Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development
ISSN: 2152-0801 online
https://foodsystemsjournal.org

Care, agency, and social reproduction in the H-2A program: A case study from Ohio

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Submitted June 15, 2023 / Revised January 8 and March 22, 2024 / Accepted April 1, 2024 / Published online June 5, 2024

Citation: Kline, A. (2024). Case, agency, and social reproduction in the H-2A program: A case study from Ohio. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, *13*(3), 237–253. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2024.133.026

Abstract

This paper uses the qualitative results of a survey of 285 H-2A workers in Ohio to explore questions of care, social reproduction, and agency within agricultural guestwork. Drawing on frameworks developed in labor and feminist geography, it examines how H-2A workers create community and develop skills of social reproduction during their time in the United States. Countering the common narratives of H-2A worker as victims or stoic, long suffering laborers, the research draws attention to the relational and emotional lives of the men who do this work. By highlighting affective and social dimensions of the guestworker experience, it argues for an approach to questions of agricultural labor that emphasizes the agency, range of experiences, and humanity of the people who participate in the H-2A program.

Keywords

H-2A program, labor geography, care ethics, agricultural labor

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Author Note

The work presented here was part of my PhD research and dissertation (Kline, 2023).

Funding Disclosure

This research was supported by The Conference of Latin American Geographers, the Horowitz Foundation, the Society of Woman Geographers, and The Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health. It was also supported in part by grant number U54OH007548 from CDC-NIOSH. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the CDC, NIOSH, or the Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health. At the Ohio State University, the research was supported by the Department of Geography, the Center for Ethnic Studies, and the Global Arts and Humanities Discovery Theme.

Introduction

In December 2022, the 117th Congress ended without passing any kind of agricultural labor reform bill. Stakeholders had hoped that as it was a lame duck session, the House's Farm Workforce Modernization Act (FWMA) or the Senate's Affordable and Secure Food Act would be taken up and approved by the other chamber (Rose, 2022). Originally passing the House with strong bipartisan support in 2021, the FWMA was considered a reasonable compromise by growers associations and farmworker advocacy groups alike (Farmworker Justice, 2021; *Vegetable Growers News*, 2021). Among other things, the bill lowered H-2A wages but piloted a portable version of the visa, included H-2A workers in the Agricultural Worker Protection Act, and provided a lengthy pathway to citizenship for undocumented farmworkers (Farmworker Justice, 2021). While some advocacy groups and academics criticized it for not doing enough to improve the circumstances of undocumented farmworkers, the bill was viewed by many as a step in the right direction (Aspenson, 2020; Zoodsma et al., 2022).

Meanwhile, the labor crisis in agriculture becomes ever more acute. Partly due to an aging workforce, and largely due to the increased immigrant enforcement of the past decade, certain sources of farm labor have dwindled and guestworkers, also known from their designated visa as H-2A workers, have taken their place. More expensive and theoretically more regulated than other sources of labor, employers tend to see the program as an option of last resort, while advocacy organizations frame it as modern-day slavery (Bauer & Stewart, 2013).

The U.S. is thus in a situation in which the "best" option for addressing the labor shortage is also highly controversial. The work itself, which includes long hours, heat exposure, and physically demanding labor, and the conditions of the non-portable visa, which require family separation and a reliance on employer-provided transportation and housing, creates a vulnerable population. Research has responded by focusing on this vulnerability, through analyzing the macroscale implications of the program in terms of immigration policy and labor, or highlighting cases of abuse and human trafficking in an attempt to improve employer accountability and worker protections (Bauer & Perales Sanchez, 2020; Bauer & Stewart, 2013; Feldman, 2020; Smith-Nonini, 2002; Strauss & McGrath, 2017; Weiler et al., 2020). Due to these emphases, and because accessing the workers is time-consuming and sometimes impossible, relatively little attention has been paid to what workers who are not in crisis say about their conditions of work on and off the job.

This study addresses that gap by discussing results from a mixed-methods survey of 285 male, Spanish-speaking H-2A workers in Ohio. By focusing on the everyday microscale of the individuals and the farms where they live, I bring nuance and specificity to conversations on guestworker programs and agricultural labor. The H-2A program is often treated as a monolithic structure, but this does not reflect the empirical reality. Although everyone is subject to the same basic labor constraints, how the program *actually manifests in a person's lived experience* varies dramatically across space and time. When we attend to questions such as a person's financial resources before joining the program, the length of their contract, or whether or not they are a parent, a more complex picture emerges. While this picture still includes the unjust and exploitative nature of the program, it also allows for the dynamism of human relationships.

The H-2A Program

Labor geography has contributed to guestworker scholarship by identifying how immigration policies interact with labor policy to create the precarity of the guestworker experience (Buckley et al., 2017; Strauss & McGrath, 2017). Focusing on the idea of unfree labor relations, labor geography highlights how labor arrangements do not need to meet the legal or popular definition of slavery to create an immobile and vulnerable workforce (Strauss & McGrath, 2017; Yea, 2017).

This is especially true for the H-2A visa, which brings migrant agricultural guestworkers to work on farms for contracts ranging from six weeks to ten months. Although the program was established in the 1950s, the visa has only become widely used in the past 15 years, largely due to the immigration policies of the Obama and Trump Administrations

(Feldman, 2020; Wozniacka, 2019). Because worker return each season is entirely contingent on their employer's invitation, employers can "blacklist" less productive or compliant workers and replace them the following season with no legal consequences (Palacios, 2010). Moreover, H-2A visa holders are excluded from the Agricultural Workers Protection Act and the visa is not transferable among farms. If a boss is abusive or dishonest, workers must choose between staying in a harmful situation or returning to their home countries with no earnings for the season (Costa & Rosenbaum, 2017). The men are not permitted to bring their families and they are required to pay taxes. Although their housing is provided free by the employer, no fees are required to enter the program, and the employer covers worker transportation costs to and from their hometowns (Costa & Rosenbaum, 2017), research has shown that the workers are often charged fees by recruiters in their home countries, not reimbursed by their employer in the U.S., and the quality of the housing provided, which is supposed to be inspected, varies widely (Bauer & Perales Sanchez, 2020).

