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Wearing Union T-Shirts

Undocumented Women Farm Workers and Gendered Circuits of Political Power

by
Hinda Seif

Numerous scholars have analyzed the political victimization of undocumented Mexican (im)migrant women. A study of women farm workers and state legislative politics in the Salinas Valley reveals gendered circuits of power that link undocumented women to Latino elected officials through their participation in electoral mobilizations led by the United Farm Workers union and facilitated by Latina organizers. Power flows from politicians to immigrant women and circulates in the reverse direction through the organizing efforts of undocumented activists. The political agency of these women farm workers is severely limited, however, by the mutual reinforcement of their immigration status and their economic marginalization.

Keywords: *Undocumented immigrants, Labor unions, Mexican migration, Women, Politics*

In the fall of 2000, I head over early to the union hall for another day walking precincts in the barrio of East Salinas. As the political director tries to match English speakers with Spanish-speaking union members, he asks me to accompany two farm workers, Marta and Fernanda, and the children of each. Marta tells me, "When the woman from the Unión de Chávez [United Farm Workers] came to my parents' group at the school and asked me if I would like to come and participate in the walks, I told her yes. I'm in California for over a decade, and I'm here without papers. I voluntarily wanted to participate in this campaign."

In recent years, Mexican (im)migrants¹ have demonstrated a breathtaking and, to many, astonishing capacity to mobilize. In the spring of 2006, up to 2 million persons took to the streets in some of the largest demonstrations in U.S. history to challenge a congressional proposal to transform the undocumented into felons. Although news coverage focused on marches in major urban areas, six California marches in agricultural communities including Salinas were organized with leadership from the United Farm Workers (UFW). Yet the impact of such protests on U.S. electoral and legislative politics may be discounted because of immigrants' inability to vote.

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In this article, I contribute to debates on the political practices of Mexican immigrants by examining them through lenses of gender and undocumented status while locating my analysis in an agricultural region. I identify gendered circuits of power that link undocumented women to Latina/o elected officials through their participation in electoral mobilizations led by the UFW and facilitated by Latina organizers. As Elizabeth Guillen, former legislative counsel for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund in Sacramento, reflected, "When you see immigrants at the capitol, usually they're . . . in matching T-shirts with their union or whatever organization they're with" (interview, April 6, 2001). When undocumented women engage in political activity wearing UFW T-shirts or buttons, they temporarily and partially transcend their formal exclusion from the U.S. nation-state through identification as workers and members of a union with iconographic status in the U.S. Chicano movement. Thus, power not only flows from politicians to undocumented women but also circulates, albeit in a limited way, in the other direction through the organizing efforts of undocumented activists. While even the indirect involvement of the undocumented in U.S. electoral politics is controversial, I argue that it is essential for the democracy and well-being of the agricultural communities in which they constitute a significant proportion of the adult population.

This analysis is based on 15 months of fieldwork and interviews conducted from 1999 to 2001 in California locations that include the state legislature and Assembly District (AD) 28 and follow-up research pursued through 2007. Multifocal research incorporated Mexican immigrants, organizers, lobbyists, and Latino elected officials and their staff. Because of their unenfranchised status, Mexican immigrant women are invisible to the quantitative methods deployed by political scientists such as analysis of election exit polls, voter registration lists, and electoral results. Women who lack lawful immigration status are especially marginalized in research on political activism and participation. Ethnography and other qualitative methods can shed light on their political beliefs, their routes to civic participation, and the creative efforts of organizers and Latina/o politicians to improve their lives (Varsanyi, 2005).

During the AD 28 campaign, I knocked on doors to help mobilize voters with four undocumented women farm workers, their children, and many more women, men, and children (largely of Mexican ancestry) who are lawful permanent residents or U.S. citizens. My research activities also included attending campaign strategy meetings and lobbying visits, rallies, victory parties, and protests. I focus on two women farm laborers because, while the political victimization of undocumented Mexican women has been extensively studied, there has been less academic inquiry into their political opinions and activities. Undocumented women farm workers, who suffer from high unemployment rates and engage in casual and temporary labor, are especially difficult to organize through the workplace. They may be recruited as members of the UFW through schools and other neighborhood institutions, and they emerge as both victims and agents in relation to California politics. The thoughts of the two farm workers discussed here are mediated by multiple translations—from Marta's Purépecha to her imperfect Spanish, from Spanish to English, and from their experience to my interpretation. I have changed their names and the details of their lives to protect their confidentiality and safety.

While only an estimated 4 percent of U.S. undocumented immigrants worked in agriculture in 2005, it is the industry in which they are most concentrated

(Passel, 2006a). Thus, it is essential to examine immigrant political activism in agricultural communities such as AD 28, located just south of the high-tech center of Silicon Valley. Known as "America's Salad Bowl," the Salinas Valley is the heart of AD 28 and the hub of Monterey County's \$3.3 billion agricultural industry, largely fueled by undocumented Mexican labor (Monterey County Agricultural Commissioner's Office, 2006: 3). Joaquin Avila (2003: 3) argues that the political exclusion of large portions of Latino communities may produce "de facto political apartheid." While there is no accurate count of the undocumented in AD 28, according to the 2000 Census, persons of Latin American ancestry made up 59 percent of the population (Statewide Database, 2001) but less than 40 percent of registered voters (Statewide Database, 2000). Over half of the adult residents at its southernmost tip, King City, lacked U.S. citizenship (Avila, 2003: 2). In five additional municipalities—Salinas, Greenfield, Soledad, Watsonville, and Gonzales—noncitizens were one-third to half of the adult population (Avila, 2003: 2).

RACIAL AND GENDER POLITICS OF ECONOMIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSFORMATION

At the entryway of the UFW service center, tables display Spanish-language brochures on the union's Mexican health insurance plan. A neon sign on the wall broadcasts the name of an international money transfer service. Political director Giev Kashkooli addresses those who have gathered in Spanish. "Now, I want to make sure you're in the right place. Who here is a friend of Pete Wilson [former governor of California]?" Not one hand is raised, and there is laughter. "Who is a friend of Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta [of the UFW]?" The group responds. He passes out buttons that say "Bush Peor Que Wilson" (Bush Is Worse than Wilson) and "Simón Salinas" (the candidate for state Assembly) that the volunteers pin to their shirts.

