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Eating Far From Home: Latino/a Workers and Food Sovereignty in Rural Vermont

By the tenth grocery store visit with a folklorist friend and colleague, the first author of this chapter was exhausted and increasingly annoyed about the prominence of canned chili and crispy taco shells in the “Hispanic” aisle of these retail outlets. Having been to at least four big box stores, two food co-ops, a dollar store, and several smaller ethnic markets owned by refugee families resettled in the Burlington area, she was exasperated by the inability to find the necessary ingredients to make tamales with Alma, the wife of a dairy farmworker, for an upcoming Dia de los Muertos festival at the Vermont Folklife Center.

This should not have been a surprise, finding real tortillas and real salsa picante along the northern border had been a source of frustration before. Yet this time, with the challenge of feeding more than 100 people, the lived reality of searching out the components of such a beloved and culturally meaningful dish drove home the significance of our collaborative research.

1 Sections of this chapter are drawn from the following conference paper:

on the foodways of Latino/a migrants in the state of Vermont. Along with this frustration came the insight, theoretical turned experiential, that having the resources necessary to search out these ingredients (specifically a driver’s license and a fairly serviceable car) was a mark of privilege linked to the benefits of U.S. citizenship and flexibility of time and labor. For the estimated 1200-1500 Latino/a farmworkers living in the state of Vermont, this kind of culinary expedition would be impossible, particularly in the cold winter months when temperatures of ten below zero and three-foot snowdrifts are not uncommon.

The next day, we arrived at Alma’s apartment the day after the shopping mission with some semblance of the list that she had sent via text message while planning the menu for the event. Upon setting down the items, the bag of masa was met with a disapproving frown and a proclamation that the dried chiles that had been procured “no son los correctos!” Assuring us that we would make do with the assortment of desirable and less-than-desirable ingredients, Alma quickly unearthed her own stash of the correct chiles, and we started the ten-hour process of making several dozen chicken tamales with red and green salsa, using a half-functioning stovetop and a blender that threatened to catch on fire. As we were completing the process of assembling the tamales and carefully placing them into large steamer pots, the doorbell rang and Alma returned with a large box postmarked in Queens, New York. With great excitement, and under the watchful eye of her young daughter, she showed us the dried herbs, candies, packaged foods, and other small gifts that had been sent by her sister who was enjoying greater access to a network of tiendas in a culturally diverse urban environment. Contained within this package was Alma’s strategy of procuring the right ingredients to prepare dishes that cross national borders.

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2 Throughout this chapter, “we” and “us” refer to two or more of the authors of this piece.
3 “aren’t the right ones!”
and connect migrant households in the United States with cultural meanings, traditions, and foodways back home.

Throughout our ethnographic and applied work in Vermont, individuals like Alma have revealed the diverse food procurement strategies common in migrant households, ranging from ordering items through the mail to receiving deliveries from mobile market enterprises that bring food, phone cards, and Hello Kitty piñatas from as far away as New Jersey. These complex negotiations of geographic and linguistic borders and barriers, markets (both formal and informal), and social networks reveal that, for migrant farmworkers, food access often entails much more than a simple trip to the grocery store. This chapter illuminates some of these complexities by connecting vignettes about the household food practices of Latino/a migrant workers with an analysis of the broader historical, economic, and cultural forces that have shaped Vermont’s dairy industry and its changing labor force. Drawing upon insights gained from our collaborative work on a kitchen garden project and applied ethnographic research, this chapter examines how living and working alongside the U.S.-Canada border impacts the foodways sustaining Vermont’s Latino/a dairy workers and their choices over the foods they consume. Through this examination, we argue in this chapter that isolation, fear of border enforcement, and anxieties around leaving the home combine to create marginal spaces through which migrant workers reformulate ideas of good food and where the layered and often contested meanings of food sovereignty are revealed.

Our long-term objective is to illuminate and challenge the links between food sovereignty and structural vulnerabilities in nontraditional destinations of migration and amongst farmworkers employed in year-round production-- a group that often falls outside the purview of most food security, anti-hunger, and food justice efforts. In doing so, we interrogate the
consequences of living and working alongside *la otra frontera* -- a space where many of the same processes of surveillance, dehumanization, and social marginalization return to shape the lives of workers who have already endured the violence endemic to the southern borderlands and within their countries of origin. A key difference between our work and the majority of the scholarship on farmworker food access is that Vermont, as a “new destination of migration” presents a geographic and social context very different from regions with longer histories of Latino/a migration. These different contexts necessarily entail variations in the scale and scope of resource provisioning, social networks, and food access, only exacerbated by federal border proximity. With workers dispersed across wide expanses of the rural landscape, the processes of accessing, preparing, and sharing food present both distinct challenges and spaces where human ingenuity and agency is revealed in everyday practices of food sovereignty. Yet, for workers who are living and working within these northern borderlands, the difficulties associated with accessing basic needs and maintaining the cultural meanings connected to food conspire to leave workers never truly satiated, even while ensuring the food security of consumers and continued profits for the farm owners who manage to stay afloat.

