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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Fieldwork: The Afterlives of Farmwork in the Academy

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Communication

by

Keven Hernandez

Committee in charge:

Professor Elana Zilberg, Co-Chair
Professor Verónica Martínez-Matsuda, Co-Chair
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2026

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University of California San Diego

2026

Dedication

Dedicated to those that came before and for those who come after.

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Vita

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Fieldwork: The Afterlives of Farmwork in the Academy

by

Keven Hernandez

Doctor of Philosophy in Communication

University of California San Diego, 2026

Professor Verónica Martínez-Matsuda, Co-Chair
Professor Elana Zilberg, Co-Chair

This dissertation examines the experiences of myself and other academic laborers in dialogue with the experiences of our families that labored within the immigrant agricultural economy. This research is particularly timely with the gutting of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs across industries and institutions, alongside the exploitative racialized labor that has

existed before, during and after. This dissertation uses an intergenerational examination of labor to reflect on how to navigate this current moment in the higher education. Building off previous research, my multi-disciplinary dissertation engages with the history of farmwork and academic labor through the frameworks of critical race theory and labor studies from the theoretical vantage of everyday life. This is put in dialectic with the results of an ongoing neo-liberalization of the University. “Afterlives” emerges as a key concept to track the ongoing salience of the lived and affective experiences of the farmworkers for their children and grandchildren, who are learning to labor as students and educators in and for neoliberal systems of higher education. Through autoethnographic fieldwork, and over 20-hours of semi-structured interviews with fellow academic workers, I propose the “the afterlives of farmwork” as an intergenerational persistence of a relationship to farmwork. With this framing, I examine three questions: How do the children and grandchildren of farmworkers who have found themselves in the academy understand and reflect on their families’ history of labor? How does this reflection come to influence an understanding of their own labor practice within the academy? How does the academic setting work against some of the ideals and cultural practices that manifest from a history of farmwork? The fields were temporary, and our families looked to the academy as an escape for their kin. Where do we look? What is the future we are working towards here?

Introduction

I am the child of migrant farmworkers. As a child, I had a positive association with these fields my family worked in, but as I grew older, I came to understand them more as the conventional site of exploitation. I began to be more ashamed of myself and my identity because of my family's history of labor. The way Mexicans and farmworkers were discussed and treated in the media led me to think that my family and I were somehow still undocumented even though we had all acquired citizenship. Although I eventually moved away from feeling ashamed of my ethnic background, I still believed farmwork to only be this abusive labor practice my family was forced into. It wasn't until my Master's thesis where I came to understand this labor as a more complex experience for my family than just a means of survival in the US. As a graduate student, I had begun to question my own labor within the academy more critically, the ways that I was tokenized and how much of a hostile space the classroom was for students of color. I had "arrived" in sense, been the one in our family to reach this higher education career, yet it still feels incredibly exploitative. This led me to return to my family's experiences of exploitative labor and conduct an oral history project with my grandmother about her time in the fields. For her, this work was about finally being able to make her own money, having pride in her capabilities to tend to land, and being able to be a role model for her children. She had unbalanced my understanding of farmwork and challenged me to think more about my own labor in the academy. Why is it that I struggle so much with my labor, yet she finds so much joy and pride in what her more apparently exploitative work brought her? I had followed my families directions of doing good in school to stay out of the fields, and yet I can't help but romanticize the kinds of lifestyles and communities that emerge there.

This experience is the impetus of my project. My project is about this intergenerational persistence of a relationship to farmwork that I come to identify as the afterlives of farmwork. The afterlives of farmwork are the ways that children and grandchildren of farmworkers continue to experience a relationship to the labor far outside of the fields. My frustrations with my labor in the academy are constantly put in conversations with my families experiences: how I should feel pride for making it out, how I shouldn't feel like my work is hard because of what my family has been through, how I continue to feel more of a responsibility to the service workers than my own classmates at times. Both the fields my grandparents worked in and my academic career are about social mobility, and I think about the ways my labor is an afterlife my grandmothers work, like it is my duty to keep moving forward for her sake. I am here because of what they went through, and I am supposed to be the proof that it was all worth it. Yet I sit here at my desk constantly questioning a future in the academy. My family worked in these harsh conditions with a future in mind. The fields were temporary, and they looked at the academy as an escape for their kin. Where do I look? What is the future I am working towards here?

It is this dilemma that I will be pursuing further with this project. I want to reconcile these feelings and examine them beyond my own families' experiences by engaging with the experiences of others in my similar position. This project elicits a question of intergenerational experiences, and the blurring of the spaces of the fields and the academy. How do the children and grandchildren of farmworkers who have found themselves in the academy understand and reflect on their families' history of labor? How does this reflection come to influence an understanding of their own labor practice within the academy? How does the academic setting work against some of the ideals/cultural practices that manifest from a history of farmwork? Equally important in these examinations are the farmworkers themselves and their evolving

relationship to labor. How do the families of these same academics make sense of their kins labor in the academy? The academy itself, its long history and shifting social capital, are also integral in this dialect experience. What was once seen as a symbolic victory is now lived in the everyday by us, creating a much more complex understanding of the role of the university and what it can actually provide for us in this current moment. Through these conversation I hope to draw out the deeply personal role of labor in our lives, the complicated ways that we come to understand each other's labor, and how those understandings affect how we labor.

I will engage more deeply with the theoretical fields and how I came to rely on afterlives later in this introduction, but I believe this to be a useful way of identifying labor practices as non-linear and never singularly experienced. These multi-sited and cross generational experiences for migrant people has been explored previously; Elana Zilberg's work with deported Salvadorian gang youths bring attention to the ongoing relationships her subjects have to life in El Salvador through their actions in the US¹. My intervention will revolve around labor practices as a way of engaging with these multi-sited and cross generational experiences, focusing on the shifting relationships families have with labor. These conversations and engagement with the afterlives of farmwork will challenge not just how we might imagine a labor being experienced, but also speak to the specific labor experiences and afterlives of farmwork. I believe that a more engaged conversation with farmwork and situating it as a complex site of knowledge and cultural creation is fundamental for my work. There is still a lack of writing on the experiences coming from the academy² and the more popular texts I've come

¹ Elana Zilberg, *Space of Detention: The Making of a Transnational Gang Crisis between Los Angeles and San Salvador* (Duke University Press, 2011).

² Lisa Meierotto, Teresa Mares, and Seth M. Holmes, "Introduction to the Symposium: Bienestar—the Well-Being of Latinx Farmworkers in a Time of Change," *Agriculture and Human Values* 37, no. 1 (March 1, 2020): 187–96. 189.

across are more invested in highlighting the abuse and exploitation.³ While I agree that this is important work, my work is more invested in the qualities of the labor that persist across generations. Moments that influence how one understands themselves, how doing this arduous labor produces some sort of positive affects whether it be because of pride in their work or a way to aid their community. These too are also important aspects of the work that comes to have afterlives for generations down the line. It is not just the moments of abuse that we remember, but also the moments of pride and accomplishment. How do we then move with that complex relationship to labor in a completely different environment? One that we are told we should be grateful for, yet can also be dehumanizing in it's practice?

Personal and Political Significance of Study

UCSD has historically had notoriously low enrollments of so-called URM's. Given its location at the US/Mexico border, one would assume that it would mirror the demographics of California. In April 2016, UCSD made the belated commitment to becoming an HSI (Hispanic Serving Institute) in an attempt to join the other already recognized UC campuses (Merced, Riverside, Santa Cruz, Irvine and Santa Barbara.)⁴ At the initial time of writing this section in 2023, the university had provided a website that details everything its doing to work towards a 25% enrollment rate for Hispanic students in order to achieve this HSI recognition.⁵ The website stated that as of Fall 2020, UC San Diego has a 23% full-time Latinx undergraduate student

³ The two ethnographic works I've been most suggested are Seth Holmes' *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies* and Sarah Horton's *They Leave Their Kidneys in the Fields*. Both are important texts for addressing all the harm that befalls farmworkers, but I feel their engagement with the personal lives and everyday experiences to be lacking.

⁴ Nicole Freeling, "What It Means to Be a Hispanic-Serving System: A Q&A with UC Vice Provost Yvette Gullatt," University of California, January 23, 2023, <https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/what-it-means-be-hispanic-serving-system-qa-uc-vice-provost-yvette-gullatt>.

⁵ Office For Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. "Hispanic-Serving Institution." Accessed August 28, 2023. <https://diversity.ucsd.edu/initiatives/latinx-academic-excellence/hsi.html>.

enrollment rate, followed by a statement on “Latinx/Chicanx Servingness” and a detailed list of everything they have done to move towards achieving HSI status since March 2017. While all of this is very informative and speaks to an investment in at least espousing a care for the Latine population both on and off campus, a look at last year’s undergraduate enrollments shows a drop in the undergraduate Hispanic populations. Records show that there is only a 20.9% Hispanic population rate in their 2021-2022 report, a drop from their prior high of 21.1% in 2020.⁶ While I’m not claiming this is an indication of the University’s failure to diversify, I do find it interesting how much of an effort the academy is making in branding itself as this heavily Hispanic serving institute while it hasn’t been able to maintain a momentum of increasing enrollment. As of 2026, these links are also now dead and there is no way of knowing how the University is currently doing regarding their original intention with the HSI push. The diversity page has also been changed to the moniker of “organizational transformation” to allegedly comply with federal regulations in 2025.⁷ The only mentions of any kind of Latinidad is a page under the initiatives tab where they make it clear that they recognize federally and state recognized heritage months. The recent changed only serve to add to how (at least outwardly) uninvested the university is to its goals that it used to flaunt so proudly.

This reversal speaks to the historically hostile environment of higher education for people of color that even HSI schools continue to struggle with.⁸ Not to mention role higher education has played for Mexican-Americans in particular as demonstrated by Edward Tellez and Vilma

⁶ Institutional Research. “Student Profile.” Accessed August 16, 2023. <https://ir.ucsd.edu/undergrad/publications/ug-student-profile.html>.

⁷“Proposition 209 Compliance,” accessed April 13, 2026, <https://transformation.ucsd.edu/prop-209-compliance/index.html>.

⁸Megan Tagami Reagan Matthew, “Are California’s Hispanic Serving Institutions Living up to Their Name?,” *CalMatters*, November 17, 2022, sec. College Beat, <http://calmatters.org/education/higher-education/college-beat/2022/11/hispanic-serving-institutions-california/>.

Ortiz.⁹ Their study shows a decline in prospects for higher education generations down the line. While higher education might be more important for the first generation, its importance begins to wane generation after generation.¹⁰ Another study conducted by Roderick L. Carey has identified how internal and external factors play a major role in the level of comfort Latine students may have with the idea of pursuing higher education.¹¹ No longer being able to help their family, the fear of having to change who they are, and the fear of being away from ones community can all feel like massive barriers. There are all also financial barriers the keep Latine students from being able to have access to a higher education, and even those who try to attend college struggle to stay enrolled and attain a degree.¹² For California in particular, the gap between its large Latine demographic and their success in higher education continues to be an issue.¹³

The COVID-19 Pandemic that began during early 2020 has also come to have dramatic impacts on Latine enrollment in the University and the lives of farmworker families. The pandemic has disproportionately affected Black and Brown communities in various ways.¹⁴ This become another barrier for Latine students, resulting in a drop in undergraduate enrollment rates.¹⁵ For farmworkers, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a loss of forms of childcare, either

⁹ Edward Telles and Vilma Ortiz, “Generations of Exclusion: Mexican Americans, Assimilation, and Race,” in *The New Latino Studies Reader: A Twenty-First-Century Perspective* (Univ of California Press, 2016).

¹⁰ Generations of exclusion, Edward tells and Vilma Ortiz 342

¹¹ Roderick L. Carey, “‘What Am I Gonna Be Losing?’ School Culture and the Family-Based College-Going Dilemmas of Black and Latino Adolescent Boys,” *Education and Urban Society* 50, no. 3 (March 1, 2018): 246–73.

¹² Lauren Mora, “Hispanic Enrollment Reaches New High at Four-Year Colleges in the U.S., but Affordability Remains an Obstacle,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), accessed August 24, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/10/07/hispanic-enrollment-reaches-new-high-at-four-year-colleges-in-the-u-s-but-affordability-remains-an-obstacle/>.

¹³ Betty Márquez-Rosales, “More California Latino Students Attending College, but ‘Disturbing Gaps’ Remain,” *EdSource*, accessed August 24, 2023, <https://edsources.org/2021/more-california-latino-students-attending-college-but-disturbing-gaps-remain/663456>.

¹⁴ “US: Covid-19 Disparities Reflect Structural Racism, Abuses,” *Human Rights Watch* (blog), June 10, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/10/us-covid-19-disparities-reflect-structural-racism-abuses>; Daniel Tadeo, “There’s a Reason Why COVID-19 Is Killing Black and Brown Americans: It’s Called Racism,” *Public History Initiative*, accessed August 24, 2023, <https://phi.history.ucla.edu/theres-a-reason-why-covid-19-is-killing-black-and-brown-americans-its-called-racism/>.

¹⁵ Marshall Anthony Jr, Andrew Howard Nichols, and Wil Del Pilar, “A Look at Degree Attainment Among Hispanic Women and Men and How COVID-19 Could Deepen Racial and Gender Divides,” *The Education Trust*

by organizations that provided services or because of the closure of schools.¹⁶ This resulted in instances of farmworkers bringing their children to work with them in the fields, even though they also still had academic responsibilities.¹⁷ Children of farmworkers have been forced to contend with both the fields and their education most clearly in these instances, feeling the weight of both these sites concurrently.¹⁸

I have felt and lived through many of these issues raised by this examination of the relationship between Latine people and higher education. While education may be recognized as a move away from the fields and a means to attain some sort of status that grants economic mobility, the institution continues to be an inhospitable and elusive site for marginalized communities. California Latine in particular feel this gap more dramatically, even with the large population there is no real correlation of their success or comfort with the idea of pursuing a higher education. Farmworking children have had to navigate their families labor and their own aspirations, sometimes at odds with each other. My project will be engaging with these conundrums and how the school can feel just as exploitative and unnerving as the fields that our family worked in.

(blog), accessed August 24, 2023, <https://edtrust.org/resource/a-look-at-degree-attainment-among-hispanic-women-and-men-and-how-covid-19-could-deepen-racial-and-gender-divides/>.