We go around the room explaining why we are volunteering to walk precincts today. Among the approximately 40 people, a number of women with children, including Marta and Fernanda, from the UFW's amnesty project sit together. The political director continues, "Dolores Huerta can't be with us because she's in the hospital. So it's our job to elect Simón Salinas and Al Gore. Six years ago, there weren't enough of us registered. So the friends of Pete Wilson thought they could ignore the immigrants—the workers. What we need is to get better education for our kids, better salaries, and a new amnesty. Simón Salinas is running for state Assembly, and he's from here—he was a farm worker, he was a teacher. George W. Bush is the governor of Texas, and the minimum wage for farm workers in Texas is \$3.35 an hour. Imagine that! Yes, George Bush speaks Spanish, but he wants a new Bracero program. We have to organize to decide if the friends of the schools, the laborers, and the farm workers will be in power—or the friends of Pete Wilson. Today we are going to speak to new voters and people who are registered but never vote. Their vote will determine whether Simón Salinas or another friend of Pete Wilson makes it to the capital!"

Marta, Fernanda, and I are given lists of voters full of Spanish names. Although most of the voters are over 30 years old, they had first registered after the passage of Proposition 187, a 1994 voter initiative championed by Governor Wilson that sought to extend the federal status of the undocumented as "illegal aliens" to the state level, was approved by a majority of citizens who cast their ballots and was later reversed in the courts.

The dominance of the Spanish language and evidence of the members' transnational lives scattered throughout the UFW service center reflect the

transformation of the U.S. agricultural workforce to one that is largely undocumented and Mexican. Changes in U.S., Mexican, and North American regional economies and policies since the UFW's heyday in the 1970s have produced large-scale undocumented labor migration and family settlement. Cycles of racialized and gendered anti-immigrant backlash generate reactive political formations (Portes and Rumbaut, 1996) in which undocumented Latinos, including women, have played crucial roles.

During the 1970s, the UFW built upon a foundation of Mexican and Chicano political and cultural iconography to win an astounding 259 elections and represent 110,000 workers (Ferriss and Sandoval, 1997: 96). Yet the union historically had an ambivalent relationship to undocumented Mexicans, who were used by growers as strikebreakers. Multiple factors resulted in a precipitous decline in UFW membership over the next decade, including the replacement of U.S. citizen and other documented farm workers with vulnerable undocumented and indigenous migrants. On the political front, Governor George Deukmejian's appointments to the Agricultural Labor Relations Board represented growers' interests and rendered hard-won labor protections ineffectual (Decierdo, 1999). Internal political battles and the union's growing, controversial focus on electoral and legislative politics led to the departure of many organizers and reduced worker mobilization (Pawel, 2006; Wells, 1996). Today, the U.S. farm labor force is largely undocumented and unorganized. Although the average length of California field workers' employment in U.S. agriculture was 11 years in 2003–2004, 57 percent remained unauthorized to work in the United States (Aguirre International, 2005: 13–15). By 2007, the UFW reported only 5,504 dues-paying members nationwide (U.S. Department of Labor, 2007).

These changes reflect the contradiction of attempting to disrupt labor migration between the U.S. and Mexico while expanding the webs of economic interdependence that link the two nations. Migration has accelerated since the 1980s because of the effects of Mexican economic crises, the increasing demand of U.S. employers for undocumented, low-wage labor, and the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) (Marcelli and Cornelius, 2001). Since the implementation of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, the buildup of U.S. border enforcement and the failure of proposals for new legalization have disrupted circular and male-dominated Mexican migration patterns and produced long-term undocumented family settlement. Since 1999, the annual numbers of new migrants in the United States without legal status have sometimes exceeded those of new lawful permanent residents (Passel, 2006a). As of 2006, 57 percent of undocumented immigrants, or 6.5 million persons, were of Mexican origin, and almost 10 percent of the Mexican population resided in the United States (Passel, 2006a). These trends toward family establishment meant that 42 percent of undocumented adults living in the United States were women and 16 percent of all unauthorized immigrants were children (Passel, 2006b: ii).

Although California's share of the national undocumented population dropped to an estimated 22 percent by 2006, 7 percent of those living in the state were undocumented, most of them Mexican nationals (Passel 2006a), and the Golden State has emerged as a key battleground over their status. Like other policy proposals with great potential impact on undocumented immigrant women, Proposition 187 was written in the language of "balanced-budget

conservatism" (Calavita, 1996) with no overt reference to race and gender. The campaign for this voter initiative aimed to cut all state-funded nonemergency medical services—including prenatal care—to the undocumented and to ban students who lacked proof of lawful status from public schools. It was argued that because "illegal immigrants" were draining the state budget through their use of public services, denial of their health care and school access would improve the state economy.

Feminist theorists employed Michael Burawoy's (1976) classic analysis of migrant labor to shed light on the racialized and gendered nature of Proposition 187 and other restrictive measures, such as proposals to limit birthright citizenship (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1995; Wilson, 2000). Hondagneu-Sotelo (1995) maintained that Proposition 187 aimed to prevent the settlement of Mexican immigrant women and children in the state. If the model of the solo Mexican male migrant worker were restored, maximum profit could be extracted from his labor while reproduction costs—the expense of bearing and raising the next laboring generation—would be externalized in Mexico.

In addition to the potential impacts of this purportedly "neutral" policy proposal on Mexican women, media and legislative debates deployed racialized and gendered rhetoric that drew consumers and mobilized Anglo-American voters. In his sociolinguistic analysis of metaphors used in articles on Proposition 187 appearing in the *Los Angeles Times*, Santa Ana (2002: 83) found that the undocumented were regularly depicted as male and as invading enemies of the United States. Feminized metaphors portrayed immigrant women and their children as public "burdens" or "parasites." Women have been physically and symbolically deployed in national boundary projects throughout the world, and the reproductive Mexican woman's body emerged as "an important terrain of struggle" in California (Inda, 2002: 99).

