I had never had an interest in any of this before, Farm House felt like home and its ethos became mine. In the years between college and grad school, like many of my peers, I participated in the WWOOF work-trade program on small organic farms¹¹ in Corbett, OR, and Bothell, WA, and worked as an AmeriCorps ‘volunteer’ at a school/community garden in a working-class immigrant neighborhood of east Portland. Although my college anthropology major was oriented to the south, shaped by my advisor’s work in Mexico and study abroad programs in Guatemala and Peru, and I applied to grad school still alight with enthusiasm for places that felt to me excitingly remote, by the time I arrived in Nashville to begin my studies I was feeling the pull of home. If I was stuck in Nashville during the academic year and shipped off to Mexico each summer, when was I supposed to go home? And thus, this project, with the idea of place right at its heart.

Thinking of my time playing farmer in Oregon, and all my middle class, college educated, extremely white friends playing farmer all across this country, I wanted to study what I thought of as *real farming*—farming that grew more than a few holey salads and unnecessary cucumbers, farming that actually fed people en masse and supported the farmers. I had meant to study agriculture in southern Mexico; now, I decided to study with Mexican farmworkers back home in the Willamette Valley, who after all mostly came from southern Mexico. I had never heard of food justice. I wanted to go home, Anthropology still meant Mexico to me, and studying with farmworkers seemed to square the circle and offer the potential of doing something socially and politically useful, too.

It was as simple as that. I contacted Jaime Arredondo, then Secretary-Treasurer of PCUN, the local farmworker union, and he suggested a labor contractor who might hire me. I spent that first summer picking blueberries, constantly exhausted, and generating very little useful data. And so later that summer, when Jaime introduced me to Javier, a former farmworker now

¹¹ Or, arguably, big gardens.

farming organically, I was delighted to have an excuse to take the day off from picking. By the time I left Javier's farm, I knew my project had shifted; a full account of Javier's work now occupies chapter 2, and it was his brilliance, passion, and charisma that led me to seek out other immigrant farmers to better understand the farmworker-to-farmer transition. Though only one chapter is directly focused on his work, Javier's influence on this project cannot be overstated, and his position in the first of my ethnographic chapters reflects the fact that this dissertation could be fairly read as an extended attempt to think through all he has told and shown me over the past seven years—perhaps even a covert version of the sort of dialogical,¹² narrative ethnographies I have long admired (e.g. Shostak 1981; Behar 2003; Wogan 2017; Crapanzano 1980). Though we don't always agree, his thoughts shape this writing far more profoundly than any of the academically recognized scholars you will find in my bibliography, and in latter chapters especially I refer back to him not simply as an example but also as a key local food justice theorist.

While this research takes place at home, and while my own connection to the Oregon landscape was a key motivation, this is not an insider ethnography (Bosse 2007:24; Peirano 1998). I have a claim to *latinidad* through my Argentinian immigrant father, but whenever my family debated the subject (for instance, when I was deciding what box to check on my college applications) I always came down on the side of not-Hispanic. I did not learn Spanish in the home, was never surrounded by Argentinian family or culture, and my dad shows little interest in his home country, which he left as a teenager. The ability to point to my father would prove useful in the field, reassuring potential informants that I have some cultural connection, helping to explain why a white guy speaks Spanish, and opening the door for the usual comments about Messi and *carne asada*. Nevertheless, in Salem, where the Hispanic population is overwhelmingly Mexicano, and at starkly socially segregated South Salem High School (“home of the Saxons”), I was socially coded as white, identified as such, and was surrounded by almost exclusively white and middle-class friends. The closest anyone in my immediate family has come to farm labor was a stint my parents spent on an Israeli kibbutz in '80s. I have local knowledge, but I certainly am not a member of the same social group as my primary interlocutors and have been spared the discrimination and structural inequities they face.

Despite being an obvious outsider among interlocutors and in many of the spaces they frequent, conducting anthropology at home provided certain obvious advantages (Moffatt 1992:206). I was familiar with the local landscape and geography, spared most of the culture shock and confusions that often mark the early phases of fieldwork. Identifying myself as a local also helped to place me socially: for most of the farmers with whom I worked, anthropologists are not a part of their world, but naming the town where I grew up or the high school I had attended was meaningful. Bearded, long-haired, and driving a Subaru with a Bernie sticker on the bumper, I visibly fit a social type of progressive urbanites with an interest in food—a type that, while perhaps outside their usual social circle, was certainly familiar and unthreatening; especially among those associated with nonprofits or who sell at farmers markets, people like me form an unremarkable part of the agricultural landscape. And indeed, I generally found both nonprofit staff and the wider, mostly white, world of alternative food actors to be deeply familiar, with both their outlooks and modes of expression closely resembling those of my

¹² “Dialogical” is a strange word for such texts, which are after all generally composed by and credited to a single anthropologist author. I use it to emphasize how such texts at least attempt to center and substantially reproduce the voice of some individual informant, with the anthropologists engaging in a running attempt to comprehend and respond to those words.

friends, acquaintances, and myself—a resemblance that occasionally provoked in me a prickly narcissism of small differences (Freud 1991:131), but that largely smoothed my passage in this world.¹³

Finally, despite the structural racism and social barriers dividing my social world and that of my informants, this divide was only partial. An old acquaintance from my time in AmeriCorps had worked at one of the nonprofits featured in chapter 3, and dropping her name helped to open that door. An old classmate introduced me to her friend, the son of an immigrant labor contractor who had joined the family business and was in the process in purchasing a mid-sized farm. There was the Bumble date that didn't lead to love but did introduce me to the Martinez brothers (featured in chapter 4). At several points I crossed paths with my parents' former students, including nonprofit workers and a farmer. More frequent in my personal life, however, were encounters with the white side of the food system, ranging from the various children of family friends dabbling in farm work on small-scale organic farms to an encounter at a lily-white Juneteenth party with an Oregon Dept. of Agriculture pesticide regulator who had partially frustrated my efforts with PCUN to ban the neurotoxic pesticide chlorpyrifos, and who was now eager to hear about my research.

While working at home offers numerous advantages, it also presents some complications. Perhaps most notably, in contrast to those anthropologists who ship out to some distant village, my personal life cannot be easily compartmentalized while in the field. Unlike the classic image of the ethnographer, dwelling with his subjects, observed by the natives even when attempting to write fieldnotes (Clifford 1986:1–2), I did not cohabit with my interlocutors, but instead lived first with family (in a generally white and affluent part of town), and later in a private rental. I worried over this decision: was I failing to properly immerse myself? Was I missing important home dynamics, the dinner table conversations? The answer to the latter question, at least, is yes, of course, almost certainly. But, in contrast to classic village ethnographies, my interlocutors did not live together in a centralized cluster, but were spread widely across multiple cities, towns, and counties; living with one family or another would have given me no particular access to the rest. I also felt uncomfortable with the prospect of attempting to insert myself into someone's crowded home when I had access to housing. Living apart, visiting my mostly white family and friends, enjoying my usual recreation, seemed not only a reasonable allowance to my own happiness and obligations, but also an honest reflection of the fact that I already have a defined social place in the Willamette Valley social landscape. This means that I may have had a less overwhelming experience of fieldwork than some; it also means, however, that I have been able to sustain fieldwork over an unusually long period, and that rather than flattering myself with some false idea of becoming a true insider, I have been able to cultivate research relationships that honestly reflect both my belonging and non-belonging in the scene.

Beyond these personal considerations, my approach to the field was in most respects fairly standard ethnographic practice. While I provide more detailed discussion of my methods and the various segments of my study population in the ethnographic chapters (especially chapters 3 and 4) a few brief remarks may be helpful here. My fieldwork was carried out in the Willamette Valley¹⁴ each summer, beginning in 2016, with an extended fieldwork period from

¹³ Conventional growers, of course, are far more likely to be conservative, and my appearance did mark me as an outsider in these settings, even among fellow white people, leading to a few awkward moments. However, these incidents were relatively few in number and did not present a significant or ongoing obstacle to my research.

¹⁴ Plus a handful of excursions to the nearby Hood River Valley, and a pair of trips to northern Washington's Skagit Valley.

May 2019 through December 2021.¹⁵ Having identified a population of interest, I sought to conduct participant observation and interviews with members of that population. Because the number of Mexican immigrant farmers in the Willamette Valley is relatively small, I was able to reach out to all of those for whom I could find contact information, and visited all those who would consent. In some cases, this turned into ongoing relationships, with me visiting and working on their farms regularly—in some cases weekly—over a period of months or years; others, I visited a handful of times; still others, I was only able to manage a single rushed interview. In the case of participant observation, which on a farm is generally hands-on—and un conducive to recording or writing—I would jot notes briefly if possible and attempt to write up my impressions in as much detail as possible upon going home. Formal interviews, by contrast, were nearly always recorded (the handful of exceptions being when interviewees preferred not to be recorded).

In sum, I identified 82 farms (or substantial market gardens), of which I was able to speak with at least one representative from some 56 of them—although those contacts ranged greatly in depth and quality, from brief one-off phone conversations to ongoing multi-year friendships. I interviewed a total of 100 people, mostly immigrant farmers; approximately 1/3 of the total interviewees were with nonprofit and government workers and volunteers; I also interviewed a handful of Anglo farmers and non-farming nonprofit participants.

In addition to time spent on the farm and with farmers, my research also included regular visits to farmers markets—a useful site to make contacts, observe how farmers market themselves, compare offerings, etc.—and nonprofit settings, including volunteering packing CSA boxes and visiting community gardens, farming classes, and educational workshops. Although the outdoor setting enabled me to conduct research throughout much of the COVID pandemic, it was necessary to suspend my field research at several points, during which time I conducted preliminary analyses and write-ups, transcribed, and conducted what little remote research was possible under the circumstances—primarily phone interviews and reviews of online material pertaining to nonprofit and government programs.

Towards the end of my fieldwork, Anáhuac Farm offered to hire me as a grant writer, and I ultimately agreed to serve in the position as an unpaid volunteer, meaning that I regularly attend staff meetings in person and on Zoom and collaborate with other team members in planning and writing grants, giving me intimate insight into this organization's self-presentation. I remain active in this role. Though not strictly part of my fieldwork, I also served as a volunteer policy researcher for the farmworker union PCUN for a period of approximately one year, working one day per week in their Woodburn office, attending lobbying events and Oregon Dept. of Agriculture rulemaking hearings, and the like; this work is not directly discussed in this dissertation, but does provide some important background to my thinking.

What follows

The rest of this dissertation is almost entirely devoted to my ethnographic research, presented in two mirror parts. The first (chapters 2 and 3) focuses on nonprofit-affiliated farmers, beginning with an in-depth case study of Javier Lara (chapter 2), an exemplary farmer in this mode. Having gone on from farming to found his own nonprofit initiative, and offering an

¹⁵ This fieldwork slowed significantly each winter, and suffered several significant interruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

exceptionally rich and well-articulated philosophy explaining his work, Javier is one of my oldest and most enduring field partnerships. Javier's chapter also necessarily involves a continuing questioning of my own role in the field and my ideas about farming. I have become a character in Javier's story, and rather than just neutrally reporting on his work and ideas, I attempt to honestly capture both the many ways in which his Anáhuac project captured my imagination, and the areas in which it continues to challenge my own views. This chapter operates in constant tension between the academic urge to criticize everything—in this case, Anáhuac's strain of cultural essentialism and Javier's emphasis on spirituality—and the ease of being swept entirely away by the beauty of the vision of food sovereignty being born at Anáhuac, a place meant to recreate the cultural landscape of southern Mexico in the Willamette Valley, an emplaced enactment of Javier's pan-indigenous belief in the fundamental unity of the American continent.

The following two chapters take a step back from the personal. Chapter 3 offers a wider review of nonprofit-affiliated Mexican immigrant farmers in the Willamette Valley, including an overview of the major programs that attempt to serve them, their successes and limitations, and a discussion of the farmers' shared characteristics and perspectives. This overview is grounded in a series of brief case studies of farmers representing various trends and tendencies within the nonprofit sphere, closely examining how actual nonprofit participants experience these programs and understand their farming projects. I show that, contra Javier's model¹⁶, these farmers do not consistently see their farming projects as a return to their cultural roots; while their personal histories have made them amenable to this farming approach, I find that these nonprofit programs are not simply channeling preexisting and broadly shared cultural desires, but rather actively cultivating new skills, preferences, and hopes, and in so doing bringing into being a distinctively patterned sort of place combining recollections of rural Mexico with marketing and cultivation practices originating in the US alternative agriculture and food justice nonprofit sphere.

Chapter 4 follows a similar course to Chapter 3, but with a focus on independent rather than nonprofit-affiliated farmers. They are far more varied in their approaches to farming than their nonprofit peers, including substantial differences in scale, crop mix, and placement on the conventional-alternative spectrum. I explore the variation in this category, outlining the major sub-groups and the substantial structural barriers they face before again profiling a series of farms representing the various types and tendencies at play. While I describe a handful of farmers who appear to concord with food justice expectations, the majority identify labor experiences as hired workers in the US, rather than cultural traditions in Mexico, as the major factor influencing their farming style. Thus, those who worked on organic vegetable farms in the US farm organic vegetables; those who worked on conventional nurseries produce conventional nursery stock. Though I find clear evidence that factors that could reasonably termed cultural influence these farmers' preference for an agrarian lifestyle, these preferences do not reliably manifest in specific agricultural techniques, business practices, or wider political opinions that accord with food justice theory. The physical places these farmers create do not resolve to a single clearly distinctive type of Mexican immigrant farm, even as they do demonstrate significant concurrence in the motivations underlying their placemaking projects.

¹⁶ Here and throughout, I treat Javier as a representative of the wider food justice movement. Though ideas similar to and overlapping with his have been formulated by more conventional scholars, I believe there is value in engaging him as not just an informant but a theorist in his own right.

Chapter 5 provides a mirror to Chapter 2. Alongside Javier, Tony is perhaps my closest field partner, and except in the darkest depths of winter (when his farm becomes impossibly and impassibly muddy) and the heights of the COVID pandemic, I visited him approximately weekly throughout my fieldwork. Tony is an independent farmer, working without the support or advice of any organization. His farm is a unique blend of the conventional and the alternative: he seems unconcerned with soil conservation or organics, has partnered with large-scale monocultural producers, and is open to doing so again. However, he also grows a diverse polyculture, distributes his produce locally, engages in a variety of reciprocal and non-market labor arrangements, and informally supports other Latinx farmers, by providing connections and access to land and machinery.

As with Javier's chapter, Tony's chapter is more narrative and reflexive than the middle chapters, exploring the development of the farm over time and Tony's role in the formulation of my research questions and answers. Unlike Javier, however, Tony does not advocate a spelled-out political or cultural philosophy. Instead, I seek to understand through him the meaning of many of the priorities expressed by other farmers: the importance of independence; the centrality of hard work to his identity; and a joy in the rural life, revealed most notably in his frequent summertime picnics in the field and his insistence on gifting large quantities of produce to visitors (including me). I also consider, through these meals and the stories and jokes he tells at them, how these values and practices connect him with his rural childhood in Oaxaca, and how he builds his farm as a place suited to living out this desired lifestyle. I suggest that these traits may be more useful to understanding the desires of most Mexican immigrant farmers than the more expansive ambitions of food justice activists.

Finally, the dissertation concludes with a brief chapter in which I tie together what has come before, seeking to synthesize the diverse sorts of farming projects into a coherent understanding of immigrant farmers' projects in terms of placemaking, aspiration, and the possibility for food justice.

Together, these figures and the places they create suggest the necessity for food justice scholars and activists to seriously reckon with the diversity of values and aspirations held by Mexican immigrants, and to recognize the adaptability of culture and heritage in informing agricultural decisions, rather than blithely accepting activists' and nonprofits' representations of marginalized people as naturally inclined towards food justice. They also point to the fundamental need to recognize experiences of political-economic structures—and, vitally, of labor—not only as traumas and barriers, but also as key factors and sources of learning that structure farmers' and farmworkers' positive placemaking aspirations and practices.

CHAPTER 2:

Javier: Food Sovereignty, Continental Indigeneity, and The Water of the Movement

My argument that food justice scholars have overemphasized nonprofits and ‘alternative’ projects while underplaying the importance of more variable (and often more conventional) independent farmers is a direct reflection of the trajectory of my fieldwork. This dissertation was born the day I met Javier Lara, an exceptional figure and one who in many ways embodies the superlative ideal of the nonprofit-affiliated farmer. For several years my fascination with his work—and consequently with ideas of tradition, continuity, and meaning-laden relationships between humans and plants—dominated my thinking on the subject of migrant farmers more generally. Despite a few early encounters that revealed the wide gap between Javier and many of his peers, and by extension the inability of standard food justice narratives to fully explain my data, nonprofits and nonprofit-affiliated farmers formed the core of my early fieldwork. Later, I would more deeply consider the independent farmers I had occasionally encountered, who intrigued me but fit uneasily against the expectations and research plans I had formed with Javier in mind.

Though I now recognize that those independent farmers are vital to a full understanding of Mexican immigrant agriculture in Oregon, the exact reason *why* they are so important is best understood in comparison with the nonprofit-affiliated farmers who are more often given the limelight. Before I proceed to show the ways that the food justice scholarship is too narrow in its focus, too confident in its belief in culture and experience of marginalization as a path towards an alternative food system, it is necessary to examine the food justice ideal. And perhaps alone among the farmers I encountered, Javier’s work wholly and unambiguously fits the description of food sovereignty. This then is one purpose of this chapter, which offers an extended discussion of Javier’s words and the place where he is attempting to make them real, a near-ideal instantiation of a food justice project: a model against which to compare the farming and placemaking projects we will encounter in the following chapters and mark the degrees by which this analytic fails to capture the full range of actual behavior. I do not suggest that those other farmers should be understood as lacking, except measured along the particular scale that food justice prescribes; all I claim is that they diverge, that their work must be understood in different terms, and grasping that difference requires understanding Javier.

Javier embodies a remarkable density of projects, ideas, and relationships, and among the farmers I have known he is uniquely interested in explicitly theorizing his own ambitions and values—though drawing more from his own experiences and lay teachers, and readings often more metaphysical than academic. Both the abundance of his plans and the degree to which he articulates their relationship to an overarching placemaking project makes him unrepresentative, but it also offers the opportunity to translate the academic theories and literatures engaged in the previous chapter into the comparatively solid stuff of a life and a farm. This chapter serves, then, as a sort of second introduction.

At Javier’s Anáhuac Farm, we have the opportunity to approach food sovereignty as enacted and emplaced by an indigenous migrant and former farmworker, and to observe an attempt to produce healthy, meaningful, and non-commodified food for fellow workers and

migrants. Here we find grounds to interrogate Gibson-Graham's (2006) and Tsing's (2015) theories for the possibility of non-scalable alternatives as a form of changemaking by exploring the achievements and limitations of one such project. As discussed in the introduction, these authors make the case that solutions need not be grand to be meaningful, that the creation of places of difference can be meaningful, even if those places may not be scalable—that, to take this case, a single farm can be important, even if that farm has no path to revolutionizing its neighbors. In this chapter we will spend some time on a farm that is truly creating something different, and will explore if and how it matters.

As noted in Chapter 1, this dissertation can be read as an extended, one-sided conversation with Javier, my attempt to make sense of everything he had told and shown me. Because this dissertation is in large part a critique of food justice thinking as too limited, too certain, too confident in culture as a concept and in oppression as a path to resistance, and because I treat Javier as a serious theorist of and stand-in for the wider world of food justice, my critique must also apply to his work. This is a tricky position for me to take. Although it is not necessary for ethnographers to particularly like their key informants, or to build an ordinary sort of friendship (Shostak 1981:25–26, 35–38), I do like Javier and consider him a friend. I respect his work at Anáhuac, believe in its value, and have continued to work as a volunteer with the organization since the end of my fieldwork.

Yet throughout this chapter I struggle with Javier in absentia, questioning in particular his emphasis on spirituality and culture, airing worries both substantive and emotional. Though it is no longer a “taboo for anthropology,” I weave this as a minor theme of “my own interpretations and responses to [his] story” (Behar 2003:xvii) not only because it seems more honest to acknowledge them, but also because the tension between doubt and enchantment is an essential part of this work. If the heart of my argument is that scholars have collectively been overly attentive to the romantic, appealing, and virtuous works of self-identified food justice actors, then my own experience falling under Anáhuac's benign spell may offer insight into how the field has arrived at this position. Leaving the trail of my own intellectual (and emotional) passage, rather than sweeping away all traces to leave a tidily authoritative finding, I hope to help you follow more readily not only my conclusions but the lines of evidence and reasoning that led me there, and to acknowledge that there remains no clear answer as to the ‘right’ way to fix our food system.

The focus of much of this struggle is with the meaning of culture, essentialism, and spirituality in food justice work in general, and at Anáhuac in particular. In Chapter 1, I argue that scholars have not been sufficiently cautious in their use of culture to explain differences in agricultural practice. Here, we encounter a minoritized farmer who wholeheartedly embraces culturalizing language, and whose approach to culture runs at odds with standard academic models. As we will see, though deeply curious about variation among different indigenous communities in the Americas, Javier tends to treat culture as something “ancestral” and essential, and to paint his work in terms of *rescate cultural*, or cultural revival, rather than creation. In many respects, this fits the definition of an “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm 1989). But this label has different—and concerning—connotations when applied to a small indigenous initiative as opposed to a western European nation-state:

“I am seriously concerned with the uncritical use of invention as a synonym of “fake,” “inauthentic,” or “disconnected” from pre-existing practices. This popularized use of the term “invention” can have a denigrating potential in commentary regarding indigenous traditions” (Theodossopoulos, 2013, p. 401).

Central to this chapter, then, will be the work of threading this needle: tracing how Javier remembers, renews, revives, and yes, sometimes invents traditions and cultural practices, not with the aim of catching out a con, but rather to trace the process by which Anáhuac Farm has become a meaningful place and figuring out what that meaning does for those who go there.

So, while the next two chapters will (mostly) focus on this or that *category* of farmers or institution, investigating types and seeking patterns, this chapter takes a more character-driven approach, beginning with a brief sketch of my first meetings with Javier. I will then flash back to take in his biography up to that point, before engaging, in turn, his philosophy of continental indigeneity and food sovereignty, the actual functioning of Anáhuac as a production farm, and its ultimate blossoming into a rapidly growing nonprofit program within the Alianza Poder network.^{17, 18}

Meeting Javier

My first summer of preliminary fieldwork, I picked blueberries with a labor contractor. I was a slow picker, quickly falling behind the rest of the crew, and even further behind the other young men. The mature bushes were often taller than I am, so the other workers were little more to me than disembodied voices. Add to that my shyness and it wasn't clear to me that I was getting much accomplished aside from picking berries. So when Jaime Arredondo—then Secretary-Treasurer of Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN, Oregon's farmworker union)—told me about a former farmworker who was now running a farm, I was eager for a good excuse to take a break from the berries.

I met Javier at his farm, Anáhuac Produce, on 2 rented acres between the wine country town of Amity and run-down Sheridan, home of a federal penitentiary. Early June in the Valley is cool, and though we met at midday, it was barely 60° and misting lightly. It was his first year on that land and his second as a farmer—he also rented a few acres near Molalla, an hour east, where he grew strawberries, a labor-intensive, high value crop the demand for which at farmers markets is nearly insatiable. He was tall, brown-skinned, his long-sleeved shirt partially unbuttoned and wearing a straw hat.

We began with a farm tour, him pointing out the 40-some vegetable varieties (lettuce, kohlrabi, chilis in the tilled field; tomatoes, cucumbers, nopal, and chayote in the hoop houses) and various experiments in cultivation technique. He showed me the rough stone altar at the center of the field and the *yerba santa*, *pápalo*, and other medicinal and culinary Mexican herbs growing here and there. He showed me his small tractor, and explained how he harvests chanterelles and other wild mushrooms in the mountains, as well as his plans to expand into mushroom cultivation. He told me that he sold at two Portland-area farmers markets (including the Forest Grove Farmers Market—see following chapter), through the nonprofit Adelante Mujeres' distributor program, as well as selling strawberries through the PCUN network.

¹⁷ Alianza Poder is a network of nine sister organizations that have grown up around the farmworker union, PCUN. The member organizations relevant to the current discussion are PCUN, the Farmworker Housing Development Corporation (FHDC, where Anáhuac's community gardens would eventually be located), Salem-Keizer Coalition for Equality (SKCE, a parents' group focused on advocating for Latinx and immigrant students in the public school system), and CAPACES Leadership Institute (CLI, of which Anáhuac is a program).

¹⁸ With only a handful of minor exceptions, this chapter describes the Anáhuac project as it existed up until the early months of 2022. In the time since then, the project has undergone significant further development that must unfortunately be left aside here.

But the physical infrastructure and even the business model were of secondary interest to both of us beside more philosophical questions. One of the first things that Javier told me is that campesinos like himself grew up eating healthy. In my notes, I wrote, *His community grew corn, squash, beans... They ate local. Farmworkers here work too hard, they don't have the time to grow their own food. He says that he wants to sell fresh, local food to them, so they don't have to be dependent on larger economy that results in people eating junk food. Money shouldn't be a barrier. He introduced the chayote, nopal, herbs as part of that goal. I added, The nopal, [and] other herbs, mostly have been selling to white people at the farmers markets. [It's] 90% whites who buy it, he estimates. Talked about how they're looking to try something new. He feels good about this, teaching people new things.*

This captures a central paradox of Anáhuac in those early days: Javier's ideas about food sovereignty were already well developed, the aspirations for what he would later create already in place—but often butting up against the contradictions imposed by the economics of being a small farmer. But despite this moment of doubt, what my notes and memory preserve is enthusiasm: here, at last, I had encountered the sort of farmer I was hoping for, and expecting. I had set out, initially, to study how farm labor experiences informed workers' thoughts on agriculture and the environment, but for the most part had found people frustratingly focused on piece-rates and short on philosophy. Javier provided, and for the rest of the summer his farm was a welcome respite from the tedium of blueberry picking.

Javier's story: the beginning

Javier Lara was born in 1973, in Chilapa, a small city in Guerrero, Mexico. When he was born the area still had a rural feel; he remembers donkeys carrying firewood through the streets. His parents and grandparents had grown up in the country, and in our first conversation, he spoke about young memories of the corn harvest, spending the whole day harvesting and cooking right there in the field. His abuela sold goat and beef stew, and he remembers helping her slaughter and butcher animals. Food was an important part of his life, and he understood where it came from. In these origins, and for much of his early adult life in the US, Javier's story closely resembles those of many of the farmers I have interviewed. As we draw nearer to the present, however, he begins to diverge in significant ways, perhaps most significantly through higher education, involvement in the organized farmworker movement, and increased contact with and skill in moving through Anglo-majority spaces.

I have heard Javier tell his life story many times—not just in our conversations, but also in conversations with other farm visitors, in presentations before various potential funders and partner organizations, and in a short 2013 student documentary made by University of Oregon's Latino Roots project (The Story of Javier Lara 2013). The purposes of the retellings vary, but across its iterations it remains roughly constant, not only in its details but in the narrative structure, suggesting which aspects of his own story Javier considers essential. The early details of his life tend to remain slightly out of focus. He rarely talks about the specifics of his parents' work or his family relations; instead, he often takes a somewhat ethnographic tone. He usually begins these life histories by identifying himself as a member of the indigenous Nahuatl community and saying that Nahuatl is the language of his people, not volunteering that he himself did not learn the language. Stories of his grandparents' rituals tend to blend with his

more recent studies into indigenous spirituality to the point it can be difficult to distinguish childhood reminiscence from his current perspectives on indigeneity.¹⁹

The years that follow often fall out of the story, at least the standard version, the one he offers to tour groups and foundation funders. Javier liked cars, and had ambitions beyond what was available in Chilapa. He left town at the age of 13 to work in cities around Mexico, and at the age of 17, he crossed the border, following a brother who already had legal status in the US. This was before the era of Prevention Through Deterrence, the US policy that has pushed migrant routes into the deadly deserts and mountains of the Southwestern interior (De León 2015): he paid someone to take him across at San Diego, where he had to scale a wall, sprint a few hundred feet, then climb another fence into a neighborhood, where a van was waiting to take him and his companions past the San Clemente checkpoint. When he was caught, the Border Patrol just released him on the other side of the border, where he tried again.

Once in the US, Javier found work in agriculture. He started in the southern California asparagus harvest—notoriously difficult stoop labor, requiring quick work with a sharp knife—before moving on to hoe tomatoes and chilies, then up to Madera for grapes and Stockton for apricots, peaches, and cherries. He continued up to Yakima and Wenatchee, Washington, for the apple harvest, then south to the Willamette Valley for Christmas trees. And then repeat, repeat, until eventually a Christmas tree farmer near Canby, Oregon, hired him full time and asked him to find two others who worked just as hard. Javier brought on his brother and a friend, and they lived together in a small trailer on the farm. Being settled had its advantages—not least, winning legal residency status and eventually citizenship through his marriage²⁰—but the work remained difficult and conditions demeaning. “The bosses look at you like a tractor, like an object”²¹ he said in the Latino Roots documentary (The Story of Javier Lara 2013); in our conversations, he often told me that his bosses saw him as “just a back and two arms,” and weren’t interested in his knowledge or in teaching him.

I gathered this story in multiple more or less partial tellings over the course of years. In most cases, these tellings were presented not merely as biography or reminiscence, but a coherent narrative with a clear moral. His life story is not just a story, but a lesson, a quality best captured by presenting the story in his own words,²² as he told the audience at a 2020 meeting of the Oregon Community Food Systems Network:

I was exposed to a lot of the practices that my grandmother, without even telling us there was a ceremony going on, just growing up as a child... we would walk to the well and on a specific date of the year we would bring lots of offerings, lots of food, different dances and music and we would honor the water. We would do an amazing encounter with the water every single year, but I never questioned it and I was never told what was going on,

¹⁹ Indigenous migrants, most notably from the state of Oaxaca, have comprised an increasingly significant portion of the migrant and farmworker populations since the 1980s. They face increased discrimination and poverty in Mexico, and are often found at the very lowest rungs of the agricultural labor hierarchy (Stephen 2007; Holmes 2013; Zabin 1992).

²⁰ As we will see in subsequent chapters, many of the farmers in this study had comparable timelines, arriving in the 1980s and 90s. While this surely reflects in part the time necessary for a farmworker to accrue savings and start a business—a fact reflected in the fact that most farmworkers who own businesses are middle aged (Pisani and Guzman 2016:239)—it also likely reflects the increasing legal and practical difficulties in entering the US in recent years (De León 2015; Golash-Boza 2016). We may therefore wonder whether more recent arrivals will have to opportunity to replicate Javier’s trajectory.

²¹ “*Los patrones te miraban como un tractor, como un objeto*”

²² Here and elsewhere, I have made very minor edits to spoken quotations for clarity and to remove fillers.

we just did it. It was something that you always did. So I always had these amazing experiences growing up, but... we were also very influenced by other factors, in this case we are influenced by the legacy of El Norte, the United States. So having no idea what El Norte was, eventually I end up here, you know, I encountered the border five times, crossed it—crossed the border five times. And I encountered El Norte, the United States. So I was a farmworker for several years and eventually, you know just working every single crop in the mega agricultural productions, I never really understood what I was doing, I was I just really the labor... just get up at 5 a.m. go and harvest the asparagus. Finish the asparagus and get up at 5 a.m. and go follow the strawberries. And then—and so on and on and on. And then get up at 5 a.m. again and go harvest the apples. So I always questioned it, is it really that's all we have here to offer, you know, just my back and my arms and all these stereotypes that we all know, you know, when someone talks about Mexicans, you know, what does that mean. So I always of course, all those labels were like a tattoo all over my body, and at one point I started to believe it.

Though the fact that he was presenting to what was in effect Oregon's organized alternative agriculture community no doubt colored the way he told this story, this didactic, moral mode of narrating his own life was not confined to such important venues and situations. To a significant extent, even outside of settings where such a narrative frame might conceivably have some strategic use, Javier narrates his early life in terms not of personal dramas but his membership in a wider community.

To this point, Javier's story—if not his way of telling it—is typical of the farmers in this study. But once settled in the Willamette Valley his life began to diverge. Sick of fieldwork, he got factory job, but found that even though he was encouraged to apply for promotions he kept being passed over in favor of white coworkers. In the early 2000s, he started taking courses part-time at the local community college with the intention of getting a transfer degree to become an engineer. However, in his final semester, he took an Intro to Chicano Studies course, and everything changed.

It was in that Chicano Studies course, and in the Ethnic Studies courses he went on to take at Oregon State University, that he finally understood why he was treated as a piece of machinery in the field, why he encountered casual racism from strangers. These studies led him to begin to get involved with PCUN and see himself as part of an immigrant and farmworker movement, but it also brought personal changes. Moved by his new studies, his visits home to Mexico stopped revolving around tourist sites and drinking with friends, and instead he began seeking out indigenous communities to interview elders, asking when fertilizers were first introduced in their communities and how they farmed before, edging from farming sideways into questions about agricultural ceremonies and spirituality. He worked briefly for the Salem-Keizer school district, then for Head Start, before spending 3.5 years as a PCUN organizer. He even considered pursuing an MA to continue studying indigenous spirituality and farming before eventually deciding that what he really wanted to do was start a farm, to put all these ideas into practice.

If his education was the most significant factor in this new life trajectory, another important development during these years also seems to have set him apart from many of his peers: his marriage to an Anglo Oregonian working a white-collar state job. He is one of the very few farmers in my sample who married an Anglo, and while he rarely mentions her (they separated a couple years into my research), their marriage suggests if not a comfort, then at least a strong capacity for navigating Anglo society, which has served him well both as a farmer and,

especially, as a nonprofit manager. Her resources as a middle-class professional—not least her state employee’s health insurance benefits—would have also been a significant help in Anáhuac’s early days since any new farm requires many months of work and investment before yielding income.

Anáhuac as a spiritual and cultural project

Though it has gone through multiple iterations and site changes, Anáhuac’s character as a place has shown a striking underlying consistency. From the crops he grows to the kitchens he builds to the ceremonies he carries out there, Anáhuac is deeply defined by connections Javier draws to his home region of southern Mexico, as well as to a distinctive vision of pan-American indigenous culture and eco-spirituality. Though the farm functioned as a business, and will be discussed in those terms in the subsequent section, he conceived it first and foremost as a cultural project (which for Javier is inseparable from spirituality), meaning that a detailed exploration of Javier’s philosophy and understanding of culture is needed. Although Anáhuac is defined by food—both production and consumption—food itself is an end in itself, but one part of a greater whole:

“While most Indigenous people today strive to attain food sovereignty, Indigenous foodways historically were not expressly focused on the right to attain food or control a production system. Rather, these food systems have primarily been about maintaining culturally, ecologically, and spiritually appropriate relationships with the plants and animals that provide food” (Raster and Hill 2017:268).

Anáhuac is not just about accessing food, but about eating food grown from the right seeds, cooked in the right way, and eaten together with others in the context of good relationships—and it is about creating a meaningful, even sacred, relationship with the place where all that planting, cooking, and eating happens.

This all brings us back to Javier as I met him in the summer of 2016. That summer, and those following, I visited the farm often, helping out with whatever work was at hand: preparing beds with compost and fertilizer; seeding; putting up the plastic covering on the high tunnels; tying up tomatoes; and, of course, harvesting. But while we worked hard—and while Javier surely worked even harder when I wasn’t around, often putting in 14-hour days in summer and too rarely seeing his children—visits to Anáhuac were inevitably social engagements. Often one or the other of us would pick up lunch at *Muchas Gracias*, or we would drive into town to eat; later, when the farm moved to a new site, he would make us lunch in the kitchen he’d built in an old shed with one whole face open to the weather: leftover maitake mushrooms from market, fresh greens, and tortillas heated on the *comal* over a fire. And these lunches only became more expansive after he and his wife separated and a new partner, Margeaux, took on an increasing role at the farm.



Figure 2. The wood-fired kitchen at Anáhuac. Photo by the author.

After lunch, we would lie in the grass and talk—talk so long that my ethnographer’s excitement at all the stories would fade, replaced with anxiety on his behalf at all the work we weren’t doing. A lot of my understanding of his ideals and aspirations came from these mealtime conversations. Our first day, snacking on cucumbers picked from the vine, he explained the meaning of the farm’s name: Anáhuac meant “land of the people,” relating it to the same root as “Nahua” and “Nahuatl” (in later years he would translate the word to mean “surrounded by water”; in other words, an indigenous name for the American continent). He then told me four principles guiding his work:

1. produce the healthiest food possible—autonomous production, without pesticides.
2. rescue traditions and culture.
3. value labor and human rights—a category in which he included his work with PCUN, his educational efforts (then largely still aspirational), and the aim of treating laborers not just as “one back and two arms” but valuing the whole person.²³
4. “everything we know, we share; everything we have, we share,” as long as the other party shares the same values and works towards a common goal.

As we will see, these values have remained present in Anáhuac—if, perhaps, in variable proportion—as it evolved from an idealistic farm business into a nonprofit program.

When Javier talks, he is quiet but undeniably charismatic, and even in those days he tended to speak rather grandly about “our” values, as if Anáhuac were more than just him and his

²³ Javier employed workers only in small numbers and only for the strawberry harvest, hiring them under one of the very few PCUN union contracts then in existence. I never had the opportunity to meet these workers; by the time my main fieldwork period had begun, his work had changed from production to education and thus no longer involved hired farm labor.

little tractor, conjuring a network, a movement, something bigger than a farm. While my instinct and inclination was to steer towards the political, thrilling when he mentioned his admiration for the Zapatistas and his vision of Anáhuac as part of the same revolution, his stories inevitably turn towards the cultural and—especially—the spiritual. He told me that the water drops in his new Anáhuac logo (see image below) was inspired by a dream in which an old Native man handed him a crystal ball containing turquoise. He is enthusiastic about birds, stopping work to point out circling vultures or hawks (which he often claimed were eagles), whistling to them and speaking too quietly to hear. He collects feathers, using them in his ceremonies (more below); he even told me once that, upon his first arrival at the farm, a bird’s feather in the field was the sign he was in the right place.



Figure 3. The Anáhuac logo. Image courtesy of Javier Lara.

I’ve kept a dream journal for years, and while I don’t see either dreams or birds as omens, this sort of talk felt comfortable enough to me: mystical, but only vaguely so. So too with his talk of “energy,” a force or substance he conceptualizes flowing through people and the wider world, animating, empowering, and healing. I might have been more judgmental hearing these ideas from a colleague or a casual acquaintance, but Javier’s indigeneity gave him a pass: anthropologists expect to encounter other ontologies, so his more esoteric interests seemed if anything to make an even more appropriate ethnographic informant. I was looking for alternative agriculture with immigrant farmers, and this was the juicy stuff, proof that immigrants carried older, better, ways of farming.

The most overt and elaborate performances of this indigenous agro-spirituality came at Javier’s semi-annual ceremonies held to mark planting and harvest. I attended two such events,²⁴ and heard his plans for and recounting of others. They varied somewhat in the particulars, but each brought together upwards of 50-100 participants, a diverse mix of indigenous people, Latinxs, and Anglos, including friends, staff from the Alianza Poder network, and a handful of regular customers from the farmers market. People arrived gradually and found ways to help:

²⁴ In addition, I attended a ceremony dedicating the nonprofit program’s new *cocina tradicional*, three sweat lodge ceremonies, and witnessed smaller and less formal ritual procedures at innumerable lesser gatherings.

indigenous women took the lead in preparing the meal, while those less talented were assigned to gather flowers and prepare the wreath for the altar.



Figure 4. Before the harvest ceremony. Javier pictured center, standing, in orange. Photo by the author.

The two ceremonies I attended varied in some particulars (e.g. the first involved the sprinkling of the margins of the field with liquor, while the second did not), but the major features were largely similar. Here I present, with minor edits for clarity and concision, the account of the 2019 harvest ceremony I recorded in my fieldnotes:

Before the conch is blown, some people start to gather. There's a group beyond the altar [i.e. a pit with a flower wreath arched over it], kneeling, facing back towards the rest of us, who lingered opposite, some sitting on the ground, some in folding chairs, some standing. A few, both Anglo and Latino, taking pictures. There's a cluster of bowls and baskets in front of the altar: of fruit, of produce, a pie, a bowl of mole... Javier announces the ceremony will start in 5 minutes, and asks no pictures—he wants us to be present, not through our technology.

The kneeling people are the nana and tata [grandma and grandpa] Mixtecos and their family... there is also a man w/ a beaded necklace and a necklace w/ a big copper plate, and he blows the conch. He turns out to be Purepecha [another indigenous Mexican people], as he explains later on he's not from the same pueblo as the others, but is from a similar background, and he has a whole kit of ceremonial instruments—deer-hoof rattles, a turtle shell he drums on at the end of the ceremony. A woman in a beautiful woven dress has a censer burning copal replenished from time to time w/ bits broken off from a couple balls kept in a woven reed box. Javier talks quietly w/ some of the Mixtecos, and

then w/ a young Latino man, lighter skinned, w/ long curly hair, white tunic and red headband. Javier talks quietly, seriously, as if instructing him on something important. They kneel, raise hand-rolled cigarettes in the air, smoke them, move them slowly through the air to spread the smoke. The conch is blown.

Javier talks first in Spanish, then English, back and forth. But gives fairly long speeches in each, so they end up being somewhat different, although not in their thematic content... He welcomed everyone, talking about the importance of giving back to Mother Earth a little of what she's given us. Introducing the Mixtecos who are going to lead the ceremony. Talks about rescate cultural [cultural rescue, or cultural revival]. These general themes are then repeated by one of the younger Mixtecos, who thanks the elders for being with us. The elders themselves talk quite little.

It's been raining the whole time, but lightly, easy to ignore. But the rain picks up, becomes soaking, cold. Some raise their hands, close eyes and look up, performing enjoying and appreciating the rain. I feel as if I should do the same—let it soak me, get rid of my stupid rain jacket and let myself be wet. But—it's cold! People start getting jackets, umbrellas. Javier asks four men to go get a tent, and they set the first up over the altar and the officiants, and the next two over the rest of us.

It is said—several times, by several people—that Mixtecos are the people of the lluvia [rain]. That we should be grateful for the rain, that it gives life.

With the rain, it's fairly impossible to hear. Each of the four at the front, kneeling but w/ backs straight, upright, speak at various points, sometimes praying, sometimes consulting quietly with each other. This largely took place in Mixteco, which was not translated. The only words I understood were the names of saints: San Cristobal, etc. Sometimes there were moments in Spanish, which Javier translated—somewhat loosely, turning it in typical Javier directions towards emphasizing universal spiritual energy, etc. etc. Not misleading translations, but putting a bit of a new age gauze on it.

Copal was smoking the whole time—the woman w/ the censer brought it around the crowd, getting the smoke on people. The censer then went to the tata and nana: she used it to smoke the flower arch, following it along its arc various times. He smoked the pit, towards the bottom, and to four directions...

Then it's time for offerings. Translating for the officiants, Javier says that people can bring forward offerings, to repay in a small way what the earth has given us. Invites prayers, songs, “even if they are not in our language.” The Mixteco leaders start us off with the things that had been set out, and then rained on. A bowl of red mole from the nana. A pie, a bowl of soup, fruit, flowers. All down in the hole, gently, placed rather than tossed. The hole is so deep this requires kneeling down, even in some cases prostration. People come forward one at a time, or sometimes in pairs—like Javier and Margeaux, who each has a basket w/ a few large squash, ears of corn, Javier has a pumpkin. This section seems to go on for a long time, with multiple bouquets, lots of fruit, lots of vegetables of all descriptions, bunches of grapes. Most kneel and bow their head and seem to pray a while before placing their offering. A mestiza wearing a Mayan huipil sings in Spanish—giving thanks for the corn and frijol, a short song, simple, repeating over and over. I had felt pleased w/ my offering, a chanterelle—but it felt so small compared to the baskets of produce many people brought forward.

Maybe the most interesting offering—and the only one that receives an explanation, comes from a young woman, who explains that in Spanish that she's also

from Oaxaca, a town near the officiants. That she remembers her grandparents making offerings like this, but hasn't done it in this country. That it is good to do this. Underscores that this ceremony is the same as the ones she remembers, the ones of the abuelos. She says that she's a farmworker, that they grow food here, but that don't do this ceremony, that this ceremony is important as a way of connecting with the land that provides. She has brought a big plastic jug of a light brown drink w/ big chunks of pineapple floating in it. One of the Mixtecos, the younger man, explains that in Oaxaca, for ceremonies they always use pulque, but can substitute another drink. Javier translates into English, adding that pulque as a kind of cactus wine, and comparing this drink to kombucha, saying that "we" have kombucha too, that this is equivalent, and saying that we're giving this good probiotic to the earth. The nana and the man then use a mug to ladle out scoops of the drink, offering it over and over to the four sides of the pit, repeating the gesture until a gallon or so had been poured out.

Offerings slow. The man, translated by Javier again invites ppl to come forward with offerings, songs, prayers. There are a few latecomers, teens, who deposit their offerings—a banana flower, some grapes from a plastic supermarket clamshell—rather quickly, without the lengthy kneeling. Then a few people come to speak. A short, dark man w/ long hair comes forward, is dressed in sort of new-age indigenous clothes. He says (in Spanish) that he's from Guerrero, Nahuatl like Javier, talks about how it is good that we do this, that mother earth and father sun, that mother rain and father wind give us so much and we give back here now a tiny portion of that. Says that, here, we go to the store and organic is expensive! But back home, they don't call food organic, they just call it corn, beans, squash. That they have less disease because of this. That this is good, that we're returning to it here. Says that if we make a mistake in our ceremony, forgive us because it is of ignorance—but that this excuse applies just once. Says that we may not all have known that we should bring an offering, but hopefully we all return next year and bring others, and that we should follow the example of the nana who made something, made a mole to bring, that we should all buy something, or make something, bring something to offer.

Things are wrapping up. Javier thanks everyone: those who, without being asked, asked him what they could bring, or just volunteered: those who brought meat, tortillas, etc. (I'd asked what to bring, heard nothing back. Felt bad.) He said those people know who they are. Thanks the elders. Acknowledges and thanks Capaces [one of the nonprofits in Alianza Poder, which Anáhuac later merged; see below], and asks if maybe one of their folks could speak about this ceremony, how this all fits with their agenda as an NGO? A young woman from Capaces speaks up. She's light skinned, thin, not dressed like she spends a lot of time either at ceremonies or on farms. She's shy, but speaks about rescaté cultural—speaks not in specifics, but emotionally, about how important this is...

As these closing statements were taking place, the officiants started shoveling dirt from the big pile back into the pit. The tata went first, then the others, shoveling carefully, slowly, gently placing the earth down on the food and fruits and flowers—not tossing it, but gently placing it. Then Javier took a turn, then the Guerrero guy—who picked up the pace, shoveling fast, working like a person who works and is filing in a hole.

And then Javier announces: it's time for the meal, for those who want to stay! We're moving one state over from Oaxaca to Guerrero, for a typical pozole verde!!

Following the formal ceremony, the occasion turns into a party: first enormous vats of pozole or mole or piles of meat from pit-roasted lamb, served by the women who cooked it and eaten at long tables or on the grass; later, music and dancing, perhaps a performance by dancers from Morelos, masked and sequined, or else by Javier's *son jarocho*²⁵ ensemble, stomping out rhythms and strumming furiously on their *jaranas*. And later, perhaps, ice cream and mezcal and Javier's homemade pinot noir, with the last few guests camping out for the night. Altogether, these *ceremonias* seem to impress attendees—none of whom, as far as I could determine, had seen anything like it in our region before—and everyone seemed to be having a good time.

The first of these ceremonies that I attended struck me as enchantingly outside the rationalizing agro-industrial paradigm, and an easy confirmation of early, naïve formulations of my thesis that strained to find cultural continuity determining agricultural practice, and Javier did nothing to dissuade me of that perspective. He presents his ceremonies as simple reconstructions of traditional Mesoamerican ceremonies in the north. Speaking of Anáhuac's work more generally, he once said

“I want to go back to my grandmother's house. I want to go back to the center, to my equilibrium. Just like the ancestors, the Toltecs,²⁶ they knew their heart so well. So how can we do that? Well we do the old practices... find your heart and ask those questions, you know. Am I really here to be harvesting so many strawberries, 10 hours a day so I can pay for that car that I'm supposed to have, and I supposed to own, right? That's the big question, but ask that question to your heart. Because that's how it was done in the past. And that's why for us it's so important to bring it to Woodburn, Oregon, even though we are 1000 miles away from my home. I still have the same heart. And I still have the ancient knowledge in me, in my genes, right, so how can I wake them up?”

In this quotation, we see two key themes that will repeat throughout this chapter, and that are central to Anáhuac: ritual practice as a *return to tradition*, “to my grandmother's house...the ancestors, the Toltecs... the old practices,” while simultaneously being something that we can all discover for ourselves, a question to answer in “your heart.” And this account of Javier's approach fits well the rituals I witnessed, which conform in many of their elements and accoutrements to indigenous Mexican rituals described in the ethnographic literature (González 2001:107–113; Vogt 1976:55; Sandstrom 1975:188–216), and whose felt authenticity is confirmed by the statements of the other participants, while also clearly bearing marks of innovation and invention.²⁷ Even their variation comports, it would seem, with Nahua custom:

“one might expect a greater reliance on tradition or rules [in ritual] than in other social realms. Instead we find some variation in the rituals themselves, variation in participation by villagers, and variation in when rituals are held. There are rules and norms in Nahua life but certain of these are often subverted or modified depending on a number of factors” (Sandstrom 1975:v).

My discussion of the ceremony to this point has been in nearly exclusively spiritual and cultural terms, reflecting the way in which Javier and his guests approach the festivities. But these events take place in a material context, and the shifting realities of making a living can

²⁵ A folk music style typical of the Mexican state of Veracruz, typified by an ensemble of variously-sized *jaranas*, a guitar-like instrument.

