Looking for Work:  
Placing Labor in Food Studies

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Michael Pollan tells us to do a lot of things. He tells us to cook, to eat more plants, to embody our grandmothers in our food choices, to care about where our food comes from. Though lesser known than his witty axioms on what to eat, Pollan’s more recent writings tell us that the price of our food is deeply problematic: that laborers in our food system are not paid a fair wage. As individual consumers, we cannot forage, shoot, or buy our way out of this problem, as much of what we consume is picked, packaged, and served by low-wage workers. Pollan’s recent attention to labor follows the growth of food activism focused on improving the lives of a marginalized and largely immigrant workforce, particularly in the area of compensation. For example, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), an organization of tomato growers in southern Florida, has effectively worked to pressure large corporate buyers—from Walmart to Taco Bell—to pay a penny more for each pound of tomatoes they purchase. This has translated not only into reduced harassment and added work breaks but also into an appreciable increase in the per-week take-home pay of each farmworker.¹

During the late 2013 restaurant workers’ strike, in a MoveOn.org petition that garnered millions of signatures, Pollan wrote:

As a society, we’ve trapped ourselves in a kind of reverse Fordism. Instead of paying workers well enough so that they can afford good, honestly-priced products—as Henry Ford endeavored to do so that his workers might afford to buy his cars—we pay them so little that the only food they can afford is junk food destructive of their health and the environment’s. If we are ever to right this wrong, to produce food sustainably and justly and sell it at an honest price, we will first have to pay people a

living wage so that they can afford to buy it. Let’s start with the people who work so hard to feed us.²

This statement brings together his eat-like-your-grandmother prescriptions with something different—something a little less individualizing than his usual narratives about ethical consumption.³ Pollan is talking about broader structures that shape contemporary food provisioning in North America. In doing so, he is bringing a discussion of labor to the table at a time when agricultural work in the Americas and beyond is becoming ever more precarious (through, for example, state rollbacks of labor regulations). We know that food is cheap in part because laborers are not paid living wages. We also know that cheap food does not come from farmers markets, but from faceless and too-large-to-fathom structures.

Questions about cheapness are typically answered with descriptions of economies of scale associated with factory farms and industrial concentration that squeeze small, underresourced farmers out of markets.⁴ Every day, more “small farmers” across the Americas find themselves surviving on nonfarm income. Depending on circumstance (e.g., whether they were born in the United States or Latin America), some commute while others migrate to urban centers or industrial farm fields to work in temporary arrangements. While some small farmers rely on the paradoxical strategy of migrant labor to hold on to their land at home, others give up land entirely. This insecure labor force produces the strawberries, wine, and kale that fill our shopping carts throughout the year. Not every farmworker wants to be—or practically can be—a small farmer.

A large-versus-small narrative, then, while certainly evocative, is too simplistic. As we detail in this article, a number of scholars use their research on small farming and alternative agriculture as a means to critique the industrial American food system and to envision change. This attention to environmentally and socially “sustainable” alternatives is certainly welcome. With all of this attention to the sustainability of farming systems, however, there has not been a similarly robust movement to bring attention to agricultural unsustainability. Increased attention to food labor in the public sphere, as witnessed by popular support for movements such as the CIW, Food Chain Workers Alliance, and US fast food workers’ strikes, has not translated

into increased attention to waged labor in the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of food studies. In short, there are fewer “small farmers” but there are increasingly more studies of them. This is somewhat surprising because food studies can trace its origins to explorations of industrial, stratified agricultural spaces across the Americas, from coffee plantations to cannery floors. Here, we review ethnographic, historical, and geographical works on wage labor in those vast systems. We call attention to this literature because studies of alternative agriculture continue to obfuscate labor, as Julie Guthman argued more than a decade ago. This article is a provocation to scholars who study food—from the industrial, to the “alternative,” to spaces in between—to piece together a critical framework for understanding and analyzing the role of wage labor within agro-food systems.

In her Winter 2013 “Editor’s Letter” in the flagship food studies journal *Gastronomica*, Melissa Caldwell discusses the transition from the subtitle *The Journal of Food and Culture* to *The Journal of Critical Food Studies*. Caldwell, quoting Guthman, questions the extent to which critical food studies is about food or “something else”—something beyond food itself that is revealed through looking through the lens of food. We, along with Caldwell and Guthman, agree that critical food studies is about the “something else.” This review highlights how, as food studies develops and diversifies, that “something else” should include labor. Food studies can build on a long tradition of situating labor and everyday life in the study of agriculture and strive for intersectionality, bringing attention to gender, ethnicity, and ecological concerns.

Certainly, most food studies scholars would agree with and even echo Caldwell’s statement that food studies has long highlighted how “food never exists in isolation from larger trends and dynamics” nor is it “merely something pleasurable or tasty. . . . [It is] crucially significant to all parts of our daily lives.” But too often, waged labor is isolated from scholarly interpretations of the food system. Laborers stand somewhere outside of our daily lives. Increased attention to labor in food studies will certainly add much to the critical food studies project. Studies of labor at the microscale of analysis favored by anthropologists, historians, and journalists provide an important complement to commodity chain studies of global agricultural circulation or ecological interpretations of food production and distribution.