¹⁶ “Statement by Farmworker Advocates on COVID-19 and the Risks to Farmworkers,” *Farmworker Justice* (blog), accessed August 24, 2023, <https://www.farmworkerjustice.org/blog-post/statement-by-farmworker-advocates-on-covid-19-and-the-risks-to-farmworkers/>.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Aguilera, “For Some California Teens, School Closures Led to Work in the Fields,” *CalMatters*, June 22, 2020, sec. Coronavirus, <http://calmatters.org/education/2020/06/california-teens-school-closures-migrant-farmworkers-fields-coronavirus/>.

¹⁸ Florence A. Becot, “Children, Work, and Safety on the Farm during COVID-19: A Harder Juggling Act,” *Journal of Agromedicine* 27, no. 3 (July 3, 2022): 315–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1059924X.2022.2068716>.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Building off previous research, my multi-disciplinary project engages with the history of farmwork and academic labor through the frameworks of critical race theory and labor studies from the theoretical vantage of everyday life and in dialectic with the results of an ongoing neo-liberalization of the University. “Afterlives” emerges as a key concept to track the ongoing salience of the lived and affective experiences of the farmworkers for their children and grandchildren, who are “learning to labor”¹⁹ as students and educators in and for neoliberal systems of higher education.²⁰

Although my work is invested in what comes after farmwork (its afterlives), it is important to engage with the vast history of farmworking labor in California in order to understand the types of cultural practices that may persist and where they emerge from. Although not the initial immigrant labor force, Mexicans began to become an idealized labor force during WWI because of their ease of deportation and control.²¹ This shift to a labor force coming in through the border led to a unique relationship between farmwork and immigration services. Texts on farmworkers have highlighted immigration raids being used as a tool by landowners to get rid of their undocumented labor force without having to pay them²². It was this relationship to being a policed group of people that then began to construct this idealized image of the deportable subject. It is against “The Mexican” that the Southwestern US had to assert Anglo Dominance. This history speaks not only to the unique precarity of Mexican labor in U.S.

¹⁹ Paul Willis and Stanley Aronowitz, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, Morningside edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

²⁰ Lauren S. Foley, *On the Basis of Race: How Higher Education Navigates Affirmative Action Policies* (New York: NYU Press, 2023).

²¹ Patrick H. Mooney and Theo J. Majka, *Farmers' and Farm Workers' Movements: Social Protest in American Agriculture*, Social Movements Past and Present (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995). 125.

²² Sarah Bronwen Horton, *They Leave Their Kidneys in the Fields: Illness, Injury, and Illegality among U.S. Farmworkers*, First edition (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016). 23

agribusiness, but also to the racialization of Mexican laborers through the policing apparatus of the state.²³

It is important to note that not every farmworker is Mexican.²⁴ Although the labor force continues to be dominated by Mexican immigrants, there are other important migrant experiences that often get overlooked when speaking of this labor. Filipinos have played a major role in UFW movements yet continue to be left out of the conversations of Farmworking experiences.²⁵ My work is not to claim any sort of monolith identity for farmworkers, but it is important to acknowledge the ways that this varied labor force has come to be conceptualized and codified by society and the state in specific ways. Border agents are taught the ideal deportable subject has more indigenous features, tied to the history of Spanish and indigenous mixing in Mexico.²⁶ The UFWs labor actions became an arbiter for the Chicano Movement of the 1960s where Mexicans began to identify themselves as a “brown” population and more explicitly connected to an indigenous history.²⁷ While this is problematic for its devaluing of European and Black ancestry, it is clear that this focus on indigeneity exists both by the state and Mexican people themselves. Even within this, there come to be tiers of Mexican-ness that come to be placed in each other and colloquially based on phenotypes (*chino*, *indio*, *blanca/o*, *morena/o* etc.)²⁸ Farmworkers are not all Mexican, and even then not all Mexicans look and are treated the same way. Yet, farmworking labor has a strong connection to a specific racialized

²³ Kelly Lytle Hernandez, *Migra!: A History of the U.S. Border Patrol*, First edition (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2010). 47.

²⁴ Isaac Ornelas et al., “California Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2015–2019,” n.d.

²⁵ Bino A. Realuyo, “Dear Filipino Organizers Erased by the Cesar Chavez Movement,” *HuffPost* (blog), March 26, 2014, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/dear-filipino-organizers-cesar-chaves_b_5019283. *The Delano Manongs: Forgotten Heroes of the United Farm Workers*, Documentary, Short, History, n.d.

²⁶ Hernandez, *Migra!*

²⁷ Tomás Alamguer, “Race, Racialization, and Latino Populations in the United States,” in *The New Latino Studies Reader: A Twenty-First-Century Perspective* (Univ of California Press, 2016), 210–27.

²⁸ Alamguer, “The New Latino Studies Reader.” 218.

experience. This racialization that occurs through the engagement with a labor practices has dramatic implications for the ways that children and grandchildren of farmworkers come to understand their own positionality in every laboring sector under capitalism, even in the more so called “skilled” ones such as the university.

The end of the bracero program in 1964, the attempted mechanization of farmwork²⁹, and the emergence of the UFW³⁰ are all important parts of this ongoing labor that continues to rely on the same tactics of racializing and devaluing groups of people in order to justify an ongoing abusive practice. Farmworkers today are currently facing the assignment of “essential worker” and all the ways that forces them to continue working under increasingly dangerous conditions.³¹ Be it COVID-19 or the increasing global temperatures, farmworkers are forced to put their lives on the line daily without any increased compensation or medical aid.³² This unique and ongoing history of labor is important to keep in mind when engaging with the afterlives of farmwork and how the children and grandchildren understand themselves and their relation to the US and whiteness. The question becomes how this particular history comes to inform and shape the

²⁹ Curtis Marez, *Farm Worker Futurism: Speculative Technologies of Resistance*, 3rd ed. edition (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2016).

³⁰ Patrick H. Mooney and Theo J. Majka, *Farmers' and Farm Workers' Movements: Social Protest in American Agriculture*, Social Movements Past and Present (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995),

³¹ Miriam Jordan, “Farmworkers, Mostly Undocumented, Become ‘Essential’ During Pandemic - The New York Times,” accessed August 23, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/02/us/coronavirus-undocumented-immigrant-farmworkers-agriculture.html>.

³² Tara Campbell, “Heralded as Heroes, Bay Area Farmworkers Still in the Shadows Post-Pandemic,” ABC7 San Francisco, August 18, 2022, <https://abc7news.com/pandemic-farmworkers-farmworker-conditions-benefits-essential-work/12135608/>; Alexis J. Handal et al., “‘Essential’ but Expendable: Farmworkers During the COVID-19 Pandemic—The Michigan Farmworker Project,” *American Journal of Public Health* 110, no. 12 (December 2020): 1760–62, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2020.305947>. Caroline Keegan, “Essential Agriculture, Sacrificial Labor, and the COVID-19 Pandemic in the US South,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 23, no. 3 (2023): 611–21, <https://doi.org/10.1111/joac.12522>. “Get Informed,” Center for Farmworker Families, accessed May 6, 2023, <https://farmworkerfamily.org/information>; Ximena Bustillo, “It’s Hot. For Farmworkers without Federal Heat Protections, It Could Be Life or Death,” opb, accessed August 13, 2023, <https://www.opb.org/article/2023/07/12/heat-wave-worker-safety/>. Christopher Harress, “Say Their Names: These Are All the Farmworkers Who Have Died from Extreme Heat in the Last Year,” Reckon, August 9, 2023, <https://www.reckon.news/news/2023/08/say-their-names-these-are-all-the-farmworkers-who-have-died-from-extreme-heat-in-the-last-year.html>.

experiences of farmworkers, their children and grandchildren, regardless of the fields in which they labor, be it as farmworkers, students or both. What are the long lived affective dimensions of the “baggage” of the Mexican farmworker for subsequent generations.

Affect theory will provide tools to construct and interrogate this project’s governing concept, the “afterlives” of farmwork. The field of affect theory reorients the ways we investigate and analyze feelings and experiences through an engagement with events on a pre-cognitive level. Affect theory is about highlighting sensory moments before we can make sense of them, before we name them and thus before we have interpreted them.³³ While affect theory has been taken up in various fields, labor has been a particularly generative site for understanding the reproduction of labor, the affective dimensions of political economy and the role of affect in building particular economic regimes³⁴. My project builds on these studies through an intergenerational dialectical and affective investments in their labor practices. How does affect travel from the fields into the home and from the home to university? How are we tethered to or alienated from these foundational experiences – lived or imagined?

My conception of the afterlives of farmwork emerges from the theory of the “afterlife of slavery” and intergenerational trauma. First coined by Saidiya Hartman, the concept is used to highlight and engage with the ways that black life continues to be affected with the history of the transatlantic slave trade.³⁵ This has been taken up by other scholar in the field to explore the ways the everyday is influenced by the afterlives of slavery³⁶, as well as the actual land that

³³ Adam J. Frank and Elizabeth A. Wilson, *A Silvan Tomkins Handbook: Foundations for Affect Theory* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2020).

³⁴ See Tania Murray Li’s work in *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics*

³⁵ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, First edition (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

³⁶ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

Black people find themselves on³⁷. This exploration of how a particular historical experience continues to move and shape an understanding of everyday life in the present and future is profoundly important in understanding how the effects of the system of slavery live on not only in political economies but manifest in very personal ways too. Similarly, the “afterlives” of farm work derive from a particular mode of human exploitation and racial capital, albeit with many important and incommensurate differences. One of those being, slavery in the US was abolished as a legal system for the reproduction of labor and value. Despite political mobilization through the United Farmworkers of America, and the Chicano/a Movement, seasonal farmwork and the precarity of farm labor remain fundamental to our contemporary political economy. The intergenerational cycle is replicated with new generations of immigrants and their offspring through a trifecta of agrobusiness interests, nativism and imperialism. Our families lived experiences in the strawberry fields along the California coast and the cherry trees of the central valley continues to haunt and enliven the everyday life of their children relocated to the university classroom. The history of labor continues to inform their conscious and unconscious relationships to their own labor.

Labor studies of and beyond farmwork informs my project in general. The concept of “affective labor” in some of these studies have important implications for my own work. Affective labor is not understood simply as emotional labor, but more invested in the ways that we are moved by the affective experiences at the worksite. Affective labor is what psychological anthropologist Tom Csordas terms “somatic modes of attention.” It refers to how the work environment is registered at the unconscious or precognitive level.³⁸ Farmwork has a deep

³⁷ Tianna Bruno, “Ecological Memory in the Biophysical Afterlife of Slavery,” *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 0, no. 0 (October 3, 2022): 1–11,

³⁸ Thomas J. Csordas, “Somatic Modes of Attention,” *Cultural Anthropology* 8, no. 2 (1993): 135–56.

investment in one's laboring community that has tended to be made up of families and friends. How does the previous form of labor that had a deep investment in the setting and the people around them manifest for labors outside of the fields? I am particularly invested in labor sites as places of cultural practices and where people learn about their own positioning to the people around them. Etienne Wenger's work with "communities of practice" has demonstrated the necessary examination of not just our work, but of who we labor with and the shared experiences of laboring.³⁹ Vanessa Ribas' notion of Prismatic Engagement then adds a racial lense to these examinations that is necessary within our current structure of racial capitalism.⁴⁰ While this dissertation is not intending to challenge any major understanding of the systems of capitalism, I do rely on the work of Cedrick Robinsons in *Black Marxism* as the backdrop of these intergenerational labor experiences from the fields and into the academy.⁴¹

How do farmworkers perceive and understand their surroundings and experiences? In her work with farmworking mothers, Emilia Ocegüera reminds us that the way we think about labor is actually a very personal experience based on a lived experience of the everyday.⁴² This will challenge some of the dominant readings of labor and how people are expected to categorize an experience of labor. Discourses around skill acquisition for specific jobs and labors that are seen as "unskilled" are deeply invested in kinship networks for their skill acquisition through apprenticeship, and in many cases for skills acquired prior to working in the U.S.⁴³ How do first generation students acquire the skills necessary for their academic labor in the absence of these

³⁹ Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge University Press, n.d.).

⁴⁰ Vanesa Ribas, *On the Line: Slaughterhouse Lives and the Making of the New South*, First edition (University of California Press, 2015).

⁴¹ Robinson, Cedric J., and Robin D. G. Kelley. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Unknown edition. Chapel Hill, N.C: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

⁴² Emilia Cordero Ocegüera, "The Daily Struggle: Everyday Resistance in the Feeding and Agricultural Labor of Mexican Migrant Farmworker Mothers in North Carolina," *Anthropology of Food*, no. 16 (June 4, 2022),

⁴³ Jacqueline Hagan, Ruben Hernandez-Leon, and Jean-Luc Demonsant, *Skills of the Unskilled: Work and Mobility among Mexican Migrants*, 2015.

networks? This discussion will connect back to the academic labor that I and my participants are working under, thinking more critically about the different practices of skill acquisition and how this can be an important component of labor that has come to be overlooked or separate from the experiences of the labor.

The field of Critical University Studies emerged out of a cultural examination of the university and its ever increasing corporatization since the 1970's, according to Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades.⁴⁴ The university has shifted to a more corporate model of business and is recognized by many scholars as continuously investing in a type of neoliberalism that echoes global capitalist practices. Slaughter and Rhodes refer to this pointedly as academic capitalism. Scholars have and continue to write about the effects of this on how the university functions particularly in our already strained environment and increasing reliance on a gig workers within the institution.⁴⁵ Within this literature, scholars also share how the labor of graduate students in particular becomes constructed by the University itself in order to sell a fantasy that no longer really exists in our current day.⁴⁶ Doubly important for my work, are the experiences of academic workers of color during the rise and fall of the DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) era. A time that was seen by many as already harmful in the added labor placed on URM (under represented minorities), and yet in its undoing, also speaks to the greater structural issues of the University in how it understands the role the racialized laborer.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.56021/9780801879494>.

⁴⁵ Adrianna Kezar et al., *The Gig Academy* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.68032>.

⁴⁶ Marc Bousquet and Cary Nelson, *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (NYU Press, 2008).

⁴⁷ Don (Four Arrows) Trent Jacobs, "Why Diversity, Inclusion and Equity Initiatives in Higher Education Really 'DIE'," *Critical Education*, July 14, 2023, 28-36 Pages; Tiffany Chambers and Bridget O'Brien, "'This Is Not For Me': A Counterstory on BIPOC Experiences of DEI Trainings," *Teaching and Learning in Medicine* 37, no. 4 (2025): 468–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10401334.2025.2471393>.