**Ethnographic and Theoretical Context:**

Often characterized as a “new” or “nontraditional” destination for Latino/a migration, the state of Vermont has seen a steady increase in the number of migrant farmworkers from Mexico and other Latin American countries since the late 1990s. Despite the newness of this trend, the Latino/a population in the state grew 24 times faster than the overall population between 2000 and 2010 (Baker and Chappelle 2012). Currently, there are approximately 1200-1500 Latino/a
migrant dairy workers in Vermont and the vast majority -- roughly 90% -- of these workers, are likely undocumented (Radel et. al. 2010). While the majority of migrant workers in Vermont’s dairies are men, a steady number of women are now living, and sometimes working, on these farms. However, as Radel and colleagues underscore, farm owners often view the presence of women on dairies as problematic. This is due to the substandard housing that many workers are provided, the fact women are often viewed as incapable of operating heavy machinery, and because of the notion held by some farmers that if women become pregnant, this could call greater attention to the presence of undocumented workers as they seek pre- and postnatal healthcare services.

As one of the whitest states in the nation, these demographic changes have not gone entirely unnoticed and the presence of these workers reveals the hidden dynamics behind Vermont’s iconic working landscape. Latino/a migrants working in the state’s dairy industry face a perplexing conundrum in their daily lives, as they are simultaneously invisible in the milking barns where they work and hypervisible when they enter public spaces outside of the home or workplace. These workers experience a great deal of fear, isolation, and anxiety connected to their status in Vermont as “invisible workers” laboring in what geographer Susannah McCandless has characterized as a “carceral countryside” (McCandless 2009). These anxieties tend to intensify the closer one is living and working to the northern border, as the concentration of active U.S. border patrol agents increases with closer proximity. The majority of the state, including 90 percent of the state’s residents, falls within the 100-mile expanse where Immigration, Customs, and Enforcement (ICE) officers have the authority to stop and search travelers without reasonable suspicion or a warrant (ACLU Vermont 2013). However, the “primary operating domain” of border patrol is said to be 25 miles within the Vermont-Canada
border, meaning that the majority of routine enforcement takes place within a much smaller region of the state. This domain encompasses three of the four border counties (Grand Isle, Franklin, and Orleans) that are home to a significant number of the state’s dairy farms employing Latino/a workers.

In neighboring New York State, the experiences of Latino/a migrant workers living in rural areas have been examined from multiple disciplinary angles (Decena and Gray 2006, Maloney and Grusenmeyer 2005, Nicholson 2006, Parra and Pfeffer 2006, Sexsmith this volume). These studies illuminate the difficult realities that Latino/a migrants face in a state where the federal border has become increasingly “Mexicanized” since 2001; whereby the number of border agents has increased and policing has become more militaristic amidst concerns of terrorism and lax surveillance (Andreas 2005). Vermont shares many of the same rural dynamics as New York, yet has a particular history of rural inclusion and exclusion distinct from other northern border states. For workers in the border region, the international border manifests itself into everyday decisions about the risks of leaving the farm and encountering border patrol versus exercising one’s autonomy and right to mobility. For most, the risks of detention and deportation do not outweigh the benefits of continued employment, resulting in dependency on others for accessing food and medications, inequitable access to health care, and generalized anxiety and other mental health concerns (Wolcott-MacCausland 2014). While there are a number of individuals who provide services to these workers on the farm, namely delivering food and other goods or transportation for hire, many of the individuals take advantage of these dynamics and charge a premium for goods and services, only exacerbating the vulnerabilities and inequalities that farmworkers experience.
To fully understand Vermont’s contemporary border dynamics, it is essential to situate them within the historical and strategic production of the state’s rural countryside. As Clare Hinrichs (1996) has highlighted, the production of Vermont’s countryside been mired in a set of exclusionary politics and cultural boundaries based on race/ethnicity, social class, and national origin. The promotion of the state as a “distinctive rural place” (ibid) steeped in Yankee values of hard work, modesty, and wholesomeness, has been carefully geared towards select groups of outsiders, particularly those with economic capital they might infuse into the rural economy. These outsiders have primarily included white northerners from the broader region who might visit the state to establish a second home or small business, to ski or otherwise recreate in the wilderness, or to consume the state’s specialty agricultural products (namely maple and dairy). Decidedly absent from this welcome embrace has been groups “of foreign stock,” including immigrating French Canadians coming south across the border from Quebec in search of greater economic opportunity. While the state’s Quebecois influence is now celebrated, perhaps because of the dependence upon tourist revenue from visiting Canadians, a newfound uneasiness about “foreign” newcomers has come to rest squarely upon the backs of Latino/a workers who have crossed the U.S.-Mexico border to work in the state’s dairies.

