

Export Agribusiness, Multimodal Dispossession, and Livelihood Reconstitution in Baja California

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Expanding California's agribusiness model, the production of fresh fruits and vegetables in San Quintín, Baja California, represents a paradigmatic case of the growth of export commercial agriculture in Mexico. Through intensive use of labor, land, and water, this region contributes to the supply of fresh produce to US markets led by transnational food retailers. Grounded in ethnographic research, we interpret farmworkers' experiences in San Quintín's export agribusiness as the result of two processes. First, multimodal dispossession compels them into wage labor in a policy regime of underenforcement of agricultural workers' rights. Second, through livelihood reconstitution, Indigenous and mestizo farmworkers engage in an array of waged and unwaged work to ensure their subsistence and strive for their dignity, given the inadequacies of employment in export agribusiness. The dialectic interaction between these processes, we contend, is key to understanding the reproduction of labor and social inequalities in export agribusiness in Mexico and a dimension missing in some policy circles that advocate for that model of agricultural production to enhance farmworkers' employment and income.

Keywords: agriculture, Baja California, dispossession, farmworkers, labor, livelihoods, Mexico, precarious employment.

Basada en el modelo de agricultura corporativa de California, la producción de frutas y verduras frescas en San Quintín, Baja California, representa un caso paradigmático del crecimiento de la agricultura de exportación en México. En base al uso intensivo de mano de obra, tierra y agua, esta región

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contribuye al suministro de productos frescos para los mercados de Estados Unidos, liderados por compañías transnacionales de alimentos. Por medio de investigación etnográfica, en este artículo interpretamos las experiencias de los trabajadores agrícolas empleados en el sector de agroexportación de San Quintín como el resultado de dos procesos. Primero, el despojo multimodal los obliga a trabajar como jornaleros agrícolas en un régimen laboral que los desampara de muchos derechos laborales básicos. Segundo, mediante la reconstrucción de sus medios de vida, jornaleros agrícolas indígenas y mestizos combinan sus trabajos con otros empleos tanto remunerados como no remunerados para asegurar su subsistencia y luchar por su dignidad, dadas las limitaciones del régimen laboral en la agricultura de exportación. La interacción dialéctica entre estos procesos es clave para entender la reproducción de la mano de obra empleada por este sector, así como las desigualdades laborales y sociales que la agricultura de exportación genera en México, una dimensión ignorada en algunos círculos políticos que abogan por ese modelo de producción agrícola para mejorar el empleo y los ingresos de los trabajadores agrícolas en dicho país.

Palabras clave: agricultura, Baja California, despojo, empleo precario, medios de vida, México, trabajadores agrícolas, trabajo.

Introduction

The large-scale production of fresh fruits and vegetables (FFV) in the San Quintín region in Baja California represents a paradigmatic case of modern export commercial agriculture in Mexico. Through the intensive use of labor, land, and water, this region emulates the California agribusiness model—industrial production, concentrated capital, intensive inputs—to supply FFV at low cost to US markets (Garrapa 2019; Chávez-Leyva 2021). Production in San Quintín expanded the North American FFV industry, led by US-based food retailers and marketers attracted to Mexico for low labor costs, climate, and location (Huang and Hammami 2022), and supported by national and regional development policies (ZloIniski 2019; Fischer-Daly 2022a). As a result, the value of berry exports from Mexico expanded 125 times between 2000 and the mid-2010s (United Nations, n.d.), as berries overtook tomatoes as the dominant crop. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) created unprecedented protections for foreign investors, facilitating large companies such as Driscoll's and Andrew & Williamson to expand to Mexico and consolidate dominant market positions.¹ In turn, the

1. Driscoll's has a US\$3 billion valuation, accounts for 28 percent of all strawberry plant patents, one-third of all berry sales, and 60 percent of organic strawberry sales in

Mexican government supported the industry by shifting direct subsidies from domestic to export agriculture and by creating a surplus labor market of people displaced through its agrarian counterreforms. These conditions, combined with close geographical proximity to the US border, enabled San Quintín's export-agribusiness boom, and, by 2019, the region accounted for 23.3 percent of Mexico's strawberry exports (SIAP, n.d.).²

Today, after about four decades of development, the academic literature on export agribusiness in the San Quintín valley is voluminous, covering the history of this mode of production and its multiple labor, social, and political consequences. Numerous studies, for example, have reported widespread violation of legal rights to fieldworkers in the sector (Garduño, García, and Morán 1989; Lara Flores 1996; Velasco, Zlolniski, and Coubès 2014; Garrapa 2020; Ayala and Ramírez 2022; Fischer-Daly 2023). Other studies have highlighted that "contract production," a form of production and labor subcontracting, has relied on workers' "flexibility" to endure poor conditions and enhance companies' profitability while insulating marketing and retail companies from labor demands (Echánove and Steffen 2005; Cruz 2016; Hernández Robledo and Barón León 2020). Other scholars have analyzed the use of migrant-labor recruitment schemes, selective law enforcement, paternalistic labor-management methods, and historically rooted forms of ethnic discrimination and violence as part of this production model (Novo 2004; Velasco, Zlolniski, and Coubès 2014; Zlolniski 2019; Fischer-Daly 2022b). These studies—many of which are grounded in ethnographic field research—contrast with recent reports about the features and consequences of the growth of export agriculture in this and other regions in Mexico (Martin 2020; Escobar, Martin, and Stabridis 2019; Martin and Escobar Latapí 2018, 2019a, 2019b; Martin and Schmidtke 2018; Martin et al. 2018). Mostly based on large surveys funded and facilitated by employers, these reports have argued that export agribusiness makes a positive contribution to national income, reduces poverty, and provides employment

the United States; sells its patented plants and purchases berries from 400 production companies in 21 countries; markets berries in 48 countries; and transports 4 million pounds of berries daily. Driscoll's owners created Reiter Affiliated Companies (RAC) as its primary North American production-management company. In 1991, RAC incorporated Berrymex, now the largest berry company in Mexico, when its CEO commented, "We have developed and patented our own plant varieties, and would not have risked bringing them to Mexico unless NAFTA protected our patents" (quoted in Crawford 1997, cited in Fischer-Daly 2023).