It is within these ongoing discourses that I reflect on our role as laborers of the university with this specific orientation of education being a way of making it out of the fields. Through CUS, I work to undo the fantasy of the university and higher education that our families have relied on in the fields. It is in demystifying this laboring environment, placing it in relation to other industries of capital, that we can then begin to see it for what it is and shift our laboring practices accordingly. This is not to discredit the important scholarship that has come out of the University, nor the anyone who chooses to labor within it. This is about the University and not necessarily the university employee.

Methodology

True to my academic training, I employ a mixed methods approach to explore the afterlives of farm work. I have conducted 20 hours of semi-structured interviews with other graduate students and academic works with a farm working background. One interview in particular involved the family of a graduate student and the sharing of their experiences in the agricultural industry. I am focusing on the specific experience of those of us who now labor within the university, since it was through my experiences of graduate school that made me reflect more on the notions of labor and my family's history of farmwork. While I believe undergrads whose families have a history of farmwork have their own relationship to this labor, I am more inclined to engage with fellow graduate students and academic employees who have made a more conscious investment in an academic career. Graduate students also have a more volatile relationship to the university in regards to its labor practices,⁴⁸ and find themselves

⁴⁸ Soumya Karlamangla, "U.C. Workers Strike on All 10 Campuses," *The New York Times*, November 15, 2022, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/15/us/uc-workers-strike.html>. Jocelyn Gecker and Chris Weber, "48K University of California Academic Employees on Strike Demanding Better Pay, Benefits," USA TODAY, accessed

conducting contract work for the school without benefits and while facing housing insecurity.⁴⁹ I can speak both as a former undergraduate student at a UC and now a PhD candidate at a different UC that TA strikes and contract negotiations are deeply regular. We just recently avoided a strike and have ratified a new contract with pay rises and guarantee financial support for international workers facing legal issues under the current presidential administration. Although as graduate students we are meant to understand this position as temporary, there is also a lot of effort put into making it better for those who come after that should not be taken for granted.

My attempt is not to conflate the experience of graduate students to those of farmworkers, but to demonstrate how academic labor can also be recognized as a site of exploitation. The graduate students who come from farmworking families continue to find themselves exploited for their labor even in this new site that has been conceptualized as the assimilative goal. Temporary lecturers and contract employees also have a precarious relationship to the university and their ongoing commitment to it - the gig work economy has reached the “skilled” laborer.⁵⁰

This dissertation focuses on a very particular group of Latine graduate students and academic workers whose research and administrative roles are directly related to their families’ farmworking backgrounds. In other words, they share my own trajectory and motivations for working within the academy, as well as a self-reflexive analytic towards that work. There are many academic workers with a farmworking background who labor within the university that may not feel this baggage of their families’ laboring history in the same ways. Their everyday

August 28, 2023, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2022/11/14/university-california-teaching-assistants-scholars-tutors-strike-pay-benefits/10700333002/>.

⁴⁹ Daniel Masterson, “Striking UC Academic Workers Say They’re Underpaid. The Data Says They’re Right,” San Francisco Chronicle, December 14, 2022, <https://www.sfchronicle.com/opinion/openforum/article/UC-strike-workers-pay-17649514.php>.

⁵⁰ Adrianna Kezar et al., *The Gig Academy* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.68032>.

experiences of laboring in the academy may vary dramatically depending on their academic and professional pursuits. Graduate students and academic workers in STEM fields for example might feel this brushing with their families' labor in even more abstract ways. This project also does not take into consideration the experiences of undergraduate students. These students have their own unique experiences and orientations to the university that are worth investigation, particularly in this more volatile time of the university. Although this project is focused on a particular population of academic workers, I hope that their experiences and concerns are relatable to many who feel overlooked by the university in any capacity

I found the majority of my participants through the snowball method. A participant would suggest someone they met at a conference or from a program they recently completed. This exposed me to the plethora of projects that we all end up pursuing that also still revolved around the experiences of our families. One participant did a history of farmwork in the border town they grew up in, another on the kinds of healthcare and reproductive practices that their immigrant family went through. A literature student wrote about the ongoing carceral like practices of field work in the mid-west that their parents had lived through, while someone else was examining the pedagogies that emerge in the fields regarding lettuce harvesting that their father and uncles participated in. All except for the family interview were conducted over zoom. We all felt the multiple deadlines of academia. Emails would get lost in our overcrowded inboxes. Things fell between the cracks. Research or conferences kept us traveling, and ultimately we decided that just scheduling a zoom between things would be the best way to meet.

Although we were spread out across the US and working in different departments, we all have a shared orientation to the university that made meeting up feel like a breath of fresh air. Our interviews were initially meant to last only an hour, yet they often and very easily went

longer. We acknowledged how we hardly ever really got to talk about these feelings with someone. The weight of the responsibility on our shoulders that is overlooked by both the university and even our family at times. Often there were tears. The conversations would veer into topics that might seem totally disconnected but then came to fill in gaps in even our own reasoning for choosing to labor in the academy and all of the dilemmas it raises for us. These interviews felt like constructing a web of experiences, not just bridging the field to the university, but also bridging within the university in ways that undermine the kinds of practices that are deemed valuable here. Yes, the conversations are being used for a dissertation. And there was also an affective experience that cannot be captured by the University. At the end of each interview, I felt so grateful and validated, and participants often echoed that as well.

Given that I might be described as a “native” researcher in regard to both sites, my study is deeply informed by an autoethnographic methodology. While critical self-reflexivity is an important tool for ethnographers in general, auto-ethnography has played a vital role in the work of scholars of color to navigate our double identification as scholar and research subject. As someone who is always marked other, I have regularly felt like an outsider within academic settings. I have always had to keep my identity in mind and how I would be perceived by those around me, policing myself before others could. Calanit Tsalach’s “Between Silence and Speech: Autoethnography as an Otherness-Resisting Practice”⁵¹ and Santhosh Chandrashekar’s “Not a Metaphor: Immigrant of Color Autoethnography as Decolonial Move”⁵² both address how sharing one’s personal story of struggle as a person of color in particular can be a way of challenging many of the issues with research creation that we take for granted. Auto-ethnography

⁵¹Calanit Tsalach, “Between Silence and Speech: Autoethnography as an Otherness-Resisting Practice,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 19, no. 2 (2013): 71–80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800412462986>.

⁵²Santhosh Chandrashekar, “Not a Metaphor: Immigrant of Color Autoethnography as a Decolonial Move,” *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies* 18, no. 1 (2018): 72–79, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708617728953>.

becomes a way for me to implant myself more clearly within my work, to highlight my identity and its importance to the subject matter I am engaging with. It is a way of turning something I have been taught to make smaller, into something that has very important implications for the kinds of work possible within the academy. Tsalach and Chandrashekar highlight how people of color are constantly being reminded of their identities within the academy and how these function as acts of exclusion as opposed to their white counter-parts whose identities are hardly engaged with. Critical of the systems we are working under, scholars of color emphasize our identity to create spaces for ourselves on our own terms. Auto-ethnographic work created by people of color tends toward the radical not only in its ability to critique conventional modes of research creation but also to serve a solidarity building function with other marginalized peoples. In *Auto/ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social*, Deborah Reed clarifies that “One of the main characteristics of an auto ethnographic perspective is that the auto- ethnographer is a boundary-crosser, and the role can be characterized as that of a dual identity.”⁵³ This notion of the boundary-crosser has felt so prevalent in my personal experiences crossing into academia. Barbara Tedlock acknowledged this shift in ethnographic work to be less about the self and an other, and more of a move towards researchers fieldwork involving a deeper emotional participation with the subjects and their experiences.⁵⁴ My Masters studies emerged from the mining of my families history and this new project continues to be invested in this personal

⁵³ Deborah Reed-Danahay, ed., *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social*. (Oxford ; New York: Berg, 1997).

⁵⁴ Barbara Tedlock, “From Participant Observation to the Observation of Participation: The Emergence of Narrative Ethnography,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 47, no. 1 (April 1991): 69–94, <https://doi.org/10.1086/jar.47.1.3630581>.

history and engages with others who find themselves caught in a similar intergenerational dilemma.

Studies on labor in particular have also relied on ethnographic field work.⁵⁵ Ethnography has also been linked to a notion of the afterlives by Savannah Shange in their work with progressive schools in San Francisco. They make the claim that because the everyday is so affected by the afterlife of slavery and because ethnography is deeply invested in the everyday practice of conducting academic work, the methodology is well suited to engage with these affective experiences. They argue that “for [Black] anthropologists of Black people in America, that *fieldwork* is never completely out of sight of another set of fields – cotton, cane, tobacco, rice.”⁵⁶ Although not engaging with the exact same population or fields, my ethnographic field work is invested similarly in the labor of those who have come before and continue to be in those fields today, even as I am co-located in the academy. Ethnography is a way to take seriously my feelings and experiences of the work I am doing in solidarity with my community. Stacy Jones elaborates more on the role of reflexivity in their examination of auto-ethnography and queer theory.⁵⁷ They emphasize the importance of fluidity and self-reflexivity in how we come to understand and own work, to think critically about how we position ourselves and keep in mind the ever-evolving role of academic work. The intentional self-reflexive modes allows me to reflect on the types of conversations I have with others in similar positions, allowing me space to challenge my own preconceived notions more critically. While reflexivity is a characteristic of

⁵⁵ Here are a few: Holmes and Bourgois, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*; Ribas, *On the Line*; Horton, *They Leave Their Kidneys in the Fields*; Willis and Aronowitz, *Learning to Labor*; Douglas Foley, *Learning Capitalist Culture: Deep in the Heart of Tejas*, Second edition (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

⁵⁶ Savannah Shange, *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiracism, and Schooling in San Francisco*, Illustrated edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2019).9

⁵⁷ Tony E. Adams and Stacy Holman Jones, “Telling Stories: Reflexivity, Queer Theory, and Autoethnography,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 11, no. 2 (2011): 108–16.

most ethnographies conduct from the late 1970s on, sharing a similar formation, heightens the affective dimensions of reflexivity.

Plan of Dissertation

The first section of this dissertation, titled “**Gracias a Dios yo he sido muy trabajador,”: Walking Backwards into the University** begins with an auto-ethnographic reflection on my mine and my family’s relationship to our labor. I feel it is important to situate myself and disclose the personal stakes I feel in this work clearly before engaging with the experiences of my participants. This project is incredibly personal for me, reckoning with the life and opportunity that my grandparents left for me. I then shift to my fieldwork conducting a family interview with my participant Marisol. Marisol has worked as a programs manager for a university located in the Central Valley of California and is now working on her PhD in Education. Her parents both immigrated to the US in the 60s and labored in different sectors of the agricultural industry throughout her childhood. Although our stories are different, there are a lot of similarities in how we both feel this weight of a past labor on our shoulder. We both labor for the university through a relationship to the fields our families labored in. We see our work as something bigger than ourselves. I understand these moments as being fundamental in anchoring the forthcoming theoretical frameworks. Through this interview and the auto-ethnographic reflection on my own family’s experiences, I present an intergenerational dilemma around the role of labor for the kin of farmworkers that now labor in the academy. This dilemma captures the way that our families’ history of labor shapes an understanding of our current laboring practices, inviting a more critical and personal orientation to how one labors.

The first chapter titled **“You’re not working, you’re just sitting there!”: Ensuing Alienation and the Gap Between Farmworking Families and First-Gen Graduate Students** begins the move into academia more directly. It focuses on the affective experiences that I and my participants experience as we reflect on our positionality in the university. As the child of farmworkers and someone who now labors in the academy, I often rely on my families’ experiences of arduous work to motivate my success in this new environment. This gap in our laboring experiences has also brought moments of tension between my family and I in how they struggle to understand what my “work” even really is. The interviews I’ve conducted with other graduate students and academic workers have found this to be a common theme across our experiences. How do we wrestle with this tension? Following our families’ suggestions to do good in school to stay out of the fields, and yet doing good in school has created this distance in our experiences that feels almost impossible to translate. Pulling from Marxist notions of alienation in wage labor and Duboi’s concept of double consciousness, I propose *Ensuing Alienation* to examine intra-family struggles within the backdrop of the racial capitalist systems. In interviewing graduate students and academic workers who come from a farmworking backgrounds, it is apparent that feelings of alienation are not only occurring from the work environment of the university, but also from their own families. It is through conversations with family members about their academic careers that graduate students and academic workers see conflict around what “work” is and a disavowal of the kinds of work they do in the academy. Consequently, we see the emergence of an ensuing alienating effect. Alienation not simply because of wage labor, but also in how one understands their own work in relation to their families’ history of work.

My second chapter, **“I didn’t want to write a study that... that was not familiar to me right?”: Seeking Whats “Familiar” In the Academy**, focuses on what our labor practices look like in the academy more directly. It examines how our labor in the academy can reflect or refract a kind of practice that has been crucial for our communities. I focus on two methods in particular: the kinds of topics we choose to research and the people we choose to work with. The common connections between these are how they are all rooted in familiarity and reminders of our communities. This can be understood as an afterlife of farm work, a way of maneuvering this unfamiliar working environment through similar *tactics* to our family members in the fields. I rely on De Certeau’s terminology of tactics because of its emphasis on opposition. It is a reactive way of moving in the work place, alive and ongoing: “it must play with the terrain imposed on it, organized by the law of a strange force. It does not have the means of containing itself in itself, in a position of retreat, of anticipating, of gathering itself: It is ‘movement in the enemy’s field of vision.’”⁵⁸ Building off of Natalia Molina’s discussions on the construction of racialized subjectivity in the US⁵⁹ and Paul Willis’ examination of an intergenerational orientation to the culture produced by manual labor, I build the term *Labor Scripts* as an analytical framework to capture these tactics that are used by farmworkers in the field and their kin who now labor in the academy. Labor Scripts are a tactic that emerge in opposition to racial capitalism and persist across generations. In the ways that my farmworking family members have relied on their community and maintain strong cultural and familial ties through their laboring experiences, I seek a similar continual connection to our community in my laboring practices in the academy.

⁵⁸ Certeau et al., “On the Oppositional Practices of Everyday Life.” 6.

⁵⁹ Natalia Molina, *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts*, 1st edition (University of California Press, 2014).