The dairy industry is the cornerstone to Vermont’s agrarian image and the state’s agricultural economy depends more on dairy production than any other state in the nation (Parsons 2010, Radel et. al. 2010). Like most agricultural sectors across the nation, milk production in Vermont has grown increasingly industrialized since the 1950’s, resulting in both the consolidation of thousands of small family farms into a much smaller number of large farms with larger herds and an intensification of milking throughout the year, rather than relying upon seasonal production. The technologies and labor practices associated with milking have also
shifted to become more uniform, mechanized, and less amenable to small-scale family farming. With these changes and challenges, Vermont has lost as many as 80% of its dairy farms, seeing a decrease from 11,000 dairies in the 1940s to fewer than 1000 in 2011 (Sneyd 2011). As of 2014, informal counts estimate that the number of dairies has fallen below 900. Across the U.S dairy industry, hiring Latino/a workers has become more commonplace alongside the mounting technological and financial challenges of farming (Radel et. al. 2010). In Vermont, Latino/a migrant workers have enabled the state’s dairy industry to produce more milk than ever before, even while the total number of farms has dwindled (Parsons 2010). As of 2005, as many as two-thirds of Vermont’s dairies employed migrant laborers, with a sizeable percentage of the state’s milk being produced by these workers (Radel et. al. 2010, Baker and Chappelle 2012).

What distinguishes labor in the dairy industry from other food sectors is that, unlike other agricultural production, dairy production takes place year-round, rather than following seasonal schedules of planting and harvesting. Because of these labor patterns, migrant dairy workers are excluded from federal seasonal work programs, such as the H2-A visa program that brings apple pruners and harvesters from Jamaica into the state for approximately five months each year. This differential access to documented work in the US food industry is reflective of the broader and deeper contradictions and inequalities that plague the food chain. Organizations like the Food Chain Workers Alliance, Restaurant Opportunities Centers (ROC)-United, and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) have documented and challenged these contradictions, drawing attention to the fact that food-related jobs, from production through disposal, are often filled by workers of color with limited access to the benefits and protections associated with U.S. citizenship. More recently in Vermont, the farmworker-led organization Migrant Justice has developed a “Milk with Dignity” campaign to pressure large companies like Ben and Jerry’s to
agree to a worker-driven social responsibility program, taking inspiration from the innovative organizing strategies of the CIW.

The growing dependence on exploiting immigrant communities of color to produce a food long associated with “white social dominance” reveals yet another cruel contradiction within industrial dairy production (DuPuis 2002). In examining the promotion of milk as a cure for bodily and social illness in the early 1900s, Melanie DuPuis notes, “…milk became not only one of the reasons for Northern European white racial superiority but also a way to pass that superiority onto other races and ethnicities” (ibid: 118). While today’s industrial dairies share little in common with the “cow and milkmaid” pastoral representations circulating during earlier times, the values of purity and wholesomeness that are still invoked to sell milk products belie the racialized labor systems that leave workers vulnerable to abuse and the political and economic conditions that make small-scale dairy farming next to impossible.

The racialized labor patterns embedded within Vermont’s dairy sector and the assumed undocumented status of Latino/a workers in the industry puts them at risk for compounding structural vulnerabilities and inadequate and irregular access to many basic needs. Structural vulnerability is both a process through which the “…vulnerability of an individual is produced by his or her location in a hierarchical social order and its diverse networks of power relationships and effects” and an analytical stance that examines “…the forces that constrain decision-making, frame choices, and limit life options” (Quesada et. al. 2011). The concept of structural vulnerability has become instrumental within the field of medical anthropology, including within studies of health disparities confronting migrant workers. Scholars in this field have offered important insights into the lives of farmworkers during and after the process of migration, focusing mostly upon the wellbeing and health of those employed in seasonal
agricultural production in states with a long history of Latino/a migration (Figueroa-Sanchez 2013, Holmes 2011 and 2013, Palerm 2002, Quesada et. al. 2011). Together, these studies highlight the structural vulnerabilities that leave Latino/a migrant workers at risk for health complications and decreased life chances.

Despite the growing consciousness around these inequalities, the intersection of food sovereignty and structural vulnerability within farmworker populations has not been examined in much depth, even though it has proven to be a fruitful line of theoretical inquiry in studies of food access within non-farmworker communities and families (Carney 2015). Yet, amidst concerns around social isolation, hazardous working conditions, and barriers to accessing healthcare, it is clear that disparities in access to food, especially food that is healthy and culturally familiar, is of paramount concern for farmworkers. Studies in more traditional destinations of migration have repeatedly documented the disproportionate rate of food insecurity among farmworkers (Borre et.al. 2010, Brown and Getz 2011, Cason et. al. 2006, Essa 2001, Kilanowski and Moore 2010, Kresge and Eastman 2010, Minkoff-Zern 2012, Moos 2008, Quandt et. al. 2004, Sano et. al. 2011, Villarejo et. al. 2000, Weigel et. al. 2007, Wirth et. al. 2007). These studies have found that farmworkers experience food insecurity rates between three and six times the national average, which currently hovers around 14%, with rates even higher among families with children. Yet, as we argue below, the concept of food security itself presents a limited vantage point to understand the broad range of choices and principles of taste (see Abarca this volume) that shape the everyday foodways of migrant farmworkers, necessitating a deeper engagement with the concept of food sovereignty.

Throughout their journeys, migrant farmworkers transgress, reside within, and are constrained by political and cultural borders. As a conceptual category tied to multidimensional
and continuously shifting geographic and social spaces, the borderlands have long been a compelling theme of scholarship across humanities and social sciences. Theorizing the borderlands has extended out from studies of migration and settlement between Mexico and the United States to enable examinations of difference, inequality, and the desire for proximity to new experiences and lifeways in many spaces around the globe (Alvarez 1995, Pratt 1999).