2. The Mexican state of Michoacán accounted for two-thirds of strawberry production in 2019 (SIAP, n.d.).

opportunities for migrant rural workers. While transparent that part of the goal is to fit data to demonstrate that export agribusiness has contributed to reduce poverty in Mexico,³ these reports generally lack historical depth and therefore the political-economic framework within which this sector has developed.

In this article, we build on this extensive literature to advance an alternative theoretical interpretation of how export agribusiness in San Quintín has impacted the lives of the farmworkers who sustain this industry and the ways in which they have responded to the consequences of this production model. Taking a historical perspective, we argue that San Quintín's production regime can be analyzed as the result of two dialectical processes of multimodal dispossession and livelihood reconstitution. By *multimodal dispossession*, we refer to the separation of former peasants from the means of subsistence and their partial transformation into wage workers with limited labor rights and access to basic means to sustain themselves and their families. In turn, by *livelihood reconstitution*, we refer to the array of waged and unwaged work in which Indigenous and mestizo farmworkers engage to ensure their subsistence and social reproduction, while also seeking to assert some autonomy from wage labor in the export-agribusiness industry that dominates this region. These activities, we argue, subsidize the labor costs in this industry while, at the same time, constituting a sphere that working-class people have created to regain control over their lives and forge their own identities as rights-bearing citizens.

Our approach emphasizes the need to examine the lives of Mexican farmworkers beyond the reductionist analytical category of wage labor. Instead, we propose a more holistic gaze that examines them as economic, social, and political agents on their own. In this endeavor, we follow the lead of “decentering the wage relationship” (Kasmir and Gill 2022, xxii), an analytical device used to capture the complex dynamics and constantly evolving social struggle that has characterized the history of export agribusiness in San Quintín. Analyzing how industry and worker strategies have dialectically interacted over time is key to explaining the system not only of production but also of labor reproduction, the heart of export agribusiness. In so doing, we seek to broaden the analysis of studies that reduce fieldworkers to the unidimensional category of cheap-labor inputs and/or victims of capitalist structural forces, and thus bring into focus workers' rich and complex livelihoods.

3. “Timely and reliable data can reinforce the message that export agriculture reduces poverty” (Escobar, Martin, and Stabridis 2019, 11).

In the rest of the paper, we first explain our analytical framework and research methods and present a brief historical context of the development of export agriculture in San Quintín. Next, we discuss the juridical categorization of agricultural workers as *jornaleros* and its attendant denial to them of labor-rights protections as a mode of dispossession that has historically underpinned San Quintín's export-agribusiness sector. The following two sections focus on livelihood reconstitution. We discuss the wage and nonwage kinds of labor and forms of resistance through which farmworkers assert their rights and autonomy while broadening their repertoire of livelihood strategies. In the conclusion, we summarize our findings and reflect on how efforts to reduce peasants and other workers to commodified labor throughout Mexico's long commercial agriculture history has always been and continues to be incomplete and uneven, leaving interstices in which people build more complex and richer lives than that afforded by wage work in agribusiness alone.

Multimodal Dispossession and Livelihood Reconstitution

Dispossession entails separating people from the means of satisfying life's basic necessities. In the contemporary context of neoliberalism, David Harvey (2003) coined the concept of "accumulation by dispossession" to explain the different policies and set of practices that allows the concentration of wealth in a few hands by dispossessing the less powerful of their land and other means of production, all with the support of the state. Reflecting diverse conjunctures, Harvey argued that dispossession has taken different forms, including forceful displacement of peasants, suppression of noncapitalist production and consumption arrangements, replacement of diverse property-rights regimes with exclusive private property rights, commodification of labor power, asset appropriations, and debt (Harvey 2003, 145).

We build on this concept and prior analyses of capital accumulation by using the term *multimodal dispossession* to characterize the production regime of export agribusiness in northern Mexico. By multimodal dispossession, we refer to the multiple ways through which this state-facilitated and industry-led production model has compelled people to sell their labor power as wage workers while curtailing their labor rights and ability to provide for their basic subsistence needs. These forms of dispossession often entail structural forms of violence, as well as privatization and/or control of natural resources such as land and water that are basic for the agroexport industry, which severely impact peoples' ability to sustain themselves and flourish.

In Mexico, the compulsion of peasants into wage-labor markets is part of a long history of dispossession that established the necessary conditions for the development of San Quintín as a major agroexport hub. In the 1970s, agribusiness expanded in San Quintín as part of the Mexican government's promotion of exports. In this era of extensive international lending, the Mexican government paved the transpeninsular highway down Baja California, facilitating vehicular transport to deliver FFV to US markets. The neoliberal reforms associated with NAFTA further consolidated the model of large agribusiness and export agriculture. As part of its structural adjustment program required by the International Monetary Fund for access to international finance, the Mexican government shifted its subsidization of agriculture from small-holders to export agribusinesses. Once enacted in 1994, NAFTA reinforced state support for export agribusiness by lowering trade barriers and expanding state protections of foreign investment, including intellectual property. US-based companies, primarily of California, capitalized on state supports and San Quintín's geographic proximity to the Mexico-US border, forging commercial partnerships with local farmers to import their produce to the United States (Zlolniski 2019, 29). Farmers who did not have the means to produce on their own engaged in "silent partnerships," whereby they rented their lands directly to US agribusinesses (Goodman and Lizárraga 1998, 19). For US companies, in addition to geographic proximity that reduced transportation expenses, the lower labor costs of growing fresh produce south of the border increased their market competitiveness (Zlolniski 2019, 31). The privatization of land that followed the agrarian reform of 1992 established a new legal framework for land, resources, and ownership. It also entailed a "reverse tenancy" (Narotzky 2016, 305), in which ejidatarios and other small-scale farmers, unable to compete with market dominating transnational companies, had to sell or rent lands to agribusinesses. Peasant agricultural production declined. Nonremunerated employment in agriculture and forestry was reduced by 58 percent between 1991 and 2007, and an estimated 4.9 million people were displaced from peasant livelihoods in this period (Weisbrot, Lefebvre, and Sammut 2014). Many of them became migrant laborers in commercial agriculture in northern Mexico.