My final chapter, *The Unskilled and the Unprofessional*, shifts away from us, the laborer, to the where we labor itself. By relying on the field of Critical University studies, Critical Race Studies, anecdotal experience from my interview subjects and myself, this chapter examines the current social and political moment of academia and the role it has played in the lives of under-represented minorities that have labored in it. It is in this neo-liberal era of the university where we see a more vocal support for initiatives such as DEI and HSIs. I connect these initiatives to the work of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney on the undercommons to suggest a re-examination of the professional/unprofessional dichotomy during the dismantling of DEI programs that they might have rightly identified as “A recruiting booth at a carnival... to turn the insurgents into state agents.”⁶⁰ I connect their unprofessional/professional dichotomy to the skilled/unskilled language used to justify the devaluing of labor done by migrant workers. I argue that the working culture of the university can be thought of as an inverse to that of farmworking. Whereas farmworkers have crafted a lifestyle and culture to maneuver their abusive laboring industry, the university itself sells a kind of lifestyle to obscure its more insidious laboring practices. As graduate students, we are invited to be part of a community of scholarship and are meant to feel grateful to be included in ongoing discourses. And yet, our position and future employment is incredibly precarious. There is no investment in the individual and we are constantly put in competition with each other for scarce resources. The unskilled and the unprofessional in dialect point to how no matter the scale, institutions find ways to punish and limit what is available and who gets to have mobility. I may not have made it as far out of the fields as I had imagined.

I structure my dissertation with a particular experience in mind for my reader. To begin engrossed in the very personal baggage of this laboring history my subjects and I carry with us,

⁶⁰ Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, “The University and the Undercommons,” *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 101–15, https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2_79-101.

and then slowly move along as we make sense of our positions in the university, how we labor within it, and ultimately, how the University itself understands us. Its is a move from the fields to the academy, echoing the trajectory that my participants and I have gone through. It works to demystify and challenge the assimilative narrative around first-gen scholarship as a wholly progressive move. To sit with the discomfort that maybe we have not made it as far out of the fields our families have imagined. My hope is to present a laboring experience that is both specific yet invites the reader to examine their own relationship to labor and what informs it. I have come to the conclusion that all labor is personal, and it is only in emphasizing this that we can begin to imagine new ways of laboring within these oppressive systems that will not leave each other behind. I am inspired by those that came before, and work for those that come after.

“Gracias a Dios yo he Sido Muy Trabajador,”: Walking Backwards into the Academy

It was during my second year of graduate school when my therapist suggested that I might be experiencing depressive episodes from time to time. She asked if any depressive tendencies had run in my family. I was initially defensive against that suggestion. I had an understanding that depression is a totally debilitating experience that must lead to suicidal ideation. There was a time when I was sure I was experiencing depression though. It was during my undergraduate experience, after the loss of two of my closest friends in the Oakland Ghostship Fire. I didn't want to ever imagine that they were gone. While mutual friends were crying, I kept saying that we just didn't know yet. And to give it time. I kept checking to see if they had opened any of the messages I sent the night before. I couldn't really sleep in the aftermath, even after getting confirmation of their passing. I would wander around in the middle of the night along the beach, or sit at the end of the pier. I remember going home for a weekend, laying on my mom's bed and saying "I think I'm depressed." She snapped her head back from her vanity to look at me and said "No! Don't be!"

I don't hold that comment against her, and she now goes to therapy as well. I do like to remind her about that remark jokingly though. "I can't believe I ever said that..." she'll say. My mom has always been very conflict avoidant, so I understand the reaction. I also know that it might have come from a defensive place. We were still dealing with the loss of my grandfather around that time, and I saw the way that she was still reckoning with that and its effects on her siblings. Out of the seven, it was my mom who ended up staying the closest to my grandparents. It's put her in a place of not only having to care for them more but also being the one that all the siblings come to when they have concerns. There's always been a lot placed on my mom as a

middle child, and I've grown to be very protective of her. I've seen the weight of all this, and the loss of my grandfather felt like the final straw. I can't claim that she experiences depression, but I recognize patterns in how we both tend to hide our feelings. The way she can shut down, not in anger but in fear. I saw how she made herself small to appease her siblings.

Any clear signs of depression in my family, though, came from my grandfather. He was an immigrant farmworker from Mexico who came to the US after the formal termination of the Bracero program. He was so full of life when I was little. He would take me to chop wood, give hugs so tight that they would hurt, and never forgot my "domingo," even as I got older. I spent all of my childhood around him. My mom and I lived with them for a bit, and even after we moved out we would still celebrate birthdays and holidays at their home. As we both got older, though, he moved less and less and his fits of anger become more common. His cursing at my grandmother was the background noise to most of my weekends. He was never a huge drinker as far as I can remember but he did love to smoke cigarettes. He had many health-related issues as he aged as well. There was kidney failure when I was 12⁶¹ where we were told by doctors that he was going to die for sure. Somehow, he survived, shocking everyone. My family accredited this to his willpower, but also to the green juices my grandmother would make him drink every day. I still believe that enough aloe vera can cure anything.

His second severe illness came during my final year of undergrad. He had heart failure, but he had also been struggling with other health concerns prior. My mom tells me about how frustrated he was in the hospital saying things like "Why don't you just let me die in peace?" and "I just want to be left alone." My aunts and uncle would come from out of state to see him, and all the conversations I overheard were about how this is just temporary. Doctors told us he could

⁶¹ My mom tells me she was sure she was experiencing depression during that time. Having to deal with everything on her own for the most part.

live longer if he just tried to get better, if he put in any effort to get up and move his body. But he never seemed to be getting better as far as I could tell and he was eventually moved to hospice. I guess he had already made his choice. It was hard to see him in this state. He wouldn't even look us in the eyes or react to our presence. He would just stare off into the distance seemingly so deeply sad about something. The last words he said to me were about school. By this time, he was already mistaking people and was barely intelligible. But it was so clear when he told me to keep doing good in school. It caught me off guard. We hadn't had a substantial conversation in years, and at that point I had just accepted that he either had no idea what was going on around him or was actively trying to push it all away. I took his last words to heart, that school was how he would remember me. It was an affirming moment that lives in my head when I think about him. I don't know what doing good in school meant to him, but I have to imagine it meant something about somehow getting somewhere he felt he didn't in his own life. To go to the places he didn't get a chance to, even if he didn't even really know what those places were like.

My grandmother speaks about how my grandfather could never be still when they were younger. He was a gambler, always thinking about ways he could make more money and how what we already had could be used to have more. Working on his family's farm in Mexico wasn't enough, working in the fields here wasn't enough, even buying land back in Mexico wasn't enough. The money would always run out. He had spent his whole life wanting more, at the cost of his relationship to my grandmother and their children. We always speak about how he was a great grandfather, though, and about how much he loved my cousins and me. And that is true. I never felt like he didn't love me. But I also saw his fits of rage and anger towards everybody else. All the screaming and cursing that would be so normalized when we all would

get together. I loved him, but it was also so clear even as a child that he was not happy much of the time. Whatever life he saw for himself towards the end was no longer worth fighting for.

My mom speaks about how his older children got a different version of him than the younger ones. She remembers him as being “strong,” always wanting to do more because he was a “business person.” He would go to Visalia to pick oranges and then sell them a corner to make rent. She felt protected by him, he was reliable. It’s this version my grandmother likes to remember as well. Growing up, I felt like he was such an important person based on the way family and friends of the family respected him. They would share stories about how he helped them when it came to work and starting a life in this country. His younger children and grandchildren saw the aftermath of all this work, the toll it takes on your body and how you grow to be resentful for not being able to work in the ways you used to. Work was everything to him. It was what made him feel validated in his community. His inability to maintain his work as he aged feels like what ultimately led to his depressive outlook on life. It was more than just not being able to move like he used to. He was also no longer the same person that people valued so highly.

My grandfather’s passing was difficult. I was still spiraling in the despair of losing my friends that I made no space for his death at the time. My mother also tried to shield me from a lot of it, knowing what I was already going through. I really didn’t make an effort to stay in contact during this time. I was actively avoiding any conversation about a service because I just felt like I couldn’t deal with more death at that moment. To this day, though, one of my biggest regrets was not attending his service. I threw myself into school as means of escape. I kept thinking about those that couldn’t make it to this point. My friends and my grandfather, thinking that I had too much riding on not finishing. I was able to finish within 4 years with two degrees

and a thesis that received the film departments excellence award. And yet, I wouldn't say that it made any of this more bearable or meaningful. I think about my grandfather more as a memory than I ever did while he was alive. And I hate that, but it's all I can do. I think about how he would understand anything I am doing with my job. Would he find it respectable? Would he be proud? I think about the fields and the version of my grandfather they got, the one full of energy looking for opportunity. The version of him that would help my great aunt and uncles find work and housing. The version of him that smiled more and would hug my grandmother, at least in photographs. His work ethic and the ways he rose up the pseudo ranks to become an instructor for others just recently arriving. This version of himself that felt more true to who he was that I only ever get to experience in the aftermath.

I noticed a similar relationship to work with my grandmother as well. She continues to labor, selling things to people in the neighborhood to make just enough money to be able to still get her nails done regularly. She gets moved around a lot between family members as well for child care services. She doesn't recognize either of these as labor, just helping her family and friends. She's a lot less stubborn than my grandfather, though. She doesn't have that same resentment towards her aging body that my grandfather did, even though she worked just as long in the fields. She is still precious about those fields and her time there in a similar way. During our interviews for my Master's thesis, my interpretation of her labor and her pushing back against the exploitative nature of it was a regular occurrence. She refuses to see her time in the fields as anything other than a purely beneficial experience that provided her with everything she needed monetarily and emotionally. She lived in a one bedroom home with four kids and was at one time deported, yet the way she describes those fields sounds magical. It's a kind of relationship to her labor that is deeply frustrating for me at times, yet equally awe-inspiring.

Both my grandmother's and my grandfather's understanding of their work in the fields, what it provided for them and the people around them, is so hard to imagine for myself. Their labor experience is particularly challenging when I consider my labor in the academy. I am sitting alone in an office space I share with two other graduate students, or at my dinner table because I cannot afford a dedicated working space at home; rereading the same pages over and over; bumping up emails to get a response; scouring for funding opportunities since we are not paid through the year; and experiencing depressive episodes because I feel detached from the world I grew up in and the people that inspire me. I feel that loss, and I worry about the more time I spend here and how it may continue to disconnect me. My grandparents labor felt so immediate and tactile, the feeling of being outside and the comradery they speak of so fondly. I know that it is all in hindsight, and that the industries they worked in were and continue to be highly exploitative of racialized people. It affects me all the same.

I share this reflection on my family's experiences of labor and my own feelings to illustrate how work has been integral in my family's understanding of ourselves. This project is an examination of labor through an intergenerational dialectic between the fields my family has worked in and the University I now work in. It is a deeply personal project, but I have come to the conclusion that all labor is personal. I have seen how my grandfather's laboring has affected his family and friends, and how it continues to affect me now. The fields and the labor conducted in them play a role in how I am understanding the value of my work. I was raised on the stories of the fields and what it's provided for my family. Yet, I was also raised to move away from them through formal education and to achieve some kind of higher status than those that came before me. This move away doesn't guarantee success, but it does invite the loss of something fundamental to understanding who I am.

I am not alone in these feelings. Although we all have a different level of investment in our academic careers, all of my participants have shared how they too have struggled to navigate this move away from the kind of laboring cultures that we were raised around. I'd like to begin this dissertation and anchor the forthcoming theoretical frameworks with a family interview. It involves "Marisol" who has worked as a programs manager for a university located in the Central Valley and is now working on her doctorate of education. Her parents both immigrated to the US in the 1960s and labored in different sectors of the agricultural industry throughout her childhood. Although our stories are different, there are a lot of similarities in how we both feel this weight of a past labor on our shoulder. We both labor for the university through a relationship to the fields our families labored in. We see our work as something bigger than ourselves. Through this interview and the auto-ethnographic reflection on my own family's experiences, I present an intergenerational dilemma around the role of labor for the kin of farmworkers that now labor in the academy. This dilemma captures the way that our families' history of labor shapes an understanding of our current laboring practices, inviting a more critical and personal orientation to how one labors.

Marisol's Family Interview

My interview with Marisol's family happened one morning over winter break in 2023. It was overcast and very cold. The central valley tends to look like a horror film during this time, with the way the fog rolls in. You can barely see past your own car when driving on the backroads during winter, and my mom always warns me about driving too late or too early when it's bad. She was meeting me at Marisol's home to help facilitate this family interview, but she had to organize some things at work first. My mom works in schools as well and she connected

me to Marisol after I asked if she knew anyone that could be a potential interviewee. I was embarrassed by mom asking people at her work if they would like to be interviewed by her son for a school project. People ended up being really excited about the opportunity. I remember her calling and saying “I met this super sweet girl and she would love to be interviewed for your dissertation! There also this guy who used to work with us that I reached out to, and I have another girl coming in to help next week that I’m gonna ask too.” It felt nice seeing my mom get so excited about being able to help me with my project. She was eager and part of me wonders if she felt like she was making up for the times she wasn’t able to understand the work I was doing.

My mom is beloved by the community she works with. Student’s families all refer to her as “la maestra” even though she isn’t a teacher. I asked her to come to help with some translation that I might struggle with and to try and make this interview feel less formal. She was already familiar with Marisol, and I made the assumption that Marisol’s parents would feel more comfortable if there was someone else that could relate a little more directly to their experiences. I wasn’t too sure about how this was going to go. I was really concerned that they would feel I was prying or that these would be conversations that shouldn’t be shared with strangers. The other academic workers I interviewed had been so open and eager to share, they understood my labor and what the interview was for. Marisol’s parents on the other hand, I can’t imagine that they had that same kind of understanding. I thought about how my grandmother understood the interviews for my Master’s thesis as just simply helping me with a “tarea.” She wasn’t wrong, and thinking about this interview similarly made it feel less daunting. We were all just here to help me with my homework. I picked up a carafe of coffee and my mom was bringing the pan dulce.

I was trying to be very intentional going into this interview. I felt like I had to make sure to get something out of it that would make it worth the effort that Marisol and her parents were putting in. Marisol opened the door with a bright smile on her face and her daughter in her arm. She let me know that her daughter was staying home from school that day, which gave me a sense of relief. It was reassuring knowing that I wasn't getting in the way of their lives, that she didn't feel that she needed to reschedule or find childcare. I started setting up the coffee and recording devices on the kitchen table and her parents showed up soon after. I could tell they were a bit nervous. I introduced myself and asked if they wanted coffee, letting them know that we were just waiting on my mom. I felt a level of embarrassment with the whole situation. I was trying to make this a casual thing but it was kind of embodying of the whole tension of the project. A meeting of the academy and the fields, as much as I wish to not see myself in that way. My mother arrives a bit later and it feels like a weight is being lifted off my shoulders. We get everybody set up with coffee and bread and we begin.