Although Proposition 187 was overturned, other restrictions were implemented that defined the undocumented as "illegal" in relation to California, further limited the physical and economic mobility of migrant families, and had great impact on Mexican migrant women, who assumed primary responsibility for family settlement. In 1993, a new law was adopted that required proof of lawful U.S. status to obtain a driver's license in a state characterized by its decentralized metropolitan regions and car culture. For immigrants, who are heavily dependent on employment at nonstandard hours and locations, losing the license meant lost income. Increased reliance on inadequate public transportation led to longer and more dangerous job commutes and less time spent with families. Women's daily tasks, such as taking children to school and medical appointments, became more arduous.

Through a series of judicial decisions, undocumented Californians were also defined as "nonresidents" for purposes of calculating tuition rates at public institutions of higher education. This was a great affront to Mexican immigrants who endured racism and low-wage employment in the hope of providing opportunities for their children. Laws that constructed immigrant children as non-Californians and multiplied the cost of college tuition cemented their futures as exploited workers. They were especially problematic for Mexican immigrant mothers, the primary advocates for their children's educational advancement (Gándara, 1995). California's anti-immigrant politics reverberated nationwide.

The failure of Mexican immigrants to prevent the passage of Proposition 187 and other restrictionist legislation reflected the minimal influence on California politics that followed from their limited English skills and literacy, poverty and legal status, and political orientation toward Mexico. Yet Proposition 187 also generated political reaction among Mexican immigrants, who became increasingly engaged in U.S. politics. The conservative political orientation of Spanish-language media conglomerates in the United States is typified by their increasing corporate concentration and their promotion of whiteness and “standard” Spanish accents (Dávila, 2001). During the Proposition 187 debates, however, the Univisión broadcast channel and the newspaper *La Opinión* assigned full-time reporters like Xochitl Arellano to the Capitol in Sacramento for the first time in response to the urgent political interests of their Spanish-speaking target audience. Arellano (interview, March 14, 2001) explains: “Reporting every day at the Capitol was not only important—it was crucial and necessary. It was affecting [the people]—it was palpable.” The state legislature’s Democratic Caucus began to produce a regular radio segment for distribution to Spanish-language stations. In contrast to the marketing of an illegal immigrant invasion by the English-language media, the latest political news entered the state’s Spanish-speaking homes via television, print, and radio from a perspective that was sympathetic to immigrant consumers. According to Arellano, “In 1994, Wilson comes out with this 187, and all of a sudden every Latino knew who the governor of California was. He was a household name.” For example, Mano, a Salinas college student, recalled many discussions of Proposition 187 and Pete Wilson with his farm worker mother and siblings around the dinner table.

Giev Kashkooli explained that when Mexican immigrants hear the name Pete Wilson, “there’s a visceral reaction. . . . Most people will immediately say if Pete Wilson is for it, I’m against it” (interview, July 24, 2001). Wilson’s name became a potent symbol of anti-immigrant politics that was deployed in protests and electoral campaigns to mobilize Mexican immigrants, including those with little formal education who might have had difficulty following the complexities of political platforms and legislative proposals. Thousands of students like Mano who were too young to cast a vote expressed their opinion of the voter initiative by participating in school walk-outs that presaged the massive student protests of a decade later. Labor unions and community-based organizations provided an avenue for undocumented workers to make state claims based on their economic contributions.

This heightened awareness of California politics was coupled with a new capacity for some born in Mexico to vote in the United States. Immigrants legalized through the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) became eligible for naturalization starting in 1993. Proposition 187 also stimulated citizenship and voter registration drives and helped many Californians to make the leap from undocumented to U.S. citizen voters in little more than a decade (Johnson et al., 1999). During the 1990s, approximately 1 million of California’s 1.1 million new registered voters were Latino (Baldassare, 2002: 161). In Salinas, the Citizenship Project, an affiliate of Teamsters Local 890, trained more than 1,000 immigrant volunteers and allies to assist more than 10,000 immigrants in applying for citizenship between 1995 and 1997 (Johnston, 2004: 89). In 1998, electoral mobilizations conducted by labor unions including the UFW helped to defeat Pete Wilson’s chosen successor and

usher Latinos into political office to represent a growing Latino constituency that included immigrants with various legal relationships to the U.S. nation-state. As lieutenant governor, Cruz Bustamante became the first Latino elected to a statewide California political office in over a century. The state's Latino Legislative Caucus, which emerged as the largest potential voting bloc in the state legislature, was more gender-balanced than the legislature as a whole. By the 2005–2006 legislative session, the caucus had its first woman chair, and Latinas outnumbered their male counterparts in the male-dominated state Senate by a ratio of 2 to 1. Stereotypes of machismo were challenged through a successful strategy of running Latina candidates in diverse districts to appeal to Latino voters across genders and women voters across races (Buck, 2000).

THE MISSING UNDOCUMENTED WOMAN IN "LATINO POLITICS"

The emergence of women of Mexican ancestry as elected representatives, organizers, and grassroots participants in the fight against anti-immigrant policies is reflected in a growing body of scholarship on the gendered political participation of Latin American immigrants in U.S. and home-country politics. This work largely either focuses on the documented or elides immigration status. The dearth of explicit examination of the political activism of undocumented immigrant women may reflect their extreme disempowerment in relation to receiving nation-state politics, a refusal to reify their construction as "illegal," and recognition of their membership in "mixed" Latino families, organizations, and communities. Yet it obscures the specific ways in which undocumented women confront these extraordinary political barriers.

Drawing on research primarily focused on documented South American migrants from middle-class backgrounds in Queens, Michael Jones-Correa (1998) asserts that the gendered construction of migration and migrant life is associated with distinct male and female forms of political participation. Jones-Correa and Goldring (2003) find that Latin American migrant men mitigate racism and a loss of gendered social status in the United States through male-dominated social and political activities oriented toward their countries of origin. Immigrant mothers, who often say that their primary concern is the life chances of their children and who may derive benefits from increased gender role flexibility in the United States, are more likely to be directed toward the destination area. As the principal intermediaries between their children and U.S. public institutions including schools and medical facilities, their avenues to civic engagement differ from those of their male counterparts (Goldring, 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Jones-Correa, 1998).