While the concept of multimodal dispossession serves to analyze the structural context and conditions for the employment of displaced peasants as farmworkers in Mexico's export agriculture, it does not capture farmworkers' livelihood strategies, which they have developed and adapted in response to these structural forces.

As Susana Narotzky (1997, 39) notes, the weakening of state regulation of labor relations has shifted social scientists' attention to the "means of livelihood," an approach that puts people first by inquiring the ways in which they earn a livelihood. This perspective, which includes nonmarket production and exchanges of goods and services, helps to bring to light a gamut of nonmarket economic social relations that were previously neglected in studies that focused on market-economic activities such as wage labor (39). As Narotzky points out, this approach "enriches our understanding of economic processes and focuses on human agents and their everyday social relations in a daily struggle for livelihood" (40). We use *livelihood reconstitution* to refer to these varied forms of labor through which farmworkers and their families ensure their subsistence, carve out some degree of autonomy, and maintain a level of dignity and control over their lives. To this end, we build on recent scholarly work in anthropology that seeks to decenter wage work and cast a wider gaze to capture other forms of paid and unpaid work in which people engage to contribute to their subsistence and pursue better lives (Kasmir and Gill 2022; Griffith 2022). Thus, David Griffith (2022, 86) has coined the term "livelihood constellations" to depict the combination of different sorts of labor by which people seek to improve the material conditions of their lives, as well as their sense of dignity, happiness, and identity. To capture this process, we need to go beyond the worker as the unit of analysis and focus instead on her/his household and its members, who often engage in multiple economic relationships and natural and social resources, including households with members who migrate while others stay at home (205). This offers a more holistic perspective that requires an ethnographic, multiscalar research strategy rather than extraction of data, such as through one-time surveys (Kasmir and Gill 2022).

From this perspective, we argue that the development of the San Quintín export-agribusiness model can be best interpreted as a dialectic process between multimodal dispossession and livelihood reconstitution that is always in flux. This contested dynamic reflects the long historical struggle in Mexico between structural forces of capitalist agriculture—especially the formation of farmworkers—and workers' individual and collective projects to satisfy their basic needs, advance their life projects, and enhance control over their lives. We focus on the denial of farmworkers' labor rights—including their politically constructed categorization as *jornaleros*—as a central form of dispossession, and on two forms of livelihood reconstitution, namely, wage and nonwage types of work outside agriculture, and political organization by which working people seek to counteract

the negative effects of economic dependence on employment in the agroexport industry.

This article is based on data gathered through ethnographic fieldwork, as well as on quantitative data. One author has conducted ethnographic research in San Quintín since the early 2000s, including extensive interviews with employers, workers, government officials, and labor and union leaders (Zolniski 2019). The other author conducted sixty-seven semistructured interviews with workers, managers, state officials, and activists, among others, as well as participant observation while picking strawberries and attending activities of unions and community organizations, between 2019 and 2023 (Fischer-Daly 2023). In addition, we use datasets produced by the Mexican and United States governments, as well as quantitative data published in previous studies and reports focused on this industry and region.

Multimodal Dispossession through the Curtailment of Labor Rights as Jornaleros

Once traditional agriculture started to decline in Mexico as the result of economic policies that uprooted peasants from their lands and livelihoods, many of them started to migrate to the north in search of jobs, often as farmworkers. However, the state had previously created the legal category of “jornalero” (day laborer), which excluded fieldworkers from national labor and most legal benefits (Velasco, Zolniski, and Coubès 2014, 197). The legal construct of jornalero drew on the assumption that fieldworkers—employed in, among other tasks, field preparation, cultivation, pruning, and harvesting—worked temporarily and migrated seasonally. But as large-scale commercial agriculture took hold in regions such as Sinaloa, Sonora, and Baja California, the assumptions about jornaleros as temporary workers constantly migrating and following the harvests did not reflect the reality of many farmworkers employed in that sector. In San Quintín, by the 1990s, most workers were regularly laboring for the same employer for most of the year and resided in the valley (Velasco, Zolniski, and Coubès 2014). By 2020, San Quintín residents estimated that 80 percent of workers were residents and considered it home (Fischer-Daly 2023, 73).

The political construction of farmworkers as jornaleros degraded their remuneration. Until the late 1990s, most companies in San Quintín paid their workers *jornales*, a fixed amount for working an eight-hour day. In the early 2000s, employers began to replace daily wages with a piece-rate system, in which the unit of product replaced

the unit of time as the payment method (Hernández-Romero 2012, 74). The introduction of a piece rate significantly increased work intensity, as workers had to work harder than before to earn the equivalent of a day's wage by meeting production quotas set by their employers (Zlolniski 2019; Garrapa 2019). In addition, piecework entailed more pressure and surveillance by supervisors, further contributing to the intensification of labor and workers' stress. Furthermore, and in contrast to commercial agriculture in California (Hernández-Romero 2012), rather than a single piece-rate system, companies use a variety of pay modalities throughout the production cycle to keep labor costs down. Planting and harvesting, for example, are often paid at piece rate, while pruning, preparing the soil for the next cycle, and other tasks are frequently paid a day rate. A worker employed by the same company is often paid under several systems throughout the year, depending on the task, crop, season, and whether work is performed in open fields or greenhouses. The shift from cultivation in open fields to production in sheltered environments such as shade houses and greenhouses further intensified the workload by creating a fast-paced and high-pressure work environment. While employers gain flexibility from the varied and constantly changing pay systems, the impact on farmworkers is rather different. Rodolfo Moreno,⁴ a Zapotec laborer who was employed in a midsized company that produced tomatoes and cucumbers for export to the United States commented, "Before we earned a bit more money working in the field. Now working in the shadehouses, the workload is higher, and we are paid very little. It was easier before. Now they give us eight furrows to complete a work task planting, . . . and each furrow has two lines rather than one; there're more plants, and it almost takes twice the work to complete a work task. It's so hard! Things are getting pretty hard for us farm laborers" (Zlolniski 2019, 107).

