Injustice Unseen: Coverage of Migrant Labor in Alternative Food Media

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Introduction

> "...the issue of social justice for labor is always present in California agriculture, whether or not it is seen." –Allen et al. [2003]

This paper is an investigation of discourse around migrant labor in alternative food media, broadly defined. The central question is whether food journalists talk about labor, and if so, whose labor? I will also explore what the framing of particular labor issues tells us about the media outlets being studied here. The conceit here is that there is a gap in how agricultural labor activists talk about their issue space compared food media, especially compared to more ecological issues of sustainability. The truth of this assertion, how it manifests in different media, and possible causes are of primary interest. This investigation contributes to the study of labor in the present day, currents of immigration and the commodified body, and racism through the discursive erasure of marginalized populations and marginalized work.

Literature Review

Sustainability discourses

The modern definition of "sustainability" is often traced to *Our Common Future*, commonly known as the Brundtland Report. It defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." [on Environment and Development, 1987]. Its discussion of sustainable development succeeded in putting environmentalism and economic growth in dialog with each other, and contextualizing human social issues as environmental. Today, "sustainable agriculture," as movement and buzzword, owes much to this definition, but often has an oppositional component. The blog *Sustainable Table*'s definition is this: "Sustainable agriculture can feed the world without damaging the environment or threatening human health." The implication, clearly, is that conventional agriculture cannot. In this paper I'll be working under the assumption that sustainable and alternative agriculture describe social movements that oppose conventional agriculture, often called "industrial agriculture." This view is supported by Kloppenburg et al. [2000]'s findings. Their interviews indicate that activists who support sustainable food systems define them as embedded, local, biodiverse, ecologically sustainable, economically equitable, sacred, healthful, and communal–qualities supposedly lacking in the "industrialized global food system."

Kloppenburg et al. [2000] interviewed attendees of a local foods conference. Their work aimed to formulate a conception of a sustainable food system from the perspective of "competent, ordinary people" who constitute the alternative food movement. The values they identified in connection with sustainability don't include worker rights as such–the closest terms for them are "just/ethical" and "value-oriented (associative) economics" which I take to mean valuing embeddedness in food markets. Neither of these comes that close to naming worker rights or labor in general as a salient issue to alternative food activists.

I will argue below that agricultural labor is, by and large, discursively separate from other issues of food system sustainability and welfare. To understand why this might be the case, it's helpful to examine the history of agricultural labor activism as well as the current configuration of alternative food stakeholders and gatekeepers.

Disposable bodies

> "The day of the wetback is over." –Ret. Gen. Joseph Swing, 1955

Andreas [2013] reminds us that Mexicans were relative latecomers to the ebb and flow of marginalized labor in the U.S. As Asian immigration was curtailed at the turn of the 20th century, Mexicans rapidly moved into the southwestern U.S. When the Great Depression began and labor demand dried up, they were rounded up, detained by the hundreds of thousands, and deported. Again, in 1942 with the Bracero Program, Mexicans were welcomed as cheap, temporary labor–employment of undocumented people was excluded from the definition of "harboring illegal aliens" (the Texas Proviso). And again, in 1954, when the market became flooded, Mexican migrants were again deported by the hundreds of thousands. But the impact of the Texas Proviso persisted. Today, the H-2A visa program allows undocumented migrants legal residency in the U.S. for purposes of seasonal agricultural work.

According to Allen et al. [2003], a wholesale withdrawal of support from agricultural laborers in California coincided with (1) the disengagement of broader alternative food and social justice initiatives with the United Farm Workers (2) the decline of the UFW and allied organizations in terms of contracts and membership and (3) the neoliberalization of the conversation on the political economy of agriculture and "ethical consumerism" [Allen and Kovach, 2000]. I add (4), changes in immigration policy, particularly the H-2A visa program and the IRCA of 1986. No clear causal chain emerges from this examination, but the relationships seem vital to shaping discourse around migrant labor.

There is agreement, then, that social justice in the seasonal migrant labor market suffered in the 1980s. This continued with the enactment of NAFTA in 1994, and continues today. The nature of public perception of this issue is less clear. I've established its absence from sustainability discourses following Kloppenburg et al. [2000] above, but this analysis also benefits from Pachirat [2011]'s discussion of concealment. Like slaughterhouse work, migrant agricultural labor is undertaken in "socially invisible conditions." Like slaughterhouse work, migrant agricultural labor happens in "a place that is no-place," through similar mechanisms of geographical segregation. Include in seasonal agricultural labor the factor of the impermanence and sometimes literal concealment of unregulated dwellings [Schlosser, 1995]. Finally, like slaughterhouse work, migrant agricultural labor plays host to a racialized system of inward-looking scrutiny and punishment. In the slaughterhouse, there are ag gag laws. In the field, migrants depend on their employers for their legal residency, their legal existence. This combines with the fact that Mexican migrant workers often don't speak English, sometimes don't speak Spanish, and are often unfamiliar with what U.S. institutional support there is for worker rights.