Without prompting, Marisol's father immediately speaks about how he is so proud of his daughter. I'm sure Marisol must have discussed with them why I was there, but it still caught me off guard. He clarifies that he is so proud of her, because he has had to work in the agricultural industry his whole life. The insinuation being he is proud of her for not having to labor in the same ways he had. Yet, he soon begins to speak about all of his own labor like badges of honor. He is a proud man, and both my mom and I commented on how he reminded us of my grandfather. I see that tension that I imagine my grandfather was also dealing with. One of pride in his work and reverence for his ability to endure so much, even though he does not wish it on his kids. He begins to list off the different kinds of fruit he picked throughout his time: blackberries, peaches, apricots. Apricots was just for one day though, the pay barely covered the

ride there and a burrito for lunch. Most of his agricultural work was actually at dairy farms. He began on a small farm with just 8 machines. He worked ten hours a day, six days a week, for \$700 a month. He says that this pay was okay because it was considered training. He was learning how to use the machines and handle the animals, they were taking a risk on him. Eventually, he got a job working at a bigger plant where he was in charge of milking 2,000 cows 3 times day with 50 machines. He shares how there was so much to keep track of and occasionally calves would wander where they shouldn't and be killed by machinery. "Yo mate uno... se quedó atrapado en las orailas y no pude salvarlo. No me despidieron por eso, fue solo un accidente."⁶² There's a nonchalant-ness to how he talks about this grueling work. It's hindsight at this point, it's hard to really fathom the day-to-day of it.

Marisol shares that it was on this dairy farm where she grew up. Eventually they moved to the "city." She laughs at the word, finding it humorous to refer to Turlock as a city. But it felt like a big deal for them to move to a more populated and bustling area. It was after this move when her father began his warehouse work. Oftentimes, farmworkers tend to "retire" into other indoor industries that are seen as more comfortable and impressive. My grandmother for instance eventually retired into cannery work. Marisol's father worked for Dole, Kholes, and Tesla for a while but eventually returned to dairy work because they offered him better pay. Marisol adds that the farm owners were nice and would throw Christmas parties for the families who worked for them. My mom has shared these stories too, kind of like a company Christmas party. Marisol shares how he was eventually run out because of some made up reasons, they just wanted him out apparently.

⁶² "I killed one, it got trapped on the edges and I couldn't save it. They didn't fire me though, it was just an accident."

Then he found work at a slaughterhouse where he was working up until recently due to an illness. This is the job he seems to have the most negative connotation of. Every day, before he started working, he had to clear out all of the carcasses of the animals that died while they were closed. He got a hernia from having to pick up so many dead chickens. The heat would be so terrible sometimes that even after just a couple days, the chickens' bodies would already be decomposing and they would have to move them in pieces. He makes a point about how unbearable the heat would be and how it just made everything worse, he got ammonia poisoning from clearing out the chicken feces. He didn't spend as much time reminiscing on this one, maybe there wasn't enough distance from it yet.

I asked him how he got into agricultural work, was there already family here that helped him get a job? He clarifies that he got here not knowing anybody at just 16 years old, sleeping in ditches. He was traveling in a group, but once they made it to Fresno, they had no idea where they were going other than North. One man in the group said that he knew someone in Turlock, but didn't know exactly where that was. As they walked on the side of the road a group of men passing by asked them where they were going and offered them a ride. They were heading to Sacramento and could drop them off on the way. These men bought his group lunch and gave them \$10 each once they arrived in Turlock. It was April 1969.

Noticing how quiet Marisol's mother has been, I pivot to asking her more directly if her story was similar to her husband's. She says she came alone with one other woman, no family either. The trip had taken so long that her family had assumed she had died and that they would never hear from her again: "Dos, tres meses no supieron nada."⁶³ The other woman and her rode on the back of a truck for a month. She says that by the time they finally made it to Merced, she

⁶³ "Two, three months... they didn't know anything."

had a lot of regret. She didn't like it and wanted to leave, but the people she came with told her not to be stupid after all they had been through.

Marisol's mother primarily worked in childcare but would also pick grapes and peaches. She also worked for a company that handled the laundry for hospitals and restaurants. Currently, she sells at flea markets and has been doing that for 20 years, rotating between four different locations a week. She's sold a myriad of things: car seat covers, curtains, right now she sells toys, which is why Marisol's daughter loves to go with her grandma to work. Marisol's mother doesn't seem to have the same kind of reverence or glee in talking about her work in the way that Marisol's father does. I'm hesitant to name this as a gendered experience, considering my grandmother loves to speak about the fields much in the same way Marisol's father does.

I changed the conversation to how they met. Marisol's father said that neither of them had any family here, they've both always been alone. They were introduced to each other by a mutual acquaintance. Marisol's father was living alone on the dairy farm, and his friend decided that he needed a wife now that he had a place to live. She mentioned a woman who watched kids next door to her and set up a meeting: "Ella me dijo 'yo conosco una muchacha,' y me presentó a ella. Duramos como tres días en conocernos, y vamos 36 años."⁶⁴ A collective "awe" erupts from Marisol, my mom, and I while Marisol's mother laughs out of embarrassment. They clarify that they didn't get married through the catholic church. Marisol's father had some friends that were going to celebrate their daughter's birthday. They were going to kill a pig and everything. So, the friends offered to also turn it into a wedding celebration. Marisol's father brings up how Marisol's mother was still very hesitant to get married: "ella me dijo 'me siento mal, porque quisiera estar mi familia aqui.' Pero estavamos igual porque yo tampoco tenia familia... siempre

⁶⁴ "She said 'I know a woman,' and he introduced me to her. We spent 3 days getting to know eachother and now it's been 36 years."

nos hemos rascado con nuestras propias uñas.”⁶⁵ The absence of her family made Marisol’s mother hesitant to get married, like it wouldn’t be worth it if her family couldn’t be a part of it. Yet, they found community in this absence they both shared.

“Gracias a Dios yo he sido muy trabajador.”⁶⁶ We had discussed all these different experiences Marisol’s parents have had after coming to this country and the worlds they were a part of. The loneliness, the little pay, long hours, dangerous working conditions. I knew that it was so much more than that though. He spoke about each of these experiences like a badge of honor, a collection of medals that he was showing off. I asked him which one was his favorite, if he had to choose. “Mi favorito... eran todos. Todos eran mi favorito porque puse todo mi empeño”⁶⁷ A noble answer, so instead I asked him what exactly he liked about doing these jobs. He responded with “Cuando haces un trabajo con todo tu empeño, ningun trabajo es aburrido. Agradezco todos los trabajos que he tenido. ¿Quién hubiera imaginado que llegaría a trabajar en una fábrica de Tesla?”⁶⁸ Listening back to this moment, the sincerity behind it affects me deeply. Part of me thinks how this whole system of precarious immigrant labor is built for someone like him to end up working at these warehouses and factory floors. Tesla’s factory have relied heavily on the labor of people of color in terrible conditions.⁶⁹ But that perception undermines his experiences of labor and what his decision to immigrate for work has led him too. How do we reckon with this? How do we understand labor to be this incredibly personal thing yet also part of a bigger system of dehumanization for many of us? How could I understand how impressive

⁶⁵ “She told me, ‘I feel bad, because I wish my family was here.’ But were were the same because I didn’t have any family either... we’ve always had to fend for ourselves”

⁶⁶ “Thank God I’ve been a hard worker”

⁶⁷ “My favorite... was all of them. All of the were my favorite because I put everything I had into them.”

⁶⁸ “When you do your best at a job, it can never be boring. I’m thankful for all the jobs I’ve had. Who would have though I’d end up working at a Tesla Factory?”

⁶⁹ Janie Har, “Black Workers at California Tesla Factory Allege Rampant Racism, Seek Class-Action Status,” AP News, June 7, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/tesla-racism-black-lawsuit-class-action-21c88bddf60eca702560be58429495de>.

that must feel in his situation without just writing this off as what Lauren Berlant calls “*cruel optimism?*”⁷⁰

We switch the conversation to discussing Marisol’s labor. I ask Marisol’s parents if she was very interested in school. Marisol steps in and clarifies that she wasn’t always interested in school but that in seeing how her parents struggled, she knew she wanted to do something different. To this day, she tries to take advantage of every opportunity available to her. Not being afraid to apply for things and taking on extra work if it means it might open a door for her later. Marisol also speaks about how she tries to model for her own students the importance of including family in your educational work. “Hubo un momento donde no les explicava porque you pensaba que no iban a entender pero... yo entiendo la importancia... por ejemplo cuando hablo con los estudiantes, yo les digo de la importancia de incluier a sus padres o sus parejas o sus hijos pa que entiendan...”⁷¹

Marisol talks about how her dad has seen all this work affect her and how he has suggested she slow down, acknowledging that she’s done enough. She discusses how she had these big ambitions, but is recognizing that as her parents age and with their health conditions it might be better to focus on family. And yet, she also sees how this work does open opportunities for her kids. She remembers how when she and other first generation kids couldn’t afford extracurricular activities. She remembers struggling with this and how she doesn’t want her kids to have to feel like things aren’t available to them. She is speaking fast, and her voice is starting to quiver. She then turns to her parents with tears in her eyes: “Papi, mami, ustedes me han dado

⁷⁰ The work of Lauren Berlant in *Cruel Optimism* will be discussed more in the flowing chapter, but I use the term here to reference the suggestion that any hope within these harmful capitalist systems is ultimately futile.

⁷¹ “There was a moment where I didn’t explain it to them because I didn’t think they would understand... I understand the importance of that... for example, when I talk to student I tell them about the importance of including their parents or their partners or their kids so that they can understand.”

mucho oportunidades, nunca me faltó un techo, nunca me faltó comida.⁷²” She clarifies that just because she’s talking about giving more opportunities to her kids, that it doesn’t mean she didn’t get any herself. “¿Vamos escalando verda papa? ¿Verda mama?⁷³” There’s a tension in the room. Up until this point, nobody had cried nor had they spoken to each other as directly as this. It’s as if there is a desperation to make clear that she isn’t disavowing how what they’ve done is the most important part of all of this. I feel this deeply too; how I try to hold onto and retain something about my families labor even as I move away from it. I hate thinking of my grandfather and my grandmother’s work as merely stepping stones on the way to a fallacy of class security.

“Es Cierto. Tus padres, todas las oportunidades que ellos poderion darte, te las dieron.⁷⁴” My mother suggest. “Y ahora tu estas hacienda lo mismo.⁷⁵” I find this to be a key moment of conceptualization of the project. How we carry the baggage of this labor that our families are so prideful of yet do not want for their kin. A labor that, as their kin, is seen as part of a colonial system and not good for us. Holding these two spaces, the lived experiences of the fields and the more formalized “skilled” work of the academy, without feeling like we’re rejecting what we come from. We are not to turn away from the fields, but we are to move away from it. And it is that experience, of walking backwards into the academy, that many of us find ourselves trapped in.

⁷² “Dad, mom, you goes gave me so many opportunities, I always had a roof and food.”

⁷³ “We keep climbing up and up right dad? Right mom?”

⁷⁴ “It’s true. Your parent’s, gave you every opportunity they could.”

⁷⁵ “And now, you’re doing the same.”

Conclusion

We speak a little bit more about Marisol's experiences, how she was shopping for blouses at the remate for work once and a lady asked "¿Son pa que trabajes en el campo?"⁷⁶ which made her laugh. We speak about the ways that my mother and I have also had similar struggles and the ways that my grandpa moved between different kinds of work throughout his life as well. We had gone well past the scheduled time, and we had to start wrapping up so people could get back to work. I felt bad about having to end our conversations, but it felt like there would have always been something else to discuss together. Marisol had previously brought up how she had been thinking about these conversations a lot more since our original interview and is thankful for the opportunity to be able to speak about it with someone in this way. The opportunity to have these conversations with others has been incredibly meaningful for myself as well. With each interview I've conducted, this emotional and intellectual space I find myself in feels more vivid and real. This meeting ground of the fields and the university feel prescient not just to my own experiences, but to how we all navigate our labor in relation to the bigger world around us. I care deeply about not taking everything my family has done for my future for granted, and yet I also have to think critically about my future and what is best for those that come after. Marisol and I carry the baggage of constantly wondering "is this enough?" and not for ourselves, but for those that came before and for those that come after.

The following chapters engage more critically with the academic literature around labor, race, and affect in order to try capture and name these feelings that I and so many other struggle with on a regular basis. I work to identify the ways that they move us to labor in the academy, and how our laboring is in a lineage of a practice of labor. The purpose of this is to have a more

⁷⁶ "They're so you can work in the fields?"

critical understanding and engagement of the university in this relationship to “unskilled” immigrant labor and how it is recognized by our families as a means of progress away from the fields. We do not discredit the work that came before us, yet we also know that we are expected to surpass it, often times through the mantra of doing well in school.

Chapter 1:
"You're not working, you're just sitting there!": Ensuing Alienation and the Gap Between Farmworking Families and First-Gen Graduate Students

When the Pandemic⁷⁷ happened, I moved back to my parents...and my mom was like, “can you help me clean? Can you help me cook? Can you go do this? Can you do that?” I’m like “No, I’m working.” She’s like “No, you’re not working. You’re just sitting there.” And this is also when I’m trying to qualify right?

Marie is a graduate student at a university located in Southern California. She shared this experience during a conversation about the ways our labor in the academy feels impossible to explain to our families who have labored in the agricultural industry. Sandra, a professor teaching at a university in the south, shared a similar anecdote about her time as a graduate student:

So when I was doing my PhD it was very difficult to explain to them why I was still in school right? So... “I’m getting my PhD,” “But what’re you gonna do with that?” “Well, I’m gonna teach,” “Well you're just gonna be a teacher? Like why do you have to do that one?” “Well, because I’m not, you know like... this is what I’m gonna do.” And so they couldn’t understand.

“That one,” here refers to the additional degree that Sandra was going to be pursuing. Her mother couldn’t understand how this additional time commitment would be beneficial in the long run.