The shift to piece rates and intensification of the labor process have contributed to San Quintín's export boom. This trend is apparent in the strawberry sector, which has come to dominate this industry since the 2010s, as shown in figure 1 below. In this sector, wage rates represented 3.9 percent of retail prices for strawberries in 2020 (Fischer-Daly 2023, 174). Despite a constitutional right to a living wage, average daily pay for harvesting strawberries was 360–570 pesos (US\$18–29) in 2020, depending on the employer, fruit yield, and work speed. For fieldwork outside of the 2–3 months

4. Pseudonyms are used for all workers quoted.

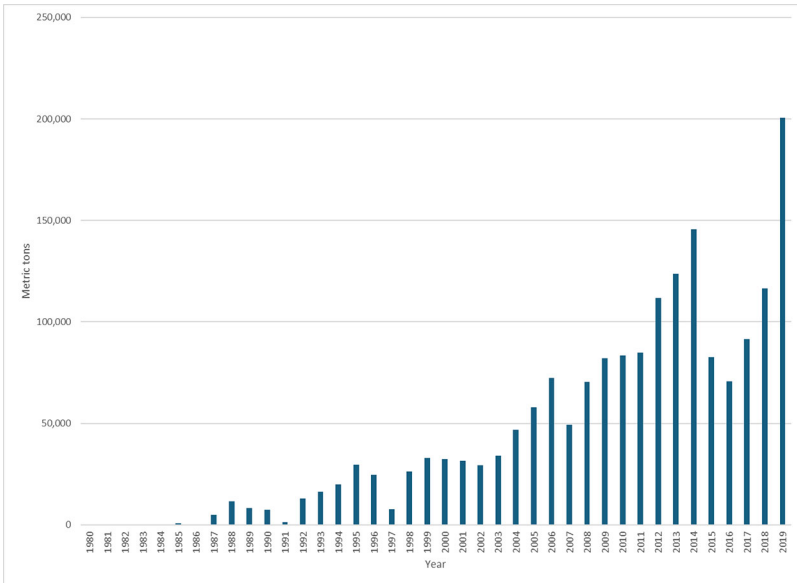


Figure 1. Strawberry production (in metric tons), San Quintín, 1980–2019. (Authors' rendering, with data from SIAP, n.d.)

peak strawberry harvest, employers paid by the day, on average 235 pesos (US\$11.75). The wage rates had stagnated for years, and workers were spending US\$11 per day for water, food, gas, and electricity (174). Furthermore, while Mexico's Federal Labor Law obliges employers to provide paid breaks, overtime and holiday pay rates, paid vacations, annual bonuses, and shares of annual profits, most workers not only do not receive these benefits in full but are also impeded from discerning employers' compliance with them by employers' use of a nonitemized "integrated" pay system and workers' lack of capacity to effectively pursue legal complaints (174).

This form of dispossession is not lost on workers employed in this sector. For example, Ramón Suarez, a Mixtec farmworker, began working in 2006 for a local company producing strawberries and tomatoes for a US commercial partner. Ramón explained how low remuneration sustains low labor costs for the industry, commenting, "Wages always fell short. I think that growers take advantage of us because they know that all the people who live here cannot go to work somewhere else and that we can only work in the field, especially if we are not schooled. The bosses know that eventually we will end up working in the field, even if we don't want to. That's why they don't raise our wages" (Zlolski 2019, 115).

The jornalero legal construct also reduced farmworkers' access to health care. By categorizing them as jornaleros, the Mexican state excluded fieldworkers from national labor and social security laws juridically from 1960 until 1995. As the number of farmworkers employed in commercial agriculture increased, the law was modified to provide health coverage only to workers employed twenty-seven weeks or longer. However, the government made numerous concessions to employers, ostensibly to facilitate registration of workers in the social security system, including a 20 percent discount in employers' fiscal contribution per registered worker and letting employers decide when to make the payments (Pérez Hernández 2012, 65). In 2020, local IMSS (Instituto Mexicano de Seguro Social) office data showed about 40 percent of agricultural workers in San Quintín fully registered for social security benefits (Fischer-Daly 2023, 68). The low rate reflects commonly reported employer practices, such as minimizing the number of workers classified as permanent or avoiding registration of their temporary workers at the IMSS while employed. In other cases, they register their workers with the IMSS but unregister them before they reach the twenty-seven weeks stipulated by the law for employees to gain full access to benefits.

The result has been that a large sector of fieldworkers employed in San Quintín's export sector are not compensated with health care or occupational-injury compensation. It has also resulted in the curtailment of pensions, paid vacations, annual bonuses, and shares of employers' profits—all of which the workers are entitled to receive under national law. In addition to indicating violations of rights under national law, lack of coverage deepens precariousness. Farmworkers in the region highlight numerous health hazards associated with working in open-air fields, greenhouses, and shade houses. While there are no published official statistics on workplace accidents in the industry, fieldworkers often complain about feeling dizzy, having episodes of high blood pressure, and fainting, as well as accidents. Elisa Ortiz, a farmworker in her mid-thirties who was employed at Los Pinos, which employs about 2,500 workers, related a workplace accident that she will never forget:

When I worked in greenhouses, they gave us scissors to do our job and I cut myself here on this hand, and I only got paid 80 pesos [\$7.20] that day. I hurt myself and almost cut off one of my fingers. On top of that I got reprimanded by the mayordomo [supervisor], who yelled at me, "Pendeja" [asshole], very upset. There wasn't anything I could use to cure myself, so they put my hand in a bucket of chlorine that was there, and I was bleeding so badly all the

chlorine got red. I then bandaged my finger myself as best I could. . . . I couldn't work for the whole week because my finger got all swelled up. (Zlolniski 2019, 113)

