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Unseen Consequences: The Plight of the Mexican Migrant Farm Worker

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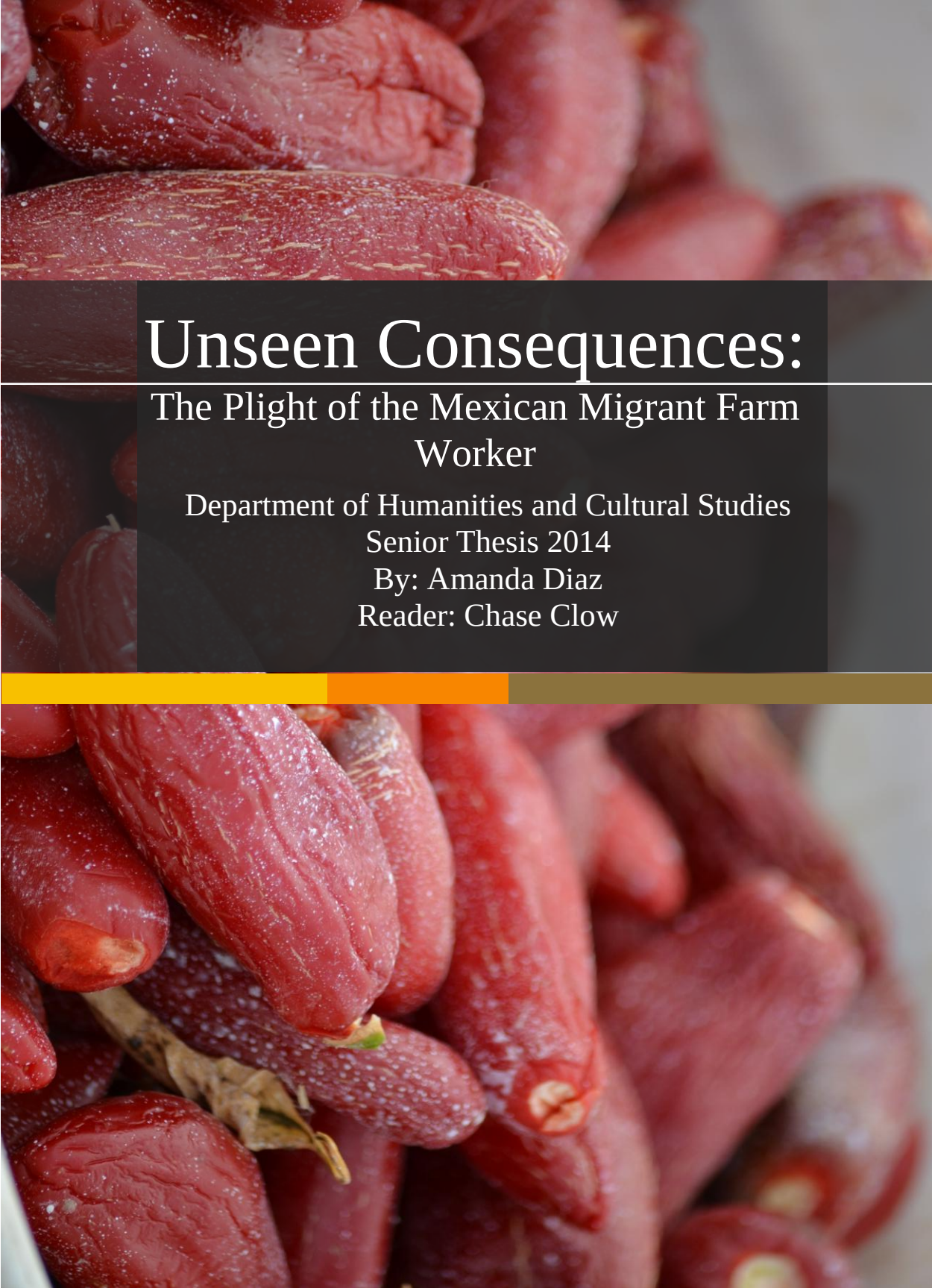
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Unseen Consequences:

The Plight of the Mexican Migrant Farm Worker

Department of Humanities and Cultural Studies

Senior Thesis 2014

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Abstract



The cultural and workforce conflicts facing the Mexican migrant farm worker have been a continuous battle. From the creation and collapse of the US/Mexico Bracero Program to the Cesar Chavez movement, Mexican migrant workers have been fighting for dignified working rights and against the negative stereotypes within American culture. With in-depth photojournalism and self-immersion with a unit of Mexican migrant crop workers, three critical areas of conflicts have risen above all others. These areas consist of the physical harm endured by the Mexican migrant worker as they start their day at five am and continue to complete back-aching labor for twelve hours. Secondly, the chemical dangers of the crops' pesticides are examined and whether or not they truly present risks to the workers. Lastly, Mexican migrant workers expose: their struggles of not knowing English in America, address the negative connotations they face and their hopes for the future. Overall the consequences of farm labor are examined through qualitative research and personal narratives of Mexican migrant workers.