²⁶ When Javier refers to the Toltecs, he is generally speaking of the highly spiritual people described in the best-selling book, *The Four Agreements* (Ruiz 1997)

²⁷ For instance, the central element of the 2022 winter solstice ceremony—a sort of slow, stately, maypole-like dance of colored ribbons—came to Javier in a dream while fasting in the high desert of eastern Oregon.

substantially impact the perceived relevance of agriculturally-rooted religious practice (e.g. Carlsen 1997:125–143). Given the necessity for small alternative farmers to constantly carve out new niches and markers of distinction amidst a crowded marketplace (Khanal and Mishra 2014; Schilling, Attavanich, and Jin 2014; Guthman 2004), the appeal of perfectly traditional indigenous people to funders of food and garden nonprofits (Minkoff-Zern 2012), and the wider capacity of capital to transform sites of cultural difference into opportunities for profit (Harvey 2002), it is worth pausing briefly to consider the role of this overt and public indigeneity in the Anáhuac project as an economic enterprise.

Dismissing out of hand the possibility that these ceremonies are mere schtick, nothing more than marketing, there remains the fact that Javier's self-presentation was highly effective with customers at the Portland Farmers Market, helpfully distinguishing Anáhuac from the mass of Anglo vendors. This presentation included not only major ceremonies, but also the visual imagery of the Anáhuac logo (see image above) and the Anáhuac name itself. Once the project had become a nonprofit (see below), Javier on several occasions directly stated that emphasizing an indigenous identity would differentiate the Anáhuac nonprofit program from nearby Latinx food justice organizations in the eyes of funders. While the durability of his focus on these themes, and the attention he gives them even in private settings, makes it obvious that his interest in indigenous identity and spirituality is not reducible to—or even primarily motivated by—marketing, the fact remains that this sincere performance of a recognizable and appealing exotic eco-indigeneity has served Javier well (compare to Conklin 1997). Alongside his intelligence and charisma, Anáhuac's strategic essentialism lent first the business and later the nonprofit a mystique and attraction that has drawn in customers and participants, the Capaces board, and more than one anthropologist.

Adding to my questions about the marketability of Anáhuac's indigenous identity, I soon came to realize that many of Javier's spiritual formulations were often decidedly non-traditional, or at least not traditional in the sense I'd hoped for. Thanks to his studies in anthropology and folklore—both academic and popular—it was often unclear whether traditions he described were ones he had learned about in his own childhood or 'just' things he'd learned about and decided to (re)create. These questions were heightened when he recommended books like *the Four Agreements* (a *New York Times* best-selling self-help book of purportedly Toltec wisdom, blurbled by Oprah and Deepak Chopra), and *La Luz Angelmatica* (by the Jewish Mexican scientist Jacobo Grinberg, whose eccentric work attempted to prove the possibility of telepathy). Had I been unknowingly studying an ethnographic reconstruction or some sort of new-age pastiche? Intellectually I knew that outside attempts to demand 'authenticity' of indigenous people are unreasonable, improper, and tied up with racist and colonial imaginaries (Theodossopoulos 2013; Conklin 1997). But despite all our efforts, feeling colors intellectual understanding.

As Javier grew closer to his new partner, Margeaux—who is white and from New Jersey—his same talk of energies began to strike me less as 'indigenous' and 'traditional' and more like 'woo-woo hippie shit'. This impression was reinforced when I met his friends and customers from the Portland Farmers Market, a diverse group tied together by an interest in herbalism and eclectic spiritualities. Once at a party, over a delicious meal of *chiles en nogadas*,²⁸ Javier and Margeaux happily nodded while an Anglo woman wearing a copper crown to conduct spiritual energies explained how light-beings called Lemurians—cousins of the Atlanteans—live beneath Mt. Shasta. I tried to tamp down my judgment—it's not my role, it's

²⁸ Green chilis stuffed with meat and apple, drizzled with white walnut sauce, and topped with pomegranate.

ethnographically interesting regardless, isn't it fascinating how he syncretizes his own traditions and research with the new age beliefs of white Oregonians—but I was not always successful.

Easier for me accept²⁹—and ultimately a more significant and lasting element of Javier's worldview—was (and is) his deep interest in indigenous North American spiritualities. This can only be understood in light of his emphatic assertion of what I came to think of as a *continental* indigeneity. Renaming North America as Anáhuac, he works to erase the importance of the US-Mexico border, instead identifying himself (and, later, the indigenous Mixtec and Zapotec participants in the Anáhuac nonprofit program—see below) as “native, native American, native from this continent.” This interest in centering indigeneity as a claim to belonging that exceeds and predates US national boundaries resonates with the 1960s Chicana/o Movement's recasting of the Southwest as the Aztec homeland Aztlán (Serrano Nájera 2015; Miner 2014; see also Ybarra 2016:21). It also echoes other indigenous efforts asserting that “renaming the continent would be the first step toward epistemic decolonization and the establishment of Indigenous peoples' autonomy and self-determination” (Keme and Coon 2018).

This attempted renaming—and Javier's double use of Anáhuac to signify both his small farm and the American continent—is not only a creative rhetorical move, but signals an intended reformulation of participants' relationship to the border and the state. At grant meetings, team members regularly expressed frustration at government grants that limit eligibility to federally-recognized tribes, while failing to recognize that, in Margeaux's words, “our community has migrated to the northern part of this continent”—that is, a migration within a wider continental homeland, not immigration to a truly foreign land. As Javier said, sounding uncharacteristically frustrated after a meeting with a USDA representative, “we're not immigrants, we're not Latinos, we're not Hispanic.”

Closely connected to Javier's insistence on asserting a continental indigeneity and an associated right of belonging in Oregon, Javier has made serious, long-lasting efforts to connect with Native American tribes and individuals, based in a belief that “wisdom, ancient thinking, the old ways” are often “stronger in tribal [i.e. Native American] communities than in indigenous communities in the south.” The most enduring of these relationships has been with members of the Crow tribe in Montana. He has attended and danced at their Sun Dance for several years, and become close with several “*abuelos cuervos* [Crow elders].” One of *abuelos* gifted Javier and Margeaux the formula to conduct sweat lodges exactly as his grandfather had done, explaining that “if you change it, the goodness goes out of it.” They now conduct monthly sweats at the Capaces Leadership Institute, asserting that they follow the same formula precisely—even when

²⁹ Though I sought to justify it to myself in various ways, my instinctive judgment of what struck me as new age spiritual practices, and especially those shared by fellow white Anglos, and my relatively greater openness to spiritual ideas identified as deriving from indigenous sources, uncomfortably echoes the racist and colonial origins of Anthropology as the study of exotic Others. As an ethnographer, ritual and unfamiliar ontologies are to be expected, are perhaps even a sign that you're really getting the good stuff. But encountering similar behaviors and ideas from people I was more primed to recognize as social peers, as members of my own community, my first instinct was often to perceive not an ethnographic curiosity to be respectfully appreciated from a culturally relativistic distance, but as something silly or unserious. These are, of course, problematic attitudes, and ones I share here not out of pride or any belief that they are intellectually supportable, but in recognition of the ways that my own biases and social positionality interact with Anthropology's own troublesome disciplinary legacies to produce observations that are, despite my best efforts, imperfectly accurate and reflective of my own emotions, anxieties, and prejudices.

the traditions prove troublesome³⁰—while evidently making certain adaptations, including prayers and songs offered in Spanish.³¹

These sweat lodge rituals provide perhaps the clearest understanding of how Javier integrates various specific indigenous traditions into a single spiritual whole. Among the participants in the Anáhuac nonprofit program, he refers to sweats by the Nahuatl-derived word *temazcal*, encouraging participants to share their memories of *temazcales* in their hometowns. The last day of my 2021 field season happened to coincide with a sweat he held in honor of the winter solstice, and a worker from the PCUN Centro de Servicios para Campesinos next door brought over a client interested in joining the program. As I wrote in my notes,

he said they're doing a temazcal today, and she said they do those in her pueblo, but that she hasn't seen one here. That it's hard, if you're in a house or apartment you can't make so much smoke. Javier seemed very excited (in the moment, and recounting it to the other participants later) that she already knew about it. He was telling her about the importance of tradition, that they need to "conservarla," and she said "y inculcarla" and pointed at her kid.

His certainty and sincerity in identifying what is other moments an avowedly, even rigidly, traditional Crow sweat lodge as simultaneously and unproblematically a conservation of southern Mexican indigenous traditions, seems clear evidence that his continental understanding of indigeneity is at root universalist, appreciating and valuing local variation and diversity while identifying a fundamental unity among far-flung traditions.

If I have dwelt a long time here on the place of indigeneity and spirituality within the Anáhuac project without yet giving a full account of its many and changing activities, that is because Javier places these themes at the center of his work, informing and structuring all the rest. Anáhuac's political meaning as a food sovereignty initiative in particular depends on this spiritual vision, as he made clear in a 2020 strategic planning meeting involving the core Anáhuac staff, myself, and a respected "movement elder," an Anglo who was among the founders of PCUN. I give my free transcription from my notes in full:

Elder: [the Anáhuac narrative] is a story about resilience. Community resilience and ecosystem resilience, and that builds leadership. And that's how it [Anáhuac] fits into Alianza Poder. It doesn't just benefit the participants, but also builds the movement. We need to make sure donors don't see Anáhuac just as its own project, but ensure they see how it's relevant to the mission of PCUN, of CAPACES, of elections etc. We need to spell out how participants understanding their culture and origins makes them a more powerful political leader.

Javier responds with a story: a grandfather knew an army was coming, bringing the philosophy of conquest. The tree, rock, and water all saw this coming and said: what do you want. The iron said, I want to take you over. The tree didn't give up, it fought, it followed the same philosophy as the iron. And of course, the iron won, it cut the tree

³⁰ Most notably the elder's insistence that men and women must enter separately. At a recent sweat, Javier's son, home visiting from college, sharply questioned this rule as exclusionary to "two-spirit" people; he said that the Nahua tradition of men and women entering together would solve this problem. Javier emphatically asserted his support for nonbinary people, but said that the ceremony had been given to him in a particular way and he is not free to simply change a tradition that has been given to him.

³¹ One such song, which Javier has taught to the Anáhuac nonprofit program participants and which they sing regularly at opening ceremonies before workshops, runs in part: "canto, cantemos, juy juy juy juy juy / agradezco, agradecemos, juy juy juy juy juy / la abundancia que tenemos juy juy juy juy juy / compartiendo compartiendo juy juy juy juy juy..."

down. Same with the rock: it fought and was defeated. The water didn't say anything. The iron said to the water, I will crush you. The water was silent. The iron blade tried to cut the water, splashing it everywhere, but it didn't harm it. Eventually the blade gave up. And the iron is still in the water, rusting away. The grandfathers saw this and understood and said, we need to be the water. We understand, "we will take over what was ours in the beginning. It's just a matter of time but it will happen eventually." Sees this in the movement: wants to fight, to do it. Anáhuac is like the water. "We need to be the water of the movement," for the other nonprofits, so they can come learn. We've been fighting since the beginning.

For the elder—like myself—the political and labor struggles seem paramount: organizing workers, passing laws. This has been PCUN's traditional domain. Javier, though personally and now organizationally linked to PCUN, and a supporter of its work, sees for himself a different role and offers a fundamentally different theory of change—a theory of change that, as Javier says, seeks to move outside of the “dominant culture paradigm” and instead “follow the old path, the old way, the traditional way... the ancestral.” I will refrain, for the moment, from seeking to evaluate the merits of this approach.

Anáhuac as a working farm

To this point, I have given only the briefest sketch of Anáhuac as an actual working farm and business, and it is to this we must now turn. Even though Javier consistently spoke of his project as something more expansive and ambitious than a production farm—and even though his ceremonies, transnational aspirations,³² and general disinterest in profit-seeking demonstrate that the farm never entirely fit within that description—that was nevertheless the financial and practical form in which the Anáhuac idea first manifested and in which I first encountered it. It is therefore important to consider Anáhuac's operation as a farm business in somewhat greater detail, both to understand Javier's technical and agroecological approach, and to understand the felt inadequacies and contradictions of this form that motivated Anáhuac's eventual reconfiguration as a nonprofit program.

In planting and cultivation decisions, Anáhuac closely resembled the other nonprofit-affiliated farms I encountered in my study (see Chapter 3). Though the cultivated area varied over time, it was generally around two acres, with a significant minority of that area under hoop-houses.³³ Uncovered beds were prepared with his small tractor or a small rototiller and amended with purchased compost, granulated chicken manure, and—depending on the crop—other store-bought organic amendments; he added additional nutrients via occasional compost teas, including a homemade brew of cow manure, molasses, milk, and rock dust fermented in a plastic barrel. Watering was done via drip irrigation, a water-conserving system that functioned well despite an occasionally under-powered well pump and a non-automated system that required manually rotating the irrigation zones. Though not certified organic, he is outspokenly anti-pesticide, vocally critical of chemical companies, and avoidant even of many organic-approved

³² These aspirations take the form not only of symbolic and affective connections across the border, but would eventually grow to include online lessons with indigenous language instructors in Mexico, as well as Javier's annual work with a Chiapan Maya community in which he has built a small second home. In the interest of some semblance of brevity, this latter must be left undiscussed here.

³³ Also known as high tunnels: long, arched greenhouses covered in translucent plastic sheeting.

compounds and practices. Despite occasionally spraying organic soap, he generally preferred to rely on crop diversity and aromatic, pest-detering inter-plantings, and on the whole seems to have been satisfied with the results; in any event, he rarely spoke to me of either pest control or their depredations, and never in my many days working with him on the farm did we engage in a task specifically oriented towards pest control.

Farmers markets were Anáhuac's most important point of sale, with Javier generally participating in the big Portland State University market as well as one smaller market each season. These were supplemented by special orders (e.g. the sale of flats of strawberries through PCUN), a CSA, and participation in Adelante Mujeres' purchasing and distribution program.³⁴ Though CSA programs can be a great support to small alternative farmers (Brown and Miller 2008), in this case his far-flung clients and the need to personally deliver produce boxes made the endeavor excessively time-consuming, and it was eventually discontinued. The Adelante program also proved frustrating: demanding high quality, attractive produce, throwing out much of what he brought them, and paying what he considered to be an unfairly low price considering how much they charged customers.

While both Anáhuac farm sites I visited included a few established perennials (some herbs, an apple or walnut tree, a couple dozen blueberry bushes), the insecurity of farming leased land necessitates a strong emphasis on annual crops. It simply does not make sense to invest capital and labor in an orchard if you are likely to lose access to the land within the next year or three. In selecting seed, Javier prefers the organic, heirloom, and open-pollinated, expressing concerns that hybrids and genetically modified (GM) seeds prevent seed saving, erode diversity, and genetically "contaminate" locally adapted varieties; however, on at least a few occasions, he did plant hybrids, saying that we might as well "use up" those seed packets before buying more preferable seed in the future. He has a strong interest in seed saving as a means to build autonomy and preserve traditional varieties. I have personally observed him saving seeds for crops including garlic, lettuce, tomatillos, beans, and squash, and friends would occasionally offer him other unique varieties as gifts—although purchased seeds always comprised the majority of his plantings.

Strawberries and a comprehensive range of standard vegetables³⁵ comprised the clear majority of the cultivated area, including multiple kinds of tomatoes, chilis, squash, cucumbers, salad greens, etc.: several dozen varieties at all. Among the vegetables, tomatoes, chilis, and squash were generally the most prominent, due both to their growing habits (squash in particular love to sprawl) and to their reliability at market; by contrast, greens—which are relatively delicate and tended to sell poorly and for low prices—occupied comparatively little space. Depending on the site and season, planted rows were generally just under 100 ft long, and he might plant three or four rows of tomatoes and an equal area of chilis, with multiple varieties of each; other crops would receive just a segment of a single row. At the end of each row, he planted sunflowers and *cempasuchil* (marigolds), both for pollinator forage and for their beauty.

³⁴ For an extended discussion of this program, just wait until Chapter 3.

³⁵ By this label, I mean those vegetables that are broadly familiar to US consumers, and that one could reasonably expect to find at nearly any stand at any farmers market in the country. Given the importance of Mexico as a primary center crop diversity, many of these crops, including chilis, squash, and corn, are also thoroughly Mexican in both historical and culinary terms. I treat them as "standard US crops" here, not to erase those origins or the significance that they hold for Javier and other farmers, but rather for the purpose of discussing their economic function at a farm whose consumer base was Anglo farmers market customers. It is also worth noting that Javier's tomatoes, chilis, and squash, while diverse, were not of markedly different varieties than those sold by his market competitors.

In rows with suitable crops (i.e. crops small enough not to choke or shade out the competition) he would plant lines of different species running side-by-side.

In addition to these crops, which can be found at virtually any small mixed vegetable operation in the region, Javier also planted a range of uniquely Mexican vegetables (nopal cactus, amaranth, various *quelites*³⁶), medicinal and culinary herbs (*pápalo*, *yerba santa*), and flowers. Most of these crops occupied, at most, five or ten feet of a row, and do not seem to have accounted for a substantial portion of sales. In some cases, climate was a limiting factor—e.g., the near total failure of the *chayotes*,³⁷ and the extremely limited growing season imposed on heat-loving and damp-intolerant nopal. More broadly, however, the secondary economic role of these crops reflects the general pattern across similar farms in which berries and tomatoes are the headliners, while herbs and greens function mostly to diversify market offerings.

Despite accounting for a limited share of the sales, these crops occupied a disproportionate amount of Javier's enthusiasm. He has a strong interest in herbal medicine, and will talk at length on the curative properties of this or that plant. This interest only deepened with Margeaux's arrival as something of an expert on the topic, and she took charge of medicinal plantings and the manufacture of tinctures, extracts, and the like. But even those distinctly Mexican plants grown primarily as vegetables (albeit ones with reportedly special nutritional value) were talked about in a way that their more mundane peers are not. Amaranth and its relative *huauzontle* (lamb's quarter), he told me, were a major staple of the Aztecs. Amaranth, he said, is "*muy sagrado*" explaining that this is why it was the only seed banned after the Spanish conquest, and why you still find *alegrias* (amaranth sweets) sold outside of churches. Of *huauzontle*, Javier told the Oregon Community Food Systems Network in late 2020:

your presence [as an indigenous migrant] can break the standards of what's available out there. Most people only know a handful of vegetables. In the whole market, in the store, it's controlled by this handful of vegetables... you know, people love tortillas now, in the United States they love salsas. You know, they love tomatoes... Italy loves tomatoes. What about if huauzontle becomes another phenomenon in 10 years. And again, that is something that we have to offer to the community... [Those growing and selling these plants] become empowered and then they bring their ethnicity as something they're so proud and something that they can share with the community, that it has nothing to do with being a farmworker in the labor force anymore.

Sharing foods with Anglo clients is presented as not just a means to expand the customer's experience, but also allows the farmer the pride and privilege of being a teacher and innovator. And though in the quotation above he speaks hypothetically about potential future participants in the Anáhuac nonprofit program, it is equally possible to read his words as the story of his own farm business.

Treating these plants as a gift from indigenous Mexico is complicated by the fact that amaranth (pigweed), *verdolagas* (purslane), and *huauzontle* (lamb's quarter) are all common weeds in the Willamette Valley, and in much of the United States. In the cases of amaranth and *huauzontle*, Javier planted distinct, named and improved varieties from purchased seed; in other cases, he simply harvested those that grew wild in his fields. All these plants can be grouped under the name *quelites*: the wild or semi-wild edible greens commonly eaten in rural Mexico. Revaluing these familiar (to me) Oregonian weeds with Spanish or Nahuatl names and preparations echoes Javier's hopes to use these humble crops to elevate farmworkers' social

³⁶ Various species of wild and semi-domesticated edible greens that often grow as weeds on disturbed land.

³⁷ A sort of small, prickly summer squash.

status and self-regard. Their wild presence—native or invasive—in both southern Mexico and the northwestern US also seems to underscore the ecological unity of the American continent he calls Anáhuac, and in this way subtly reinforces his claims to continental indigeneity.

The importance of these plants was not only symbolic or cultural: although I have already noted that distinctly Mexican crops accounted for a relatively minor proportion of Javier's sales, they nonetheless served a useful economic function in distinguishing his offerings and Anáhuac's brand from other organic or organic-adjacent small farms—especially at the big Portland Farmers Market at Portland State University, where some 140 booths crowded with students and tourists and shoppers looking for something different. Javier—a relatively rare non-white vendor, who emphasized his identity with a banner bearing the Anáhuac name and logo—was well positioned to stand out. He attracted a loyal clientele for whom his medicinal herbs (and, especially after Margeaux joined Anáhuac, herbal and mushroom tinctures, extracts, and syrups), offered with his recommendations for use and personal attestations to their potency, were a key attraction. His home-made canned chipotles and green mole served similar roles, appealing and unique items well-suited to offering as samples to draw in passersby. These forms of distinction were especially vital given challenges of competing with the major organic farms, whose booths often sprawled across two market stalls and offered unmatched quality and variety.

Medicinal and cultural herbs were not Javier's only point of distinction in the market. He also relied significantly on sale of wild and farmed mushrooms, as well as on foraged sea beans (a crunchy, salty succulent common in coastal estuaries)—the latter, especially, being well suited to sharing as samples and cheap enough to convert into an easy sale. On those occasions I worked alongside him in his booth, these were the best-selling items, with mushrooms (especially morels) also being his most expensive non-value-added product. I shared Javier's interest in foraging wild mushrooms, and we often talked about mushroom hunting. Although in most cases the mushrooms and sea beans he sold came from a commercial supplier, he generally glossed over this fact with customers, instead sharing the general fact that he foraged mushrooms and leaving the customers to put two and two together.

In addition to their economic importance, markets offered an important break from the relative isolation of working on a farm, and it was at markets that Javier was able to connect not just with customers but with a wider Anáhuac community—people who wanted to discuss herbs and dreams, and would attend ceremonies and parties at the farm. Though these interactions could certainly be treated as reinforcing customer loyalty and heightening the Anáhuac brand—and I'm sure they had this effect—it would be wrong to suggest this was primary meaning of these interactions. As noted above, even from our earliest interactions, Javier emphasized Anáhuac as a collective project, consistently turning conversation towards educational and cultural and spiritual aims in a way unique among the farmers in my sample. Simply put, a business was always an awkward fit for his aims, and it is now time for us to move past this phase of the Anáhuac story and on to the nonprofit it became.

Anáhuac becomes a nonprofit

Jaime Arredondo, who first introduced me to Javier, moved from his role as Secretary-Treasurer at PCUN to become the executive director of Capaces in 2018. Though he still believed in the importance of PCUN's political work, he had increasingly felt its limitations.

More than that, he felt worn out and ready for something different, and Capaces' broader range of activities—from leadership training to a youth group—seemed to offer new possibilities. Among those possibilities, Anáhuac occupied a large place in his imagination, and by summer he had secured several tens of thousands of dollars in grants to run a pilot with members of the Capaces youth group attending Anáhuac workshops on herbal remedies, cooking, and agriculture.

From there, the partnership grew rapidly. By October 2019, enough grant funding had been secured for Anáhuac to be formally absorbed as a sub-program within Capaces, with Javier hired on as staff. Ground was broken that same month on a new .75-acre community garden at the FHDC³⁸-operated Nuevo Amanecer farmworker housing development in Woodburn, and Javier and Margeaux left their rented farm to live in an apartment in town, nearer to the new garden.

The new Anáhuac program “germinated” rapidly at FHDC. Canvassing the approximately 140 families living at Nuevo Amanecer and a neighboring development, approximately 10 core families were recruited—about 30-40 regular participants in all. The participants were mothers³⁹ and their children, ranging in age from pre-K to high school. Especially among the teens, participants were overwhelmingly female; male teens were rare, and fathers virtually absent from Anáhuac events.

All the new Anáhuac participants were indigenous people originating in southern Mexico—mostly Mixtecs and Zapotecs from the state of Oaxaca—and their children, born in both the US and Mexico. All the mothers for whom I have firm information came from rural backgrounds and grew up at least in part around farming, migrating to the US between the ages of 15 and 25, in at least one case with an intervening period working as a contract laborer in the fields of Sinaloa. This relatively young age of migration meant that, while broadly familiar with their home communities' agricultural practices, they generally felt they lacked expertise and were glad for the opportunity to (re)learn. Lorena's story is typical:

“...I am from the state of Oaxaca, from the central valleys, and my town is called San Pablo Huitzo... My maternal grandmother cultivated wheat and chickpeas. As for my dad, he grew corn, bean, squash. But everything has changed in my town... When I remember my childhood, it all grew the same, very organic. One didn't need to fertilize the land... The chickens, goats, bulls, we used all their waste as fertilizer. And one didn't have to use as much chemical. But later, in time, when I was around 10 years old, everything changed because my town—everything was changing. They began to put chemicals because the earth wasn't giving anymore. I don't know if this was due to the climate change that happened in my town. It stopped raining, droughts began. Everything was deteriorating, to the point that now only the *hacendados*, those who have money, those who have irrigated land, remain, are able to cultivate. You can't grow extensively anymore, seasonally [i.e. dependent on the rains]. You can't anymore. All this has changed and impacted my town because it's gotten more urban... It's more of a city, more polluted, more—it's pretty, but now we don't have vegetation like when I was five years old, now the countryside doesn't produce like it did before.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Farmworker Housing Development Corporation – another member of the Alianza Poder family of nonprofits.

³⁹ Though men were invited to participate, they were only ever extremely occasional attendees. Later, as the group solidified, I suspect that the identification of Anáhuac as a women's space likely deterred male involvement.

⁴⁰ “...*soy del estado de Oaxaca, pertenezco a los valles centrales y mi pueblo se llama San Pablo Huitzo... mi abuelito materno cultivaba el trigo, el garbanzo. Y por parte de mi papá, el cultivaba el maíz, el frijol, las*

This story of tradition and fertility giving way to ecological dysfunction and the need to migrate recurred among many of the mothers, although it is difficult to say to what degree this predisposed them to participation in Anáhuac and to what degree this particular narrative reflects norms or discourses internalized through their participation in the Anáhuac community.

The nonprofit program began with the main community garden site at Nuevo Amanecer, where Javier encouraged participants to suggest vegetable crops and varieties from their home communities to plant. A much smaller site at a neighboring FHDC development, comprised entirely of raised garden beds, is referred to as the *farmacia viviente* (living pharmacy) and is used exclusively for medicinal herbs. During the growing season—from February, when the first cold-hardy plants can be sowed out and when seeding can begin at the small greenhouse, until the last crops are in, and the garden put to bed for the winter—there are formal work parties each weekend. So many hands typically make for light work on all but the busiest days, and the mothers smile as the children and even the teens—resolutely fashionable, dressed not at all for the farm—tear about in the mud, catching bugs or competing to move overloaded wheelbarrows of compost.

During the summer and early fall, when the garden is at its most abundant, Saturday work parties also included a farm stand, set up at the garden gate beneath a wisteria arbor. The teens washed the produce, priced it, and sold it to their neighbors. Though lacking the size and aesthetic quality of store-bought produce, the offerings had the advantage of being fresh, organic, convenient, and grown by familiar faces; distinctively Mexican varieties seem not to offer a major advantage here, given the abundance of well-stocked tiendas throughout Woodburn. Sales were generally modest; though on the best days the teens were regularly summoned to attend a customer, there were often only a handful of buyers. While the food stand was an important learning exercise for the youths, and represents Javier’s aspirations to distribute food more widely, the actual quantities of food moved seemed largely symbolic and unlikely to make a major impact on the diet of FHDC residents as a whole. Instead, most food was consumed by the core participant families.

When it’s time for a break, we relax in the shade; the teens text and whisper, record each other practicing dance moves, play music on a portable speaker: romantic Spanish-language pop, Billy Eilish, accordion-heavy rancheras, or—when Javier seizes control of the Bluetooth—perhaps some Mercedes Sosa. The garden (and later the kitchen, below) was not simply a space for production and education, but also a place to build friendships and genuine community (Minkoff-Zern 2012; Thompson 2011). For the mothers, like Julia, this social element is crucial to their participation:

“Honestly I already know almost all of this, I already lived it, but well, she [her daughter] wants to learn—ok, let’s go! She has never missed a session until now, never missed, is always here with her friends and she’s learned to *convivir* [literally, live together; the

calabazas. Pero todo ha cambiado en mi pueblo... Cuando recuerdo mi niñez y mi infancia, todo se daba igual, muy orgánico. No había que fertilizar las tierras... el pollo, el chivo, los toros, todo que tuvieron, todo sus deshechos de ellos, todos los utilizábamos como abono. Y no haba que usar tanto químico. Pero después, en tiempo, como unos 10 años, cambió todo, porque mi pueblo - todo se fue cambiando. Empezaron a meter químicos porque las tierras ya no daban. No sé si esto debía al cambio climático que pasó en mi pueblo. Dejo de llover, empezó las sequillas. Todo se fue deteriorando, de que hoy en día solamente los hacendados, los que tienen dinero, los que tienen terrenos de riego, pertenecen, pueden cultivar. Ya no se puede cultivar a grandes como antes, de temporal. Ya no se puede. Todo eso ha cambiado e impactado mi pueblo porque ya se urbanizo más... Mas de ciudad, más contaminación, mas – esta bonito pero ya no tenemos vegetación como de cuando yo tenía unas 5 años de edad ahorita, ya no se da en el campo lo que se daba antes.”

word however has implications of not just coexistence but conviviality] with them, with the young ones and the moms, too. Here we feel like we're family, all sisters, brothers, all of us, because we're always here *conviviendo* together. This is how I feel... And it's what we feel when we come here, we have our dads, our moms, they're all over there [in Mexico]. Some are there and some are here and we've got our families here too, but sometimes because of work... Well, one works and nothing more, one only works and works and the weekend arrives, and everyone rests, and don't even want to go out, just go do whatever they need to and that's it. On the other hand here, here we *convivimos*.⁴¹

Lorena likewise notes Anáhuac's role as a place to socialize, while also repeating and emphasizing Julia's characterization of it as an opportunity for the children to learn the way of life the mothers had known. She explains that she entered her children in the Anáhuac program

So that they learn to grow, so that they learn whatever because here they don't know how to do any of this. Like we [the parents] do know because our parents brought us [to the fields], but for them [the kids], well, no. So I say it's a good program for the kids to began to develop, to socialize, everything, to learn to work the fields. And this is what attracted me. And being here, we begin to learn a little bit of the culture, of our roots...⁴²

This melding of different sorts of activities is an intentional aspect of the program's design. In addition to hands-on activities in the garden, additional weeknight workshops focus on gardening theory, culture, or arts. There are regular movie nights, partially funded by a grant from the Mexican Institute of Cinematography, featuring films on indigenous Mexico: the obvious documentaries, like *Sunú: Mexican Maize Farmers and their Struggle against GMOs*, as well as more artistic works, like *Mara 'akame's Dream*. There are also field trips to visit other farms, harvest mushrooms at the foot of Mt. Hood, or simply to take advantage of the program's vans for a summer daytrip to the coast. These activities ceased briefly in the early days of COVID, replaced largely by online activities like a follow-along-at-home tutorial on making a tonic to enhance immune response; by late spring, however they had resumed, masked, although with only vague gestures towards social distancing.

⁴¹“ *ya yo sé casi todo eso, verdad, ya lo viví, pero pues ella [her daughter] quiere aprender – está bien, vamos. Ella pues nunca faltado hasta ahorita, nunca faltado, siempre está aquí con las compañeras y pues han aprendido a convivir mucho con ellos, entre ellos que son jóvenes y entre las mamás también. Aquí nos sentimos como si todos somos familia, todos como hermanas, hermanos, todos, porque siempre estamos aquí conviviendo. Es como yo siento pues... Y es lo que nosotros sentimos por venir aquí, porque tenemos nuestros papás, nuestras mamás, todos están allá [in Mexico]. Unos son allá y otros son acá o aquí también tenemos nuestras familias, pero a veces por el trabajo... Pues, trabajo y no más, uno no más trabaje y trabaje y ya llega fines de semana, pues, todo descansan, y ya ni quieren salir, ya no más van y lo que necesitan y es todo. En cambio, aquí pues, aquí convivimos...*”

⁴²“*para que aprendan a cultivar, para que aprendan lo que sea porque ellos aquí no saben hacer nada de esto. Como nosotros [the parents] sí sabemos porque nos llevaban nuestros papás, pero para ellos [the kids] pues, no. Entonces dije es un programa bueno para que los niños empiezan a desenvolverse, a socializar, a todo, aprender a trabajar el campo. Y eso es lo que me atrajo. Y estando aquí pues, empezamos a aprender un poco el parte de cultura, de nuestras raíces...*”



Figure 5. Javier stirs a huge pot of stew at the inauguration of the *cocina tradicional*. Photo by the author.

Nearly every Anáhuac gathering includes food: sometimes tortas from a nearby restaurant, often a home-cooked meal prepared by one or another of the mothers hired for the occasion, and—on more festive occasions—a communally-prepared feast, usually (especially once COVID struck) cooked in the *cocina tradicional*, the outdoor wood-fired kitchen. The food is abundant and delicious, and the moms run the show, displaying impressive skill and cooperation, chatting and laughing as they work. In the kitchen, far more than the garden, the women’s expertise matches or exceeds Javier’s, and they treat it as their space, easy and at home.

As many scholars have noted, the sensuous qualities of the kitchen – crackling wood, rich mole, the smells of woodsmoke and frying onion – make it an ideal place to transit across space and time to connect intimately with memories of home and (for the children) ancestors (Hadjiyanni and Helle 2008; see also Vázquez-Medina and Medina 2015). This power emerges in the statements of the kids who, according to Javier, told him the kitchen reminded them of their abuelas, and of the mothers like Lorena, who said “it’s nice. I believe that that it has maintained us, being here... to cook in the traditional kitchen. There too, we go there to cook traditionally, to *remember* [her emphasis], to get covered in the smoke.”⁴³ As her comments suggest, the food itself is only a part of the experience, deepened and given meaning by the physical stuff of the kitchen. The decision to rely on open wood fires, the use of rattling hand-cranked *molinos* [corn mills], and the presence (though only occasional use) of heavy basalt *manos y metates* [grindstones] helps the kids, in Josefina’s words, “to grow up learning a little of what *we were* [her emphasis], or about what *we used to do* [her emphasis].”⁴⁴ The point is not

⁴³ “*está bonito. Yo creo que nos ha mantenido, estando acá... cocinar en la cocina tradicional. Allí también, allí vamos a cocinar tradicional, recordar [her emphasis], ahumarnos con el humo.*”

⁴⁴ “*cre[cer] aprendiendo poquito de lo que nosotros fuimos, o de lo que nosotros hacíamos [her emphasis].*”

only to connect participants with a distant place, but also with another time: to how the mothers *were*, to what they *did*.

Though always present, these uses of the kitchen were made fully explicit in the summer of 2021, when Anáhuac hosted a seven-part series of workshops for the mothers and youths of Salem-Keizer Coalition for Equality (SKCE), an Alianza Poder organization focused on “advocat[ing] with Latino families, schools and communities to ensure equitable educational outcomes” (Mission and Values n.d.). The workshops included mural painting, trips to the mountains, and three days of mole making. Six Anáhuac moms—aided by teenaged sous chefs—were hired to teach the SKCE guests to make mole from scratch in open air kitchens. Even more than usual, traditional methods were stressed, including the (occasionally successful) use of *manos y metates* to grind ingredients.



Figure 6. The mural outside the cocina tradicional. Photo courtesy of Capaces Leadership Institute.

The day before the first workshop, the Anáhuac families gathered at the *cocina tradicional* to prepare. I recorded in my notes how Javier addressed the moms and teens who would soon be teachers:

“When we share something with the community, what is the most powerful thing we have?”⁴⁵ He answers: family tradition, handed down from mom and abuela, and my experience with them. “What are your stories? What did your mom teach you? What did your grandma teach you?”⁴⁶ He says, the Anáhuac kids will be learning some of those stories here for the first time, during this event. Bring it into the light, bring your story into the light. Encourages this especially with the dry chilis (he’s unloaded the ingredients of his mole on the table in front of himself)...

Javier asks, encouraging: “Do you have stories, or don’t you have stories? Do you have power, or don’t you have power?”⁴⁷ Don’t be overcome by timidity! Says, “jovenes you’re not going to engage with this mole like you do in the restaurantes”—you’re not going to say to yourself, “I’m Mexican because I like to eat mole at Tapatío [a local restaurant]”—you need to engage these “beautiful beings” (he indicates the plastic bag of dry chilis).

⁴⁵ “¿Cuando compartimos algo con la comunidad, que es la cosa más poderosa que tenemos?”

⁴⁶ “Cuáles son tus historias? ¿Qué te enseñó tu mama? ¿Qué te enseñó tu abuela?”

⁴⁷ “Tiene historias o no tiene historias? Tiene poder o no tiene poder?”

He proposed an exercise, asking everyone to share a personal memory about one of their ingredients:

Josefina recalls desvenando [de-veining] chilis with her abuela, who showed her to use sugar to make her fingers stop stinging. Others chime in – some haven't heard of this technique, others have, or have their own methods. Then, again following Javier's formula for the food-story, Josefina says "I have a lot of relationship with ajonjoli [sesame]..."⁴⁸ and talks about her mom cooking with it. Another mom chimes in: we call ajonjoli "amaranth." Josefina zings back, with a sassy head-wag: we don't call ajonjoli amaranto [in my pueblo] bc we're "very rich in culture"⁴⁹ and cultivate amaranth too.

Javier: remember, as we're telling these stories, we'll be peeling the bananas. Everyone mimes peeling.

Esperanza: my mom always used fried platano macho [a kind of plantain] to make mole. Esperanza loved the fried platano, would steal it to eat, which made her mom mad...

The stories continue around, there's laughter, eruptions of commentary and chiming in. They continue, talking about chilis, piloncillo, platano.

Food, tradition, and personal history are thus deliberately brought together, and participants are encouraged to develop their own memories as a means to stir similar memories in others.

Most of the mothers taught their own recipes, making red or black or yellow mole pastes typical of their own regions. These moles looked and tasted remarkably different, sweet or spicy or nutty-fresh. Teaching all six side by side, the mothers underscored Anáhuac's recurring theme of in diversity within a common heritage. Whether discussing seeds, recipes, vocabularies, or rituals, Javier consistently encouraged the women to share their specific experiences even as he positioned them as instances of a shared indigeneity both distinctively southern Mexican *and* broadly continental.



Figure 7. Three of the mole pastes prepared at the workshop. Photo by the author.

⁴⁸ "yo tengo mucha relacion con ajonjoli..."

⁴⁹ "bien rico en cultura"

This theme of diversity-in-unity, or unity-in-diversity, runs through not just the kitchen but nearly all Anáhuac programming. It is clear in the language classes—begun only briefly before the end of my extended field research in late 2021—in which two program mothers serve as *maestras comunitarias* [community teachers], hired to offer alternating weekly lessons in Zapotec and Mixtec and trained via Zoom by Mexican language instructors. Despite the obvious difficulties of studying two languages at once, especially at such leisurely intervals, participants are not tracked into one or the other according to ethnic or family tradition; all study both. This eclectic continental indigeneity, embracing regional variation yet insistent on underlying unity, also manifests in Javier’s ceremonies and now-monthly Crow-style *temascales*, which been fully incorporated into Anáhuac calendar, and in the smaller rituals – smudging with sage, passing a small medicine bundle of found feathers—that mark the opening of nearly every Anáhuac workshop.

Scaling up

Javier had often told me his wish to buy land for Anáhuac—not just a small community garden, but a proper farm—and in the final months of 2021, as my main fieldwork period came to a close, this dream began to move rapidly forward. I became involved as a more regular volunteer for the Anáhuac team, attending strategy meetings, conducting research and meeting with potential lenders, and writing grants. I took on this added work primarily because Javier asked me to—initially offering part-time, paid work as a grant writer, which I declined—and I want to repay his kindness to me over the years, and because I believe that the community Anáhuac creates is a good one and meaningful to those who participate. I hope to see it grow and succeed. This added work also had the additional advantage of providing me consistent access to behind-the-scenes staff meetings, planning documents, and lengthy discussions of Javier’s, Jaime’s, and the rest of the team’s hopes for the future of the program. Writing grants for the organization also offered the interesting challenge of writing as Javier, speaking as an indigenous immigrant for the benefit of potential funders—ethnographic malpractice perhaps, but also a unique opportunity to practice representing his work and ideals on his own terms and under his supervision.⁵⁰ In this final section of Javier’s chapter, I explore the intended future of the

⁵⁰ Writing as and for Javier for a variety of government and foundation grants, I necessarily discarded my own voice: potential funders don’t care what I think or about my positionality, they want to hear from Anáhuac’s founders and participants. Some of these changes are relatively small: forgoing the third person, I write about “our community,” “our community,” “our traditions as Indigenous people.” Other changes are more substantial, and require forgoing many of the very distinctions and qualifications for which I argue most strenuously in this dissertation. For instance, absent from these grants are any attempts to problematize culture and tradition, to emphasize their changeability and constructedness, or to emphasize the many Mexicano farmers who adopt methods divergent from Anáhuac’s. Instead, our grant applications are full of language making quite sweeping, essentializing claims about Indigenous culture and its inherent, timeless entanglements with spirituality and sustainability—claims I dare not quote an extended passage here for fear of giving my advisor a heart attack. The language is different too, borrowing heavily from Javier’s characteristic phrasing—a strategy I also deploy, though with far more restraint, here and there throughout Chapter 2. Both in the substance and style, adopting this voice has been an extremely helpful tool in helping me to not only understand but internalize the Anáhuac perspective, to practice thinking about the farm on his terms, with the helpful check that each grant I write is subject to review and feedback before it is turned in, effectively pointing out areas where I fail to accurately convey the organization’s official voice and perspective. This sort of writing, in both style and substance, would of course be quite problematic in a scholarly

Anáhuac program. I also attempt to weigh the significance of this exceptional and ambitious project. How does it fit within the wider landscape of Oregon alternative food nonprofits, and into scholarly critiques of such programs? What does it reveal about the possibilities for migrant food sovereignties? And to what extent can or should it serve as a replicable model?

In preparing for the next phase of program growth, Javier, Margeaux, and two program staff took exploratory trips to the Southwest and Northeast to visit a variety of food sovereignty projects and programs run—as Javier explained—by indigenous, Black, and LGBTQ communities. These programs included the famous Soul Fire farm in upstate New York, which impressed the team with their “equity guidelines for funders,” and the queer-led Rock Steady farm. However, the projects that seemed to most excite the team were those led by Native people, including Navajo Ethno-Agriculture, the White Mountain Apache Tribe’s People’s Farm, and the Nalwoodi Denzhone Community agriculture project. This was in part because of their emphasis on traditional crops, but equally because many of these projects—like Anáhuac—were often as much interested in culture as in food production. Of the Iroquois White Corn Project, Margeaux said “everything they do, they do within their traditional Mohawk worldview, which is their spirituality... we can’t just do some things with the spirituality and others not.”

Javier made clear that he regarded these specifically indigenous projects as Anáhuac’s closest peers, and emphasized that he hoped these visits not be merely exploratory, but rather the first steps in an ongoing relationship. He announced his intention to invite members of the communities they visited to the opening ceremony at the new farm site, and hopes to initiate a wider exchange program, just as he plans to bring Anáhuac youth to the Crow reservation in Montana. This stands in contrast to the relative lack of interest expressed in exchanges with Adelante Mujeres and Huerto de la Familia (the major local Latinx food justice nonprofits, discussed in detail in Chapter 3); indeed, he tends to distance himself somewhat from these organizations, which to his mind serve the Latinx rather than indigenous community, and which fall closer to the dominant “monocultural” model.

One of the key questions emerging from the exploratory trips was what model the expanded program should take. The organizations visited included both grant-funded nonprofits and socially-minded private businesses, as well various sorts of hybrid operations. Given Anáhuac’s origins as a business, and Javier’s expressed desire for the program to function autonomously, I had imagined that a hybrid model involving the sale of farm products might hold some appeal. I was mistaken. While the entire team was uncomfortable with the limitations and obligations imposed by grant funding, both Javier and Margeaux consistently opposed the idea of incorporating any sort of business into Anáhuac. Speaking of one of the Apache projects they visited, Margeaux said that many community members—and especially elders—had been uncomfortable with its for-profit model, and suggested that this discomfort is common among many “traditional communities,” including Anáhuac. While in the past Javier had spoken about perhaps using a portion of a future Anáhuac farm for participant families to start a cooperative, family-run market garden, or value-added business, the ultimate strategic plan drafted in this process made no mention of these or any other for-profit activities.

paper. However, I am comfortable writing in this way for Anáhuac as, effectively, a ghostwriter; my own perspective is not the point, I have been asked by the relevant parties to take on the role, and they seem satisfied with the results. And, in any case, these applications have been quite effective, having helped Anáhuac raise well over \$1.5 million.

Despite Anáhuac becoming a subsidiary program of a larger organization, I have continued in this chapter to treat Javier's (and, to a lesser extent, Margeaux's) preferences and values as synonymous with those of the program as a whole. Jaime, the head of Capaces and a thoughtful thinker on food sovereignty and migration in his own right, has supported Javier's vision for the program, and has gradually adopted Javier's perspectives on many key issues, including his emphasis on indigenous identity and spirituality. Once, after Javier forcefully explained that "we're not immigrants," Jaime said, almost to himself, that Javier "blew my mind" with the line, "but he's right." Jaime repeated it several times to himself: "we're not immigrants."⁵¹ The other program staff were more recent hires; one, significantly younger, and the other a former program participant whose limited English meant that she rarely attended or participated heavily in strategic planning meetings (while meetings were often ostensibly bilingual, most attendees other than Javier are more comfortable in English and meetings tended to revert to that language). While these other staffers and I shared opinions, we mostly deferred willingly to Javier's vision. As for the program participants, despite Javier's occasional statements to the importance of communal decision-making, I never saw any evidence that they participated directly in the strategic planning process. In sum, Javier's vision for Anáhuac that he had expressed to me before joining Capaces has continued to define the organization in both spirit and substance.

Though expansion was a long-term goal, these planning conversations were spurred by the discovery of an available and at least theoretically affordable farm site just outside of Salem, about 35 minutes from the current Anáhuac site. Priced at \$1.2 million, the land that captured the entire team's imagination was a 60-acre organic certified farm, complete with a farmhouse (where Javier and Margeaux planned to live), high tunnels, outbuildings, and a small grove of native Oregon white oaks. The tightness of the local real estate market contributed to the team's enthusiasm for the site, but in conversations it seemed that the tangibility of it, actually being able to walk the land and imagine a future there, was what animated the decision to move ahead—to launch a capital campaign, but also to seek financing in case the cash could not be raised in time. I worried what effect this might have on the financial stability of the organization: the land purchase alone would be the largest capital expenditure in Capaces' 10-year history, and that's before the significant increase in program staff that would be needed to operate the scaled-up program. However, the rest of the team felt confident that having the land would inspire donors far more than a mere program plan.

To support a planned 30 acres of *milpa* on the new land, including rotations of corn, beans, and squash, the organization plans to hire two year-round and eight seasonal "traditional farmers." One candidate for this position was a recent Tzotzil migrant I met one day as he and Javier were finishing the drying of a new clay oven in the *cocina tradicional*. It was November, cold, and we pressed our palms against the gently steaming, cracking clay. Javier introduced the man—let's call him Josue—who was slight and soft-spoken, wearing flip-flops despite the cold, as an expert corn farmer. The two had met in Chiapas, in Josue's hometown, where Javier was building a house and attempting to start an Anáhuac project to teach the locals to grow organic chiles and tomatoes. They had become friends and Josue had become one of the project leaders

⁵¹ Jaime has told me that, as a result of his involvement with Anáhuac, he has embraced his Purepecha roots and now identifies as indigenous.

until coming to the US for several stints as an H2A guestworker⁵² in Florida and California’s smoky, sweltering Central Valley. Now he was here in Woodburn, staying with Margeaux and Javier in their small apartment and consulting on which Chiapan *criollo* corn varieties they should test in the garden and begin acclimatizing.

While the produce of the current 0.75 acres is easily consumed by the participant families and sold at the small farmstand, scaling up to 30 acres will enable the program to engage in more ambitious food distributions. The five-year strategic plan calls for making free or low-cost CSAs available to residents at multiple farmworker housing complexes in Woodburn, Salem, and Silverton. These food distributions will include both fresh vegetables and preserved and packaged food, including nixtamalized masa,⁵³ dry beans, and seeds. Meanwhile, the current community gardens will continue in operation, and additional community gardens will be added at other FHDC sites.

Cultural activities will undergo a similar expansion. New language instructors will be added to cover the new FHDC sites. Culinary workshops will continue and be expanded to take in both the *cocina tradicional* and a commercial kitchen suitable for canning and preservation. Arts and culture activities will be expanded, both for regular participants and visiting groups like SKCE and public school field trips (Anáhuac already has a relationship with Woodburn Public Schools, supported by an Oregon Farm-to-School grant and a school board majority elected with PCUN backing). The medicinal plant program will be expanded, too, with more workshops, guest instructors (*curanderos, parteras*), and a “mobile wellness van” to bring both traditional and Western forms of healing to local FHDC sites with a nurse-practitioner, *curandera*, and massage therapist.

In the year since I initially drafted this chapter, much of this vision has already come true. The money was raised, the land purchased, and the planned scaling up is underway. Though their full flowering remains to be seen, these plans and aspirations are useful indicators of the scope and direction of Anáhuac’s vision of food sovereignty—a vision that is, beyond question, the most expansive and “alternative” of any farmer or organization documented in my research.⁵⁴ Anáhuac—both as it currently exists and as it is imagined into the future—can therefore serve as a benchmark for the outermost limits of farmworker-based food sovereignty initiatives in Oregon.

So what to make of it?

Anáhuac is beautiful. This much is beyond doubt. It has created space for a warm community of mothers, teens, and children who cook and eat together and share stories and experiences from a distant home, giving mutual support and joining in celebration. Though none of the participants seem to be as fully committed to Javier’s particular blend of indigenous

⁵² The H2A program allows agricultural migrant workers to enter the US legally for a limited period, but places significant restrictions on their mobility, ability to change jobs, and the duration of their stay. Javier often compares it to the Bracero program.

⁵³ Processed corn ready to make into tortillas

⁵⁴ I do not include PCUN in this statement, both because I did not conduct extensive formal research with that organization, and because PCUN has not shown any particular interest in prefigurative projects or building new forms of agriculture. While PCUN’s work—which, in recent years, has focused far more on policy and elections than on labor organizing in the fields—is undoubtedly important, and while it hews far closer than Anáhuac to my own views of political change, it seems to operate in a different enough space that little is to be gained by comparing it to farmers and farming programs. And anyways, as fellow members of Alianza Poder, PCUN and Anáhuac function as parts of the same movement; their differences in strategy, while occasionally in tension and certainly reflecting the personalities and priorities of their respective leaderships, can be understood as complementary parts of a whole.

spiritualities as he is, they nonetheless approach these events and rituals with respect, and in a focus group I held with the program mothers, they all enthusiastically, expansively, and at times hilariously related Anáhuac's rituals with practices they recalled from their own hometowns⁵⁵—primarily ritual healings from maladies like *susto* and *mal de ojo* [evil eye], but also agricultural rituals.