Another layer of labor-rights dispossession entails the denial of farmworkers' collective rights. The systemic undercompensation of labor is facilitated by a system of employer-protection unions that flourished under neoliberalism in Mexico. Under protection contracts, an employer pays and signs a contract with a union entity to protect it from workers' unions and collective bargaining (Bensusán 2006). When workers in San Quintín began to collectively demand improvements in labor conditions in the 1980s, employers organized their own association and signed employer-protection contracts with affiliates of the national federations Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos (CTM; Confederation of Mexican Workers) and Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana (CROM; Mexican Regional Labor Confederation). Both the CTM and CROM are notorious for employer-protection contracts. The two federations' affiliates and the main employers' associations (the Unión Agrícola and the Consejo Agrícola) signed contracts covering most of San Quintín export agribusiness without workers having any involvement whatsoever. Farmworkers consider these unions "sindicatos charros," corrupt, undemocratic organizations that favor the interests of the employers rather than workers. A worker explained, "We have brought complaints to the government, but the union protects the owner, and the owner protects the union" (Interview with Fischer-Daly, 2020).⁵

Meanwhile, the Mexican state has underenforced regulations of working conditions. Nationally, the Labor Ministry collected 2.5 percent of the US\$3.1 million total in fines for 55,800 violations of labor laws by export-agribusiness production facilities between 2006 and 2017 (Escobar, Martin, and Stabridis 2019, 34). In fact, even industry reports acknowledge that employers are not "liable for all labor law violations committed on their farms" (179). Not surprisingly, when asked about labor law enforcement, workers responded, "What government?" (Fischer-Daly 2023, 76), reflecting the minimal or in-existent presence of the government to protect their labor rights in the region. A community organizer elaborated that the 2015 strike sought to reverse the long-standing denials of workers' rights: "In the fields here in San Quintín, there wasn't an authority. The goal was to

5. Fischer-Daly's 2020 interviews were conducted in Spanish; quotations in the text have been translated into English by the author.

win, to retrieve the legal benefits that workers are owed. The rights of a worker should be respected in accordance with everything written in the law. And given that that was not happening, we tried to make them, with the legal benefits that are supposed to be provided immediately in accordance with the law, that they are in fact provided, and the benefits that are supposed to be given at the end of the year, they have to be respected” (Interview with Fischer-Daly, 2020).

The jornalero category in Mexico parallels what Sarah Horton (2016) calls “exceptional workers” in the United States, where the state excludes farmworkers from many of the labor protections afforded workers in most other occupations.⁶ This exceptional treatment is the political-economic heart of agribusiness. Its reduction of labor costs for employers is intensified in export enclaves like San Quintín, which are created as low-cost suppliers to international markets, by mechanisms such as employer-protection contracts and underenforcement of all applicable labor laws. As such, we argue, this exceptional treatment plays a key role in the dispossession of farmworkers’ rights, simultaneously contributing to their labor precarity and increasing the amount of value produced through their labor, which is captured as profits by the agribusiness industry.

Livelihood Reconstitution through Wage and Unwaged Labor

Like working peoples in other historical conjunctures, the commodification of farmworkers’ labor in San Quintín has never been even or complete. Since the inception of commercial agriculture in the region, workers have engaged in a range of activities to ensure their subsistence, improve their living conditions, resist exploitation, and seek better opportunities for themselves and their children. At the same time, and to the extent that wages and labor benefits in this sector fall short of meeting the costs of living, this diversity of subsistence strategies has subsidized employers, who externalize labor-reproduction costs to workers and their families by paying low wages and not contributing fully to national benefits programs. Examining the dialectic between the political, economic, and social organization of labor, and workers’ strategies to cope with the challenges that wage labor in this sector entails clarifies the articulation between

6. E.g., the US National Labor Relations Act excludes agriculture and domestic work, denying federal protection of collective bargaining rights of workers in these sectors.

production and labor reproduction at the heart of export agriculture in Baja.

Specifically, we highlight three types of wage and unwaged labor. First is work in the informal economy. With wages often insufficient to cover even the most basic living expenses, many farm laborers engage in secondary jobs in the informal economy. Men usually work as manual laborers in construction and other trades, especially in the winter when agricultural employment slows down. Since the early 2000s, others alternate between farmwork and informal employment such as gathering beach pebbles, hired by subcontractors who sell them to export companies that commercialize “Mexican beach pebbles” in the United States for landscaping and construction. Women more frequently engage in service-oriented activities such as cutting hair, sewing, tailoring, baking breads, selling soft drinks, and domestic work (Zlolniski 2019, 169). For single mothers employed as farmworkers, supplementing their wages with income from other jobs is especially important, particularly considering that about 17 percent of families living in colonias (neighborhoods) are headed by women (Velasco, Zlolniski, and Coubès 2014, 170), reflecting increasing feminization of labor in the region’s horticultural sector (Velasco Ortiz 2022).

Celeste Hernández’s story illustrates the hard choices single mothers often confront in San Quintín. A migrant laborer, married to her husband since 1987, she found herself in a critical situation when he abandoned her in 2006 while working in San Diego County after he obtained a green card through the Immigration Reform and Control Act legalization program of 1986. To sustain her four children, Celeste began working longer hours in agriculture and created additional sources of income working in the evenings. One of those nonwage work activities was cooking tamales to sell. Every weekend she prepared about four hundred tamales to sell in the colonia and local flea market in the nearby town of Lázaro Cárdenas. While she had the option to work in the fields on weekends, she preferred selling tamales, as she could earn more money and have a break from the onerous farmwork. As she put it, “Sincerely, I make more money selling tamales than working in the field. I invest about 400 pesos [US\$36] in preparing them and get about 1,200 pesos [US\$110]; hence, it’s good business. But I also get very tired because I don’t cook them in the stove but with firewood” (Zlolniski 2019, 169).