Prologue

As a child, I grew up around crops, particularly an almond orchard owned by my grandparents. Every summer my cousins and I were tasked with irrigating the trees, we did so by going tree to tree, poking out the dirt from the minute sprinkler, with a needle.

Through this task we learned the hardships of working in the heat, enduring the rays of the sun beating on our backs as we were crouched over in gravel that inched its way into our skin. Although it was hard work, we passed the time by joking, playing around the trees, and exploring the animal-life of the almond orchard; overall we had fun. At the end of each summer my entire family, consisting of seven aunts and uncles, and all the children, nine and over, would participate in harvesting the almonds.

My family's yearly harvest would continue for three days. While it was extremely exhausting work, memories of laughter, music, and celebration continue to fill me with joy. Through this family tradition, along with the hard work ethic exemplified by my grandparents, my curiosity of the life of the Mexican migrant field worker emerged.

Prologue Continued...



This curiosity evolved into fascination as I gazed out the window of my high school bus, examining the strawberry pickers of Watsonville, California. Through my observations, I noticed the Watsonville crop workers did not have the same sense of celebration while harvesting their fields. Instead there were signs of exhaustion as the workers were bent at a ninety-degree angle to reach the low-grown strawberries, along with a large crowd at the water truck due to the overbearing sun. Despite these signs of fatigue, I still witnessed laughter. The perseverance of Mexican migrant workers is truly inspiring. Through my family's experiences, my observations of farm workers' hardships, and the lack of acknowledgment of these hardships, the plight of the Mexican migrant farm worker has truly interested me. It is for this reason that this work explores the life and the consequences of the Mexican migrant farm worker.

Introduction

In order to best understand the current struggles of Mexican farm workers, it is critical to recognize some of the history of the Mexico and United States migration and labor force movements. An essential agreement between the U.S. and Mexico emerged within the early 1940s, with the United States' entry into World War II.

Due to the call of arms of every able-bodied American male during World War II, the U.S. was experiencing a shortage of farm labor. As a result the Mexican and American governments created the Bracero Program on August 4, 1942. This agreement provided temporary permits to work within U.S. agriculture to the thousands of Mexican men whom were unemployed and struggling to support their families. These Mexican men, however, also saw the Bracero Program as a gateway to eventually migrate their families into America, causing many to apply for a Bracero permit. While the Bracero program provided work to a vast majority of unemployed Mexican men, it also allowed labor-starved American farmers to obtain an inexpensive workforce.

This workforce was one in which American farmers controlled Braceros' living standards, wages, and most importantly legal status within America. For if farmers and their regional bureaus removed a Bracero's working permit, that worker was immediately required to return to Mexico. In spite of the control American farmers held over Braceros, Mexican men continued to apply for a permit, due to the desperation of unemployment and financial hardships.

Furthermore, since the Bracero Program was operated through independent contracts controlled by farmers associations and the Farm Bureau, the farmers who held these contracts were free to treat the entering Braceros as they pleased.

Introduction Continued....

This cheap workforce was the perfect solution to the farm-labor drought for it allowed farmers to provide low-end housing, extremely low wages, and a pool of vast amount of Mexican workers, ready to replace any injured or diseased worker, since the braceros were only slightly protected under the rights of American law.

“We want Mexicans because we can treat them as we cannot treat any other living men.... We can control them at night behind bolted gates, within a stockade eight feet high, surmounted by barb wire... we make them work under armed guards in the field.”

- Californian farmer testimonial excerpt from *They Saved the Crops*.

California's proximity to the Mexican border ensured a population of hard-working Mexicans willing to put in the proper skills and labor to produce viable crops. Enduring the long process of becoming a Bracero and migrating into the U.S was well worth the sacrifice since it enabled these men to support and provide for their families. Due to this readiness of Mexican men to work within America's agricultural industry and the early success of the program within the southwest in the mid-1940s, California farmers began organizing themselves into regional private labor bureaus. These bureaus recruited workers, assigned them to specific locations, and set a fixed low wage; this streamlined economic cost and marginalized profit for farmers. The organization of California farmers eliminated competition for workers between farmers during high demand periods. As a result of the unification of California's regional private labor bureaus, Mexicans became the foundation of labor in California farming, as well as the casualty of economic exploitation.

Introduction Continued....

As **World War II** came to a close the federal government began decreasing the amount of Bracero permits issued, causing Mexican laborers to enter the United States illegally. This overflow of “illegal aliens” fueled the rise of stereotypes and racial discrimination which viewed Mexicans were seen as dirty, ignorant and a persistent danger to community welfare. The postwar consensus of Mexicans reflected anti-alien prejudice; racial slurs such as *mojados* (wetbacks) emerged, exemplifying the bias against those who were illegally crossing into the country by wading across the Rio Grande River. Due to the growing discrimination against Braceros and the intolerance of illegal Mexicans, California residents, as well as the rest of America, wanted the program to cease and all “illegal aliens” deported to Mexico.