The program mothers spoke about Anáhuac as a meaningful continuation of their traditions, and were open to Javier's broader messages about indigeneity, heritage, pride, and reciprocity with the earth. While I have my doubts that anyone will be gaining much Mixtec or Zapotec fluency in semiweekly classes, participants seem happy to be there, and *maestras comunitarias* seem genuinely proud to be teaching their languages. And, while even program gatherings at the peak of harvest season relied more on purchased food than vegetables produced on site, it seems clear that the garden did increase both the youths' horticultural competence and the availability of fresh and local produce—and the addition of a farm seems poised to put to rest any doubts about the program's food production. By many metrics, then, Anáhuac is a clear success on its own terms.

But what terms are they, and where do they lead? Anáhuac offers a sheltered retreat from the difficulties of life as a farmworker and migrant, a warm space in which to revive memories of distant homelands and pass them on to another generation. Should it also be understood as having political meaning, in the sense of posing some challenge to the existing arrangement? In other words, does Anáhuac matter for those outside its lovely circle?

The standard scholarly charge against alternative agriculture and the food movement writ large is that it is neoliberal: that organic certifications and buying local are solutions that remain within the sphere of the market (Harrison 2008b; Alkon 2008; Gray 2014), and therefore become transformed into little more than marks of distinction that are then reabsorbed by capital (Guthman 2004). Anáhuac avoids this pitfall: it steers clear of market-based solutions. Yet it appears at least potentially at risk of failing on the second charge that scholars have often levied against food movement actors: that *political* action is necessary to reshape the food system, that merely providing access and reorienting individual tastes and behaviors is not enough (Guthman and Brown 2016; Holt-Giménez and Wang 2011). Food sovereignty is necessarily about achieving structural change.

Does Anáhuac seek structural change? The broader Alianza Poder certainly does. PCUN has fought to unionize farmworkers, campaigned for mandatory overtime pay, and won a statewide ban on the neurotoxic pesticide chlorpyrifos. SKCE's slate of candidates recently won the majority of the Salem-Keizer school board, and Causa was instrumental in the defense of Oregon's sanctuary law and the passage of a bill granting drivers licenses to undocumented immigrants.

As for Anáhuac: it's less clear. As noted above, in my discussion of Javier's philosophy, and particularly his story of the iron and the water, Anáhuac does not fit entirely easily into ordinary political terms. The programming is never explicitly political, and I have not seen attempts to collaborate with campaigns lead by other Alianza organizations—to turn out for rallies, for examples, or provide public comment on the proposed chlorpyrifos ban. Nor is it clear how Anáhuac's model, though providing food outside of market relations, could be grown to supplant the dominant model. Anáhuac exists as a nonprofit program, dependent on grant

⁵⁵ Doña Cristina told a long story, un-transcribable due to the screaming laughter of the group, regarding her experience getting *susto* in a childhood encounter with a ram, and her village's method of curing *susto* by tying up the victim and dangling them into a well.

funding and without any plan to change this state of affairs. Even if it grows to the full scale envisioned in the ambitious strategic plan, this funding mechanism imposes a limit on its scalability and replicability.

This brings us back to one of the basic theoretical problems I pose in Chapter 1: are scalability and replicability necessary features of structural change-making? Anna Tsing argues that they are not: that modern science so systematically seeks out the scalable that we blind ourselves to everything not suited to such projects of expansion. According to Tsing, “[w]e need a nonscalability theory that pays attention to the mounting pile of ruins that scalability leaves behind. Nonscalability theory makes it possible to see how scalability uses articulations with nonscalable forms even as it denies or erases them” (Tsing 2011:506). She points to weeds and wild mushrooms—two products that have fascinated Javier—as examples of nonscalability: “What if precarity, indeterminacy, and what we imagine as trivial are at the center of the systematicity we seek?” (Tsing 2015:20).

Tsing’s questioning fits comfortably alongside Gibson-Graham’s critique of political economy, in which the authors reject representations of the economy “as a bounded and unified space with a fixed capitalist identity,” a perspective that sees capital as an entire universe, virtually impossible to imagine your way out of; instead, they suggest that we should see in the “totality of the economic... multiple forms of economy whose relations to each other are only ever partially fixed and always under subversion” (Gibson-Graham 2006:12). Gibson-Graham points to the many forms of non-capitalist production and reproduction already surrounding us, arguing that rather than imagining a need to revolutionize everything all at once, there are already innumerable alternatives ready at hand, small perhaps, nonscalable perhaps, but existing as functioning alternatives nonetheless.

In his Oregon Community Food Systems Network (OCFSN) talk,⁵⁶ Javier seems to side with Tsing and Gibson-Graham, framing Anáhuac as a manifestation of the future the wider farmworker and food sovereignty movement seeks to create. This vision remains (for now) a limited preserve, a sheltered garden, but he asserts its existence is essential:

Anáhuac is a place where the community can come and find their center. I think the beauty of merging with Capaces and the movement is that they are part of Anáhuac. Anáhuac is the roots, the center of who we are. The movement has the struggle, the organizing. But where can we rest, heal, talk to our hearts? Anáhuac. Yes, we are fighting, we have gained political capital and justice. But where can we have a moment of silence amidst the struggle, to have a moment to be with corn, listen to the plants of our ancestors, to walk barefoot and connect with Mother Earth, to sit in ceremonies like [the] *temazcal*? This is what the movement does not have that our community needs to preserve life here on Mother Earth for many generations to come.

Anáhuac’s wider significance comes from this relationship with the wider movement. Quietly planting heirloom seeds, teaching native languages, and hosting ceremonies might not be transformative in and of themselves, but at Anáhuac this work is not an isolated, walled off retreat. The project is deeply tied into wider local and regional farmworker, immigrant, and

⁵⁶ Though this particular statement was made before a largely Anglo audience of nonprofit workers who might be supposed to be in a position to support his work, it is important to note that Javier often repeated similar statements to me in personal conversations, and when addressing a range of audiences. As in other quotations from this same presentation, I see no reason to doubt that this is his genuine sentiment. My repeated use of examples drawn from this particular presentation simply reflects that it is a particularly fully articulated version of the same thoughts I heard him express many times.

antiracist movements, and the increased capacity of the new farm is likely to deepen that relationship. This is not only my assessment, but the opinion of the institutional movement in the Willamette Valley. Among the Alianza Poder network, Anáhuac already has active partnerships with two (FHDC and the Salem-Keizer Coalition for Equality). Representatives from six more Alianza organizations sit on the Capaces board, and have lent their support to the program, including supporting the capital campaign for the farm purchase, the largest single expenditure in the organization's history. This institutional and movement backing, in turn, has been vital to Anáhuac's rapid growth, perhaps most evidently in enabling us⁵⁷ to win \$1,216,000 in federal appropriations in the 2022 Build Back Better bill. When I say that Anáhuac is engaged in prefigurative work, therefore, it is not merely in the sense that the project sets some vague example that might be followed elsewhere; it does, but Anáhuac also remains intimately connected with organizations actively engaged in the day-to-day slog of electoral work, lobbying, administrative rulemaking, and the like, helping provide both a respite and a vision of something more.

So if Javier has cracked the code and solved food sovereignty in Chapter 2, what are we doing for the rest of this dissertation? Well, one last difficulty remains: the very fact that I have throughout this chapter been able to talk of Javier as a synecdoche for Anáhuac seems to raise uncomfortable questions that I must now address. What does it mean that a single individual has been so utterly central to this project, especially considering Anáhuac's uniqueness among both nonprofits and farm businesses in Oregon?

Javier himself tries to minimize this problem: even in my earliest experiences with Anáhuac, he always attempted to make the project more than him, referring to "our" values, "our" beliefs, and stressing the importance of collective decision-making. And it is true that he has always conjured community around Anáhuac, at ceremonies and informal gatherings, and more lately in the form of the nonprofit program with its committed staff and an active core of participants. If we consider Anáhuac as a dream still emerging into being, the projected organizational chart (below) is instructive: Javier is positioned near but not quite at the center and the top. Above yet off to one side are the Capaces higher-ups—eventually, it is hoped, to be shed when Anáhuac becomes its own independent organization within Alianza Poder. More prominent, the obvious powers atop of the organizational chart, are "Mother Earth" and a "Council of Elders," an idea inspired by the organization's exploratory trip to the Southwest that has not yet taken solid form.⁵⁸ Though it is clear that many people are willing, even excited, to follow where Javier is leading, it remains substantially his project, at least for now.

⁵⁷ I was a lead grant writer on this project.

⁵⁸ Though not yet existing as a formal body, Javier names several people currently in the Anáhuac orbit as potential members, including several Mixtec elders who have helped perform ceremonies on the farm, as well as the Crow who taught him how to conduct a sweat lodge.

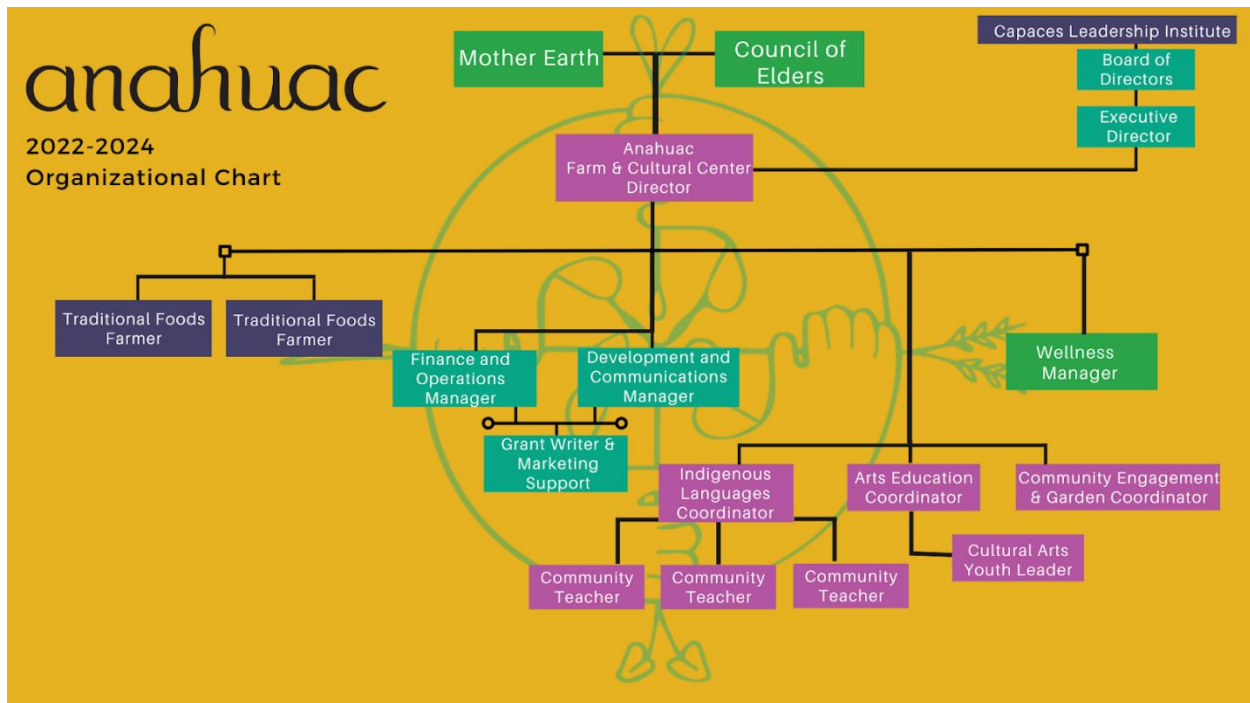


Figure 8. Organizational chart, drawn from the Anáhuac strategic plan. Courtesy of Capaces Leadership Institute.

I hope it's clear by now that I respect Javier for his moral sense, his commitment, and his hard work. I believe his vision for Anáhuac is a good one, and trust him to carry it out well. The question raised by his singular role within Anáhuac is not a question about Javier as a man, but rather one about a food movement—and a wider culture—that elevates charismatic figures and allows them to stand in for entire communities, populations, and causes. Within the small world of Oregon alternative food, Javier is not quite a rockstar, but he is well known. When I ran into another anthropologist early in my fieldwork, over a year before the merger with Capaces, I learned that in addition to the usual nonprofit suspects, she had already met Javier. He was written up in a local newspaper (Slovic 2016b; Slovic 2016a). He was featured as a success story on the Oregon FarmLink⁵⁹ website, asked to speak at the OCFSN Food Charter presentations, and invited to serve on the board of Oregon Agricultural Trust. During ice breakers at an OCFSN retreat, the first person said Wendell Berry was her farm hero; the second, one of the Zenger Farm⁶⁰ managers, said Javier. Any one of these facts would be unusual among the rest of the farmers I know, even those with links to nonprofits; taken as a whole, they are exceptional.

It is a mild sort of fame, even within the small world of Oregon alternative food, but in a period in which this very white community is eagerly seeking to diversify itself (especially following the murder of George Floyd in spring 2020),⁶¹ it lends him a degree of power to

⁵⁹ Run by Oregon Friends of Family Farmers, this website's primary purpose is to match landowners and land-seekers.

⁶⁰ A high-profile teaching farm located in Portland, and one of the most prominent institutions in Oregon's food justice / alternative farm sphere.

⁶¹ The world of alternative food remains strongly white-coded (Hoover 2013; Alkon and McCullen 2011; Slocum 2007; Guthman 2008). Especially during the spring of 2020, when due to COVID I focused my efforts on phone interviews with area food and farming nonprofits, many of the overwhelmingly white, female, and college-educated nonprofit staffers with whom I spoke emphasized their desire to better reach communities of color and to integrate

represent not just Anáhuac and not just his own story, but rather to stand in for indigenous farmers, Mexicano farmers, and farmworkers more generally. (We will grapple with the same difficulties in the following chapter regarding Mexicano and Latinx food justice nonprofits more generally). His clear and—in my opinion—persuasive vision in many ways makes him a perfect candidate for this role. But isn't it concerning, at least a little, that the man selected as the prototypical immigrant farmer, the one to whom the nonprofit world turns to represent his community, stands so far outside the norm?

In his talk before the OCFSN, Javier told those assembled in the Zoom that farmworkers “have so much knowledge. But the problem is that when you come to United States, that goes into dormancy. They just want to survive. So how can we wake up that spirit? How can we call up this knowledge that they carry and share with the greater community?” This is an attractive question, one that he has dedicated his career to answering, and one that has preoccupied me throughout this research. But it is not the only relevant question. By emphasizing the cultural knowledge that migrants carry with them from the south and from the past, we fail to recognize that even in Javier's own biography the story is not simply one of recollection, but also of creation. He did not arrive from Guerrero, or even from that Christmas tree farm outside Canby, fully formed in these ideas; instead, it took years of involvement in PCUN and Chicano studies courses, time spent with his friends and customers at the Portland Farmers Market, travel to Chiapas and to the Crow reservation. So here I have to disagree with Javier, if only by a few degrees: the question is not simply what migrants carry and how to awaken it, but also how that knowledge is transformed, re-jiggered, and added too by experiences here in *el norte*, and what identities are recalled or remade in the process. And if that is the case, the paths these migrants will choose to follow may far more varied and contingent than the food justice literature may have prepared us to expect.

more racial justice into their work, although many were unsure how this could be achieved. More than once, Capaces Executive Director Jaime Arredondo told me happily that this period was a good one for fundraising, as funders became newly eager to support racial justice and diversity initiatives.

CHAPTER 3:

Food justice nonprofits and affiliated farmers

Though Anáhuac provides a useful portrait of an ideal food justice nonprofit, and Javier articulates a particularly thoughtful insider account of food justice, it is just one organization and is largely defined by just one man. In this chapter, I broaden my focus, examining the wider sphere of food justice organizations in western Oregon and attempting to understand the sorts of farmers with whom they work. Here we find a world of farmer training programs, experiments in marketing assistance, and very small alternative farms universally focused on ‘no-spray’⁶² production sold directly to consumers. In contrast to Anáhuac, however, participants’ identities are generally understood as Latinx rather than indigenous, and the associated cultural emphases that are so prominent at Anáhuac are largely absent. While these organizations invoke ideas of culturally rooted sustainability, the rhetoric of both nonprofits and participants more often centers around entwined notions of personal and environmental health and small entrepreneurship.

Examination of food justice nonprofits and affiliated farmers complicates the notion that Mexican immigrants carry a strong, shared cultural disposition towards sustainable production, or that—as Javier asserts—the role of nonprofit projects is to help participants reclaim the knowledge they already possess. Nor, as the food justice scholars cited in Chapter 1 would have it, is their engagement in these programs a response to negative experiences with agroindustry in the US (e.g. Mazar and Mares 2020). While many farmers share backgrounds in rural Mexico and family traditions in agriculture, and link them to their desire to farm, most frame their foray into alternative agriculture as something new and exciting. With the assistance of nonprofits, these farmers create places that enable them to enjoy a desired healthy, rural lifestyle that for many resonates with their memories of home—but they do so using techniques learned in Oregon from their nonprofit supporters.

Like many researchers, I began my fieldwork by seeking out these organizations: unlike farmers, they are easy to find, hold regularly scheduled public events, and have staff who reliably answer their email. They are also amenable to volunteers—a major advantage to the ethnographer aspiring to do socially useful research—and provide an easy introduction to farmers. This chapter centers on three such programs that can broadly be classed as Mexicano immigrant food justice nonprofits, and on the farmers working with these organizations. While other institutions exist that might broadly fit this description, especially with respect to food distribution or nutrition education, these are the only major⁶³ organizations in the region that 1) emphasize Mexican immigrants as a primary constituency, and 2) not only provide access fresh, healthy, culturally-appropriate food, but also make (or have made) substantial efforts to foster

⁶² That is, production that follows organic requirements in terms of the nonuse of synthetic chemicals, but that forgoes the costs and paperwork associated with formal organic certification, which are often prohibitive to small farmers on insecure leases.

⁶³ One additional organization, CAMPO, will be dealt with in the case studies below. It is excluded from broader discussion because of its extremely limited scale—it is essentially the passion project of a single founder and lacks full-time staff and organizational infrastructure.

the development of farm businesses or other production beyond the level of a personal or family garden plot for supplemental home consumption.⁶⁴ These organizations are:

- Adelante Mujeres, in Forest Grove, a small city located where the western fringes of Portland's outer suburbs give way to wine country and the Coast Mountains;
- Huerto de la Familia,⁶⁵ in Eugene, a liberal college town of 175,000 at the southern end of the Valley;
- and The Next Door (specifically their Raices Cooperative Farm), in Hood River, a small, scenic town located near in the Columbia Gorge and famous for its orchards.

The three organizations share deep similarities in both style and content, and have engaged in occasional partnerships. In addition to their food justice activities, Adelante and The Next Door both offer a range of educational and social services that fall beyond the scope of this study and did not figure significantly in my research, while Huerto was almost entirely focused on food justice. All three operate community gardens primarily aimed at Latinx immigrants—a category that, given local demographics, is nearly synonymous with Mexican immigrants.⁶⁶ All three also offer garden education, and have at times sought to help their participants launch farm businesses. Adelante and The Next Door both engage to some degree in food distribution and are involved in local farmers markets, although Adelante more so than The Next Door. Of the three, I have spent the most time with Adelante, the largest and arguably most comprehensive, and I will thus center my analysis there, with occasional reference to the others where appropriate.

One final similarity bears mentioning: the precarity of these programs and of the farms born out of them. Though these programs have achieved significant community benefits, their aim of launching financially viable small farm businesses has met extremely limited success. This is largely attributable to economic factors, most notably participants' lack of capital, and the particular difficulties of securing long-term land access at the fringes of a major urban area, where suitably small parcels are priced for hobby farms rather than agricultural potential. As a result, the number of nonprofit affiliated farmers who have managed to sustain a commercially viable business remains small, and the nonprofits themselves have tended to split their business incubation and food justice programming.

In this chapter, I outline the activities of these Mexican immigrant food justice nonprofits, discussing the implicit and explicit aspirations expressed in their programs, and the limitations they have encountered. I will then discuss the agricultural practices and business

⁶⁴ A fourth organization I exclude with some hesitation. The Asociación Hispana de la Industria del Vino en Oregon y Comunidad (AHIVOY) stands apart from the organizations in this study in several important respects: firstly, it was founded quite recently, in 2018, meaning that their activities had barely begun before the COVID pandemic struck. I was therefore unable to either observe AHIVOY activities in person or meet with participants; my information on AHIVOY is limited to interviews with several of the founders and with information gleaned from social media and news reports. AHIVOY also diverges from the other organizations in that it is focused specifically on the wine industry, meaning that its inclusion in the category of food justice organizations is questionable. Finally, while most participants are vineyard workers, the program's focus is largely on enabling them to move up in the industry by seeking positions as winemakers and in hospitality, rather than as growers.

⁶⁵ In the final weeks of my fieldwork, it was announced that Huerto would be merging with the Centro Latino Americano, a larger social service provider also based in the Eugene area. For the purposes of this study, I will be speaking of Huerto as it existed prior to that merger.

⁶⁶ Among the program participants I have met or of whom I have direct knowledge, the only non-Mexicans I am aware of are one Guatemala couple and one Peruvian man, who has since returned to his home country. These programs also include some Mexican Americans, especially but not exclusively the minor children of immigrant parents.

models of farmers trained by—and in some cases still affiliated with—these nonprofit organizations, both as a group and through a selection of case studies. After a very brief discussion of the absence of coordinated government involvement on this issue, I will return to these immigrant food justice nonprofits to consider their place within the wider regional alternative agricultural sphere. In sum, I argue that these organizations and their respective farmers complicate standard food justice narratives, demonstrating that Mexican immigrant farmers are more varied, and more contingent, in their support for alternative production than is commonly supposed. Though some staff and participants frame their work as expressing distinctive cultural values, and many of these farmers connect their work to early experiences in Mexico, the knowledge and dispositions born of those experiences are best understood as grounding an interest in agriculture and an agrarian lifestyle, rather than providing a template for specific farming styles or practices.

Adelante Mujeres: creating alternative farmers

Adelante Mujeres occupies a big, recently renovated brick building on Main Street in downtown Forest Grove. Go inside, and the white walls are decorated with museum-style text on the indigenous past and immigrant present of the Willamette Valley, photo portraits of participants, and generic shots of Latinas looking folkloric. Next door, they operate a small shop selling *artesanias* made by participants in their business development program. The building projects the solidity of a well-established nonprofit, proud and multicultural and presentable, but lacking the shades of overt politics and aesthetic nods to Chicano Movement radicalism evident in the murals on the PCUN and Capaces buildings.

While PCUN and its wider movement have received significant attention in academic publications (Stephen 2003; Stephen 2001; Sifuentez 2016), Adelante has not (see only mentions in Sprunger 2015), Huerto de la Familia appears only in student theses (Caroline Ann Dezendorf 2013; Gordon 2006), and The Next Door, without a college on its doorstep, appears nearly invisible (the only remotely academic source I can find is from what appears to be an MDiv thesis by Layton n.d.). This is unfortunate, because while Alianza Poder's struggle is indeed of major historical significance, it is not alone in its efforts to advance Mexican immigrants (and Latinx Oregonians more generally). Adelante is the clear preeminent institutional voice of this population in Washington County, Oregon's second largest county, and its organizational history and political posture—like those of Huerto and The Next Door—diverges significantly from its better-documented peer.

In a short video posted on Adelante's website, the organization traces its history through the life of one of its founders: an Anglo Oregonian woman, Bridget Cooke, who found escape and healing from childhood traumas first in volunteering with the 1980s Sanctuary Movement in solidarity with Central American refugees, and then in unspecified work with Chilean women. Returning to Oregon, she joined forces with a nun, Sister Barbara Raymond, involved with Centro Cultural of Washington County. Cooke and Raymond launched the Adelante Mujeres program within Centro Cultural to “giv[e] women a sense that their desires and their dreams and their hopes had value” (Adlante Mujeres 2019). Though the video is full of stills and videos of Latina program participants, and Cooke emphasizes the importance of listening to the Latinas they served and allowing them to guide the organization's direction, and emphasized that a

strong majority of staff are now Latinx, the voices of these women are largely absent from the video.

As this video suggests, despite the Sanctuary Movement's formative role in Cooke's development, Adelante is clearly less 'political' than Alianza Poder in its history and current form, hewing instead closer to the service-driven nonprofit model. This is reflected in its formal structure as a 501(c)3 nonprofit—a form it shares with Capaces, but lacking comparable relationship to an explicitly and primarily political organization like PCUN. Adelante does participate in certain policy issues, most notably through their Immigrant Solidarity Project, which among other things has offered “Know Your Rights” classes, connections to resources for those with family members at the border or in ICE detention, and participated in a statewide coalition that successfully campaigned to make Oregon drivers licenses available to undocumented immigrants. However, nothing in my interviews with staff or participants, my participation in Adelante events, visits to their offices, nor reviews of their publicity materials suggests that Adelante views itself—or wishes to be viewed as—part of a political movement, let alone associated with the sort of radicalism Alianza Poder enjoys projecting.

Adelante's first programs emphasized women's empowerment through education, and education remains central to their mission and image. The organization boasts programs for adult education (including ESL and GED courses), early childhood, youth, leadership development for civic involvement, and a Beyond Trauma program focused on healing and psychological recovery. The last three of these programs have direct analogues at Capaces and PCUN. More relevant to this research, however, are Adelante's Health Equity, Empresas Small Business Development, and Regenerative Agriculture programs. It is these—and especially the agriculture program—that I will be addressing here.

A new participant interested in joining the Regenerative Agriculture program begins with the ten-week garden class, taught by Alejandro Tecum, a Guatemalan man always wearing his signature straw hat. Alejandro was a farmer who underwent a conversion experience when he enrolled in an ecology course at a progressive university in his home country. As he shared in a 2010 oral history, he awakened to the fact that

“we are harming the earth, harming ourselves by using chemicals... since then I started making some changes in my—because I lived in the countryside, I had a piece of land, and I was using chemicals too. So when I went there I started reducing the chemicals... the knowledge about sustainability, about protecting the earth was with me since then” (Tecum 2010).

His early experiments in organic farming were at best partially successful due to his lack of knowledge and soil that he says was dead from years of conventional farming. However, Alejandro remained convinced of the importance of this kind of farming, even when personal tragedy led him to abandon farming and move to Guatemala City, and then to follow his new American fiancée to Oregon. In the US, he found work teaching for Adelante's adult education program. When Adelante launched its agriculture program in 2005, he was the first instructor, a role he has held ever since.

Though the agriculture program is embedded in wider efforts around nutrition and small business development (about which more shortly), Alejandro's approach to the actual care and cultivation of plants, and to education on those topics, has defined Adelante's farming philosophy. This is achieved firstly in the ten-week garden course, for which participants are charged \$50, that is required in order to gain a plot in the Adelante community garden; adherence to the principles taught in this course is also mandatory for community gardeners.

This course is also the entry point and primary recruiting ground for participants in Adelante’s farm business development program.

When I took the garden class, in the fall of 2019, it was held Monday evenings in the social hall of an Adventist church on a street of modest homes and run-down Latinx businesses. There were about 15 of us student that first day, mostly women; a handful were elderly, one quite young, most apparently in their 30s-50s. We sat in folding chairs at folding tables, a video already playing, projected on screen, shots of plants and fungi with narration in a Nature Documentary Voice speaking over swelling Nature Documentary Music about the wonders of decomposition and soil. The documentary ended abruptly, and Alejandro spoke. In my notes, I recorded:

He's wearing his classic straw hat w/ black band, looking jaunty as always. I note throughout, especially in this church setting, he seems almost like a preacher—he talks easily, confidently, loudly. He mixes authoritative statements w/ jokes, and anecdotes about his successes and failures, about people who disregarded his lessons and were worse off for it. He walks around the room, up and down in front by the computer, but out into the aisle among the tables... He talks about the soil microbiome: “since we don’t see them, we believe they don’t exist.”⁶⁷ But now we have tech, can see microbes, must remember when we cultivate. He gets out a whole corn plant, uprooted, w/ a small ear on it—said he took it from his huerto [garden] this a.m., chose one w/o a good ear. Showed us how it's all green, everywhere. He smells the root—“mmm” smells of soil. This all results from soil, sol, and rain... He tells us, we need to nourish soil, which nourishes plants, which nourish us.

The first class focused on the various micro- and macronutrients that plants need from the soil, and how to recognize signs of deficiency in discolored leaves, malformed strawberries, and mushy-bottomed tomatoes. Alejandro recommended soil tests and described the various organic additives one might use, passing around samples of bonemeal and bloodmeal and kelp in little plastic bottles. Though the focus was on practical tips home gardening, wider environmental and health concerns surfaced, underscoring the importance of this approach: he explained how nitrogen runoff causes algae blooms on the Willamette River, blamed Monsanto and agro-industrial neglect of micronutrients for rising rates of cancer, and criticized federal farm subsidies for convincing farmers to give plants synthetic fertilizer “instead of food.”⁶⁸ His presentation concluded with a slide reading “Good health isn’t on the plate, but in the soil”⁶⁹ and Water soil trash, make good fortune”⁷⁰— he tells us there's another version that swaps “mierda” [shit] for “trash,” and a woman screams in surprise and laughter.

As the weeks went on, the classes followed a similar tone and format. The lessons were methodical, detailed, and at times exhausting technical rundowns of garden techniques and tools, from irrigation timers to home-made pest controls. Most of the advice—to reject synthetic chemicals and GMOs and conserve water through drip irrigation—would be readily familiar to anyone who has taken a sustainable gardening course, as would his advice not to copy the big farmers. Like many alternative growers, Alejandro emphasizes the importance of soil health and the microbiome, placing it at the center of his lessons. He is a strong proponent of the no-till approach to soil conservation, which argues that plowing disrupts mycorrhizal networks,

⁶⁷ “Como no los vemos, creemos que no existen.” The entire class was conducted in Spanish.

⁶⁸ “en vez de comida.”

⁶⁹ “El buen salud no está en el plato, sino en el suelo”

⁷⁰ “Agua suelo basura, haga buena fortuna”

desiccates soil, and leads to erosion; instead, soil should be kept constantly covered by either plant growth or mulch, and once a bed has been properly constructed it should be disturbed only minimally. According to this system, “we don’t feed the plant, the soil feeds the plant;”⁷¹ your job as a gardener is to nourish the soil with regular amendments, compost, and crop rotations. As noted above, his lessons were full of preacherly tales of doubters and converts to the no-till path, and in these stories, woe betide those who till the soil or leave it bare, as I recorded in my notes: *Alejandro tells the tale of some gardeners who broke the garden rules, used the tiller. And oh boy did they fuck up the tierra (says he won't refer to what they had as soil) and got an infestation nobody else did, even a few feet away. And that helped them begin to understand.*

While various themes surfaced throughout the course, the importance of nutrition and clean eating to health was paramount, and paired with a pervasive skepticism of corporate food. I have already noted one incident in which Alejandro asserted that conventionally farmed produce is low in nutrients and that Monsanto is therefore culpable for rising cancer rates; another story, recurring throughout the course, to the amusement and disgust of participants, was his allegation that McDonalds uses slugs to make their hamburgers juicier. Participants expressed similar views, like the man who said that we’re killing ourselves by “heating food in plastic, in tupperware,”⁷² which gives us stomach cancer, to which Alejandro responded in a dramatic, mocking tone as the tupperware-microwaver asking God why he had done this. Though these stories were deeply critical of corporate actors, mentions of public policy were very rare; the alternative he proposed comes from individual gardeners and farmers choosing a better path for their cultivations. He also supported individuals choosing better food for their families, as he does when he refuses to buy cheap GMO tortillas—a choice explained not in terms of ‘voting with your dollar’ for social change, but merely as a personal health decision.

In contrast with Anáhuac, Alejandro makes few appeals to tradition or culture in his classes. I recorded just one instance of him speaking of agricultural ritual or ceremony, when he told the class that, on the eve of planting the corn, his parents would put a container full of seed on the table together with flower and candles to give thanks. He said that he lost this tradition—but that now he believes that soil is sacred, and explains that he when tells people to not step where we plant, he does so not only to avoid squishing the plants, but also because it’s *sagrada* [sacred]. Yet even this moment seems to underscore a difference: rather than re-creating this ritual, which is positioned in the past, the sacredness he now identifies seems not to focus on corn, but rather on the soil, and to demand not candles and flowers but instead respectful stewardship. The Adelante program has not, to my knowledge, made any attempt to introduce agricultural rituals.

The language of tradition is similarly peripheral in Adelante’s approach to farming techniques. Alejandro defines regenerative agriculture as built atop three pillars: tradition (giving the stock example of Three Sisters⁷³ planting), innovation (cover crops, association of crops), and science. To this last point, he said that our *abuelos* didn’t know about the “infinity of living beings”⁷⁴ in the soil, but they practiced soil-building techniques nonetheless. Rather than advocating a return to traditions, Alejandro rhetorically points to them seemingly as a means to stake a cultural claim to scientific agriculture, and perhaps to lend the techniques he advocates the solidity of history. In most cases, tradition was positioned as prefiguring modern techniques:

⁷¹ “*nosotros no alimentamos a la planta, el suelo alimenta a la planta*”

⁷² “*calentando comida en plastico, en tupperware*”

⁷³ That is, the ‘Mesoamerican trinity’ of corn, beans, and squash.

⁷⁴ “*infinidad de seres vivos*”

impressive for anticipating what modern science now confirms. Whatever their role, these invocations tended to be brief, slipped into asides and introductory remarks rather than occupying center stage as they might at Anáhuac, and no class session was focused on traditional cultivation or other practices overtly identified as ‘cultural’. Nor did participants’ comments tend to steer conversation in that direction, instead tending towards practical questions (what time of day should I water? How many PSI can drip tape handle?), occasional impressive displays of technical knowledge (as in one man’s explanation of GMOs vis-à-vis conventional breeding), and entertaining swerves into tabloid territory (e.g. in response to Alejandro’s stories about McDonalds slugs, one woman shared a story of restaurant shut down for serving tacos made with human flesh).

Students graduating Alejandro’s gardening course are expected to go on to cultivate vegetables for home consumption, either in a plot at Adelante’s community garden or at their homes. Most participants stop here, gardening purely for recreation personal or family consumption. This is true not only for Adelante, but also for The Next Door and Huerto. Leaving aside the possibility that some may have genuinely enormous properties, we can safely assume that the dimensions of the growing space available in the Adelante garden or at a normal residence in suburban Washington County means that the food produced in such gardens may be a welcome treat or even a meaningful seasonal addition to participants’ diets, but that it is unlikely to dramatically transform their consumption. These gardeners also receive the numerous intangible benefits of gardening, including a sense of connection to home or culture through specific crops or the general act of gardening, social interactions with fellow gardeners, physical exercise, and the psychological and physical benefits of time spent outdoors and in nature (Thompson 2011; Chalmin-Pui et al. 2021; Clatworthy, Hinds, and M. Camic 2013).

For graduates of Alejandro’s course who do seek to go further—and the excitement and enthusiasm Alejandro generates among his students leads many to at least entertain the possibility—Adelante has offered a range of services to support the beginning sustainable farmer. This includes a “distributor program” that purchased small quantities of vegetables from community gardeners to aggregate and re-sell to local restaurants and through a CSA that at its height served approximately 200 households. Selling through the distributor allowed gardeners to begin earning money from surpluses—10 lbs. of tomatoes, 20 lbs. of chilis—that would be too small to justify the time and expense of operating a farmers market stall, and too irregular to maintain steady customers. Early on, Adelante’s farm business program manager, Silvia Cuesta, attempted to coordinate production among the farmers, but was often frustrated by farmers not growing what they had promised; the farmers meanwhile often chafed against Silvia’s strict purchasing requirements. As a former farmer and former produce department manager for the upscale New Seasons grocery chain, Silvia insisted that produce not only be fresh, but also that it meet high aesthetic standards, since “our CSA is not here to make money, it’s not a business... it’s for them to learn and practice.” Nevertheless, participants and former participants complained that her standards were unreasonably high, and that the prices Adelante paid were too low to be worth the bother.

In keeping with Silvia’s understanding of the distributor as training wheels, rather than infrastructure for an ongoing business in its own right, participants were required to take business classes provided by Adelante. Adelante’s small business program was not limited to agriculture—most participants run food service businesses, and the program also operates a small retail incubator space for participants’ various arts and handicrafts—but farm businesses operated as a distinct track. Participants received training in business management and basic

accounting, marketing, and advice on planning expenses and anticipated revenue, and were taken to tour successful local farms—though Silvia often complained to me that her hard work developing workshops was often unappreciated, leaving her in sputtering frustration at would-be farmers turns down these free opportunities. After leaving her job at Adelante, she told me,

“they would just not show up, they would say they’d come to the class and they just don’t show up, they show up late or they were just not putting any effort and then they would—and you would see this, some of the people that were constantly calling you for help were the ones that never showed up to the trainings and the classes. [*She laughs.*] So therefore they always needed so much help, they was always calling you... and it was, well, you know, that you will save yourself so many headaches if you just come to the trainings and workshops!”

Those who graduate the class receive ongoing access to technical support on both the agricultural and business ends.

Home and market gardeners in food justice programs

As it became increasingly apparent that Adelante, Huerto, and The Next Door were primarily focused on home and community gardeners rather than commercial farmers, I spent some time worrying that perhaps it was unreasonable for me to exclude such gardeners from my study. Is there some capitalist worm in my brain, whispering that non-market production is invalid and below consideration? Am I falling for the agoindustrial line that argues for ever-greater scale, discarding and devaluing small producers? I ultimately concluded that there is a meaningful, qualitative difference between gardeners who produce small, supplemental, quantities of food—growers for whom production is very often not even the primary benefit of growing—and farmers, who regardless of scale, produce enough food to meet a substantial proportion of their household needs, whether directly or (more often) through market exchange. Without devaluing the importance of home gardening and its benefits, if our project is to consider *alternative* agriculture and *alternative* food systems, then those models we examine must offer genuine alternatives, possibilities for *replacing* conventional production, not merely garnishing it.

While I draw this distinction, and decline to investigate in depth the community gardening activities at the heart of these three organizations, it is necessary to recognize that the lines between gardeners and farmers can and do become blurry. Individuals move between these categories, either attempting to scale up their gardens into part-time businesses, or downsizing farms into more manageable gardens. Both Adelante and Huerto have provided opportunities for gardeners to sell modest surpluses, recognizing an intermediate category of market gardeners. Since so many farmers that pass through these programs begin or end their farming careers in such a position, it will therefore be useful to briefly visit one such farmer and consider the factors that led him, like many of his peers, to embrace gardening rather than operating at a larger scale.

Otoniel was recommended to me by Javier—who once described Otoniel as the Adelante farmer most receptive to his hopes for cooperation and collaboration—and by Silvia, the former Adelante farm business program manager, who described him as an exemplary participant. We met only once, as I described in my notes:

He lives on a pleasant cul-de-sac in Forest Grove, middle class, not new but perfectly nicely maintained ranch houses. Approaching the house, he calls me from behind a gate

into a large back yard, entirely fenced (due, it becomes clear, to a very energetic black-and-white border collie who races all around and jumps up on me). There's an old, very productive plum tree dropping yellow plums; a row of 8 or 12 potted nopales [an edible cactus], among the biggest I've seen here. He tells me they're the vegetable kind, not the variety grown for fruit.

He's got a covered kitchen/dining area against the house, half-walls open above. It's painted bright orange, and cut-paper flags hang from the rafters. Outside the walls, a row of cacti, at least 4 or 5 feet tall, potted; he tells me that he's from Zacatecas, which is semi-desierto, so he likes to grow them; they're not bothered by the cold, but need to keep them out of the rain.

We talk there in the garden. The vegetable garden is fenced off in a moveable plastic-netting fence, which he opens to let us in. Bare dirt paths; raised beds (permanent, he says) "padded"⁷⁵ in Alejandro's style with the soil covered in composted leaves material, which conserves the wet and "prevents the nutrients washing out."⁷⁶ Drip hoses: says they're good, save water, otherwise you're watering the paths. He's growing lettuce, chilis, tomatoes, cukes, beets, and more. It all looks extremely healthy—much better than my garden!! The area is maybe 20x35? When he moved in, last year, it was all covered in blackberries and brambles, and they're working on improving it. They have a small chicken house, nicely made.

Otoniel is a mestizo of about 40, light-skinned and with the shadow of a beard, handsome in a slightly neutral sort of way. He grew up in Zacatecas, where his parents farmed corn, beans, favas, and squash on about 12 acres. But arriving in the US in the early 2000s, Otoniel did not go into farm labor and spent ten years "completely distanced"⁷⁷ from agriculture: "I believe that we all have a farmer inside, but due to circumstances we don't bring it out, for lack of time, for lack of space."⁷⁸ Upon moving to Forest Grove, he began hearing about Adelante Mujeres from a friend, and so when he ran into Alejandro at church and was invited to join the sustainable agriculture class, "this farmer who I had inside, well, he felt he had to come out."⁷⁹

Though Otoniel's talk of a "farmer inside" could be taken as a claim about his agrarian background, he rejects this interpretation, explaining instead that it is rooted deeper in our collective past: just as we all come from hunter-gatherers, we all come from farmers. He mentioned his childhood memories of agriculture as part of his interest in the Adelante garden course, but only briefly, and did not dwell on their importance or offer any suggestion that this heritage is central to his ideas about gardening. When asked directly whether he applies anything he learned from his father in the garden, or if he draws more from Alejandro's classes, he said, "No, look this is very interesting because you bring a system from over there, knowledge. But there they use a lot of chemicals. Because the soil is so spent, you need to apply chemicals. So I believe that it's a combination between the techniques that you bring from your ancestors and what you do is reinforce it with the techniques that you encounter here. I believe that you try to unite the good from there that you bring and the good from here, right, to make a style. This drip irrigation, you don't see this over there

⁷⁵ "acolchado"

⁷⁶ "evita que salga nutrientes"

⁷⁷ "alejado por completo"

⁷⁸ "yo creo que todos tenemos un agricultor dentro, pero por ciertas circunstancias no la sacamos pues, verdad, por falta de tiempo, por falta de espacio."

⁷⁹ "ese agricultor que llevaba adentro, pues, sentio la necesidad de salir."

either. Another of the things I changed is that there they're used to turning the soil, plowing the soil year after year. And here I don't. I have my permanent beds, where I focus on nourishing, in giving nutrients to the bed."⁸⁰

He went on to tell me about his mulching with composted leaves (a favorite recommendation of Alejandro's no-till style) and the need to adapt to shade conditions on a residential lot. He never returned to the topic of his parents' or *abuelos'* farming practices, and nor offered an example of any aspect of their approach that he replicates in his own garden.

To the extent that Otoniel's gardening should be understood at least partially in cultural terms—and I believe his crop selection and cactus garden strongly suggest that his garden is at least partially experienced as a place to live out some part of his Mexican upbringing—its significance is not made explicit, and do not seem to include strong associations with particular cultivation practices, nor does he seem to view his tradition as pointing towards sustainable practices. He voiced a favorable opinion of Javier's ceremonies, describing his approach as "*espiritual*," but in application to his own life concluded that "we should all—if not practice it like they do, then keep it in mind, that you have to respect the soil, that you have to respect the environment"⁸¹—a sentiment I share, but that hardly suggests a profound or specific interest in agro-spirituality.

Otoniel gardened first in his yard but then, needing more space, took a 30x40 ft plot in Adelante's community garden. He says that "I started cultivating for my family. And I was having so much produce that they told me, listen, why not start selling?"⁸² And so he began selling his excess through Adelante's distributor program, and to a small handful of own clients, offering CSA-style boxes of mixed produce, perhaps decorated with a small bouquet of flowers. Though he worked full time, his wife did not, staying home with their young daughters, and since he needed additional part time work, he thought: why not do something "that I enjoy so much. It relaxes me, it's something that I like to do."⁸³ He set Fridays aside to work in the garden, and also signaled his dedication to this path by enrolling in the paid Campo farm internship program (see below) and serving on the community garden's *mesa directive* [board of directors].

Within a couple years of starting to garden, Otoniel was feeling ready to scale up. He began searching for land—and here he encountered a problem shared by nearly all the farmers I spoke with, especially those in the Adelante program. Though he only wanted a quarter-acre market garden, he found that "rent was expensive, and they only make year-long contracts. You had to have insurance; the property owners require that you have insurance. And it made it difficult for me to find a bigger space."⁸⁴ Shortly thereafter his wife returned to work, meaning

⁸⁰ "No, fíjate que ese es muy interesante porque tu traes un sistema allá, un conocimiento. Pero allá se usa mucho lo que es el químico. Por lo mismo, porque el suelo ya está tan desgastado, que necesitas aplicar químicos. Entonces yo creo que es una combinación entre las técnicas tu ya traes de tus antepasados y lo que haces tu es la refuerzas con las técnicas que conoces aquí, verdad. Yo creo que tratas de unir lo bueno de allá que tu traías y lo bueno de aquí, verdad, hacer un estilo. Eso del riego a base de gotear, también allá no se mira. Otra de las cosas cambié es allá se acostumbra en voltear el suelo, arar el suelo ano por año. Y aquí yo no. Yo tengo mis camas permanentes, donde yo me enfoco en alimentar, en darle alimento a lo que es la cama."

⁸¹ "todos deberíamos—si no practicarlo así como ellos lo hacen, tenerlo en mente, no, en cuenta que hay que respetar el suelo, hay que respetar el medio ambiente"

⁸² "empecé a cultivar para mi familia. Y estaba teniendo tanto producto que me dijeron, oye, ¿porque no empiezas a vender?"

⁸³ "que yo me disfruto tanto. Me relajo, es algo que me gusta hacer."

⁸⁴ "las rentas eran caras, y hacían un contrato nada más por un año. Tenías que tener una seguridad, el dueño de la propiedad te requiera una aseguranza. A mí se hizo muy difícil acceder a un espacio más grande."

he had to take on a greater role in providing childcare and that the family no longer needed the supplemental income. He stopped looking for land, and stopped gardening for sale altogether. The garden is now strictly for fun and home consumption.

Barriers to farming

While most participants at Adelante, The Next Door, and especially Huerto de la Familia never intend to grow for more than supplemental home consumption, Otoniel's experience is typical of the minority who do aspire to establish a supplemental income or move towards a larger business. The most serious challenge is the high cost of land: especially for Adelante's participants, seeking to buy small acreage farms in the Portland area means that they must compete on a real estate market where land is priced not for its agricultural production but rather for residential hobby farms (compare to Guthman 2004:85–86). In nearly all cases, purchasing proves impossible, and even in more rural areas of the Valley it remains extraordinarily difficult. While several nonprofit-affiliated farmers do own their own land, all owned it prior to their involvement in their respective programs; I am unaware of any nonprofit-trained gardeners who set out to buy farms and succeeded.

Without the realistic possibility of buying land, would-be farmers face not only the high cost of rent, but also the reluctance of landowners to agree to longer leases. Short-term leases make it difficult for farmers to invest in infrastructure, soil improvements, perennial crops, and organic certification (an expensive process that takes at least three years), since these improvements are left behind when a lease ends. Since most of these farmers seek small acreages, the land they find is usually in exurban or suburbanizing areas amidst hobby farms and developments. These sites may be less than ideal for farming, lacking appropriate water supplies, and often with the owners living on site. This arrangement can easily lead to friction if owners are bothered by the noise or mess of commercial farming, or object to farmers inviting guests to the farm—an inconvenience for ethnographers, but also a serious barrier to farm-gate sales. Given that most farmers are attracted to the industry at least in part for lifestyle reasons, it is not an appealing prospect to farm under the eye of a landowner who gets angry or might not renew your lease if the field looks too messy, and who won't allow you to host a weekend barbeque.

One additional factor is also worth considering as a barrier to success: stigma. Nonprofit workers from several organizations told me that many Latinx Oregonians view agriculture as something to be escaped, and in particular as an inappropriate career path for their children.

According to Silvia,

most of them have worked in the fields and a lot of the people were like, I moved out of my village, or I want an education, or I want my children to have an education so they don't have to go work on the fields or farm... They have a stigma that comes with farming, it's very negative for them cause the way they've been treated on farms, the way that you know the immigrant community is treated on the field. They have this stigma about agriculture, farming, and they don't want their kids to do that.

Alejandro tried to head-off this stigma in his classes by building up agriculture as a technical and advanced science; Javier did the same with the opposite tactic of revalorizing tradition and spirituality. When I asked Silvia why she had embraced agriculture instead of turning away, she responded

We went out in the fields and helped our dad, we either watered the plants or things like that, but was mostly done by my dad and my older brother so we were not sent to work at other farms to make money you know, or bring food. I mean we were poor [*she laughs*]*—*but this is why my dad worked so hard on growing food, and he used to grow corn, beans, squash you know, planting trees, we had a lot of peaches and oranges, grapefruits, limes and mangos and guavas and all—I mean, we had a small avocado orchard, so we always had something, and this is why I always love agriculture, because I have a good memories of that. My dad loved watermelon, I love watermelon [*laughs*]*...* I remember coming home from school and going out in the field to pick watermelon, we'd crack the watermelon open right there in the field, sit down by the trees and just eat it with my hands... those are the best memories I have of farming, or agriculture. I don't have that stigma.

Perhaps because my research focus on farmers naturally selected for people who were drawn to agriculture, stigma against agricultural work was not a significant theme in my interlocutors' statements, and many expressed memories along the lines of Silvia's, although memories of hard times were equally prevalent. Given the nature of my sample, however, my data is poorly suited to assessing the role of stigma in discouraging enrollment in farm and garden programs.

As in Otoniel's case, the economic barriers to farming, combined with the fact that most Adelante participants can make more money in other industries, tends to push even enthusiastic participants out of agriculture. Out of the initial cohort of ten Adelante trainees, whose enthusiasm reportedly led to the creation of the wider agriculture program, I was only able to identify two who continue to farm commercially on any level. And this is an unusually high rate of success: as of the end of my fieldwork in late 2021, among the graduates and current participants of the three major nonprofits discussed in this chapter, I was only able to identify a combined total of eight households or individuals who were farming or gardening commercially, of whom five relied on farming as a primary or sole source of income.

