The Transnational Lives of Migrant Youth on New York Dairies

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Under the Obama administration, the legal obstacles faced by young undocumented immigrants brought to the U.S. as children and raised in local communities and schools have finally received the attention they deserve. The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) initiative, announced by President Obama in 2012, provides temporary work authorization and deportation relief for young undocumented immigrants who have completed or enrolled in a formal education program in the U.S. The experiences and politics of these young-adult "Dreamers," self-named for their eligibility for the currently stalled DREAM Act,[1] has ignited public debate about the rights and responsibilities of those who feel themselves to be U.S. Americans but, in technical, legal terms, do not belong. This debate centers on a moral question with deep resonance for U.S. citizens: if that high school valedictorian or soccer captain is *just like my son or daughter*, but an undocumented immigrant through no fault of their own, shouldn't they also enjoy basic rights like living without fear of deportation and aspiring to the career they desire?

Thankfully, U.S. media and voters are paying more attention to this extremely important topic. Nevertheless, the experiences of another group of undocumented youth, whose transitions to adulthood are different from those of the Dreamers, remain largely overlooked. They are the undocumented youth who came to the U.S. of their own accord as teenagers to work in so-called low-skill jobs to support families living in poverty in their home countries. These youth never had the opportunity to integrate into U.S. schools. Rather, from a tender age, they have worked long hours under arduous conditions in agriculture, construction, and other socially denigrated jobs. With limited knowledge of U.S. society and under the constant threat of deportation, they are isolated from the mainstream and live in a transnational social field that is intensely oriented toward their home countries.[2]

This article focuses on the experiences of young undocumented Mexican farmworkers who live and work on the

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isolated dairy farms of Upstate New York. A 2009 survey suggested that at least 2 600 Latino workers labor on New York dairies, 24 percent of the hired labor used by the industry.[3] There are no databases collating workers' current ages or their ages at the time of their migration to the U.S., but my 5 years of ethnographic research with more than 60 dairy farmworkers in central, western, and northern New York suggest that a significant share arrive in their early or late teens. I use here the results of my interviews and participant observation to describe the migration experiences of these young "birds of passage,"[4] focusing on the difficult decision to migrate, their transnational lives in the U.S., and the ways they express agency in the workplace despite the extremely difficult circumstances they face.

The Decision to Migrate

Many of the young farmworkers I met had decided independently to travel to the U.S. in order to support families living in poverty conditions at home. Arturo,[5] 22, from Chiapas, Mexico, left school at the age of eight, after completing just two years of primary school, to earn money to help his parents provide for his seven siblings. From age 9 until age 14, he worked packing sweets in a candy factory for 50 pesos (less than US$5) per day. At age 14, Arturo migrated completely alone —not even with friends— against his parents' wishes. As he describes it, "I had no money; I was so poor. That's why I came here." He spent 15 days traveling, including a terrifying 4-day walk through the Arizona desert, finding determination in his extreme sense of economic need. Arturo had decided on his own at the early age of 14 to improve his and his family's lives by finding work with cousins already established in the dairy farming industry of Upstate New York. In this way, he made his transition to adulthood under particularly trying conditions.

Not all young migrants make the decision to move with such maturity, but rather out of a youthful sense of adventure. They make life-changing and potentially life-threatening decisions with little information about the possible consequences. Brenda, 21 at the time of our interview, left her home in rural Veracruz at age 16 with a large group of extended family members (not including any siblings or parents). Brenda says that within a span of only 20 minutes, she had received and accepted the invitation to travel with them, starting her journey toward the desert on a whim. "I was still a child. . . .

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I didn't have any idea what this thing was. It's as if I said to you, 'Okay Kathy, come to visit me,' and you come just like that, without anything, without thinking about it." Once Brenda got to the Sonora desert and fully realized the danger of the border crossing on foot, she says she immediately regretted her decision and "begged God that [U.S. immigration officials] would catch her." She eventually made the passage safely and arrived to New York dairy farms with family, where she continues to live and work.

Brenda, Arturo, and others like them are child migrants, with varying degrees of adult maturity upon arriving to the U.S. However, they receive no special protections in the Upstate New York dairy belt. They work there in exhausting and low-paid milking parlor jobs without a parental figure to support or guide them.