The H-2A program and its Canadian cousin the SAWP have been analyzed both structurally (Beltran, 2018; Lee, 2017; McLaughlin, 2017; Minkoff-Zern et al., 2022; Zoodsma et al., 2022) and ethnographically (Binford, 2013; Morales, 2021; Palacios, 2010; Smith-Nonini, 2002). The conclusions are consistent: The non-portability of the visa, the lack of a pathway to citizenship or increased job security, the family separation, and the physical and social isolation create a precarious and vulnerable workforce. This approach by the government to labor migration "functions by legally constructing groups of racialized workers as unfree, precarious and deportable" (Weiler et al., 2022, p. 157) and creates a host of problems, from wage theft and unsafe housing to human trafficking (McLaughlin, 2017; Palacios, 2010).

The nature of guestworker programs also creates significant methodological challenges for researchers and advocates alike. The men are hidden and dispersed throughout rural landscapes. Most lack driver's licenses and cars, rendering them immobile, and because they are often housed on their employers' property, to access them entails negotiating a potentially fraught relationship with the employer. As a result, North American scholarship often focuses on small groups of workers, clustered in one area or farm, where the researchers managed to develop relationships (Basok, 2002; Binford, 2013, Preibisch, 2004; Smith-Nonini, 2002) or the population only becomes visible when the conditions are so egregious that legal remedies are pursued (Bauer & Stewart, 2013; Favakeh, 2022).

Therefore, the problems of guestworker programs and the way they create a disposable labor force are well established. Within this critical framework, however, many questions remain about who these people actually are: In addition to being guestworkers in the U.S. and Canada, the men in the program are also fathers, sons, and brothers. They are tattoo artists, shop owners, school bus and uber drivers, and farmers of their own land. But the terms of the program require the men to suppress these social identities because they are only present on the farm to work and are only valued as productive workers. All other aspects of their selves or experiences are essentially considered irrelevant. Consequently, guestworker scholarship to date has mirrored this splitting of the self. Even when discussing the affective dimensions of the guest worker experience—the emotional toll of family separation, for example, or the social exclusion by their hosting communities, the social life and social reproduction in the labor camps themselves are minimally discussed or ignored (Horgan & Liinamaa, 2017; Locke, 2017). (See Campos-Flores & Martin (2023) for a recent exception in Canada.)

This research begins to address that oversight. Utilizing concepts from labor geography, and specifically feminist labor geography, I highlight other aspects of these men's identities and experiences. I share findings that bring attention to their other selves, and in doing so emphasize the relational and social dimensions of their experiences. Attending to these aspects of their lives is important because it restores their humanity. When we only discuss their conditions of labor or only narrate them as laboring bodies, we rob them of their subjectivity and the multifaceted, complex, and often contradictory experience of being human. As Laura

Agustín has noted, "To pay attention only to the jobs migrants do is to essentialize them as workers and deny the diversity of their hopes and experiences" (2003, p. 391).

Conceptual Framework: Social Reproduction, Care Ethics, and Agency

Social reproduction, which I am defining as "activities necessary to maintain and reproduce life daily and intergenerationally at both the individual and social scale" (Winders & Smith, 2019, p. 872) is usually discussed in terms of the invisible work of running a household, most often done by women. Global householding refers to the transnational version of this, in which migrants—usually women—work in homes in the Global North in order to support their families in the Global South.

A related concept is care ethics, which "begins with a social ontology of connection: foregrounding social relationships of mutuality and trust (rather than dependence)" (Lawson, 2007, p. 3). Centering an ethics of care in research allows us to see how people connect and support each other—thus enabling social reproduction—within oppressive and otherwise challenging structures. Again, this kind of focus often takes up relationships between women, often in the roles of factory workers, nannies, or maids (Pratt, 2012). My work expands these lines of inquiry by exploring the social reproduction undertaken by male migrants during their time abroad. By centering an ethics of care within an entirely male community, I broaden the scope of feminist scholarship on these topics, encouraging us to see men's capacity for care beyond their role as fathers and husbands.

I also continue the frames of inquiry identified by Madhumita Dutta in her ethnographic study of female factory workers in Chennai, India. Identifying a multitude of dynamics in the workplace, she observes that this complexity "challenges the idea that workers' agentic behaviours can be clearly identified as either compliance with or resistance to neoliberal labour pressures…the workplace becomes neither a site of pure resistance nor one of worker co-optation. Rather, the workplace is rendered far more capacious for worker agency, which can be seen to emanate from other social relations of labour, feelings and emotions that recreate conditions and possibilities for women to live" (2020, p. 1368) My exploration within the circumscribed world of H-2A labor camps identifies similar relations and interactions, allowing us to see the possibilities within these places and the ways in which agency and humanity are always present in labor arrangements.

Finally, looking at social reproduction and care ethics at the microscale of these labor camps allows me to identify moments of agency that might otherwise be missed. The question of agency is central to labor geography, as scholars seek to understand it "not only as forms of resistance but also as resilience and reworking" (Raj-Reichert, 2023, p. 188; see also Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2011) and to identify how it exists "through every-day and informal acts and practices exercised both within and beyond the workplace" Carswell & De Neve, 2013). For the purposes of this paper, I use Rogaly's definition of agency as "both the intention and the practice of taking action for one's own self-interest or the interests of others" (Rogaly, 2009, p. 1975). I contribute to this body of work by examining how agency plays out in the highly constrained and precarious context of guestworker labor.