Why they farm the way they do: memories of home and new nonprofit inspirations

There are significant commonalities among the few nonprofit-trained farmers who do succeed in building financially viable businesses. All follow organic practices but operate without formal certification, a costly and time-consuming process that generally makes little sense for a land-insecure farmer. All sell their produce locally and directly to consumers via farmers markets, as well as through nonprofit-facilitated channels (like Adelante's distributor program) and, often, personal connections and online platforms like Facebook Marketplace. All grow diverse polycultures (usually numbering in the dozens of varieties), generally prominently featuring summer favorites like tomatoes, chilis, and strawberries. Only two families own their own farms, while the others operate on insecure leases. With the lone exception of a family with income from a white-collar job and a small construction business, all the rest operate on under 3 acres. Though at least one farm hires occasional part-time workers, all are primarily (and most are exclusively) owner operated.

While alternativeness in agriculture may be defined according to various metrics and spectra, all nonprofit-trained farmers in my study are unambiguously alternative. This appears to be a notable success for the nonprofits, which are all explicit in their desire to train and support sustainable farmers. As Minkoff-Zern describes, many of these features can also be understood

as the result of farmers' specific social position and structural disadvantages, in addition to any ideological preference they may have for alternativeness (Minkoff-Zern 2019): lack of capital limits scale; selling at farmers markets and through local networks may be the only viable option when you lack the volume, connections, and certifications to sell to wholesalers; crop diversity both manages risk and increases competitiveness in direct-to-consumer sales. Even non-use of pesticides may reflect the high cost of inputs, as well as the preferences of farmers market customers.

While pragmatic factors have a crucial bearing on nonprofit-linked farmers' business and growing models—most especially their scale and local marketing—conversations with these farmers makes clear that they broadly share the values of the organizations with which they work. Even those who benefitted from nonprofit training and support in their early days but have since cut ties and work entirely independently continue to profess a belief in the importance of no-spray uncertified organic practices. According to Aldo, who along with his wife was one of the early graduates of the Adelante sustainable agriculture program, “if something motivated us or makes us continue doing this, it's precisely to not use more chemicals. We are very clear that we don't want to continue damaging the environment.”⁸⁵ Explaining why organic certification is not viable for their small farm and year-to-year lease, he credits customers for trusting his word that that they do not spray, a neat articulation of the local food claim that farmers markets can build links between consumers and producers to support more ecological practices, and that good alternative producers should emphasize the non-economic aspects of farming (e.g. Lyson 2007): “because the clients show thankfulness at the markets. To thank, to say, ‘thank you for what you do, thank you for bringing us food.’ *So* [word in English in the original] these little things are very important for us”⁸⁶

Maria, a retired childcare worker who operates a half-acre market garden with her orchard-worker husband, likewise emphasizes the non-economic significance of farmers markets:

“I have liked to socialize with people. I like it! Sometimes I didn't sell much but I had a good time... [the money] is an extra. Clearly it helps and lot and alleviates the financial stress a little... [however] this business of ours is how we do something that we like to do, and well, it feels very good to eat a meal that one produces oneself, especially fresh. We know how we grew it. And also, this is how we have the opportunity to eat stuff that's so fresh, so healthy, well—one feels good because the people buy it. Including family, we give them vegetables. That's how to contribute to good nutrition and to other people too.”⁸⁷

Here, again, we see a nonprofit-trained farmer embodying the alternative agricultural ideal: downplaying the profit motive and instead emphasizing a passion for the agrarian lifestyle, the

⁸⁵ “*si algo nos motivó o nos hace seguir haciendo eso, es precisamente no usar más químicos. Tenemos bien claro que no queremos seguir dañando más el medio ambiente.*”

⁸⁶ “*porque los clientes lo muestran con un agradecimiento los mercados. Agradecer, decir ‘gracias por lo que hacen, gracias por traernos de comer.’ So esas cosas son muy importantes para nosotros.*”

⁸⁷ “*a mi me ha gustado socializar con gente. ¡Me gustaba! A veces no se vendía mucho pero pasaba uno un buen tiempo... [the money] es algo extra. Claro que esto ayuda mucho y sirve mucho como aliviar un poquito el estrés financiero... [however] esto de nosotros es como hacer algo que nos gusta hacer, y pues se siente muy bien comer una la comida uno se produce, especialmente fresco. Se sabemos cómo nosotros lo cultivamos. Y también porque así como tenemos esas oportunidades de comer esas cosas tan frescas, tan saludables, pues—se siente bien que por la gente que compra. Inclusive que es los familiares, les regalamos vegetales. Que es como contribuir también a la buena alimentación y de otras personas también.*”

conviviality of local exchange, and stressing the importance of good healthy food as an expression of care for family and customers alike.

Unprompted, Maria located her and husband's motivation to farm in "culture and the custom that one lives, and how we want to revive our customs and our own culture, from childhood, from our youth in Mexico. [We want to] continue with this sort of activities that we have done since we were little, and because it's what we know how to do best."⁸⁸

And, like the Anáhuac mothers, she expressed a desire to pass this knowledge on to her children: "since they were little the kids learned where food comes from, and how to see a plant, to identify a cucumber plant or a squash... Well, my daughter is big now, she goes to the university and sometimes she brings some friends over, come over to the house with a friend and tells me, we're going to the garden to look for some vegetables to take, and my daughter tells me [*she laughs*] 'I couldn't believe that this girl doesn't even know how carrots grow!' And the friend says, 'it's my first time,' I start chatting with these friends who come with her, it's their first experience of finding out where different vegetables come from!"⁸⁹

Maria is one of the participant-leaders in her nonprofit program, and is particularly direct in describing cultural values and transmission as important components of her work. While other farmers also seemed pleased that their children had learned where their food came from, the lessons in some cases may not have been quite those that food justice advocates would hope for. One former market gardener with Adelante, a grocery store worker, told me that money was not a motivation in his farming, but that he wanted to teach his kids the importance of hard work. Though he had the chance to go to college, he lacked the drive; now, he wants them to do better than he did, to seek out white-collar professions—time spent working on the farm was, in effect, and object lesson in what was in store if they failed to take their schooling seriously. As for Aldo, he told me that "our kids know about this [i.e. farming] because they participated. But they didn't like it, it didn't draw their interest. They want their work, want to study, to prepare themselves. *Fine* [word in English in the original]. Everyone can choose their own path, right, but I repeat: someone has to do the agriculture."⁹⁰

We see then that, among the major food justice nonprofit in this study, the mothers of Anáhuac are the participants most direct and outspoken in defining 'culture' and its revival, preservation, and transmission as a distinct aspect of their project. Participants in the other programs are emphatic about health, sustainability, and the conviviality of local food systems, while only invoking the culture concept occasionally, and even then not emphasizing it as a primary factor in their involvement. In each case, participants' rhetoric seems to correspond to

⁸⁸ "la cultura y la costumbre de la que uno vive, y como que queremos revivir nuestras costumbres y nuestra cultura de nuestra, de infancia, de nuestra juventud en México. [We want to] continuar con ese tipo de actividades que nosotros hacíamos desde chicos, y porque es lo que sabemos hacer más bien."

⁸⁹ los hijos desde chiquitos si aprendieron de dónde venía la comida, y como se mira una planta, identificar una planta de pepino de una de calabaza... Pues mi hija ya está grande, va a la universidad y a veces trae algunas amigas, viene con una amiga o algo aquí a la casa, y luego me dice, va al jardín a buscar cosas para llevar, verduras, y dice mi hija [*laughs*] 'no pudo creer que esta no sabía ni cómo ni donde crecían las zanahorias!' Y dice, 'es mi primera vez,' me pone a platicar de esas amigas que viene con ella, es su primera experiencia de conocer de dónde vienen las diferentes verduras.

⁹⁰ "nuestros hijos tienen conocimiento de esto [i.e. farming] porque ellos participaron. Pero no les gusta, no les llama la atención. Ellos quieren su trabajo, quieren estudiar, prepararse. *Fine*. Es algo que cada quien elige su camino, verdad, pero repito: alguien tiene que hacer la agricultura."

the overt and implicit aims and values of the organizations in which they participate. This raises obvious questions. Should we understand the ideals of and inclinations towards sustainability, no-spray, and healthy local food shared within a community—as Javier does—as a simple reflection of traditional indigenous or campesino values, with the nonprofit helping participants to realize their own preexisting desires? Or, on the other hand, should we take these ideals and inclinations, to some greater or lesser extent, as an outcome of participation in nonprofits rather than a cause.

While the mothers’ testimonies in the previous chapter seem to lend credence to Javier’s position, the fact that these testimonies were collected in a focus group held in an Anáhuac classroom may have influenced them to provide more ‘correct’ (though not necessarily less sincere) responses. The stories of participants in the other nonprofits suggest that, while preexisting (and arguably ‘cultural’) preferences contributed to their decision to get involved in a food justice program, the nonprofits significantly shaped their desires in ways that go well beyond simply facilitating preexisting desires.

Let’s return to Aldo, who was quoted above expressing his preference for organic practices and the pleasure of distributing food in the community. Prior to becoming a farmer, Aldo worked for 18 years pouring asphalt in the Portland area. One day he went to the doctor, who asked Aldo if he smoked. He didn’t, but learned that the asphalt fumes had damaged his lungs. After this wakeup call, he decided he needed to start growing healthier food for his family: “While I worked in construction, I only had a little time to plant a few vegetables in the *backyard* [word in English in the original]. Well so my brother, he told me, ‘you like to plant your vegetables’—he invited me— ‘there’s a program where they help families learn to grow organically. And they even help, and blah-blah-blah.’ And so [laughs], well I said, why not? I want to see. Because I remembered my dad—and I remember my father, rest in peace—always used natural methods.”⁹¹

This story appears a straightforward confirmation of Javier’s thesis—and that put forward by food justice scholars (e.g. Minkoff-Zern 2019; Mazar and Mares 2020)—but further details of Aldo’s life story offer complications. His father “only grew corn and beans, squash. But that’s all. And very minimal.... He worked in construction and... as a driver. *That’s what he did* [English in the original]. And in the end—he did some farming, but very minimally.”⁹² Many farmers sharply distinguished Mexican corn-and-beans *milpa* production from diversified vegetable farming to the point of seeing them as entirely separate occupations; in several cases, interviewees denied outright that their parents had farmed, only to later mention that they grew corn and beans. Aldo clearly shared this perspective, and his father’s limited range of production stood in such obvious contrast with the highly diversified field in which we were speaking that it seemed to him not to belong to the same category of activity at all.

Aldo’s participation in his father’s cultivation as a child was reluctant: “my dad always brought us [to the garden] almost by force, ‘you have to help me in the field, because that’s

⁹¹ “*mientras trabajaba en la construcción, yo tenía un poquito de tiempo para yo plantar mis contadas verduras en el backyard. Entonces pues Saul, mi hermano, me dijo, a ti que te gusta plantar tus verduras—me invitó—hay un programa en donde ayuda a las familias aprender a cultivar orgánicamente. Y aun los apoyan y blah-blah-blah. Y entonces [laughs] pues dije, pues, porque no. Quiero ver. Porque yo recordé que mi papa—y recuerdo que mi padre, en paz descanse – siempre usaba los métodos naturales.*”

⁹² “*solo cultivaba maíz y frijol, calabaza. Pero es todo. Y muy mínimo.... El trabajaba en la construcción y... chofer. That's what he did. Y finalmente—hacia algo de agricultura, pero muy mínimo.*”

where the main thing comes from, corn.”⁹³ As a teen he left to seek employment in construction, first as a migrant in Baja California and then in Oregon. He spent his working life in construction rather than agriculture, keeping only a small garden for the family. Lucy, his softspoken wife, grew up in hyper-urban Mexico City and was introduced to farmwork when she arrived in Oregon, picking crops and working in canneries, “and it wasn’t easy for me, it was very hard.”⁹⁴ She firmly rejected the idea that her experience as a hired farmworker informed her current work, describing her former jobs as “totally different... Here [on their farm], it’s different here.”⁹⁵ Lucy and Aldo both stressed that they had intended their gardening purely for home consumption, and it was only with the urging and supports of Adelante that the family had ventured, step by step, into commercial farming.

In sum, then, while elements of this family’s story concord with the model provided by the Anáhuac mothers, of nonprofit involvement as an opportunity to revive valued agrarian traditions, other parts fit less easily, or resist the pattern entirely. For Lucy, Adelante’s gardening classes felt new, equally disconnected from her metropolitan childhood and her seasonal farmwork. For her husband, meanwhile, their programs stoked his early memories, augmenting and transforming them. He recalls that, lacking scientific meteorological information, his father planted with the phases of the moon, but being disinterested and “a little dumb”⁹⁶ as a child, he had failed to understand the system; now, as an adult, he plants with the moon—using not his father’s system, but one he found on Google. It is an apt metaphor for an approach that draws inspiration from his past but few of the specifics, and a farmer equally proud of his chilis and his African kiwano melons.

Other farms bear the imprint of organized food justice initiatives even more clearly. According to Maria, who above spoke directly about farming to “revive our customs”:

“What we grew in Mexico was corn, bean, and other grains. And it wasn’t until here [Hood River] that we experimented with vegetables. It’s with Raíces [The Next Door’s garden program] that I learned. Because it’s different, right? I think that it is different, I don’t remember in Mexico that someone taught me to take care of the earth. [In Raíces,] I learned alternatives to stop using chemicals, for example fertilizers that they used in Mexico were for corn, they were chemicals, they weren’t organic. Here, well, they’ve taught us about organic fertilizers. Or how to provide nutrients to the earth in order that it’s not necessary to use these chemicals. They’ve also taught us to control pests without using chemicals that can be dangerous to one’s health.

Me: “And you didn’t know this before?”

Maria: “Exactly. All this was new for me.”⁹⁷

⁹³ “*mi papa casi nos llevaba pues casi a fuerzas, no, ‘tienen que ayudarme a campo, porque de allí sale lo principal, el maíz’.*”

⁹⁴ “*y no me fue fácil, fue muy difícil.*”

⁹⁵ “*totalmente diferente... Acá [on their farm], es diferente acá.*”

⁹⁶ “*poquito torpe*”

⁹⁷ “*Lo que nosotros cultivamos en México era maíz, frijol, y otros granos. Y hasta aquí fue cuando experimentamos con verduras. Es con Raíces [The Next Door’s garden program], yo aprendí. Porque es diferente, verdad. Yo pienso que es diferente, no lo recuerdo en México como que alguien me enseñado cuidar de la tierra... [In Raíces,] aprendí alternativas para dejar de usar químicos, por ejemplo, fertilizantes que se usaban en México eran para maíz, eran químicos, no eran orgánicos. Aquí pues nos han enseñado sobre los fertilizantes orgánicos. O como proveerle nutrientes a la tierra para no haber necesidad de usar esos químicos. También nos han enseñado el control de las plagas sin usar químicos que se pueden ser peligrosos para la salud.*”

Me: “*¿Y este es algo que no conocía antes?*”

Though some nonprofit participants reported childhood memories of organic practices, Maria's comparison of farming in her native Guanajuato with what she has learned in Oregon is not unusual, tracking closely with the statements of independent farmers (see Chapter 4)—although in many cases their experiences have led to quite different results. We must therefore ask: if even the nonprofit participant who is most explicit in identifying culture and custom as a motivation behind her farming practice regards both the crops she plants and the methods she uses as novel, what *are* the continuities that she sees? What is it about the garden (or farm) as a place that enables this feeling of connection to childhood, to home, to a larger imagined ethnic or national community? As will be more fully explored in the remaining chapters, the answer is found not in specific plants or planting techniques—although, as Javier demonstrates, these can play an important role in meaning-making projects—but instead in a particular experience of living afforded by the garden.

When food justice projects fail: the limits of cooperation and nonprofit-led initiatives

Throughout this dissertation, I have struggled with a very basic problem in my methodology: the nearly inevitable bias towards successful—or at least surviving—farms. Farms that fail or are otherwise wound down leave little trace; the former farmers are often difficult to locate, since they no longer have reason to advertise themselves, often fall out of contact with nonprofit staff, and in many cases move away. Yet given the very limited success among these nonprofits in creating lasting, viable farm businesses in the face of often overwhelming structural barriers, examination of failed farms and ex-farmers is a vital part of the story. This is especially true in light of nonprofits' active role in developing participants' desire to farm and approach to farming, since it is here that we may begin to gain a fuller picture of the costs of promoting such ambitions.

While many small farms and market gardens disappear with little trace—a familiar market stall fails to reappear one summer, phone calls go unanswered—the Small Farmers Project, launched by Huerto de la Familia in 2008, provides a valuable opportunity to examine how farms fail and appealing food justice initiatives can go awry. Although the Small Farmers Project was already nearly defunct by the time I first encountered it, and I was thus unable to observe its full operation in person, I have collected histories of the experiment from multiple participants and organizers, as well as contemporaneous media accounts and promotional materials, and made multiple visits to a successor project. This enables me to provide an account of how exactly an appealing project fell apart, and thereby to offer a glimpse into the experience of the many nonprofit affiliated farmers—likely a majority of them—whose farming dreams either fail to launch or else tumble back to earth.

As a cooperative enterprise, the Small Farmers Project is a bit of an outlier among the nonprofit-backed farms in this study, but its larger scale and higher profile also offer advantages. Once the flagship project for Huerto's farm incubator program, it may never have been typical, but it embodied some of the highest ambitions shared by all the nonprofits studied here. Adelante briefly attempted a sort of cooperative farm in its very early days, although I have been able to gather very few details about its operation and eventual end, and in his garden classes Alejandro often expressed a hope that enterprising students might someday revive the effort. The Next

Maria: "*Exactamente. Todo eso si fue nuevo para mí.*"

Door expresses their desire in the name of their community garden and related programs, known officially (and somewhat misleadingly) as Raices Cooperative Farm; Anáhuac's cooperative aims are extensive and documented in the previous chapter.

While nonprofit staff and funders are drawn to the cooperative ideal, I have seen significantly less interest among participants themselves. This disjuncture—and the reasons behind it—are illustrated in a conversation with Silvia, an Adelante staffer, that I summarized in my fieldnotes:

She also talked about how Margarita couldn't get a tractor—was bldg beds by hand, asked for help from the Adelante farmers group [but] only Silvia turned up. This got her onto another roll, about how in Silvia's village (this is what she says she said to the grp) if someone has a big project, to build something, say, they'll ask for help and everyone comes, the women all cook food, the men all work. Don't they have this in their villages too? And they said yes, but here it's different, we have jobs, we come home and are tired. Silvia wants to change this, thinks it would be better for everyone if there was this sort of mutual help.

Nearly all nonprofit-affiliated farmers discussed in this chapter work as independent family units,⁹⁸ coming together only in and around markets, workshops, and other formal settings convened by their respective nonprofits. Though all three organizations operate community gardens, creating opportunities for community-building and conviviality through casual encounters and occasional communal work parties to maintain shared space, except at Anáhuac the participants primarily cultivate their own personal or family plots—and anyways, commercial farmers generally don't keep beds at the community gardens.

Huerto de la Familia began in 1999 with a social worker named Sarah Cantril who worked with undocumented mothers and children. According to Sarah, it was “obvious that there was this need for more food and culturally appropriate food” and that food banks were “doing a horrible job at reaching out to Latino immigrants... [so] it just seemed to make sense” to create a place for them to garden. She proposed the project to the women, and when a group expressed interest, they started a small garden. By 2007, the program had grown into an incorporated nonprofit with Sarah at its head, and she was beginning to look for other organizations working with immigrants in agriculture, and learned that Heifer International had just such a program—and that they had a staffer based just up the road in Corvallis.

The Heifer staffer's visit to one of Huerto's community gardens marks the moment the Small Farmers Project was born. As Sarah recalls, she understood from that visit that Heifer funds would be available to start a farm: “[t]hat beginning determined what happened. And I wish that I'd had a better understanding of what we could have done with the Heifer money.” She convened a gathering of Huerto gardeners, invited another Heifer staffer down from Washington State, and won an initial \$6,000 planning grant to hire a consultant, Carl Berg, a former Peace Corps volunteer and organic berry farmer hired largely on the strength of his bilingualism. Heifer would ultimately award the project another \$142,000 over its first three years.

The initial group included 19 individuals,⁹⁹ all Latinx immigrants, varying widely in age. Some participants had significant agricultural experience. One older participant, Roberto, is a

⁹⁸ For a notable partial exception, see Margarita's story, below.

⁹⁹ Various sources and interviewees cited competing figures, ranging as high as 30 for the initial group. Some discrepancies seem to relate to whether they are counting individuals or households; more generally, it seems to be a

vineyard worker who recalled cultivating corn, beans, favas, and wheat as a child in the Estado de Mexico; his wife added that because it was rain-fed agriculture, they couldn't grow vegetables, and only learned to do so here in the US. Basilio grew up among milpa farmers in Jalisco, worked alongside his father at a pear orchard in Oregon as a teen, and then got a job at a dairy while putting himself through night classes to graduate with a degree in counseling and find work at a local nonprofit. Others—a majority, according to Carl (Bjornstad 2010)—did not have agricultural experience. Roberto's nephew Margarito told me that, though he had grown up in the Chiapan countryside, he had been entirely uninterested in plants as a child, left town at the age of 11, and knew “nothing, absolutely nothing more than I learned with Huerto.”¹⁰⁰ Most were recruited from Huerto's community gardens, but all informants agreed that there had not been few or no social ties among the participants prior to their involvement in the planning process, with the notable exception of several extended families within the group.

With assistance from Heifer, Sarah and Carl facilitated a series of meeting with the participants in which the future shape of the farm slowly came into shape. In our interview, Sarah recalled that “they, on their own, decided that they wanted to be a cooperative. Which was very difficult. We *could* have used [laughs] Heifer money completely differently, which might have been better for the organization.” A few minutes later, however, she revised her opinion, suggesting that the idea may have partially come from Heifer: she asks if I have a lot of experience “working with the [Latino] community,” and says “I think that there's a deference that happens,” a respectful tendency to defer to those perceived to have authority, and that if Heifer or Carl gave a suggestion, the families “quickly globbed onto them without really determining if they're the best idea. I don't know.”

According to Carl, though only a minority of the participants were from a farm background, “they all had these ideas, or knew somebody potentially from a farm background, and they brought that to the front,” looking into a

“mixed bag of things that could be done, like a general farm operation... people really wanted to have the hacienda type of background, that they would have a little bit of everything, that it would be a cross-section of what their abilities and knowledge was, and that there would be an animal component.”

Some suggested raising chickens and selling eggs, an idea that was ultimately deemed unrealistic: “it wasn't gonna be able to be the mixed bag thing they wanted to do.”

Still seeking an appropriate crop, Carl took the group on a fieldtrip to a blackcap raspberry grower in the northern part of the Valley, hoping to

“open the—[sigh]—I'm trying to say this in the right way—trying to see if there would be some way that this group could do something and not be competing with other local farmers, where there might be potentially feelings of an unfairness or something like that, there would be farmers with an unfair competitive advantage because they were being funded to do things. And so blackcap raspberries was a crop that I thought had potential in growing in the southern Valley, in the '50s and '60s [it] was a successful enterprise and there was nobody around here doing that, and so I thought that was something that could be a niche type market that they could fit into.”

case of fallible memories and a group that fluctuated significantly in size over time; 19 is the most commonly cited figure, and it is therefore the one I use here.

¹⁰⁰ “*nada, absolutamente nada más que aprendí con Huerto.*”

Ultimately the group did decide to focus on blackcap raspberries and strawberries (a crop that Carl's farm had been producing for the past 50 years), in addition to turkeys and mixed vegetables for personal consumption.

To this point my recounting of the early days has dwelt on the nonprofit staff. This is no accident: while Sarah, Carl, and the former Heifer International liaison to the project all took pains to emphasize their efforts to facilitate a participatory process, to enable rather than to steer, it is clear both from a careful reading of their testimony and from that of the three former co-op members I interviewed¹⁰¹ that despite their conscientious efforts the structure that emerged was in the greatest part a reflection of Huerto and its professional partners. Roberto told me outright that he had no experience with those crops, and the idea came from the nonprofits. The other stories I collected similarly treat the project as one that originated within Huerto, something they were happy to join but not their own idea or creation. Margarito—the participant who I came to know best—told me

“Look, when we began, when were 19 families, ok? 19 families. Ok. When we began, when Sarah [Cantril] told us, ‘hey kids, pay attention, there’s a program’ a we had to go to *meetings* [English in original]. *Meetings, meetings, meeting, meeting, meeting*. When the meetings began, there were various meetings... and after so many meetings, there were maybe like four families left. Because meetings meetings meetings and they wanted to see it already. Including my wife. And I don’t speak badly of my wife, because I love her. Even my wife told me, ‘there were so many meetings,’”¹⁰²

At no point in our conversations has he ever discussed the content of the meetings, or taken ownership over them, or indeed treated them anything other than a tiresome process that led to attrition in the group. The decisions of what to grow, how to grow it, and how to structure the group are completely absent from his narrative.

While the choice of crops and the cooperative structure appear, at a minimum, to have been heavily influenced by nonprofit guidance, former participants had a more genuine enthusiasm for organic practices. As one of the most educated farmers in my study, Basilio was unsurprisingly¹⁰³ the most explicit, saying that he joined the Small Farmers Project because “learning more about organic farming, it has been a passion of mine. And I wanted to be part of that, to learn more about organic farming.” He recalls,

“when I was growing up years ago, the practices of farming was very different down in Mexico. Now they use pesticides for [*laughs*] everything—it’s like, instead of cleaning the weeds, a lot of people down in the south, they use spray to kill the weeds. And they

¹⁰¹ In addition to these three formal interviews, I have also had shorter and less detailed conversations with two of those participants’ wives, who were also involved in the Small Farmers Project. My efforts to track down other former participants failed. This is due in large part to the acrimonious circumstances under which former participants departed, which mean that many are no longer in contact or on speaking terms. Several have moved away, and at least one has left the country.

¹⁰² “Mira, cuando nosotros empezamos, éramos 19 familias, ok? Ok. 19 familias. Ok. Cuando empezó, cuando Sarah nos dijo, ‘hey jóvenes, fíjense que hay un programa y esto,’ y teníamos que ir a meetings. Meetings, meetings, meeting, meeting, meeting. Cuando las reuniones se empezaron, hubieron varias reuniones... Y después de tantas reuniones, se salieron posiblemente como unas 4 familias. Porque reuniones reuniones reuniones y ellos ya querían ver. Incluso mi esposa. Y no hablo mal de mi esposa, porque la amo. Incluso mi esposa me decía, ‘tuvo tanto las reuniones.’”

¹⁰³ See also Javier, as well the nonprofit staff (largely college educated 1.5 generation or US-born children of immigrant farmworkers) discussed in this chapter. The handful of US-born or -raised Mexicano farmers with whom I spoke similarly had higher levels of formal educational attainment and expressed a uniform preference for organic / alternative production.

use sprays to control insects and stuff. But when I was a kid I was just helping my grandfather and my dad, so I mean it's just the passion my own background, you know, my family and the desire to pass on the information of the benefit of not using weed killers and other type of chemicals in the soil... The movement of organic farming... it needs to continue. To really value the organic farming instead of using chemicals that are bad for your health.”

He has a small family farm in Mexico, and hopes that “when I retire maybe I can be part of a... like in a community where I’m from I can maybe start some classes to the farmers there how to farm without using pesticides.”

Roberto, who works at an organic vineyard, agrees with Basilio in his framing of organic techniques as both healthy and traditional. He told me that everything was organic in his hometown—though later, when his wife emerged from the kitchen, she disagreed, saying that some people there spray for insects and use synthetic fertilizer. The couple agreed, however, that organic food is “limpio” and he says that if he brings food to feed his children, he wants it to be clean and healthy.

Margarito, the least experienced of the three, is unusual among nonprofit-affiliated farmers in that he rarely mentions organics or pesticides; when he does so, it is to say that Huerto taught him that organic is preferable. When I asked about sustainable agriculture, he told me “Sustainable is something that helps you, no? Or that sustains you or maintains you. I thought about it like that, I don’t know if that’s how it is... Like for example, all the teaching, or all the produce that we cultivate, with this we sustain ourselves, to nourish ourselves. And so we don’t go and buy in the stores. The produce from this farm, with this we sustain ourselves economically... I’ll say it’s a sustenance for my family.”¹⁰⁴

Rather than dwelling on either personal health or a concept of culture, Margarito’s strong evangelical faith and his personality as something of a dreamer leads him to see farming and food production less as an end in itself than the base for a series of shifting but distinctly social aspirations, ranging from teaching his children to grow food to earning enough money to hire workers and devote himself to a mission with street children.

The Small Farmers Project formally launched in 2008, renting six acres at the edge of town, amidst a minor flurry of positive coverage in the local media. Descriptions at the time—as well as my later interactions with Huerto—mirror the food justice discourses shared by the other nonprofits in this study. The farm is presented as an idyll: “Looking across six acres of lush green rows of strawberries and black cap raspberries that stretch north from East Beacon Drive off River Road, Basilio Sandoval talks with pride, satisfaction and more than a little wonder” (Bjornstad 2010). They stress the unique character of the farmers, as in a story on a local public radio station:

Reporter: “What’s also unusual is who runs this farm business: eight low-income families, mostly migrants from Mexico, who have day jobs as farm-workers and janitors... Carlos Sollo, who works full-time as a landscaper, came out to prune and weed the canes on a recent evening. His wife and twin 9-year-old sons joined him in the field.”

¹⁰⁴ “Sostenible es algo que te ayuda, no? O que te sostiene o que te mantiene. Yo lo piensa así, no sé si sea así... como por ejemplo, toda la enseñanza, o todo el producto que nosotros cultivamos, con eso nos sostenemos nosotros, para alimentarnos. Y así no vamos y compramos a las tiendas. El producto de aquí, con eso nosotros nos sostenemos económicamente... Es un sustento para mi familia voy a decir ahorita.”

Sollo: “It’s amazing to grow your own and harvest your own. It’s different than when you work for somebody else.”

Reporter: “What would his relatives back in Oaxaca say if they could see him now?”

Sollo: “Oh, they will not believe me. They don’t believe that I have this I send pictures to them and they say, ‘Hey, that’s incredible.’ I think this the American Dream” (KLCC Discusses Small Farmers’ Project & Black Cap Raspberries 2010).

Ideas of tradition crop up in descriptions of culturally specific foods and referencing “seed sent from their families back home, for instance chilis, jicama and special varieties of corn” (Foster 2008) and memories of hometown agrarian lifestyles (Bjornstad 2010), but in most cases the emphasis—as in the radio story above—is one economic aspiration, of immigrants working their way up.

Despite the optimism of early press coverage, the Small Farmers Project soon ran into difficulties. The co-op group had already shed members during the drawn-out planning process prior to launch; now, as the farmers prepared the land and planted, new conflicts emerged. Though the group grew some vegetables and raised turkeys, and planted strawberries for “u-pick”, their primary crop was black-cap raspberries, chosen at Carl’s recommendation as an unusual and high-value product, and one for which they were able to arrange a buyer in the Organically Grown Company, a socially-minded wholesale organics distributor. As it turned out, however, black-cap raspberries are uncommon for a reason: they are a pain in the ass. Low-yielding, labor intensive, and covered in “brutally sharp” thorns, Sarah recalled, “they’re delicious, I love them. But there’s a reason no one’s growing them.” They also take about three years to come into full production, meaning that income was scant in those early years.

While Huerto’s connections and project’s high profile and appealing story ensured access to reliable institutional customers in progressive Eugene, the combination of hard physical labor and disappointing income led to tensions within the group. The participants with whom I spoke complained about other members not working hard enough. According to Margarito, they started off dividing labor so that everyone put in equal hours, but this plan proved frustrating when it became plain that some members could accomplish far than others in the same amount of time. An alternate approach was proposed: work would be divided up equally, with each member assigned an equivalent task. However, as Margarito recalls this just resulted in

“Disagreements and disagreement... It’s a lot of work. Ok. Some are going to make the rows, others plant, other are going to put in the irrigation. Some would come, others wouldn’t come... Harvest time arrives. When we start to pick, we’re starting to make money... Ok. We all had our [other] work, like for example, I come here, but I work for a cleaning company. And everyone the same. Some would come in the morning for—let’s say two hours. When it was the strawberry harvest. This person would come, come and pick—they would fill up the bucket like to here [*indicating a not-so-full bucket with his hands*].”

Me: Yeah, just a little.

“A little! Others would come and pick buckets... Ok. The first payment arrived. And those people who never picked more than a little bit wanted the same amount as those who stayed until four in the afternoon working. And this also was—this was a problem. Why? Because, well, I say good—if I work less I should be aware that the amount I’ll make is going to be less. Because it’s not fair that one who works—ok, if I work two

hours. And that guy works eight or more—because if there were people who stayed [working all day]—it’s not fair that I make the same amount as him. No.¹⁰⁵

Similar differences in opinion as to how to count labor and distribute revenue also led to disputes between Basilio and other co-op members when he hired relatives to weed his section. This disagreement clearly reflects Basilio’s status as one few members with a white-collar occupation, a divide that further manifested in the group’s reliance on him to put in extra work dealing with English-speaking customers and managing paperwork related to organic certification—even as they joked uncomfortably that he would be the one to end up owning the whole farm. This disconnect may also be related to Basilio emerging as something of a stickler for the rules within the group, and when someone broke the rules “I was the one who would say, ok, we need a meeting, we need to talk about this.” When word went round that someone had thrown a party at the farm site and served alcohol—a violation of the co-op bylaws—Basilio raised a complaint, to which the others just “kinda smiled.”

According to both Sarah and the former members, the group’s ability to resolve these basic problems was hampered by the fact that the collective had been assembled specifically for this project, and aside from their shared commitment to the Small Farmers Project lacked a unifying identity or social commitments to tie them together. However, the group did include several extended families—meaning that there were preexisting factions prepared to defend their own when disputes arose. In addition to these factors, the simple fact that farm income was sparse and all participants relied primarily on some other job meant that it was possible for them to walk away when the whole thing became more frustration than it was worth. And, through the slow grind of disputes and meetings and not enough money—and through occasional more acute problems, as in the case (vaguely alluded to) of a member with serious addiction problems—the co-op suffered a slow bleed of membership. When Basilio joined in 2008, just a year into the project, he recalls that membership had already fallen to 12; when he left, 6 years later, only two remained:¹⁰⁶ Roberto and Margarito, who were still farming together in 2018, when I first met them. By 2020, only Margarito and his wife were left.

As of the completion of my main fieldwork in 2021, there was still a farm at the former site of the Small Farmers Project—though now it is not the Small Farmers Project, but instead Los Olivos Family Farm. Margarito and his family keep some chickens, plant a few long rows of

¹⁰⁵ *Desacuerdos y desacuerdo... Es mucho trabajo. Ok. Unos van a hacer surco, otros van a plantar, otros van a poner manguera. Unos venían, otros no venían. Unos venían, otros no –ok... Se llevo el tiempo de la pisca. Cuando ya empezamos a pisca, ya empezamos a producir dinero... Ok. Todos teníamos nuestro trabajo, como por ejemplo, yo vengo aquí, pero trabajo para la compañía de limpieza. Y todos lo mismo. Unos venían en la mañana por— vamos a decir 2 horas. Cuando era la pisca de la fresa. Esa persona venia, venia y piscaba -- le subían tanto así de la cubeta [indicating a not-so-full bucket with his hands].*

Me: *Si, un poquito no mas*

¡Un poquito! Otros venían y piscaban cubetas... Ok. Llegó el primer pago. Y aquellas personas que nada más piscaban poquito querían la misma cantidad que ellos que se quedaban hasta 4 de la tarde a trabajar. Y esa fue también - eso fue un problema. ¿Por qué? Porque, bueno, yo digo bueno, si trabajo menos debo estar consciente que la cantidad de ganancia va a ser menos. Porque no es justo que aquel que trabajo - ok, si yo trabajo 2 horas. Y aquel trabajo 8 o más - porque si había personas que se quedaba - no es justo de que yo gane lo mismo que él. No.

¹⁰⁶ Margarito, Basilio, and Roberto all accord on these numbers—in all cases, however these figures leave out their respective wives. Basilio and Margarito’s wives were, as far as I can determine, significantly involved in the Small Farmers Project, although perhaps to a lesser degree than their husbands. I follow their counts here, with the understanding that they may obscure female labor within the project.

vegetables for home consumption, and gather walnuts from the beautiful tree at the front of the property. Margarito works long hours as a janitor, and was only occasionally coming to the farm. In 2020, the new plants had gone in so late that any harvest seemed unlikely, but the following year he planted a few acres. In addition to u-pick customers, the farm was making extra income hosting visiting groups of elementary schoolers from the Migrant Education Program, a Federal enrichment program in which their own young children were enrolled. Margarito spoke to the kids, delivering the sad news that the recent record-breaking heat dome had killed the fruit, and walking them around to see the fruit trees and irrigation hoses and (to everyone's delight) the baby chicks, before serving lemonade and frozen strawberries. He told me he is thinking of expanding his work with the Migrant Education Program, inviting them to make more regular visits throughout the year, and for the children to plant little vegetable plots.

A few days later, Margarito hosted a barbeque at the farm, cooking up enormous portions of carne asada and tacos al pastor in the shade of the walnut tree while his guests, a couple dozen Latinxs in church t-shirts sat at folding tables, discussing faith. Later, Margarito loaded up the kids on a wagon and towed them in slow circles around the field with his tiny tractor. The new strawberries weren't ripe yet but were starting to get close. I don't know if the farm will survive as a business; in our conversations Margarito had always seemed far less interested than the other farmers in these pages in either growing plants or running a farm business, turning instead always to ambitions off the farm—missionary work, or maybe starting a small taqueria. The moments he lights up at the farm are when he presents me with an absurd abundance of fruit as a snack after a few hours cleaning strawberry starts, or talks about camping out on the land with his children—in other words, moments when the farm is a place for recreation, relaxation, and peace.

As for Huerto, they have not been formally affiliated with the former Small Farmers Project for years; Sarah has moved on from the organization, and its current leadership have had only limited contact with Margarito in recent years. Though Huerto continued to support Latinx immigrant farmers after the launch of the Small Farmers Project, they have not attempted another co-op. They continue to run to business incubator, but as of early 2022, their list of graduates' businesses included only one farm besides Margarito's; in recent years, the organization has also supported a handful of chicken or egg businesses, "but I wouldn't say that they're like businesses-businesses—it's more like a gig, no one's living on it," and none appear to remain in operation as of this writing. Participants are, it would seem, more interested in starting taquerias, cleaning services, and landscaping companies than farms. As Huerto's business program manager explained, the cost of land and other institutional barriers to farming are simply so high that few people enroll in their business classes with the intention of farming, and those who do so soon find insurmountable barriers; others may begin with that ambition but discover that other businesses are simply more lucrative, as in the case of a couple that launched both a small farm and a yard maintenance company before deciding that farming simply wasn't worth the bother. Community gardens remain the organization's heart, and business training and support is still be offered, but these two programs have parted ways. They are not alone: as of the end of my fieldwork, Adelante too had discontinued its distributor and CSA programs based on a lack of enthusiasm from participants. Though they were continuing to teach Alejandro's garden class and offer business support to existing farmers, Adelante would no longer seek to recruit new farmers to their training program.

A little success: a case study of a growing nonprofit-affiliated farm business

While nonprofit interest in incubating farm businesses has declined in the face of setbacks like the slow dissolution of the Small Farmers Project, there are, as I have noted, a small number of nonprofit-linked farmers making a go of commercial agriculture not as a sideline or hobby, but as a primary source of income. Among these farmers, Margarita stands out as a sort of posterchild for Adelante's farm program, having been prominently featured in write-ups on their website, in a promotional video, and in a story in a local newspaper (Schmid 2017; Mago's Story n.d.). She is also one of the nonprofit-affiliated farmers with whom I have had the longest relationship, and whose farms I know best. I therefore conclude this chapter with a detailed examination of Margarita's farming, her achievements, and her aspirations. Through this qualified success story, I also point towards the possibilities and limits of the food justice initiatives encountered in my study, leading us towards the world of independent farmers still to be encountered in the following chapters. In her own distinct way, Margarita, like her peers, demonstrates an approach to agriculture that draws impetus from a rural childhood and that manifests in a form that directly corresponds to that encouraged by Adelante Mujeres. We also see in her adoption of Adelante's model of alternative farming—and in her divergences from it—a pragmatic flexibility and openness to a surprisingly broad range of agricultural styles in pursuit of her desired rural, independent life, a quality that will emerge as a central theme in my discussion of independent farmers in Chapters 4 and 5.

Simply by the hours spent together, Margarita is one of the most important figures in this dissertation. I met her early in my research in the summer of 2018, her first year selling produce at Adelante's Forest Grove Farmers Market, and have continued to visit regularly through 2021, driving up the back roads through Yamhill and Washington counties for a day or afternoon planting, weeding, and harvesting, and occasionally helping out at her market stall. Despite this relatively long history, however, my relationship with Margarita was never as close as with Javier or Tony (see chapters 2 and 5, respectively). Maybe this is related to gender, or to language—Margarita and I speak exclusively in Spanish, while my conversations with Javier and Tony tend towards Spanglish—or maybe it's just because she is a quieter person, as I am. It may also be because Margarita simply leads a busier, more precarious, and more stressful life; while we made small-talk and occasionally shared a meal of take-out pizza or burritos, our visits tend to be much more work-oriented, without the long hours cooking, relaxing, or driving around that typified those other relationships.

Margarita is a short woman, round-faced and sturdy, seemingly perpetually dressed in a hoodie and sweatpants even in the summer heat. She was born in the mid-80s in rural Oaxaca, where her family farmed *milpa* and vegetables. She only went to school through the 9th grade and married at 15; shortly thereafter her husband brought her to the US without documentation. She eventually left that husband due to domestic abuse, achieving tenuous legal status first under the DACA program and then the U visa program for survivors of domestic abuse. Though she remarried, she has raised her three children as a single mother since her second husband's deportation to Mexico (Schmid 2017). She made her living off of farm labor: ongoing but seasonal work at a local organic nursery, summers picking berries for piece-rate, and a month or so weaving Christmas wreaths in late autumn. It is a testament to both her determination and hard work, and to the difficulty of her situation, that she was the only single woman farmer in my sample.

When we first met, her small farm was located on land leased from the nursery where she worked, tended after work and on days off while the kids helped sporadically or sat unhappily in the shade of her old minivan, waiting and whining for some entertainment. Little wonder, then, that her farm—in stark contrast to Margarito’s new Los Olivos Family Farm—is less a place of relaxation than a place for hard work, and I often found her tired, slightly harried, and less than talkative. Little wonder, too, that her farm often seemed a half-step behind the others in my sample, unplanted starts sitting parched in their flats and crops unharvested, wilting in the heat or turning soft in the early autumn rain. This struggle to keep up was exacerbated by her reliance on her employers’ cast-off vegetable starts—a sign of both thrift and creativity in using her position as a farmworker to support her independent venture, and to limitations inherent in such salvage at the margins, as she struggled to shore-up unhealthy plants put in the ground too late, and to sell the second-rate produce that resulted.

By the time we met, Margarita had already finished Alejandro’s garden course, but—in contrast to Aldo and Margarito—she remained in close contact with her nonprofit patrons, not only selling at the Forest Grove Farmers Market and their distributor program but also seeking technical and business advice from Adelante staff, and I often encountered them coming and going from her farm. This close relationship is why she was one of the first farmers Adelante recommended to me, and is also likely why I was able to so easily gain access to her farm: she is used to visitors and volunteers, and has become relatively accustomed to telling her story, even if she continues to feel some awkwardness in the role.

I wasn’t the only outsider that Adelante pointed towards Margarita’s farm. “As a young mother with three children, reaching for her dreams hasn’t always been easy,” reads the header on an Adelante fundraising page, “But this strong, independent woman never gave up. You can give the gift of life-changing support to women like Mago [sic]. Every gift provides empowerment through education, enterprise, and leadership training” (Mago’s Story n.d.). These words are accompanied by a short video that opens on a close-up of Margarita’s hands scooping up a handful of soil, and a voiceover of her saying, “I have always liked agriculture because since childhood I grew up with agriculture.”¹⁰⁷ The video pans back to a shot of her against the bucolic backdrop of her farm, telling her life story, cutting away to zoom in on a sunflower. Margarita laughs: “I want to be the boss. I want to be independent.”¹⁰⁸

Despite this ongoing relationship, Margarita’s feelings towards Adelante were often ambivalent. She sold through the distributor while it was in operation, but complained to me—as did several other farmers—that their aesthetic demands for produce were unreasonably high and that prices were too low, and that the purchases were often inconsistent; once, in late October 2019, she drove from the farm in to Adelante’s headquarter, only to have them reject all her produce except a measly 5lbs of jalapenos, far too little to justify the bother of the trip. She repeated—as did several other farmers—rumors that Adelante gets grants and donations to support farmers and gardeners, yet those aren’t passed on to the farmers. That they get money to run the distributor program, she said, and where does that go? They don’t pay much for the veggies, they sell it at full price, and all the packing is done volunteers!

Despite these frustrations, Margarita’s farm bore the clear marks of Adelante’s approach, closely resembling the other nonprofit affiliated farms in this study. After leaving the site at the nursery, she rented ~2 acres from a friendly Anglo co-worker on an insecure, short-term lease. She produced mixed vegetables using organic techniques but without certification, selling direct

¹⁰⁷ “*siempre me ha gustado la agricultura porque desde niñez crecí en la agricultura.*”

¹⁰⁸ “*quiero ser jefa. Quiero ser independiente.*”

to consumers, primarily at Portland-area farmers markets. Though not strictly adhering to Alejandro's no-till principles, which she said were better suited to gardening and not workable on a large scale, she did use mulches (often autumn leaves brought as waste products from Mexicano landscapers), drip irrigation, and other techniques promoted in his class. And she performed nearly all the labor herself, with occasional help from her children—especially, as the years went by, from her oldest, who was able to tend her market stall and by 2021 was able to maintain the farm when Margarita had to go to Mexico to help her parents, who were seriously sick with COVID.

Margarita was a longtime farmworker, and drew on that experience on her own farm alongside lessons learned from Adelante's classes and fieldtrips, and from instructional videos she found on YouTube. For instance, when discussing her preference for organics she gave not only the standard answer found among her peers—that production that is "*limpio* [clean]" is healthier for herself, her family, and her customers—but framed this in terms of memories of picking strawberries in fields recently sprayed with unknown chemicals. She also—unusually—cited her father as an important source of her agricultural learning who she continues to consult over the phone:

"He always recommends following the moon a lot. They say that we need to plant the seeds at the full moon for the plant to grow strong and give good fruit. They follow the moon a lot... And they calculate more or less on what day—the climate there is different from here so I can't follow the climate there [*laughs*]. But they more or less have an idea, when it is that one should plant or what one should plant."¹⁰⁹

Her use of lunar cycles for planting recalls' Aldo's practices, though unlike him she has sought advice directly from her parents. However, she is also clear about the need to adapt those techniques to local conditions and a markedly different climate. More significantly, she casts her parents' knowledge not as a timeless, traditional inheritance, but instead as something situational, evolving, and fallible:

"when I travel to Mexico, my parents are also seeing how to not use chemicals, because they grow everything with chemicals... there it's very difficult, from the start they always used chemicals, but not they're seeing the sicknesses... trying to change their practice a little. But it is difficult because in Mexico, especially in Oaxaca, the soil... doesn't have natural force anymore, so it takes people a little work to get plants to grow, to return to cultivating the soil again [i.e. to improving the soil, as Alejandro recommends]. But I think that with workshops and everything they can fix it."¹¹⁰

In this model, rather than simply returning to ancestral wisdom, Margarita selectively borrows some practices, modifies others, and opines that with proper workshops—presumably like those she has taken with Adelante—Oaxacan farmers like her parents could adopt the organic practices she has learned in this country.

¹⁰⁹ "Él siempre recomienda es seguir mucha por la luna. Ellos dicen que en luna llena tenemos que sembrar la semilla para que crece fuerte la planta, y dé buena fruta. Ellos siguen mucha con la luna... Y más o menos en qué fecha ellos le calculan – el clima de allá es diferente de aquí, entonces no me puedo guiar por el clima de allá [*laughs*]. Pero ellos más o menos, este, tienen una idea, o cuando es se siembra o como es que se siembra"

¹¹⁰ "cuando yo me viaja para México, mis papas también están viendo la manera de cómo no usar químicos, porque ellos crecen todo con químicos... allá es muy difícil, desde el principio ellos siempre usaron químicos, pero ahora están viendo que enfermedades... tratando de cambiar un poco la práctica. Pero es muy difícil porque en México, en Oaxaca especialmente la tierra... ya no tiene fuerza natural, entonces a las personas les cuesta un poquito trabajo dejarlas que crezcan, que volver empezar a cultivar la tierra otra vez. Pero solo yo pienso que con talleres y todo, se puede componer."

Despite significant continuing challenges—not least her year-to-year lease—Margarita’s farming technique has improved, resulting in more reliable harvests, less waste, higher quality produce, and better sales. She has been successful enough that she was able to significantly cut back on her hours as a hired farmworker, and by the end of my fieldwork was working full time on her own production and selling her produce at three farmers markets. Little surprise, then, that Adelante promotes her as a success story.

But despite being a model nonprofit-affiliated farmer, Margarita has not been afraid to flirt with practices that stray beyond what Adelante might recommend. Her production has been quite varied, including at least two dozen different varieties, generally emphasizing smaller number of popular and relatively high value crops, most notably chilis and strawberries; however, in my final field season she told me that she was thinking of transitioning her entire land to grow a strawberry monoculture. Strawberries bring high prices, offer multiple harvests per season, and reliably sell out at market. They are also a paradigmatic labor-intensive, high-value crop well suited to self-exploiting immigrant farmers, and offer among the highest dollar returns per acre of any crop (Wells 1996; Sánchez 2002). If she follows through on this plan, it will represent a potentially significant departure from Adelante’s production style, but her plans remain unsettled. The same day she declared her intention of going all-in on strawberries, she backtracked, telling me first that she would still want to plant some jalapenos and *chiles de agua*, and then (seemingly unable to help herself) that she’d also like a few short rows of *pápalo*, epazote, cilantro, maybe radishes, and green onions... Though strawberries make good business sense, she seems still to feel drawn to plant mixed vegetables, the same fascination with variety that animates so many alternative farmers.