Therefore, to initiate the program’s termination; “Operation Wetback” began in 1953. This operation would forcibly remove Mexicans from the U.S., whether or not the individuals’ Bracero labor contract was expired. Not only were the Braceros’ permits suddenly removed, but illegal aliens from Mexico and their American born children were rounded up, herded into trucks and trains and taken to the U.S./Mexico border. Those individuals who fought to keep the life they had created within the U.S. were met with violence; they were beaten and often times killed. According to historian and author Nancy Maclean, during Operation Wetback’s “lifetime some 3.8 million Mexicans and their American-born citizen children were deported, nearly all without a hearing” (MacLean 159).

Introduction Continued....

The request to finally end the Bracero Program was granted on May 30, 1963. The Bracero Program had recruited approximately 350,000 Mexicans to the U.S. each year and about a total of five million by the end of the program. Consequently, due to the end of the Bracero Program, along with the undignified forcible removal of Mexicans through Operation Wetback, an extreme separation was felt between Americans, Mexicans, and Mexican Americans.

Law and American custom quickly segregated ex-Braceros that re-entered the U.S. with their families. Other Mexicans who were able to evade “Operation Wetback,” were later able to migrate their families to their location. Education failed to prepare them for good jobs and government programs were little to no assistance in looking for higher level and well-paid jobs.

As a result many immigrant Mexicans were forced to remain in the low pay farm labor jobs. The Cesar Chavez farm labor movement emerged in response, for in the mid 1960s the average life expectancy for a farm worker was forty-nine years. Within the agriculture regions of America, particularly that of California, during the time of Cesar Chavez, men and women would work grueling farm labor alongside their children. The Californian field workers made less than a dollar an hour, for a painful routine that consisted of the intense sun beating on their aching backs from the early hours of the morning until the skies began to darken. Due to the farm laborers’ extremely low pay and the need to provide food for the family, children were often pulled from school during harvest seasons.

Introduction Continued....

Through the harvest strikes, particularly the California Delano Grape Strike¹, Chavez's captivating speeches, and farm worker unions, the Cesar Chavez labor movement resulted in a significant pay raise. All farm laborers, whether U.S. citizens or not, were required to be paid federal minimum wage. This allowed children to return to school and leave the hardships of the fields. Not only did Cesar Chavez help raise the pay of his fellow laborers, but through his eloquent speech and leadership many workers began to realize that educating their children was much more important than having them in the fields, for education was the key to ending the generational cycle of field work employment. Despite the advances gained at the time and the fact that farm laborers continue to be paid minimum wage and children rarely work under harsh farm labor conditions, farm workers continue to suffer many injustices. Presently, this fact is evident throughout the Central and Santa Clara valleys of California. Mexicans who are legal citizens, American- born citizens, and those who are currently illegal aliens continue to be the primary force in labor work within California. While they have gained some benefits, such as wage increase, the plight of their farm labor is still evident.

¹ Boycott against the Californian grape growers. Began in 1965 and lasted for five years, resulted in the first contract between growers and farm workers for minimum wage.

Introduction Continued....

Research Method

Through photojournalism, in-depth interviews, and self-immersion with a band of Mexican migrant workers that travels throughout the Santa Clara and Central California valleys, this paper will help expose some of the current issues faced by Mexican Migrant Workers despite gains made during the Chavez movement. For the purpose of this research, “migrant” refers to the movement within California, moving from field to field or farm to farm. The unit of Mexican migrant farm laborers under examination is led and managed by Ernesto^{*2}. Ernesto is contacted by the farmer, given a deadline as to when the crops need to be harvested, and ensures that his unit completes the task properly and on time. With permission from Ernesto, photographs were taken of his unit, which ranges from twenty-five to forty farm laborers at any given time. These photographs illustrate the different hardships endured by this band of workers as they spend a couple of weeks of a fall season harvesting non-organic chili peppers. While these photographs display the physical and chemical dangers that the farm workers sustain, they also exhibit the friendship and bond of these individuals. Additionally, interviews conducted during the Central Valley lettuce crop harvest, further reveal the struggles of their journeys as migrant farm workers. These interviews also establish a humanistic connection to the interviewee as they discuss their travels to the United States, as well as their hopes for themselves and for their children. The protection of Ernesto and his band of Mexican migrant farm workers is an essential aspect of this process, especially for those considered illegal-alien; therefore the workers’ names have been changed.

² Names with (*) indicate a pseudonym, due at the request of the participant.

Introduction Continued...