Without seeing these moments, we risk a kind of theoretical closure and paralysis of action: it is clear that guestworker programs involve dehumanizing, dangerous work and create a vulnerable and precarious workforce that is essentially treated as disposable labor. It is also clear, as discussed in my introduction, that political interventions at the macroscale of national policies are unlikely to be the solution in the foreseeable future. This fact leaves us in an uncomfortable position: either we can simply restate the problem, again and again, or we can approach the phenomenon from a different angle. The structure that shapes this workforce is powerful, but it is not all-powerful, and it is in attending to the microscale of each man's experience across many farms that we begin to see the fissures. They are tiny, to be sure, but they are openings; and if we follow, they can help us to see these men otherwise, and if we can see them otherwise, perhaps we can begin to envision spaces, moments—however fleeting—of intervention. The research on the H-2A program and the literature in labor geography inspired the following three

research questions: how the tasks of social reproduction are managed in an all-male environment, how the guestworker arrangement impacts the social ties and emotional bonds among the men, and how the men employ agency within the program.

Methodology

Survey Design

To gather both population-level data, such as age, educational attainment, and years in the H-2A program, and more subjective information about H-2A workers' experiences and labor arrangements, I designed a semi-structured interview that contained both open-ended and closed questions. The survey contained 155 fields and included general demographic information (such as age and marital status), questions regarding the recruitment process in Mexico, labor and living conditions at the farm, their social networks within the camp and in Ohio, and a section on occupational health and safety and healthcare access. This latter section used questions from the National Agricultural Worker Survey for the years 2000, 2010, and 2017. The survey instrument itself was designed as an ethnosurvey (Massey, 1999), combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. Other than the NAWS section, questions were asked in an open-ended format, and the instrument allowed for follow-up questions, as appropriate. For the NAWS section we followed a specific script. Generally speaking, the entire process lasted about 20 minutes, which varied depending on the participant's interest and enthusiasm.

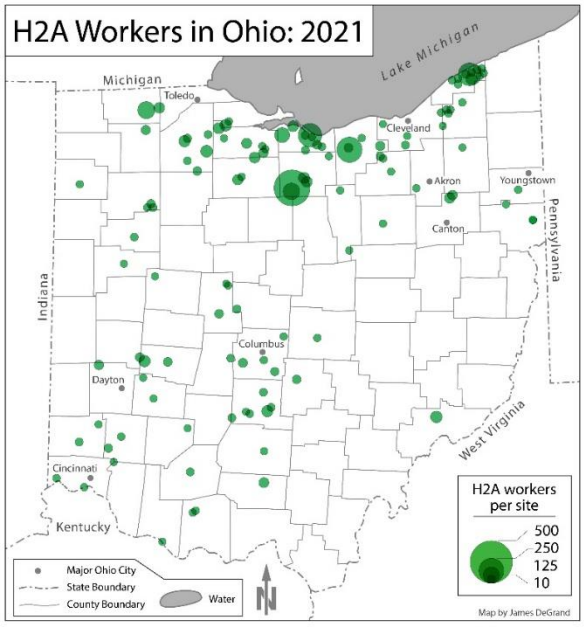
Sampling Frame

I created the sampling frame, consisting of any male H-2A worker in Ohio who was from Mexico or Central America, by making a database from Department of Labor data, which records, among other information, the addresses where the men live and work, the dates they are to be in Ohio, and the number of people living at each site. Although the Department of Labor does not include country of origin by worksite, nationally over 94% of H-2A workers are from Mexico or Central America and virtually all are male (Martin, 2022). I knew how to access the data and had firsthand experience of the broad demographic makeup of this population from spending a summer as a migrant outreach worker with Advocates for Basic Legal Equality, a nonprofit with offices throughout Ohio. Ohio was chosen as the fieldwork site because of this prior experience.

Data Collection Design

To recruit a cross-section of workers at different kinds of farms, I divided the farms by location and by farm size. For location, I divided the state into southern Ohio and northern Ohio. Everything in Franklin County, where Columbus is located, and south of it, was considered southern Ohio. Everything north was categorized as northern Ohio. The geographic division was based on farm locations and where they are generally clustered in the state (Figure 1). Small farms had 1–15 workers, medium ones had 16–70, and large operations had more than 70. I created target numbers for each category, which, when totaled, would equal 375—a representative sample of the 3,686 workers present from the 2021 applications (Table 1). The target number of people was proportional to the number of people in that category when looking at the entire sample. There were no large farms in the south, so that strata was left empty. I also made a

Figure 1. Distribution of H-2A Workers in Ohio, 2021



rule that we would not interview more than 15 people at a medium farm or 50 people at a large farm, to ensure that my final sample would include a number of different farms.

Originally, I planned to do a randomized sample by randomly generating the order of farm names within each strata and then visiting them in the order of the random sample. However, after one week in the field, it became clear this would not be feasible. Due to the distances between farms, it would take too long to visit locations in a random order. Instead, I organized trips by county and timing of H-2A worker arrival. Once most of the workers in a general area had arrived, we went to as many farms as possible in that county or region, a process described in more detail below. The limitation of this approach was that the results are not random and, to some extent, responses could be influenced by season. That is, some places were only visited in the spring or the summer, which have different weather patterns.