Gloria Anzaldúa, whose work has become canonical within border studies, describes the borderlands as those spaces that are “physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (1987: preface). This view emphasizes that the borderlands are markers of difference and of closeness, of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, and of sovereignty of the nation-state and of individual bodies. In this vein, it is essential that border scholars examine both movement across and maintenance of borders, and the dialectical relationships between geopolitical spaces, social practices, and cultural identity. The relationships between people and the food that sustains them presents a compelling entry point into these examinations.

Cultivating Food Sovereignty in the Borderlands of Vermont

If we, as eaters, reflect for a moment about our motivations for leaving the home as we move through our daily lives, grocery shopping, meeting friends and colleagues for lunch or dinner, and running by the convenience store for a quick gallon of milk for tomorrow’s breakfast are surely central to our daily tasks. These realities are entirely different for migrant workers in Vermont who face significant geographic, cultural, and linguistic barriers in accessing food and
other basic needs. Since late 2011, the three authors of this piece have collaborated on an applied kitchen gardening project that works to increase food sovereignty among Latino/a migrant workers. The Huertas project (*huerta* is Spanish for kitchen garden), which supports migrant farmworkers in planting home gardens, is connected to UVM Extension’s Bridges to Health Program. In the summer of 2015, we worked with farmworkers on 44 farms, many of whom had gardened for the past several years, in addition to a few first-time gardeners. These gardens range in size from a few square feet to hundreds of square feet of growing space, providing varying amounts of food for farmworker families and those with whom they share extra produce. Farmworkers who have participated in the project have been primarily identified through ongoing outreach coordinated by Bridges to Health and have expressed interest in growing some of their own food. There are no minimum standards for program participation, and Huertas serves a diverse group of households, ranging from groups of men sharing cramped living quarters to nuclear families with young children.

What is unique about Huertas is that the majority of gardens are located on land owned by dairy farmers, given that most Latino farmworkers are living on the farms where they work. Unlike most community gardening initiatives, the community aspect of Huertas is fostered by the social relationships between volunteers and members of migrant worker households, rather than the social ties facilitated by the shared use of space. Many of the volunteers involved with the project are university students, though supportive neighbors living in rural Vermont have also been involved in the project. The majority of farmworkers with whom Huertas collaborates are geographically isolated and most do not have access to personal transportation, much less public transportation, while living thousands of miles away from family and friends. Moreover, as discussed earlier, those living near the federal border face significant risks in entering and
utilizing public spaces, making traditional community gardening approaches next to impossible. By connecting farmworkers with volunteers, materials, and the permission from the dairy owners to plant these gardens within this set of constraints, Huertas aims to address the disparities in access to nutritious food while simultaneously bridging the barriers of social isolation that are sustained and reproduced in this type of working landscape.

The Huertas Project began in 2010 as an informal program to distribute seeds and plant starts to farmworkers to increase access to more localized and culturally appropriate sources of food. Over the last few seasons, in our effort to learn about and prioritize the cultural preferences of the dairy workers with whom we work, our project team and student interns have begun dialogues early in the season to gain a better understanding of the preferred selection of vegetables and herbs for each participating farm. These vegetables have ranged from the everyday staples easily found in US grocery stores like lettuce, tomatoes, carrots, and onions to culturally familiar herbs like \textit{cilantro}, \textit{epazote}, \textit{hierba buena}, and several varieties of \textit{chiles} (including \textit{poblano}, \textit{miracielo}, \textit{jalapeño}, \textit{habanero}, and \textit{serrano}) used in preparing various Mexican dishes. Based on the preliminary list, we have received the generous support of local greenhouses and farmers who have provided supplies, seeds, and transplants for the gardens. Several of the gardeners have also planted their own seeds that they saved themselves or brought from home. Volunteers from the broader community are matched with gardeners to do two outreach visits; plot planning and preparation in the late spring as well as a planting day in the early summer. However, several of these partnerships have extended past these visits, resulting in regular visits and shared meals between farmworkers and project volunteers.

Although the population of farmworkers in Vermont is relatively small and the number of farmers is also on a continual decline, it is difficult and perhaps also counterproductive to
generalize the relationships between farmworkers and farm owners within the dairy industry or the cultural and livelihood backgrounds that farmworkers bring with them into the state. While cases of worker abuse are well documented and there are significant concerns of exploitation, many workers with whom we have collaborated have expressed their appreciation for their employer and the opportunity to work, and some are regularly welcomed into their employers’ families for celebrations and meals. Yet, the power dynamics between farmers and farmworkers are necessarily borne out of imbalances of power and privilege, though it must be acknowledged that farmers themselves are also caught in a cycle where their productive work is continually devalued by the market economy and where pressures from corporate consolidation and failed agricultural policies are ever-present. Still, on the farms where Huertas is active, all of the farm owners are supportive of the project, though this support ranges from a simple granting of permission to utilize a small plot of land to helping to prepare the soil and add compost enriched by manure generated by the herd. Within the group of participating farmworkers, some have extensive agricultural experience in their home countries and reflect upon their families’ farms with a sense of fondness and nostalgia, while others were already disconnected from an agrarian tradition long before they arrived in Vermont.