To explore this critical framework for labor-sensitive food studies, in this article, we first review recent food studies scholarship on agricultural production, which

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leans heavily toward studies of alternative and small-farmer agriculture. We then overview different analytical and theoretical framings dominant in the study of labor and agriculture, tracing work in food studies from anthropological analyses of peasant and plantation agriculture, to cultural ecologies of smallholders, to American agrarianism, and finally to political economic studies of commodity chains and the labor process. In the review’s penultimate section, we curate scholarship that attempts to merge macrolevel political economic analysis with a detailed narrative and interpretive inquiry. We do so in hopes of laying groundwork for future intersectional research in critical food studies that is more sensitive to the lives of waged labor. In our conclusion, we argue for further theoretical and empirical expansion to engage the relationship between labor and food in the twenty-first century.

**Food and Agricultural Studies**

As a field that straddles several academic disciplines and includes work aimed at both popular and scholarly audiences, “food studies” remains a dynamic area of inquiry. Scholarly food studies often take the form of “stories of stuff,” which describe the actors and processes in food production and consumption. Attention in this area of the literature tends to be on “the social lives” of food products: their symbolic or cultural potency. In line with the prescriptions of anthropologist Laura Nader, other studies “study up” the commodity chain to focus on the practices of powerful intermediaries—retailers, distributors, and marketers of various foods. Recently, journalists and others writing for nonspecialist audiences have combined an interest in “social lives” with a call to “study up,” reorienting the conversation around issues of consumption: access to “good” food, education about where food comes from, and what constitutes “healthy” eating. These accounts attempt to unmask the condi-


tions of food provisioning. In this popular food literature, the “study” is literally on our plates. As such, it works to change what is on our plates. This approach, however, ultimately serves to validate or condemn our individual purchases while turning the lives of others, particularly producers and middlemen, into ciphers for what is wrong with the food system.

The intensification of agriculture in the Americas has catalyzed activist and scholarly attempts to re-embed markets that, in Karl Polanyi’s terms, have been “disembedded” from society. Scholars have recently become interested in analyzing alternatives to the industrial food system. The social science literature from the past decade includes explorations of small-scale, local production, such as heritage meat, artisanal cheese, community-supported agriculture, and community gardens. Scholars have theorized alternative food movements as Polanyian, in that they attempt to bring ethical conventions back into circulation and, thus, challenge the environmental and social degradation of market forces, which treat land and labor as commodities and inputs into the production process. Third-party, environmentally friendly certification schemes (e.g., organic or fair trade), or local, community-based distribution systems have become popular strategies for this project.

The theoretical promise of alternative food to re-embed production, or to defetishize the commodity, has been complicated by empirical research on certified agro-food production. Significant attention has been given to the “mainstreaming”

of alternative food networks, particularly in the case of organic and fair trade. Scholars argue that the enrollment of larger-scale producers and branded transnational corporate buyers has undermined the principles of sustainability and social justice that served as the initial impetus for these movements and which continue to be used for product marketing. In the case of fair trade, Jaffee argues that plantation certification threatens the position of smallholders within the movement. While there is truth in this claim, particularly given the economics of scale, and resources and market access enjoyed by plantations, this focus also obscures the substantial use of wage labor in smallholder agriculture. While plantation certification remains contradictory and problematic, since working conditions remain highly stratified and obstacles to labor unionization are numerous, fair trade plantation standards, at a minimum, acknowledge the presence of wage laborers and include them in the benefits of certification. Organic agriculture movements have likewise sidelonged the fundamental role of workers in commercial production. More recently, some studies have shown how labor practices, including waged and contracted labor arrangements traditionally associated with conventional agriculture, still undergird “alternative” production. These studies lead us to conclude that “alternative” agriculture might not be that alternative at all. Instead, it appears to provide arguably rarified food choices for consumers who are interested in (and able to) “vote with their forks” for a particular food ethic and aesthetic in the marketplace.

As alternative, local (or seemingly local) food production becomes a more familiar space for scholarly attention, industrial production, from canneries to


CAFOs (concentrated animal feeding operations), has become more distanced from scrutiny. Why, in an era of increasing industrialization of the food system, do we see less attention to industrial spaces of production (and their associated labor processes) in favor of studies of environmentally friendly or small-scale alternatives? One answer is that despite the enduring popularity of fictional and nonfictional accounts of the plight of agricultural workers from the likes of John Steinbeck29 and Carey McWilliams,30 a pastoral ideal of agriculture popularized by Thomas Jefferson,31 which highlights the virtuous qualities of agrarian life, has held sway over popular representations of farming in the Americas through most of the twentieth century.32 Geographer Julie Guthman describes these representations as part of an “agrarian imaginary” that substitutes the actual hierarchical, labor-intensive workings of industrial agriculture—even organic agriculture—with a mystified image of a redemptive, morally righteous family farm.33

Guthman’s notion of an agrarian imaginary undergirds many of the critical studies of alternative agriculture to which we referred previously, but a second question remains: what is the place of wage labor in food studies? To answer this question, in the sections that follow, we review scholarly works along three lines: (1) ecologically informed studies of food production, (2) labor process and commodity systems studies, and (3) histories and ethnographies of wage labor in the food system.