Numerous scholars have found that women are central to grassroots organizing in Mexico and Mexican migrant communities (Carmona de Alva, 2002); their political engagement in the United States is often initiated through concern for the quality of their children's education (Johnston, 1999; Rocco, 2002). Gilda Ochoa (2004) demonstrates that Mexican immigrant women, in coalition with U.S.-born Latinas, protected bilingual education programs in Los Angeles using family-oriented organizing strategies. In her ethnographic study of a grassroots women's social justice organization in the San Francisco Bay Area, Kathleen Coll (2004) finds that members frame their domestic and

public activism in terms of the needs and problems that they share as women, mothers, and immigrants. They highlight *convivencia* (spending time together) as a foundation for political action—something that is difficult to achieve with non-Latinas because of language barriers. In a rare study that addresses the political agency of female Mexican migrant farm workers in the United States, Lynn Stephen (2003) observes that the wives of campesinos from rural and indigenous Mexico have created a gender-segregated forum as an offshoot of a regional labor union in agricultural Oregon. As members of *Mujeres Luchadores Progresistas* (Women Fighting for Progress), women who are unaccustomed to speaking publicly beyond their extended families develop leadership skills that they later bring to male-dominated public arenas.

Through these qualitative studies, we see that although Mexican immigrant women are marginalized in formal power hierarchies, they are pivotal in family settlement and community activism in relation to receiving areas (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). Through family-oriented and sometimes gender-segregated grassroots organizing, they challenge assumed boundaries between public and private spheres and concerns. Despite language barriers, women organize on the basis of a broad and politicized concept of motherhood that includes expanding children's educational opportunities (Pardo, 1998). It is critical to build upon our understandings of the gendered constructions of undocumented Mexican immigrants as "illegal" and of Mexican immigrant women's activism with analyses of the ways in which undocumented women fight against the illegalization of themselves, their families, and their communities.

A GENDERED PORTRAIT OF MONTEREY COUNTY FARM WORKERS

Marta and her daughter and Fernanda and her two children pile into my old car wearing UFW buttons and carrying flyers with the union's electoral slate. As we drive to the section of East Salinas where they will urge people to vote, the two women speak of their lives and worries. It looks as if they will have work in strawberries next week; the contractor is hiring, but he is only paying \$8 per hour with no health insurance. Marta, whose first language is Purépecha, peppers her words with apologies for her limited Spanish and her gratitude to God for life's small blessings.

"Look, when I first came here as an immigrant to California, I went picking strawberries. It was hard for me because there are no strawberries where I come from in Mexico, or at least I hadn't worked with them. But I'm telling you, I have worked, and I'm not ashamed of it. Thank God I have had work! There are men who say, 'Ay, lettuce! I won't go because of the stooping!' I tell you, I've picked it all! I won't say, 'I won't go! Ay! It hurts me here!' The first and second day—yes, I'm just a little bit sore. But, thanks to God, on the third day I no longer am sore. One becomes accustomed. It is pretty to work in the fields—with the lettuce, the strawberries, the apples, the pears. For me, it is better to work in the fields than in a factory or in a packing shed. I tell you, you're locked up there. It's easier in a packing shed, but for me it's better in the fields because I get a little bit of oxygen."

As for Fernanda, she prefers packing produce. "This year I'll see if God sends me to pack lettuce. I like strawberries too, but it's very hard work. When I worked in strawberries, I no longer could straighten my back. Lettuce is good. One also gets very tired, but there is nothing to do about it." Yet the work conditions in California are preferable to those she faced as a young widow in Guanajuato. "I

worked with broccoli in Mexico. There one loaded the boxes on your back, and one didn't have shoes or sneakers. I walked shoeless between the mud and the thorns that stuck into me."

Fernanda speaks of her grueling daily schedule when she has agricultural work in the United States. "I wake up at 3 or 3:30 to start making lunch. At 4 in the morning I make my hot tortillas. I leave food for the children to eat, leave clothing ready for school, and we go. After work, you arrive home good and tired. And then the time comes to make dinner and to bathe the children, to do the laundry. I go to sleep at 11 or 12. And at 4 in the morning—here we go again! It's a lot of work. I have worked so much because my children cost me so much—\$150 a week for child care." Marta's daily routine is similar to that of Fernanda. "At times I don't want to wake up early in the night. But it's better because I don't have to reheat food the next day. If I do that, lunch is no longer very good. I eat tortillas during my break. And if we leave the fields late, even if I only have tortillas, I like to eat something there." Fernanda's family members work constantly during the extended agricultural season to make ends meet. "Not one day off to rest. My husband, sister, and brother work seven days from March through November or December."

The two women share their strategies for keeping their uninsured children healthy. Marta tries to feed hers fresh fruits, vegetables, and meat. Fernanda says she doesn't have enough money for the proper food. She is worried that her youngest will get sick. The stress of Fernanda's life always seems lodged in her throat, ready to pour out: how her first husband was killed in Mexico when she was 29, how hard it was to survive after that, how grateful she is to her second husband, who treats her eldest children as his own and pays most of the bills. But their expenses are so high—the rent, the electricity, the garbage, the water—that they try to always have three boarders in the house. Now that the harvest season is winding down, the lodgers have moved out and they need to pay all the bills themselves. Thinking about it makes her sick with worry. Fernanda fears that her husband will become frustrated with the burden of another man's children and leave her.

As the women talk, one of Marta's children, impatient and full of energy, starts to climb up the back of the car seat. Fernanda exclaims "¡la policía!" as a patrol car pulls up beside us. Marta instructs us to check all our seatbelts and grabs her son and tries to restrain him. The officer catches my eye; I am terrified that he will pull us over and ask for ID that Marta and Fernanda cannot produce. When the light changes and the policeman drives off, the relief in the car is palpable. We continue toward the block where the UFW has sent us to speak to voters.

The popular U.S. image of the Mexican farm worker is rooted in the solo migrant male of the Bracero era, a picture that is challenged by Marta and Fernanda's outpourings of the daily pressures of family settlement in California. While women represent only 27 percent of California farm workers (Aguirre International, 2005: 8), we know little about their collective conditions because, with the exception of health studies, most quantitative analyses of this occupational group are not disaggregated by sex. Women bear much of the strain of holding families together under intense social, economic, and political pressures. They depend on casual contract labor to help feed their families and must creatively address family health needs without medical insurance. In their memories and their present lives, they feel the violence and control of husbands, fathers, employers, and coyotes. They bear the burden of household chores, sleep deprivation, and separation from family across borders. The stress is so intense that their precious hours of sleep are often disrupted when they wake up in panic. Thus, it is important to look at the differences as well as the similarities in the pressures facing male and female farm workers in Monterey County.