As Huertas has expanded over the last few years, we have become increasingly guided by and committed to a food sovereignty framework. Within food-related projects and the many food movements in which they are embedded, multiple discourses guide activist and advocacy efforts, including local food, community food security, food justice, and food sovereignty (Mares and Alkon 2011). The promise of a food sovereignty framework stems from its bottom-up perspective that demands a deeper conversation of rights, control, and choice. Perhaps most importantly, food sovereignty moves beyond a focus on food security to advocate for a deeper
connection to food that challenges a narrow consumer-commodity relationship. Developed most intensively by the international peasant movement *La Via Campesina*, food sovereignty has been primarily conceptualized as an all-encompassing movement with the end goal of rebuilding locally-controlled food systems, rather than a set of everyday practices and choices that individuals and families make over the food that sustains them. In our work, we have become convinced that food sovereignty can and should operate at both levels, and that the household (or garden) is a crucial space where food sovereignty might emerge.

In examining how food sovereignty plays out within the home and on the plate, theoretical concepts like “principles of taste” and “culinary subjectivities,” as described by Meredith Abarca in this volume, prove to be helpful in understanding the material realities that shape and are shaped by the foodways of Latino farmworkers. For Alma, whose story opened this chapter, the *right chiles* and the *right masa* are key to reproducing tastes from home, revealing a depth of culinary subjectivity that illustrates a keen sense of agency and autonomy over the food that sustains her and her family. However, the lengths she must go to secure these foods reveal the challenges present in everyday practices of attaining food sovereignty in a place beset by structural vulnerability. In the narratives below, the practices of food sovereignty demonstrated by Huertas participants are placed into conversation with the structural vulnerabilities that shape their lives.

Narrating the Self Through the Garden

A central component of building a community-engaged research project connected to Huertas has been to share the stories of the gardeners with whom we work not only in academic literature
but also with local audiences in Vermont who are often unaware of the particular challenges facing the workers who are producing the dairy products for which the region is known. What follows is an attempt to share the narratives of some of the farmworkers with whom we have collaborated and what we have learned about their relationships with their gardening spaces, the experience of migration, and the food that sustains them. These vignettes reveal that, even while these gardens are significant in rebuilding some sense of place and fostering practices of food sovereignty, our efforts are necessarily limited by constraints of a short growing season, demanding work schedules, and the deeper structural vulnerabilities these workers face.

Since early 2012, we have regularly visited with farmworkers, planning and preparing garden beds, witnessing the births of calves, deciding the best place to plant tomatoes, and hauling away hundreds of pounds of squash that had transformed overnight from *calabicitas* to what we have jokingly termed “*calabazones.*” During the harvest seasons over the past few years, we have set aside several full days to visit gardeners during the height of the gardens’ productivity to gain a better understanding of what has worked well and what we might consider doing differently the following year. These visits have also provided important ethnographic insights, allowing us to refine our long-term research interests and objectives. In anticipation of a series of visits in 2012, Wolcott-MacCausland warned Mares and Mazar, half-jokingly, that we would need to make sure the car was empty to carry all of the produce that would be given to us as we made our rounds. This turned out to be fair warning, as we soon found ourselves the lucky recipients of pounds and pounds of extra veggies, most of them coming from the garden of Tomás.

Tomás, born in 1950, had been working on and off in the United States since he was 24 years old. Raised in the state of Guerrero, he is the father of eight children, six of whom live and
work in various states north of the border. Until arriving on a Vermont dairy farm in 2002, he traveled back and forth frequently between jobs working on large farms that grew tobacco, lettuce, cabbage, cauliflower, and beets while in the United States and tending to his maiz y frijoles (corn and beans) while at home in Mexico. With increased border security following 9-11, Tomás and millions of other migrant workers have found themselves less able to visit Mexico for fear that they would not be able to return to work in the United States. While he reminisced frequently about caring for his land in Mexico, until connecting to the Huertas project, he had never grown food for his own sustenance in the United States. After decades of working in US agriculture, Tomás permanently returned to Mexico in January of 2015 after his employer sold the remaining herd and retired. His return to Mexico occurred just months after he appeared in immigration court and had been granted deferred deportation proceedings until late 2015.

In the fall of 2012, as Mares and Mazar entered the small two-bedroom mobile home that he shared with two other men, Tomás quickly pushed into our hands three gallon-sized bags of frozen wild black raspberries that he had picked from the surrounding hills in anticipation of our visit. After scooting us through the trailer and out the back door, bags in hand, we were stunned to see the vibrant inter-cropped garden that spanned almost the full length of the home. We were even more taken aback when we learned that the space in which we were standing was just one of four gardens that he tended around the property, all the while working more than 60-70 hours per week milking cows. Over the next hour, we followed him around the garden as he proceeded to fill bags and bags of tomatoes, ground cherries, herbs, winter squash, corn, and zucchini that he insisted we take home. This produce, which he regularly calls “gifts from the earth,” was shared with the two men with whom he lived, health outreach volunteers from UVM Extension,
and the wife of the farm owner for whom he worked (in fact, she was quite jealous of his
garden). He was even known to package up produce to send to his children in various states in
the eastern and southeastern US.