### Between Culture and Ecology

Scholarly inquiries at the intersection of food and work are not novel. In anthropology, Audrey Richards’s *Land, Labour, and Diet in Northern Rhodesia* serves as a foundational text for understanding not only food production and exchange but also the nutritive and symbolic aspects of food.34 Anthropologists after Richards have used myriad foods as lenses for understanding cultural life.35 Hunting and gathering

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have also been of concern to anthropologists exploring subsistence, exchange, and human-animal relations. Since the 1960s, four theoretical and methodological frameworks have dominated anthropological, geographical, and allied studies of agricultural work in the Americas.

The first is the political economic analysis of plantation agriculture. In *Sweetness and Power*, Sidney Mintz traces Caribbean sugar plantations back to the British mercantilist period. Born out of this protectionist system, the plantation thrived during the Industrial Revolution, during which time, the circulation of slaves, silver, sugar, and tea created a drink that fueled factory laborers back in England. The cultivation of colonial plantation crops—sugar, coffee, bananas, tea—has long been implicated in global exchange and the dispossession of (often migrant, bonded, or enslaved) labor. The plantation system—marked by the large-scale, vertically integrated production of single crops in an ecologically intensive and sociologically hierarchical manner—certainly laid the groundwork for the contemporary industrial food system, but it is important to note that plantations still operate in many parts of the Americas much as they did when Mintz did his fieldwork in the 1950s.

The second framework is that of peasant studies. “Peasant” agricultural systems, characterized by farmers working land owned by a landholder and growing crops for subsistence as well as for estates, have been of long-standing interest to social scientists. The peasant studies literature brings attention to the “moral economic”

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38. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*.
40. Besky, *The Darjeeling Distinction*.
relationships between elites and rural cultivators. Ethnographers of peasant moral economies in the Americas have explored the inclusion of peasants into wage labor agreements, participation in transnational social movements, and how the image of the peasantry is idealized in sustainable development projects.

The work of cultural ecologist Robert Netting represents another highly influential thread in early studies of agriculture. Netting’s legacy to food studies is his call for attention to a third space where labor and agriculture intersect: the smallholder farm. In a 1972 article on “agrarian ecology,” he suggested that the production of food was perhaps so basic to daily existence that it had been overlooked by his fellow anthropologists who worked among smallholders. Netting is credited both with drawing attention to farmers’ perspectives and with scientizing the field (what he and others self-deprecatingly called “potato counting”). His focus on quantifying everyday labor spawned many studies under the rubric of cultural ecology on “the sexual division of labor” in food production, household organization, and anti-Malthusian discussions of agricultural intensification. This scientized tradition still

shapes cultural ecology. More recently, scholars have been drawn to Netting’s work on smallholders as a rubric for “sustainable” food production in food studies.

The fourth major framework concerns the agrarian question, the concern—mainly among Marxist scholars—about the potential for capitalism to penetrate smallholder agriculture and to create a differentiation among the peasantry into a rural proletariat and bourgeoisie. While Lenin argued for a progressive differentiation and consolidation within agricultural sectors, Karl Kautsky argued that particular social relations and environmental conditions associated with farming presented significant barriers to capitalist penetration. In particular, Kautsky viewed the tendency of peasants to self-exploit through household labor as a means to resist market competition, and thus to hold on to land and maintain independence. Following Kautsky, Alexander Chayanov presents a more nuanced examination of peasant agriculture, citing significant differentiation among smallholders and theorizing that cooperative production could cultivate economies of scale and political organization to improve peasants’ position vis-à-vis large estates.

Contemporary scholars have drawn on these classic theories to explain both the persistence of family farming and how a return to sharecropping arrangements in the United States has served as a means for capital interests to externalize risk while maintaining control over production. Others have highlighted how industrial farms in the global South have come to rely on contracting smallholders and hiring piece workers as a means of appropriating surplus value while not providing wages. Goran Djurfeldt describes this phenomenon as “capitalism without capitalists.”


Agriculture is problematic for labor theorists because it is, in Leo Marx’s terms, a “middle landscape,” partly natural and partly cultural, partly mechanized and partly organic. This problem becomes especially apparent when theorists attempt to explain working conditions in the Americas, where a combination of indenture, sharecropping, and mechanization has created the most productive agricultural landscape anywhere in the world. To bring the study of agricultural labor out of this liminal space, scholars have attempted to bridge agricultural studies with industrial sociology. In the next section, we address these studies of commodity chains, which describe the macroscale workings of agro-food production and distribution.

### Labor Process and Commodity Systems

Harry Braverman describes the development of industrial work as the evolution of tighter systems of labor control in the forms of quotas, bonuses, and increasingly segmented tasks, which enables management to control the pace of production. Braverman elaborates Karl Marx’s theories of alienation, explaining that capital “steals skills” from labor and degrades the satisfaction workers can gain from work. This “labor process theory” analyzes changes in the structure of capitalist economies, modes of production, and strategies of control. Michael Burawoy expands upon this framework to explore the concept of workers’ “consent” to remain in the labor process. Burawoy likens this consent to the game of “making out”: making above and beyond management-set quotas. Burawoy, like Braverman, worked as a machine operator and described participating in this game, which was not done for the monetary bonuses he and other workers received but as a way to transcend the monotony of production.