Our sampling was essentially a convenience method. We determined which places to visit using a combination of timing and location. H-2A entries are staggered throughout the growing season, so we timed our trips to a specific county to coincide with the time in the season when the majority of the workers in that county would be present. We then mapped the addresses and went to them one by one. If there were multiple farms within a county that had workers present at the same time, I would prioritize the farms that were in the strata where I most needed to add participants in order to reach my survey goals. Table 2 presents our final numbers by strata. I did not end up using either stratum, north/south or farm size, in the analysis phase.

Since some counties contain only one or two H-2A employers, I do not share county participation data. However, the Figure 1 map shows the distribution of H-2A workers in the state and thus gives a general idea of where I conducted fieldwork.

Table 1. Original Sample Goals

	Region of Ohio		
Farm Size	South	North	Total
Small	50	50	100
Medium	50	75	125
Large		150	150
Total	100	275	375

Table 2. Final Sample Numbers

	Region of Ohio		
Farm Size	South	North	Total
Small	22	52	74
Medium	50	56	106
Large		105	105
Total	72	213	285

Fieldwork Logistics

From April to August 2022, one female research assistant and I conducted fieldwork, on Sundays and after working hours Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays. After arriving at an address, we would knock on the door and wait for someone to respond. If someone answered, and we confirmed they were an H-2A worker, we invited them to participate in our survey using an IRB- approved script and offered a $20 cash incentive for their time. If they consented verbally, we set up folding chairs and tables outside or occasionally interviewed inside during inclement weather. At large camps we repeated the process, knocking on all the doors or relying on a very loose snowball method, in which one worker, after being interviewed, would go find other men to participate. We returned to the very large camps multiple times, where it was impossible to recruit or interview everyone in one visit, but this was the exception. If no one was home, and it was possible for us to return, we would visit the address again at a later date. Using this method, we located workers at 48% of the addresses we visited, and our response rate was 74%. By the season's end, we had visited 82% of all H-2A employers in the state and driven over 10,000 miles within Ohio.

Unless the employer was physically on the site when we arrived, we did not ask their permission to visit a property, nor did we alert them to our presence or otherwise share worker participation

with employers. Workers are permitted to receive visitors at their place of residence, even if that residence is on the growers' property. We often drove past "No Trespassing" signs to locate the housing, but we did not cross physical barriers, such as locked gates. We encountered growers at ten sites, and all but one granted us permission to speak with the men he or she employed.

Data Collection Details

All surveys were conducted in Spanish, and I have translated the quotes in this article. When permission was granted, we audio-recorded the interviews. Otherwise, we recorded their answers in our survey instrument, and kept fieldnotes to record our general observations or interactions that occurred outside the interview itself. No identifying information was collected; all names included here are pseudonyms.

The information shared here comes from the "open" portions of the survey instrument, which asked participants to reflect on their experience as an H-2A worker. It is drawn from the audio recordings, survey data, and fieldnotes and supplemented by semi-structured interviews I conducted in 2021 with stakeholders (such as farmworker advocacy organizations or relevant state agencies) and H-2A employers (n=27).

Data Analysis

Data were collected using the password-protected RedCap app on password-protected tablets. The survey results were initially stored in password-protected RedCap server, then downloaded as a CSV file onto a password-protected computer. The observations were cross-referenced with our field logs and duplicate entries were eliminated.

I used thematic and content analysis to interpret the qualitative data. I began by organizing the answers to the open-ended questions by question, reading the responses of all participants to a specific question at once. This helped me identify themes and patterns in the data, in addition to flagging unusual responses. I then re-organized the responses by theme, noting where certain phrases or topics surfaced repeatedly throughout our interviews. Throughout this process I also referred to my fieldnotes and audio recordings of the interviews to supplement and deepen my interpretation of the survey responses.

Results

Self-Care: Social Reproduction at a Micro-Scale

How these men managed household chores in their residences and labor camps was not originally a focus of the survey. However, when men reflected on what they had learned about life in Ohio and what they have had to get used to while living there, they often discussed their life outside of work. Specifically, they addressed learning to take care of themselves:

> In Mexico you don't cook, here we make our own food. Clean my house, make my bed. (Alex, Tlaxcala, 27)

> Doing chores by yourself, becoming self-sufficient. (Yago, Chiapas, 43)

> It's hard because you have to do everything yourself. My mom showed me how to cook. (Silverio, Veracruz, 32)

> Cook and clean by myself. (Cristian, Hidalgo, 24)

> You have to learn how to live independently. (Jonás, Guanajuato, 28)

> It has taught me to be independent … to value ourselves. (Geraldo, San Luis Potosi, 29)

Like women who are living away from their families, who have to be "both father and mother" because they are earning an income and caring for their children from afar (Paciulan & Preibisch, 2014), men in the H-2A program have to be both husband and wife for themselves—something to which they are not accustomed. The men themselves frame the experience in terms of gender and, at least in some cases, it has caused them to reflect on the domestic labor of their wives and mothers.

> Being away from family has taught me a lot about being a man and doing domestic chores. (Ignacio, Aguascalientes, 34)

> In Mexico you depend on others: your mom or wife. Here you have to do everything yourself—make your bed, wash your clothing. (Lucio, Hidalgo, 25)

> To be more independent. In Mexico my wife cooks, here I have to cook and clean. (Francisco, Guanajuato, 38)

> Do the chores your wife normally does; value what they do at home more. (Uriel, Guanajuato, 30)

> You learn to value the work women do for you (clean, cook, etc.). [I] learned to cook by cutting my fingers. (Isidro, Durango, 24)

Caring for Each Other

My findings confirm the social isolation many migrants' experience. When describing how he spends his free time, Hector's response was typical for many: "Rest, hang out outside, you only leave for chores. Maybe go to the store to spend some time, but I spend most of my time here." In this response, though, there is also an implicit sociality: he is in fact "hanging out outside" with the other men in his camp, who are also spending most of their time there. And when one spends 6–18 hours a day working with people, in addition to living with them, friendships—or, in academic parlance, "affective ties"—are developed, which become an important, genuinely meaningful part of the guestworker experience.