Aside from her occasional flirtations with monoculture, Margarita also complicates the food justice model with her interest in hiring labor. As quoted above from the Adelante fundraising video, she says “I want to be the boss. I want to be independent.”¹¹¹ As early as 2019, she told me that she worried that all the farm work was leading to her “*descuidando* [neglecting]” her children, and expressed an interest in hiring a part-time worker to help her with markets. Two years later, she had hired workers on her farm about twice a week, and she continued to contemplate hiring more regular help. When one day I mentioned that I had recently seen Aldo and told her about his plan to scale down production in favor of better quality, she was dismissive. This was a poor choice, she told me: Aldo always sells well at the market, and if he and his wife were less stingy they could hire a worker and expand their farm.

While I did not come to know any of Margarita’s hired workers well, those with whom I had the most extended interactions were her cousins, fellow immigrant farmworkers from her hometown. They are part time, few in number, and in the interactions I have observed she works alongside them and every bit as hard. I have seen no evidence of abuse or condescension in her treatment of them, and did not hear them complain. I see no evidence that the presence of these workers qualitatively transformed the farm, nor did it vault Margarita into the role and subjectivity of the labor-exploiting capitalist. Yet these were clearly wage relationships: they told me they were here for pay, and when we broke for lunch, they kept an eye on the time because they had a set 30-minute lunch break.

I should emphasize that I have no reason to suppose that Margarita is treating her cousins anything less than ethically; the point is simply that even Adelante’s model farmer may be working towards a vision of a good life in agriculture that is her own, diverging at least in part from that of her nonprofit patron. Family-operated farms were the ideal of all three organizations

¹¹¹ “*quiero ser jefa. Quiero ser independiente.*”

discussed in this chapter—an implicit ideal, because the possibility of hiring workers was never discussed. A story of *farmworkers becoming farmers* is clear and inspiring, fitting neatly into an American ideal of small yeoman farmers that has been enthusiastically adopted by the alternative agriculture movement (Calo 2020); *farmworkers becoming farmers and then hiring more farmworkers* is a more complicated story. Should Margarita continue down this imagined path and succeed, hiring more workers, simplifying her plantings, scaling up, I know I will be happy for her. That this is a path she envisions, however, unsettles the naïve notion that simply changing the demographics of agriculture will in itself bring about an alternative agricultural revolution—or at least the particular revolution envisioned by food justice advocates.

But Margarita's fate as a would-be capitalist farmer is not yet settled, and there remains one force left to discuss still pulling her further towards the food justice ideal: Jesse Nichols, co-owner of a successful mid-sized alternative farm and founder of yet another nonprofit, Colaboración Agrícola Mobilizando Poder Orgánico (CAMPO). An Anglo from upper-middle class origins, he studied with anthropologist Lynn Stephen (see especially Stephen 2001; Stephen 2007) as an undergraduate at University of Oregon, traveled in Latin America and speaks enthusiastically about the Zapatistas and Cuba's experiments in permaculture. After college, he took an AmeriCorps position with Adelante Mujeres and remains in touch with them to this day, though he wishes the organization had a more radical politics. I find him incredibly easy to talk to: his life feels like my own path not taken.

CAMPO was Jesse's effort to synthesize his own "agroecological" approach to farming with his involvement in the local immigrant and farmworker communities and inflected by his reading in food justice and related fields. CAMPO's home page features a boldface quote from the scholar Eric Holt-Jimenez: "Racial injustice and the stark inequities in property and wealth in the US countryside aren't just a quirk of history, but a structural feature of capitalist agriculture" (What Do We Stand For? n.d.) The program began as "the only on-farm internship in sustainable agriculture for native Spanish speaking beginning farmers in the Portland, Oregon region," promising that "As we grow in numbers, our power as agents of agricultural change grows as well, from the ground up. CAMPO doesn't just teach agricultural skills, it provides a space and a platform to rethink our relationships with the land and agriculture." At least a few Adelante participants also did stints as CAMPO interns, including Otoniel (the gardener who decided to abandon commercial production, above). Later, CAMPO expanded to include an exchange program in which students from the University of Oregon participated in short-term homestays with local Spanish-speaking immigrants while studying organic agriculture and the history of Mesoamerican agriculture on the farm.

Margarita met Jesse through the Western Farmworkers Association, an organization she describes as helping local Latinxs out with basic needs, and that he describes as an organizing project, then met again at the Beaverton farmers market where they both sell. It was the early days of the COVID pandemic, meaning that CAMPO's other activities were suspended, and so he invited her to a study group he'd been meaning to start—in his telling, a group reading about agroecology and food justice in Latin America; she just told me they read about soil fertility, that it was a lot of what she'd already learned from Alejandro but that this was better because she was learning from someone who actually practiced these lessons. Together with another intern, a younger, college-educated Argentinian American, and an Anglo employee at Jesse's farm, they decided to launch Campo Campesino.

Campo Campesino is a 1.7 acre area of Jesse's farm that is run as an independent cooperative by Jesse, Margarita, and two other collaborators (a fifth member, a Guatemalan alum

of Adelante’s garden program, joined in the summer of 2022). In contrast to both Margarita’s farm and the rest of Jesse’s land, the area is managed using fully no-till practices combined with an ambitious, permaculture-inspired polyculture that emphasizes intercropping annuals and the inclusion of perennials like berries and fruit trees.

Campo Campesino’s success to this point has been mightily helped by the fact that Jesse already owns the land they work and is subsidizing the project by declining to charge rent, allowing the use of his tools and packing areas, and drawing on his existing financial management and distribution systems. Together with a grant from Slow Food, this allowed the co-op members to pay themselves a \$15 hourly wage; any profit at the end of the year will be allocated by the group, either divided amongst themselves or reinvested in the project. This relatively flexible and generous structure left room for Margarita to be a full member while only dedicating three days per week to the project in order to continue running her own farm. The two farms also cooperate in marketing, benefitting from Margarita’s increasing specialization in strawberries while the Campo Colectivo strawberries were not yet yielding.

Campo Campesino seems to be thriving and Margarita and her coworkers there are fond of each other. Nevertheless, she made clear to me that she has no interest in giving up her own farm and going all in on the cooperative; after all, if she did that, then “Reyes Family Farm wouldn’t exist.”¹¹² Anyways, she said, what if Jesse changes his mind—it is, after all, his land. Her primary goal was still to buy land, although she lamented its high cost and the fact that “always it’s those who work most who are paid least.”¹¹³ She seems bound, then, for a somewhat mixed path: towards increasing specialization on her own land with a less diverse and culturally-specific crop mix, and a goal of land ownership and hired employees who might eventually allow her to scale up; and towards deeper cooperation, more ecological practices, and a more overtly cultural-political approach with Campo Campesino.

The differences between Margarita’s two projects are slight when set against industrial agribusiness. Nevertheless, they point towards a tendency we will explore in the chapters to come: immigrant farmer’s ability to adapt to the opportunities presented to them, and a pragmatic flexibility when it comes to farm practices. I think of a story told to me by one of Margarita’s partners at Campo Campesino: a group of students from the local university had come to the farm make a little documentary about Margarita. With Adelante’s help, she’d been enrolled in a program with the food bank, which was buying her produce and that of some other local small farmers of color. The students were hoping to tell a story about how nonprofits make community, and so they asked Margarita why she had gotten involved with the food bank, clearly hoping for a quotable moment about the importance of caring for our neighbors and those in need. They were disappointed, however, when Margarita said simply: ‘well, it’s nice to make some extra money.’

Why there are no public programs in this chapter

Since I have dwelt exclusively on nonprofits in this chapter, it is worth briefly remarking upon the role of government in this arena. Government has largely been absent from this chapter for the simple reason that I have found almost no evidence of any concerted effort on the part of

¹¹² “*Reyes Family Farm no existiría.*”

¹¹³ “*siempre son los que trabajan más que paga menos.*”

local or county governments,¹¹⁴ community colleges,¹¹⁵ Oregon State University (the state land grant institution) or its extension service, Oregon Department of Agriculture, or the USDA to foster Mexicano farmers in the state, or to specifically provide resources to farmworkers hoping to start their own businesses.¹¹⁶ This persistent lack of government engagement with and support for immigrant farmers is not unique to Oregon, but reflects a wider national pattern (Minkoff-Zern and Sloat 2020). The extremely small handful of bilingual and/or bicultural workers I found within these institutions shared accounts of attempting to help immigrant farmers while receiving little more than lip-service and no real material support from higher-ups. Among the white government workers I met, most assumed I was interested in farmworkers rather than farmers. Some of these government workers seemed baffled by my questions; a few expressed a sincere desire to improve outreach and services to this population—and then pointed me back towards the nonprofits discussed above.

Whatever the merits of these nonprofits, the absence of active government outreach to immigrant farmers and its implicit reliance on these nonprofit organizations as both service providers and sources of data is troubling and inadequate. As I argue throughout this dissertation, these organizations have a very particular vision of why and how their participants should farm, and thus cannot be expected upon to provide a comprehensive portrait of Oregon's Latinx and Mexican immigrant farmers either to the wider alternative food nonprofit sphere or to government. Furthermore, as noted above, food justice nonprofits' models for creating new immigrant farmers have met extremely limited success, mostly due to the inaccessibility of land. The organizations themselves recognize this nearly insurmountable obstacle and have responded to by shifting to focus on their more successful gardening and food distribution programs. Government agencies simply pointing back to these same nonprofits is therefore unlikely to produce the necessary changes to allow Mexican immigrant farmers to succeed.

The failure to stand up new, self-sustaining farms is not limited to those organizations working with Mexican immigrants—although the challenges faced by this population are clearly heightened. At a meeting of the Oregon Community Food Systems Network, a few dozen nonprofit and government workers—mostly white, mostly women—gathered at a rainy retreat center perched above the Columbia River Gorge to discuss common problems and solutions facing beginning farmers and ranchers. These are people who spend their days trying to help farmers, providing training, marketing assistance, connections to USDA grants. The first morning, participants were broken out into small groups and given discussion prompts. I recorded in my notes,

One of the questions is what's realistic? We struggle to think of anything realistic: everyone points to the current land access system as a basically unsolvable barrier. The group to share after us talks about how the answer needs to be policy or we're fiddling around the edges. They point to the need for reparations... nearly every group talks

¹¹⁴ Perhaps the one exception being the small Headwaters farm incubator program operated by the East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District, which is a notable supporter of diverse farmers. However, reflecting the demographics of the Portland Metro area, the diversity of their farmers largely falls outside the populations under consideration in this paper, and I am not aware of any former farmworkers among their participants.

¹¹⁵ Throughout my research, I heard from multiple sources that Chemeketa Community College was on the verge of launching a new agricultural program serving this population, and even spoke with one employee involved with the project. As of the conclusion of my fieldwork, however, no such project was in operation.

¹¹⁶ I exclude from consideration here the government grants and contracts that these nonprofit initiatives have won. While these funds have significantly aided the nonprofits' work, they are not equivalent to the development of true public programs.

about how land is too expensive, the need for new ways. A deep, deep skepticism that the current land tenure system allows any real change. [The head of a small nonprofit says]: private property is colonial, vs. Native systems of stewardship. Nods briefly to traditions of public ownership that could serve, but returns to a broader critique of the whole ownership system as a fundamental barrier.

These conversations continued throughout the conference, and back to the little pub in Corbett after the meeting ended, where everyone wondered and complained and sympathized at the ever-rising price of land—problems they know not just from serving their clients, but also (like so many nonprofit workers in the alternative food world) as farmers and aspiring farmers themselves. I jotted, “*General frustration, despair: who can buy at this price! Folks saying, I don't know anyone who can buy this.*”

These barriers and frustrations represent a general trend well understood in alternative agricultural circles. As Guthman writes, “any transformative politics of sustainable agriculture must squarely face the dynamics that arise from private property in land itself” (Guthman 2004:225). For the time being, however, state action to remake the basic conditions of land access seems a distant prospect, and no powerful social movement has emerged to demand it—no new Donation Land Claim Act is coming to help these immigrant farmers get on the land. And so we are left with these nonprofits as the primary institutional actors seeking to support immigrant agriculture.

Conclusions

The food justice nonprofits presented here share common aims and common methods: to train farmers and gardeners in sustainable agriculture, which is largely defined in terms of organic practices and soil conservation; to bring this food to ‘the community’ through CSAs, farmers markets, and similar means; and to help their participants start farm businesses. Their clients enthusiastically adopt many of these practices, especially the non-use of chemical pesticides, while showing little interest in other elements of the nonprofit program, most notably the development of cooperative enterprises. However, despite attracting the interest of their intended constituencies, these programs have failed to stand up significant numbers of commercially viable farms, primarily due to the unaffordability of suitable land.

On the whole, the three organizations have, despite some stumbles, shown a willingness to adapt. Adelante, for instance, discontinued its distributor program after a participant survey showed little interest in deepening involvement in commercial agriculture. Huerto has pivoted its business incubator program away from agriculture, and as of the end of 2021, Adelante too had largely wound down its farmer training efforts, choosing to focus instead on community gardening and food access programs. These include a partnership with the Oregon Food Bank and promoting SNAP match and Produce Rx programs to participants in their various health and education programs—a marketing effort that funnels those dollars to the handful of Adelante vendors still selling at the Forest Grove Farmers Market, and that has resulted in that market having the most heavily Latinx customer base of any of the approximately 20 markets I observed in the course of my research.

Whatever one thinks of these organizations’ work—and I tend to think it is both well intentioned and generally positive in its impact—their outcomes pose a theoretical, and perhaps practical, problem for food justice as an analytic. Whereas food justice is meant to empower

‘communities’ to produce their own food in manners of their choosing, this chapter should amply demonstrate that, despite organizations’ rhetoric and hopes, there is no convincing evidence that participants enroll with a clear and shared idea of what sort of cultivation they would like to practice, or with any particular interest in becoming commercial farmers. Instead, we see an affinity for a broadly agrarian lifestyle associated childhood experiences in the Mexican *campo*, the desire for independence, and a demand for healthy food that seems at least much as linked to media consumption as it is to any personal or communal experience of either smallholder agriculture or farm labor. Much of the rest—cooperative organizations, organic techniques, the aspiration to start a small farm—are as often as not directly taught and incentivized by the nonprofits, rather than simple reflections of participants’ personal or cultural inclinations.

This matters in light of both the culturalizing tendency on display in food justice / food sovereignty literature (see Chapter 1), and the representations of these organizations themselves. Though I have noted that none of these nonprofits emphasize notions of culture to quite the degree that Anáhuac does, it nevertheless forms an essential part of their self-representation—especially to the outside world. From the folkloric décor at the Adelante or Huerto offices to Adelante marketing special “salsa share” CSAs (complete with participants’ family recipes) to the inevitable mentions of heirloom seeds sent up from Oaxaca in media stories on Huerto’s gardens, a constant, subtle message is sent that there is some essential Mexican-ness about these projects. Less defined than Anáhuac’s definite assertions of indigeneity, this Mexican-ness adheres not only to those things that participants themselves find familiar, but also to those program components participants describe as most novel.

An example of this discursive slip will help to clarify. Here is a statement from Daniela Perez, a Tijuana-born, US educated woman who replaced Silvia as Adelante’s Farmers Market and Farm Business Manager:

“I didn’t grow up in a rural setting in Mexico, so I definitely am somebody that got into farming from having farming background in my history but not necessarily direct experience of farming—like my grandma always had a garden kind of thing, but definitely there were no farmers in my family. But I really got into farming as I was learning about the food system in college [at the University of San Diego], like 10 years ago. And it just kept like making me want to learn more, and I kept trying to find opportunities here and there and working on different farms and then I did WWOOFing¹¹⁷ for a full year... I ended up going to grad school for sustainability education.”

Later in our interview, she expanded:

For me, I think getting into agriculture was like a journey of getting to know myself better, and my own culture. And I think that one of the reasons why that became so pertinent is because Mexico, México [first pronounced in English, then in Spanish] and a lot of countries in Latin America are—farming is a cultural practice. More than an economic practice... our cultural foods are so important, and they’re tied with rituals, they’re tied with traditions, they’re tied with different seasons of the year and those are very much agricultural based. And so when I started to learn about agriculture and the seasons and what’s available and what’s not and how things are grown, and where things

¹¹⁷Willing Workers On Organic Farms, or WWOOF, is an online directory that links volunteers with organic farms in need of workers, typically exchanging labor for room and board, and popular especially with young people taking gap years and recent college graduate. I volunteered as a WWOOFer on several farms in the Northwest in the years between college and grad school.

come from you know, the tomato and the corn and the beans and the squash and all of these native foods of Mexico that I grew up eating, it just gave me such a moment of realization and moment of empowerment, like how beautiful my culture is, for preserving all these things.

The second paragraph here is typical of food justice scholars and advocates, and of nonprofits' public self-representations. "Farming is a cultural practice"—and, it would seem, a specific sort of farming at that. Yet, the first paragraph, regarding her own life history, reveals that despite her grandmother's gardening, her own knowledge of agriculture derives primarily from her college and graduate education, and from her experiences as a WWOOFer—in other words, the same places where white alternative food advocates (including myself) learn what constitutes proper farming.

The point is not that the sort of farming that Daniela came to embrace is inauthentic, or that her linking it to her culture is either inaccurate or insincere. Culture is a shifting thing, hybrid and changeable and difficult to pin down. The point is simply that, whatever it means for her vision of farming as part of her culture, it does not seem to mean something she grew up knowing intimately, or something that we could safely assume her peers to share. In other words, Daniela and her food justice seem to be *making* it part of their culture—or, in recognition of the real and well-documented roots of sustainable cultivation in Mesoamerica, deliberately remaking it.

This distinction—between simply enabling participants' preexisting desires and actively cultivating a new set of preferences and claiming them as cultural—matters more than it might seem. Firstly, it matters because it rather changes the project of food justice: rather than couching a political program as the authentic representation of an ill-defined community, we see it more clearly as a project to definitely instill and incentivize a particular set of (admirable, beneficial) values and practices in a population that may or may not share them to any significant extent. Secondly, it matters because these organizations have claimed and been granted the authority to speak on behalf of Mexican immigrants within the wider food movement, and even more broadly in the realm of agricultural policy writ large, and their representations of this population's perspectives and needs consistently fail to acknowledge the partiality and constructedness of their own programs. As we will see in the next chapter, this effectively makes most Mexican immigrant farmers invisible to the organized agricultural community.

When speaking with representatives of Oregon's many alternative food nonprofits—a project I began in earnest in the early days of the COVID lockdown, while other fieldwork ground to a halt—I found that most serve predominantly white clientele. As the spring of 2020 turned to summer and Black Lives Matter protests erupted across the state and nation, the generally white, liberal, and female staff of these organizations were thoughtful on the question of Oregon agriculture's overwhelming whiteness, and self-critical regarding the whiteness of their own organizations, fully fluent in the contemporary language of antiracism. And yet they struggled to see how their own organizations could effectively challenge the prevailing situation. In the words of one nonprofit worker,

It's one of the things we really struggle with. Because we know that, you know, as much as we try to develop a lens and a sensitivity and an understanding of privilege and culture, we're limited. And we feel kinda stuck. In my experience, I can't really speak for everybody, but I feel like we're just in some ways kinda just like wistfully wondering, you know, how our organization could encompass the broader community and not seeing a way to that being practical.

The most common solution such workers provided was that they hoped to partner with members of those communities, to support those who already knew them and had built relationships and trust.

Without fail, the organizations white alternative food workers pointed to as having such expertise were those discussed in this and the previous chapter. And this tendency was reflected in the composition of the panels at the Oregon Community Food Systems Network's Food Charter presentations—designed to allow the organized alternative food community to “learn from Indigenous, Black, Latinx, and Immigrant and Refugee communities about their visions for transforming the food system in Oregon” (Giombolini and Gwin 2021) in order to coordinate programming and policy—where the Latinx community was represented by staffers from Adelante, Capaces, and The Next Door. Attendees were given little reason to imagine that Mexican immigrant farmers might not universally share these organizations' environmental ethos or approach to agriculture.

And so is where we must now turn: to those Mexican immigrant farmers who work outside the orbit of food justice nonprofits. As we will see, though they share significant commonalities with their nonprofit-affiliated peers, the places they make are far more varied than we have seen thus far. Understanding this variability, built upon a largely shared foundation of life experiences, will be the central task of the remainder of this dissertation.

CHAPTER 4:

Uno se acostumbra a trabajar: Independent farmers, labor learning, and the aspiration for autonomy

This chapter focuses on those immigrants in the Willamette Valley who have succeeded (at least partially, at least for a time) in transitioning from hired farm labor to owning their own farm businesses *without* the significant involvement of a nonprofit or other organized food justice initiative. I label this group “independent” or “unaffiliated” farmers, terms which I will use interchangeably. Drawing on data on 53 farms,¹¹⁸ including interviews and participant observation with 41 unaffiliated farmers in and around¹¹⁹ the Willamette Valley, I argue that—in contrast to their nonprofit-affiliated peers, and to the theoretical expectations underpinning food justice literature—these farmers do not display strong or consistent tendencies towards agricultural “alternativeness,” although they do at least partially support Minkoff-Zern’s (2019) contention that undercapitalized businesses may be structurally obligated to follow some practices regarded as alternative. As a group, these farmers do not base their farming practices on Javier’s eco-spiritual or cultural ideals of tradition, nor on the more generic appeal to community and personal health expressed in the nonprofits of chapter 3. Instead, these independent farmers are joined by a common desire to make their farms places in which to create an aspirational good life understood in terms of hard work and independence, competence, self-sufficiency, and the ability to enjoy the fruits of a life lived outdoors—values that they link both to their rural upbringings in Mexico and to their working lives in the US.

Though sharing similar campesino origins, labor histories, and structural constraints with each other and with their nonprofit-affiliated peers, independent farmers demonstrate a striking variability in their farming strategies. Many explicitly and extensively draw on their experience as hired workers, replicating the practices of their former employers while creatively adapting them to generally smaller and more financially precarious circumstances. The considerable variation in their approaches to farming point to the inadequacy of simplistic culturalist explanations and relativizes the food justice farming model highlighted in Chapter 3 as just one of many possible agricultural forms available to this population—and not necessarily the one to which these farmers will naturally gravitate. Instead, the data presented in this chapter gives us cause to recognize among Mexican immigrant farmers a broadly shared set of aspirations to an agrarian lifestyle combined with pragmatic openness regarding how best to achieve that aim, resulting in a surprising diversity of farm types.

Although I have argued throughout that the food justice and allied literatures systemically ignore independent and conventional farmers in favor of their more colorfully cultural, activist, and networked peers, these farmers are not entirely absent from the literature. Most notably, they feature in Minkoff-Zern’s (2019) *The New American Farmer* in a chapter on Mexicano orchardists in Washington’s Yakima Valley; in Wells’ (1996) examination of the California

¹¹⁸ Included in this count are four aspirational farms – that is, would-be farmers with specific plans to acquire land and/or begin cultivation within the next couple of years. This count also includes three US-born or 1.5 generation farmers raised by farmworker parents. Several farms included are no longer operational. I exclude one exceptionally tiny market garden.

¹¹⁹ I include indirect data here on one orchard in Hood River County.

strawberry industry; and in her student, Figueroa Sánchez's (Sánchez), dissertation on Mexican family strawberry farms. Notably, in each case these are conventional farmers—that is, non-organic commodity¹²⁰ producers growing crops not coded as 'culturally specific'—and are primarily analyzed not in terms of culture or meaning-making, but instead markets and the socio-political structures that limit their opportunities.

In addition to these sources, independent Mexicano entrepreneurs in agriculture appear in the literature in one other notable form: as *contratistas*—the labor contractors who often feature as villains in the literature on farm labor. *Contratistas* are frequently described as abusive and exploitative, and the role of contractor is understood as shielding farmers from responsibility for their workers (Krissman 1995; Sexsmith 2016:313). While the dramatic and time-sensitive seasonal fluctuations in labor demand inherent in agriculture mean that labor contractors may be a necessary feature of capitalist agriculture (Griffith 2016), it is notable that *contratistas* are generally treated as not only structurally parasitic, but as often personally noxious (Waugh 2010; Galarneau 2013:149), and only exceptionally rarely as a potential ally to farmworkers (Maldonado 2005).

I invoke the figure of the *contratista* because labor contracting is a relatively low-entry agricultural business for an enterprising Mexicano farmworker, and contractors share many personal and biographical characteristics with the independent farmers in this study. Several of the farmers in this and the following chapter either began as *contratistas* or continue to serve as labor contractors for their Anglo neighbors, a role that offers both supplemental income and ready access to labor on their own farms; in at least a few cases, contracting appears to be the primary income source, with farming perhaps best understood as an aspirational lifestyle rather than a core economic activity. I have no evidence that these particular contractors did or do live up to their profession's negative reputation. However, it is worth holding these two figures—not infrequently the selfsame individual—in the mind together, and wondering why one is treated as villain and the other as hero. More precisely, I introduce the contractor here to note that they should offer an immediate warning to those who would assume that a shared ethnic identity and experience of farm labor will lead directly to a food justice orientation. As I show in this chapter, such assumptions are incorrect.

The purpose of this chapter, then, is to explore independent farmers' variability along multiple axes. This includes locating farmers along the alternative-conventional spectrum, a shorthand that can help simplify comparisons and demonstrate the ways in which many of these farmers fall beyond the range of practices described in the previous chapter, expanding our sense of what sorts of agriculture Mexicano farmers may choose to practice. This, however, represents a starting point rather than a final destination. While 'conventional' and 'alternative' are useful concepts, they are inadequate descriptors for many of these farmers, who only rarely think in such terms, and who feel free to combine both 'conventional' and 'alternative' approaches in service of aims best understood in other terms altogether. Understanding those underlying aims, the pathways of learning and opportunity that lead farmers to adopt this or that assemblage of practices in service of their aims, and the sorts of places that are created as a result, is therefore the central purpose of what follows both in this chapter and the next.

Complicating, structuring, and sometimes foreclosing farmers' desires are the structural forces already identified and discussed in previous chapters. We will, however, inevitably revisit

¹²⁰ I use this word, perhaps imprecisely, to characterize crops grown in bulk—generally in a monoculture—and sold wholesale, in contrast to the more 'artisanal' produce grown in polycultures and sold directly to consumers in settings that emphasize their uniqueness and quality.

them here, as the struggle for capital, markets, and land play out somewhat differently in the realm of independent farmers as compared to their nonprofit-affiliated peers, despite shared roots in America's racialized immigration and farm labor regime and Oregon's distinct history of white supremacist land distribution. Most of these farmers arrived in the US as teens and young men, often without documentation, and with minimal financial resources. Few had completed formal education even as far as high school. Beginning their careers as farmworkers, they occupied the lowest rungs of the agricultural system, and their climb upward has involved healthy measures of both luck and persistence. Overall, "male, middle-aged, married, experienced, and settled agricultural workers... are more likely to become business owners," and that finding bears out here (Pisani and Guzman 2016:239). For many, the Reagan-era IRCA immigration reform—notable for including the last major immigration amnesty—was a key factor since legal status is a key pathway towards much-needed stability. To the extent that this amnesty has not yet been repeated, the road these farmers have followed may not be as readily open to succeeding generations.

Equally essential and equally bound up in systemic racial hierarchies, but mediated through individual relationships rather than federal policy, the relationships these farmers built with their Anglo employers. As noted in Chapter 1, Oregon's history of white supremacy has been inextricably tied up in the ownership of agricultural land since before statehood, and has left a legacy of an overwhelmingly white Anglo class of farm owners strikingly at odds with an agricultural labor force that has, since the mid-20th century, been dominated by Mexicanos. Relationships between farmworkers and farm owners therefore emerge as one of the key arenas in which some immigrant workers are able to gain access to the resources necessary to launching their own businesses. The shift from seasonal labor to long-term employment on a single farm is a crucial turning point in many of these stories, offering the opportunity to develop expertise in a specific agricultural field. By standing out to their employers as exemplary hard workers, many of the men¹²¹ in this study were promoted to better-paid and more responsible managerial positions:

"gaining esteem for being a hard worker can enhance the dignity of undocumented immigrants who are highly stigmatized as 'illegal aliens,' while gaining autonomy and respect on the job may be particularly important for undocumented workers who are subject to constant and arbitrary supervision" (Gomberg-Muñoz 2010:299)

By gaining esteem and responsibility, and working closely with their employer over years or even decades, these workers could, at least in some cases, transcend the generalized racial divide in agriculture, ceasing to be interchangeable inputs like the seasonal workers brought by labor contractors, and instead develop closer and more personal relationships. Such relationships enabled them to benefit from their employer's support in setting up their own business and accessing land, capital, and customers, or even succeed an aging employer once he retired.

Together, the structural constraints imposed on independent farmers by their immigration status, lack of inherited land and capital, and lack of formal training and access to government support (e.g. OSU Extension and USDA services), along with the importance of relationships with employers in facilitating the successful launch of farm businesses function to direct many independent farmers to follow the course plotted by their laboring careers. That is, those who

¹²¹ I did not encounter any stories of a woman achieving such a durable, responsible relationship with an employer or achieving a supervisory role. The only partial exceptions were in cases of married couples, in which case the male relationships still appeared primary. This is consistent with findings reported elsewhere in the literature (e.g. Waugh 2010:256–257)

worked on organic mixed vegetable farmers are likely to start organic mixed vegetable farms; those who worked at nurseries are likely to start nurseries, although this trend is not absolute, and we will encounter exceptions. This is true even though—as we shall see—workers often came to work in one or another agricultural field not due to any particular interest or preference for that line of production, but rather due to the luck of family or other connections, and to the desire to stick with a reliable gig and a decent boss. This sort of path dependence is not, of course, unique to immigrants or to farmers, but a normal part of life. However, with relatively fewer job prospects, and less of a safety net to fall back on, it seems reasonable to extrapolate from the patterns presented here that the pressure to build on skills and connections already developed is felt especially acutely among this population.

This chapter approaches the intertwined questions of how some immigrants have navigated the structuring realities of Oregon agriculture to become farmers and what sort of places and lives they attempt to build, beginning with a broadly descriptive overview of the independent farmers I encountered. I sketch the range of scales and approaches within the group, and to suggest a typology of the main sub-groups of farmers at work. With this broad landscape established, I proceed to examine in greater detail individual farmers representative both of their specific types (i.e. organic certified mixed vegetable producers, nurserymen, berry growers, etc.) and of particular traits or bundles of traits that might shed broader light on independent farmers as a whole. In sum, I argue that while farmers draw clear links between their desired agrarian lifestyles and their rural upbringings in Mexico, they do not consistently link that lifestyle to a particular approach to commercial farming. Instead, experiences of hired labor emerge as a key site of learning, treated by most farmers not as something to be rejected, but rather as a desirable model for their own work—although labor experience does not perfectly determine farmers’ approaches, and I examine informative exceptions both at the end of this chapter and in greater depth in Chapter 5. In sum, then, despite similarities in their aspirations and desired lifestyle, they exhibit considerable flexibility in how they set out to achieve, suggesting that it is unwise for scholars to presume that either cultural heritage or labor and migration experience will lead Mexican immigrant farmers to reliably cohere around a particular political or ecological vision of agriculture. And in light of these divergent approaches, it is therefore of particular importance to closely attend to how farmers themselves value and understand their work, and to trace the logics by which they themselves explain their decisions.

Outlining the scope and scale of Mexicano agriculture in the Willamette Valley

No one has an exact count of the number of independent Mexican immigrant farmers in the Willamette Valley, in Oregon, or in the United States, but the number is almost certainly growing—and fast. The best proxy figures come from the Census of Agriculture, conducted by the USDA’s National Agricultural Statistics Service. In 1974, NASS recorded a total of 44 “Hispanic principal operators” in the entire state of Oregon; by 2017, the most recent year for which data is available, that number had risen to 1,462, of whom 796 were located in the ten counties of my study area.¹²² This comprises 4.1% of all farms in that area, working 2.5% of the total acreage. By comparison, 83% of all US farmworkers are Latinx, with 69% born in Mexico (Hernandez and Gabbard 2018), illustrating the starkly racialized divide in agriculture between those who own the land and those who work it; indeed, as Ngai points out “[t]he formation of the

¹²² The nine counties of the Willamette Valley, plus Hood River.

migratory agricultural workforce was perhaps the central element in the broader process of modern Mexican racial formation in the United States,” meaning that the role of the farmworker is often treated as equivalent with the racialized category of Mexican, almost definitionally excluding Mexicanos from the status of farmer. Thus, for example, when explaining my research, whether to nonprofit or government workers or to Anglo acquaintances, my explanation that I was interested in “Mexican immigrant farmers” would almost invariably be misunderstood to mean “Mexican migrant farmworkers.” The blindness of many observers to the existence of Mexican immigrant farmers, combined with the farmers’ often informal and short-term land arrangements, lack of English fluency, potential distrust of government, and the USDA’s generally poor outreach to Latinx farmers, there is good reason to believe that these figures are an undercount, and that among those captured there is a bias in favor of relatively larger farmers over market gardeners (Minkoff-Zern and Sloat 2020). However, while we may doubt the numbers, the trend seems clear enough: though still a small proportion of overall farmers in Oregon, especially when compared to their outsized role in the farm labor force, Latinx farmers are on the rise.

While some of the “Hispanic principal operators” identified by NASS clearly are either not immigrants or not Mexicano, and therefore do not belong in this study, my own sampling process suggests that, at least in the Willamette Valley, the NASS sample likely overlaps heavily with the farmers studied in this dissertation. Using a combination of snowball sampling, farmers market visits, local media, and chance encounters (e.g. passing a farm on the roadside with an identifiably Latino name), I identified a total of 53 unaffiliated farms relevant to my study.¹²³ I reached out to every farm I could find via various means—phone calls and texts, emails and social media messages, mailed letters, and just dropping by—with multiple rounds of follow-ups where initial efforts were unsuccessful. Ultimately, I met with 41 farmers representing 36 farms; where I was unable to meet with the farmer, I did my best to gather partial data from other sources, including observation of market stalls, websites, and social media, and information reported by their peers. Through this process, I only identified a handful of Hispanic farmers who *did not* fit into the categories of interest in this study.

Since I am highly confident that I have identified all farmers affiliated with nonprofits in this region, it therefore seems safe to at least tentatively presume that most of the 796 Hispanic principal operators identified by NASS resemble those independent farmers discussed in this chapter. Furthermore, having visited 19 farmers markets in the Valley—including primary and secondary farmers markets in all major population centers, most on multiple occasions over the course of several years—and having reviewed lists of vendors for additional markets, it seems doubtful that more than a scant handful of relevant vendors could have escaped my notice. This suggests that the bulk of the farmers accounting for the difference between my sample and the NASS figure likely fall into one of two categories: 1) very small market gardeners distributing their product via personal networks and social media marketplaces (Ramsey 2022), or 2)

¹²³ I include in this category farm businesses owned by a Mexican (or, in one case, Guatemalan) immigrant who is either 1) a former or current farmworker or 2) from a rural background and with an extensive personal history of working-class jobs in the US (construction, cleaning, etc.); I also include a handful of children of parents fitting the preceding categories, although with some hesitation, as their practices and motivations seem to diverge significantly from those of first generation immigrants, instead resembling more closely the nonprofit-affiliated farmers of the previous chapter. I exclude Mexican Americans more distantly removed from their families’ immigrant and farming histories, as well as one individual from an upper-middle class background in Mexico City who co-owns a small vineyard with her Anglo husband, but who has no personal or family experience with farm labor. I also exclude one market garden based in a plot measuring only 20’x20’.

wholesale producers (see, e.g., Juan and Lupe, or Angel and Candida, below)—which is to say the category of farmers whose farms diverge most pronouncedly from those affiliated with nonprofits.

Given the diversity in their approaches, it is more difficult to generalize about independent farmers than those affiliated with nonprofits, and much of this chapter will therefore approach this population through individual profiles of farms representing various tendencies within this population. However, a brief orienting overview will help to situate these farms, and to develop a sense of the range of variation. These variables and their interactions will be explored in greater depth in the case study portion of this chapter and the next.¹²⁴

Scale:

While comparing acreage is often like comparing apples and oranges (or strawberries and Japanese maples, as the case may be), these farms are generally small. Among the 37 farms for which I have reliable figures on acreage, size ranges from 0.5 to 600 acres, with a median of 24 acres. The three largest farms control more acreage than the remaining 34; fully a dozen have less than 10 acres.

Scale can also be measured in terms of workforce. At least 26 farms report hiring some outside labor; only 11 were confirmed to hire no workers. Of those 26, eight hire five or fewer workers; the biggest current hired workforce was at a berry farm, which at peak harvest season employs 50.¹²⁵ Most of the remainder are under 20. Furthermore, it is notable that many of the larger employers report formerly having workforces significantly larger than at present; that berry farm with 50 workers formerly employed “hundreds” for the harvest. Many farmers complained about the difficulty of finding and retaining skilled and reliable workers, reflecting a national shift in the farmworker workforce and a decline in the number of undocumented Mexican migrants (Warren 2021; Warren 2020), although farmers tended to describe this shift in terms not of an objective decline in the number of available workers, but rather a decline in the younger generation’s work ethic. Mexicano farmers and workers generally treated the possibility of hiring Anglo workers as laughable, reflecting the overall racialization of farm labor (Holmes 2013). Farmers therefore made do and adapted to understaffed farms and (especially among berry producers) sought to mechanize harvest where possible.

I did not collect sufficient data to attempt to measure farms by total sales in either dollar or volume.

Land ownership:

I found 19 independent farmers who own their land, either outright or (more often) with a mortgage; 18 rent. An additional five farmers own property but rent additional land elsewhere; this includes two of the four biggest farms in my sample, renting 250 and 300 acres respectively. At least two of the landowners rent out the majority of their property to other farmers.

The median size of owner-operated farms is 25 acres; median size of rented farms was 13.75 acres.

¹²⁴ Note that, due to my inability to collect full data on all farms, there are discrepancies among the totals in the various quantitative figures offered here.

¹²⁵ Unsurprisingly, this was at the farm that also had the biggest acreage.

Crop mix and production style:

Nursery and mixed vegetable production are the two most common types of farms, with a smaller number focusing on one or a small handful of specialty crops, notably berries and Christmas trees.

Nursery growers produce ornamentals for the wholesale market, selling to other nurseries and distributors or to landscapers. Most of these producers focus primarily on trees, especially conifers and Japanese maples, although most also produce groundcovers, grasses, or flowering plants. Nearly all had extensive experience as hired workers at nurseries prior to launching their own. In more than a few cases, growers explained that they had started their nursery business while still employed at another nursery, and that this dual status provided advantages. Jose, whose nursery was the youngest of those in my sample, had begun growing nursery crops only the previous year on less than an acre of rented land. He explained that his costs are minimal since he focuses on crops that can be grown from cuttings and that he can propagate himself,¹²⁶ and that by focusing on crops that complement his employers' selection he can reliably sell his product to his own boss. Since only the very biggest nurseries will have in stock every plant a landscaper or wholesale buyer might desire, many growers report that the nursery industry is relatively collaborative in comparison with other forms of agriculture, and that selling plants to other growers—including former employers—is a common and mutualistic strategy.

Nurseries have other advantages for beginning and undercapitalized growers. Many nursery crops are best grown in plastic pots rather than in-ground, meaning that they are both portable and relatively amenable to growing even in a backyard; several growers reported first producing plants at home in precisely this manner before renting or buying land. Unlike food crops, perennials like trees and groundcovers can be sold at any time, lessening the intensity of labor ebbs and flows common in fruit and vegetable production, and mitigating the risk of being stuck without buyers and a field full of rotting produce; in most cases, unsold product can simply continue to grow, passively accruing value.

Since their plants are inedible ornamentals, it is obvious that food justice provides at best a tenuous fit for understanding their work (at least so far as their commercial production goes—many also cultivate small personal vegetable gardens). It is further clear that, whatever the role of farmers' traditions or agrarian heritage in inspiring their nursery work, that these effects are not of the sort practiced at Anáhuac or celebrated by most food justice activists: Japanese maples and Sitka spruce are not heritage crops or possessing of special cultural significance in Mexico, and except in its broadest outlines the cultivation of such plants differs from traditional milpa techniques in nearly all respects. As I show below, nurserymen do draw links between their current work and their upbringings in rural Mexico, but those connections function primarily on the level of a particular desired way of life, rather than adhering in relationships to specific plants or farming techniques.

All nurseries were primarily—and most entirely—reliant on wholesale sales, including to other local nurseries and landscapers, as well as sales with out-of-state distributors. Only one nurseryman in my study sold at farmers markets. Unlike both nonprofit-affiliated and independent mixed vegetable producers, who often referred to the importance of their providing healthy food to customers, nursery operators generally did not speak about the end buyers of their plants. This reliance on wholesale distribution does not entirely eliminate the sorts of

¹²⁶ He also reports harvesting some wild plants, explaining that he and his father had dug up ferns growing in a small, wooded area at the margin of vineyard where his father works.

market sociality that many nonprofit-affiliated farmers experience, but it does limit it largely within a professional sphere, rather than providing a link to the end consumer. These professional networks were in part ethnically defined—perhaps more than any other set of independent farmers, the nurserymen I spoke to knew each other and some regularly did business. However, this was not an exclusively or even predominantly ethnically defined market; they also did business with Anglo nurseries, sometimes in quite close partnership, and often spoke about those colleagues in equally positive terms as compared to their co-ethnics.

The nurseries I visited showed few special considerations for ecological stewardship. All grow polycultures, and trees—especially native ones—tend to require few or even no chemical inputs. However, none of the farmers claim to refrain from spraying or applying chemical fertilizers when they view it as appropriate, or expressed significant hesitation about doing so. None compost or engage in other deliberate soil-building activities. Many cover the ground in gravel and black tarps, growing plants in small black-plastic pots. If, as Beus and Dunlap (1990) suggest, attitude is an important part of agricultural alternativeness—if some intention to steward the land or advance social, economic, or ecological values counter to those of mainstream agroindustry is significant—then this would seem to be a poor descriptor for their work. Instead, understanding of their motivations and logics must be sought in other terms.

Mixed vegetable producers form the second clear subset of independent farmers. See chart below for the distribution of farm size within this group. Note that I am counting total acreage farmed, not total landholdings; several farmers in this group farm only a relatively small portion of their total holdings, reflecting that these individuals treat farming as a hobby or side income. Note too that several farms on which I gathered only indirect data are not included in this chart.

Size range (in acres)	# of farms
0-3	3
4-10	3
11-25	3
50	1
100-150	2
400	1

Table 1, distribution of independent farms by acreage.

Among the independent producers these are generally farms most obviously resemble those supported by the nonprofit initiatives in Chapter 3. Minkoff-Zern makes a compelling case that their businesses should be understood as a form of alternative agriculture due to their polycultural plantings, frequent reliance on family labor, local direct marketing strategies, and limited their use of pesticides, noting that in addition to any ideological preferences these alternative features are often structurally imposed adaptations to a lack of capital (Minkoff-Zern 2019). These more diversified farms also seem to have greater potential to recall or re-create small farms of growers’ childhoods—although as we have already seen in Chapter 3, and will explore further in the case studies, farmers do not necessarily perceive strong similarities between these mixed vegetable farms and the milpas of their childhood.

Despite their similarities, there are clear grounds to view these farms not as simply a spontaneous version of the nonprofit-linked food justice model, but as something qualitatively

distinct. These farms are almost always larger than their nonprofit-linked peers; they are significantly more likely to hire non-family labor; and their proprietors are more likely to have extensive experience in farm labor prior to launching the farm, often in the form of long-term, year-round employment at a single farm, in many cases in a supervisory role. This last is reflected in their explanations of why they farm and what they get out of it: though not entirely absent in this group, the nonprofit-linked farmers' references to personal and family health are less prominent, and instead farmers are more likely to talk about the desire for independence, a preference for working outdoors, and in many cases their lack of other skills.

Another key distinction concerns environmental practices. All nonprofit-linked farms in my study at least claim to practice no-spray or a comparable form of uncertified organic approach. Things are more complicated among the independent mixed vegetable producers here. Seven of these farms¹²⁷ refrain from using synthetic pesticides, while an equal number do not. However, this story is complicated by the fact that four of those no-spray farms are direct successors of just two Anglo-owned certified organic farms at which the founders had been long-term employees, and whose owners actively supported the founding of their farms, including aiding the organic certification process and transferring wholesale buyers. Crucially, in each of these cases, the new (or in one case, aspiring) proprietors are explicit in stating that their organic methods are directly modeled on those of their former employer. Only in three cases do we find unaffiliated farmers independently opting for no-spray practices. In sum, while we see among the independent mixed vegetable farmers a potential amenability to no-spray, the trend seems to be defined not by a strongly shared aversion towards pesticides, but rather towards the replication of the agricultural forms they experienced as hired workers here in the US—although there are at least a few who buck this trend, as we shall explore.

In terms of distribution, these farmers again offer partial similarities to nonprofit-affiliated farmers. Most sell at farmers markets, although some also rely significantly on wholesale. Among market vendors, the actual selling is often handled by employees or younger relatives, rather than the farmer.

Finally, the monocultural (or near-monocultural) specialty crop producers are more variable than the others, and thus difficult to summarize. These include blueberries, caneberries, Christmas trees, chilis, and wine grapes. Unsurprisingly, since monocultural production is the normal model for conventional production, this was the category of farmers least likely to appear alternative. I did not document any organic / no spray farmers in this category, and wholesale distribution predominated. These farmers are also the most likely to rely on seasonal hired or contract labor. Despite these features, however, these farmers share many traits with their more alternative peers—once one moves beyond classifying farmers based on technique and instead examines the way of life they seek to realize on the farm.

Case study: farm succession and labor learning on an organic mixed vegetable farm

Let's begin with a farm that would inspire any food justice advocate. The Martinez brothers, Paulo and Floriberto, grew up in rural Oaxaca, where their father worked in forestry. Floriberto arrived in Oregon first, in 1995, and worked planting trees in the mountains, as well as in restaurants and for short stints on farms. Paulo arrived a few years later, and traveling the Valley in search of work he spotted some greenhouses and stopped to ask for a job. He had

¹²⁷ I include here one aspiring farmer.

arrived at Spring Hill Farm, an organic farm producing tomatoes, lettuce, onions, cucumbers, kale, cauliflower, leeks, herbs, and more. Spring Hill’s owner, Jamie Kitzrow, was in the process of shifting from the unreliable and unskilled labor provided by students and recent grads from nearby Oregon State and towards more professional Mexican migrants, and soon hired on Floriberto too. The brothers remained Spring Hill’s top managers for nearly 20 years as the farm grew and became a fixture of the local organic landscape; together, they and their wives Gladis and Leonilda worked at the farm for a combined 55+ years, developing a comprehensive knowledge of its operations.



Figure 9. Paulo and Floriberto on their farm. Photo courtesy of the Organically Grown Company.

By 2018, Jamie was contemplating retirement, and was in the fortunate financial position of not needing to dispose of his land at the highest possible price. This financial flexibility—combined with his daughter’s disinterest in farming, his decades-long relationship with his employees, and the social justice inclinations of an organic movement veteran—led him to ask his workers if any of them might be interested in taking over the farm. Paulo remembers,

“I had the idea of making a business similar to this one. But not here. In Mexico. But I remember some words that the owner of Spring Hill told me: opportunities arrive maybe once in your life. And what he said, ‘if you all want to start something, I’m disposed to

help you,’ those words he’d said one day came to my mind and I said why not benefit from this?’”¹²⁸

Ultimately, Spring Hill was divided between the Martinez family, who named their new business Sunrise Farm, and another successor farm started by longtime Spring Hill employees, also Oaxacan immigrants. Side by side but working independently of each other, the two new farms took over Spring Hill’s lease on nearby plot 18-acre plot, as well as renting a few high tunnels and washing/packing facilities on Jamie’s own land. Jamie worked out long term payment plans to help them buy his equipment, helped to transfer over customer accounts—most significantly, with the Organically Grown Company, a large organic distributor—and guided the new farms through the organic certification process.

The transition benefitted significantly from Jamie’s foresight and willingness to support his former workers. He began the discussion of a transition well in advance of his retirement, meaning that

“me and my farm continued on for two years after that, and so what we did is—which I didn’t realize it at the time, but it was kind of a smart maneuver—that they started their farms on the side while they were working pretty close to full time for me. They had to cut back some hours in order to do their own thing but that way they had the guarantee of a salary from me plus this extra income for what they were going to grow on their own. And I sold their product under the Spring Hill Farm name... So—you know, after the first year we all sorta realized that this was a way for them to sort of create a nest egg for themselves to then be able to really go out on their own. Cause they had the salary already to live on so this was extra income. So they had a second year and the second year they sold it under their own names while they were still working for me, and they set up official businesses, created LLCs and all that. Insurance required. And started selling on the wholesale market. And that was sort of a way for the wholesaler to test these two new farms and see how they did. And by the end of the 2nd year, I decided to retire and at that point I talked to all of our different accounts and tried to get them to agree to transitioning to these new farms.”

Though he now charges rent for their use of his land, and did not outright give them money, Jamie’s willingness to allow the initial free or low-cost use of his land, facilities, and equipment—and his technical assistance in setting up the business—was vital in getting the new farms launched. And proprietors of both successor farms confirmed to me that Jaime continues to be involved as both a benevolent landlord and as an advisor.

Visiting Spring Hill in its first and second years of fully independent operation, I was impressed first by its professionalism. Though at 8.5 acres it is on the smaller side for an independent farm, in comparison with the nonprofit-affiliated farms the facilities are well-maintained, production is higher, less produce is left unharvested in the field, and the vegetables are consistently attractive and unmarred by pest damage (and therefore saleable). This professionalism is reflected in the Martinezes’ ability to jump through the bureaucratic hoops to achieve organic certification, and the consequent distribution of much of their production through the Organically Grown Company in addition to farmers markets and restaurants.

¹²⁸ “yo tenía la idea de poner un negocio similar a esto. Pero no aquí. En México. Pero recuerdo unas palabras que dijo el dueño de Spring Hill: las oportunidades lleguen tal vez una vez en la vida. Y cuando él dijo, ‘si Uds. quieren empezar algo, yo estoy dispuesto ayudarles,’ entonces vino a mi mente estas palabras que dijo un día y dije yo, ¿porque no aprovechar eso?”