This issue is touched on by Holmes [2013]. He argues that discourse about and among agricultural labor market actors racializes and naturalizes suffering. In Holmes' view, Mexicans as a group are seen as undesirable citizens and bodies, fit for undesirable labor. This coherence eliminates the urgency of social injustice narratives. The same process is borne out on the farm in more personal-scale ways, such as the ethnic division of supervisors and farmworkers (white vs. U.S. Latino vs. Mexican) and of farmworker labor economies (mestizo Mexicans doing the more desirable work, followed by Mixtec indigenous Mexicans, followed by Triqui indigenous Mexicans). The point most relevant to the current study is that these categories are created and reinforced by discourse. In this case, social stances and personal talk create links between a marginalized social group, marginalized kinds of labor, and personal and social defects associated with both.

My investigation aims to determine whether these issues Holmes writes about are of interest to the alternative food media. If so, the mechanisms by which they become stories and the ways migrant workers' narratives are deployed ideologically are the central results. My hypothesis is that attention will be given to stories that provoke outrage—framed as human rights violations. Additionally, I conjectured that focus would be on issues thought to be susceptible to consumer-behavior modification. In this way, I anticipated a heavily neoliberalized discourse, with stories chosen and reported according to their audiences' market participation.

Methods and Data

For this project, I did content analysis on alternative food media outlets. From a set of hundreds of media outlets and journalists, I chose 32 blogs to read through and code according to a "mentions" schema. I searched each site for the terms: labor; worker/s; migrant/s; immigration; Immokalee. According to these search results, I recorded each mention of these categories: Labor shortage; migrants and immigration reform; existing ag labor law; worker rights initiatives; economic structure of ag labor. Most of the 32 didn't have more than one mention of any of these, so I looked at 14 in detail. At this point, I was essentially doing document analysis, focusing on the breadth of labor-related content each blog displayed and how these issues were characterized. As a common point of comparison, I looked at coverage of the Immokalee campaign to determine the orientation of each media outlet towards that issue. Finally, I emailed 16 journalists affiliated with the media outlets I looked at and talked to some of them about my hypotheses and data.

It's clear that in each of these steps, I selected a subsample that was disproportionately heavy on coverage of labor issues. The point about discursive erasure of migrant labor stands, or rather is independent from what was discovered in my content analysis.

I went into my data collection with questions about how issues would be framed and what issues would be covered at all. As my analysis progressed, it became clear that the determining factor was who was talking to who. That is, dividing blogs according to their target readership was the most analytically powerful thing I did.

The categories I came up with were: agribusiness; sustainable farming; ag policy; food system activism; lifestyle. These were arrived at after data collection. In some cases blogs didn't fit clearly into one category, and I tried to base my (somewhat arbitrary) categorization on the tone of the posts rather than trends in the data.

This type of categorization and analysis was chosen because it allows the tracing of social and economic motivations. Instead of simply separating and analyzing relevant discourse, text can be assigned a particular socioeconomic orientation that allows insight into its treatment of an issue.

Main Findings

The most striking result of the media outlet categories was that it established a dichotomy between producer-oriented blogs and consumer-oriented blogs. Consumer-oriented blogs, by and large, covered worker rights issues overseas. Lifestyle blogs' mentions, in particular, were over half worker rights initiatives. Most of these were articles about fair trade certification projects or violations thereof; or international labor issues such as the economic plight of coffee growers in Ethiopia or the treatment of Thai shrimp workers. More often than not, these were framed as opportunities for the reader to exercise their neoliberal agency: "Celebrate National Fair Trade Month: Vote with your Wallet!" (*organicauthority.com*). In stark contrast was the somewhat panicked immediacy of producer-oriented blogs' labor coverage: "Immigration Reform Needed Now, Not Later, For American Food Chain to Remain Intact Industry Leaders Say" (*iamimmigration.org/Farm Bureau*). Another article on the Farm

Bureau site warns that food prices will rise at least 5% if enforcement-only immigration laws are passed. Indeed, around 20% of labor mentions in the 'agribusiness blog' category are about the labor shortage and the resulting loss of economic efficiency that would result from enforcement-only reform. An even larger percentage of mentions–over half for all three producer-oriented categories (sustainable farming, agribusiness, ag policy)–advocated for immigration reform. Producers, and media aligned with them, are in a tough spot: they don't want to pay their workers more or to pay for them to work in the country, nor do they want them deported.

Tomatoes from Slave to Subway: the Case of Immokalee

In February 2015, Eric Schlosser, author of *Fast Food Nation*, gave an Edible Education talk at UC Berkeley. In it, he indicts the "food movement" for its inattention to the issue of farm labor in the U.S. He invites farmworker Maricruz Ladino to speak about her experience. She speaks of the humiliation of working 14-hour days, enduring physical trauma and emotional and sexual aggression, and raising children, only to be looked down upon for her occupation. Her presence, and the lawsuit she brought against her former bosses for sexual harassment, was possible because of the work of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers.

Many more Florida farmworkers have had similar help. Wages have been increased, and what amounts to a system of peonage was more or less dismantled. A documentary about the struggles of the Immokalee community of migrant workers was produced, Eric Schlosser cosigning and Eva Longoria narrating. And the data is reflective of this type of success. Nine of the original 32 outlets mentioned Immokalee; often the trailer for the documentary, *Food Chains* was the only post a blog had about labor issues. Whole Foods, Wal-Mart, McDonald's, Taco Bell–the list of corporate signees of the CIW's Fair Food Agreement is long and impressive.