Marisol’s mother also had concerns when she shared that she was going back to school: “y para qué sirve eso?”⁷⁸ I have been in a similar situation. My mom asked me if she could share the good news with our family group chat after I passed my qualifying exam, to which I immediately

⁷⁷ The 2020 Covid Pandemic and the subsequent lockdown made issues of labor more apparent, The designation of “essential workers” and the shift to working from home forced many to reflect on their labor in relation to their family. Suddenly we were working side by side with others family members, having opinions on their work versus ours etc. But for many of us, thinking about our precarity under capitalism and navigating with family was already so essential to our everyday lives. This article does not emerge from covid, but acknowledges it as a cultural moment that spotlighted issues regarding labor, race, class, gender, and familial expectations. Many of the experiences of my subjects did not happen only during lockdown, but I encourage readers to reflect on that period and how those fears and anxieties have been and continue to be present for many.

⁷⁸ “And how is that going to help you?”

felt embarrassment. I don't think my mom herself understood what qualifying meant entirely, and I worried that it would be misunderstood as completing my PhD by my family. It was.

I don't blame my mom or anyone for not understanding this kind of work. I am doing a PhD in communication studies and the graduate career path for the social sciences does not carry the same cultural capital as a medical doctor, lawyer, or engineer. I worry about *alienating* my family. But it is also the work that has been pushed on me as a child, the classic mantra of "doing good" in school in order to "stay out of the fields." It *has* gotten me out of the fields, so far out of the fields that it feels far from my family as well. The chasm between the fields my family worked in and the academy I now work in feels so wide, and yet, those fields are also central to how I understand and engage with my labor as a graduate student.

This project seeks to bridge the alienating experiences of labor in two disparate field sites - the farm and the academy. I take affective moments around the alienation of our labor to engage with how the fields brush against the university in a visceral way. I understand these moments as the *afterlives* of farm work, an echo of past experiences still ringing in our ears. The lasting effects of one generation's labor on the next has been explored previously, most notably through the works of Doug Foley⁷⁹ and Paul Willis⁸⁰. My reliance on affects and the afterlives builds off these works to center intra-family experiences more explicitly. The afterlives is a concept first coined by Saidiya Hartman,⁸¹ which has continued to be used in diaspora studies. For instance, Christina Sharpe engages with the afterlives of slavery as living in the "wake," engaging with the everyday effects of slavery far past the point of emancipation.⁸² I use this generational lens to think about the fields our families have labored in continue to shape what

⁷⁹ Foley, *Learning Capitalist Culture*.

⁸⁰ Willis and Aronowitz, *Learning to Labor*.

⁸¹ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*.

⁸² Sharpe, *In the Wake*.

Michel de Certeau theorized as the "practices of everyday life."⁸³ I think with these moments through the lens of affects studies, what these moments feel like and how they ultimately move us to understand our situation as academic laborers differently. This exploration takes seriously the ways that our families comment on our work and how those comments shape an understanding of our work. While there is likely not any ill-will in their understanding of our work, its distinction from a kind of labor that they are familiar with marks it as something that is positioned differently.

Farmworking children have had to navigate their families' labor and their own aspirations, sometimes at odds with each other. This article takes affective moments around the alienation of our labor to engage with how the fields brush against the university in a visceral way. I identify these experiences as moments of *ensuing alienation*, where our labor in the academy is increasingly affected by the alienating labor that came before us in the fields. We feel devalued by both the university as well as our families for choosing to labor in it. These moments are the *afterlives* of farm work, an echo of past experiences still ringing in our ears.⁸⁴ To best explore the dilemma of ensuing alienation—that is, moments where graduate students are caught between alienating laboring experiences and must contend with both spaces of labor at the same time—this chapter addresses the following questions: when do we feel this ensuing alienation occur and how does it impact our work? How do these moments accentuate feelings of alienation? Where do we find the common ground between these two forms of labor that are only a generation away from each other? How can these affective moments between generational

⁸³ Certeau et al., "On the Oppositional Practices of Everyday Life."

⁸⁴ The "afterlives" was first coined by Saidya Hartman in *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2008) but has continued to be used in diaspora studies to examine intergenerational experiences. *In the wake: On Blackness and Being* (2018) by Chrtistina Sharpe engages with the afterlives of slavery as being in the "wake," engaging with the everyday effects of slavery far past the point of emancipation. While I am focusing on a very different experience of racialized labor, I believe this intergenerational examination to be useful for all who seek to investigate the lasting implications of a laboring experience.

experiences of labor expand our understanding of alienating labor and the different ways we maneuver it?

Alienation and its Afterlives

I rely on the terminology of alienation because of its roots in labor studies and its emphasis on power relations in forming an identity. Although alienation emerges from Karl Marx's examination of the dialectic relationship between factory owners and factory workers during the industrial revolution, it is still applicable in contemporary agricultural contexts.⁸⁵ It is not a stretch to imagine the fields that our families worked at as extensions of the factory floor.⁸⁶ And yet, when speaking to my mother and grandmother about those fields, they express a reverence for that work. These spaces are also understood as familial, places of play, spaces of bonding and kinship. They are alienating in theory yet also have these strong communal qualities that have persisted outside of those fields. Qualities that many struggle to find in the university. While not the factory floor, the increased neoliberalization of the university in response to ever-growing intrusion of capitalist interests has transitioned it into a space that feels resonant with the same kinds of machine-like employment.⁸⁷ Incomparable to the back breaking labor of picking fruits and produce, but increasingly similar in our disposability as workers.

I build on Marxist theories of alienation through post-colonial and critical race scholarship. Scholars like Sara Ahmed, W. E. B. Du Bois and Gloria Anzaldúa examine alienation through racially subjected experiences. Ahmed elaborates on alienation by connecting

⁸⁵ Marx K (1977 [1844]) The economic and philosophical manuscripts of 1848. In: Tucker R (ed.) *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: WW Norton and Company, pp. 66–126.

⁸⁶ Carey McWilliam captures this sentiment vividly in *Factories in the Fields* (2000) through their historical analysis of the agricultural industry.

⁸⁷ Devorah Kalekin-Fishman and Lauren Langman, "Alienation: The Critique That Refuses to Disappear," *Current Sociology* 63, no. 6 (October 2015): 916–33.

it to Franz Fanon's work on the colonized subject, identifying a "double alienation," where a dual subjectivity is experienced.⁸⁸ Another way to examine this doubly alienating experience is by placing it in conversation with Du Bois' concept of "double consciousness". In his examination of the lived experiences of blackness, Du Bois identifies how Black Americans are forced to live with a fragmented sense of self, having to always examine themselves through the lens of a White America.⁸⁹ While Du Bois is exploring inter-race relations in his examination of alienating experiences and Ahmed is referring to the colonized experiences of indigenous peoples, I move the analysis to the terrain of intra-family relations to examine how practices of alienation under racial capitalism occur within our own imagined communities of solidarity. Anzaldúa touches on this intra-community tension through what she terms a "new mestiza consciousness."⁹⁰ Anzaldúa focuses on womanhood and queerness as parts of herself that alienate her from the community she was raised in. While her positionality to this tension is more combative than what I propose in this article, Anzaldúa speaks directly to how otherness is multiply determined, with all parties orientating themselves to power differently. What occurs when these differently alienated experiences meet is *un choque*, "the coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference."⁹¹ I sense this choque when these two alienating experiences of labor - in the fields and in the academy – rub against each other.

Du Bois, Anzaldúa, and Ahmed all spoke of these alienating experiences as moments of consciousness raising, suggesting how they allow for the potential of change as opposed to an

⁸⁸ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010).

⁸⁹ W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt) Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction; an Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935).

⁹⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Fourth Edition. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012).

⁹¹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera*. 100.

entire loss in understanding of the self.⁹² This opens up the alienating experience that Marx understood as foreclosing a possibility of personal growth through class consciousness. I examine these multiple alienations not just as an experience, but as a material identity. I propose the term *Ensuing Alienation*, to highlight the two-fold alienation (grand) children of farmworkers experience from the academic environment and their intergenerational alienating experiences. While they may be felt as two distinct forms, one is in fact an extension of the other. Ensuing alienation is a lens for examining these more knotted and complex social relations that find themselves doubly caught between worlds. Ensuing alienation takes seriously the experiences of laboring under capitalism without foreclosing the possibility of change and growth, particularly for doubly marginalized laborers that have long had been critical of their positionality. It bridges disparate laboring experiences across time to formulate a critical positionality to labor that navigates a multiplicity of lived experiences through an inability to connect entirely with just one or at times, either. It emphasizes not just a historical and social positionality, but a personal one as well. It focuses on the everyday and how our immediate communities have navigated these exploitative laboring experiences we find ourselves in.⁹³

Affects of Ensuing Alienation

These experiences of ensuing alienation are informed by affective moments. Moments that move us to understand a situation in a new way.⁹⁴ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri suggest that

⁹² Theresa A. Martinez, “The Double-Consciousness of Du Bois & The ‘Mestiza Consciousness’ of Anzaldúa,” *Race, Gender & Class* 9, no. 4 (2002): 158–76.

⁹³ It is important to acknowledge that these experiences of alienation are all happening against the backdrop of what Cedrick Robinson termed “racial capitalism,” in his text *Black Marxism* (2000). These multiple alienating experiences that I and my interview subjects reflect on are only possible under the systems of exploitation that have rendered us and our families as racialized nonwhite, machines for profit.

⁹⁴ Silvan Tompkins frames affects as specifically a “pre-cognitive” moment that move one to act and make sense of an experience. (Frank & Wilson, 2020)

affects can be considered “as a *power to act* that is singular and at the same time universal.”⁹⁵

Affect comes to be an entry point into understanding a specific experience and relationship to power. It is through the language of affect that I recognize how the children of farmworkers carry their families’ labor history into the academy. We stand in the fields and the classroom, feel the weight of both, reacting to these dual spaces at once. We experience this ensuing alienation as ruptures in seemingly normalized experiences of academic labor. The constructed everyday is ruptured in these moments where we come face to face with just how alienating our situations are. Sianne Ngai adopts the term “ugly feelings” to describe these emotions that are “unusually knotted or condensed ‘interpretations of predicaments’—that is, signs that not only render visible different registers of problem (formal, ideological, sociohistorical) but conjoin these problems in a distinctive manner.”⁹⁶ Ngai brings serious attention to these moments of intense negative experiences that arise when engaged with particular “obstructions,” moments that work against our understanding of something. Ngai’s examinations of these feelings resonates with the experience of ensuing alienation I have felt when trying to explain my work to family members or in thinking about my everyday labor in comparison to that of farmworkers. Our decisions to pursue graduate school becomes an obstruction in our families’ understanding of a labor trajectory. Their misunderstandings and pushback then become obstructions for our own understandings of our labor within the university as well. These are moments charged with political meaning that acknowledges this obstruction that exists due to this shift in working environment. They are a knot of complex “ugly feelings,” emerging in everyday moments. I know I should be proud to be here and to not be in the fields, and yet I feel these ugly feelings regularly.

⁹⁵ Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, “Value and Affect,” *Boundary 2* 26, no. 2 (1999): 77–88.

⁹⁶ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*⁹⁷ and Kathleen Stewart's work in *Ordinary Affects*⁹⁸ serve as an entry way to thinking about the role of affects in the everyday. While Berlant is focused on this optimism as harmful, I believe that it can be more than just that. Berlant underplays the actual act of doing a labor and the different relationships to labor that can emerge through an everyday practice of it. I understand the notion of cruel optimism as opening a labor practice up for affective moments in the future, an approach to affect that is structured and not foreclosed in its possibility. Stewart states that ordinary affects are "the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give the everyday life the quality of continual motion of relations, scenes contingencies and emergencies."⁹⁹ In the context of these intergenerational experiences I focus on, these moments of alienation as ruptures in the everyday. They are reminders of how un-ordinary this work is for us and our families. These moments are the point of entry for the afterlives of the fields. And this happens over and over.

These ruptures are moments of the past intersecting with our present everyday. It is in these affective moments where we see the "spillage" of the fields into the academy, where Nigel Thrift identifies how things "become part of hybrid assemblages: concretions, settings and flows."¹⁰⁰ Affects are presently experienced, but emblematic of pasts meeting a future. Ensuing alienation, an experience bound to labor, power and marginality, is built off histories being re-enacted in everyday affective moments. The everyday moments speak to a past, and a future that comes to influence a present moment, which then has lasting and compounding effects. The history of farmwork my family has experienced and their relationship to labor is not in the past, but recreated and felt every day in our own experiences. Time and space is collapsed on top of our

⁹⁷ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

⁹⁸ Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Duke University Press, 2007).

⁹⁹ Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*. 1-2.

¹⁰⁰ Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (London: Routledge, 2007),

own, it is felt in the present, it is moving us to act towards a future. I am simultaneously in and out of the fields in the way my family was in the fields but also working towards a future away from the fields.

The “Somethings” of Graduate School

Returning to Marie’s experiences, Marie’s work was renounced in favor of her helping around the house. She goes on to say that she was:

...taking also like a class during the pandemic, it was like from two to five and that was the time when everyone would come back from work. ‘What are you doing? Can we make sounds? Can we not?’ So it was an interesting experience just for them to see what my day to day looks like and trying to explain what I’m doing... Before they hadn’t seen me, right? Like they just knew that I was in school doing *something*.

A frequent topic throughout my interviews with fellow graduate students and academic workers has been about the ways our families treat our labor. I take these moments as examples of when these two alienated labor experiences meet and come to challenge the personal expectations of what work is supposed to look and feel like. These moments ask us to think about how we conceptualize “work.” And for the children of farmworkers, we experience this as an ensuing alienation. Marie’s family did not have to engage directly with her labor prior to sheltering in place together. Seeing her working created these moments of tension around what constitutes work. Even when her family can see them “working,” they don’t always know how to navigate it. I think here about the phrasing of “doing *something*,” we are kept busy but by what or how seems less important. Our families get insight into our everyday, and their comments or treatment of that everyday comes to rupture our understanding of normalcy. We then critically examine these moments as ways to understand what we have constructed as “normal” and why.

I also moved back in with my family and began my PhD program from our home. My mom would bring me food during class which I found embarrassing but also very sweet. I appreciated the care, but I was also worried about coming off as juvenile in front of my newly acquainted cohort and instructors. Providing food in the fields and eating together was something my mom and grandmother often spoke about, but here I saw it as shameful. This was an affective moment, an ugly feeling originating from these two-sites coming together. I think that she should know better, but I am also critical of having that judgment.