Working on New York Dairy Farms

Miguel, 20, was born in a small village in the highlands of Veracruz, Mexico. He migrated to the U.S., directly to an Upstate New York dairy farm, at 14. Miguel couldn't find a job for the first three months after he arrived; dairy farmers resisted hiring him due to his youth. Eventually, a farm-owner whose business was suffering from rapid labor turnover took him on. Miguel quickly discovered why this farm had been losing workers when he didn't receive a single cent of his pay for six months. The farmer claimed that he couldn't process his paycheck because Miguel had no form of identification. Indeed, Miguel had no one to help him gain access to the illicit documents these young migrants must present to employers in order to be hired. One week after he finally obtained these "papers," as migrants call them, the farmer took him to the bank to cash a US$7 000 check for his back pay.

Miguel found his next job on a small dairy through a *contratista* (labor contractor). There, he was the only immigrant employee and he lived alone. His work commitments were excessive, often reaching 16 hours a day over a 7-day work week. The contractor regularly took a US$100 or US$150

cut from his bi-weekly paycheck for "food" deliveries, which usually consisted of nothing more than a few cans of beans and soft drinks. When Miguel eventually asked him to stop, he was forced to leave the farm —and therefore was also thrown out of his home without a moment's notice. In addition, the contractor withheld a full month's pay, about US$1 500, after he left. The money was never recovered. As of our interview in May 2013, Miguel had recently arrived to a small farm with about 150 milking cows, where he was happy to report earnings of about US$2 000 per month and consistent delivery of his pay.

Young and traveling alone, Miguel and farmworkers like him have few means to contest labor abuses when they arise. Without a strong network of locals or migrants to provide needed information about his rights in the U.S., Miguel found little opportunity to speak up against abusive situations; when he did, he was further punished for his assertiveness. Employers and *contratistas* have significant control in this paternalistic labor system, where basic needs like housing, food, and transportation (see the article by Mary Jo Dudley in this issue) are exchanged for long, hard hours of work. This paternalism takes many different forms, ranging from caring and attentive employers to abusive situations like those of Miguel, described above.

Employer paternalism is possible because of the very limited incorporation these migrants experience into mainstream U.S. society. Instead, their social networks and cultural attitudes remain focused on their communities at home.

A Transnational Mode of Incorporation

"Transnationalism" refers to the peculiar sentiment of living in two societies at once —simultaneously "here and there"—[6] and can be experienced by both migrants and those affected by migration. It is often characterized in contrast to assimilation, whereby immigrants come to adopt the cultural ways of their new society (although sociologists note they can be mutually reinforcing).[7] Young undocumented farmworkers in Upstate New York live decisively transnational lives, with little opportunity to assimilate. This is because they live and work with other undocumented immigrants, often from the same communities or regions in Mexico, creating social and geographical separation from the mainstream U.S. population.

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The creation of these ethnic enclaves can be explained by dairy farm hiring practices for immigrant workers, who are usually posted to the milking parlor. U.S. farm employers rely on immigrants' existing social networks for recruitment to reduce the costs associated with searching for employees and labor turnover.[8] In the case of New York dairy farms, workers usually bring family members or trusted friends from their hometowns in Mexico or Guatemala to replace outgoing workers. As a result, their primary social worlds involve interactions with other undocumented migrants with whom they live (often sharing rooms and even beds), speak in Spanish, share Mexican and Guatemalan meals, and discuss economic and family concerns from home. As 24-year-old Ismael put it, "Honestly, I like being here surrounded by my friends, people that I already know from my family. . . . We get to see each other, not regularly, but we see each other. We know we're among family."

Therefore, the institutional integration of young migrant workers is shaped by interactions with similarly positioned migrants in workplaces, rather than with U.S. citizen youth in schools or other civic spaces. In fact, when asked during interviews if they spend social time with any local U.S. citizens, the farmworkers in my study named only their employers and their employers' spouses, Spanish-speaking Jehovah's witnesses, and sometimes representatives of organizations providing specific support services to this population.[9] Interaction with locals is limited because they travel to town infrequently, mainly to shop for basic supplies or to visit the doctor. Moreover, the labor hierarchy on the farm concentrates Latino immigrants in the lowest-paid ranks in the milking parlor, with little opportunity to interact with U.S.-born workers. These conditions mean that they live in a transnational social field that is much more "there" than "here," despite residing in the U.S. for years at a time.