When asked what they liked most about their work, a number of respondents said "la convivencia." There is no English equivalent for this word, but I translate it as the camaraderie of living and working with others. Throughout the course of our fieldwork, it became clear that even when this precise word was not used, this was a defining aspect of their lives as guestworkers. In the responses below, we can see that although the men are here to work, and do so under grueling conditions, there is more to the guestworker experience than the labor itself.

> Like: The closeness of the company, meeting people from all over. Hard: Being far from family. (Dominic, Jalisco, 26)

> Like: How many people I get to meet, the friends from Mexico and the U.S. Hard: The hardest part is adapting to being alone. (Ignacio, Aguascalientes, 34)

> Like: Likes the other workers, they become friends. Hard: Not knowing English is the hardest part. (Alvaro, Guerrero, 34)

> Like: Work environment and compañeros. Hard: English. (Alfonso, Guanajuato, 36)

> Like: The convivencia, there's no rivalry. Hard: The weather: we have to work even when it rains. (Timoteo, Guanajuato, 32)

> Like: La convivencia between friends. Hard: The weather: the cold. (Edgar, Chiapas, 35)

> Like: The convivencia. Hard: Getting used to being here. (Jaime, Michoacán, 25)

> Like: The convivencia with my people and learning about life here. Hard: In terms of work, it's the same. Being here alone without family. (Ricardo, Guanajuato, 48)

> Like: I work with family and friends, meeting new people, good community. Hard: Far from family. (Saul, Guerrero, 21)

> Like: I live with friends and I earn more. Hard: Nothing has been difficult for me because I've done manual labor before. (Omar, Michoacán, 19)

Furthermore, the camaraderie during both work and leisure time creates feelings of connection that are a crucial antidote to the loneliness and disorientation of guestworker life. In one camp, where the men had only recently arrived and a number of them were working as an H-2A for the first time, Marco explained what is hardest and what he likes the most about the work: "[The hardest thing] is working in the field because I'm new at this. But it doesn't stress me out because my compañeros support me." For another, the hardest part was the schedule: "We work every day from 5 am–

11 pm," but the part he liked the most was "chatting while we work" (Manuel, Veracruz, 41). At another camp, a man who was about five months into his first H-2A contract, which would last ten months, shared how the social connections with his compañeros were an important coping mechanism when he first arrived:

> Interviewer: And what's it like being far away from your family? How do you manage?
>
> Roberto: Now it's a little easier to manage, but when I first arrived, I was like, "to hell with the contract, to hell with the visa, I'm out of here." In truth, I was depressed at the beginning because it was my first time here, but later, it got better. I started to work and it was a distraction.
>
> Interviewer: What helped you with the depression?
>
> Roberto: I think everyone. … They didn't know it, but for me, just with talking I began to focus on other things.
>
> Interviewer: So having compañeros helped?
>
> Roberto: Uh-huh.

For others, this manifests as an appreciation, or excitement even, at being able to meet and form relationships with people from different places. In a camp that had brought together men from Chiapas and Durango, more than one participant remarked on this when asked what he like most about his work: "To start with, you meet different people. It's nice getting to know people from different parts of Mexico" (Andrés). In another instance, we interviewed men from Guanajuato, Michoacan, and Zacatecas, all living in an apartment complex on the edge of a medium-size city. Diego, a young worker from Michoacan, shared that he enjoyed the H-2A program because it afforded him an opportunity to "be far [from home] and get to know people from other parts of Mexico." Indeed, when we met him, he was on his way out the door to meet friends and had to participate quickly so he wouldn't be late.

In addition to creating a sense of belonging within a general context of social exclusion, the relationships—both established before the program (as when an uncle and nephew work together) and developed during the program itself—allow for more efficient social reproduction. For example, instead of every man cooking for himself, households often organize themselves so that each man takes a turn providing dinner for his roommates. When workers from different parts of the country share a space, the arrangement functions as a kind of cross-cultural exchange: "It's interesting" said Isaías; "you learn something" when eating and cooking with compañeros from other places. Workers will also split their grocery bills in order to maximize the earnings they can send home to their families.

When men shared that they had learned how to cook, my research assistant had the good sense to follow up with "and how did you learn how to cook?", a question which I also began including in my interviews. The responses were illuminating, and sometimes funny, as when one man remarked dryly "by ruining a lot of meals." Some called their mothers, others watched their wives during their time in Mexico, some learned from YouTube. But many learned from each other. This was particularly true at a large vegetable farm in northern Ohio, which joined the program in 2019 and now, at peak season, employs over 400 H-2A workers each summer:

> I learned to cook from my compañeros here. (Sebastian, Guanajuato, 21)
>
> You have to learn how to prepare your own food and wash your own clothing. My friends are teaching me. (Jaime, Michoacán, 25)
>
> You have to get used to doing things on your own, things you don't normally have to do. Me and my compañeros learned to cook all together. (Ruben, Veracruz, 38)
>
> Be independent, at first it was hard to learn home chores. Friends here taught me to cook. (Kevin, Veracruz, 21)

As can be seen in the responses, an ethics of care is woven throughout the experience. Indeed, in our sample, the men often framed their workplace communities as families; for example, "Here we're a family even though we're from different states. We support each other" (Benito) and "I enjoy…the companionship. It's a second family" (Ramón). And while these bonds are no replacement for their partners and children, men regularly give and receive care in these space, such as teaching their newer compañeros how to cook, or being the camp barber, offering haircuts under the shade of a tree.