At a more recent visit, we asked Tomás why he had not grown a garden previously given
his extensive agricultural experience and enthusiasm for growing. He replied that until he was
approached by Huertas, he never even thought planting a garden was a possibility. Despite
having a tremendous wealth of agricultural knowledge and experience and a deep love of
growing food, he was unable to access the seeds and other necessary materials needed for his
garden, a connection that was successfully established through participating in the project. After
this brief discussion, he quickly returned to the tour of his garden, pointing out the sunflowers
and flor de viuda (widow flowers) he had planted around the perimeter of the space and the dry
beans he had received from his family in Mexico. Over the course of our many visits, Tomás
regularly requested that we take pictures of him in his garden so that he could share them with
his children and so that he could bring them with him back to Mexico. In these instances, the
sense of pride and sovereignty that is cultivated through these gardens becomes clear, as is the
desire to share the bounty of the food produced in these spaces. Before he returned home to
Mexico, he made sure to let our team know that he was looking forward to growing his own food
again on a greater scale on the land he had been accumulating in his home state of Guerrero.

As our visits with Tomás grew more regular throughout 2013 and 2014, and more
focused on socializing than gardening, he began to prepare elaborate meals in anticipation of
having guests. These meals nearly always centered upon homemade tortillas that he prepared
with Maseca purchased from the mobile vendors, and were accompanied by a rotating
assortment of vegetables, chicken mole, posole, atole, beans, salsas, rice, and candied squash that
suited his own principles of taste. When asked if he cooked these kinds of dishes in Mexico, he gave a sly laugh and stated, “No, in Mexico, I was the king! I did not need to cook or clean, nothing!” Commenting on the “machista” ways of men in Mexico, he both acknowledged his gender privilege during this conversation, but also hypothesized that when returned home for good, he most certainly would not continue to cook if he could find a woman who would do so. However, as his stay in the United States stretched longer than he had originally planned, he sought out the expertise of women, particularly when he was working in seasonal crop production where women were more commonly employed. These women shared with him their cooking knowledge and skills, which he began to employ in his own kitchen. While tortillas were an everyday staple in his Vermont home, as he repeatedly reminded us, cooking more elaborate meals was really only worth the time and effort if it brought visitors to his home. In this way, Tomás engages his culinary subjectivity and practices of food sovereignty to rebuild a sense of commensality that was often absent while he worked in the United States.

During Huertas site visits, what has been particularly striking are the daily lives of women, especially mothers with very young children, who are living at these dairies. Unlike Tomás, who would likely give up his cooking duties if he could find someone else to cook for him, for Juana, preparing meals that resemble those from home is what she loves most about her garden. As a newer gardener, Juana’s success growing food for the first time in 2012 was impressive, especially given that the farm owner periodically cut off the water supply to her family’s home during the hottest period of the summer to redirect it to the cows in the barn. At this farm, Juana lived with her two small boys, her husband, and a few other men in a small manufactured home, though she has since moved to a new farm and now lives only with her immediate family. For Juana, cultivating her own food has given her an opportunity to get
outside and recreate some of the meals she misses from home, and to also develop new skills in food production that she had only witnessed while living in Chiapas, Mexico. Although she has jokingly complained about the fact that her husband and children do not have enough appreciation for vegetables, she has continued to find new ways of sneaking them into the meals she prepares. Over the past few years we have regularly visited and shared meals with Juana, and during this time, her garden has increased exponentially in size and productivity.

Unlike many of the gardeners with whom we have worked, Juana had little experience growing her own food before becoming involved in Huertas, despite having been raised in an agricultural community. However, she has thrown herself into the project with both feet, growing flowers and vegetables that she regularly shares with other volunteers who come to her home and with our project collaborators whenever she gets a chance. Whether it is fresh salsa or a bouquet of recently picked flowers, Juana has developed a firm sense of pride in her ability to create something from the ground where she resides. Even with this personal growth, her autonomy and sense of pride is rooted to land that she does not own, a connection that remains tenuous and seemingly impermanent. Nevertheless, Juana has grown increasingly active in local farmworker activism efforts and has recently taught a cooking class focusing on tamales at a local food cooperative, in addition to starting to work a few hours at a nearby dairy. Despite the fact that these events require her to leave the home -- which is a risky venture given where she lives -- Juana’s relationships to the local community are deepening despite all odds.

Another woman, Lourdes, lives with her young daughter and husband, along with several other workers at a farm very close to the border. The Huertas project has given her and her daughter an outlet for creativity, experiencing the outdoors, and cultivating fresh food with
deep cultural resonance. She reflected upon these experiences during a 2014 visit with Wolcott-MacCausland:

“I used to only leave the apartment to go to the milking parlor to help my husband sometimes. I never went outside. I didn’t see the sun. Three years ago I started to have a garden. I didn’t know anything about having a garden here. Jessie [Mazar] and Teresa [Mares] came to talk to me about it. They explained how to prepare the soil and asked about the plants I wanted. The boss gave us a place to plant in an area in between the barns and farm machinery. Immigration always passes by on the roads next to the farm so it was difficult to find a place that was not visible from the road.”