Growing their own food is another common nonwaged strategy by which many farmworkers in San Quintín seek to provide for their own consumption. Many families grow vegetables and herbs, and raise animals such as chickens, turkeys, pigs, and rabbits to consume,

sell, or barter with kin, neighbors, and friends. This type of food production for self-provisioning allows them to create a cushion for times of unemployment or underemployment, especially in the winter, or just to have a surplus of food for family gatherings and celebrations, especially for the Christmas holidays. This “backyard economy” is part of the rich array of nonwage work activities that not only add to their household economies but are also often a source of personal satisfaction and pride for the individuals who engage in them. In addition, for many farmworkers, fishing from the Pacific Ocean has long been another means of supplementing food obtained from waged work and, for a few, even an alternative. For example, after working in export agribusiness for three decades, Javier Osvaldo explained his turn to fishing as a source of both food and autonomy:

I worked my entire life, until I couldn't anymore, in the fields. Then I dedicated myself to fishing. Thank God, from the sea I've been able to move. We created Sociedad Cooperativa de los Sureños [Cooperative Society of the Southerners]. We go at night, depending on the tides. Sometimes you don't have enough to eat, but usually. The sea is great, and that's why we have to take care of it. Sometimes we argue with people who try to take even the small fish, and tell them to leave it, only take the large ones, so that other generations will also have it. (Interview with Fischer-Daly, 2020)

Labor migration to the United States constitutes yet another common strategy that many farmworkers use to compensate for low wages in San Quintín agribusiness employment. While migration to the US has a long history in the region, once crossing the border without state permission became costlier, riskier, and more uncertain due to US immigration policies, farmworkers have increasingly been recruited to work in the United States under the H-2A Temporary Agricultural Employment program. In San Quintín, the H-2A program has expanded. While in 2007 there was only one recruitment company in the region, by 2023 there were more than half a dozen companies. Some of these firms hire between 3,000 and 3,500 workers per year, reflecting the popularity of this program. Companies who use this program particularly value fieldworkers' skills such as dexterity, speed, agility, crop knowledge, and experience. They also seek to recruit “disciplined” workers who demonstrate soft skills such as punctuality and compliance with their supervisors' orders. In turn, many farmworkers in San Quintín consider the H-2A program as an opportunity to secure more income while avoiding the risks of border crossing without a visa. In 2020, there was an average wage of US\$18.41 (MX\$313) per *day* in San Quintín compared to US\$18.65

(MX\$317.05) per *hour* in California (Fischer-Daly 2022a). With the savings generated, H-2A workers habitually invest in land, housing, and their children's education, and/or start a family business, while others quit agricultural employment in San Quintín altogether.

Anayeli Fernández's experience is illustrative. A Zapotec farmworker who lives in the region with her husband and three small children, Anayeli began seeking H-2A work based on her siblings' experiences. "I saw my brothers going every year and coming back home with money and presents for their children, while we here couldn't afford it," she commented (Zlalniski 2019, 103), reflecting the sense of deprivation that often arises between households receiving income from migrant workers and those that do not (Cohen 2011, 106). After attempting to receive the work visa for nearly a decade, Anayeli was finally recruited in 2014 by a company in California to work trimming strawberry plants. As such, she was paid a piece rate of US\$14 per one thousand plants, earning US\$670 a week plus a "quality bonus," a significantly higher wage than farmworkers in San Quintín's berry sector were earning at the time (about US\$90 a week). Participating in the H-2A program also provided Anayeli with a comparative transnational perspective of farm labor in both sides of the border. As she explained, she preferred working in the United States because of the higher wages and her experience of better treatment, although she added that work there was more intense and controlled. "There [in the US] they treat workers better, but they're also more demanding," she said, adding that "in the United States, we are more submissive, we don't say anything, you don't complain because if you do [the company] won't call you again to come; you shut up. Here [in Baja] we protest more" (Zlalniski 2019, 103).

Anayeli's case reveals the complex ways in which settlement and labor migration are rearticulated in the lives of farmworkers in San Quintín. Settlement and citizenship help farmworkers to exercise rights (Fischer-Daly 2023). While in Mexico the *jornalero* categorization and employer-protection contracts impede workers' exercise of their full labor rights, particularly freedom of association, the U.S. H-2A program almost fully blocks such efforts by tying workers to a single employer and institutionalizing temporary contracts. Like Anayeli, some workers are willing to trade the ability to protest working conditions for higher wages and a chance to save for their families. Workers' view of the H-2A program thus reflects the structural maintenance of limited opportunities to earn living wages in San Quintín. Working north of the border provides an avenue not only to reconstitute their livelihoods after being superexploited for decades but also to carve out a space of personal dignity by leaving

the local employers, many of whom have historically treated the farmworkers with contempt.

The creation of opportunities under the H-2A program for individuals also reinforces the structural extraction of value from Mexican workers by US agribusiness. US employers use this program to capitalize on the skills and work experience of Mexican farmworkers during their most productive years while externalizing the economic and social costs to their home communities of raising, training, and maintaining them. And while employment in the United States presents workers with an important income-generating opportunity, abuses within the H-2A program are widespread. Many H-2A workers, for example, pay recruiters fees, which are prohibited by the program, and the terms of the program reduce migrants' ability to refuse work despite poor working conditions, which has led some scholars to refer to this guest worker program as a modern form of debt bondage and indentured labor (Bauer and Stewart 2013; CDM 2020; Montes de Oca 2021; Polaris 2022; Hernández-León, Sandoval, and Muñoz Paniagua 2022).

Livelihood Reconstitution through Social and Political Mobilization

Settling in San Quintín not only allowed farmworkers to diversify their employment opportunities and sources of income but also to organize collectively to improve the conditions of their lives. In addition to improving the material conditions of their lives, social and community mobilization served to create a space for autonomy and rebuild a sense of control and dignity, a central dimension of what we call livelihood reconstitution. These are social and political processes by which workers engage in place making and develop a new sense of belonging, community, and empowerment, which can be lost when adopting an analytical lens that reduces them to the unidimensional category of cheap wage labor.