The interlocking stresses of cultural marginalization, limited health care access, poverty, and anti-immigrant politics experienced by Marta and Fernanda are shared with over 67,000 farm workers in Monterey County, who average 32 years of age (Aguirre International, 2005: 8). Despite national trends toward the mechanization of field crops, Monterey County's field workers largely work through crew systems and farm labor contractors with high-value, labor-intensive fresh produce such as lettuce (including bagged salad mix), strawberries, and broccoli. Increased demand for fresh fruits and vegetables means that more than 580 million pounds of produce were shipped to over 50 countries from the region in 2005 (Monterey County Agricultural Commissioner's Office, 2006: 3). Ninety-six percent of California's field workers were born in Mexico; the sending states for those in the Salinas Valley are Guanajuato, Michoacán, Jalisco, and Oaxaca and, secondarily, Zacatecas and Mexico City (Strochlic et al., 2003). While most Salinas Valley field workers are mestizos, approximately 13 percent are indigenous persons who speak languages including Mixteco, Triqui, Zapotec, and Purépecha and who represent the fastest-growing farm worker population in the county and the state (Strochlic et al., 2003). Indigenous farm workers like Marta face racism from Anglos and mestizos. Although they have low levels of formal education and limited English and Spanish language skills, few interpreters are available to help advocate for their rights and their access to services. It is estimated that only 17 percent of indigenous farm workers in Salinas have lawful status, and they often face the harshest work conditions in the fields (Aguirre International, 2005: 15).

Like Marta and Fernanda, the farm workers of Monterey County may work long hours in a stooped position with crops that grow close to the ground, such as lettuce and strawberries. For an average reported compensation of \$7 per hour or up to \$12 per hour for piecework, Monterey County farm workers are exposed to wet, hot, or cold conditions, pesticides, and dangerous machinery. They are employed intermittently without health insurance, paid vacation, or sick days (Strochlic et al., 2003: 16). Many suffer from musculoskeletal pain, injuries, arthritis, and joint problems (Strochlic et al., 2003: 17). Although there has been a marked increase in California's fresh berry production, productivity, and cash receipts, real income for berry workers dropped by 13 percent between 1988 and 2002 (Villarejo, 2006). In 2006, the UFW negotiated one contract covering over 1,000 berry workers that raised both the hourly and piece rate and required employers to pay 80 percent of medical, dental, and vision insurance. Because of low union density, however, political victories in the form of California minimum-wage increases have been more effective in raising industry standards than collective bargaining (Villarejo, 2006).

Despite the stereotype of the solo migrant male, approximately 40 percent of male farm workers live in the county with 53,800 family members (Strochlic et al., 2003: 7). California's women farm workers are much more likely to live with immediate family members (82 percent) than their male counterparts (Aguirre International, 2005: 23). They are also more likely to be married (72 percent) and have children (69 percent) than men (61 percent, 49 percent) (Aguirre International, 2005: 22). Like Marta and Fernanda, married women farm workers almost always reside with a spouse (98 percent) and children (95 percent); these rates are much lower for married males (61 percent, 62 percent)

(Aguirre International, 2005: 21). Farm worker families in AD 28 are significantly larger than the California average (Strochlic et al., 2003). Thus, women farm workers are important indicators and engines of settlement.

Women farm workers have a marginal position in the agricultural industry. Between 2001 and 2003, 61 percent of undocumented women in U.S. agricultural regions were in the labor force (compared with 94 percent of undocumented males), an employment gap that is partially explained by their primary parenting role (Passel, 2006a). For women in the labor force, their unemployment rate was much higher (24 percent) than that of undocumented males (9.8 percent) (Passel, 2006a). When undocumented rural women do work, they face double discrimination due to their residency status and gender and are largely confined to informal labor markets with minimal pay, job security, and chances for economic mobility (Houston and Marcelli, 2006: 3).

While a long history of political organizing in the Salinas Valley has produced more affordable and culturally oriented health care facilities and clinics than in most agricultural regions, farm worker women bear the burden of obtaining health care for themselves and their families without insurance. At least 25 percent of farm workers in Monterey County do not receive prenatal care during their first trimester, and 17 percent of infants born at Natividad Health Center, the hospital serving East Salinas, had low birth weights (Strochlic et al., 2003: 49). Some indigenous women who have no experience with medical care in Mexico may seek help for the first time at a hospital or clinic during labor (Strochlic et al., 2003: 49). The women farm workers of Salinas must also build a home in the metropolitan region with the second-least-affordable housing market in the United States (National Association of Home Builders, 2007).

The anxiety stemming from these poor conditions produces mental health concerns for farm worker women that are rarely treated (Strochlic et al., 2003). Just as Marta and Fernanda's reaction to the police agitated their children in my car, women farm workers' stress impacts the well-being of children, families, and communities. It urgently needs alleviation through labor and community activism and government policy. Despite these seemingly insurmountable challenges, Marta and Fernanda try to maintain healthy families and to keep their male companions satisfied. They signed up as UFW members to address their problems collectively. Because legislators represent their entire district population, not only its citizen voters, they are responsible for addressing the needs of women like Marta and Fernanda. In regions such as AD 28 with large numbers of undocumented immigrants, political engagement regardless of immigration status and an inclusive definition of political "constituency" are necessary for community health and democracy (Seif, 2004).

INTERLOCKING POLITICAL AND LABOR STRUGGLES IN SALINAS

It rained last night, and as we drive through the barrios of East Salinas I weave through cavernous puddles on the streets, evidence of a historic lack of adequate sewers and infrastructure in the Mexican part of town. Marta tries to help me find our destination; at first I am confused when the two women pronounce English-language street names as if they were Spanish—a sign that they live in an ethnic

enclave that is isolated from Anglo culture. After I park, Marta and Fernanda and the children march from door to door. They distribute pamphlets today, a photo of Cesar Chavez on one side and one of the Assembly candidate and his qualifications on the other. They knock on doors with multiple locks and iron gates, yet most of the residents welcome us graciously. When the children need to drink water or use the toilet, we chat in living rooms lined with reproductions of saints and the Last Supper beside family photos taken in the United States and in Guanajuato, Michoacán, and Jalisco, the sending states of former migrants who are now U.S. citizen voters. Marta and Fernanda inform the residents of the UFW's endorsements. When they speak of the farm workers' minimum wage in Bush's home state, their neighbors groan and roll their eyes.