Through the exploration of this group of Mexican migrant farm workers, three essential themes have risen above all other as the most pressing issues affecting the workers. These issues are explored three separate sections; the purpose of these themes is to convey a personal/ narrative insight into the day-to-day life of working as a Mexican migrant field worker. These sections will essentially show the workers opinions and thoughts of how they are treated, as well as how they view themselves versus their beliefs about how Americans view them. The first of these sections is physical endurance, which reveals how the workers prepare for a long day in the fields, the physical struggles that they may encounter, and the consequences of those possible inflictions. The second theme, pesticides, uncovers whether or not there truly is a danger to the workers and their families. If a danger is present workers describe how exactly they protect themselves and deal with these potent crop chemicals. The final theme is that of culture, in which workers reveal their place in society and how they connect to American culture and citizens.

This work seeks to humanize the Mexican migrant farm workers so they are no longer viewed as cogs in the commercialized crop industry of California, but rather should be respected as valuable individuals who wish to express their truth and value. Henceforth, the in-depth photojournalism and the investigation of physical and pesticide trauma, along with the cultural impact of American influence on these laborers, reveal the significances of Mexican migrant farm workers.



Chapter One: Physical Harm

Due to the high probability of strained muscles and bones, the development of arthritis, along with the skin disorders associated with farm labor; the agriculture industry is one of the most dangerous industries in the United States (NCFH)³.

Along with the physical dangers associated with farm work, migrant laborers work hours that far exceed the average American's eight-hour workday. The Mexican migrant farm workers under Ernesto's* supervision usually work an average of twelve hours a day, six days a week, most often for California's minimum wage⁴, and just like many other farm workers throughout California, they are without any health benefits. Ernesto's unit of migrant workers usually begins their day at five in the morning and labor until four-thirty in the afternoon, or until their task within the crops was completed. Since the workers' schedules are based on the crops and the seasons, it is vital for the longevity of the crops and to produce a beneficial harvest that each task be completed on time. These duties include, but are not limited to: planting, thinning, irrigating, and harvesting.

³ The National Center for Farmworker Health

⁴This depended on what the farmer agreed upon per hour, the highest they received during my time with them was \$9/hr. and the lowest \$7.25/ hr, the federal minimum wage.



Between the time of plantation to when the produce is finally ready for harvesting, workers can suffer from any amount of injuries as well as heat strokes and exhaustion. Upon reminiscing at his first week as a migrant worker; Jose G. remembers the extreme exhaustion he felt (Interview 1.1).

Just like Jose G. many other workers were unsure whether or not they would be able to continue to endure the muscle soreness and extreme fatigue. However, despite their exhaustion, at the end of their first week, often known as the hardest week, each interviewed worker said they were satisfied and happy with themselves for making it through their first week of hard labor, but most of all were proud of the money they earned. Even if some days the pay was not enough, they were still proud. This pride is seen throughout each of the following worker's testimony; while they all admit to being exhausted, they were proud for persisting through the fatigue. One young man even compared the sensation of completing his first week of work to winning big, "come me gano⁵," he states.

Crop workers rarely stay stagnant. As a part of California's agriculture industry, they migrate according to the season and that season's corresponding crop.

⁵ "It was like I had won."



Physical Harm Continued...



Figure 1.1



Figure 1.2

As the crops change throughout the year so do its physical demands, for every crop exacts its own specific aches. Low-hanging fruits such as strawberries and chili peppers are known to be “la fruta del Diablo”⁶. These low-grown fruits cause workers to bend over all day long (figure 1.1), with the only relief they can receive from such soreness is by kneeling into the dirt and pebbles, which the crops grow from. However, without proper protection, such as kneepads or even a cushion to kneel upon, the workers’ knees would be easily scrapped and also become extremely sore. On one of the days I visited the workers, Sara*, one of the eldest women of this Mexican migrant worker unit, had unfortunately left her kneepads at home and had to use the materials around her to create protection against cuts and possible inflammation. Sara eventually found an extra sweater a worker had brought, put that in a plastic bag and used that to kneel upon throughout the day (figure 1.2). Scrapes and deep cuts from the bushes can usually be avoided through preparation of wearing long clothes, boots, gloves, and cushioning for the knees.

⁶ “The Devil’s Fruit.”

Physical Harm Continued...

However, bodily aches and muscle fatigue from bending over and dragging each tub of produce back to the tractor cannot. These pains arise from lifting produce over the rows of crops or dragging the produce between the small lanes in their heavy containers to empty into the tractor. While in the Santa Clara chili pepper crops, the tractor was too large to fit in-between the produce lanes without harming the crops or endangering the workers. Therefore workers were forced to carry two, sometimes three, industrialized buckets of chile throughout the crop lanes (figure 1.3- 1.4). This task proved to be especially difficult for Sara* and Lucy*, being the two oldest women in the group, as the day wore on it became harder for them to carry their load back to the tractor (figure 1.5). Henceforth, young men, like Jose* often carried his load to the tractor along with Sara's or Lucy's.