Agriculture has long fallen out of the purview of industrial ethnographies. Global commodity studies have attempted to rectify this. Drawing on economic
history and world-systems theory, commodity chain studies attempt to analyze how goods and services are designed, produced, brought to market, and consumed. Global commodity chain (GCC) research has tended to focus on questions of governance, in terms of economic interactions between individual firms within a given supply chain, and the relative power of various actors to shape conditions of production and trade. Global value chain (GVC) analysis has built upon GCC studies to provide a more nuanced view of relationships across the supply chain and to account for increasing complexity in supply chain transactions, the roles of codification and certification, and the importance of supplier capabilities. Despite this analytical broadening, the GVC framework remains a somewhat rigid typology for understanding the factors shaping production and distribution, particularly with respect to the governance of labor relations. Labor remains an abstraction, one input in the production process. GCC and GVC have been deployed in agro-food studies across an array of commodities. In particular, scholars have used Gereffi’s “buyer-driven commodity chain” analytic to highlight the power of branded food corporations and chain retailers in shaping production and trading practices in agro-food networks, including the ratcheting down of prices paid to producers and, concomitantly, wages and working conditions.

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67. The term commodity chain has been widely used to encompass the various actors and institutions involved in the production and distribution of commodities, as well as the relationships between them. See Terrance Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein, “Commodity Chains in the World Economy Prior to 1800,” Review (Fernand Braudel Center) 10, no. 1 (1986): 157–70.

68. Gereffi unpacks governance along the following lines: an input-output structure linking various activities, products, and services; territoriality, or the spatial and organizational configuration of production and distribution; and structures that determine the distribution of resources, or value, across the chain. See Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, Commodity Chains.


72. Stephanie Barrientos and Sally Smith, “Mainstreaming Fair Trade in Global Production Networks: Own Brand and Chocolate in UK Supermarkets,” in Raynolds, Murray, and Wilkinson, Fair Trade: The Challenges of Transforming Globalization, 103–22; Burch and Lawrence, Supermarkets and Agri-food Supply Chains; and Smith, Fair Trade Bananas.
Within commodity systems analysis (CSA), William Friedland, Ann Barton, and Robert Thomas’s study of the lettuce industry is foundational.\(^73\) The authors bridge industrial sociology with labor process theory to define a “sociology of agriculture” that “emphasizes the productive processes rather than the derivative social process [of agriculture].”\(^74\) CSA looks beyond the “mere growing of a commodity” and toward an analysis of an overall agricultural system that includes processing, distribution, storage, treatment, transportation, marketing, promotion, and sales as well as the “technical means of production,” including machinery, tools, equipment, and their usage.\(^75\) For Friedland et al., the categories of labor and capital, as well as industry and community, co-constitute one another in the process of producing material things.\(^76\) Communities, they explain, have little measurable effect on the organization of agricultural production; rather, in CSA, communities are derivative of the labor process.

We can certainly critique GCC, GVC, and CSA studies for their bias toward industry-, firm-, or buyer-level analysis and for their lack of attention to particular, place-based, historical and cultural contexts. So-called global commodity chains are also inherently local and contingent. Jennifer Bair and Marion Werner’s “dis/articulations” framework complicates traditional commodity chain analysis by reorienting attention to “the layered histories and uneven geographies of capitalist expansion, disinvestment, and devaluation” in particular locales, and the “place-making and subject-making which make their production possible.”\(^77\) One element of a dis/articulated study of agriculture is a reinvigorated attention to the labor process: an attention to the cultural, linguistic, and gendered nature of the agricultural workplace. In the next section, we look at studies that shed ethnographic light on the lived experiences of agricultural workers themselves. We pay particular attention to the ways in which multiple forms of difference have sustained systems of labor control, at the same time that they have produced possibilities for collective action and resistance.

**Critical Studies of Labor and Agriculture in the Americas**

In his solo-authored work on the California lettuce industry, Robert Thomas challenged the “sociology of agriculture” framework that he and his collaborators


\(^74\) Ibid., 7–8.

\(^75\) Ibid., 15–22.

\(^76\) Ibid.

developed (and which is described above). Thomas describes the CSA approach as unable to account for forces of marginalization outside of the industry because it relies on a strict economic determination of inequality and thereby fails to account for other historically persistent inequalities—namely those of race, gender, and citizenship. Earlier formulations of CSA, Thomas explains, tried to fit a twentieth-century reality into Marx’s nineteenth-century model of capitalist production, and in doing so, adhered to a societal model in which labor—as class—is the fundamental category of social life. Thomas asks scholars of agriculture to move beyond both “mechanical schemes” for explaining different systems of labor control and “notions of the simple exploitation of disadvantaged workers.” Most important, he urges scholars to write against the idea that people—particularly disempowered poor farm laborers—have no idea about the world around them or that their understandings of that world amount to false consciousness.