Because of this continual fear of immigration enforcement, Lourdes explained that prior to having a garden, there were periods where she would not leave her apartment for as long as two months at a time because there simply was not anywhere enjoyable to go. This apartment, tucked behind a makeshift farm office, has a small kitchen and sleeping quarters for the workers, and little else.

As Lourdes recalled, in deciding upon the location of the garden we had to take extra care that it was out of sight from the small state highway that loops around the barn and their housing unit. To get to the raised beds, Lourdes and her daughter put on their rubber boots and muck their way through the milking parlor and then the cow barn, wading through inches of animal waste to arrive at a sunny area tucked between two sections of a free stall barn and bunker silos that store the majority of the cow feed. Despite these obstacles, Lourdes has repeatedly expressed that the
garden has given her and her daughter a reason to get outside, often as much as three or four times a day, and reconnect with dishes like *chile rellenos* that she prepares with the produce that she is growing with her own hands. As importantly, she has expressed her appreciation for the project for the ways it has allowed her to meet more people and form lasting friendships.

During the summer months, the produce from her garden provides a significant percentage of the fresh vegetables her family consumes and throughout the winter, she has added dried herbs from the garden to flavor her dishes and has saved seeds to replant the herbs the following year. For her, this is a meaningful addition to her household’s food supply and a practice in food sovereignty, though there are seasonal limitations. She explains:

“The rest of the year, the manager on the farm buys us the vegetables we ask for once a week. We make a list and request what we need. Its difficult to know how much I need each week and there are times that we eat all the vegetables I ask for in a few days and then we don’t have any for the rest of the week. Other times, we have too much and they rot before we can use them. With the garden, I harvest what I need daily without the vegetables going bad or not having enough for the meal. Since I started harvesting this year I haven’t purchased any vegetables. Every day I harvest what I want that day. I covered my garden a few weeks ago to protect it from the frost and am still able to harvest.”

Lourdes’s garden continues to be one of the most productive we have seen, an abundant space where she grows corn, tomatoes, several varieties of *chiles*, tomatillo, lettuce, radishes, summer squash, carrots, watermelon, cucumbers, onions, garlic, in addition to many different herbs (cilantro, oregano, mint, chamomile, *epazote*, dill, thyme, *papalo*, and *cepiche*). While the
variety and quality of vegetables is of clear benefit, Lourdes’ ability to choose which vegetables she wants to pick and eat, and avoid waste, is perhaps even more significant in terms of everyday practices of food sovereignty. Unlike all of the other women involved with Huertas, Lourdes has no interest in planting flowers, preferring to dedicate this precious space to food production only.

Over the last two years she and her husband have made special efforts to construct raised bed borders and extend the overall footprint of the garden, in addition to adding a large umbrella to provide shade for relaxation. This has transformed the garden from a space of producing only vegetables to one of broader impact:

“One benefit of the garden is the distraction. If I didn’t have the garden, I’d be inside all day in the kitchen watching TV. I don’t get bored in the kitchen but its different being outside. Now I go outside and listen to the birds sing. I feel more free, like I’m in the fields in my village. The memories of what it was like there come back. Another benefit is to breathe fresh air and have fresh vegetable and herbs and no more rotten cilantro!”

In these connections, we can observe the desire to create a sense of belonging and tranquility, even amidst the challenging conditions and fear in which she lives. She has repeatedly told us that when the time comes for her to return to her home state of Guerrero, Mexico, she would like to take the skills she has learned through gardening in Vermont and grow vegetables for sale on land that she owns.

As Lourdes’ young daughter has grown increasingly talkative and precocious, Lourdes has made an effort to expand her social networks as much as possible, recognizing the importance of her interacting with other children. At times, this has involved Lourdes sending
her to Easter egg hunts and birthday parties for the children of other farmers in the area with the farm owner’s wife, an opportunity that her daughter has because she was born in the United States and is not subject to the same fear of immigration enforcement that confronts Lourdes. The sad fact is that Lourdes does not feel safe going to these parties herself, though she will sometimes make exceptions and endure the risk for the parties of children of other Mexican mothers. These kinds of contradictions are fueled by a misguided and unjust set of immigration and agricultural policies that leave migrant farmworker households in a state of structural vulnerability where even the most mundane events – like an Easter egg hunt – become a point of disconnection between mother and child.