Despite her difficulty speaking Spanish, Marta is more assertive than her companion. "When I first came from Mexico, I was very quiet and ashamed. But if you are quiet and ashamed, you carry much sadness." She urges Fernanda to speak up, but Fernanda says that she is shy. Both women became involved in the union through the elementary school. They attend a mother's group there, where they work on issues related to their children's education and youth violence. "At the school, I'm a helper—like they say in Mexico—in the parents' society." Marta first got involved in 1998 because of a shortage of classrooms in her daughter's school and others in the district. In this farm worker community, the student population doubled during the 1990s (Monterey County, 2002: 5.17–3). In the group, mothers also learned how to deal with their own insecure situation—not to sign a voluntary departure form if they are caught by immigration law enforcement. Ana, a UFW volunteer, visited their group and asked them to help the union elect candidates who support rights for immigrant farm workers, public education, and a new amnesty. Marta is very conscious of documenting her labor in the United States because of the women workers she knows who were unable to adjust their status through IRCA because they lacked proof of their U.S. presence and economic contributions (see Hagan, 1994).

In addition to trying to elect sympathetic representatives, the two women are trying to defeat a school voucher ballot initiative. Fernanda is most concerned about her 14-year-old son, who was born in Mexico and who also lacks legal status in the United States. She wants to make sure that he is able to attend public school through college. She hopes that education will enable her son to escape her life of poverty and assist his mother and siblings. "Right now he is interested in college. He says that he wants to continue school because he really wants to be a teacher. I hope to God! Well, he needs to do it for himself and his sister, right? Because you don't know, I could die, and they would remain here without a mother and without a father. Yes, it's true." Her son's father was killed in Mexico, and Fernanda feels the precariousness of her own life. "And he says, 'Sí, mami, sí, I'm going to move forward. Look, don't worry, because I'm studying. And at the end of my studies, I'm going to pass my exams. And later I'll apply for legal status for you. It can be done.' He has many dreams. He says, 'I'm going to buy my house.' But there are times when he becomes discouraged. What if there's no longer any money to study?"

Although contemporary Latino political activism is often compared to the awakening of a sleeping giant, the campaign materials that the women distribute with the photo of UFW founder Cesar Chavez on them reflect a regional history of creative Latino politics interwoven with labor activism in which women have assumed increasing leadership over time. Under Chavez, the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA, the UFW's precursor organization) tackled the daunting challenge of farm worker organizing in 1962. Because agricultural laborers were excluded from the 1935 National Labor Relations Act, which guaranteed workers the right to form unions, early organizing was linked with the legislative struggle to gain collective bargaining rights. When Governor Ronald Reagan and a majority Anglo-American legislature opposed this, the

NFWA resolved to secure political representation. California's farm workers finally won labor rights with the passage of the 1975 Agricultural Labor Relations Act. Women played an important part in the nascent union, which was dependent on their volunteer efforts. Yet with the notable exceptions of Dolores Huerta and Jesse de la Cruz, women were marginalized in the early UFW leadership (Rose, 1995).

With the decline of union membership and influence, former UFW organizers joined Chicano activists in Salinas to fight for representation in electoral politics during the 1980s. According to the community activist Gary Karnes, "All of those guys who became masters of campaigning started with UFW organizing. . . . But it wasn't like classes—formal training. Most of it was learn-by-the-seat-of-your-pants. Everyone wanted to change the world. And we lost a lot in the eighties" (interview, September 6, 2001). Early Latino electoral activism in Salinas centered on improving children's educational opportunities. The city council member and community college teacher Juan Oliverrez explains, "Chicanos value education. So we decided to push education and educators and get them into office. . . . In 1981 to '82, we ran campaigns throughout the Valley. We elected several people. That became a base" (interview, September 10, 2001).

Despite inroads in school board representation, Latinos were still excluded from higher elected office by a system of at-large elections (Flores, 1990; Geron, 2005). Because the entire region elected all seats, Mexican East Salinas was unable to choose its own judges, city councilmen, and county supervisors. In 1988, activists challenged this system with a class-action lawsuit against the city of Salinas (Geron, 2005). The plaintiffs included Marta Nava, trustee to the Alisal Union School Board, and Simón Salinas, a 33-year-old bilingual education teacher. When local officials agreed to put the matter to a vote the next year, grassroots activists went door-to-door explaining the ballot measure in East Salinas much as Marta and Fernanda would do over a decade later. Although a minority of registered voters was Latino, at-large elections were defeated by a narrow margin (Geron, 2005). In 1990, Simón Salinas was elected the city's first councilman of Mexican ancestry. In a city where both Latinos and women were historically underrepresented in electoral politics, the fight against at-large elections had interlocking racial and gendered impacts. "This wasn't just about Latinos—it was about women. I wonder if we would have a majority of women on the city council today if we hadn't moved into district elections" (Gary Karnes, interview, September 6, 2001).

By 2000, a resurgent UFW with few contracts in the fields emerged as central to the fight for rights of undocumented laborers by addressing their multiple injustices in the realms of work, housing, education, and immigration reform (Johnston, 1999). Some of this was accomplished through the union's community organizing arm, La Unión del Pueblo Entero (The Union of All the People—LUPE), whose work included educating farm worker parents about their children's needs and eligibility for public services. When unions are weak at the workplace, they may also rely heavily on achieving change in the political arena; the renewed UFW operated in local, state, and federal politics to recruit new members and improve the lives of farm workers and their families in the fields and beyond. This holistic approach reflected both the union's social movement tradition and the growing leadership of Latinas. After the death of Cesar Chavez in 1993, Dolores Huerta became the symbolic leader of the union. At the 2000 UFW convention, three out of five newly

elected executive board members were women, including former migrant worker Rosalinda Guillen. As legislative and political director in Sacramento, she regularly strained to address crowds on the Capitol steps at a podium designed for tall men.