While the low-grown crops are agreed to cause extreme back aches and soreness, the weather exacerbates that pain, “Hot weather is bad,” according to Felix Vega, “but cold is worse;” it makes back pain unbearable⁷.

⁷ Excerpt from an interview by the Economist, on migrant farm workers and the physical pains they endure.



Figure 1.3



Figure 1.4



Figure 1.5

Weather plays a vital role in the health of Mexican migrant field workers. While cold weather aggravates muscle soreness, heat has the potential to be much more dangerous. Within the California Santa Clara and Central valleys, temperature can easily rise to 105 degrees F and higher; with such extreme heat the potential of a heat stroke and dehydration rises significantly. In order to protect themselves, the band of Mexican farm workers under examination use layers of clothing as their barrier from the sun. Long sleeves, long pants, and a hooded sweater are often the requirements needed to endure the sun. Not only are the farmworkers' clothing essential to protecting themselves from the sun, they are also a vital aspect in protecting against the toxicity of the crop's pesticides.⁸ Many workers, especially the women go beyond that and cover their faces with hats and bandannas, only allowing their eyes to be visible. Lucy and Sara, for example, are fully equipped with down-feather winter jackets, sun hats, and long thick sweats. While most of the workers take precautions to protect their skin from the rays of the sun, a few young men do not take the same safeguards.

Jose Fernandez

Interview 1.2- Dress Code

Interview 1.2

Adrian* a twenty- two year old male explained that while some days he did dress to protect himself from the sun, wearing long- sleeves, gloves, and a hat, there were other days where he just simply did not see the point, "Whether it is the sun, exhaustion, or possibly even these chemicals [pesticides on the chile] if we are in this work long-term one of them will eventually get us."⁹ When asked about the clothing, Jose Fernandez, a twenty year-old young man who began his career as a farm laborer at age 16 explains the strict dress code (interview 1.2).

⁸ Protection against pesticide toxicity is further examined within the next chapter.

⁹ Translated from Spanish

Physical Harm Continued...

Despite about five hundred agricultural workers suffering injuries everyday, which result in loss of work time according to the NCFH, many migrant farm laborers do not receive health benefits. Ernesto and his farm labor unit are unfortunately not the exception. For just like many other workers, they do not receive any health-care benefits. Consequently, if a work accident were to occur, the workers would not be paid any sick leave. Days off to recover means a much lower pay, not allowing the workers enough money to support themselves, or to send money to their families in Mexico. However going to work while injured or sick can further exacerbate their symptoms causing temporary injuries to become permanent. Therefore, since most workers cannot take any time off due to an injury, painkillers become a necessary requisite to the laborers, says Antonio*, a veteran field worker, who is now a United States resident due to his long residency in California. A heavy supply of painkillers and clean water is the remedy to treating farm labor injuries without the fear of losing one's job due to missing work. While this remedy may seem to sufficiently rid the physical pain, it is only a temporary fix with dangerous long-term effects, such as liver and kidney damage. Due to the high availability of farm workers, any individual on Ernesto's team could be replaced if off of the job for too long. The added stress of this daunting truth does not allow workers to nurse their injuries back to their full health. Through the combination of strenuous back and shoulder discomfort, the threat of heat stroke and dehydration, along with the constant exhaustion, farm labor lives up to its nickname as the devil's work. In spite of these physical struggles Ernesto's unit of Mexican migrant farm workers continue to not only work hard, but also take pride in what they do. They understand that agriculture work can result in sickness and injury yet they continue to endure, to provide a better life for the families and a future of possibilities for their children.



Chapter Two: Pesticides

Farm workers' direct contact with crops and soil also puts them in contact with the pesticides and chemical fertilizers used to treat the fields.

As Americans become increasingly aware of the hazards associated with pesticides, more and more families are reducing their consumption of pesticide grown produce. Despite the rising demand for organic agriculture, conventional farming growing methods rely heavily on pesticide use. While California farmers are required by law to inform their hired workers of which pesticides and chemicals they used within their crops and how to properly protect themselves from such chemicals, most of the information only covers the general health effects caused by pesticide exposure and how to minimize that exposure. Workers are usually not warned about the specific symptoms associated with pesticide contamination and how they should treat these indicators. The typical California crop and its pesticides cause acute symptoms, such as poisoning, headaches, nausea, shortness of breath, and seizures. Long-term pesticide exposure can cause infertility, cancer, neurological disorders, and respiratory conditions.

According to the report on pesticides conducted by Farmworkers Justice, “Farmworkers are the only group of workers not covered by a federal right-to-know- regulation,” this regulation requires that all employees must be informed of the health hazards associated with crop pesticides and chemicals (Farmworker Justice). Furthermore, the National Agriculture Workers Survey reports, that despite only twenty-seven percent of farm laborers being able to speak English well, it is not required for pesticide warning labels to be printed in Spanish. Therefore, the only Spanish found on these labels translates as such: “If you do not understand this label, go find someone so that they may explain to you its details.” This lack of accommodation toward a majority of the migrant farm worker population, who are unable to understand the hazards of the pesticides being used, is troubling.