For farm laborers in the region, moving from labor camps to their own parcels was a transformative experience that shaped their individual and collective memories. After displacement from homelands, migration, and entrance into precarious wage-labor markets, living in their own homes—even in highly difficult conditions—brought them a sense of independence that they have highly valued. Achieving residential independence, having space for their children to grow, and being property owners brought a sense of pride and progress after long years of hardship and sacrifices. Adelina and Rodolfo Moreno, for instance, conveyed the accomplishments of moving to

their own home as follow: “We don’t have to pay rent anymore, . . . we now have a lot where we live that is ours; it’s progress, . . . it’s an improvement” (Zlolniski 2019, 163). Residential independence also allowed many farm laborers to send their children to school year-round, which they deeply value, considering that many of these workers themselves did not have the opportunity to complete elementary school. By investing in their children’s education, they hope the next generation can escape the intense physical strain and paltry wages of farm labor and pursue more life-enhancing livelihoods. A farmworker who became active in union organizing during the 2015 labor strike offered his analysis of this hope as a critique of employers’ view of workers like him: “They know perfectly well that the poor people of Mexico, the Indigenous, the people with fewer resources—their only means is through education. And they know that for me to send my children to school, I need a good salary. So they say, ‘We cannot raise the salaries so high that he can send his children to school, because then we won’t have workers’” (Fischer-Daly, 2023, 75).

Community organizing at the local level has also contributed to a new sense of attachment and belonging. Farmworkers often engage in civic activities through local committees and/or regional organizations to improve the material conditions in their colonias. They also partake in family celebrations, especially those marking important stages in their children’s life cycles, such as quinceañeras, school graduations, and marriages. Developing strong ties with kin, friends, and neighbors brings a sense of joy and belonging that roots them in their communities and the region at large. This social network provides material and emotional support, contributing to a collective sense of community building whereby residents become firmly integrated into the social fabric of the region.

At the same time, community mobilization has contributed to political consciousness among farmworkers in San Quintín. While ethnic cultural differences and tensions still persist, moving into colonias transformed the social basis for collective mobilization by facilitating a higher degree of interethnic collaboration and solidarity that was absent when farmworkers lived in labor camps grouped along ethnic lines. Building communities strengthened their sense of political agency, despite the class and ethnic discrimination many still face in their work lives. Agustín Mejía, for example, a farmworker employed as an irrigator by a strawberry company, proudly shared his experience of individual and collective efforts to improve the living conditions in his colonia, and the sense of collective dignity that experience engendered: “We felt we were working for

something worthwhile, and despite all the sacrifices and missing many basic things, we had our own lots and place. And we began to love this land, to love our small parcels, our own homes even though they were humble. We told ourselves that this was ours and nobody would take it away from us. And little by little we started to get ahead . . . to see the results of our efforts, even if it took a long time” (Zlolniski 2019, 167).

Labor protests constitute another layer of community mobilizations that are part of the collective experience of many farmworkers in San Quintín. The labor strike of March 2015 was a potent expression of such political agency (Cruz 2016). Led by the Alianza de Organizaciones Nacional, Estatal y Municipal por la Justicia Social, several thousand farmworkers stopped working and occupied the transpeninsular highway to demand higher wages; registration in the national health system; freedom to join independent unions; the end of “integrated wages,” by which employers reduced bonuses and other pay benefits stipulated by the law; and the eradication of sexual harassment of female fieldworkers. They also denounced industry-controlled certifications of labor standards and employer-protection contracts, demanding respect for their right to independently unionize and engage in collective bargaining. The strike drew attention and support from social sectors in Mexico, and featured in the national and international press (Marosi 2015; Domínguez 2015). The collaboration of the labor movement with Indigenous organizations that had a history of collective mobilization galvanized the strike, which received strong support from local committees in the colonias where farmworkers live. As one organizer of the labor strike said, the movement “included members of all the Indigenous and Spanish-descendant communities—we understood each other on the basis of our common [work] experience” (Interview with Fischer-Daly, 2020).

The strike delivered important results. An agreement signed with employers included commitments for a wage increase, overtime pay, registration of farmworkers in the Mexican social security system, and labor benefits such as pensions and annual bonuses. The national government registered two independent unions, the most important of which is the Sindicato Independiente Nacional y Democrático de Jornaleros Agrícolas (SINDJA). Mass participation in the strike by tens of thousands of farmworkers also strengthened solidarity and highlighted the disrespect in public discourse by many employers and politicians who blamed “external groups” for the labor revolt (Daria 2019; Fischer-Daly 2022a). However, with no significant changes in the export-agribusiness model, gains from the strike have

been limited. By 2024, no employer had negotiated a contract with the independent unions, indicating avoidance of collective bargaining. Instead, according to the Federal Center for Conciliation and Labor Registration, 116 contracts with CTM and CROM affiliates—all viewed as employer-protection contracts by workers—remain in San Quintín. Workers' purchasing power declined as inflation eroded wage increases, while many companies increased the workload associated with the piece-rate system to compensate for higher wages. Furthermore, common employment practices, including labor subcontracting, keep many workers unregistered in the social security system and employed informally.

Meanwhile, large agribusiness quickly responded to control the effects of the labor strike. One of their responses has been increased use of corporate social responsibility (CSR), particularly the adoption of codes of conduct and certifications that reference international labor standards, and of the auditing of farms against the standards imposed by auditors hired by the industry (Daria and Canning 2023; Fischer-Daly 2023). This response echoes prior industry attempts to avoid collective bargaining and legal regulation following pressure to respect labor rights (Bartley 2005; LeBaron 2021). In a similar vein, Walmart funded a series of reports on labor conditions in export agriculture in Mexico in response to the massive labor strike of 2015. The series was based on interviews of workers arranged by employers, whose associations provided lists of employers and access to workers at their places of employment (Escobar, Martin, and Stabridis 2019, 127). Its main report acknowledged that FFV suppliers to Walmart use illegal “end-of-contract pay agreements”; exercise “no real control of their [workers’] exposure” to agrichemicals that “can cause both acute and chronic illnesses”; force overtime work; refuse to pay into the social-protection programs to which workers have constitutional rights; and “would take more responsibility for hired workers on their farms if they were liable for all labor law violations committed” (24, 29, 78, 179, 230). Yet its conclusion states that export agribusiness benefits workers, even though its survey data shows increased informal employment as FFV exports grew, as well as stagnant wages below living costs (50, 53, 115, 121–22). Along with the certification push in Mexican agribusiness, this series of reports exalts the export-agriculture industry in Mexico as a model by which to improve the lives of poor farmworkers and decrease labor migration to the United States, and—to the extent that it acknowledges violations of farmworkers’ rights—attributes the violations solely to the Mexican state. This narrative, especially—but not solely—geared to policymakers, protects the business interests of