It might be that our families previously understood our work with school better when they did not see what it looked like, when that *something* did not look like sitting down all day. Marie's experience points to how our work might be understood as something more solitary by our families. A labor that requires distance from others and a quiet environment as opposed to the social labor of farmwork. It might not be what they immediately understand work to look like. Another graduate student, Lily, shares:

When I was home this Winter break and doing oral histories, I locked myself in the... office... and I told my little brother... "when dad gets home, tell him he cannot come and talk to me because I'm recording an important interview for my research," and I close TWO doors. And still, my dad gets home, comes in, stares at me... "Who are you talking to?" And I'm just like "Oh my god." I ignore him... He goes, makes dinner, and then he comes in "Dinner's ready."

We experience feelings of frustration when our parents don't take our work seriously. Maybe it is because it was happening in the home, but it might also be because it is hard to take seriously a kind of labor that does not *look* laborious. Lily adds: "I think because... he's still on his feet all day doing that type of work, he doesn't... like I'm just sitting on my laptop. Like as much as he gets a lot of it, I don't think he gets it entirely..." When we say things like getting it entirely, we imply a kind of understanding that our colleagues might have knowing what doing research

“looks like.” On the outside, yes it looks like nothing more than sitting on a computer, but it is a very important part of the dissertation process.

Lily takes a moment to correct herself, a moment where these ugly feelings come up: “Well, I won’t say he doesn’t get it because he definitely does.” She takes the time to clarify that just because her father does not get it in the ways that our colleagues might, that doesn’t mean that they don’t demonstrate an understanding in other ways. This is a moment where we are reminded of the gap between us and our family. This ensuing alienation builds, and we contend with how alien this work is not just for us, but for our community as well. Lily’s father is excited by their work and accomplishments, but there is this different experience of alienating labor that influences how he acknowledges what work looks like. It’s not that he doesn’t understand the importance of the work she does, it is just difficult to recognize it as labor. How do we explain that we write, and teach, and read, and research on a constantly shifting schedule to someone who works a nine to five? While these labors are not comparable, they are both alienating us from ourselves and from each other.

We are confronted with the gap in our labors as ruptures in the everyday. These moments of alienation can come as mere jokes or as real moments of interruption during the job. These then become moments of ensuing alienation where we make space for their experiences and justify their orientation to our work. We are at our desks, then suddenly in the fields, remembering how it is we got here. We are alienated by our own labor and then additionally by our families’ misunderstanding of that labor, and making sense of it all in a moment’s notice. For me, this distance between the fields and the academy raises my anxieties and makes me reflect on why and for whom I am doing this work. We are not critical of our families for not understanding our work because we too are critical of the work itself. We know that this is an

alienating job, it's exclusive and hard to understand, but we also don't get that support from our parents to do it all the time. Marie says,

They know I've been training to be a professor. So that's what they understand. But they don't know what I do... what the work entails. Because I'm also working full time, they kind of started not asking about my education and they ask about my job now.

They care and engage with the work that they are better able to understand, the work that is less alienating. As people who maintain a close relationship and connection to our family, we forego attempts at explaining the alienating work and learn to prioritize other kinds of conversations. We are deeply affected by how our family misunderstands and engages with our work. We are frustrated when they don't understand it in the ways we do. But then we do the additional labor of justifying their reaction since we still feel their labor in the fields.

What Even is Graduate School?

Beyond the everyday tasks of graduate school, the overarching experience becomes another impossible task to convey to our families. It is a school after school, but also a job that invariably requires work into the evening and weekends. There is the additional concern shared by our families about the amount of time it has taken us to complete our degree. Marie says "I think for them, they're just at the point where they're 'Hey it's been too long, just finish and move on.'" They have seen school as this steppingstone to work. We were supposed to leave this place for something more real, not stay in it forever. How is one both a student and an employee in the same space? It is a work environment that feels entirely foreign for many working-class families where the boundaries and expectations of schooling might have been made clearer. We were supposed to go to school, but not for this long. Graduate school is a moment where suddenly our families' mantra, to get a good education and a better job, and the script of this

successful assimilative immigrant journey starts to take on a more puzzling aspect. We are now doing "too good" in school, maybe have strayed too far from the fields. Remember also how Sandra and Marisol's mothers reacted to the news of the PhD, the disappointment they felt and the questions they raised. There is an understanding of an undergraduate experience to get a degree, but it is unclear how an additional, and even longer schooling experience is going to dramatically change your economic positionality. There is this clear contrast in their understanding and appreciation of an undergraduate versus a graduate degree.

This pushback not only challenges the value of graduate school, it also hurts our feelings. There is this affective experience of our families not taking seriously what we feel is an exciting opportunity. Lilly shares her mother's reaction:

My mom, she... I think it's just, you know, coming from an immigrant background, you're, you are to be very practical things otherwise... we don't have the knowledge of "why are you doing a degree in Chicano studies? Where can that get you?... Is there money in that? How are you going to support your family?"... and I remember when I first declared... she was unhappy because she didn't understand it. And she thought I would take longer to graduate and I remember that just like, really hurt me.

Here again we see that balancing act of ensuing alienation. Lily is understanding of her family's outlook on work and how they might understand the purpose of school for immigrants. It is often sold to us as a moment of finally "making it," of achieving something that secures a kind of financial stability for future generations. We know as social scientists that our careers do not necessarily achieve these guarantees, our "making it" might maintain a kind of precarity. There is an added weight to education as a means of escaping poverty or staking a greater claim of belonging to the country. Even knowing this, it is still hurtful to hear that our decisions are not being respected. To experience ensuing alienation brings an ability to see both sides, the consciousness raising experiences of Anzaldúa's *la facultad* or DuBois' "second sight,"¹⁰¹ but it

¹⁰¹Martinez, "The Double-Consciousness of Du Bois & The 'Mestiza Consciousness' of Anzaldúa."

also means allowing increased scrutiny that we take seriously because it's coming from our community.

Gloria Anzaldua's intra-family conflicts led her to understand her outsider positionality as a strength. She forms a "new mestiza consciousness," to see things her family couldn't. But it doesn't feel that way for us, it doesn't necessarily feel like we see something that our families don't, or at least I don't think any of us would claim we do. We don't recognize our families' perspectives as more limited, just shaped by different experiences and expectations of work. The brushing of these two worlds is felt in a visceral way, the knot in our stomach of self-doubt that we feel in the academy is then added onto by our family.

The undergraduate experience is easily understood to be a steppingstone to the labor market, but graduate school as an obstruction to it. Throughout this process we wrestle with the intrusion of ensuing alienation and its affects. To have to take seriously our own labor, but also reckon with the equally real concerns of our family, is yet another layer of unacknowledged labor. Connor also speaks to this sentiment as they address the transition from completing graduate school but still working in the academy as a professor.

I think especially once I finished graduate school there was a little bit of that there. The sense "Oh, Connor will never be done with school."... And I think they all thought that was kind of funny, like maybe you know, it was a way of not being serious that I'm just gonna like spin my wheels and study forever.

To those of us in the academy, Connor's achievement of being able to continue their work is celebrated, but it is again being understood in this more nebulous way by their family. Not really being clear to them what "staying" in school is doing for Connor. Rather than more, it somehow represents less cultural capital. This again might have to do with the varied lived experiences between generations. These experiences come to demonstrate how dramatic of a shift this labor is. Suddenly school takes on a different meaning after a certain point, it is no longer about doing

good in school to stay out of the fields. Graduate School, the PhD in particular, becomes something that “delays” your entry into the work force. Connor continues:

Not to be overly optimistic about it, but for people who have particular working-class backgrounds, it’s just like a huge jump in upward mobility, it’s just dramatic...I think the fantasy was, if I’d been a lawyer, I would have had ostentatious cars and stuff.

Connor acknowledges how our families might have imagined longer schooling to lead to work that is more easily recognized in our families’ communities. I’ve joked with some of my participants about how this might all be more revered if we were going to law school or medical school. Yet those of us in the social sciences know that it is less about the fiscal compensation of our work and more about being able to have the space and resources to do the kind of work that feels important to us. It might be harder to show off the things we are proud of when it’s a journal article as opposed to the kinds of things we own. The different cultural distinctions of success are the disjuncture between the fields and the academy, there’s been a shift in our expectations of work. An alienation they experience, that is then alienating our experiences of work. If this work isn’t understood by our own community in the way ways we understand it, how do we come to make value out of it for ourselves in the everyday? Our degrees in Chicano studies or efforts to research subjects close to home are questioned by those that it would ideally mean the most to, and yet we also know that this is something we feel is important to continue to commit our time to. We do not forget the fields, we move with them, and we dwell with this tension.

Reflections on Our Own Misunderstandings of Graduate School

What continues to be alienating to our families is not something we ourselves necessarily understand entirely. This leads to the kinds of isolation that my fellow academic laborers have

been getting at, this double alienation we feel when the fields rub against the academy. We can see both labors but feel unable to connect with either position entirely. In these moments where our families question our career choices, we are challenged to justify how it is the right move for us. We are quick to make sense of their positionality and understand how convoluted our trajectory must look and sound to those who are unfamiliar with the career path. It is hard for our families to understand why we are in school for so much longer to still just be a teacher because they believe a greater time in school should equate to something more financially rewarding. The difficulty in explaining might also come from our own misunderstanding with the system, and the ways that it runs on a constantly shifting goal post.

Speaking from my own experiences, I have been a lifelong academic and continue to find myself unable to understand my own responsibilities and expectations. This job is not just about doing, but also about planning, and constantly being open to those plans changing. We are told that we should be on top of readings and writing for our classes, teaching and grading for our Teaching Assistant positions, researching and writing for our qualifying exams, but also thinking about conferences and publications if we plan to pursue a career in academia. And then if we do get accepted into a conference, we are supposed to have funding through grants and fellowships because a department may have run out of travel funds for the year. For someone who was not raised in this environment and has no one at home to ask for help navigating these obstacles, graduate work becomes so convoluted that it can be hard to take seriously. This isn't necessarily specific to those of us with farmworking families, but there is that added level of the migrant assimilation trajectory placed on us by both society and our families that then comes to make our ugly feelings feel uglier. Such emotions capture the aspects of ensuing alienation. Marie shares:

... how do we expect our parents, families to understand if even among ourselves, like in the LGSA (Latinx Graduate Student Association), we're always like "oh history, what do

you do? Oh policy, what do you do?” And we’ve been doing PhDs for a long ass time, we still don’t know what each other is doing... We can’t expect our parents and family, or I’ve gotten to that point where... I can’t expect them to understand if like I don’t understand what Amanda is doing in a different field. And we’re... all colleagues but we don’t really understand.

Marie pivots our conversations to being about just how difficult it is for us to understand someone else’s work in graduate school, when you’re literally working with them in a writing session. We are working in the same profession, but our work is different. This speaks to how specific each of our experiences can be. Solidarity is difficult when we are all on different funding packages, timelines, and departmental expectations.

We are supposed to only be here for five or six years (depending on the program and funding package) but there is also an unspoken understanding that hardly anybody ever finishes in that time. Connor describes how dramatic this can sound:

... for someone like me who, you know, no one in my family had gone to college, let alone graduate school, a PhD was just incredibly foreign and seemed like... you’re going to the military for six years.

Comparing graduate school to the military is meant to be comical, but it also speaks to how isolating this work feels to everything we know. It asks us to leave our families behind, and we get so inundated in these new ways of speaking to each other and making sense of the world.

Sam, who recently completed graduate school and is now on the job market, adds to how puzzling this all is:

It’s always just nebulous... I’ve been at this for seven years... So they’re like “You’re still not done? What are you doing?” Like, “There’s a lot of steps.” And they’re like, “what steps?” and I’ll say, you know... How do I explain the bizarre... The academy doesn’t make sense to me and I am ensconced in it. How do I explain it to people who have had no experience with it?

This observation echoes what Marie brought up, how the misunderstanding becomes shared by us and our families equally in some ways. Our alienation is informed by our families, and we

come to share in their critical position to the institution. It is unfamiliar territory for even those of us who have been at it for half a decade now. How can we make it make sense when it doesn't really make sense to us? How can we make it feel less alienating to them, when it is entirely alienating to us? I think one could argue that it doesn't make sense for anyone, but then why do we all continue to pursue it? Regardless of the work making sense to themselves, their family might view it with more reverence if they have also been through the process or have a different relationship to formalized education.

I think about why I don't try harder to bring my family into this kind of work. I've addressed parts of the shame and embarrassment I feel around my work, but in having these conversations, I think there is something about me not wanting them to understand. We see this position of ensuing alienation as a burden. Graduate school is a privilege, and we recognize how lucky we are to be able to do it, but we also know how opaque and dehumanizing it can feel. I think we do really understand it, at least in some sense. There is a very real understanding of the weight of this work, even if I can't clearly describe anyone else's work except for those in my own field. It is important to us and we are frustrated when it's not validated by our community, but we also know that explaining it wouldn't make any more sense to them. It's this ugly feeling that we parse through, we think about our families' alienation, our own, and how this work does or doesn't fit into our lives. We reckon with what it means to be multiply alienated by work, failed attempts to translate, the baggage of a previous generations work influencing how we feel and move through this new site.

My Own Alienation

I want to share an experience of my own act of alienation. My grandmother was once describing how her daughters would work alongside her in the fields during their breaks from school. I made a remark about how that could be understood as an instance of child exploitation at the hands of the business owners. When I asked if they got their own pay checks, she responded with “Why would they get paid? They were just helping their families. If I asked you to come over and help me with something, would you expect me to pay you?” As I tried to explain to her how these examples are not comparable, she just waived her hand and said that I didn’t know what I was talking about.

I was frustrated and disappointed at that moment. It was those same ugly feelings that I feel when speaking about my work being misunderstood, yet it was about someone else not understanding their work in the ways I wanted them to. I was trying to apply my own alienating experiences and relationship to work on hers. Whereas I saw the work to be alienating because of its abuse of vulnerable populations, she was acknowledging the community aspects that couldn’t be explained in the terms I was bringing to the conversation. We dropped that discussion and moved on, but it is a moment that has haunted me.