The companionship created in these spaces is perhaps best illustrated by the following vignette. We had entered the labor camp, and knocked on the first door where it seemed that someone was inside. A man answered, listened to us explain our work, and told us that, although he was making dinner, we were welcome to come inside and talk with him while he cooked. I described the following interaction in my fieldnotes:

> There are three men in a small kitchen space. They are cooking dinner. One man is methodically slicing a pineapple, another is making rice in a pan and the third is cutting up the ingredients for pico de gallo. Each guy seems to know exactly what he is doing—there's not a lot of conversing between them about their tasks. By the end of our conversation, they have a big pot of carnitas cooked, rice with jitomate salsa, homemade tortillas, and two kinds of salsa done and they share their tacos with us. It's delicious.

The men had done this work together so many times in the past, they did not need to plan or strategize. Each person knew their job and knew how to do it well. Indeed, they were so comfortable with the process, two of the men let us interview them while they were cooking.

Agency

It is true that the terms of the program considerably constrain guestworker agency in the host country. However, the process of actually becoming a guestworker is itself an act of significant agency, since the men and their families must mobilize substantial resources in order to participate in the program: it requires connections, material resources, commitment, ingenuity and no small amount of courage. Workers often evinced a sense of pride at being "contratado" (contracted). We met a man from Chiapas who had only just arrived—on his first contract—two days before. He offered to show us his documents (we declined) and when I explained the interview would be anonymous he said, "I have nothing to hide—I came here with papers." After the interview concluded, he insisted on introducing himself, shook my hand and looked me in the eye: "Nice to meet you. My name is Miguel."

Nonetheless, once here, workers' agency is significantly constrained; it is here where Rogaly's attention to the microscale, and his assertion that researchers "need to focus on the low-key and often invisible ways by which people with very limited material means make viable lives" (2009, p. 1984), is helpful. In terms of space, workers had a variety of strategies to improve their living quarters and make it feel more like home. We saw volleyball nets, makeshift soccer fields, and fire pits, where the men would smoke meat or simply gather around, listening to music and drinking beer. They also often planted small kitchen gardens of their own, partly to supplement their diet but also as a way to pass time and beautify their spaces. In addition to growing food, men planted herbs and flowers, making their yards—where they spent most of their free time—more pleasant and attractive.

Many men also got their drivers' licenses, and after saving for a few years bought their own cars. In one case, we interviewed two men while a third stood in the yard, shouting directions at his compañero who was practicing for the parallel parking part of his driver's test. Occasionally, after the formal interview ended men would ask us if we knew how they could get their license, expressing a desire to increase their mobility and independence. It should be noted that the logistics of getting a license generally requires the active support of the employer, and not all are willing to help their employees with the process. However, in my grower interviews, eight of 13 said that they had helped their workers get licenses, and five

provided vehicles for the workers to use both during and after work. This was corroborated in the survey: 15% percent of those surveyed had a license, of whom 88% had access to a vehicle for personal use—either their own, one they shared with friends, or one their boss lent them for the season.

While this may seem a minor concern, the immobility and subsequent isolation of the men during their contract is often a chief concern for farmworker advocates. It increases their vulnerability and makes it difficult to learn of workplace abuse, wage theft, or other violations that may be occurring on the farm. While having a driver's license and car doesn't overcome the vulnerabilities built into a non-portable visa, it does improve the workers' quality of life and increase opportunities for them to participate and connect with communities outside the farm. The men we interviewed who had their own cars and lived in or near towns would spend their free time visiting family that had settled in the area, going to bars or restaurants, and sometimes participated in activities in the community such as a soccer league or gym. They also operated as an informal taxi service, charging their compañeros a small fee if men without cars wanted to go somewhere other than the weekly errand trip offered by the employer.

The Limits of Care

The creation and appreciation of an ethics of care among coworkers exists alongside their awareness of the exploitative and precarious nature of the labor arrangement they participate in. While less common, or addressed indirectly, workers spoke to the structural injustices of the program and in some cases were quite clear about the limits of their coping mechanisms. The critiques were offered at various scales, and each will be discussed in turn.

At the interpersonal level, a worker from Guanajuato at a small nursery in northern Ohio told me early in the interview that what he most liked was "La convivencia." Later, however, he noted that "You get stressed near the end of the season. You get tired of each other." Even in the best of cases—when the man is working with long-time friends and generally gets along with his compañeros and the employer—those relationships do not substitute for the intimacy and connection of a partner and children.

His comments also point to the variability *over time* of the social and affective dimensions of the program: friendships can sustain you, but only for so long. The sacrifice and the mental and emotional fortitude necessary for a nine- or ten-month contract is much greater than a four-month contract, for example—something the men take into account when weighing the decision to return for another season. In some cases, workers will request a shorter contract in order to have more time with their family while not losing out on the opportunity entirely. One man explained his cost-benefit analysis: "I do like coming here to work, it's nice; I come because it is a short amount of time (four months); if it were longer I wouldn't come."