In 2006 the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) admitted, “Risks to workers still exceed EPA’s level of concern” (Farmworker Justice). The levels of pesticides and chemical treatments applied to the crops are also of concern to Ernesto’s troop of migrant farm laborers. Maria*, admits that while her clothing is to protect her body from the sun, her gloves and the bandana covering her mouth is her protection against pesticides.



“I am aware of how dangerous it is to breath in pesticides; I know it can cause lung problems and other health faults. But what else are we supposed to do, what else are the owners (of the crops) supposed to do? Pesticides are necessary for crops and we need to pick the crops. There is no choice but to protect ourselves as much as we can.”
-Maria*

Pesticides Continued....

Jose G.

Interview 2.1 - Pesticides

**Antonio**

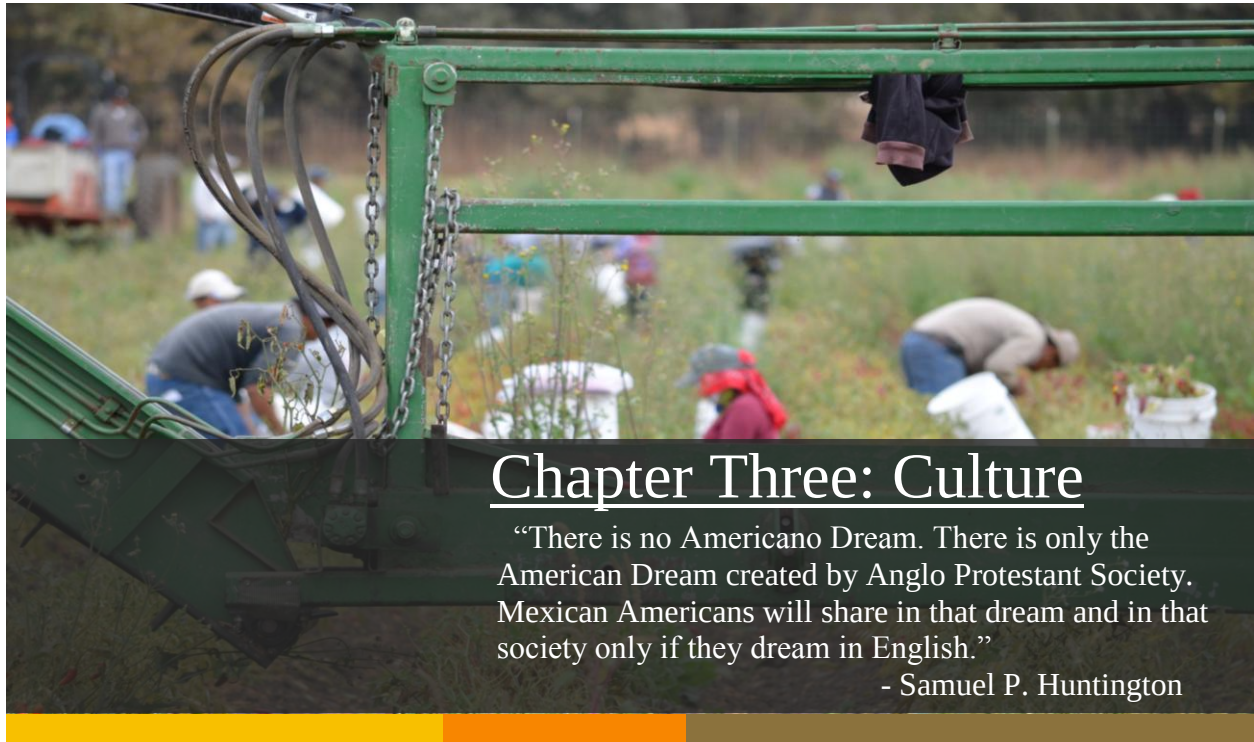
Interview 2.2- Precautions and Worries of Pesticides

Maria is a twenty-eight year old woman from Michoacán, Mexico. Just like Maria other workers also understand the necessity of pesticides for agriculture, yet they take all the precautions that they can in order to prevent pesticide poisoning. Not only are the workers concerned with their own well being, each interviewed worker mentioned the need to keep away agriculture chemicals from their families, especially children. (Interview 2.1). Similar to the workers, pesticides are not stagnant, instead they leak into the water, travel through the wind, and are transported through the farm workers' clothes. It is for this reason that the workers take the following precautions: (Interview 2.2). The precautions taken described by Antonio and Jose are extremely necessary, especially after working in a field that is heavily sprayed with pesticides, a field such as the Santa Clara chili pepper. For the chilies were shockingly not their vibrant red, but covered in white specks (figure 2.1), specks that throughout the day covered the hands and clothes of the migrant workers. Due to the high concentrations of pesticides applied to crops, the EPA reports an estimate of twenty thousand farm workers a year suffering from pesticide poisoning.