However, this transnational orientation provides a unique perspective on dairy farm work that attributes meaning and success to a job well done, in stark contrast to the disparaging views of U.S. citizens toward farm jobs. Rural Mexican youth were acculturated in their home societies into very different valuations of work than those held by mainstream U.S. society. From their transnational perspective, dairy work

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is a means of acquiring social status. The most commonly cited benefit of dairy farm work is that the net pay is better, because farmers typically provide free housing, allowing them to send more money to their families or invest in their own farmland or homes in Mexico and Guatemala. Moreover, if they show longer-term loyalty to the farm (typically over a period of two or more years), they are often promoted from the milking parlor to higher-responsibility positions in calf care or animal medicine.

These youth express feeling empowered as they move upwards in the farm labor hierarchy, particularly in comparison to their U.S.-born colleagues. One worker who had replaced a U.S.-born worker as primary caregiver to newborn calves said with pride, "I saw the [U.S.] American, he was obeying the boss's orders. . . . He wasn't putting in his own brain, no effort to do better. . . . And I arrived . . . and now [the calves] don't get sick." Dairy farm jobs are valued because they facilitate socio-economic advancement at home, and promotions create a sense of empowerment that can be recounted to family and friends with pride. By contextualizing their experiences in transnational social fields, they find dignity in their farm work experience and demonstrate their agency in the face of seemingly impossible structural constraints.

Conclusions

This article has reflected on the decision-making processes and experiences of undocumented children and youth who move to the U.S. to work full time. They did not make the choice to move based on the desire for long-term integration in the U.S. or under their parents' influence. Rather, they chose to enter undocumented status as a short-term strategy to help their families and to achieve more fulfilling forms of membership in their home societies through transnational activities. These findings demonstrate how age at migration and institutional integration together shape the life trajectories of young migrants. They also reveal how these farmworkers live their young adulthood in limbo, perpetually suspended in a set of unimaginable trade-offs between their families and their jobs, between the future they want and the means to achieve it.

This article has also explored an oversight in policies and discourse about the responsibilities of U.S. society toward young undocumented immigrants. Greater social inclusion of undocumented students, or Dreamers, has been based on their deep integration into the fabric of the mainstream —their being, legal status aside, "just like us." However, young migrants who work in agriculture and other industries also merit recognition for their contributions to society and deserve equal relief from the threat of immigration enforcement. They demonstrate maturity and resolve from a young age in the sacrifices they make for the well-being of their families and to build their futures. Ironically, by excluding these young people from any legal protections, U.S. society denies social belonging to those who arguably demonstrate the values of hard work and family commitment that it most deeply cherishes. VM

Notes

[1] The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act was first introduced in the U.S. Senate in 2001, but it has failed to pass. The DREAM Act was intended to provide conditional permanent residency to certain immigrants of good moral character who had graduated from U.S. high schools. If passed by Congress, it would have granted them a pathway to U.S. citizenship. DACA provides temporary relief from deportation and the right to apply for a Social Security number, but it does not qualify recipients to apply for citizenship and, as an act of prosecutorial discretion, it could be repealed by subsequent presidents.

[2] Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller, "Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society," *International Migration Review* vol. 38, no. 3 (Fall 2004), pp. 1002-1039.

[3] Thomas R. Maloney and Nelson L. Bills, "Survey of New York Dairy Farm Employers 2009" (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, Dyson School of Economics and Management, 2011), http://publications.dyson.cornell.edu/research/researchpdf/rb/2011/Cornell-Dyson-rb1101.pdf.

[4] Michael Piore, *Birds of Passage* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1979). The term "birds of passage" refers to economic migrants who temporarily relocate to a more developed country to improve their economic situation.

[5] All names of interviewees are pseudonyms.

[6] Levitt and Glick Schiller, op. cit.

[7] Robert C. Smith, *Mexican New York: Transnational Lives of New Immigrants* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

[8] Fred Krissman, "*Sin coyote ni patrón:* Why the 'Migrant Network' Fails to Explain International Migration," *International Migration Review* vol. 39, no. 1 (Spring, 2005), pp. 4-44.

[9] The Cornell Farmworker Program, Worker Justice Center of New York, and Workers' Center of Central New York provide essential supports for workplace matters and beyond for many of the farmworkers I interviewed; they also introduced me to a large share of my interviewees.