Beyond the personal sacrifice required to participate, workers were also keenly aware of the imbalanced power dynamics, vulnerabilities, and limitations created by the terms of the visa. The following group conversation, held after the formal interviews were completed, illustrates some of these issues:

> They asked if I'm only studying H-2A workers, and not other visa holders. And I explained yes, and began to explain I'm doing that because of how their experiences differ from other ag workers. I don't know if I did a good job explaining that overall concept, but I did say "for example, the grower has to provide housing free of charge—that's not the case for other ag workers. … BUT if you don't like your grower, you can't just quit and go find another boss. You're stuck with this one because your visa is only good for this one" and one guy responded by saying "Like slaves." And I said "Yes, well some people say that about this program. Is that how you guys see it?" and they gave me a look, with silence and raised eyebrows, that seemed to say, "Well that's the reality but we're not going to say it out loud." Also, they asked me if they could ask for a higher salary, if, for example, one of them got a supervisory role, and I explained that the wage was set by the federal govern-

ment and it's against the rules for them to be paid anything different—higher or lower.

While this conversation involved program regulations, workers also reflected more generally on U.S immigration policies when asked what could be done to improve the program. We asked this as a wrap-up question at the very end, and it was common for men to say "Oh, nothing," because, in the words of one man, "They're never going to change it." Or they would say, "Nothing, it's great the way it is." In either case, we would counter with something like "Well, sure, we can't do much about it, but it's still helpful to know what you would change. For example, would you like to be able to bring your family? Get residency? Get paid more? Get English classes?" When phrased this way, 14% said "residency." Efraín—who needed no prompting—elaborates on this point:

> Interviewer: If you could change one thing to improve the program, what would it be?
>
> Efraín: That they help us get visas.
>
> Interviewer: In what sense?
>
> Efraín: Although the truth is that the work is good, it's also very hard. And there are many compañeros that have more than five or six years in the program, and so I think there should be an opportunity for them to get papers.
>
> Interviewer: Like for their residency?
>
> Efraín*:* Yes, their residency because I think that's fair. Many people don't like this kind of work. They get here and the first thing they do is leave. There are only a few of us who can handle it. And so I feel that we deserve the opportunity of getting residency.…Some people come, creating problems, entering without documents. They're not following the rules…[but we are]. So, it would be fair. Yes, it would be fair to fight for that paper. But unfortunately, we can't. … It would be great if that opportunity existed.

In contrast, at another farm a participant was emphatically not interested in gaining residency:

> I came here out of necessity, because the situation in Mexico is very hard; you can't support yourself with the salary they pay there. I have my own land in Mexico but I have to find other work because it isn't enough. I have to find money to start production every season. For harvesting, you are paid very little in Mexico. I still really enjoy my land, home; but I get frustrated at my government because they make so much money, raising prices They never think about the campesino that is out there working. The government in Mexico needs to help us, we shouldn't be suffering in another country. (Patricio, Guanajuato, 54)

As these interactions show, the men are acutely aware of the structural factors that circumscribe their laboring lives. From interpersonal dynamics to the dysfunctional policies of their own country, they can see and name the systems that create their precarious labor arrangements. Specifically, the lack of any kind of career ladder that rewards experience and expertise with increased wages or job security makes the H-2A program essentially a dead-end job. For the visa holders, this truth, and the injustice of it, is held alongside the valuable social connections, social reproductive skills, and acquisition of technical knowledge when they reflect on their lives as guestworkers.

Discussion

This article adds specificity and detail to labor geography's interest in precarious work in general and guestworker programs in particular. Investigating social reproduction within the labor camps, the affective ties developed through the experience, and the small but meaningful ways these men exercise agency during their contracts contributes to the "widening and diversifying approaches and perspectives" that are "necessary to continue our understanding of evolving forms and actors of labour agency" in a variety of contexts (Raj-Reichert, 2023, p. 191). In addition to broadening our analytical perspectives, focusing on dimensions of the guestworker experience beyond and outside

their jobs encourages scholars and advocates to see these men as full human beings.

Social Reproduction and Feminism

How migrants manage both productive labor and social reproduction while doing guest work is not a new question. However, the emphasis has been almost universally on women, and how they, for example, mother their own children in a different country while also caring for others' children as a nanny (Pratt, 2012). Nevertheless, while the entire premise of the program is a split between production and social reproduction—men produce in the North so that their families can socially reproduce in the South—the men still must buy groceries, cook, clean, and maintain their shared quarters in the camps, apartments, and old farmhouses where they are housed during their stay.

Researchers such as Salzinger (2003) and Dutta (2020) have explored how factory work for women, while being exploitative and physically exhausting, also partially liberates them from an oppressive and stifling domestic sphere. A feminist interpretation of social reproduction would also see it as liberatory that the men in this study have learned how to cook and maintain their temporary homes. Indeed, the ignorance and inexperience around tasks of social reproduction is one of the many ways a patriarchal social structure costs men, because it leaves them without the basic skills necessary for self-care. While this in no way makes up for the vulnerability and exploitation created by the H-2A program, the men participating do find value in it beyond wages—experiences and skills *that they themselves* find useful.

The research still leaves unclear how the men transfer their newly developed household skills to their own homes in Mexico, or, if after months of taking care of themselves, they arrive home, flop onto a couch or hammock, and shout for their wife or mother to bring them a beer. It is therefore premature to celebrate this as some kind of great equalizer that disrupts gender norms on a larger scale. However, one of feminism's earliest and more important contributions to the concept of social reproduction was identifying the value of unpaid domestic labor and how it makes productive labor possible (Winders & Smith, 2019). If we want to truly place equal importance on productive and socially reproductive labor, then we must value these newly acquired skills, even as they are being developed in oppressive circumstances.