Pesticides Continued....

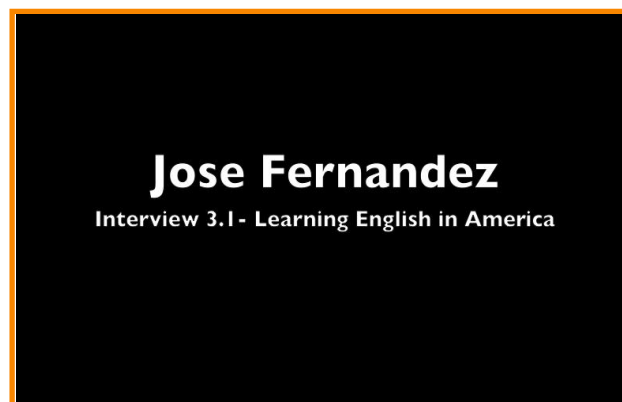
However, the number of estimated pesticide poisoning is believed to be much higher. Because of the fear of being deported felt by illegal Mexican farm workers, not all who suffer from pesticide overexposure seek professional medical attention. Also many farmworkers are misdiagnosed, due to the flu-like symptoms associated with pesticide illness.

In order to fight such extreme numbers of overexposure to crop pesticides, the EPA issued The Worker Protection Standard (WPS). While these regulations intended to aid farm workers in the protection against crop chemicals, the WPS has not been updated in over twenty years. The lack of inclusion of new information discovered about pesticides and their effect upon individuals who handle them on a daily basis is considered neglectful by the National Center for Farmworker Health (NCFH). While individual efforts such as not drinking the water surrounding the crops, covering one's mouth, and removing pesticide-exposed clothing before entering a home are necessary precautions they are not enough. Therefore it is vital that the WPS be immediately updated. For while more and more affluent American families are eating organically due to the awareness of the headaches, nausea, blindness, and birth defects associated with pesticides, farm workers, including Ernesto's unit, continue to endure chemical poisoning. For the protection of Ernesto and his workers, along with their families, which are exposed to pesticides through the workers tools, shoes, clothes, and skin, a larger national effort toward pesticide awareness is necessary. The purpose of the EPA is to perform this very task, however they themselves have acknowledged their failure to do so. Along with the necessity of the EPA's implementation of informative material of pesticides and preventative steps to diminish poisoning, pesticide labels should also be translated into Spanish. California Mexican migrant workers, like Ernesto's team, work in a strenuous and evidently chemically hazardous environment; therefore it is the duty of the American people to protect their fellow human beings from the perils of farm labor.



Despite the United States not having an official language, many citizens hold the same opinion of Huntington, the former coordinator of security planning for the National Security Council. With statements such as these, which are becoming more and more prominent in American culture through bumper stickers, Facebook posts, and Pinterest statements, pressure for non-English speaking residents to learn the American approved language can be overwhelming. Each of Ernesto's Mexican migrant farm laborers understands these pressures and states the importance of learning English within this country. One of whom stated that his only dream for the future was to be able to learn and speak English fluently.

Jose Fernandez further explains the difficulty of not being able to speak the unofficial English language of America (interview 3.1).





Furthermore, Huntington argues that Mexicans' failure to learn English causes Mexicans and their children the inability to assimilate into American society. This lack of assimilation, he maintains, will "pose a threat to American national unity" (Telles 7).

While American unity has, at times, struggled to persist throughout the decades, there is no correlation between the faultiness of America's strength and the lack of English as a first language for Mexicans. The few of Ernesto's workers who felt as if they were a part of American society were those who were able to speak English well enough to hold a conversation. These workers however have lived in the United States long enough that they were able to receive their legal residency. The reason, according to Ray* that the workers must be able to speak English to be accepted by Americans is "because if we go around talking to them in Spanish, they will see us as a foreigner. It does not matter if we are intelligent, not speaking English is a sign of ignorance." Unfortunately, Ray's opinion is one that is held by many of the farm workers, some even adding that without the ability to speak English, they are immediately labeled as illegal and become pariahs within the community. This outsider effect makes it even harder for Mexican migrant farm workers to learn English and become accepted within American culture. For as outcasts, most workers are only able to converse and relate to their fellow compadres¹⁰, unable to receive the chance to learn or practice what little English they do know.

¹⁰ Companions

Culture Continued....

Despite the sense of being outsiders from American culture, every worker agreed that the perils of coming to the U.S. are well worth the hardships. The journey to entering the United States, especially illegally, is a long and often dangerous one. Jose Fernandez narrates the stress of crossing the Mexico and US border: (Interview 3.2). One might ask that due to these workers vulnerability, because of the farm laborers lack of health care and the limited protection they receive from the law, how are these sacrifices worth it? With one word, Ernesto's unit of migrant workers answers this with family.