During the 2000 campaign in AD 28, the UFW and its nonprofit sister radio station Radio Campesina joined with other labor unions and worker centers including the Citizenship Project of Teamsters Local 890, the United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 1096, and Service Employees International Union Local 535 to mobilize the vote by phone banking and precinct walking in a coalition that would later help organize the immigration reform marches of 2006. The UFW led the campaign in East Salinas, where a Latina ran the union's service center and Mexican immigrant Andrea was an active volunteer who coordinated poll-monitoring on election day. It was important that Latina organizers serve as intermediaries for women farm workers' political engagement because women were more comfortable and given greater latitude by their male partners when their political activities were conducted in a same-sex environment and interwoven with their maternal responsibilities.

This infusion of women's leadership shaped creative organizing tactics that brought women like Marta and Fernanda into the union despite their marginal position in agribusiness. This is part of a broader strategy of organizing immigrant workers through neighborhood and ethnic networks rather than at the workplace (Gordon, 2005). By recruiting new union members through an elementary-school parents' group, UFW organizers furthered the union participation of women who work in agriculture on a casual basis. Children were welcome to walk precincts with the UFW and participate in other political activities that were often framed by meals donated by area businesses. Family members were invited to partake; this relieved women participants from the financial and time pressures of cooking and helped allay male suspicions of their women partners' engagement in gender-integrated community activities.

Innovative, family-oriented organizing transformed women farm workers into more than political victims who passively received the kindness of sympathetic elected officials. Despite their illegal and unenfranchised status, Marta and Fernanda emerged "not just as an audience but as actors" (Giev Kashkooli, interview, July 24, 2001) who helped send a former farm worker to represent their needs in the state legislature. Furthermore, labor unions are well positioned to have political and legislative impact. Unlike grassroots immigrant organizations with very limited budgets, membership, citizen influence, and legal restrictions on their ability to participate in partisan politics, unions regularly mobilize voters, help fund political campaigns, have full-time lobbying professionals, and claim significant access to citizen voters. The UFW's use of Cesar Chavez's image on its campaign materials suggests that, despite the union's small membership, power circulated to elected officials through women farm workers, the union's iconographic status in the Chicano movement, and its affiliation with other national labor unions.

CRAFTING POLICY FROM CALIFORNIA'S MARGINS

Simón Salinas won the 2000 campaign with 54 percent of the vote, and the school voucher initiative was defeated. The first Latino to represent AD 28, a

man who grew up on the migrant trail with his parents and 11 siblings brought a deep understanding of the farm worker experience to the legislature. The election was a great symbolic victory in a region where “farm workers [have been told] you’re less than, you don’t have talent, you don’t have the capacity to play an important role in this community” (Juan Uranga, interview, September 11, 2001). The new legislator, along with labor and community organizers, helped farm workers “take control over certain aspects of our lives,” yet the material circumstances of the district’s farm workers have largely failed to improve. The summer after the election, Marta and Fernanda expressed enthusiasm about helping to elect someone to represent farm worker needs and engaging youth in the political process, but Marta was also frustrated that her life was still confined to East Salinas and the fields by walls of language, time, legal status, and poverty. A review of Salinas’s political record reveals his attempts to reshape the edges of state policy to fit the contours of farm workers’ lives. The success of his efforts was limited because the change in political power was unaccompanied by immigration reform and union strength in the fields.

Offering her perspectives on the Salinas campaign and victory, Fernanda focused on the competence she had gained by walking precincts for the first time. “I felt good about it. Because I learned things that I had never done. I had never walked like that—knocking on the doors. I learned many words.” The more outspoken Marta, who had campaigned in the past and planned to do so in the future, spoke of collective empowerment for local immigrants and youth. “It was a joy to walk and to participate, making the effort. I helped Simón Salinas win so that we Mexicans, we immigrants, could see the benefit. And I tell you, many children also walked. This is a memory for the many children.” Marta’s focus on the children was a common theme in the politics of the Salinas Valley, where farm workers saw few prospects for improving their own condition. They placed much of their energy and hope in the next generation, raised, educated, and often born in the United States. As a speaker said to great applause at a UFW rally held in a schoolyard, “The vote on Tuesday is not for us—it’s for the future! For our children!”

Marta urges other women she knows to participate in politics despite the hardships. Yet her excitement about activism within the boundaries of Mexican Salinas often turned into tears of frustration about the lack of opportunities to learn English and become capable on the other side of town:

There are people who don’t become involved in campaigns, who sometimes don’t speak Spanish. Or they are ashamed to participate, or it’s difficult for them. Others say, “No, I have much to do.” Women always have much work, working in the fields. And then when you come home—you have to make lunch, to do the wash and all. But it just takes a little time, an hour or a half-hour, I say to them. You have to go and participate! In the afternoon, it doesn’t matter what I have to do—I’m going to stop doing it to go to the school. And there are people who come here from the state of Oaxaca, from *pueblitos* and *ranchitos*, who don’t speak any Spanish. They speak their own language. So for them, like for me, I say, there should be someone to come every day, an hour or it could be a half-hour, to teach me English. It wouldn’t be much, but how much I would learn!

Marta points to the multiple barriers that keep women farm workers from becoming politically active in Salinas or restrict their activities, including organizing efforts, to Mexican enclaves. Even those whose first language is

Spanish may be shy about knocking on doors and speaking with strangers or severely constrained by the time required to maintain a family in poverty. As an outspoken indigenous woman with limited Spanish skills, Marta found a pathway to activism, but her life and politics remain restricted to East Salinas and the fields. Just as the UFW walked precincts in the Mexican part of town, I found in my fieldwork that because of language and legal vulnerabilities, the community-organizing efforts of California's undocumented immigrants rarely moved beyond the relative protection of Spanish-speaking enclaves.

Marta and Fernanda spoke in generalities about the election and were largely unaware of the specific policy proposals put forward by their legislator. Mano, who became a U.S. citizen in time to vote in 2000, offered a perspective that was grounded in the potential policy impacts of the election:

There were people who didn't believe he could win. I don't think people realized then what kind of impact his victory would have on the whole community. I know that he's helping write legislation that will understand the Latino community. . . . That's enormous. You feel protected after all that happened in the '90s. There's so many Latinos who have helped California become the fifth-largest economy in the world, and they don't get the credit. And with him being elected, you feel empowered.