Thomas provides a critical point of departure for considering questions of labor exploitation and marginality in agriculture. In a review article on agro-food labor, Sutti Ortiz notes that this scholarship tends to focus on processing and packing plants, workplaces with arguably more traditional shop-floor dynamics, rather than farm fields. (Many of the studies Ortiz mentions are rooted in the industrial ethnography tradition we outline above.) She highlights how social categories—gender, racial, or ethnic—are manipulated by capital to maintain control over labor. In some cases, agribusinesses transform these categories to their advantage. Using the case of the California strawberry industry, Miriam Wells argues that while labor relations are structurally influenced, they cannot be reduced to structure. Instead, Wells sees macrolevel dynamics of technological change, economic competition, and class relations as intersecting with the micropolitics of differentiated groups of workers, based on geographic location and sociocultural tradition. These micropolitics extend beyond the narrow spaces of trade and regulation. In the remainder of this section, we review ethnographic and historical works that analyze the lived experiences of workers and their communities. Taken together, this literature provides an understanding of farmworker identity that goes beyond class and of circulation that goes beyond economic and regulatory chains.


79. Ibid.

80. Ibid., 27.

81. James Scott makes a similar argument in the context of peasant agriculture. Using the concept of a “moral economy,” he explores the ways peasants resist authority, through risk-averse practices, in order to ensure subsistence, even in hard times. He also argues that the breakdown at the hands of market forces can engender resistance. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*.

82. Ortiz, “Laboring in the Factories and in the Fields.”

83. Ibid.

84. Wells, *Strawberry Fields*.
Legacies of Migration and Collective Action in the United States

Among the political-economic processes that have fueled the phenomenal agricultural productivity and market dominance of US agriculture, racialization and gender discrimination have been central. Perhaps nowhere else have the intersecting categories of race, gender, and class been more pronounced than in California. Throughout the state’s history, successive waves of immigrant workers have been slotted into an ethnic division of labor whereby the most vulnerable, often recent entrants, were offered the most precarious, lowest-paying jobs. Walker’s historical analysis of the development of California agribusiness illustrates how the presence of immigrant workers helped to entrench a particular system of labor relations, which has underpinned the state’s phenomenal agricultural development, productivity, and profitability. This process of “racial formation” has played heavily not only into agribusiness strategies but also into forms of collective action on the part of farm laborers in response to marginalization.

In his work on California agriculture, Don Mitchell urges scholars to read agricultural landscapes as sites of struggle, where workers have not only served as inputs in the process of making fields productive, but also as agents of resistance and social change. Mitchell describes the 1913 Wheatland Hop riot as an early fulcrum for leveraging simultaneously progressive and repressive transformation in California farm fields. In the following decades, workers used openings to engage in mass workplace actions that caused the industry and the state to both repress and accommodate labor in various ways. Strategies ranged from putting down labor strikes through violent police action, to harassment and deportation of identified labor activists, to state support for improving worker housing, to the implementation of health and safety rules, albeit ones that were unevenly enforced.

While unionization has been a critical mechanism for securing workers’ rights, forms of organization and resistance based on nationality, race, ethnicity, and gender undergird these struggles. These hybrid forms of collective action have reshaped social relations in agriculture and challenged perceptions that certain groups are “unorganizable.” In her study of farm labor activities in California’s


Depression-era cotton fields, for example, Devra Weber highlights the crucial role of Mexican workers in successful strikes and union organizing activities.\footnote{Weber, \textit{Dark Sweat, White Gold}.} Despite a widespread belief that Anglo Dust Bowl migrants were more likely to support trade unionism, Weber shows how Mexican migrants’ long tradition of labor and political activism, as well as community and family ties brought with them from Mexico to the United States, undergirded their leadership in the successful cotton strike of 1933.\footnote{Ibid.} Vicki Ruiz’s history of the canning industry in California during the 1930s and 1940s illustrates how shop-floor camaraderie served as the basis for organizing one of the strongest and most enduring unions within the US agro-food sector.\footnote{Ruiz, in \textit{Cannery Women, Cannery Lives}, documents the rise of the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA), which formed in 1937 under the auspices of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). While this particular worker-organizing effort was short lived, its legacy survived in the strength and density of subsequent cannery unions. Indeed, this predominantly female industry remained unionized for many decades and resulted in one of the most militant strikes in California, and indeed the United States, during the late 1980s. See William Flores, “Mujeres en la Huelga: Cultural Citizenship and Gender Empowerment in a Cannery Strike,” \textit{Humboldt Journal of Social Relations} 22, no. 1 (1996): 57–81. The mass relocation of food processing plants during the 1990s has meant the loss of many good unionized jobs and created conditions for oppression and resistance in the expanding food-processing sector of Central Mexico.} Patterns of occupational segregation based on gendered and ethnic differences developed to produce profit for agribusiness firms, while also producing networks of cooperation and solidarity, through which the predominantly female labor force navigated shop-floor and family life.