Given all this, it's in no way a dismissal when I say that this is a highly neoliberal

campaign. Individual moral outrage in one market (the purchasers of canned pasta sauce, burgers, and cheap tacos) is brought to bear against exploitation in another (the seasonal agricultural labor market). Like the fair trade label, this is an issue that alternative food blogs can advocate through the avenues familiar to them. These blogs are used to mediating purchases; they are used to provide an alternative manifest in the local, the biodynamic, the ecologically sustainable. The CIW (and Eric Schlosser) have established "the economically just" as a cause to be transplanted in parallel onto this logic.

Coffee and Chocolate: Interpreting Exploitation

"An estimated 215 million children worldwide are involved in child labor. Several industries use child labor, one of those is the chocolate industry" asserts Green Phone Booth. The post goes on to remind the reader that child labor exists in the U.S. too–a common enough practice in alternative food blogs, occasionally calling out the tobacco industry. But the reader's attention is drawn to the young Burkina Faso boys cutting cacao pods open with machetes. "Abdul isn't paid a wage," says the reporter. "He is essentially a child slave." The exploitation of this boy is captured by the aberrance of his relationship to production.

This is the story with most of the 14 mentions of worker rights that deal with fair trade production and violations thereof. The boundary being reinforced is between the exploited worker and the agentive participant in an economic relation.

#IFarmImmigration

The Farm Bureau's participation in the #IAmImmigration campaign was initially surprising. Analyzing the arguments presented on its site, and in the agribusiness category as a whole, made it clear that this was a natural partnership. The position of the agribusiness lobby, in brief, is that President Obama's amnesty plan will make working under an H-2A visa less

desirable; undocumented immigrants will leave their farm work jobs and seek less strenuous work. This will cause a labor shortage. All of this is, to some extent, true. The type of reform advocated by the Farm Bureau and affiliated groups, then, is to make guest worker visas cheaper, easier, and more desirable than other types of residency. They also advocate against tougher enforcement of immigration laws. Although the physical, emotional, and monetary costs of emigrating illegally are enormous, to an employer, an undocumented worker represents savings.

The Discursive Division of Labor

> "It's almost a holier than thou problem." –Richard Oswald, farmer

It became clear from my conversations with farmers and producer-oriented journalists that they didn't have much affection for "food movement" gatekeepers. "Pollan, Bittman, et al." were derided for the fairly basic reason that they don't talk about farmers. The more nuanced critique Mr. Oswald and Bill Bishop (formerly of Daily Yonder) make is that the alternative foodie crowd doesn't seem interested in engaging markets. "Antitrust is seen these days as only a problem if it impacts individual consumers, not markets," said Mr. Bishop. He went on to describe how the Obama administration held several hearings and deployed the Departments of Agriculture and Justice to investigate monopolistic market share in the food industry. No further action was taken.

This orientation toward federal policy parallels dissatisfaction with recent immigration reform in producer-oriented media. "Will Frustration with Immigration Reform Lead to New Approaches?" asks an AgWeb columnist. The anxiety and uncertainty that pervades these blogs' discussions of long-term reform reflects an ideological contradiction: equitable, accessible paths to residency would allow farmworkers greater agency in their interaction with the labor market; this is to be celebrated. But this freer market could cost some of

these blogs' readers their livelihood.

Conclusions

Whose labor does alternative food media talk about? The answer, as presented thus far, is that consumer-oriented media talks about the exploited labor of foreign others, and, when the CIW pushed their issues to the fore, the labor of marginalized immigrants. *Food Chains* and the fair trade discourse are an interesting comparison here. Though the CIW's public campaign functions largely through consumer choice-centric models of market influence, it can't be fairly considered a neoliberal movement–after all, its roots are in collective action and worker solidarity. A comparison could even be drawn with the circumstances surrounding the founding of the UFW (and the National Farm Workers Association before it). The CIW's network of corporate allies may or may not protect it from the ebb in membership the UFW experienced in a labor-hostile era.

The gap in discourse on labor in alternative food media can of course be partly attributed to a racialized lack of access to these apparatus. However, as mentioned above, there are many more coincident factors. It was surprising to see alternative food media, and even conventional food stakeholders like the Farm Bureau, engaging very reactively with the migrant work reform process. It seems that, in a frankly backward shift in discourse, the grocery store is seen as the ideological check on the vegetable farm. The discursive lever of the foodie idealist is buying power. The CIW has seized upon this ideological shift, even as alternative food media reproduces it. Is it the case that the Bittman and Pollan set have no sympathies with collective action? This seems inconsistent with the data. Instead, the type of moral outrage accessed by the CIW exists in an discursively proximate space to us, the readers. The tomatoes we eat are the product of human and market dynamics that are apparent, and repulsive, to us. But as long as the concealment of the migrant farmworker

is reproduced in our hometowns as on food blogs, we can use our own buying choices to discursively remove our personal subjectivity from this exploitative relationship.

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