An Ethics of Care

Often research on guestworker programs has emphasized the isolation that migrants experience (Basok & George, 2021; Reid-Musson, 2017), as scholarship tends to focus on the relations (or lack thereof) between the workers and the host community, rather than investigating the social worlds inside the camps themselves. In fact, The H-2A experience is profoundly social. Like the women in Dutta's ethnography, the men experience the workplace as a "site that produces a sense of community that exceeds the problem of wage relations" (2020, p. 1360). And while work—precarious, physically demanding, and dangerous labor in a foreign country—was the structure under which these relations occurred, the experience and meaning of it went far beyond the work itself. Men form friendships, support each other through difficult moments, and share a variety of resources—from medicine and food to knowledge about cooking or where to find the closest Mexican tienda. Highlighting the various ways these men give and receive care to each other helps us challenge dominant definitions of masculinity, which do not allow for male tenderness, while also encouraging us to see beyond their identities as workers.

Agency

The mobilization of both social and financial capital that is required to participate in guestwork reflects what is widely known in migration literature: the people who migrate are not generally the most vulnerable or least-resourced. Instead, they have some measure of connection and efficacy which they have utilized to achieve their goals (Feliciano, 2020). Labor geography also recognizes this dimension of migrant labor and guestworker programs, noting how agency is exercised within a range of constrained circumstances (Rogaly, 2009; Seo & Skelton, 2017). Recent ethnographic work has also made it clear that "precarisation and agency should not be examined as two opposing poles but rather as an inherent part of the migra-

tion process where one cannot be separated from the other" (Deshingkar, 2019, p. 2639). This approach has the added benefit of reflecting worker subjectivity: the terrible working conditions notwithstanding, getting a contract is considered an accomplishment. In other words, the men can both be aware of the exploitative nature of the job and still feel pride in the fact that they got it.

Once in Ohio, the men exercise agency by doing things like planting a garden or getting a driver's license. Although these kinds of choices don't transform the terms of the program, they do materially improve the workers' lives and demonstrate the small ways they can exercise control within a highly constrained environment. As Rogaly notes, the "influence of such agency on workers' spatially embedded everyday lives can be significant to workers themselves both materially and in relation to the subjective experience of employment" (2009, p. 1975).

Limitations

This piece explores the experiences of guestworkers that go beyond labor and attempts to create a fuller and more nuanced portrait of who they are as *people*. However, the research was still conducted with men who were, essentially, "at work" —separated from their families, living at labor camps, and beholden to their employers in significant ways. It was also conducted over one summer, creating a broad portrait of H-2A life in Ohio at a certain moment in time. Future research would benefit from both a binational approach and a longitudinal one: connecting with men during their months with their families would likely yield richer insights into how the men perceive themselves in other contexts and how their experiences in the U.S. shape their time at home. A longer-term study, in which a researcher returned to the same camps for multiple seasons in a row, would also create more opportunities to understand how questions of social reproduction, care ethics, and agency evolve as the communities of men shift and the men themselves age and gain more experience.

Implications for Practitioners

For practitioners, including an ethics of care opens up potential new spaces for intervention and support of the H-2A population. While documenting violations and pursuing legal remedies continue to be necessary and essential work, the politically charged nature of migrant advocacy programs and the extensive power that employers exercise over H-2A workers' lives means that such efforts are often met with intense opposition I consider work that is based on an ethics of care and centers the workers' agency to be something of a backdoor approach: programs that increase workers' integration with their host communities, support their psychosocial wellbeing, increase their autonomy, or help them develop new skills have the potential to meaningfully improve the men's lives without placing the practitioners and programs in direct confrontation with other stakeholders.

Examples of this approach include the Sembrador Initiative that is piloted by the Catholic Migrant Farmworker Network in Michigan and Arizona and the Immigrant Worker Project in Ohio. The purpose of the Sembrador Initiative is to create a farmworker ministry that "welcomes, protects, promotes & integrates migrant farm workers into the parish" (Catholic Migrant Farmworker Network, n.d.), through a series of workshops educating participants in both the structural vulnerability experienced by migrant farmworkers (H-2A and otherwise) while also emphasizing the shared humanity, mental health, and spiritual and social needs of the workers. There is an emphasis on accompaniment within a "faith/justice framework" (Catholic Migrant Farmworker Network, n.d.), both community members and farmworkers learning and becoming empowered to take collective action. A more secular version of this approach is practiced by the Immigrant Worker Project in Ohio. Inspired by Paolo Freire's pedagogy, the organization focuses on building capacity and leadership within farmworker communities and H-2A camps while also offering direct services, such as legal advice on workplace violations. In both cases, the initiatives emphasize seeing a migrant farmworker as a whole person, establishing relationships between migrant workers and members of the host community and developing interventions that empower the workers themselves.

Conclusion

On January 17th, 2023, the U.S. signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Mexico that specifically addresses many of the issues surrounding guestworker programs. Among other things, the two countries agree to "increased transparency and coordination between the two countries … enforcing working conditions and preventing discrimination … [and] establishing fair recruitment processes and facilitating the availability of quality temporary agricultural and non-agricultural employment" (Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 2023. Para. 2). It may seem at first glance that this development contradicts my earlier assertion that macroscale solutions are not realistic. In fact, I believe that the MOU does just the opposite. Its existence is the product of an executive branch that recognizes the need to improve the critical visa program but cannot count on the legislative branch to address the issue. Moreover, operationalizing something as broad as "improving shared mechanisms to prevent, report and investigate worker rights … and to connect workers harmed or exploited with assistance and care" (Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 2023, para. 3) entails exactly the kind of nuanced understanding of the H-2A experience that this paper advocates. Increasing transparency and coordination, effectively improving labor recruitment practices, and ensuring legal redress in abusive arrangements all require seeing the agency and humanity of the men at the heart of the experience.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Hailey Fortson for her reliability and enthusiasm during our fieldwork and Munirih Yeshwant for providing the space for a writing retreat where early drafts of this paper were written.

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