In his history of the bracero program, Mitchell chronicles the mutual constitution of American racism and industrial agriculture.\footnote{Don Mitchell, \textit{They Saved the Crops: Labor, Landscape, and the Struggle over Industrial Farming in Bracero-Era California} (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).} Following the mass deportation of Mexican workers during the Great Depression, and the movement of white workers into the military and other industries during the Second World War, demand for agricultural labor boomed. In response, beginning in 1942, the US government recruited guest workers from Mexico to fill this demand. While initiated only as a temporary wartime measure, the bracero program continued until 1964, creating a class of workers with fewer rights and lower wages than their Mexican immigrant counterparts with legal residency and even than Mexican workers with undocumented status. Bracero recruits endured a litany of abuses and an extreme system of control, managed through state policy and bureaucratic institutions.\footnote{Ernesto Galarza, \textit{Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story} (Santa Barbara, CA: McNally and Loftin, 1964); and Kitty Calavita, \textit{Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the INS} (New York: Routledge, 1992).} Along the way, the bracero program worked to concretize a vision of “Mexicans” as racialized others, isolated from broader community life in the regions where they toiled.\footnote{Mitchell, \textit{They Saved the Crops}.} The program created and sustained a hierarchy within this category of Mexican other, which
included legal residents, unauthorized immigrants, and guest workers. By the 1940s, growers had come to rely on bracero workers to effectively undermine farmworkers’ organizing efforts. The institutionalized ability of agribusiness to control farmworkers, thus ratcheting down wages and working conditions, created resentment among permanent workers. Despite this, some bracero workers (for example, in the sugar beet industry) were able to effectively organize to improve wages and living conditions, even enlisting support from “better off” immigrant workers.

The end of the bracero program in 1964 coincided with leftward political shifts at the national and state levels, creating an increased public awareness of farm labor conditions. These shifts produced new possibilities for the recently organized United Farm Workers’ Union (UFW) to pursue the goals of improving wages and working conditions during the 1960s and 1970s. This involved a multipronged approach, including community and workplace organizing, political advocacy, and the development of support among middle-class urban consumers, most notably through the boycott of table grapes. A rightward turn in national politics during the late 1970s and 1980s, combined with agribusiness strategies to break the UFW’s power by subcontracting work and negotiating with less militant unions, challenged the UFW’s gains. Within the UFW, a lack of internal democracy and a failure to develop rank-and-file leadership, coupled with the union’s failure to acknowledge and incorporate workers’ own forms of self-organization through migrant networks, further undermined its power.

More recently, US-based unions have attempted to incorporate solidaristic ties developed within immigrant workers’ communities of origin into organizing strategies in US workplaces. Leon Fink describes how immigrant poultry workers from the Mayan Highlands of Guatemala successfully organized in rural North Carolina, an area known for its historical lack of unionization. He suggests that, despite forces...
of neoliberalization, technological innovation, and labor control based on differentiation among immigrant groups, workers must be viewed as agents who draw on logics of family, friendship, and community spanning national boundaries in order to develop solidarity.\textsuperscript{106}

These forms of intersectional solidarity remain precarious. Leon Fink shows how mergers and buyouts in food-processing industries over the past several decades, especially in meat production, have resulted in the loss of unionized jobs, declining wages, and deteriorating conditions of work.\textsuperscript{107} In her ethnography of the experiences of cannery women forty years after the period of Ruiz's study, Patricia Zavella found that the seasonality of cannery jobs undermined women's power within their own households. Women cannery workers struggled to not only negotiate the ebbs and flows of seasonal labor but also to navigate family and community life outside of the shop floor, in spaces where they were not necessarily viewed as legitimate workers.\textsuperscript{108} Examining meatpacking, Deborah Fink highlights how gender-based job structures went unquestioned by unions, even as women participated in efforts to advance workers' position through shop-floor organizing.\textsuperscript{109} She situates the material and discursive construction of “women's work” and the lived experiences of women laboring “on the line” within a detailed description of the division of labor in industrial meatpacking.\textsuperscript{110} Agribusiness firms have worked to develop gendered and ethnic systems of labor control; however, male workers and male-dominated labor unions have also played a role in producing marginality, by viewing female workers as a low-wage threat, and thus undermining the potential for solidarity in the face of employers’ efforts to deskill and rationalize labor.\textsuperscript{111} Ethnic identification has long resonated as a means of marking difference and manufacturing control across agricultural landscapes in the Americas. In the next section, we discuss how the workplace has become a site not just for articulating labor rights but for articulating identity itself.

Identity at Work: Articulating Ethnicity and Gender in the Agro-food System

Historical studies of race, ethnicity, and citizenship suggest that the ongoing devaluation of farm labor has been achieved through not only material but also immaterial means. In the post-bracero era, racial constructs have remained firmly entrenched within the agricultural economy and popular imaginaries. Indeed, the trope of the farmworker as simultaneously unskilled and indispensable is widely embraced by industry, consumers, and workers alike.\textsuperscript{112} Mexican immigrant laborers in the United

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  \item \textsuperscript{106} Ibid.; see also Timothy Pachirat, \textit{Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight} (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).
  \item \textsuperscript{107} Fink, \textit{The Maya of Morganton}.
  \item \textsuperscript{108} Zavella, \textit{Women's Work and Chicano Families}.
  \item \textsuperscript{109} Deborah Fink, \textit{Cutting into the Meatpacking Line: Workers and Change in the Rural Midwest} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).
  \item \textsuperscript{110} Fink, \textit{Cutting into the Meatpacking Line}.
  \item \textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{112} Walker, \textit{The Conquest of Bread}; and Bardacke, \textit{Trampling Out the Vintage}.
\end{itemize}
States have adopted the concept of the need to *aguantar*, or to endure hardships of work and life apart from home and family. The lived realities of immigrant workers within the United States contrasts with the agrarian imaginary that has undergirded the nation’s agro-food economy, and concomitant policies that have excluded farmworkers from the rights and protections afforded workers in other sectors.