The differences between this farm—and the three highly comparable successor farms in my sample—and those backed by nonprofits appears quite slight. However, while the form of this farm appears to perfectly reflect food justice expectations, the reasons for this form diverge significantly. Though the proprietors are Oaxacan former farmworkers, labor exploitation does not feature in their explanations of their approach to farming. Unsurprisingly given the story of the farm’s founding, Paulo, Floriberto, and their wives consistently expressed appreciation for Jamie’s support. Remembering his early days at Spring Hill, Paulo said

“I didn’t speak English and Jamie... didn’t speak Spanish. But, good, there he was for like a year more or less, he was like a worker. And I was like the boss, because he would do the work and I would like how he did it, and I would do it after. And that’s how we got into farming.”¹²⁹

Though they later assumed more conventional roles, and the Martinezes speak of Jamie respectfully, as a patron rather than a friend, it is difficult to find any feeling of injustice in their accounts, and other former Spring Hill employees agreed that he “he always [paid] a good salary, and treated everyone very well.”¹³⁰

The Martinez brothers also defy expectations in their technical approach—or rather, in how they came by their technical approach. They explicitly and repeatedly stated that the farm’s organic, mixed vegetable production drew nothing from their rural upbringing and is instead a nearly identical replication of Jamie’s technique. While growing up in the *campo* inspired a lifelong preference for the rural life, their parents weren’t farmers, and the crops they now produce bear limited resemblance to the Oaxacan milpa. Questioned about their choice for organics, they point to health benefits for both consumers and workers, saying that their beliefs are informed by what they learned working at Spring Hill and from the media rather than any negative personal or second-hand experience with pesticides.

The brothers say that they did not learn about organic agriculture until arriving in Oregon. Minkoff-Zern quotes one of her informants stating that “We were organic, we just didn’t know we were organic” (Minkoff-Zern, Welsh, and Ludden 2020); not so here. The Martinezes’ neighbors in Oaxaca applied pesticides liberally: in Paulo’s memory, if anyone was seen spraying a new chemical, everyone would want to try it. Virginia and Zenon, the proprietors of the other Spring Hill successor farm, similarly remember a distinctly chemical-forward approach to farming in their upbringings on small Oaxacan milpa farms:

Virginia: “There they use chemicals [i.e. pesticides and fertilizers. There they use a lot of chemical. My mom started to make an organic fertilizer, but this—it was very difficult for her to do it alone, so she did it like three times and then couldn’t do it anymore. But it did work [*laughs*]. The fertilizer that she made—because she didn’t want chemicals. She didn’t like chemicals very much. Yes, all the time she would look for ways to use less chemicals... what they used to do was the horse poop or from the cow or the goats, from the chickens, they used this and look for weeds—they mixed it all up [*laughs*]. And this was how she would make her fertilizer, she would leave the fertilizer in a closed box, later she was shovel it from one side to the other and keep it there for almost two months and then use it.”

Me: “But she only did this a few times?”

¹²⁹ “yo no hablaba inglés y Jamie... no hablaba español. Pero, bueno, allí estuvo como un año más o menos, anduvo él como un trabajador. Y yo andaba como el patrón, porque el hacía trabajo, yo miraba como lo hacía, y yo lo hacía después. Y así fue como nos fuimos metiendo en esto de la agricultura.”

¹³⁰ “siempre [*pagó*] muy bien sueldo, y le trato muy bien a todos.”

Virginia: “Yes, she only did it a very few times because she was old and couldn’t manage anymore [*laughs a little*]. And the people didn’t like it because when you’re making this there’s a very strong smell. They didn’t like it.”

Me: “Yeah. [Addressing Zenon:] And your family too?”

Zenon: “Nothing but chemicals [*laughs*]. There they have the thinking that if you don’t put chemicals, the corn won’t yield...”

Me: “Did you have doubts [about organic farming] at first?”

Virginia: “We thought it wasn’t going to work [*laughs*].¹³¹”

Though Virginia’s mother experimented with organic fertilizers, perhaps influenced by Mexico’s own organic movement (see e.g. Nigh 1997; González and Nigh 2005; Nelson et al. 2010), perhaps expressing some more personal inclination to avoid chemicals or return to more traditional methods, these experiments were an exception not only in her town, but even in her own family’s usual agricultural practice. And Virginia’s laughter at her mother’s stinky, simple approach makes clear that even if these experiments were formative to her attitudes (and she gives no particular reason to believe they were), the specifics of her technique was not. Like the Martinezes, Virginia and Zenon say that their methods are basically identical to what they did as workers at Spring Hill. Jamie agrees with this assessment: “they pretty much copied my system, which you know they had done for a long time, so it was a system they knew... they saw the results had been working pretty well. So you know, that was easy for them to step into.”

The purpose of tracing how the Martinezes arrived at their organic practices is not to judge their authenticity or lack thereof, but rather to begin to understand how immigrant farmers more generally make decisions around agricultural technique. Here, as with some of the nonprofit-linked farmers in the previous chapter, we find immigrant farmers who have enthusiastically embraced ‘alternative’ production, not as a return to timeless ancestral tradition, but instead as a new approach of whose merits they have been persuaded, and that suits their vision of a good life. In this case, however, rather than learning from a food justice nonprofit’s workshops, the Martinezes learned on the job. When circumstances enabled them to start their own farm, they chose to substantially replicate the systems they have operated as hired workers.

Just as they learned from and reproduced Jamie’s cropping systems, so too did the Paulo and Floriberto largely preserve his labor arrangements. Hired immigrant workers remain central to the success of the farm, and conditions compare well to industry standards. Workers are kept on for nearly the entire year (a significant advantage in an industry where seasonal unemployment is common), and the hourly wage is \$15. On one of my early visits to the farm,

¹³¹ Virginia: “*Alla si se usa químicos. Alla se usa mucho químico. Mi mama empezó hacer un abono orgánico, pero este - se le hacía muy difícil para ella sola hacerlo, entonces solo lo hizo como tres veces y ya no pudo hacerlo. Pero si lo funciona [laughs]. El abono que ella hacía - porque ella no quería químicos. No le gustaba mucho los químicos a ella... Si todo el tiempo buscaba la manera de que pueda menos químicos... lo que hacían era el popo de los caballos o de la vaca o de los chivos, de los gallinas, esto es lo utilizaban, y buscaban hierbas - lo mezclaban todo [laughs]. Y así era que hacía ella su jabono, le dejaba fertilizar en una caja tapado, después lo paliaba de un lado al otro y lo mantenía allí casi por 2 meses y entonces lo usaba.*”

me: “*¿Pero solo lo hizo unas veces?*”

Virginia: “*si, solo lo hizo muy pocas veces porque ella era mayor y ya no aguantaba. [laughs a little] Y la gente no le gustaba porque como cuando estás haciendo esto hay un olor muy fuerte. No le gustado.*”

me: “*Si. ¿Y su familia también?*”

Zenon: “*Puro de químicos [laughs]. Allí tiene el pensamiento de que si no le pone el químico, no va a dar maíz...*”

me: “*¿Tenían dudas [about organic farming] al inicio?*”

Virginia: “*Pensábamos que no iba a funcionar [laughs].*”

Paulo told me that he'd hoped to have 8 workers this year, and now they have 13: he listed them off, including himself, his brother, and their wives on the list. This attitude is reflected in their working habits, with the Martinezes working side by side with the employees—several of whom were old coworkers from the Spring Hill days. I wrote in my fieldnotes:

I ask if it was weird, having been a coworker and now the boss? Not really, he [a worker] says. They're still friends. [Paulo] doesn't try to be a patron, up above them (he indicates with his hand, holding it up high, above). They're still friends, just sometimes he has to give a little direction.

This seems to be true. While Floriberto and Paulo gave instructions to the others, and were more likely to be doing more running around and coordinating and somewhat less of the actual hands-on labor, these divides were not absolute. Everyone did all the work. The tone of the group overall was affable, with lots of joking around and friendly teasing. A few times, the guys called the brothers “patron,” but often laughed after doing it—not mocking, but apparently just playing with the formality of it.

Joking, of course, can serve many functions, expressing not just pleasure and amusement, but derision, consolation, hostility, and even transcendence (Berger 1997). Writing of working class Mexicano *chingaderas*, Limón describes how such this crude, sexualized banter and teasing helps create “*confianza* [confidence, trust]” and “*respeto* [respect]” among the men who play at it (Limon 1982:479). Gomberg-Muñoz adds to this analysis, writing of of Mexican immigrant workers in a Chicago restaurant that

“One of the primary mechanisms by which these workers encourage norms of hard work is the use of humor. New or slow workers are nicknamed “turtle” or “stupid” and teased about their poor work ethic. One worker known for moving a bit slower than the others was nicknamed ‘el Ferrari,’ and when the other guys wanted him to move faster, they would call over their walkie-talkie radios: ‘Hey Ferrari, vroom vroom vroooooom!’” (Gomberg-Muñoz 2010:300).

Gomberg-Muñoz’s analysis details how teasing can encourage hard work among her busboy subjects—thereby retrenching the stereotype of Mexicans as naturally hard workers suitable for exploitation—while simultaneously using their performance of hard work to carve out a space of autonomy in which they are largely left to manage their own affairs in the workplace, and that can be used to secure certain benefits, such as securing work for their friends and relatives.

In contrast to Gomberg-Muñoz’s restaurant, at Sunrise some of the old crew of jokers have now become the bosses, though they still engage in the joking. In this context, the joking takes on an additional shade—still motivational, still building the team, but encouraged not only among the workers but also as a management strategy. An easy, cynical reading would be to treat this as a cheap tactic to build worker loyalty and keep the whole crew working fast. But if, per Limón, this teasing builds trust and respect among those engaged, it would seem that, at Sunrise at least, the connection grows in both directions.

More than any other farmers in this study, the Martinezes emphasize the wellbeing of their workers and a desire to provide them with a living as a key animating ideal behind their work. Why do they grow mixed vegetables rather than just tomatoes? In order to “hire more people.”¹³² I ask if hiring more workers is good. Yes, Paulo says, it’s good to *ocupar* workers. He adds that it’s good to provide good food to customers, but workers are the theme he keeps returning to. He’d like to have 20 workers eventually, and take over the entire old Spring Hill. He frames this desired growth in terms of providing employment: this is the good he sees the

¹³² “*ocupar mas gente*”

farm doing. Despite news reports of a labor shortage, he said there are always migrants who are struggling to find work; he used to be in that position and has friends who still are, who need steady work, and he'd like to be able to provide it.

A year later, I was questioning Paulo about religion and ritual: does he bless the fields? He said he doesn't, just prays at home—and then he surprised me. He said that God holds him and whole world in his hands, and he prays to God, *I'm putting this in your hands, if it's for good let me succeed, if not no, if it'll do harm then no*. He said that he prays that if money will make him like those rich people who don't want to have anything to do with normal people, not let him make money. He said it's complicated, but if he doesn't make money, he can't employ those two—he pointed at a pair working nearby—and they can't feed their families.

Though Paulo and Floriberto have ascended the agricultural hierarchy to become farmers rather than workers, they continue to identify with the worker role. This is no doubt partially attributable to the recency of their change in position, partially to the racial coding of farm work, and partially to the fact that a significant proportion of their employees are longtime coworkers, comfortable enough to tease them and keep them from getting too big for their britches. This close identification with their workers, combined with their own experience with a beneficent boss in Jamie, leads them to see the provision of stable, fair employment as a sort of service rendered by the boss to the worker. And it has led to the creation of a remarkably egalitarian sort of farm labor experience, one largely free of the racialized humiliation so common in farm labor (Benson 2011; Holmes 2013), and in which workers' skills and expertise are generally respected. These qualities, in turn, have helped Sunrise to retain reliable, experienced workers who are motivated and who know the farm's system well enough to work with only light supervision.

In many respects, Sunrise shares significant features with the sort of farms promoted by the nonprofits described in the preceding chapters. Both are defined not only by organic production, but also by owners maintaining a certain social self-identification as workers, and by the elimination—at least on the farm, if not beyond it—of racialized hierarchies. But the place the Martinezes have created is also clearly distinct from those imagined by nonprofit staffers, even as it appears to produce many of the same results. Shared livelihoods are created not by a cooperative but a family business oriented around the Martinezes' moral conception of their role as job creators responsible for the wellbeing of workers with whom they identify—a structure, if not necessarily an outcome, well established as an American ideal. Rather than being conceived as an oppositional alternative, Sunrise is best understood as a continuation and a deepening of what the brothers identify as the positive features of the farm at which they labored.

Case study: immigrant conventional growers in the nursery industry

If Sunrise diverges from the nonprofit-affiliated farmers described in Chapters 2 and 3 in relatively subtle ways, suggesting placemaking projects that differ primarily in their pathways into being rather than in their final result, the nursery growers I encountered offer a much more striking divergence. Here we find farmers creating a quite different kind of place from those that a food justice analysis might prepare us to expect, and seemingly demanding to be understood in different terms. It is to these farmers who we must now turn. As we shall see, despite their apparently distinctive farm practices, however, these farmers and their logics underscore themes already identified at Sunrise—most notably, their strong tendency to draw on labor experience as a key site of learning, something to be emulated rather than simply reacted against. Unlike

Sunrise, however, where the tendency to understand themselves as job creators was tempered by a strong identification with workers, some nurserymen—including those profiled in this case study—adopt a more conservative understanding of their role as business owners, generalizing from their own success to conclude that structural barriers are either nonexistent or can be reliably overcome through hard work.

These farmers are poorly represented in the literature—I have yet to find any substantial published anthropological discussion of immigrant nurserymen—and the most difficult to find: none were affiliated with any of the nonprofits with which I worked, and only one sold at a farmers market. Further, their business names were generally just initials (L&R Nurseries, say) or nondescript names in English (Northwest Tree Nursery); none used any sort of identifiably Mexican or indigenous aesthetics in their logos or other design features, meaning they were not readily identifiable as immigrant-owned from business listings or roadside signs; and I was only able to find one of these farmers profiled in local media (and then only after he showed me the newspaper clipping). Among the nursery owners, more than any other farmers in this study, snowballing personal introductions were essential, with nearly all connections cascading from a single original conversation.

It is difficult to choose a single nursery to profile, but let's talk about Juan and Lupe. The pair grew up in rural Nayarit, where Juan's father was the judge of an *ejido* in addition to being a farmer.¹³³ They were poor, their house palm-thatched and with a dirt floor, but they both emphasized the fertility of the land: you could plant a banana and it would give fruit that same year. They were “farmers” (though we spoke in Spanish, that word was always given in English), growing plantains, mangos, corn, and beans. There were animals to hunt, fish and shrimp in the rivers.

Juan first came to the US in 1977, arriving in California at the age of 16. He explains that “I had land in Mexico. The reason I came here is because the government wouldn't leave me alone to work. Everyone wanted to rob you. And that's why I came [to the US].”¹³⁴ He was on a tourist visa, and began working illegally at a restaurant. He didn't like the work: he already identified as a “farmer” (this word again in English), and felt embarrassed: “when you are a farmer, it makes you embarrassed to work in those places. How am I going to be washing plates?!”¹³⁵ This response is not unique; a number of other farmers I spoke to had also done stints in other lines of work before returning to agriculture, preferring to be outdoors in nature. There is also a gendered component to this distaste for restaurant work, which some experience as emasculating (Horton 2016:56). He came to Oregon in 1982, and Lupe joined him. They already had four kids, and had a fifth one here. She too identified as a farmer, and together they looked for farm work. Before long, they found employment at a small nursery where they were the only two workers, and where the owners were largely absent.

Just three years after arriving in Oregon, the couple bought a trailer on a one-acre site and started growing their own nursery plants for sale. In his telling:

“I arrived with just \$40 in my pocket. No house, no work, nothing. Ready to get to work. In three years, we bought the first place here in Canby. *Cash* [English in the original].

¹³³ Forgive me – for each of our two interviews, I arrived with the intention of learning more of her story, and on each occasion he monologued while she cooked and brought us food, chiming in here and there before disappearing back into the kitchen.

¹³⁴ “yo tenía tierra en México. La razón que me vine aquí es porque el gobierno no me dejaba trabajar. Todo te lo querría robar. Y es por eso que yo me vine.”

¹³⁵ “cuando tú eres un farmer, da vergüenza trabajar en estos lugares. ¿¿Como voy a estar yo lavando platos?!”

Because we didn't have papers... And working every day. For three years. That's why people come here. I tell you this: they earn well, but they waste it all, they throw it away. That they have parties, they buy new cars... On the other hand, if you don't do anything but work, work, work, and in three years you've got enough to buy the first place."¹³⁶

Hard work emerges here as a crucial theme in Juan's story, and one that mirrored by nearly every farmer I spoke with. Some researchers have found that Mexican migrants in the US view work as a means to an end, rather than a value in its own right (Dewey 2004), or have argued that "migrant men's pride in their work capacity" is weaponized by "[s]upervisors [who] use gendered barbs to encourage men's productivity, taunting men who become ill... by saying they are merely 'lazy' (*flojo*) or 'weak'" (Horton 2016:27).

Yet hard work is not only valued by manipulative bosses; Mexican immigrant **"workers also associate dirty and difficult labor with bravery and self-worth...** By equating willingness to work with integrity and bravery, workers convert socially degraded work into a source of self-esteem" (Gomberg-Muñoz 2010:302). I found something similar. The ability to work hard, to endure, is treated as a point of pride, and though this may represent in part the internalization of norms learned as an exploited farmworker, these farmers retain work as a value even when there is no boss to berate them. Indeed, a number of farmers expressed that even if they were able to retire, they would not want to, that quite aside from any need for food or money, they valued farming for keeping them busy. As one farmer told me, he first moved to Oregon with the wish to "buy myself a little bit of land, for when I retire, just to walk around, and entertain myself a while until God decides it's my time"¹³⁷—an astonishingly casual description of a 20-acre blackberry farm. Yet he was not alone; multiple farmers (all men), emphasized the need to keep working, at least a little, and explained that the alternative was to vegetate before the tv, grow sick, and die. As Graeber wrote, "Human beings certainly tend to rankle over what they consider excessive or degrading work... people also have a particular aversion to being humiliated. But leave them to their own devices, and they invariably rankle even more at the prospect of having nothing useful to do" (Graeber 2018:82). He concluded that "[a] human being unable to have a meaningful impact on the world ceases to exist" (Graeber 2018:84). Juan, I suspect, would agree.

While the shared experience of virtuous hard work can bind a group together (Gomberg-Muñoz 2010), it can also be claimed as a personal mark of distinction, an explanation for one's own success relative to less fortunate peers. In addition to his emphasis on his and Lupe's hard work, Juan's account of his own arrival in Oregon is also interesting for his disparagement of his less thrifty peers, a theme that will recur though out Juan and Lupe's tale. Note also the date of their land purchase: given the rising costs of land in Oregon and nationwide, many fewer farmworkers are likely to follow in their footsteps, and among the landowning farmers in my sample, nearly all first purchased real estate in the nineties or earlier. Two years after buying this land, the couple legalized their immigration status under the IRCA immigration amnesty for farmworkers—another opportunity unavailable to more recent arrivals. In Juan's telling,

¹³⁶ "Llegue con solamente \$40 en la bolsa. No casa, no trabajo, no nada. Para ponerme a trabajar. A los 3 años, compramos el primer lugar aquí en Canby. Cash. Porque no teníamos papeles... Y trabajando todos los días. En tres años. Por eso la gente viene aquí. Lo que te digo: ganan bien, pero todo se lo gasta, lo tiran. Que hacen fiestas, compran carros nuevos... En otro, si nada más trabajar, trabajar, trabajar, y en 3 años trae para comprar el primer lugar."

¹³⁷ "el tiempo, puedo comprarme un pedacito de tierra, para cuando ya me retire, ya no más caminar, y divertirme un rato hasta dios quiera."

however, these structural and historically contingent factors in the couple's success fall away, leaving only their own work, and the wastefulness of their fellow migrants.

For 20 years, while operating their own small nursery business out of their yard, Lupe and Juan worked for small nursery where they were the only full-time employees. They continued even when their employers divorced and divided the land, living off their salary from the ex-wife while saving their pay from her ex-husband. When their employer decided she wanted to sell them the land, they initially declined—Juan says that avoiding debt has been one of the keys to his success—but she prevailed, and they worked out a scheme by which he would pay her \$36,000 annually for five years.

As of 2020, the couple owned 26 acres at two different sites. They employed two workers; once, Juan had hoped to expand the business more, but now he says that ambition has passed: he's too old, and anyways the state takes everything in taxes—"it's abusive."¹³⁸ He also recalls the 2008 recession, which he said hit big nurseries hard.¹³⁹ He reasoned that if you employ 50 people, maybe 20 are working and the rest are just hanging out: you just can't *controlar* that many at once—an attitude a striking odds with that of the Martinez brothers at Sunrise Farm, who worked as part of a team at Spring Hill and for whom job creation is a key market of success. Despite them having worked largely autonomously in their own time as hired workers, Juan says that if you've got lots of workers, you think you can take a vacation, but no! Bosses need to get themselves up first, they need to walk with the workers.

Like most of the nurseries I visited, this one grows a variety of ornamentals, many of which are propagated on site, both in high tunnels and outdoors. These he sells wholesale to a number of out-of-state nursery retailers, mostly in the Northeast, with whom he connects via nursery shows and, increasingly, online. He compares this distribution system with berry growers who might depend on one or a handful of big buyers, and who are highly vulnerable should those buyers fold; by contrast, his sales are diversified, and his crops won't rot if there is some unexpected delay.

Touring the farm, Juan takes pleasure in telling me both the common and Latin names of the various species—he's proud to know them all, and he laughs saying the name of the *sango kaku* Japanese maple. He says not every plant grows equally well in every place—there are flows of water through the soil, different kinds of soil, even within a property, and he knows the property like his own hand, knows where these flows of water are, knows what plants to put where.

Despite this understanding and the diversity of crops, it would be a stretch to suggest that the nursery is seamlessly integrated into its natural setting. The ground beneath the trees is kept entirely bare of cover; elsewhere, large areas are covered over in gravel and black tarps, the plants grown in plastic pots. Everywhere, at almost all nurseries, the amount of plastic used is astonishing; though the farmers reuse where possible, the discards still pile up, and many farmers burn the waste. And though the pest control needs of nursery crops like native kinnikinnick and Japanese maples are far lighter than many food crops, none of the nurseries I visited profess to avoiding either pesticides or synthetic fertilizers, and few if any raised the topic at all without direct questioning. Where nursery operators did mention attempting to limit chemical usage, their rationales emphasized thrift rather than the health or environmental concerns mentioned by nonprofit-affiliated and independent vegetable producers.

¹³⁸ "*es un abuso.*"

¹³⁹ Another nurseryman in this study, Jose, operated one of those bigger nurseries and nearly lost everything in 2008; see Korsunsky 2020.

While their commercial production seems quite conventional, this falls away at the edges, where many nurseries began to look more like small homesteads. Many nursery growers I visited maintain vegetable gardens large or small, not for sale but for family consumption: tomatoes, chilis, a few pots of nopal in the greenhouse, some chickens. Lupe and Juan do too, on a somewhat larger scale, with corn, tomatoes, tomatillos, fruit, and cattle. They also harvest wild weeds, especially *verdolagas* [purslane], and trade firewood to a neighbor in exchange for pork. According to Juan, they grow enough food to feed themselves all summer, and Lupe freezes enough to last a good part of winter too. When I ask why, he begins with the cattle. He says that the meat in the store “doesn’t do,”¹⁴⁰ that “it stinks,”¹⁴¹ that the ground beef at the store has “a lot of fat”¹⁴² and that commercially raised cattle are fed chicken shit while his eat home-grown corn and graze in his small woodland. He is emphatic that growing their own food is a healthy choice, despite being much more work. He says they’re poor, but they have everything, drawing the direct comparison to their rural childhoods in Nayarit.

All these complaints about the food system, and the desire to grow healthier—and distinctively Mexican—crops for their own consumption clearly echo the perspectives of the nonprofits discussed in Chapter 3. Should this nursery, then, be understood simply as a livelihood, an income stream meant to subsidize and enable their real interest in recreating the simple affluence of Juan and Lupe’s childhoods in Nayarit? Should the couple be seen as the sort of food-justice inclined, capital-constrained farmers who just need some institutional or organizational intervention to unlock their potential for alterity?

Such a perspective accurately highlights key elements of a desired lifestyle broadly shared across the various categories of Mexican immigrant farmers considered in this dissertation. However, it is ultimately overly reductive to suggest that Juan and Lupe are simply waiting around for some nonprofit to show them how to become alternative farmers, and doing so fails to recognize important features of their vision of success. A story Juan tells can help to explain: when the couple had almost all the money to buy their first property, he borrowed the last \$1,500 from his boss. When he went to PCUN for advice—he wanted to know if a person without legal status could buy land—he remembers the woman in the office told him that was fine, but warned him against the loan from the boss, saying the boss could use that bit of investment in it to cheat him out of his land. But he trusted his boss, and anyways the boss had a big house and plenty of land, why would he do that? The woman, he says, got angry, and yelled at him—that if he’s coming to them, then he should have a complaint about the boss. If he’s on the boss’s side, get out. So he did. Years later, the woman came to their house, and there she was, on his land that she’d warned him not to buy. So he threw her out, told her to take herself and her car off his property. Telling the story, he seemed very pleased with that outcome.

This story encapsulates several themes that recurred throughout our conversations, themes which amount to a rejection of some of the basic premises of food justice: namely, that racism and class inequality are pernicious, structural features of our economy and political life, and that political mobilization against them are desirable and necessary. Juan feels that he has been treated well by his bosses, and Lupe agrees, telling me they’ve never been cheated by a boss, that sometimes payments were late if the boss didn’t have money, but that they’ve only ever been robbed by customers. He also denies that racism is a problem in the US, and claims never to have encountered it. He says that respect is earned, and that the only racism he sees is

¹⁴⁰ “*no sirve*”

¹⁴¹ “*se apesta*”

¹⁴² “*mucha grasa*”

among the Mexican community. Many of these statements, it should be noted, were made during the summer of 2020, as the George Floyd protests continued in nearby Portland. Both emphatically condemned the protests. “Who’s going to pay”¹⁴³ for the property damage, Lupe asked; she answered, “people who work.”¹⁴⁴ Even President Trump—who the farmers I met in this study universally derided as a racist or a “*loco*”—drew only lukewarm condemnation: Juan said that, while he supports rights for undocumented migrants and believes that Trump “is nasty, greedy”¹⁴⁵ he likes “his way of working”¹⁴⁶ when it came to economic questions.

While the couple are undoubtedly among the most outspokenly conservative farmers in my sample, many of the ideas underlying these attitudes were widely shared. Crucially, their rejection of what they see as PCUN’s unnecessarily oppositional stance towards bosses echoes the Martinezes’ similarly warm regard for their own former employer. While many of the farmers with whom I spoke had tales of exploitation, warmer memories were also common. Even among those who did have some complaints about former employers, most independent farmers treated their former farm labor as a significant learning experience. Though more plainly partisan in their expression, Lupe and Juan are typical in that, while embracing independence and autonomy, they do so without framing this ambition as a rejection of either their former bosses or the wider agricultural system.

Equally important in Juan’s story is his claim that the couple’s success is due to hard work, and that others—explicitly including other Mexican immigrants—are lazy or irresponsible. They both repeated this idea in many forms: he said that half the people in this country work, and the other half live off of us, the workers, our taxes. She talked about a cousin who is supposedly disabled, but could work if he wasn’t on drugs. He said that he knows people who’ve lost an arm or leg and still work, and that he personally knows welfare cheats. He was also unhappy about the \$600 bonus added to early COVID era unemployment benefits, saying that because it is more than people earned while working, they don’t want to return to work—that even one of their sons didn’t want to get back to work, since his wages were doubled while unemployed. These themes—if not the specifics—were repeated to me regularly throughout my fieldwork by farmers understandably proud of their own exceptional work ethics and, often, frustrated at the difficulty of finding reliably employees in an increasingly tight agricultural labor market.

In sum then, despite the similarities in form between the homestead-style farming around the margins of the nursery and the gardening promoted by nonprofits, and a shared interest in recreating elements of a rural Mexican lifestyle through autonomy, hard work, simplicity, and meaningful foods, these common desires do not resolve into a shared understanding of the meanings of these projects. Having worked largely independently, both as hired workers and now as farmers, Juan and Lupe have embraced an understanding of success that centers hard work and eschews systemic critiques. Embracing their role as business owners and as bosses, they look skeptically upon both the general mass of workers (half of whom, they say, are lazy or wasteful) and upon organizations like PCUN. In this way, they illustrate that, absent identification with an organized movement, the same impulses and desires that animate the Martinezes or the nonprofit-affiliated farmers in Chapter 4 can fit easily into mainstream conservative discourses of individualism and entrepreneurship.

¹⁴³ “*Quien va a pagar*”

¹⁴⁴ “*la gente que trabajan.*”

¹⁴⁵ “*es sangrón*”

¹⁴⁶ “*su forma de trabajar*”

Case study: hard times and hope on a monocultural commodity farm

Thus far, both the farms discussed in this chapter have been success stories: farm families that, in their own ways, have succeeded in building lives for themselves on the land. Though their businesses are small and the hours long, these farmers work for themselves and with their families. Yet, as I argued with Chapter 3's examination of the long slow end of the Small Farmers Project, it is not enough to present cheerful success stories. Farming is a hard business, and making a living at it is even harder. Given the structural disadvantages facing Mexican immigrant farmers—the lack of family wealth and inherited land, difficulty of accessing USDA services, and outright racism—there is every reason to suppose that the challenge they face is even harder, and that their farm businesses likely fail at a significant rate, and over the course of my research I did hear of several farms that, upon investigation, turned out to be defunct. Yet, once again, we encounter a sampling problem: it is not easy to track down a farmer once the farm has ceased to exist. In this section, then, I present one farm to stand in for all those that have gone under. It is an imperfect representative; the farmers managed to hold onto their land and enjoy many associated lifestyle benefits, even if they were disappointed in their initial dreams of autonomy and economic self-sufficiency won through commodity farming. Though their story, we are better able to examine the severe limitations that bind Mexican immigrant farmers' aspirations, and at times foil them altogether.

Angel and his wife Candida were the first independent farmers that I met, the first links in the chain of connections that eventually led me to Juan and Lupe, and to many other nursery growers. Javier Lara (see Chapter 2) first made the introduction—Angel was an old PCUNista, never a dedicated activist but with close personal ties to the union's founding generation of leadership, and Anáhuac was founded on a little rented corner of Angel and Candida's land. Despite these connections, Javier was clear that he and Angel “walk different paths.” He said that the system requires many things to be a “mainstream” farmer, and Angel had committed to doing those things, to meeting all the demands of the cannery—and still he wasn't successful. But that's Javier's version of the story—how do Angel and Candida tell it?

The couple were born in the *municipio* of San Sebastián Tecomaxtlahuaca, in Oaxaca. Of his upbringing, Angel says “I'm from the countryside, I was born in the country, all my life I've been in the country.”¹⁴⁷ By age 10, his family had moved to Sinaloa, where he began working in the fields near Culiacan, an area known for its large-scale commercial agriculture (Maya-Ambía 2011).

“I said that I wanted to be someone... And when I was growing up, 17, 18 years old: [I thought to myself] I'm not going to work my entire life for someone [else]. I want to be someone, I don't—that I'm not going to die just working for someone, I'm not going to have nothing, right? And this was my dream.”¹⁴⁸

This desire for independence and advancement led him to cross the border first into California, in 1977, and the following year to continue north to the Willamette Valley, where he found summer work picking berries and vegetables, and winter work at nurseries. He says, “I've never been without work, there's work all the time.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ “*soy de campo, yo nací de campo, yo todo mi vida andado en campo.*”

¹⁴⁸ “*Decía que yo querría ser alguien... Y cuando yo fui creciendo a 17, 18 años: yo no voy a trabajar toda mi vida para alguien. Yo quiero ser alguien, yo no – que no voy a morir nada más trabajando para alguien, no voy a tener nada, no? Y esa era mi ilusión...*”

¹⁴⁹ “*Nunca me quedado sin trabajo, todo el tiempo hay trabajo.*”

Candida's childhood upbringing was also defined agriculture and work, but of a more independent, smallholder variety. Her grandparents spoke the indigenous Mixtec language, but she was raised speaking only Spanish. This is how Candida remembers her upbringing:

“My grandparents—they were merchants. They planted vegetables: cilantro, garlic, ‘green tomato’—tomatillo, we call it. And they had cattle. So they always would leave our little village to sell in town or in another city, would go on horseback. Well, there didn't used to be a bus that would go to the village, it was all with horses. So that was how they made money. And well—how we grew up with them, my mom was a widow and she went to live with my grandfather. So we that's where we grew up... And he had a lot of land. He had a lot of cattle... And we would work helping him. Weeding the vegetables, caring for the cattle. Planting, sometimes helping him weed the *milpa*, because he used to plant a lot of corn, and he sold corn and had cattle and sold cattle... and that's how we lived, that's what fed us.

Me: And did you like this kind of work, or did you want to do something different?

“Well, when one is little, well, one doesn't know... but we went to school. And then in school I learned to write, to read—as part of growing up, one has dreams. I had some uncles who were older than us... And they went to Mexico City. They would come, and when they'd arrive in the village. And we'd see them, and least I would see them, and they brought—they arrived with things for their parents. Well dressed. Well, that's how it was when they'd arrive from the city. And I said—well, just in my mind, because I never told my mom that I'd said this—that when I was older, I'd go too, right? To the city. And that's just what I thought. And well—when I was older, I'd already left school, and that was it. I helped my mom in the house, in the kitchen. But I didn't really like the kitchen [laughs]. I always preferred the fields.”¹⁵⁰

Candida's formal education ended with primary school: further studies would have required moving to the city, and her family couldn't afford it. At 15 she met Angel, who had returned from the US to visit his nearby village. At 16 they married, and in 1982 she followed him to Oregon.

¹⁵⁰ “*Mis abuelos – ellos fueron comerciantes. Ellos sembraban verduras: cilantro, ajo, tomate verde – tomatillo que decimos. Y tenían ganado. Y entonces pues ellos siempre salían fuera del rancho a venderlos en el pueblo o a otra ciudad, así con caballos. Pues antes no había camión que fuera del rancho, fue puro con caballos. Y entonces así ellos se ganaban dinero. Y pues – como crecimos con ellos, que mi mama quedo viuda y se fue con mi abuelo a vivir. Y entonces pues allí crecimos nosotros... Y pues él tenía mucho terreno. Tenía mucho ganado... Y nosotros trabajábamos ayudándole pues a él. Rasgando la hierba a las verduras, cuidando el ganado. Sembrando, ayudándole a veces a sacar la hierba a la milpa, porque era que el sembraba mucho maíz, y vendía maíz y tenía ganado y vendía ganado y - y así es que nosotros – de allí vivían, de allí comíamos.*”

Me: “¿Y le gustó este tipo de trabajo, o quería hacer algo diferente?”

“*Pues, cuando esta chica, pues, una no sabe... Pero andamos a la escuela. Y entonces pues, yo en escuela pues aprendí a escribir, a leer, y – como una forma va creciendo pues, tiene uno diferentes sueños. Yo tenía unos tíos que ya eran más grandes que nosotros... Y ellos ya iban a la Ciudad de México. Se venían. Entonces - cuando llegaban así al rancho, y nosotros mirábamos, al menos yo miraba pues, y llevaban-- llegaban con cosas para sus papás. Y - bien vestidos. Pues así, cuando llegan de la ciudad. Y yo decía - bueno, yo en mi mente nada más, porque a mí mama nunca le dije, que este dije yo, yo cuando al mejor cuando sea grande, la mejor yo también me voy, verdad? Para la ciudad. Y así no más pensaba yo. Y pues - ya si fui creciendo, y ya salí de la escuela, y ya. Empecé pues a ayudarle a mi mama en la casa, en la cocina. Pero casi no me gustaba la cocina [laughs]. Siempre me gustaba más el campo.*”

In Oregon, the couple worked in the fields, much as Angel had already been doing. Though she had grown up working on her grandparents' farm, the work she found here was different. Back home,

“well yeah, every day one had to go out to work. But sometimes, ‘ay, I don’t want to go there, better that I stay to do this [at home].’ And well—we’d have the option! And here when we arrived, they told us well, we’re going to work this time to that time. And I had never worked like that, just working all day! ... There, you get tired, you sit down in the shade or something, and no one scolds at you. [Laughs]. Or they’re not minding you. And here no, because if you’re working with a group, you’ve got to go the same as them... But yes, little by little I got used to it. But when I’d get my check and all that, I’d say, ‘ay, well here you make money!’ [Laughs].”¹⁵¹

Angel remembers,

“I worked for contract [i.e. piece rate]—if you try hard, there’s money! If you don’t try hard, well, there isn’t money. It’s like everything. We were earning, I earned in those times, like in ’89, ’90, it was good money, there weren’t a lot of *boleadores* [workers who dig up live trees by the roots and ball them in burlap for sale]. I’d make \$300 per day, \$250. And I was saving, saving. In the season, like six months of *boleada*. It would end but we all moved over to strawberries, blueberries, working all the time. And my wife was working with me. All the time we’ve worked together... saving money little by little”¹⁵²

These years were not just work. They started a family, and in 1991 bought a home in Woodburn. They had a little greenhouse in the backyard, and began growing potted nursery plants for sale. They also made the acquaintance of Ramon Ramirez, one of PCUN’s founders, who would eventually become their *compadre* [i.e. godfather to one of their children], and they became members of the organization. According to Angel, “they helped us with whatever problem we’d have,”¹⁵³ including winning legal status in the 1987 IRCA amnesty¹⁵⁴ and successful protests for higher wages. And in return, Angel says they were loyal members, turning out reliably to PCUN actions.

The couple lived in Woodburn for 10 years. Things were going well, but the couple were not entirely happy. Candida remembers that the downtown was “*feo* [ugly],” and they worried about their children getting into trouble. They had always preferred rural living, and Angel had his dream of being his own boss. Now was the time. They began searching for a little piece of land, three or four acres—but ended up finding their current farm, 50 gently sloping acres

¹⁵¹ “*pues sí, todos los días tenía que salir a trabajar. Pero a veces, ‘ay, yo no quiero ir allí, mejor me quedo hacer esto.’ ¡Y pues - teníamos la opción! Y aquí cuando llegue, nos dice pues, vamos a trabajar tal hora, tal hora. ¡Y yo nunca había trabajado así, solo trabajo todo el día! ... Alla, se cansa uno, ya se sienta una allá en la sombra o algo, y nadie te regaña. [Laughs] O no te ‘tan cuidando, algo. Y aquí pues no, porque si está trabajando con un grupo, tienes que ir igual que ellos... Pero si, poco a poco me acostumbre. Y pero ya cuando agarraba el cheque y todo eso, decía yo, ‘ay, pues, aquí si se gana el dinero’ [Laughs]”*

¹⁵² “*Ando por contrato—¡le echas ganas, hay dinero! Si no le echas ganas, pues no hay dinero. Es como todo. Nosotros ganábamos, yo ganaba en esos tiempos como el – el ’89, ’90, estaba bien trabajo, no había muchos boleadores. También ganaba 300 al día, 250. Y fui ahorrando, ahorrando. En la temporada, como 6 meses de boleada. Se acababa pero todos movimos a la fresa, y la blueberry, todo el tiempo trabajaba. Y esposa trabajaba conmigo. Todo el tiempo hemos trabajado juntos... Ahorrando dinero y poco a poco.*”

¹⁵³ “*nos ayudaban con cualquier problema que teníamos*”

¹⁵⁴ According to Sifuentez, “PCUN’s staff of six people processed 1,300 applicants in a twelve-month period with a 95% success rate. The dues-paying membership rose from about 150 to 2,000” (Sifuentez 2016:110)

northeast of Woodburn, with doublewide trailer and a distant view of Mt Hood. They qualified for a mortgage, sold their house in town, and moved back to the countryside.

The farming was hard going from the beginning. When they closed on the land in May 2001, the farm was planted in strawberries, but the plants were untended, and harvest was coming. They had experience working on farms of course, had harvested strawberries and weeded them, had repaired and operated irrigation systems, but were less certain in operating the machinery, and like many farmers I met relied on fieldmen working for seed/chemical companies or local farm supply vendors to advise them and to apply pesticides. They had to find a truck and hire workers. Worse, Candida remembers that the price of strawberries was low that year, and “it almost didn’t come out—we made enough to... pay for gas, fertilizer, pay them for everything: fertilizer, chemicals.”¹⁵⁵ They had also taken out loans for machinery and irrigation systems. Like many farmers (Khanal and Mishra 2014), their production income was so low that they had to work off-farm to supplement their income, meaning they continued to work on other farms. Candida remembers that this was particularly hard on Angel because “it was more man’s work, with the machinery, he worked with the tractor and all that. I continued working... But yet it was *hard*. More for him, for Angel, because he had to work... plowing until midnight, and the next day would come, and he’d have to go to work.”¹⁵⁶

Things stayed hard: machinery and inputs were expensive, and like other farmer Angel complains that it was difficult to find reliable labor—a situation no doubt exacerbated by the fact that, unlike diversified Sunrise Farm, a strawberry monoculture is poorly suited to the steady, year-round employment that workers prefer, instead forcing the grower to compete for short-term labor at the peak of summer demand. However, the challenge Angel consistently singles out as most vexing was the difficulty of finding a good buyer for his production. The major local cannery, NORPAC, was a farmer co-op with limited member-owner slots, and Angel was unable to join. He credits this to the insularity of the farming community, and the fact that bigger and more established growers were always ready to swoop in and claim a rare open membership slot; the possibility that his race and imperfect English may have played a role goes unstated. Outside the circle of member-owners, Angel and other growers had little choice but to produce on the hope that the cannery will decide to buy their goods for a fair price.

One day, Angel was out at his job planting trees when he got a call from a fieldman from Steinfeld’s, a Portland-area pickle plant: would he like to plant cucumbers? He dropped his shovel and rushed home to meet the fieldman who asked a few simple questions: did he have his own tractor? What was the capacity of his well? The fieldman shook his hand: congratulations, he was now under contract. Start discing,¹⁵⁷ the fieldman told him, you’ll plant in May. And so the work began in a rush. Angel would return from his job and get on his tractor, plowing into the night, sometimes until one or two in the morning. And then the struggle of the harvest, of finding enough workers they could afford to pay, of driving truckloads of cucumbers up to the cannery early in the morning. But they were making it work.

And then in 2008, and the cannery closed (Crombie 2008) and they couldn’t find another buyer. The closure came months before the financial crisis, exceptionally poor timing for a farm that had just lost its key buyer. Angel and Candida struggled on a while, planting strawberries for

¹⁵⁵ “*casi no salió—salió no más para... pagar gas, fertilizante, pagar ellos pues porque todo: fertilizante, químicos.*”

¹⁵⁶ “*era más trabajo de hombre, con la máquina, con el tractor y todo eso lo hacía él. Yo sigue trabajando... Pero si fue duro. Mas para él, para Angel, porque él tenía que trabajar... tractoreando hasta la medianoche, y llegaba otro día, tenía que irse a trabajar.*”

¹⁵⁷ i.e. tilling.

a couple years and even considering selling the land. Eventually they decided to rent out the land, mostly to a series of large and mid-scale conventional farmers, though they also leased a few acres to Javier when he first launched Anáhuac. The couple continue to live on the site, getting jobs as hired laborers working for other farmers. Angel tends some nursery trees and shrubs in the garden around their house, and expresses an interest in gradually expanding the nursery. But the couple is aging, Angel's joints suffering from his many years of heavy labor. It seems likely that most of their serious farming is behind them.

What hope or dream or necessity kept these farmers going? What drove them to continue trying to farm despite the exhausting hours and the struggle to so much as break even. Like the other farmers in this chapter and the next, Angel and Candida complicate the activist vision of food sovereignty, offering something more hybrid and idiosyncratic in its place. Candida especially points to her Mixtec heritage of self-sufficient smallholder farming as a source of her desire for the rural life; Angel dreamed of farming as a source of autonomy cast against his experience as a hired worker, and speaks affectionately of PCUN. Yet they farmed conventionally, producing monocultural commodities for the wholesale market and relying on the expert advice of fieldmen to select and use agrichemicals, despite a clear and justified distrust for the agroindustrial systems that shut them out and eventually forced them out of business. Like many indigenous farmers, they did not bind themselves to a static suite of traditional crops, instead readily adopting those that seemed most profitable and practical when the opportunity arose (e.g. Fischer and Benson 2006; González 2001). Though they were friendly with Javier and attended at least one of his ceremonies (see Chapter 2), they never showed me any sign of interest in replicating his explicitly spiritual or culturally-oriented approach, nor seeking out ecological or sustainable growing practices. And, in contrast to both Sunrise Farm's somewhat paternalistic vision of farming as an opportunity to care for fellow migrants by offering work, and Juan and Lupe's anxiety about lazy workers who need to be closely watched, Angel and Candida speak about workers not in terms of their personal qualities and motivations, either good or bad, but simply as another input problem, a question of cost and timing and availability.

For Javier, this farm represents the dangers of pursuing the conventional path, and I am largely inclined to agree. Though many farms fail as commercial enterprises, and the undercapitalized and land-insecure farms of migrants almost certainly do so at higher rates than their Anglo peers, such farms are almost inherently difficult to find, and for a long time Angel and Candida's farm stood in my research for the many ghosts I couldn't find. But on what terms is it a failure? For whom? Clearly the farm failed as a business: the couple were unable to achieve their desired financial independence, had to continue working as hired farmworkers, and ultimately, reluctantly, stopped farming commercially. Despite both their luck (arriving in time for the last immigration amnesty; buying a home while real estate was still affordable) and hard work, they found the barriers to commercial farming simply too high, a fate that has undoubtedly come to countless similar projects.

Yet while it was a commercial failure, it goes to far to say the farm itself failed. Angel and Candida own their land, which has appreciated significantly in value, and they enjoy a small but steady income in land rents, and a smaller income from the few ornamentals they grow and sell. And perhaps most importantly, they have achieved their dream of living in the country in a place that's peaceful and beautiful and *theirs*. Once again, the best explanation of this independent farm is not to be found in simple recourse to tradition, or in resistance and reaction to the exploitation of hired farm labor on conventional farms. Instead, we can trace clear desires stemming from Candida's agrarian upbringing, and Angel's experience as a young laborer:

aspirations to autonomy, independence, and a peaceful, rural existence, and an understanding and acceptance that this can be achieved through hard work. And this is largely the life they have led, despite the hardships and disappointments.

I want to conclude Angel and Candida's story by talking about hard work—a theme that recurred throughout virtually all my interviews with independent farmers as a chief value and source of pride—and about the couple's children. Each time I met with Angel, coming out to their house or meeting at El Tule Oaxacan restaurant in Woodburn (menudo for him, quesadilla con huitlacoche for me), he would proudly update me on their kids: all out of school, all married, all homeowners—one studying to be a cardiologist! His nieces and nephews too: none working in *el campo*; instead there's a teacher, another doctor, an engineer making medical equipment. This is why we came here, he says: I suffered in the fields, and don't want them to have to.

“Well, it's what we've done in life. Work and work. There isn't anything else that one can do. Work and that's it, and the kids—I tell my kids that, if I was good, that they should be better than me. Even better. [Have] more in life... they were born here, a lot of us say that it's a golden cage, this country of opportunity, that you have to be head and shoulders above those of us who come from Mexico. Well I say, I want you all [my kids] to be better than me. If I bought my ranch, you all can be even more and buy more things. Or you can go to the moon. Do your best with your studies, there isn't anything impossible. You say, 'I'm going to set my goal, I want to do this. And do it! But if you just *think* and you don't do it, you're not going to get anywhere... And this is how I am with my kids... If they're all going to be doctors, I say, well, we'll see nothing but doctors. But what they want to do. If you'd like to be a musician, well, be a musician. Or if you want to be a baker, make bread. Everyone, do what you like to do. I'm glad that each one likes to do something... But—not the *campo* [field].¹⁵⁸ It's hard, the *campo* is hard work. And my kids, I used to bring them to the *campo* to work. I'd show them. If you don't study you'll be here, like me, here in the *campo* all the time. Well, they studied, made themselves different.”¹⁵⁹

Me: And they achieved this? They studied?

Angel: “Yes, they saw how hard the *campo* is. 'I'm not going to work in the *campo*, I'll do my best in my studies.' Teaching them what is better, the *campo* or studying... From Mexico, I come from the *campo*, and I'm still working in the *campo*. Now I can't be more. My age too... but anyways, I still want to be something... Because I don't want to just be sitting and asleep there [in my house], wake up dead without doing anything. Well no, I'm going to continue moving because maybe my age is catching up to me, but I keep

¹⁵⁸ For a thoughtful discussion of the meaning of “*campo*”—not only in its literal sense of “field” or “countryside,” but also as used metaphorically by tobacco workers to speak of the fields and labor camps as sites of degradation and humiliation—see Benson (2008).

¹⁵⁹ “*Es lo que hemos hecho en la vida pues. Trabajar y trabajar. No hay otra cosa que pueda hacer. Trabajar nada más, y los hijos – yo le hablo mis hijos que, si yo fui mejor, que ellos que sean mejor que yo. Mas mejor. Mas para la vida... Nacieron aquí, muchos decimos que es la jaula de oro, es un país de oportunidad, que tienes que sobresalirte más. que los que venimos de México. Le digo pues, yo le quiero que Uds. sean mejor que yo. Si yo compre mi rancho, Uds. puedan ser alguien más y comprar otras cosas más. O pueden ir a la luna. Échenle gana al estudio, no hay nada imposible. Dices, yo voy a poner mi meta, yo quiero ser esto. ¡Y lo haces! Pero si no más piensas y no lo haces, no vas a llegar a nada... Y así vivo con mis hijos... Si todos van a ser doctores, digo, pues puro doctores va a ver. Pero lo que te gusta ser. Si te gusta ser músico pues, ser músico. O quiere ser panadero, haz pan. Cada quien, lo que uno le gusta hacerlo. Me da gusto que cada quien le gusta hacer una cosa.... Pero – menos el campo. Es duro, el campo es duro para trabajar. Y ya mis hijos, llevaba yo al campo para trabajar. Ensenaba. Si no estudian, aquí van a estar, como yo, aquí en campo todo el tiempo. Pues estudian, te hace diferente.”*

working. Well look, one gets used to work. One gets accustomed. In the end, this is my story.”¹⁶⁰

Farmers less easily classified

I have dwelled in this chapter on the ways in which unaffiliated farmers defy the expectations of food justice advocates and scholars by opting for apparently conventional forms of production and distribution, and illustrating that even those farmers who choose the organic path may be doing so not in reaction against the abuses of conventional agriculture, but rather—like their conventional peers—in an effort to replicate the sorts of agriculture they learned as migrant workers. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, food justice scholarship has tended to overestimate the role of ‘culture,’ ‘tradition,’ and ‘resistance’ in determining immigrant approaches to agriculture while undervaluing the role of wage labor as a site of learning. However, a handful of independent farmers in my sample defied the patterns outlined above and opted, for a variety of reasons, to practice alternative techniques, focus on heritage crops, and distribute their product through direct-to-consumer marketing. It is to this final subset of independent farmers to whom we must now turn our attention, considering in greater detail the role of non-farm income, access to community distribution networks, and personal preference in farmer decision-making. These idiosyncratic cases are a forceful reminder that, in spite of the many structural constraints, farmers have their own agency; though we have seen that most follow the paths laid out for them by nonprofit sponsors or labor experience, neither factor is absolutely determinative.