sector-leading corporations. It “fairwashes” their brands for consumers who buy their products in the United States and avoids public regulation and collective bargaining with independent labor unions that challenge the power structure of the transnational agribusiness industry (Daria 2022; Daria and Canning 2023).

Conclusion

In the essay “Where Have All the Peasants Gone?” anthropologist Narotzky (2016, 304) argues that current processes of de-agrarianization that resulted from neoliberal economic policies have undermined peasant economies and livelihoods across the world, leading to different proletarian, semiproletarian, and hybrid classes of worker-peasants. In this article, we have examined the fate of farmworkers who, displaced from their home communities mostly in southern Mexico by neoliberal economic reforms, migrated in search of wage work in the agroexport sector in Baja California. To understand these workers’ lives and how they have changed over time, we have used an historical analytical approach focused on the dialectic between multimodal dispossession and livelihood reconstitution to explain the articulation between production and labor reproduction at the heart of the agribusiness industry in northern Mexico.

From this analytical perspective, we first referred to state policies that displaced and compelled millions of people into wage labor in commercial agriculture in Mexico. In this historical context, we interpret the curtailment of labor rights of farmworkers employed in export agriculture as a central mode of dispossession. The legal construction of the *jornalero* category as only partially protected by labor laws and state-supported employer-protection contracts has stripped farmworkers of rights that are supposedly guaranteed to all workers by the national constitution and labor code. In San Quintín, these policies have historically been used to facilitate the suppression of wages and the right of farmworkers to organize and bargain collectively for improved terms and conditions in their employment. Just as dispossession from land involves material separation from the means of production, the political construction of the juridical category of *jornaleros* has deprived a multitude of farmworkers from fulfilling their basic material and psychological needs through employment in commercial agriculture. This commodification of farmworkers’ labor is the process through which the global agribusiness industry has incorporated them into its circuits of labor (De Genova 2002; Harvey 2003; Griffith 2022).

Despite these structural trends, the labor regime of Baja's fresh-produce industry has not gone uncontested. As we have shown, farmworkers have responded by engaging in a wide variety of wage and nonwaged types of work, civic and political activism, and labor protest and resistance. In addition to wage labor in agriculture, many farmworkers are involved in domestic production of food for self-provisioning and barter, secondary jobs in the informal sector, petty commodity production, and labor immigration as part of a rich repertoire of "livelihood constellations" (Griffith 2022). These wage and nonwage labor activities are essential for their labor reproduction, hence helping to subsidize the insufficient income most of them earn as workers in the agroexport sector. Thus, rather than a unilinear process of proletarianization, these "multiple livelihoods" reveal that nonwage-labor economies continue to be recreated and articulated within advanced forms of capitalist agriculture (Palerm 2014; Narotzky 2016; Griffith 2022).

Like all people, farmworkers are more than their labor. As we have cautioned, reducing them to the monolithic category of cheap wage workers in the agribusiness industry is an act of heuristic distortion that obscures their more creative livelihood reconstitution strategies, through which they create material, social, and cultural values. As we have shown, despite the challenges they face, many farmworkers participate in more satisfying forms of work outside agribusiness; invest in education to provide better futures for their children than the harshness of export-agribusiness fieldwork; and collectively engage to improve the rules governing their workplaces and communities. Collectively securing and moving to their own parcels, building their homes, constructing the infrastructure of colonias, and negotiating with local and state authorities to bring public services are fundamental dimensions of their experience. This has contributed to workers rooting themselves in the region and cementing their collective sense of belonging, dignity, and pride. Collective labor actions, including the 2015 labor strike, served to articulate demands for full protection of their labor rights as citizens and to challenge nativist discourses that portray them as migrant outsiders, culturally backward, and incapable of participation in the rules to which they are subjected. Through these activities, farmworkers in San Quintín have reaffirmed their political agency and adopted and claimed San Quintín as homeland. This is a form of community building and place making similar to the experiences of Mexican farmworkers employed in California agribusiness who, since the 1970s, have contributed to populating, rejuvenating, and reenergizing previously declining rural communities in that state (Du Bry 2007; Palerm 2010).

The dialectic between dispossession and livelihood reconstitution presented is thus a means of understanding the economic, social, and political contradictions of the export-agribusiness regime in San Quintín. Since large-scale export agribusiness emerged in this region in the 1980s, the sector has grown dramatically, generating substantial profits for the North American food industry and export revenues for the Mexican state, while also creating thousands of jobs for local and migrant workers. This economic growth has tremendously benefited a segment of engineers, managers, and technical workers associated with the agribusiness industry, as well as a new cradle of government workers—with both groups forming the core of the region’s expanded middle class. This economic success has been built largely on the backs of fieldworkers, who constitute the bulk of the laborers employed in this sector and of the working poor in the region. Despite this growing class inequality and multiple forms of labor exploitation, farmworkers in San Quintín continue to refuse to be reduced to simply agricultural wage labor. Instead, they exert a degree of autonomy and control over their own lives and livelihoods. As people who have historically endured different and ongoing forms of dispossession, they refuse to fully integrate into the capitalist logic and discipline ethos at the heart the export-agribusiness industry that many policymakers and academic “consultants” in Mexico and the United States would like them to embrace.

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