Outside North America, Philippe Bourgois’s ethnographic account of working life on a United Fruit Company banana plantation along the Costa Rica/Panama border highlights the importance of ethnic difference in shaping labor systems and control. Bourgois shows how ethnicity is not an exogenous variable that can be isolated from class relations but rather an ongoing, dynamic process that helps constitute and sustain systems of exploitation, or “conjugated oppression.” Drawing on Bourgois’s theories of “structural violence” and conjugated oppression, Seth Holmes describes the construction of social difference among undocumented migrant Triqui workers in the Pacific Northwest berry industry. First, they are *Latino* laborers, which marks them in the United States. Second, they are *indigenous*, which marginalizes them back home in Mexico. This marginalization travels with them across the border, insuring a kind of double marginality in the berry fields. Holmes reminds us that immigrant workers, who may appear Mexican in the public eye, experience marginalization and, indeed, structural violence in varied ways.

Holmes’s analysis says little, however, about the role of gender in producing a triple marginality for indigenous *women* workers. Feminist scholars have highlighted how multiple systems of oppression shape the flows of labor and worker...
identities within an increasingly globalized economy. Working in this vein, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo describes a growing employer preference for female labor in high-value crops and niche market agriculture. Such a specific gendering of work is central to contemporary agro-food production both within the global North and more recently expanded sites of production in the global South. In a comprehensive study of one corporation with tortilla factories spanning the United States and Mexico, Bank-Muñoz illustrates how a transnational company utilizes immigration status, as well as racialized and gendered classifications of labor, to maintain control of its workforce. She discusses how macroscale political economy and policy and the microlevel of the shop floor are mutually constitutive of workers’ senses of identity. The women workers who dominate Colombia’s fresh-cut flower industry (women comprise 80 percent of the flower workforce, and flower cutting remains the single largest employer of women in the greater Bogotá area) are implicated in complex social and economic networks with women who work as “community mothers” in their home communities. Colombian and Ecuadorian flower laborers demonstrate both place-specific forms of resistance in their workplaces, as well as coordination with each other through interventions in community planning projects that span multiple worksites.

Steve Striffler contributes an ethnographic and historical analysis of the United Fruit Company’s Hacienda Tenguel in Ecuador to illustrate how labor controls were rooted in supporting gendered institutions and practices, which reified gendered spheres of workplace and family unit. While early plantations were organized around male labor (either unaccompanied or as head of household units) women were central to struggles with the United Fruit Company, although they were initially excluded from formal waged work. As banana work became more segmented, devalued, and precarious, women were allowed into the labor force. Beginning in


122. For a review article on the experiences of transnational migrant women workers, see Preibisch, “Gender Transformative Odysseys.”


127. Striffler, In the Shadows of the State and Capital.

the 1980s, women fought for a place in the Latin American banana unions. Since then, women’s empowerment and union activity have become inextricably intertwined. In some cases, the restructuring of production, in particular the imposition of contract labor relations, has ratcheted down wages and working conditions and undermined the potential for bananeros “to adopt the identity of worker in a more subjective and political sense.” An increasingly specialized division of labor has shaped the lived experience of mujer bananera, or women workers, who are excluded from on-farm work, which is viewed as too heavy for women (e.g., banana cutting and field maintenance) or too skilled (e.g., equipment operation). As Dana Frank has shown through collective education focused on women’s empowerment across national borders, including the development of trainings focused on women’s rights and the establishment of women’s committees within the unions, women have developed an increased consciousness of their subjugated position at home, in the workplace, and within their unions. They have played a lead role in the development of the international Coordination of Latin American Banana Unions (COLSIBA) as means for developing transnational labor solidarity, while maintaining their focus on women’s issues.

Looking Around and Looking Ahead: Landscapes of Agro-food Labor

What might link these ethnic, gendered, and other non-class-based forms of oppression and collective action? We suggest that, as critical studies of food labor move forward, attention to the spatialization of difference in agro-food systems might do just this. The concept of landscape, Mitchell argues, functions through its ambiguity to naturalize and thus conceal relations of power and inequality. Just as landscapes obscure experiences of exploitation, marginality, and structural violence, so too do they conceal stories of solidarity and action. Mitchell favors attention to the embedded social relations of exploitation, resistance, and subversion within California’s rural landscape. He suggests that the everyday experiences and practices of workers form the critical link between “morphology and representation” that has long confounded geographers and social theorists. Mitchell connects the landscape to the labor processes that bring it into being, a perspective, he argues, that reveals rather than conceals. Following the insights of Henri Lefebvre and Neil Smith, Mitchell argues that what this exposes is an ontology of labor rooted in people’s interactions with their

130. Frank, Bananeras, 93.
131. Ibid.
132. Ibid.
133. Ibid.
135. Ibid.
136. Ibid.
137. Ibid.
material environment, as well as the particular forms that the “production of space” takes under the capitalist mode of production.\(^\text{138}\)