I visited Armando¹⁶¹ in November 2021, one of the last farmers I met during my fieldwork. There had been an atmospheric river that week, torrential, interminable rain, but it let up as I drove out to the 60-acre farm just outside of Independence where he lives with his wife and an adult daughter. The first time I drove right past it—the big old farmhouse and front yard seemed too big and fancy. Up close I could see the white paint was worn and weathered, flaking from the front door. There was a porch with hanging baskets and a potted rosemary bush; painted bottle gourd birdhouses in the trees. Along the road in front, a row of big, blueish agave plants, spikey and looking distinctly out of place amidst in the gloomy wet Oregon fall; a row of leafy cane along the side of the driveway, the kind whose leaves make good tamale wrappers.

Armando grew up poor in rural Michoacan. His family grew corn, and his father—a former *bracero* who later “had to cross the river”¹⁶² to work illegally in the US—worked building adobe houses. Armando immigrated to the US in 1979 at the age of 16, living with his *abuelita* in Los Angeles. By 1986 he was married with children, and decided to follow his brothers up to

¹⁶⁰ “*Si, miraron como duro el campo. Yo no voy a trabajar al campo, yo echarle gana al estudio. Ensenarle cual es el mejor, el campo o el estudio... De México, vengo de campo, y todavía estoy trabajando de campo. Que ya no puedo ser más. La edad también... pero todo modo, quiero ser algo todavía... Porque no quiero estar tampoco sentado y dormirme allí, amanezca muerta sin hacer nada. Pues no, voy a seguirme moviendo porque tal vez se hace que me gane la edad, pero yo sigo trabajando. Fijes pues, se acostumbra uno a trabajar. Se acostumbra uno. Ese es la historia que tengo, por fin.*”

¹⁶¹ I will be speaking of this farm as Armando’s, although his wife is also heavily involved. As with many farms I visited, I was initially given the husband’s contact information and he was the one I met with. While at some farms I was able to eventually meet both partners, that was not the case here, and Armando—like many men in this study—spoke little of his wife’s role on the farm beyond noting that she does most of the cooking and canning.

¹⁶² “*tenía que cruzar el río*”

Oregon, seeking a more tranquil place to raise children than the big city. His brothers and a sister worked in the fields and so did his wife, who worked at a nursery; Armando, however, spent little time as a farmworker, instead finding work in construction and picking up odd jobs on the weekend as a landscaper. Around the year 2000, he took a job as a custodian at a local elementary school, and a few years his wife got hired at the same school as a cook.

“Ever since I came from Mexico, I wanted to have something,”¹⁶³ Armando told me. By ‘have something,’ he meant, “to have a property.”¹⁶⁴ They purchased their home and farm around the same time he started working at the school, and like the other farmers I met, he stressed hard work as the core of his success: “we work the hardest that we could to buy it. And also we worked as hard as we could to pay it off soon... This has been one of my dreams, to get to what I have now. We’ve got the ranch paid off. We just pay taxes, and I’ve got my work and—it’s a great dream that I’ve already achieved.”¹⁶⁵

The farm is diversified, but unusual in its mix. The family grows about two acres of blueberries, has four greenhouses full of nopal (which he claims is an ultra-healthy superfood), and most of the rest is fenced pasture for ~200 goats, 30 sheep, and a handful of cows, all raised for their meat. His daughter and her husband use a little area of the property as the home base for an arborist business. Around the fringes are a small flock of chickens and ducks, a few rows of table grapes, some scattered fruit trees, and an impressive home garden—like Juan and Lupe, “most of the things that we eat come from the farm,”¹⁶⁶ his wife canning for the winter and putting up meat and produce in three freezers. Their production techniques, though not strictly organic and not certified, are low input.

Armando distributes his produce not through a farmers market or a middleman but rather direct to the “*comunidad hispana* [Hispanic community],” including a pool of regular customers and acquaintances as well as through Facebook Marketplace. This is a venue that several other farmers—primarily nonprofit affiliated—mentioned as a significant outlet, and one that other researchers have observed as an important for small, informal immigrant farmers and market gardeners (Sandoval and Rodine 2020; Ramsey 2022).

This marketing strategy fits well with his focus on culturally specific products. He repeatedly and specifically referred to “*la comunidad hispana*” as his client base, drawing this ethnic distinction even when he unprompted by my questioning, though he never seemed to characterize this as ideological in the way that Javier or other food justice advocates do, as a desire to provide for the community or meet an unmet need. Instead, he explained that “Americans [i.e. Anglos] don’t like it. It’s very rare for an American to like goat... This is why we sell to the *comunidad hispana*... It’s what they like to eat in their countries. From the root, we already know that they like it... It’s very rare that [Anglos] like nopal.”¹⁶⁷ He told me that he has Anglo friends, and when he offers to prepare a meal of goat they are freaked out and amazed: “they’re not used to it. It’s like I—I’m not accustomed, I grew up here in the United States, but

¹⁶³ “Desde que yo vine de México, yo quería tener algo”

¹⁶⁴ “Tener una propiedad.”

¹⁶⁵ “trabajamos lo más duro que se pudo para comprarla. Y también trabajamos lo más duro lo que se pudo para pagarla pronto... Este ha sido uno de mis sueños, lograr lo que tengo ahorita. Tenemos el rancho pagado ya. No más pago los taxes, y aparte tengo mi trabajo y – ya es un grande sueño que ya logré.”

¹⁶⁶ “la mayoría de las cosas que comemos, provienen del rancho”

¹⁶⁷ “los americanos [i.e. Anglos] no se gusta. Es muy raro el americano que le gusta el chivo... Por eso le vendemos a la comunidad hispana.... Es lo que les gusta comer en sus países. De raíz, ya conocimos que les gusta ellos... Es muy raro que [Anglos] le gusta nopales.”

I'm almost unaccustomed to American food. I don't eat hamburgers, I don't eat pizza, I don't eat sandwich. All my food has to be cooked like this, beans, meat, chicken, fish, all these things."¹⁶⁸

Armando is unusual but not unique; several other independent farmers also opted in whole or part for some combination of low/no-spray techniques, diversified and culturally specific products, and community-based distribution, even without a clear path laid out by a former employer. How should they be understood: as understated, undertheorized Javiers, quietly carrying out a food justice program without quite putting it into words? As savvy businessmen who've found a niche market? And what is it about their lives or personalities that lead them to take this road in contrast to the other unaffiliated farmers in this chapter?

In Armando's case, one possible explanation is his and his wife's work history, which diverges from the general pattern among the independent farmers in this study. With limited farm labor experience to fall back on as a template and no already-operating farm with its own inertia and supply chains, the couple simply had far less determined a path before them than many of the other independent farmers in this chapter. They started from scratch, casting about for what appealed to their tastes and sensibilities, and what fit the opportunities they saw, drawing less (in his telling) on his childhood in agriculture than from instructional videos on YouTube. These decisions, in turn, freed them from the need to rely heavily on chemicals: the animals are few enough to pasture and no-spray produce is popular with customers, and chemical additives in any case represent an added cost and hassle, especially since the couple would likely need to hire a certified applicator. Their approach, in other words, mirrors on a larger scale how even more conventional independent farmers like Juan and Lupe grow food for themselves.

Another factor contributing to Armando's approach is that the security of landownership and two off-farm incomes allows the couple to farm the crops that please them. While they need to cover costs and hope to make a supplemental income, the farm is not purely a business venture, freeing the couple to scale up gradually. Rather than seeking a big buyer—the approach that ultimately undid Angel and Candida—this model fits well with a more informal approach, growing the foods they enjoy for which they knew there was an accessible local market among their own community of acquaintances. As Armando explained, the farm “it's like something extra, until I retire. When I've retired well, I can work here on the ranch and try to make it a little more. Right now this is like a pastime.”¹⁶⁹ It should be little surprise that a farm operated as a pastime—a hobby farm—would function according to different norms than a farm operated as a serious commercial enterprise. As we saw in Javier's work, and will see in the next chapter, it does seem that a buffer from the market can enable more meaningful and ecologically gentle production, and more sociable forms of distribution.

While the combination of reliable off-farm income and less experience as a farm laborer are useful factors to understanding Armando's farming decisions, comparison to other idiosyncratically alternative independent farmers suggests that this is not, in and of itself, a full and generalizable explanation. The farmer who referred me to Armando, a friend and neighbor and fellow construction worker-turned-farmer grows a conventional strawberry monoculture. Furthermore, several other independent farmers who show seemingly idiosyncratic preferences for various forms of alternativeness do have long histories of farm work. Clearly, then, neither

¹⁶⁸ “no son acostumbrados. Es como yo - yo no estoy acostumbrado, yo me ha creado aquí, en Estados Unidos, pero no estoy acostumbrado a comer comida americana casi. No como hamburguesas, no como pizza, no como sandwich. Toda mi comida tiene que estar casi cocinada así, frijoles, carne, pollo, pescado, todas estas cosas.”

¹⁶⁹ “es como algo extra, para mientras que me retiro. Ya cuando me retire pues puedo trabajar aquí en el rancho y tratar de hacer un poquito más. Esto es como un pasatiempo ahorita que hacemos.”

labor farming experience nor non-farm primary income in itself offers a consistently generalizable explanation. One family, who I find particularly difficult to explain, have for decades managed a farm on behalf of its disabled and largely uninvolved owner, transitioning that farm to a beautiful and highly diversified no-spray u-pick paradise of fruit and berries—yet on their own recently rented land, they practice a conventional blueberry monoculture. These farmers are a useful reminder that, just as tradition can suggest a direction but does not determine the means by which it is achieved, so too does labor experience inform farmers’ decisions without necessarily assuring a particular outcome.

Armando’s own explanation for what sets farmers on their course is intriguing. I asked him whether he thinks Mexican immigrant farmers’ shared experiences give them a shared approach to farming, and what that approach might be. He replied:

“Well, there are Hispanics who have bought their little farm with a lot of effort and try to plant what they can. They try to plant blueberry because most of the *gente* [people] who have worked in the field know it... for example, my wife worked in a nursery. And if I have a property and know nurseries, I’m going to plant blueberries or flowers to sell. And this is what a lot of people do, they do what they learned, right? ... You try to produce what you learned, right? ... And we saw how to grow nopal here in the greenhouses [English in the original] in order to sell it to the Hispanic community.”¹⁷⁰

I ask, so where did you encounter this way of doing it?

“Nowhere... In Mexico I ate nopal, I’d go up in the hills to cut nopal. In Mexico there was a lot of it. So the people—it’s what they’d eat when they didn’t have anything to eat well, right? But here it’s a luxury to eat nopal. Right? And so we saw how this was, [and thought] well we’re going to plant it, but we’re going to have it in a *greenhouse* [English in the original]... One learns from what one saw before... It was a little different there. But one looks to what was before and tries to do it here. Right? You do what you see is best, or what you know how to do... And so a lot of Hispanic *gente*, they do what they know how to do. Or try to do what they learned. Or if they buy property—I know people who started their little nurseries, *nursery* [word in English]. To grow little trees and sell them, right? It’s what the *gente* do, as I already said.”¹⁷¹

I object: but you didn’t do that!

¹⁷⁰ “Bueno, hay hispanos que han comprado su ranchito con mucho esfuerzo y si tratan de sembrar a lo que puedan. Tratan de sembrar bolito [blueberry] porque la mayoría de gente que conoce el campo, si lo conozco... por ejemplo, que mi esposa trabajó en un nurseria. Y si yo tengo una propiedad y sé de nurseria, voy a tratar de plantar bolitos o flores para vender. Y es lo que hace mucha gente, hace lo que aprendió, ¿verdad? ...Tratas de producir lo que aprendiste, ¿verdad? ...Y nosotros vimos la manera de hacer crecer nopal aquí en greenhouses para venderle a la comunidad hispana.”

¹⁷¹ “En ningún lado... Yo en México comía nopal, subía al cerro a cortar nopal. En México había mucho. Entonces la gente – es lo que comía cuando no tenía que comer bueno, ¿verdad? Pero aquí es un lujo comer nopal. ¿Verdad? Y entonces nosotros miramos esta manera pues, que vamos a sembrar eso, pero vamos a tenerlo en el greenhouse... Uno aprendió de lo que miró atrás... Era poquito diferente allá. Pero uno mira de lo anterior y trata de hacerlo aquí. ¿Verdad? Uno hace lo que mira es mas bien, o lo que sabe hacer.... Y asi mucha gente hispana, que hace lo que sabe hacer. O trata de hacer lo que aprendió. O si compran una propiedad – yo conozco personas que ya empezaron sus nurserias chiquitas, nursery. Hacerlo crecer arbolitos y vender, ¿verdad? Es lo que hace la gente, ya le digo.”

“Well, I started with the nopal because I saw that there weren’t any here, that here nobody knew how to grow them, right? And I’ve already started to see more [nopales].”¹⁷²

Armando’s answer is intriguing, albeit somewhat frustrating: he posits a simple explanation for his neighbors’ choices—roughly the same explanation, in fact, for which I have argued for throughout this chapter—and yet refuses to be explained by his own rule. Not only is his production not principally defined by his labor experience in the US, but it also represents an innovation on his memories from Mexico rather than a restoration of dormant skills. Nopal may be a familiar food from home, but Armando is clear that he never cultivated it in Mexico; instead, he was sent by his mother to harvest wild nopal paddles from the mountains near his home. It was only in the US that this wild food, eaten when there was nothing else good available, was revalued as a luxury (and a healthy superfood). It was likely through this revaluation, and the realization that nopal was expensive and not widely available, that he came to recognize in it a business opportunity, and set out to market it directly to the local Latinx community through informal channels. A similar explanation would seem applicable to his goats as well.

People are quirky, and short of turning this dissertation into even more of a mosaic of individual case studies, it will be impossible to provide a rule that accounts for every farmer’s choices. Recognize then that, despite the general rule laid out in this chapter, some farmers, for a variety of personal reasons, will take left turns onto roads less conventional. These farmers are worth recognizing and point once again to the cultural resources shared by Mexican immigrant farmers—their knowledge of crops like nopal, the ability to recognize that these crops’ potential as a market niche and to connect with those who want to eat them—and to the undeniable role of agrarian heritage in motivating so many of them to want to grow these foods for themselves, and to create farms where they could work hard outdoors on their own account. Some of these idiosyncratic cases may be romantics by nature, or savvy businessmen who spotted an underserved market, or simply sufficiently economically secure to farm for pleasure rather than profit. They do not demonstrate that such outcomes should be expected in most cases—quite the contrary, most independent farmers’ approaches to farming follow courses laid out for them by the learning and social networks formed through hired labor in the US—but these exceptions are worth considering, and the following chapter will offer a more detailed exploration of one more idiosyncratic farmer.

Conclusions

Throughout this chapter, we have encountered a striking array of farming styles. In contrast to the nonprofit-affiliated farmers in Chapter 3, independent farmers do not hew to a shared and distinctive agricultural style, to a consistent set of crops, nor to a single approach to marketing or labor management. But despite this pronounced variability, we are not left with chaos. Through all the variability, we can trace a common desire to create an agrarian *rancho*, a place where they can grow good food for themselves and their families (even if this food is unrelated to their commercial production), live in peace and safety, and where through hard work

¹⁷² “*Pues yo empecé con los nopales porque yo mire que aquí no había, que aquí nadie sabía como crecer, ¿verdad? Y ya empieza ver mas.*”

they can achieve autonomy. In his account of one Willamette Valley farmworker-turned-business owner, Wogan writes that

“[t]hey wanted to bake bread and pastries, the kind that taste like Mexico. They wanted to work with their hands, as they had done most of their lives, first working on their parents’ farm in Mexico, then at plant nurseries in Oregon. The bakery had even more personal meaning to Ranulfo. It would give him a chance to work side by side with his wife, Lupe... The bakery wasn’t just a business plan, it was sustenance” (Wogan 2017:11–12).

Swap out bread for tomatoes, and this description could fit any of the farmers in this chapter. The farms may be businesses, but they are also a way of life.

Much of the potential confusion in interpreting independent farmers’ placemaking work comes from the fact that the places they create to achieve this desired way of life are strikingly flexible in form, and in political significance. The desire to work hard, grow good food, and be outdoors can form part of a left political project of food justice or food sovereignty, as explored in Chapters 2 and 3; it can just as easily fit into Sunrise’s model of job creation as a form of care for friends and workers; and into Juan and Lupe’s conservative denial of structural racism and insistence that the American dream is achievable to anyone who works hard. Look closely at these farms and many critical strands woven together in food justice—concern for structural racism, for labor rights, for migration, for sustainability—can seem to come apart; the connections traced by scholars and activists may not be those seen by the farmers themselves. Angel and Lupe, the old PCUNistas, set out to create a conventional strawberry monoculture, and they see no contradiction.

If agrarian upbringings inspire the desire to farm without provide a widely adopted template for *how* to farm, independent farmers generally fill in many of the specifics through their labor experiences. While only a few enjoyed the degree of mutualism and support from their bosses as did the Martinezes at Sunrise, many recalled some degree of support from their former bosses, and more still drew upon the farms at which they had worked as a model of how, exactly, farming should be done. The certified organic farms were started by those who had worked on certified organic farms; the nurseries were started by those who had worked at nurseries. Not all farmers follow this pattern—as discussed in the case of Armando, a variety of factors can and do inform farmers’ work, and it is not possible to predict with perfect certainty the path any individual will take—but labor experience does nevertheless appear to be the biggest single factor in setting farmers towards on particular farming style or another. In other words, while farmers highly valued their independence and the ability to be their own bosses, this generally did not correspond to a rejection of the sort of agriculture they had experienced as workers. It was their position within this system that they hoped to change; the rest, for the most part, seemed to offer an acceptable vehicle to achieve their desired way of life.

CHAPTER 5:

Tony: Adaptability and the placemaking on the farm

Alongside Javier (Chapter 2) and Margarita (Chapter 4), Tony has been one of my most important and enduring research partners. From our first meeting at his farmers market booth the beginning of my extended fieldwork in the late spring of 2019, I visited Tony most Fridays for the next two and a half years.¹⁷³ I not only helped him plant and harvest, clean produce, and unstick his tractor from the mud, but also spent significant time socializing: barbecuing on the farm, going out for lunch at Ixtapa Mexican restaurant and breakfast at Tater's,¹⁷⁴ and several frigid, unsuccessful deer hunting excursions.

I devote this final ethnographic chapter to Tony not only because of the depth and extent of my observations and friendship with him, but also—and more importantly for our purposes here—because he, like Javier, is something of an exceptional, exemplary figure, albeit of a very different type. Just as Javier can embody an entire world of food justice precisely because he diverges from its norms, exceeding its ambitions in multiple directions, Tony offers a synecdoche for the diverse category outlined in the previous chapter at least in part because, in certain respects, he stands apart from his peers, embracing a particularly variable approach to farming. Concluding the ethnographic portion of this dissertation as I began it, with the tale of an individual farmer and his work, I draw together many of the threads offered up in the previous chapter and explore in greater depth the visions and experiences of the good life that inform independent farmers' placemaking projects.

Both Tony and his wife have non-farm incomes (he as a public-school custodian, she as a debt collector), and he has at times claimed that farming is just a “hobby.” Despite this, the farm represents both significant expenditures and income, and his day-to-day behavior diverges little from that of other independent farmers. He works there nearly every day, managing an area comparable with many other farms in this study, arriving early, working hard through heat and rain and cold. Furthermore, he is active in seeking out new business partnerships and opportunities, whether experimenting with new crops, taking odd jobs pruning trees and planting bushes for teachers at his school, or collecting odd junk—machinery, antiques, an old RV—to resell. Like many farmers I spoke with, Tony continually impressed me with his ability to recall and quote prices both paid and received for various goods, to remember past prices, and to calculate earnings. In any case, Tony's family is far from unique in earning a non-farm income (see, e.g., Armando, Angel, and Lupe in Chapter 4), and though his and his wife's off-farm income provide a living and significantly relieve financial pressures that would otherwise more

¹⁷³ With interruptions in the dead of winter, as well as a few longer intervals related to the early COVID outbreak and subsequent waves and restrictions.

¹⁷⁴ In contrast to some farmers who said unprompted that they prefer to eat exclusively Mexican foods (see, e.g., Armando's statement in Chapter 4), Tony was culinarily open minded. When eating out or getting takeout, he would sometimes suggest Mexican food—generally leading us to restaurants where he had friends among the staff—but he is also particularly fond of American-style breakfasts of bacon, eggs, and toast.

forcefully direct his farming, he gives every sign of treating the farm as a serious business venture.¹⁷⁵

Crucial to understanding Tony's farm are the different sorts of relationships that make it up. As we saw with the independent farmers in Chapter 4, and reflecting the heavily racialized character of agriculture, Tony can slip between identification—and attempts to emulate or partner—with bigger, more established, and often white farmers, and continuing connections with Mexican immigrant farmworkers. His connections to fellow migrants working at larger area farms occasionally give him access to resources: rolls of plastic sheeting, bins of fertilizer, or old equipment that can be fixed up and made to work again—things salvaged at the margins from bigger players. When in need of workers, he finds them within his own social circle through arrangements perceived on both sides as mutualistic, and often cast as friendship rather than antagonism. Yet, like the other independent farmers, his status as a farmer and employer means that relations with workers are necessarily complicated. Mutualism may come unbalanced, and changing fortunes and changing directions in his work can recast relationships with both business partners and workers.

Alongside the farm's commercial purpose, and coloring the relationships that take place there, Tony's farm is rich in subtler, less easily measured meanings. His approach to farming draws on memories of home, but that does not make strong claims as to its own cultural specificity in the manner of the nonprofits investigated in chapters 2 and 3. Farmers like Tony create distinctively Mexican places on the Oregon landscape—a form of what Mares and Peña refer to as “autotopography,” a process of “grounding of self and communal identities through place making” in which “the cultivation and celebration of meaningful food... [is] central to place making” (Mares and Peña 2011:199). In contrast to the nonprofits described in earlier chapters, this process at Tony's farm is characterized not by a particular set of crops or practices so much as an aspirational lifestyle of hard work, independence, and the ability to cook and eat and share with friends outdoors. These traits are, of course, neither uniquely nor universally Mexican; plenty of people from other backgrounds work hard and like to barbecue with friends, and plenty of Mexicans, presumably, do not. Nevertheless, these characteristics—and the sensory qualities of the place itself—lead Tony and his visitors into reminiscence and even nostalgia, to cast the present against bad memories of poverty, migration, and exploitation, and to draw explicitly connections from the farm to their lives in Mexico. How exactly the farm works to elicit these memories and experiences will be a major focus of this chapter.

Though placemaking projects can originate from different sorts of needs and desires, the meaningfulness and affective specificity inherent in the concept of place militates against a purely instrumentalist reading. Certainly, Tony's farm is a place of production and practicality, but it is also something more than grounds for reaping profit. Placemaking is thus best understood “as a situated, collective approach to the enhancement and maintenance of community well-being” (Jørgensen and Tietjen 2023)—or, in other words as an effort to make manifest a particular vision of the good life.

I argue that vision of the good life enacted by Tony on his farm, while potentially amenable to alternative agriculture, does not necessarily or automatically lead to either alternative or conventional practices; instead, it is flexible enough to find realization through a wide range of environmental practices and labor relationships. This points both to the limitations

¹⁷⁵ I emphasize this point here not to denigrate hobby farms, but to clarify that, despite the fact that his off-farm income gives him a certain degree of flexibility unavailable to other independent farmers, he nevertheless approaches his work with a comparable degree of seriousness—as a livelihood, rather than just a fun thing to do.

of the food justice dream, and to its potential: the lived agrarian culture and aspirations that guide farmers like Tony cannot be counted on to subvert or revolutionize Oregon's agricultural regime, but it does offer affordances to the food justice program, a potential that can be realized by farmers and nonprofits who do the work and create the supports and incentives necessary to allow farmers to realize their distinctive vision of a good life through alternative means.

Growing up and coming to Oregon

Antonio "Tony" Diaz was born in San Juan Lachigalla, Oaxaca, in 1966. The community was rural, and the family of 12 lived in large part by farming, growing corn, beans and garbanzos, and—for a time—a few acres of marijuana for an American expat who flew it out via a small airstrip. The family also migrated within Mexico as agricultural laborers, and ran a small store.¹⁷⁶ They were poor: the family slept in a single room, ate outside, and Tony grew up working on the farm. A few weeks after we met, I interviewed him for the first time at his farm. We stood beneath a tree, and I asked about his early memories. His answer introduced many themes that I would come to recognize as central in his farming: childhood memories of a simple life that move between emphasizing poverty and sufficiency, linking this past with his own present desire to farm and ability to make do, and always the turn to food as a touchstone for memory. The intermittent chop – chop – chop of his machete punctuates the recording:

“Well, the thing is, in Mexico, when you living at the farm, you don't see big stores like here. And then you don't see restaurants, fast food, *nothing!* Nothing like that, so everybody in that town, they have to cook their meals. I remember, when we start working—or the soon as they start raining, *wow*, they will only work the ground as soon as they dry a little bit. And then we gonna plant the corn and we're gonna plant the garbanzo beans and we're gonna plant whatever we plant, is what grows. And sometimes my dad go into town, you know, once a week to get whatever we don't grow, like sugar, salt, maybe garlic, onions. Very simple things.¹⁷⁷

“[We were] very very excited when we have weeds coming between the roads, and they called pigweeds. And you know what, we very excited because the kids—well, when we was little, we picked the big pigweeds. And then my dad make a *nice* meal, like spinach! And you know what, that was so good. We don't have to eat, you know things like right now. And then when the corn start getting ripe, I mean we eat corn, my mom make tortillas, and you can make a lot of stuff out of corn. So you can make gravy, you can make—a lot of stuff, so sometimes you need a little bit of meat, and you don't have refrigerators then, so you dry the meat, and we have meat in the boxes, dry, and it's how we eat.

“And you know what? Very simple, we not missing anything because we don't see the stuff, you know, we don't eat nothing else to miss it. Well, sometimes candies.

¹⁷⁶ Tony describes the store like something out of a Western, complete with men on horses and at least one deadly gunfights. Following one such incident, in which Tony's father was nearly killed, the family relocated to Ocotlan de Morelos, Oaxaca. Tony speaks casually about these incidents; he says he now likes watching cowboy movies because they remind him of his childhood.

¹⁷⁷In order to respect the integrity of his speech and self-expression, and in order to avoid forcing his words to conform to the standards of formal academic English, I have opted not to correct grammatical or syntactical 'errors' in his speech except occasional minor edits where required for clarity.

“Yeah, that was neat. And maybe it’s why I like to farm. Because I’m here, I bring my barbeque, and I can roast peppers, onions, and I can bring a piece of steak and my tortillas and I’m so happy! Hey! we don’t need McDonald’s, we don’t need pizza, we don’t need nothing like that. Well, of course when we don’t have nothing here [in the winter and spring] and we so in a hurry and so busy, you know what we do is get a pizza, right away.

[He laughs.] “But, no. I can live at the farm, like maybe an animal [laughs].”

This spoken text captures several key themes that often recur in Tony’s stories and statements. First, he emphasizes the major differences between his life in Oaxaca and his life in Oregon, describing the former in terms of what it lacks: restaurants, stores, and food. In other conversations, he went further, describing what in the above text could appear an idyllic simplicity in terms of food insecurity and even hunger. Consider the following incidents from my fieldnotes, each of which took place at the weekly barbecues that are the highlight of summer on the farm:

7.23.21 – Tony says that whenever he eats pork he remembers when he was 8 or 9 and went to work for some man. At home, his family only ate beans, but here he ate well, meat, rice, all kinds of things. The man gave him carnitas, and he kept eating and eating, taking a little piece at a time. He had a little pouch, and stuck little bits of meat in there, just little bite-sized bits. Cooked pork keeps well, and he kept it for 2 weeks til he went home. He gave each of his siblings a bite—just a little each since there were 12 of them.

8.26.21 – They’d already grilled meat and chilis, heated tortillas, and had a bottle of Coke. When we’re all done with the tacos, he grills corn too. Tony is really going to town on the food, and urging everyone else to eat more. Keeping up the regional teasing, the older man [who is from Morelos] says that because Tony is from Oaxaca, he eats to the point of “hacerse daño” [doing himself harm] rather than let food go to waste. Everyone gets in on this, including Tony, who agrees fully.

These lunchtime conversations underscore a second theme of Tony’s account of his childhood: his tendency to treat these hardships as a source of valuable lessons, especially around self-sufficiency, work ethic, endurance, and similar virtues. In part, this is no doubt a reflection of his personality. Tony is a cheerful man, constantly teasing, always with a slightly mischievous smile, always ready with a corny joke; he is not one for outward melancholy or self-pity. But the consistency with which he links hardship and virtue suggest that he is not simply minimizing or deflecting, and demand we take these claims seriously. As discussed in the Chapter 4, there are good reasons to suppose that farm labor experiences in US reinforced this pride in the ability to work hard and *aguantar* [endure], but Tony—like many of the farmers in this study—arrived in the US having already learned the importance of hard work. As González writes, most residents of the Oaxacan community¹⁷⁸ he studied

“assume that physical work is a normal and inevitable part of life for all but a select few. In the words of an informant, “There’s no rest until they lay the leaves on your belly” (a reference to the broad leaves of a plant used to cover earthen funeral mounds)... From a young age, Taleans learn how to do simple farming and food-processing tasks, and parents take special precautions to ensure that their children do not grow up to be lazy people. They train their children to carry out chores responsibly; to ensure that their

¹⁷⁸ Although González studied an indigenous Zapotec community while Tony identifies as mestizo, the comparison nevertheless seems an apt parallel to Tony’s own recollections of growing up and learning to work less than 50 miles away.

infants will collect firewood efficiently later in life, some farmers place tiny amulets around their necks, formed from a cocoon resembling a miniature log. One of the most striking things about the fieldwork experience was the sheer physical strength of many villagers—men, women, and children... Many were able to stoically endure pain or physical discomfort for long periods. Critiques of those who escape manual work are harsh” (González 2001:18)

Tony’s life remained difficult as he got older and ventured further from home. His stories of farm labor in Mexico are disjointed, not an orderly narrative but instead series of alarming incidents that he tells with flourish and humor that belies their contents: narrowly avoiding assault in a bunkhouse over his refusal to take a hit from an offered joint; a dispute over bins of grapes that escalated and left Tony hiding from armed gang members who shot up his house; getting mugged by a gang of adolescents with an ice pick; finding the body of a drowned girl in an irrigation canal and cheating the boss out of the money to pay for a casket. The last is the only story that doesn’t make him laugh.

Given his life as a migrant farmworker, it was perhaps inevitable that he would find himself drawn to the US. As he tells it though, his interest in the US goes back earlier, to his childhood. He remembers in his father’s store a certain advertisement on the wall, a picture of a blonde woman. He fell in love with that picture, telling his brothers someday he would marry someone like that. They made fun of him, but nonetheless he rushed every morning at breakfast to claim a spot where he could see her. And, he tells me, when he came to the US, his first partner—they never married, but had three kids together—was a blonde Anglo, as is his current wife.¹⁷⁹ Telling me this story, he explained: if you set your mind on a goal and pursue it, if you’re certain what you want, then you can achieve anything with hard work. He paused, then corrected himself: achieve almost anything, you can’t go to the cemetery and make the dead live again.

This story is open to mounting, multiplying interpretations. The woman on the calendar could be read as standing in for the US, or the romance of the American dream, enticing young migrants north towards unknown hardships and opportunities. The calendar itself was almost certainly produced to market some consumer good or another, meaning we could also question the role of marketing in promoting beauty standards that idealize whiteness in a majority-nonwhite country, and then uses sexualized white female bodies to sell consumer goods. We can also ask, quite reasonably, whether this is overreading. The calendar offers a striking image, but her role in the story is that of a throwaway remark, almost a joke. Perhaps most straightforwardly, this story seems to say that Tony has achieved his childhood dream, found that blonde princess at the end of the quest, achieving not only material comfort but—via his wife, and the distinctive racial politics of this place—belonging.

¹⁷⁹ In marrying an Anglo, Tony notably diverges from nearly every other farmer in my sample, almost all of whom married fellow Mexican immigrants, most often either from their own hometowns or nearby communities. He shares this difference with Javier. Though I have met Tony’s wife only in passing, and she seems to have little interest or involvement in the farm, I do wonder what the fact that my two key informants are married to Anglos suggests about my own research. Does this trait indicate a bias on my part towards research partners more fluent in English (though I speak with many of my informants in competent Spanish, I am of course more fluent in my native language)? Or is it a marker of a greater openness on their part? Or a simple coincidence? I raise these questions in a footnote and not in the main text because I am uncertain how to answer them, except to note once again both the strange and unpredictable role of personal chemistry in forming ethnographic relationships (Shostak 1981), and the long history of those sitting at the borders or astride social categories serving as culture brokers, translators, and key informants (Middleton and Cons 2014; Shokeid 1988).

But let's turn back from this speculation to the solid facts of biography. Tony arrived in the US in 1986, at age 20. He crossed the border illegally into California and found a job:

And I almost returned back to Mexico because the person where I was working, he paid me only \$75 for the whole month. And I was working planting trees in the mounts, and he overcharged me I think for the food, and the rides, and sleeping bags and all that. So I thought, well, if this is America maybe it's better to be in Mexico.

Rather than returning to Mexico, however, Tony left that job, headed north once more, and found work picking strawberries in the Willamette Valley, near Woodburn, where he was able to make "pretty good money," \$75-100 per day. But strawberry picking is seasonal, and so Tony had to find additional employment:

"Oh, I worked in *anything*. I was working on the strawberries, blackberries, I was working in the big, huge meat company, in Salem... I was making steaks for the restaurants, we was making pizza rolls I think. Lotta different stuff for restaurants, and I was working here in West Salem for a turkey plant... So I was there, working for a while, and then I was working in the Christmas trees and planting trees in the forest for *ten years*."

Me: "So you've really done all different kinds. Did you have a favorite one, or one that was worst?"

"Um—I think that it's the same thing, when you get used to work for a job, you never done. You can get used to it. Like planting trees in the mount[ains]. That is a very hard work, you cannot even sit down because your body is so sore. But in a week, a week later, you know what, you feel very comfortable."

Me: "yeah?"

"Oh yeah! You can walk all day and you get tired of course, but you know, very simple. But the first week, you know, you can quit. In two, three days, and you last a week that means you not gonna quit, because your body get used to it. Because the big hills, the big mounts, it's not like this, it's like *big* mounts, like straight up. And then maybe 80 lb. bags, walking straight up. You know, that's heavy. And then, you know—it's not clean, you step over the branches and rocks and logs and it's bad. It's how it is."

Me: "Yeah"

"But my favorite is this one [i.e. farming independently], because I know what to do and I take my own time to do it. And I like it."

Despite the many years spent in difficult and often underpaid labor, in one key respect Tony was lucky: like several of the farmers of the farmers featured in this study, he arrived in the US just in time to benefit from the farmworker amnesty program passed in 1987 as part of IRCA. This means that, not long after his arrive, he was able to legalize his status, opening the door to greater stability. Unlike Javier, however, Tony did not pursue continued education¹⁸⁰ or find a political awakening, and never had any substantial contact with PCUN. But tree planting was too seasonal and the pay too poor:

So I decide to work for somebody else, because there was a lot of opportunity for me to work for somebody, because they know me, I know how to do things, so I work for this person over there, about a couple miles over there, so he hired me and he told me I can

¹⁸⁰ I use this phrasing advisedly; many barriers stand in the way of people like Tony returning to school, and no doubt college was not a possibility for him at many points in his life. However, he has also spoken with me directly regarding his lack of interest in a college education in terms that suggest he feels it was an available option that he has chosen not to pursue.

grow some vegetables for myself. And I did, I had too much tomatoes left overs and I decide to put a little stand by the freeway, and I sold every single one. So I did it again, you know

Me: And you just used a little bit of his land?

Yep, it's what we could get. And later on when [the employer] see a lot of traffic and the stand was bigger, he liked to be a partner. So we did. And then that business went up, so later on we didn't get along very well and I decide to quit. And then I have all my customers, my markets, and all that and thought well, how am I gonna do that? So I find this person, he was the son of [his current landlord], he was working with me, on the same farm. So he got fired and then I know him because he was working with me, we was working together, so then I came over and asked, and he say, oh you can have the land, so it's how I start. He said 'oh yeah, we have water, we have water pumps, and we have pipes and everything!'

He also married his second wife, an Anglo woman who works a white-collar job, and they bought a small ranch house in Independence, where one of his adult daughters now lives next door.

Tony's farm

The land he found, near the tiny unincorporated community of Bridgeport, is on a long low slope down from the landlord's house to the Little Luckiamute, hidden out of sight in the narrow band of cottonwoods and bigleaf maples that frame the fields. The Coast Mountains are visible not too far away to the west. When he arrived, the farm was overgrown with blackberries that Tony cleared. All told, approximately 40 acres now stand cleared, although Tony typically farms only about 16 of those acres, those located on the lowest ground and furthest from the house.

Tony's plantings are diverse. Though they vary somewhat year to year, his annual crops include multiple varieties of pumpkins, summer and winter squash, lemon and English cucumbers, sweet and Indian corn, cherry and Roma tomatoes, broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, green beans, dry beans, garbanzos, onions, tomatillos, beets, a few greens, various melons (to the eternal surprise and disbelief of his customers), and numerous varieties of chili. He also grows a few rows of cane berries, and as of my main research period was planting increasing numbers of Christmas trees, although these were small enough that he generally still sowed vegetables among their rows.

While small to mid-sized mixed vegetable cultivation is typical of organic and beyond-organic production, Tony's other technical practices are ambiguous in their alternativeness. In contrast to Javier, he has no problem with hybrid seed, and expresses minimal interest in heritage varieties or seed-saving. He uses some water-conserving drip irrigation, but much of his system relies on inefficient broadcast irrigation. He does not engage in any soil conservation practices, including cover cropping, tilling the ground in late fall and leaving it bare over the winter to till again before planting.

Minkoff-Zern describes farmers in her study using little or no chemical inputs for a combination of practical (i.e. financial) and health reasons (Minkoff-Zern 2019). Tony's vegetable production accords well with the former and little with the latter, meaning that much of his approach to fertilizers and pesticides resembles alternative production while lacking most of

the framework of belief that is typically seen as characterizing alternative farming (e.g. Beus and Dunlap 1990; Lyson 2007). In contrast to many farmers, he talks little about soil or the need to improve it; he has never mentioned the soil microbiome, and he does not compost, or apply purchased compost. Generally, he believes that his soil will nourish the plants with little help aside from the rain—which he says can be as good as fertilizer. On the occasions that I have planted with him crops as diverse as onions, pumpkins, and raspberries, we generally did not add amendments to the soil. This is not due to a positive rejection of fertilizers: he sometimes uses chicken manure, and three 1000 lb. bags of synthetic fertilizer crystals, discards gifted to him by a friend working at the supplier, sit by the edge of the field for occasional use. When he helped an acquaintance rent a neighboring plot on the same property for chili cultivation (more on this below), the two farms shared an irrigation system, and Tony was pleased to see how the chili grower’s injections of fertilizer into the watering system improved his own yields too. However, the following year, he did not repeat the chili grower’s practices.

The story is much the same with pesticides. He does not actively avoid pesticides. In spring 2021, for example, I helped him plant pumpkin seeds coated in a pink treatment that stained our hands and threw up dust when we dumped them in the bin. However, neither does he view pesticides as essential: that same day, when we ran out of pesticide-treated seeds, he moved on to untreated ones with little concern. Lack of concern is perhaps the underlying theme in his approach to pests. He has a home-made sprayer hooked up to the back of an ATV, but it seems that he uses it only rarely, and though I visited the farm nearly weekly for two years, I never witnessed him engaged in *any* task discernably related to pest control, and—with the exception of some complaints about damage from deer, who love his green beans, and one unsuccessful attempt to kill a chipmunk that was ravaging the seed trays in his greenhouse¹⁸¹—he rarely if ever discussed pest damage, and was sanguine when I raised the subject directly.

While he views pesticides as inessential, and therefore a largely avoidable expense, Tony is skeptical of the organic movement’s health claims. When I raised the topic of organic cultivation in our first interview, he told me:

“You say you only like organic. Ok. I agree... [but] I been eating stuff for *long* time, and you know what? When I walk to the fields, or you drive your car on the highway, there’s a lot of people spraying, and a lot of pesticides, and you know what? That stuff is in the air. Right? And then when you get water from the river, you know how much stuff they drain into the river? So what is organic stuff? Well organic stuff is something you can grow with filters in greenhouses, and no air. And they can be organic... The bees, they travel for 2, 3 *miles* and they bring the pollen to you.”

Me: “they’ll go from an organic field to a not organic field and back”

“Yeah that’s right. So *how* is organic? Course maybe they don’t use pesticides straight to the plant. Maybe they don’t use fertilizer. But that means they still have *stuff* on it. People say, ‘oh I like to eat organic.’ But then they go to eat McDonalds and eat frozen food. Or smoke cigarettes. ‘Oh I wanna smoke cigarettes but I like organic stuff.’”

Me: “So you’re not very into that”

“No. I think it’s really, really difficult to be sure. If we’re gonna put something in the plants, we want be sure we follow what the tag say. Right? Because it’s—that stuff is legal to buy from the store, like the 7, lot of people use the pesticide 7. And they say on the tag how much stuff you can put on it for to kill the bugs, and how long you can

¹⁸¹ This was my fault. We had the chipmunk trapped, but I refused to stomp on it and allowed it to escape, to Tony’s moderate frustration.

harvest after you spray. But I don't use pesticides you know, because they say that if you plant so many different things that the bugs don't bother."

Me: "Oh really?"

"Mhm. And most of the stuff, like the beans, they eat the *leaves*, but they don't eat the crop that come. Like the deer, they eat the—see? They eat the leaves. Sometimes the deer they do a favor to the plant because you know what? Look at how many bloomings there is right there. And they're gonna be loaded in stuff. So—I'm not worried about it."

Me: "So you're not worried about pesticides but you don't use them?"

"No"

Me: "Because you don't need them?"

"No. No. And a lot of people, they see a little bug, 'oh, let's spray.' Look this one has so many bugs, look. But it's healthy, see? They have holes, look at the bugs right there, see? They're not gonna do nothing. What, they eat the leaves but not the flowers. And I don't have no problem. Yeah, like I said, I respect the people who want the organic stuff.

There's a lot of people that like organic, because when I sell stuff at the market and somebody's there next to me selling organic stuff, you know what, he sell more than me. Because people want organic and maybe because they have less *stuff*."

In this extended quotation, we see Tony move rapidly between a number of ideas: that truly organic food is near impossible in a world where pollution moves on the wind and in the water; that non-organic food is unhealthy, but no worse than other vices; that proper pesticide application ('following the tag') renders their use quite safe; that pesticides are overused. Like many farmers I met, he consistently expressed trust in the seed company fieldmen and confidence that pesticides applied as directed were safe; aside from them, his knowledge relies on the other farmers and workers he talks to, and emphasizes his own experience as a worker as his main way of knowing.¹⁸² Other farmers also mentioned learning about pesticides from the news, from social media, and from YouTube videos. Like the other independent farmers, Tony has not been in contact with nonprofit organic farming educators, nor with anyone from OSU Extension or the USDA.

His overall conclusion regarding pesticides is one of some uncertainty, a reminder that experiences of

"polluted surroundings... do not follow straightforwardly from the toxic environment but from schemes of perception, appreciation, and action that have been shaped by history and the by the present... they shape what people see, what they don't see... what they do and what they don't do" (Auyero and Swistun 2009:145).

Tony is conflicted about the use of chemicals but also dubious about the possibility of organics. Having experienced them as a consistent part of agriculture in two countries, and receiving favorable information from sources perceived as reliable, he defends them while minimizing their use. He gets on well enough without spraying much, an approach that also happens to be affordable, but is casual and unconcerned when it seems necessary. In total then, he has arrived at a version of the low-spray diversified polyculture advocated by alternative producers, but done

¹⁸² This was true not only with pesticides, but regarding nearly every aspect of farming. When asked to explain how he learned to farm, whether in general or regarding a particular practice, Tony—like other independent farmers—typically cited his own long work history as the source of expertise. He has learned by doing, rather than deliberate study, and is generally confident both in the knowledge he has built and in his ability to use common sense to apply this knowledge to new plants and circumstances.

so without sharing in the sort of wider alternative producer identity or framework shared among the nonprofit-affiliated farmers.

Unsurprisingly given the diversity of his production, Tony mostly sells directly to consumers. He does this both at a local farmers market and at a farm stand located at an intersection close to the farm. Early in my fieldwork, he ran the stand himself, meaning that it was generally unoccupied, with customers dropping money into a lockbox on the honor system. Customers regularly walked off without paying, but Tony seemed to accept this calmly. Later, an older white woman who lived in the area and was a regular customer told Tony to hire her to run the stand, to cut down on theft and collect more regular payments and generally keep it in order. She ran the stand well, and she and Tony clearly enjoyed each other, her joyfully cantankerous and him teasing. Within a year, she had struck up a romance with the neighbor across the street, and she and Tony had come to an agreement whereby she took over the farm stand altogether to run as a business with her new boyfriend.



Figure 10. Tony's old farm stand, late in the season with almost all the produce gone. Photo by the author.

In addition to these outlets, Tony also carries out a significant trade with fellow farmers, produce stands, and local restaurants, selling a few boxes of vegetables at a time; in the case of his fellow farmers, he also regularly buys bulk produce from them too, supplementing his

offerings with apples, pears, hazelnuts, honey, and the like. In some cases, rather than Tony providing harvested vegetables, the customers themselves come and pick the vegetables they want to buy, lowering the sale price but saving Tony considerable labor.

These u-pick deals point to one of the most distinctive features of Tony's farm: his labor arrangements. Unusually for a mixed vegetable farm of this size, Tony only occasionally hires workers, and then only very few. This is not due to high tech solutions; his tractors are ancient, break down regularly, and their attachments, though often ingenious, are home-made. Nor can he count on family labor; in my years of visiting, I only once saw one of his family members at the farm, and even then she was just dropping by to pick up some vegetables.

Instead of a regular workforce, when Tony needs additional helping hands—primarily for harvest in summer and early fall—he finds help in a mix of friends, volunteers, and work-trade arrangements:

“My friends come over sometimes and I tell them, you know what, you help me pulling weeds you [so] know what, it's like your stuff. When we have stuff, take whatever you want, you know? We can help each other, ok, you wanna be part of the thing, come and pull weeds. [They say,] ‘Ok, fine.’ You know, they pick, and they gonna buy vegetables at the store they say, might as well get fresh and I can help you.”

In exchange for half a day of work on the farm, Tony sends his friends home with boxes of corn and squash, gallons of tomatoes and chilis, armfuls of melons. This arrangement has obvious practical benefits in that he can compensate his workers without the need for cash, and allows the level of compensation to fluctuate depending on the abundance of the season. The produce is cheap for Tony, which enables him to give it in abundance, and is appreciated by recipients accustomed to paying full retail prices, who are encouraged to take all they want (and then some).

Informal, non-cash compensation has the added benefit of creating the feeling all involved that they are engaged not in a business transaction, but rather in mutual generosity among friends. This personal connection between Tony and the volunteers is useful since this sort of intermittent work is generally seen as undesirable. Other farmers in my study told me that they emphasize offering regular, year-round employment as a key strategy to retain workers even when they may not be able to match the wages or benefits of larger farms. This approach would not be compatible with Tony's farm, and so a reliance on relationships defined and experienced in terms of friendship rather than employment help meet the labor need.

This is, however, just a partial explanation, capturing the utility of Tony's unconventional labor arrangement but painting it in overly functionalist, even manipulative terms. The fact is that Tony delights in giving in excess. I have often seen him gleefully pile more and more produce into a departing guest's car, insisting they take only the very best. When I tried to beg off or insist I had enough, that there was no way I could possibly eat it all, he would laugh and offer me more, telling me that I could use the tomatoes to woo a girlfriend, or that I should give the extra melon to my grandparents. The ability to give generously is, clearly, part of the point.

These compensated volunteers are occasionally supplemented by workers (almost always themselves friends or friendly acquaintances) hired for a day or two. As an observer, it was often extremely difficult to tell these categories of helpers apart, not least because, Tony tends to refer to everyone as a “friend.” Working alongside these various sorts of guests over the course of two summers on my regular Fridays on the farm, I observed few differences in his treatment of them. His tone tends to remain conversational and friendly, often joking; no barked orders, no commands to work faster. Though he gives directions, runs logistics (e.g. packing produce,

loading it up in the truck to run over to the stand), and operates the heavy machinery, with work parties so small divisions of labor are moderate, and Tony does not exempt himself from the dirtiest and heaviest work. And with all sorts of workers at his produce operation, he would frequently interrupt our work to suggest a break in the shade, or roll up in his ancient, battered pickup and start slicing up a melon and insisting everyone eat.