Workers like Antonio still believe in America as the land of opportunities. A country with their hard work as a model and the never-ending encouragement for their children to continue with their education, that those children will be able to build the life they deserve (Interview 3.3). Whether it is working the crops to provide a better future for their children or traveling across the border alone at the age of sixteen, as Jose F. did, to be the sole financial provider for family, these men and women are full of hope for the future.

Jose Fernandez

Interview 3.2- Crossing the US/Mexico Border

Antonio

Interview 3.3- Hopes for Children

While some American communities are not accepting to the Mexican migrant farm worker, the workers in contrast are accepting of Americans. Interviewed workers stated that any American would be welcomed to work among them, even provided advice, to continue to work past the exhaustion and complete the first week. In 2010, during a time of high unemployment, many Americans were complaining that Mexican migrant crop workers were filling American jobs. Therefore, the United Farm Workers (UFW) launched a campaign known as “Take Our Jobs,” this campaign called all eager Americans to harvest the crops. Throughout the entire US only 8,600 people contacted the UFW for information, however they made requests which are unusual to farm laborers. Most of these Americans asked for high pay, health benefits, sick leave, and other requests, which are associated with most normal, American jobs. That September only seven Americans accepted and began working as a farm laborer.

“America’s farm jobs, which are excluded from almost all federal and state labor regulations, are not normal jobs. Americans refuse to do them. The argument about stolen jobs is just a façade, for a coarser scape-goating and we demonstrate the hypocrisy.”

- Arturo Rodriguez, UFW’s President

Many workers are aware of this perception against them and wish that the American people would understand that they are not here to take any jobs.

Ernesto’s unit of farm laborers see themselves as helping society, for all Americans need the produce of the crops. It was never their purpose to threaten society’s unity or individuals’ opportunities for work, but merely to create a better life for themselves and their loved ones. (Interview 3.4) Ernesto’s team of Mexican migrant farm workers are not simply ignorant, Spanish speaking illegals, but they are human beings that are deserving of the human dignity and respect provided to every other individual of America.

Jose Fernandez

Interview 3.4- Message to Americans



Chapter Four: Conclusion

While the themes of physical harm, pesticides, and culture reveal the difficulties of Mexican farm laborers they also call for help of American organizations and its people to assist these farm workers in their plight. The physical pains endured by these farm laborers as they are “bent over in painful contorted positions and labor” all day, under overbearing heat is not humane (“Field of Tears”).

Nor does the toxicity from the crops’ pesticides inhaled by the workers and exposed to their families ensure a good quality of life. Yet, despite these hardships, along with the lack of health care or low-wages

provided to these crop harvesters, they continue to persevere. While health insurance cannot be provided to all farm workers due to their legal status, paid-sick leave should be provided. Therefore a worker would be able to take the time to truly heal their physical pains, without the fear of losing their jobs. Just as Ernesto’s group occasionally did, all farm workers should be required to stretch out their muscles before and after a day of work.

Not only should farm laborers take these physical precautions but they should also be accurately and well informed of the dangers of the sun, as well as the hazards of pesticides.

However, warning and education of the dangers of pesticide toxicity must occur both on the lower (farmer) and government levels. For example, farmers should not only be required to inform their harvest workers on which pesticides are used in their crops but what precautions the workers should talk against overexposure and how to treat overexposure to the chemicals.

Conclusion Continued....

Furthermore, it is vital the EPA update their statistics of how pesticide toxicity affects the workers, as well as the Worker Protection Standard. By doing so, this can reduce overexposure of the workers and their families to the harsh crop chemicals. These are hard working individuals; people who work for the benefit of America's produce needs, yet they tragically do not receive any benefits worthy enough to subsidize the difficulties of farm labor.

Through my observations and interactions with Ernesto's unit, I have not just connected with my observational subjects but with my human counterparts. Mexican migrant farm workers are just as resilient and goal-oriented as any other group of people. While those currently working in the fields may not have completed the life goals they have set for themselves, through their hard work, they are making it possible for their children to establish and succeed in their own hopes for the future. Although many communities only view these individuals as migrant workers, and others view them as beings to be pitied, most do not witness the strength and joy for life that each worker encompasses within them. Though I did observe the exhaustion and precautions of each worker to protect themselves against the sun and pesticides, I also witnessed the laughter, bonding, and playfulness throughout this tight-knit band of workers. This experience was one that I will never forget and has truly taught me the need to persevere through the hardships in order to gain the realization of the true importance of life. Although some of these workers may be illegal beings within America that, however, does not give the right to denounce their value as individuals, workers, or as people of this nation. For despite their status, they do provide a service to all America, since the California valleys are the most prosperous within the agriculture industry. The plight endured by the Californian Mexican migrant worker demonstrates the need for equality and security for all individuals, not just those that are labeled legal.

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Unseen Consequences: The Plight of the Mexican Migrant Farm Worker



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