These “produced spaces” include California’s farm fields, labor camps, and agricultural towns, as well as Central American coffee villages, Mexican corn farms, and Argentinian mate yerbales.\(^\text{139}\) Throughout the Americas, state institutions have worked in concert with popular ideological constructs of racial and class difference to discursively frame workers as outsiders, aliens, and/or criminals and, thus, to construct them as politically vulnerable.\(^\text{140}\) From Chinatowns and Mexican barrios to farm labor camps, workers have long been segregated from broader community life within the United States and throughout the Americas.\(^\text{141}\) For example, Matt Garcia traces the establishment of ethnic enclaves in twentieth-century California’s citrus-growing regions.\(^\text{142}\) Citrus workers established their own worlds, largely isolated from broader community life.\(^\text{143}\) More recently, the hardening of the US/Mexico boundary has led to significant changes in the ways in which migrants navigate life in the United States, as well as the forms that migration itself takes.\(^\text{144}\) While purportedly rolled out as a critical component of the “war on terror,” the extension of immigration policing has deliberately targeted undocumented immigrants.\(^\text{145}\) In their study


143. Ibid. Still, Garcia highlights the ways in which forms of cultural production, in particular through art and music, created spaces for the development of multiculturalism and cross-ethnic solidarities that facilitated worker resistance.


of the changing Wisconsin dairy industry, Jill Harrison and Sarah Lloyd identify how increased immigrant policing at the border and within immigrant communities serves the productive functions of capital accumulation and ensuring the political legitimacy of the state in the eyes of the public, by rendering laborers “illegal” and thus legitimate targets of punitive state interventions. While immigrant workers operate within a framework of transnational identity, mobility, and precarity, border buildup serves to reify ideas of difference and “othering” discussed previously. Landscape making is a struggle in a dual sense—a struggle to both endure and resist exploitative conditions. Attention to the liminal space of agriculture—to what we referred to previously, following Leo Marx, as the middle landscape—reveals a multitude of overlapping liminalities and marginalities. The conditions for justice—and injustice—are actively built into the ground. While making landscapes, laborers also cultivate the grounds for collective action.

Conclusion
The field of food studies has emerged amid a wave of interdisciplinary interest in social and environmental sustainability. In colleges and universities across the country, the subject of sustainable food systems now encompasses specialized courses, professional interest groups, student organizations, and even undergraduate majors and masters programs. While we welcome this trend, we emphasize that since most of the food we eat is still produced in decidedly unsustainable ways, the field of food studies must endeavor to make explicit linkages between sustainability and its perceived opposite. To this end, we have attempted in this review to outline the contours of a critical study of labor in large-scale agricultural systems across the Americas. By tracing classic studies and contemporary work to a set of common theoretical antecedents, we have shown how the field as a whole might benefit from a closer attention to the ways in which the spatial marginalization of labor, the dynamic forms of labor mobilization, and gendered and ethnic articulations shape farm life in the Americas.

The critical study of food must make it a priority to trace the systematic linkages between sustainable and unsustainable, mainstream and alternative, industrial and artisanal. As this special issue shows, labor may be the common denominator that links these. Future food studies could build on the work reviewed here, continuing a tradition of narrative and oral historical research among farm laborers. One

area of great potential is a phenomenological approach to research that privileges active participation, even in such uncomfortable milieus as packing plants, slaughterhouses, and fields. In his discussion of the complex division of labor among immigrant workers from Central and South America (as well as Southeast Asia and East Africa) in a Midwestern slaughterhouse, Timothy Pachirat illustrates how violent conditions become normalized, how divisions and tensions based on race, gender, and concomitant job responsibilities develop, and how forms of solidarity emerge as workers navigate shop floor realities.151 Pachirat’s study of the beef industry, along with those of Steve Striffler (on poultry)152 and Alex Blanchette (on pork),153 remind us of a key methodology afforded to ethnographers of factory production in the United States (recall the work of Braverman and Burawoy): to work as laborers alongside their interlocutors (though we recognize that this methodology is considerably more difficult for those who work in agricultural fields, particularly outside of the United States).

Linking sustainability and unsustainability will also mean attending to new intersections of agriculture and labor. For example, critical studies can help elucidate the role of waged and migrant labor in “alternative” and “local” food systems. More work must be done on the conversion of small farmers to large-scale agricultural workers through contract farming, for whom the implications for both land tenure and environmental sustainability are dire.154 More attention to the embodied aspects of farm labor, including its health effects, can also enrich a food systems critique.155 Using the tools of medical anthropology, medical history, and science and technology studies (STS), food systems scholars can explore the agricultural dynamics of chemical exposure, the emergence of new pathogens, and even investigate the origins of chronic conditions, such as the mysterious kidney diseases that appear to have disproportionately affected Nicaraguan sugar laborers.156 Finally, new theoretical tools in STS might help us expand the notion of agricultural labor beyond the human, to ask about the changing roles of nonhuman animals, plants, and even microbes as creators of, and coworkers in, food landscapes.157 In each of these emerging areas of concern,

151. Pachirat, Every Twelve Seconds.
155. Holmes, Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies.
laborers continue to struggle for improved conditions, better wages, and basic human rights. Unless attention to the work of industrial agriculture continues to be a part of critical food studies, sustainability risks becoming a parallel program of action, rather than an integrated scholarly and social movement.