The final vignette is brief and brings us back to the individual whose story opens this chapter. During the long process of assembling tamales in 2013, we asked Alma whether she had any interest in starting a garden. She hesitantly explained that she had tried small container gardens before, but that she was fearful that the family who lived below her, all US citizens, would destroy any effort she might make towards expanding her gardening space. She described how this family had a long history of stealing and breaking any items that she and her children left outside and repeatedly threatened to call border patrol on them if they made any complaints. Despite her love of cooking, and the elaborate steps she regularly takes to access food that is familiar and meaningful, the risks of starting a garden did not outweigh the benefits. Fortunately, Alma has since moved to a new home with her family and her overall living situation has become more comfortable. She has recently started a garden at her new home and also hopes to support the project through providing outreach to other workers in the area, many of whom purchase food from the informal catering business that she runs out of her home. Alma’s story reminds us that while Huertas has enabled participating farmworkers to expand their everyday
practices of food sovereignty, the overall impact of the program is small in relationship to the needs, and hundreds of farmworkers still stand to benefit not only from the familiar food that the project aims to provide, but also from the social connectedness that is perhaps even more needed.

Moving Towards Sovereignty in a Vulnerable Place

Over the past few summers, as the gardens were bursting with produce, we have planned several fiestas to bring many of these gardeners together and to celebrate and share the literal fruits of our labor. Over a large gas-fired stove at the Wolcott-MacCausland family farm, the individuals and families described in these vignettes have come together to share homemade tortillas, prepare and can fresh salsas and black raspberry jam, and use up some of the baseball-bat-sized calabacita in zucchini cakes. We have done this all with the goal of building a sense of commensality and community that is often missing from the daily lives of these workers. In a small way, these events have challenged the isolation that is produced by and reproduces Vermont’s rural working landscape. In these fiestas and in the gardens themselves, we see the glimmers of sovereignty and autonomy over the sources and diversity of foods these individuals are consuming. Yet, in planning these events, we must remain constantly aware that for farmworkers, leaving one’s home and entering the public sphere, for a reason as simple as celebrating a birthday or sharing one’s tomatillos, puts them at risk for surveillance and potential detention by border patrol. These individuals take these risks, fully aware of the consequences, because of their deep desire for social connection.

In this snapshot of a man in his beloved gardens where he tends to “the gifts of the earth,” the rejection of planting flowers in favor of vegetables, or the firm commitment to provide
healthy foods for one’s husband and children, we can observe how these individuals claim a
sense of agency and a connection to meaningful meals in a borderland region that is far from
welcoming. We also can observe how these individual efforts, and the broader objectives of the
Huertas project, call into question the complicated dynamics of how food sovereignty efforts
plays out on the ground and the challenges of working towards greater autonomy over one’s food
access in an environment that is beset by so few choices. As we continually develop the Huertas
project, questions of food access are of central concern, but it is not a straightforward connection
to mere calories or nutrients that we are aiming to enable. Rather, in working alongside
individuals like Juana, Tomás, and Lourdes, we seek to expand the choices and decisions that
socially marginalized individuals have over how to source their food and what kinds of foods are
available close to home. While the chile or corn plants they cultivate are just one small
contribution to the household’s food supply, as these stories demonstrate, the meaning of these
plants goes deeper than their nutritional value to more fundamental issues of self-sufficiency and
sustaining ties to cultural identity.

In previous work, Mares has written about the ways that kitchen gardens can serve as a
source of sustenance and the maintenance of cultural identities, especially in the midst of
migration and settlement (Mares and Peña 2011). This is something that we have seen very
clearly through our work with Huertas. Our project team is also aware that no matter how many
gardens we plant, or how successful they may be, they are just one small part of addressing basic
needs year round and it is imperative to underscore that these gardens are only productive for a
few months out of the year. While most of the gardeners make an effort to freeze, dry, and
otherwise preserve foods for the winter months, all remain dependent on others to do the
majority of their shopping for them, often the manager or owner of the farm who rarely speaks
Spanish. In this way, their ability to choose and have regular access to food in these northern borderlands - particularly fresh foods with cultural significance - remains compromised and their practices of food sovereignty remain constrained. While many of the Huertas participants have indicated that they have consistent access to food, they do not often have total control over what they are eating or when the food arrives. We have observed that gardens are one part of a broader patchwork of responses that have sprouted up because of unpredictable and inconsistent food access and that in this northern climate, year round access to healthy, sustaining, and culturally relevant food is of utmost importance.

As a border state, many of the same fears, anxieties, and dangers that are connected to the southern border are reproduced in Vermont, with significant consequences for the food sovereignty, health access, and overall wellbeing of migrant workers sustaining the state’s dairy industry. While the number of migrant workers in these northern borderlands is much smaller than at the U.S-Mexico border, significant experiences of structural vulnerability have been expressed by the workers involved with Huertas, a vulnerability that both is produced by and serves to reproduce the ongoing fear and anxieties of living and working in a landscape where one is so visibly out of place. While the cultural and political contexts in these northern states are very different from California, Texas, and other areas with large numbers of migrant farmworkers, the political possibilities of Vermont’s political progressiveness remain limited by a failed set of agricultural and immigration policies at the national level. More broadly speaking, we must recognize that our agricultural system is built upon a systematic and often violent denial of sovereignty to workers across the food chain, both in the United States and in their countries of origin. Until we as a nation are ready to come to terms with the needs of those who feed us, and do all that we can to ensure that they can feed themselves in a way that they deem
appropriate and nourishing, the mealtimes of individuals like Tomás, Juana, and Lourdes will continue to be incomplete.

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