This form of worker relations echoes some of the themes examined in my discussion of Sunrise Farm (Chapter 4). As at Sunrise, the combination of shared ethnic and linguistic identity, as well as Tony's own experience of farm labor, make for easy identification and rapport between him and the workers. Here, this effect is amplified by the fact that (with a few exceptions, discussed below) Tony generally hires workers on a few at a time, for short-term work, and draws heavily on his personal network, meaning that he tends to engage them as individuals rather than as a mass of workers. Absent enduring employer-employee relationships, it is easy to not only view the offer of employment as a favor or benefit bestowed on the worker, but also to overlook the potential power relationships embedded in employment in favor of the rhetorical—and, in many if not all cases, actual—mutualism of “friendship.” And, as at Sunrise, this sort of identification may also have benefits for Tony in the form of workers motivated to work carefully and conscientiously, and even, often, to work without any monetary compensation at all.

Conventional turns in Tony's farming practice

Despite some mild divergences from the food justice ideals outlined in chapters 2-3, Tony's produce operation described to this point seems overall to fit it quite well—and certainly to accord to Minkoff-Zern's description of non-ideologically motivated immigrant alternative farmers. In some respects—especially his reliance on cooperative, non-wage labor arrangements—he seems if anything to represent a greater divergence from conventional agriculture than the farmers described in earlier chapters. It is time, therefore, to turn to other aspects of Tony's work.

Though the independent farmers in my study are not joined in any formal or even informal organizations,¹⁸³ many of them are socially connected and engage in some mutually beneficial forms of exchange. Naturally outgoing and charming, Tony stands out among his independent peers as particularly well connected, both to other growers and to hired workers and managers at other local operations, connections born from long years living in a small town and operating a farmers market stall and produce stand. These connections often proved beneficial to Tony: he was able, for instance, given free or discounted cast-off materials, including the fertilizer discussed above. He also used his connections to help newer farmers, like when vouched for a beginning nurseryman to rent a half-acre of land to start his business on the same property as Tony, loaned him use of a tractor, and helped transport the plastic tubing needed to construct a high tunnel from the farm of another friend.

Tony also participated in more ambitious joint ventures with other farmers, both Anglo and Mexicano. The most significant of these were a five-acre strawberry partnership and two

¹⁸³ Numerous growers associations and lobby groups exist in the region, both for farmers in general and for specific industries. I reached out to several of these groups, and reviewed media produced by others; as far as I can determine, none have significant Mexican immigrant membership or make visible efforts to reach out to that population.

larger-scale, but short-lived collaborations with neighbors to grow chilis and hemp, respectively. The strawberries were grown on land belonging to one of the area’s biggest Mexicano mixed fruit producers, with responsibilities and income divided between Tony and one of the landowners, with whom he also trades boxes of vegetables for peaches and berries to resell at market. Though I was never able to visit that farm, and my many phone calls to Tony’s business partner were ignored, the portrait that Tony paints is quite distinct from what I described above. At times, he reports, the berries had to be sprayed weekly for pests and fungi, and the harvest was carried out not by “friends” or volunteers, but by a hired crew of ten workers. He never spoke of that farm as a place for relaxation, recreation, or socializing.

While I rely on Tony’s reports to describe the strawberry operation, I was able to witness his other ventures into conventional production up close. In 2019, thanks to new language in the previous year’s federal Farm Bill legalizing the production and interstate distribution of hemp, the crop experienced a surge in popularity. The same species as recreational cannabis, hemp contains very low levels of THC, the primary chemical responsible for cannabis’ psychoactive effects; it is grown primarily for industrial purposes (fiber, etc.), and for CBD, a chemical to which have been attributed near-miraculous medical properties (Lee 2019). With the change in legal status, hemp farms sprung up around the Valley, visible (and smell-able) from the roadside, with farmers rushing to get in on what promised to be a booming new industry.



Figure 11. One of the fields of hemp Tony helped to grow in partnership with a neighbor. Photo by the author.

One of those farmers was the neighbor on whose land Tony had placed his farm stand. Wearing a red Make America Great Again hat and with an iron “I stump for Trump” sign nailed up next to the front door of his trailer, he seemed like an unlikely partner for Tony’s next business venture. But when the neighbor rented out his land to a beginning grower to plant some 20,000 hemp plants on his property, they also signed a deal to pay Tony \$34,000 to grow five acres more on his own farm, eating into the area usually dedicated to vegetables. Tony also helped to arrange a small work crew to tend to the neighbor’s plants. Like the strawberries, but in notable contrast to his vegetable production style, this foray into hemp represented a significant and deeper venture into industrial production: a monoculture, intended for wholesale rather than direct-to-consumer distribution, and reliant on waged labor. Tony told me that if the project worked out, he’d plant even more hemp next year, proportionally reducing his vegetable production. Altogether, then, this project seemed to represent a significant shift in his mode of working that could, at least potentially, be read as a reorientation of his farm around more capitalistic aims.

The labor arrangements in the hemp operation were notably different from those of Tony’s vegetable production, even if they largely involved the same people. In mid-October, a large greenhouse on the neighboring property was converted into a processing facility, with seven workers provided by Tony. The women stripped the hemp leaves and flowers from their stems; the men kept the women supplied with fresh plants, tossed the stripped hemp onto enormous industrial driers, then packaging the dried product into bales. The entire place smelled so strongly of weed that it burnt our eyes to the point of tears until Tony turned on the ventilation system. One of them tells me he has known Tony for years, that he goes to his farm and helps, not as a hired worker but just to help out and pick vegetables for himself. By contrast, working on hemp these workers receive a standard hourly wage; I was the only volunteer.

Though Tony was polite, bringing pizzas for lunch and chatting as we eat, the number of workers and the increased operational demands of keeping the workflow running smoothly set him apart in a quite different manner than when we pick vegetables together. He did not interrupt the work to joke or offer food, and once scolded his business partner for standing around talking with a worker: *talk while you work, I’m paying this guy and you’re stopping him working, if you want me to help with this you gotta help, you need to listen to me*. He did not scold the worker in this interaction, and in general remained his usual affable, joking self throughout the season—but the logic of the labor was clearly distinct: sped up, depersonalized, and reorganized around economical production. Even within the space of a single season, this entry into conventional hemp production had shifted how he interacted with his workers, and shifted the nature of the farm—or at least that segment focused on hemp—from one of informality and a strong orientation towards social rather than productive aims into something much more defined by clearly marked employer-employee relationships and a focus on efficient production. The perceived mutualism between himself and the workers, still present, was redrawn around his doing them the favor of getting them a job, in place of more intangible and affective exchanges of gifts, food, and voluntary labor.

Ultimately, the hemp experiment was a failure. The partner was new to farming, and Tony came to see him as both incompetent and unwilling to learn; worse, he tried to boss Tony around as if he was a hired worker rather than a business partner. The partner, meanwhile, was bothered by Tony telling him what to do. Amidst this strife, there were delays in obtaining the plants and delays in planting, all resulting in plants that grew smaller than hoped. The hemp flowers, which contain the densest concentration of CBD, were not in full bloom until October,

by which time the weather had turned gloomy and cold, the Valley soaked in constant mist and drizzle. All of this was a problem: plants molded in the fields before they could be harvested, and due to a glut in the market, much of the dried and processed product could not be sold. Tony once estimated to me that of his partner's \$250,000 investment, he had likely recouped only about \$150,000. Although Tony had a contract and was owed \$34,000 for his land and trouble, he ultimately accepted a cash payment of \$10,000. It was that or sue, he explained, and Tony knew his erstwhile partner had no money. The neighbor eventually sold off his land, and Tony has not planted hemp again.

Despite the disappointment, this was not Tony's last foray into larger-scale, more conventionalized production. In 2021, he entered into a similar agreement with another new grower, in this case to produce jalapeno, serrano, poblano, and habanero chiles. In this case his partners were fellow Mexicanos: an investor who lives in Los Angeles and runs a construction business; his nephew, an Oregon restaurant owner and farm labor contractor with experience in hazelnuts and blueberries; and his hired manager, who owns a 30-acre Christmas tree farm, and until the previous year had managed an 800-acre conventional hazelnut orchard. Tony sublet out 8 acres of his farm, and facilitated the growers' access to a further 17 adjacent acres owned by the same landlord; they also rented 25 acres on another property nearby. The chilis were to be distributed, both fresh and dried, to restaurants and stores in California via several middlemen.

The chilis were grown quite conventionally. The ground was cleared and plowed; the chili starts were planted through black plastic. Though hooked up to Tony's irrigation pump that draws water from the Little Luckiamute, the drip irrigation system was fed a special blend of nutrients recommended by an agronomist who would periodically visit the site to tweak the fertilizer mix. Tony wasn't sure what they were being fed— "the engineers know more than I do"¹⁸⁴—but said that it would make the plants grow fast. And so they did, outpacing his own crop, except in one corner where a quirk of the irrigation system led Tony's plants also receiving the additives. When the chilis seemed to weaken, the agronomist came and recommended a fungicide, which was duly applied. From the perspective of the chili manager, by comparison "almost everything that [Tony] plants is organic. Not *organic* organic [i.e. certified] because he does put chemicals on the ground, but he does grow more organically [than us]."¹⁸⁵

Labor arrangements in the chili field were similarly conventional. The man heading the operation ordinarily worked as a farm labor contractor, and this was his first venture into farming his own crops. This meant he had a large pool of workers to draw on, attracted and managed through means in obvious contrast with Tony's vegetable production. Throughout that summer, I would usually see two or three men working in the fields; when harvest arrived, that number grew to perhaps a dozen, with young men doing the picking and women working the mobile sorting and packing station. The men especially worked quickly, and kept to a far more regular schedule than Tony's casual visitors; in contrast to Tony's friendly visitors, their experience of the farm was not as a site of conviviality, but simply of work—a means to the things they hoped to buy with their wage, rather than an end in itself. The chili workers earned \$15 per hour, the same wage other farmers in my study at that time reported as the industry standard. I never saw the grower himself working; his visits to the farm were brief; he arrived in a shiny car, dressed snappily, consulted with Tony and his field manager, and departed. The manager wore work

¹⁸⁴ "los ingenieros saben más que yo"

¹⁸⁵ "casi todo lo que se planta [Tony] es orgánico. No es orgánico orgánico porque si le pone químicos a la tierra, pero si lo planta más orgánico pues."

clothes, but generally only offered directions and engaged in logistical work like moving and loading vehicles.

As with the hemp project, Tony's role was ambiguous. He chose not to enter into a formal contract this time, telling me on one occasion that he had *confianza* in his partners; later he explained it more pragmatically, that, given the cost of filing a lawsuit and the slowness of the courts, a contract simply can't be enforced and therefore doesn't count for much. Though not the landlord, he provided access to the land. Though not an agricultural engineer, his irrigation system served as the basic infrastructure that the chili growers extended to meet their needs, and he helped to design and maintain this system. He was not a labor contractor, but helped at least one of his own occasional workers find more regular work sorting and packing chilis. And he was not the farm manager and unlike with the hemp operation he did not directly supervise workers, yet he regularly consulted with the chili grower's manager to offer advice, and stopped to offer friendly directions to the workers, correcting their weeding technique and rearranging the sorting station to simplify the workflow.

Though clearly viewing the grower and farm manager as peers and unabashedly telling them how to do their jobs, he socialized more with the hired workers, calling out to joke with them as his truck rolled past. In September, we stopped to chat with some of the women as they took their lunch break; one had brought chicken tamales and she insisted we eat. Later, he invited them to join us for a barbecue. He had defrosted the backstrap of a deer shot the previous season, along with the usual corn, summer squash, tortillas, and soda. A half-dozen came, including a young woman I'd often seen helping Tony with his vegetables, the woman with the tamales, and her boyfriend, an enormous muscular Anglo who everyone called "*el Vikingo*;" the boss stopped by too, but only long enough to grab a taco before walking off again. I wrote in my notes:

There is discussion of rain plans—namely, will they be working if it rains? One lady seems most confident, saying maybe a half day at most—discussion of tarps to cover the working area, and covering the boxes which will otherwise break; another suggests loading boxes directly into the truck. Also, Tony says they're wasting a lot of chilis by throwing them out rather than getting a tarp to dry them on. Everyone has lots of thoughts on how things should be run. No one outright condemns management, but plenty of ideas put forwards as alternatives to what they seem to be doing.

As they leave, one lady asks Tony: do you plant pepinos? Where? She says she wants to know so she can steal them, like in Mexico. Several other women look in the back of his truck, call out orders: two boxes of tomatoes, one of serranos...

As it happens, Tony and the workers knew better than their inexperienced managers. Throughout the season, the sorting, packing, and shipping of the chilis had been plagued with inexplicable delays and confusions, resulting in packed boxes piling up. When the first rains arrived, a few days after the barbeque, the boxes of sorted chilis had not been loaded into the truck, nor had they been covered with tarps. The cardboard swelled and the picked chilis rotted. One day at the farm, Tony pointed out to me a pile of boxes that he estimated amounted to \$3000 of chilis, a full day's picking, sitting abandoned. Many more remained unpicked.

As with the hemp, the trouble was not only an issue of weather and inexperience, but also interpersonal conflict. Tony had helped obtain land and facilitate the operation, lent advice and occasional labor, with *confianza* in place of a written contract, and only what he understood to be a verbal agreement that he would receive \$10,000 for the use of his land, irrigation system, and support. In September, Tony complained to me that although he "gave" the growers 8 acres, the investor in LA who was funding the venture had said he wouldn't pay him, that maybe he would

pay next year. Tony said, *he's not going to get to grow here next year if that's the case, he can go find some other place*. Another time he suggested that perhaps he would let them have a little of the land higher up the slope, but keep most for himself: “they don’t do nothing for me, why should I help them?” He even pondered just hiring people to harvest the remaining unpicked chilis himself, saying that since he rented the land, he had the right. When I asked if he was serious or it was just a threat, he told me that he hoped the threat would be enough. Ultimately, he was never paid.

The next year, the chili growers did not return, leaving behind a mess of plastic sheeting and irrigation hoses. When Tony asked for \$6000 to clean it up for them, they paid \$3000; as of this writing, he is still waiting and hoping for the rest, having mostly completed the work, which is necessary if he is to continue farming that part of the field. Tony has returned to his vegetables, but he also continues to experiment with alternatives, explaining that he hopes to reduce the vegetable production to just one third of its former footprint. Though this reduction has progressed slowly, beans have occupied a growing area in the past two growing seasons. Easily planted and harvested from a tractor and shelf stable once dry, beans provide an easier alternative to the higher value but more finicky and fragile vegetables that have typically been the center of the farm. When we most recently discussed this plan, he told me over his eggs and bacon that, reckoning their yield at 2000 lbs. per acre, and estimating that he can sell beans for \$2 per lb., he is considering just planting 15 acres of beans—not a bad income, in his estimation, for part time work done from the seat of a tractor.

Finally, any accounting of Tony’s ventures beyond the alternative agricultural model must note his work with Christmas trees. He has long run a pop-up Christmas tree and wreath business from his home in town, reselling trees and weaving his own wreaths,¹⁸⁶ and early in my research he had a few small sections of Christmas trees planted at the bottom of the field. More lately, looking ahead to retirement, he has seen them as an opportunity for a lower-maintenance income stream. Once planted, the trees just need to be sprayed in the spring, young trees watered in the hottest part of the summer, and weeds kept low enough to not overwhelm them; mostly it’s just a question of waiting five years or so for them to reach salable size. In the meantime, while they remain small, he has put the space to use by intercropping vegetables around them. As of this writing, he continues to plant more. In late November 2022, I received a call from Tony, sounding sniffly but cheerful, reporting that he had hired four workers to help plant another 4000 trees.

Conclusions: understanding Tony’s variable approach to farming

As we have seen, Tony’s farm resists easy classification. Different aspects of his work, and different spaces on the farm, appear to be managed according to entirely different logics. He grows low spray vegetables for local distribution using reciprocal labor arrangements—except, of course, when he’s growing conventional monocultures for wholesale distribution using contract labor. Clearly, then, labels like alternative and conventional are not particularly useful in understanding his attitude towards farming, even if we do take conventional and alternative as poles of a spectrum rather than binary opposites. Instead, it seems most reasonable to suppose that Tony understands his work through some other set of priorities and values that are

¹⁸⁶ Wreath-making is a common seasonal income stream for many Oregon farmworkers.

substantially agnostic as to the importance of the conventional-alternative divide, or that are flexible enough to find realization in either mode.

What could such a value system be? As noted above, Tony himself claims that the farm is a “hobby,” and it is true that he does not appear to be motivated primarily by a drive for profit maximization. This does not mean the farm is just a sort of adult playground. It is clearly meant to yield an income: he is an eternally creative entrepreneur, always open to new ventures, and frequently talking, unprompted, about the price he could make selling this or that product at market. However, both his statements and his actual style of working—his unconcern about theft at his produce stand, for example, his tendency to leave substantial parts of his crop unharvested, and especially the many hours he spends at the farm with “friends” *not* working—make it difficult to conclude that making money is the farm’s primary purpose, or, more to the point, that profit yield is the primary lens through which decisions are taken.

While Tony certainly never evokes tradition with the same reverence as Javier and does not share his indigenous identity, Anáhuac’s approach to agriculture as an expression of tradition does offer a useful framework for understanding Tony’s work. True, Tony conducts no ceremonies, makes no blessings, and expresses no piety for his land, crops, or work. He does not share a vision of tradition that centers indigeneity, nor define his tradition through heirloom seeds or even a more generalized care for *la Madre Tierra*. Nevertheless, the farm he has created is in important respects a Mexicano space, embedded though it may be amidst a distinctly Oregonian landscape. And it is this Mexican-ness and the lifestyle that it enables, alongside a supplemental income, seems to provide the motive force behind the farm.

Writing of migrant efforts to claim space in New York City, Quiroz Becerra quotes one of her informants, the head of a local immigrant sports federation, saying,

“From the moment you arrive [at the soccer game] the ambiance is entirely Mexican. You arrive and there are stands with taquitos, Mexican food stands, souvenirs or t-shirt stands, hats, which have a lot to do with the Mexican community. It is not only a soccer field, now; it is a very Mexican place, just as if you were playing in the Plaza Mexico, that’s the way soccer has been transformed” (Quiroz Becerra 2014:341).

The author continues, “these spaces can be said to be ‘Mexican’ in their materiality and associated meanings... It is, however, not any representation of what is Mexican. This ‘Mexican’ space is construed as a space where families come together” (Quiroz Becerra 2014:341; see also Maldonado and Maldonado 2017). In these passages, we see how public space can be recoded as ethnically significant through food, material culture, participation in meaningful activities, and the simple congregation of community. Note too how Quiroz Becerra’s emphasis that, while her informant describes the place created in simple ethnic/national terms, it is understood not as generically Mexican, but rather emphasizing a particular sort of participant and a particular set of (family) values.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁷ Ethnic coding of spaces is not, of course, always a matter of positive reclamation and assertion. Often it reflects how racism manifests in segregation and other forms of spatialized inequality. Benson describes this phenomenon in farm labor camps: “Avoidance marks the camp, like the back of the pickup truck, as ‘Mexican’ space. Even though the workforce on most farms is multiethnic, composed of Latinos of various backgrounds, locals commonly call labor camps ‘Little Mexico.’ The term Mexican, used to refer to all migrants, is defined as someone who does a devalued, stigmatized, and odious kind of work and traffics in stigmatized space” (Benson 2008:601; see also Neely and Samura 2011). This description notably contrasts with Tony’s farm, and not only because all his regular social visitors self-identify as Mexicano. Unlike Benson’s farm labor camp, Tony’s farm is a private space, protected from the potential judgmental gaze of outsiders, and where Tony himself is the boss. It fundamentally lacks the

It is in this sense that I suggest that Tony's farm functions as a Mexicano place, and one defined not around family but rather an agrarian sensibility tied to experiences on both sides of the border. For that both Tony and many of his visitors, the farm seems to serve many of the same functions of recollection and recreation that Javier has so deliberately cultivated at Anáhuac. In its own way, Tony's farm is a place to remember his homeland and his childhood, to share food and stories, and to build community. This is perhaps most evident at his barbecues. Off the farm his diet is varied; when eating out, he is more likely to propose a diner-style breakfast of bacon, eggs, and toast than a taqueria, and he often mentions getting pizza or McDonald's with his wife. At the farm, however, he always cooks asadas, never burgers or hot dogs, and serves the food with tortillas and corn on the cob. More significantly, the conversation often drifts back to Mexico, especially when he has guests beside myself, almost all of whom are fellow Mexicanos. This tendency can be observed in many of the lunchtime discussions quoted at length above, and I present a few more here to underscore the point:

8/13/21 – *He says to me, this is how we eat in Mexico. A visitor says, this reminds her of in Mexico, in school they'd go on outings, go out under trees, have a meal. Tony asks if they'd just dump the trash there—says, in Mexico you go to the market and eat a melon, just leave the rind on the ground, no trash cans! She says, it's not like that anymore, there's garbage cans and they had to pick up all the mess from these pasaditas. But, she says, she thinks maybe they left the pinata litter behind.*

7/23/21 *Growing up, their house was just a little room where they all slept. They ate outside, and in the field a little distance away was a big chili plant—he points into the field, an indeterminate distance. There was also a tree—he points at a small tree behind us—with leaves that tasted just like cilantro. The chilis were tiny (he shows with his finger, a half-inch). When they ate, they'd say, 'who's going to go get the chili?' He or his brother would say, 'I'll go get it—but you have to eat three!' His brother, he learned, would swallow them whole to avoid the burn! Today's friend says, seems fair!*

All this makes the friend start talking about how hard things used to be there, in Mexico—recalls her abuela lived in a ranchito, and sometimes she would have nothing to eat but dry tortillas w/ salt and water to dip them in. Tony says yeah, and it's still hard there now. But she says, and he agrees, that while it was hard they survived and were healthy—unlike ppl now who drink energy drinks, and some story she must have read online of someone having 7 Red Bulls and it giving them a heart attack!

7/31/20 – *We sit in the shade. He's eating mint Oreos, saying how good they are, how his wife says they're bad but they're good. He urges on us another soda.¹⁸⁸ He tells a silly riddle, pun-based, about a bird.¹⁸⁹ They talk about this and that—in the heat, I'm sleepy, have trouble tracking. They talk about beds—Tony says that in Mexico, he didn't have a mattress or pillow, just a woven mat, from palm, like the hat he's wearing. The abuelo agrees. Tony lays down on the ground, in the dust, and at the old man's suggestion uses a bucket as a pillow. It seems awfully high but oh well. He sighs, exaggerated, and says that this is the "American Dream," and asks me to confirm.*

involuntary, controlled, and demeaning features of a space pejoratively deemed "Mexican" by powerful outsiders. This meaningful remaking of the familiar landscape of the commercial farm may even be part of its appeal.

¹⁸⁸ Though the main course at the farm was always homemade, Tony did occasionally bring mass-produced packaged snacks and especially sodas. Often these were foods he had been given free by friends or possibly extras from the school.

¹⁸⁹ The riddle: "un pájaro sobre un lago canto. Se cayó/calló y no se mojó. ¿Cómo fue posible?"

These conversations were quite typical, and I witnessed numerous others that could have served equally well in its place. Together, the food and the company and the outdoor setting at the farm seemed to help memories to wander.



Figure 12. Tony and the abuelos cleaning onions. Photo by the author.

These themes were particularly visible in the weekly summer visits of the “*abuelos*,” an octogenarian couple who had migrated from their farm in Zacatecas in late middle age and who came to the farm as friends, not hired workers. The couple are thrifty and clearly appreciated the produce they brought home at the end of the day; *la abuela* complained to me of the high price of produce in the store and often insisted on gathering up gallons upon gallons of the bruised and ugly discards, while Tony laughed and tried to force her to throw them out and take the best. However, the farm for them was plainly not just a cheap source for produce, and as often as not *la abuela* would have homemade food to share with the rest of us, supplemented with Tony’s corn, summer squash, and melons. Often, they spent hours just sitting in the shade, eating and joking, enjoying being in the countryside. I recorded in my notes:

8/13/2020 – *Sit in the shade, eat more corn. Tony lays down with a giant calabaza as a pillow. They tell jokes back and forth—the abuelos have a bunch of little sayings that just really tickle Tony to no end for reasons I can't really follow. They tell jokes back and forth, like one about a Mexican who meets a guy from Idaho. The Idahoan says, ‘we have*

potatoes so big where I'm from you can only fit one on a truck.' He asks the Mexican what they've got. The Mexican says, 'we've got huuuuuuuge pots.' 'Why,' asks the Idahoan? 'To cook your potatoes!'

The old man laughs.

Reminded by the joke, el abuelo reminisces about a time working in Nampa, Idaho, then he tells a joke about how in his parents' time, during the Revolution, everyone was hiding from an army and a rooster started crowing, and they had to threaten it to shut up because it kept crowing. Tony asks, and what was it crowing, setting him up. El abuelo: "here I am, here I am!"¹⁹⁰ Then we meander on to remembrances of the first person in the abuelos' town who got a radio, and everyone came around to listen...

What is striking here is the fact that neither Tony nor the *abuelos* treat the farm in these long afternoons as a place of work. The harvest is done, there is no reason why they shouldn't go home; Tony even has a grill in his backyard. But that is not why they come. In the excerpts above, we see the farm setting calling forth memories in both Tony and his guests. Having grown up in the countryside and now living in town, the neighbors right there over the fence, the sounds of traffic, the farm is a place that calls up the experience of home through the peaceful open vistas, the sun and quiet, the taste of grilled meat and grilled corn and tortillas, and the ability to go grab an extra onion or a few serranos right from the field—an immediate connection between field and plate Tony often linked back to his childhood.

The experience of work is a key part of this mnemonic experience, not a mere drudgery to get through for a reward of vegetables and *asada*. Tony often had to actively insist on breaks or send them to do lighter work sorting and cleaning produce, especially in the summer heat. *El abuelo* in particular was astonishingly spry, plunging into plots of tall corn plants with visible enthusiasm and stubbornly finishing long rows of tomatoes. Having spent most of their lives on a farm in Zacatecas, Tony's farm now served as a welcome outing and a break from their indoor lives in town.

Although I have emphasized the positive memories called up by afternoons on the farm, the *abuelos'* thriftiness, their inability to let any food, no matter how bruised or questionable, go to waste hints that the autotopography of the farm is more complex than simple nostalgia. I recorded in my notes,

9/13/2019 - We're back at the trees, in a sheltered shaded area. Tony shows us a big bin of pears that look nice, but that he says are no good. La abuela starts loading up on them. Tony says they're no good. He rips one in half to demonstrate: it's all weird inside, wormy and soft. He takes a bite from another and it's fine. The abuelos are putting a bunch of pears in a bucket. Tony teases her a little bit, they all do, and her granddaughter says the food is just going to rot at home. La abuela says, 'when you're poor you take what you can get.' Her granddaughter says, 'but now you're not poor, you don't need to.'

They talk about poverty—swap stories about being poor, about growing up w/ nothing—Tony says that his dad's store would buy bread on Fridays, so by the next Thursday the bread that was left was so hard, they'd put it in coffee, and it wouldn't even get soft. Tony and the abuelos all talk about eating food found in the garbage when they first got to the

¹⁹⁰ "estoy aqui estoy aqui"

US.¹⁹¹ They talk about how Americans think there's poverty here; the old man says there is, Tony and la abuela say there isn't, and Tony continues that you see young people and they just don't want to work ('isn't that right?', he asks me).

In the end, la abuela takes maybe a half-gallon of pears, although that's just a small part of what's there. Tony dumps the rest into the blackberry brambles.

As these excerpts suggest, childhood poverty and even hunger were not infrequent themes on the farm; and, as hinted in the preceding excerpt, tales of migration and hired farm labor in the US also make their appearance. Not infrequently, such thoughts in turn led to reflections on the comparative work ethic of Anglos and Mexicanos,¹⁹² and the laziness of the younger generation—conversations whose direction recalls, gently, Juan's bitter conservatism described in the previous chapter.

The farm and the food there awaken memories, but the lessons of those memories are ambivalent. Like at Anáhuac, the emotional and embodied significance of working the land and tasting its yield is a major theme at Tony's farm. Here, however, it is not stated as such—not elevated as political project or cultural revival, without the embellishments of spirituality and or the attachments to specific crops and technique. In its place we find Tony and his friends, eating and laughing, at times almost competitive in their tales of hardship, taking pride in their ability to work hard and *aguantar*. And these struggles are not only in the past. Tony told me:

“You know what, farmers, they don't make money... There's no money, you have to pay for diesel, you have to pay for bills, you have to pay for tractor parts, for your gas, moving things around you know, there's so much stuff. And my kids, I say, 'you know what, stay in school and learn about something else! Because you don't want to stuck like me. You know, I stay here and'—ha, sometimes my wife say, 'you stupid? You know you can have a job, a normal job, 40 hours a week, and not stay in the farm all day long after 10:00, you know.' I say yeah, you have a point, the thing is, after 8:00, after 8 hours, I'm gonna be watching tv and getting fat and lazy, and maybe when I get back to work, I don't want to, because I'm so lazy. You know? It's my opinion, you know.”

Farming is too hard a life to pass on to his children, it makes little economic sense—yet Tony concludes with the decision to continue. Like the farmers in the previous chapter, Tony treats hard work as a good in itself, and in light of the evidence presented above we can now read this decision to *aguantar* as not only a rejection of laziness, but an affirmation of virtues engrained in him through his childhood and working life, a form of strength both Mexican and masculine, an expression of his competence and ability and independence.

Read in this light, Tony's seemingly erratic farming style makes a great deal more sense. Though clearly strongly rooted in a particular experience and vision of the good life—and a

¹⁹¹ For a parallel story about a newly arrived Mexican immigrant needing to eat from the trash—and later finding the “strength to present it later... *as a triumph, something to laugh about,*” and a sort of commentary on migration and the American dream, see Wogan (2017:78–79).

¹⁹² Anglos were, universally, regarded as incapable workers, especially in physically demanding fields like agriculture—an interesting mirroring of the longstanding racist view that Mexicans (or other racialized groups) are inherently hardworking, tolerant of physical exertion, or otherwise well suited to difficult labor and dirty conditions (e.g. Holmes 2013; Molina 2014). Throughout my fieldwork, stories of Anglo workers on farms were unfailingly met with hilarity and disbelief. Though informed by a structurally racist system, this attitude is understandable; in all my research on farms, including a summer spent picking blueberries, I only rarely encountered Anglo workers, and most of those lasted only a day or two on the job. I myself was generally a slow and clumsy worker, and quite aside from any intellectual curiosity the difficulty and unpleasantness of farm labor was a significant contributor in my decision to shift from studying hired farmworkers to farmers.

particular embodied value of hard work and activity—farming for Tony seems best understood in terms of a *way of life* rather than *tradition*.¹⁹³ His farming makes no claims about its own rightness or worth beyond his own contentment. Though he shares this sense of what makes for a good life—both his many friends and visitors, and with other farmers—and links this vision to his upbringing and labor experience as something distinctly Mexican, there is no totalizing claim that it is either uniquely or universally so. Tony does not claim that the farming he practices represents ancestral wisdom and has made no particular effort to pass it on to his children, let alone disseminate it to the wider community. He does not suggest that others, who see leaving the fields as a form of personal or communal advancement, are mistaken or should return.

In all these respects, Tony emerges as an ideal representative of the independent farmers I encountered. Like his peers, Tony stresses the importance of hard work not only as a value, but also something necessary to his personal health and wellbeing, and perhaps even more importantly as something he does not know how to shed. For these farmers, nearly all of whom originate in rural communities and had at least some childhood experience with agriculture, working hard outdoors is simply what they do. It is something they enjoy, at least when working on their own behalf, but it is also something that is simply part of how they live—a meaningful, embodied link to the past that they choose to keep remaking. They farm because it is what they know how to do.

Farming, then, is less about a return to the past or to tradition than something they simply have been doing all along. This means that ideas of authenticity lose the centrality they hold at Anáhuac, and the reproduction or revival of culture is never discussed as an aim. They identify not as milpa farmers who have sojourned as hired workers in agroindustry, but as *campesinos*, a term broad enough to include both farmworkers and small farmers, and not restricted to any particular set of practices or techniques. They do, of course, value particular foods that are recognizable as culturally specific—many, for instance, regardless of their commercial emphasis, have a few pots of nopal growing in a greenhouse for personal consumption—but these tastes need not rule their work. The lifestyle they seek is one of hard work outdoors, independence, simple sufficiency, and the ability to live peacefully in the campo, to have a barbecue, to give food to their friends. These desires are compatible with any number of approaches to farming, including approaches that we would describe as conventional.

Tony's flexible approach to agriculture, running from alternative to conventional and back again, encapsulates in one person the broad tendency of the independent farmers in this study, and points to something essential that tends to fall out of activist food justice discourses: that many farmers—most farmers, I suspect—are motivated not by distinct environmental ideologies or cultural projects of the sort that animate Javier, but instead by a vision of a particular lifestyle, of a good life. These aspirations are broadly agrarian in character, deeply and self-consciously informed by early life experiences in the Mexican *campo*. As such, they set in motion placemaking projects. Working outside, exercising skill and creativity with plants and machinery, working free from the surveillance of either bosses or customers, growing good food to enjoy with family and friends right there on the land: the envisioned lifestyle is one that

¹⁹³ These words are, of course, slippery and subject to multiple meanings. I use 'tradition' here to suggest something formalized, taken by adherents and observers to suggest some timelessness and authenticity and purity, and regarded with a certain degree of reverence. Social scientists, of course, recognize that traditions are often none of these things—or, at least, that these qualities are socially constructed and historically changeable (Hobsbawm 1989). Nevertheless, here I prefer the term 'way of life' to avoid some of those unnecessary implications, and to suggest a looser, less reverential, and perhaps more dynamically hybrid way of understanding habits, affinities, and attitudes that still bear the definite stamp of both personal past experience and longer and more widely shared histories.

requires a certain kind of place, one that the farmers themselves identify and experience as a link to their origins.

Independent farmers' placemaking projects are not entirely free. They are heavily constrained by struggles to access land, markets, and workers—by, in other words, the structures of capitalist agriculture and private property. These structures weigh particularly heavily on immigrant farmers whose racialization marks them as presumed workers rather than farmers. And these conditions shape the sorts of placemaking projects available: necessarily thrift, demanding a special degree of creativity and flexibility to navigate markets, encouraging (at least in Tony's case) the leveraging of his social proximity to workers rather than fellow farmers as a means to access labor. The frequent references in moments of plenty and relaxation to past hardship certainly suggests that the farm's function as a space of freedom and enjoyment is given added savor by earlier experiences of farms as sites of hardship, a sentiment reflected in this passage from my fieldnotes:

8/13/2021 – *Tony cuts open a melon: he insists we each eat a lot, keeps offering when I'm not even finished with my first piece. It's very good. He says it's a "reward for all this sweat and work."*¹⁹⁴ *Says that all these vegetables are what make the job worth it. That eating the melon it's so good, it's almost like we didn't grow it.*

First, he offers the expected sentiment, that hard work has made the harvest all the sweeter. Then Tony turns the idea around: the sweetness of the fruit almost wipes away the hardship. This works as an apt metaphor for his farming endeavor as a whole: the reward at the end, the food and sociability, the creation of a space of relaxation and connection, makes worthwhile the underlying work, obviating the question of whether that work was conventional or alternative, both or neither.

My point then is not to deny the relevance of either cultural or socio-political factors in influencing Mexican immigrant farmers, but rather to highlight the empirical diversity in their projects, even among a relatively geographically circumscribed group of farmers who share deep commonalities in their life experiences. Their shared aspirations are not accompanied by a strongly linked shared vision of how best to achieve those aspirations. The places they hope to create are marked by the purposes to which they hope to put them rather than by the agroecological strategies they intend to employ. All commercial farmers are heavily constrained by the political-economic realities of the agricultural system in which they operate, and contending with the white supremacist legacies of land tenure in Oregon, and access to capital everywhere in the US, these farmers are more constrained than most. Because their aspirational lifestyle and the places which they require to realize that lifestyle are at least potentially compatible with a wide range of crops, cultivation practices, labor structures, and distribution networks, it is unsurprising that these farmers as a group demonstrate tremendous flexibility, availing themselves of knowledge and resources gained as hired workers and as nonprofit program participants, and learning and adopting attitudes concordant with those often divergent trajectories.

¹⁹⁴ "*recompensa por toda este sudor y trabajo*"

CHAPTER 6:

Conclusions

I began this research naively, expecting to finding immigrant farmers turning back to agrarian and ecological traditions, planting culturally meaningful plants like corn and beans and chilis, and actively rejecting the forms of industrial agriculture in whose service they were abused and exploited as hired workers. This expectation was rooted in both an overly reified vision of culture and tradition, and in expectations born from environmental justice and food justice literatures grounded in a recognition of the racist distribution of environmental goods and hazards, and oriented towards seeking out forms of resistance. As Ybarra asks, “[d]o Chicanas/os appear in an environmental context only as victims of exploitation, or can they also be a source of knowledge and alternative approaches?” She answers herself:

“alternative, decolonial environmentalisms [are] evident within Mexican American culture—a treasure trove of knowledge virtually unknown to and unrecognized by environmental studies... these decolonial environmentalisms embrace dignity and respect as their core values. Blending the practical and the theoretical, decolonial environmentalisms range from the popular practices of *curanderismo* (folk medicine) and hybrid spirituality to backyard *milpas* (corn fields) and recycling—by necessity and convention, rather than in the name of environmentalism” (Ybarra 2016:20)

Ybarra describes the sorts of practices readily recognizable and nameable as culture (folk medicine, spirituality, *milpas*) as manifestations of an authentic, autochthonous environmentalism. In her analysis, such practices have enabled farmworkers to find meaning and care in a relationship with the land despite a racialized agricultural system in which they are uprooted and alienated from their labor. bell hooks writes of the Black experience,

“We were indeed a people of the earth. Working the land was the hope of survival. Even when that land was owned by white oppressors, master and mistress, it was the earth itself that protected exploited black folks from dehumanization... This relationship meant that southern black folks, whether they were impoverished or not, knew firsthand that white supremacy with its systemic dehumanization of blackness, was not a form of absolute power” (hooks 2009:117–118).

Through the power of the earth—and by developing knowledge of and affective connections to particular places upon it—the dispossessed can recognize and claim their own worth and belonging. Or, as Wald puts it, farmworkers

“may not own the land upon which they labor, but they redefine the landscape around them as home. Their political belonging exists through this redefinition of home rather than through processes of property and consumption... [they] become politically empowered. As denizens, they demand not only equal treatment but equal voice” (Wald, 2011, p. 580).

Migrant farmworkers, in this telling, can claim their rights and justice residents whose relationship to place is based in dwelling rather than the legal construct of citizenship (see also Flores and Benmayor 1997; Stephen 2003), and their form of dwelling makes manifest an alternative to social and environmental exploitation.

As we have seen throughout this dissertation, Mexican immigrant farmers in Oregon, most of whom are current or former farmworkers, do indeed stake a claim to belonging through their labor and their connection to the land. They engage in active placemaking projects, using their farms as sites on which to attempt to build a good life—a life that draws on memories of rural life in Mexico and insists upon the independence and autonomy farmworkers lack. In my early interviews, I tried in various forms to ask why, despite so many hard experiences of working on the land, these farmers wanted to remain in agriculture. The question was met with uniform confusion. As Ybarra, hooks, and Wald recognize, people may want to escape agriculture’s exploitative labor relations without wanting to escape agriculture and the rural landscape.

Escaping exploitation while maintaining a connection to the land sounds sensible enough in theory, but what does it mean in practice? My initial expectations were in important ways deeply simplistic, based in an overly romantic vision of agriculture and an overly static understanding of culture. I expected it to mean more than just working on one’s own account, but also rejecting the logics of industrial agriculture, from pesticides and synthetic fertilizer to monoculture to reliance on contract labor, and a return to traditional forms of not just cultivation but also of valuing land and crops. I imagined that this ‘tradition’ would entail some deep connection to particular crops and heritage seeds, personal recollections of childhood and stories from their grandparents, as well, perhaps, as more spiritual or ritual dimensions. Encountering first Javier (Chapter 2) and the other nonprofit-affiliated farmers (Chapter 3), this perspective seemed to be confirmed.

As impressive as their projects are, however, they nonetheless complicated the notion of a return to pre-migration forms of agriculture. Traditions are constructed and changeable, selecting (consciously or unconsciously) particular elements of past experience or collective memory to elevate as meaningful constituents of identity and practice even while adapting them to evolving circumstances, and leaving other elements of the past either forgotten or unremarked upon. What is treated as tradition and how these traditions are embroidered and updated is, in turn, a product of social experience and necessity. Minkoff-Zern, probably the single most important scholar writing on Mexican immigrant farmers today, argues in her study of immigrant gardeners in California, that

“The opportunity to cultivate land allows participants to recall Oaxacan traditions and language, while also providing a space for them to apply techniques and technologies learned working in California agriculture. This synthesis of practices learned on both sides of the border makes available a shifting agricultural identity, one that at once incorporates knowledge from Oaxaca and provides a space to apply newly acquired skills” (Minkoff-Zern 2012:388).

Farmworkers engage in placemaking projects, drawing on older ways of interacting with the land—but these are infused and remade by their encounters with farm labor and industrial agricultural landscapes. They are also, it turns out, changed by their encounters with nonprofits, as I learned in conversation with gardeners and small farmers who told me that they had only learned to grow organically in Oregon.

Even with her recognition that immigrants draw on hybrid techniques, Minkoff-Zern’s work tends to emphasize Mexican immigrant farmers as alternative producers. Acknowledging that “Mexican farmers are certainly not a monolithic, organized, or self-identified group among US farmers,” she nevertheless concludes that

“unlike the majority of farmers in the United State, [Mexican immigrant farmers] use a combination of what have been identified as alternative farming techniques... practices [that] are reflective of farming approaches that are alternative to the dominant conventional industrial agriculture model” (Minkoff-Zern 2019:3).

It is a nuanced claim, but one that in its essence concords with the sorts of perspectives cited above (see also Chapter 1) in positioning immigrant farmers and workers as unwilling captives of the dominant system, ready and willing to break towards something fundamentally different and better.

While my empirical findings often concord with Minkoff-Zern’s, and much of her ethnographic description is readily and precisely familiar from my own fieldwork, my conclusions differ on this key point. Especially among the independent farmers encountered in chapters 4 and 5, the farmers I encounter do not demonstrate a pronounced attraction to ‘alternative’ practices or principles. Instead, this group shows remarkable diversity and flexibility even as they work towards a broadly shared vision of a good life defined by hard work, independence, and the ability to grow and share good food. Aspects of these desires are traceable—are, crucially, traced by the farmers themselves—to their early lives in rural Mexico, and in this sense can be understood in terms of culture or tradition. The places they create call forth memories, but this affective experience can be separated from the actual operation of their farm businesses to a remarkable extent. Farmers like Juan and Lupe (Chapter 4) may be recreating the *campesino* lifestyle of their youth in Nayarit, growing *quelites* and raising their own cattle and not answering to an Anglo boss—but if one were to extrapolate from these ‘cultural,’ ‘alternative’ desires to speculate about their style of farming or their attitude towards racial justice, farmworker unions, labor relations, or pesticides, one would likely be quite taken aback by their conservative politics and conventional approach to growing ornamental trees and shrubs for suburban gardens.

Just as farmers’ own aspirations mean that desires for an agrarian way of life can lead to quite ‘conventional’ farming styles, I also find that labor experiences are also complicated in their effect. Rather than simply offering a negative template, something to be rejected through food justice politics or a return to tradition, many farmers I encountered actively embrace the sort of farming they learned as hired workers. As Minkoff-Zern noted above, skills acquired as farm laborers can offer a valuable resource that migrants freely incorporate into their own projects to complement older ways of working. The Martinez brothers at Sunrise Farm (Chapter 4), for example, asserted that organic production was unknown in their hometown and were definitive in their statements that their current organic production was learned as hired workers; several nonprofit-affiliated farmers (Chapter 3) made similar statements. Some conventional farmers expressed perfectly reversed experiences. When José, a nurseryman I discuss extensively in another publication (Korsunsky 2020b), showed me his little patches of corn and beans growing in an unused plot of ground, he explained that planting them separately makes for an easier harvest. He told me that he has encouraged his family in Guanajuato, who still intercrop, to leave behind their backwards techniques in favor of his more sensible monoculture. Learning on the job provided many farmers with what they regarded as positive examples for agricultural production. In some cases, they used these models to adopt more alternative methods than those used in their hometowns; in other cases, they moved in a more conventional direction. Even if farmers *were* to embrace tradition as the guide for their farming technique, there is no shared consensus of what Mexican agriculture is like.

This flexibility and willingness to adopt new practices must be understood in the context of the serious structural constraints upon their work. Short on capital relative to their Anglo peers, lacking both formal training and connections to support services through OSU Extension or the USDA, and facing severe difficulties in accessing land, farmers do not begin with an abstract dream of farming and then fill in the details that strike them as most appealing. Instead, they draw on the resources available to them—resources that most often emerge from their work as hired farm laborers or through connections to nonprofits. In some cases, employers may directly support their former workers through access to land, equipment, and customers. Even without such patronage, lengthy experience and practical knowledge of a particular agricultural business is often vital to would-be farmers who are otherwise heavily disadvantaged when seeking to enter the market.

In sum then, immigrant farmers share common structural constraints that incentivize them to embrace highly variable forms of agriculture as their means to achieve broadly similar aspirations for how to live. But while these farmers are not naturally the food justice protagonists imagined by activists, neither do my findings discredit those projects. Immigrant farmers may not be culturally pre-programmed for sustainability and inoculated by farm labor against committing abuses and exploitation of their own—but their experiences do create at least a *potential* amenability to the food justice agenda. Among the values and aspirations expressed by the farmers in this study, notably absent were many linked to ecologically detrimental practices: I found no strong tendency to view farming primarily as a moneymaking venture, no emphasis on production maximization, no obsession with the latest technologies. This is borne out in the qualified successes of the programs described in chapters 2 and 3, as well as the experiences of some of the independent farmers described in chapters 4 and 5.

Structural marginality and technical flexibility can lead farmers to embrace apparently opposing outcomes. Mexican immigrant farmers' dreams are compatible with a just, sustainable future—and they are also compatible with a future in which the agricultural system continues to deplete soils and pollute rivers, abuse farmworkers, and suck small farms dry. This is the work before us. While anthropologists recognize the systemic links between immigration justice, labor, and sustainability and are understandably drawn to moments and movements making these same connections, my findings underscore the fact that a former farmworker or new immigrant farmer will not necessarily make these same connections. For food justice advocates and activists, the task is not simply to help farmers get started, but to actively cultivate the knowledge and inclinations—and provide the hard resources—to ensure that their aspirations are realized in forms that contest rather than reproduce the harms of the current system. And to do so they must reach not only the fragile beginning farms they have thus far emphasized, but also the sorts of independent farmers who this study suggests are more numerous and farm more acreage, and whose farms are generally more lasting.

But food justice organizations have limited power and limited resources. Too often, I found while these organizations have a sophisticated understanding of what is required, they are frustrated in their work due to systemic constraints that lie beyond their control. This is most pronounced with regards to the question of land. Both farmers and nonprofits recognize land access as the most pronounced barrier to new farmers. This will be all the more true as the generation that received immigration amnesty through IRCA and were able to buy houses and build wealth age out of farming, and rising generations find themselves shut out of both citizenship and homeownership. Radical reform of land tenure in the Willamette Valley is currently unthinkable, and I encountered no individuals or organizations working towards that

end, and I thus have no ethnographic grounds to discuss this issue at length. Nevertheless, it must be named here, at least in passing: the Donation Land Claim Act was a key force in producing Oregon agriculture's racialized hierarchy of labor and land ownership, and it is difficult to imagine any number of grant-funded nonprofits or generous employers transforming the structure of Oregon agriculture and land tenure without some significant political rethinking of the basic question of land access. Until that time—and it may be a very long time—Mexicano farmers are likely to continue to increase in number, but to exist largely at the margins and interstices of the system.

But I will end not with political speculation or even a call to action—a dissertation is a silly place to write a manifesto—but instead by returning to the twin figures who have framed my narrative and my thinking on this subject, Tony and Javier. As detailed in their respective chapters, these two farmers both exemplify certain key traits of independent and nonprofit-affiliated farmers, respectively, and exceed the norm in ways both unusual and informative.

Javier in many ways represents the highest ambitions of the food justice ideal. Self-consciously mobilizing his own indigenous heritage, labor and migration experiences, and involvement in the organized farmworker movement, he uses farming to make a place for himself and his community in Oregon. As I write this conclusion, now over a year since the end of my fieldwork, I think of my latest conversation with Javier in which he told me about the new classrooms and community center planned for the farm. He had gotten the latest architects' drawings (below), and told me excitedly how they plan to incorporate pre-Hispanic motifs from Zapotec temples into the building design. The metaphor could hardly be clearer: the turn to tradition, spirituality, and a syncretic, continental indigeneity even in the construction of something new; the transformation of a white, conservative corner of the rural Valley into a place to remember and recreate a distant homeland, not as a museum piece but a living experience not just for migrants but—even more so—for their Oregonian children. We have already won the grant funding, and if all goes well construction will start soon.



Figure 13. Architect's rendering of the planned Anáhuac classroom. Note the Zapotec motifs above the murals. Image courtesy of Capaces Leadership Institute.

Javier's story is so beautiful, so inspiring, incorporates so many diverse elements and aims so seemingly effortlessly that it takes effort to remember that his vision is anything but inevitable. Yet there are many more farmers like Tony, working independently on their own placemaking projects—projects that have their own distinct logics, not reducible to stunted or deficient Javiers, and equally seeking to make places for their own aspirations for living well on the land. Less formalized than Anáhuac, more inward looking, he has built a place where he can keep tinkering with his tools and tractors, keep barbecuing and giving away vegetables, keep busy and happy and free, keep sharing with friends both nostalgia for home and the joy at having built an easier, more prosperous life. It is a good vision, one shared with many of his peers—far more than have chosen to follow the nonprofit model. Through the diversity among these independent farms, Tony's unusually varied work reveals an important truth about this group: they stand, finely balanced, facing many branching paths. Which ones will enable these farmers to create and maintain the lives they desired? Though they draw on their pasts, both in Mexico and in the US, on tradition and labor, the answer is not predetermined; the appeal of the food justice narrative cannot be assumed. Many different kinds of places can serve the good life they imagine and work towards.

The challenge for the rest of us, for everyone involved in agriculture, is to work to create a world (or at least an Oregon) that allows not just for a few precious Anáhuacs but for a proliferation of Tonys, too—one in which he and many farmers like him can securely build the sorts of places and the sorts of lives they seek by farming in a way that helps create a good life for all people.

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