During his term in office, Salinas introduced or supported a series of bills that address issues that Marta, Fernanda, and other working Californians care deeply about—education, health care, housing, and economic opportunity. He pursued such efforts in concert with Latino and farm worker advocacy organizations including the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation and the California Hispanic Health Care Association. For example, Salinas made addressing the dental crisis in farm worker communities a priority. On his way to the opening of a dental clinic in the summer after his election, the legislator recalled with sadness childhood memories of farm worker children who hid smiles marred by untreated dental problems. Salinas lacked the power to extend employer- or state-funded dental coverage to the majority of the state's farm workers, so he introduced a bill that would permit some registered dental hygienists to provide limited preventive care to children and farm workers without a prescription. Despite resistance from the California Dental Association, the bill became law in 2007.

Other bills championed by the assemblymember forgave loans to the public hospital and clinics serving Salinas farm workers and helped district residents purchase mobile homes. However, most farm workers remained uninsured and vulnerable to a costly and volatile housing market. The new representative and the Latino Legislative Caucus supported legislation that brought Fernanda's son a step closer to achieving his dream of becoming a teacher. In 2002, Assembly Bill 540 restored the ability of California youth who graduate from the state's high schools to pay the equivalent of in-state tuition to attend its public universities regardless of their immigration status (Section 68130.5, California Education Code; see Seif, 2004). Salinas was unable to address Fernanda's primary concern—to obtain legal status for herself and her son. With little unionization in the fields and stalled immigration reform efforts, circuits connecting farm workers, union organizers, and elected officials had little power to change farm worker's lives.

CONCLUSION: WOMEN FARM WORKERS AS AGENTS OF DEMOCRACY

Since Marta and Fernanda walked precincts in 2000, the struggle for farm worker justice in AD 28 has continued to grow. On May 1, 2006, an estimated 13,000 people took to the streets of Salinas (pop. 150,000) and closed most of the businesses on Alisal Boulevard, the main thoroughfare of East Salinas (Withers, 2006). Forty-two percent of the students from Salinas Union High School walked out of their classrooms that day, and half were absent from the twelve elementary schools of the Alisal Union School District (Stahl, 2006). In 2007, when Simón Salinas returned from Sacramento after serving his allowed time in office because of term limits, he was elected to the Monterey County Board of Supervisors and was replaced by Ana Caballeros, the former mayor of Salinas and the first Latina legislator to represent AD 28.

These developments are reminders that it is crucial to expand gendered understandings of anti-immigrant politics through analyses of women's pathways to resistance. While it is difficult to generalize from my ethnographic fieldwork, women farm workers in the Salinas Valley appear to share challenges with other Mexican immigrant women in relation to electoral and legislative politics. Organizing approaches that blur the boundaries between women's political and maternal roles, that include sex-segregated activities and children, and that feed family members are especially promising for women who are unaccustomed to public speaking, short of time and money, invested in the political training of the next generation, and must overcome male partners' wariness of their activism.

Yet the barriers to women farm workers' political engagement are magnified and qualitatively distinct because of their immigration status and agricultural setting. The organizing activities of Spanish-speaking immigrant women are limited by language; undocumented status greatly intensifies the geographic limitations and risks of activism. Transportation to political activities is difficult for people without cars, but limitations on physical mobility outside of barrios are exacerbated for undocumented women. The crescendo of popular anti-immigrant rhetoric and the introduction of related local, state, and federal laws such as driver's license restrictions translate into heightened "deportability" (De Genova, 2002) for those who venture beyond their own routines and neighborhoods. Thus, while undocumented women participate in visits to the offices of elected officials and group demonstrations mediated by documented organizers, they may be excluded from or fearful of engaging in door-to-door organizing in nonimmigrant neighborhoods.

Furthermore, California's agricultural legislative districts are racially polarized, and farm workers of Mexican ancestry have long been constructed as marginal to political and economic power. Until 2000 the UFW was, paradoxically, more openly active and successful with electoral efforts in regions like Los Angeles than in agricultural communities. As Kashkooli said of the Salinas campaign, "Historically in the rural communities there's a very conservative tendency, even among Democrats. For years, farm workers have come to urban areas to help fuel campaigns. . . . We thought it was time to start shaping rural areas. We thought it was time to be open about UFW support" (interview, July 24, 2001). Increasing numbers of farm workers come from urban Mexico and indigenous agricultural communities. If indigenous farm workers are to be

incorporated into the circuits of political power in California, they may require the additional mediation of indigenous organizations such as the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (Kearney, 2000) or grassroots groups that incorporate culturally appropriate outreach such as Líderes Campesinas (Blackwell, 2007).

Because of all the barriers to political empowerment of undocumented women farm workers, it is crucial that they form coalitions with groups that organize citizen voters. By wearing union T-shirts or buttons, farm workers are able to draw attention away from their legal status and toward their economic contributions, their linkages with Chicano and other U.S. citizen activists and voters, and a national labor movement that, though weakened, still wields substantial legislative and electoral power. Women farm workers, who are more likely than their male counterparts to be unemployed or to work on a casual, temporary basis, may be organized by labor unions such as the UFW away from the fields and through schools and other neighborhood venues.

Through their electoral efforts, immigrants may help elect politicians to represent their interests. Thus, power does not only flow from Latino legislators to persons without green cards; it also moves in the reverse direction when mediated by organizations such as labor unions. This expansive exercise of political power and representation is essential in legislative districts such as AD 28, where a significant proportion of the population is undocumented. Yet union membership outside the workplace is no substitute for union contracts and strength in the fields, just as indirect political participation cannot replace immigration reform and a pathway to citizenship. At a time of union decline and political division in the United States and in Mexico, the inspiring union and electoral efforts of Marta and Fernanda suggest that undocumented farm workers should be encouraged in their fight to improve the abhorrent living and working conditions that they and their families and communities experience on both sides of the border. Like the waves of immigrants before them, women farm workers help reinvent and revitalize democracy through their creative political contributions (Honig, 2001).

NOTE

1. I use the term “(im)migrant” to disrupt the assumption that one can easily differentiate between immigrants, who have settled in the United States, and migrants, who circularly move between the United States and their “home” country (Rouse, 1995). Because its repeated use is awkward, I shift to the term “immigrant,” despite its inaccuracy, to denote those who are primarily settled in the U.S.

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