It was a turning point for me, and speaks to the gap in my understanding of that situation in the fields. It illuminated how we orient ourselves to work based on what we understand it providing for us. It also shut down a conversation — we didn’t try to bridge that gap — we both just acknowledged that the other wouldn’t understand the perspective we each had on it. Two alienated laborers unable to meet common ground on what constitutes labor. It was this moment that then led me to think more critically about this generational gap in understanding how and what “labor” is. We misunderstood each other’s work, and that led to a fundamental inability to

understand what our work has meant to us. Time away from that interview has made me reflect that she and I were both right in our understanding of the experience, but we're just examining it from different alienated vantage points. My grandmother, through the everyday moments and feelings of doing this agricultural work, and myself separated and ingrained in a work culture of having to examine a situation through a structural understanding. This does not mean to imply that she has no critical orientation to her labor, just that her concerns were different than mine. My grandmother builds an understanding that pulls from a cultural experience of work and familial moments. My understanding is one of insider/outsider, having grown up in proximity to but never laboring in the same space. In the ways I know I am not just sitting here all day, she knows how her work is not just the exploitative aspects of farm labor.

It is this same experience that happens when speaking about graduate school. Academic workers are all coming to the labor from different alienated experiences of working under racial capitalism, and this creates an ugly feeling within us that makes us reorient ourselves to think about our labor more critically. Importantly, my grandmother nor I is any more or less correct than the other in how we have understood our experiences. We are both understanding the labor from the vantage of our positions within, and navigating it however that makes sense to us even if it might not to the other. Bringing food to us while we are in meetings or letting us know dinner is ready during an interview, it isn't a total disregard of the work, but an attempt to engage with it through a different alienated experience. Wanting us to be done with school so we can get a more "real" job is a concern. We may not always understand it as such, but we do feel it. That concern is what moves us make space for more of their perspective. Our ensuing alienation allows us to have a critical vantage point of both the academy and the fields, even if we're unable to fully understand what the fields have also provided. This is not intended to idealize

hard work, or productivity under capitalism. It is to engage more critically with our labor as something that carries different interpretations depending on your relation to it.

Conclusion

Sam explains:

[My family] didn't understand what grad school was. That was, that was tough for them. Because they're like "You already have a degree. You already have an Ivy degree. What do you need to go back for?" "Well, I need more to be a professor." And then the way they're like "Well what does a professor do?" And I was like "alright well a professor, does two things: They teach, and they write books." And I was like "I want to write a book about our experiences in the fields." And they're like "Who's gonna care about that?"

This is a sobering moment. It is a dilemma, caught between these two alienating sites of labor. As graduate students, we have to defend our work to the institution, then also defend it to the people who have motivated and inspired us. We as graduate students with this working class, immigrant background must navigate the field and the academy, defending their value to each other, being misunderstood on both sides, and justifying it all to ourselves in the everyday.

This doesn't mean that we are entirely alienated by our families. We are supported and loved by our families, but it can feel like their concerns are coming off as judgments. This can hurt, but we as lifelong cultural translators make space for these concerns. Marie states:

I always try to explain but I know that understanding is limited... when people haven't been there all along, they haven't had that experience, it's different imagining from actually living it. I'm sure that us, had we not had this experience, we wouldn't understand it.

Marie is acknowledging the vastly different work experiences that our families have had and how it leads to the formation of a different place of understanding of what the day to day looks and feels like. It is a reminder that we can also be just as ignorant about other people's work that we have not engaged in ourselves. I think about us as labor scholars researching work sites that

we ourselves have not lived or understand the day-to-day of. I leave these discussions more aware not just of the gap between my family's work and my own, but how we each orient ourselves around an understanding of labor differently. These ugly feelings can provide a political vantage point that allows us to pursue our work while honoring what came before us, and what will come after.

As the neo-liberalization of the university continues amidst the political attacks on higher education in the US, it is obvious that it will be the working class, and people of color, that are dealt the hardest blows. ICE raids and arrests across campuses and in our communities are a stark reminder of just how precarious we are here, just like our parents were in the fields, and how we are always navigating our lives under the forces of imperialism and capitalism. Marx, Du Bois and Ahmed remind us of this, but they overlook the intracommunity friction that also happens. Anzaldúa draws attention to this friction through their queer and feminist perspectives clashing with some of their families' cultural values. These moments are messy, opaque, slightly familiar yet also uncomfortable and hard to understand. It is a rupture of the everyday, an affective moment that invites reflection on this distance between us and the ones who raised us. It is this friction that serves as the reminder of possibility. A reminder that things do change, and there are things that we go through that even the people who raise us cannot understand. We know that in a single generation we have become something entirely different. Ensuing alienation is about feeling lost and misunderstood by many of the people and places around you, but also knowing that you have to keep going because that is our most important job. It is not just about survival, but about working hard towards a future you wish to see even if it feels out of reach in the moment. Knowing intuitively that every day has the potential to make something to feel different. Our families saw something beyond the fields, and we now stare back at them

from within this ivory tower. We are working hard for what comes next. We hope it is for something bigger; our work here is helping our families in the fields. And those fields continue to help and guide our work.

Chapter 2:

“I didn’t want to write a study that... that was not familiar to me right?”: Seeking What’s Familiar In the Academy through Labor Scripts

I was speaking to my mom about my dissertation, emphasizing the kinds of isolating feelings that I and other subjects have shared about graduate school and our academic careers. My mother is usually surprised to hear that I have these negative feelings about graduate school. I think she assumes that because I worked so hard for this, that I must be happy here. She responded by sharing a memory of moving me on campus for my undergrad. She said that there was an orientation for the families where they were told that they had to learn to leave their kids alone, to not come and visit as often as they like and to expect less communication. They were told that expecting to maintain the same form of relationship would only get in the way of our academic success and ability to transition to this new environment. I was caught off guard hearing about how direct the school was about the effects that our college education would have on our relationship to our families. It was this direct acknowledgement that a relationship with our family would only hinder our success here in the academy. It is as if what is familiar and safe for some can be at odds with the kind of laborer the university works to create.

I have come to understand this as another critical aspect in the dialectic relationship between the university and the fields in which my family has labored. The fields, that were full of aunts and uncles and cousins versus the university that wants us to see our family less and less. I was speaking to Sara, a professor in Southern California, about her family’s experiences in the agricultural industry. She spoke about how she started working alongside her parents when she was a teenager in order to help with their finances. She remembers how those first times in the fields were incredibly difficult and required support from her parents:

When I started working, it was me, my dad, and my mom. So, my dad would pick up my slack because we had to move with the crew, you can't stay behind... I know now that my dad had to kind of work double just to make sure that I will keep up with the pace.

Sara focused on the communal experience of the job, how you have to move with the crew and can't leave each other behind. A successful harvest requires a unit working together, and when you're paid per box filled as opposed to an hourly wage, it is doubly important that everybody is able to maintain the set speed. In this laboring environment, a family's aid and community knowledge are integral to succeeding. I couldn't help but reflect on the different ways of laboring across the fields and the academy, and how opposite they feel.

In the way the fields have relied on the construction of an idealized, racialized and deportable subject¹⁰², academia and higher education has also produced an idealized laborer and maintains a fraught relationship with racialized peoples. Many of the spaces in higher education continue to be hostile and inaccessible for Black and Brown people not only economically, but socially as well, as documented by Edward Telles and Vilma Ortiz in 2009¹⁰³, Roderick Carey in 2018¹⁰⁴, and Betty Márquez-Rosales in 2023.¹⁰⁵ Even HSIs (Hispanic Serving Institutions), continue to fail their Latinx student bodies because of the lack of critical engagement with their different lived experiences and relationship to the University¹⁰⁶. The recent COVID pandemic has also impacted farmworking families through their designation as “essential workers” and has negatively impacted Latine enrollment in universities.¹⁰⁷ Those of us with an immigrant, working-class background have and continue to struggle to feel like higher education is a viable

¹⁰² Molina, *How Race Is Made in America*.

¹⁰³ Edward Telles and Vilma Ortiz, “Generations of Exclusion: Mexican Americans, Assimilation, and Race.”

¹⁰⁴ Carey, “What Am I Gonna Be Losing?”

¹⁰⁵ Márquez-Rosales, “More California Latino Students Attending College, but ‘Disturbing Gaps’ Remain.”

¹⁰⁶ Reagan, “Are California’s Hispanic Serving Institutions Living up to Their Name?”

¹⁰⁷ Jr et al., “A Look at Degree Attainment Among Hispanic Women and Men and How COVID-19 Could Deepen Racial and Gender Divides.”

option, or that it will provide something crucial for our success. Our ensuing alienation provides a more critical orientation to the institution. We have understanding of what it can and cannot provide for us at any given time and navigate it with the concerns of our families in mind as well.

While the last chapter focused on the affective experience of ensuing alienation, this chapter focuses on what our labor practices look like in the academy and how they build on previous laboring practices that have been crucial for our communities. I focus on two practices in particular: the kinds of topics we choose to research, and the people we choose to work with. The common connections between these tactics¹⁰⁸ is how they are all rooted in familiarity and reminders of our communities. I rely on Michel De Certeau's terminology of tactics because of its emphasis on opposition. It is a reactive way of moving in the workplace, alive and ongoing: "it must play with the terrain imposed on it, organized by the law of a strange force. It does not have the means of containing itself in itself in a position of retreat, of anticipating, of gathering itself. it is 'movement in the enemy's field of vision'."¹⁰⁹ Building off of Natalia Molina's discussions on the construction of racialized subjectivity in the US¹¹⁰ and Paul Willis' examination of an intergenerational orientation to the culture produced by manual labor¹¹¹, I build the term *Labor Scripts* as an analytical framework to capture these tactics that are used by farmworkers in the field and their kin who now labor in the academy. I identify labor scripts, as a mode of laboring that responds to this oppressive environment, politically and socially, and works against our subjugation as non-actors. These labor scripts are comprised of a continuous investment in the familial and the communal, in the informal ways that we educate and learn from each other that undermines the more "formalized" or "skilled" laboring sites. Labor Scripts

¹⁰⁸ Certeau et al., "On the Oppositional Practices of Everyday Life," 3.

¹⁰⁹ Certeau et al., "On the Oppositional Practices of Everyday Life," 6.

¹¹⁰ Molina, *How Race Is Made in America*.

¹¹¹ Willis and Aronowitz, *Learning to Labor*.

are tactics that emerge in opposition to racial capitalism and persist across generations. In the ways that my farmworking family members have relied on community and maintain strong cultural and familial ties through their laboring experiences, I seek a similar continual connection to our community in my laboring practices in the academy.

Our work and the kinds of people we find ourselves working with and around are all integral for us to move forward in a working environment. In some ways, it may sound like a universal experience for any academic. The importance of a good advisor, and finding yourself surrounded by like-minded people, will strengthen what you produce. For the children of farmworkers, this carries greater stake and is also working against a long history of exclusion. We continue to find ourselves unable to succeed and struggling to stay working at universities that invited us to be there. This is about identifying the tactics to stay and succeed in institutions that are increasingly neoliberal and isolating¹¹². These experiences demonstrate a new way of understanding our relational experiences to labor and how, for some of us, success is not something that can be achieved alone.

My Grandmother's Labor Script

My grandmother regularly comments on the freshness of produce during our meals together, often reminiscing about how they remind her of ones that she's harvested in the past. A store-bought strawberry, for instance, isn't good. Not like the ones that were fresh off the vines when she worked in Salinas. One time I asked her how she learned to pick fruit, was it learned after she arrived in California? She reminded me that her family owned a cattle farm back in

¹¹² This understanding of universities is informed by the field of Critical University Studies and the immense amount written about the university since its neoliberal pivot in the 1970s. The chapter that follows this one dedicates more space to addressing this and the history of neoliberal practices at the university.

Michoacan and so she was already aware of some of the agricultural practices. She learned more in the fields here though. “You had to be cleaner and pick up after yourself, move in a group,” she says. Her favorite crop to pick was cherries because you wouldn’t get as dirty and the pay was usually better. My grandpa would hold the ladder and grab anything that fell while she picked up near the top of trees. I remember the cherries. My grandparents would often remark about visiting “Cherry land,” which meant climbing in the back of a truck, driving down a long dirt road, and running around in the fields with our cousins while the adults picked fruit.

On her own, my grandmother adds that when her parents would come visit, she would take them to the fields to make some money and have to show them the proper way of picking fruit in the United States. It was almost as if she had to end the story with a reminder that she didn’t just learn, she also became an instructor and was able to teach the skills to those who wanted to work. It’s stories like these that my grandmother shares that have come to inform my analytical framework of Labor Scripts. She learned from my grandparents back in Mexico, and then they came to learn from her here in the US. There were no formal channels of learning how to do any of this, no professionalization workshops or job training by the farm owners. It was all learned through these personal and informal methods. I think fondly about these stories as moments of skill sharing and working in community, aiding each other in a labor that is historically so fraught and oppressive. Agricultural labor is known to be incredibly arduous and dangerous, leaving long-lasting health conditions that I have seen both my grandparents struggle with. My grandmother also presents it as a place where she felt that she had a mastery of a skill, where she was an educator and able to provide her family with the skills to labor. She shares a version of laboring that is more idyllic and always in relation to family and community. Something that I have ultimately come to revere and try to replicate in my own work.

Labor Scripts Theory

I construct the terminology of labor script through Natalia Molina's work on the history of racism in the US. In *How Race is Made in America*, Molina identifies how the use of non-white bodies to conduct farm work has been consistent in the history of the US. Non-white labor became integral in maintaining an economic momentum and type of social order.¹¹³ This social order built off a history of racialization, a process that Molina identifies as "Racial Scripts." The concept of racial scripts works to highlight the interconnectedness of racialized people and their histories: "To put it simply, racism builds on past racial acts."¹¹⁴ A clear example of this is demonstrated by the way Lee G. Williams, a Department of Labor official supervising Bracero employment, referred to the Bracero Program as "legalized slavery."¹¹⁵ Although this work does not compare to the history of chattel slavery in the US, the ways that it becomes a referential point for this new version of oppression and marginalization is an important detail in the construction of a new racialized labor identity. It is the repetition of a kind of language to describe and dehumanize people that maintains a justified social order for the purposes of racial capitalism. Racial scripts are a living construct; they change and adapt depending on which group is the most viable to be transformed into an "other" to be taken advantage of. The historical treatment of Indigenous, Black, and Chinese people has been used to fashion a new marginalized identity in the US. The "Mexican" has been created to justify the treatment of a certain group of people for the purposes of cheap labor and easy deportability.

These racial scripts have positioned farmworkers as a specific and more disposable kind of laborer, but that does not mean that their humanity was entirely erased. Farmworkers have

¹¹³ Molina, *How Race Is Made in America*.

¹¹⁴ Molina, *How Race Is Made in America*. 23

¹¹⁵ Patrick H. Mooney and Theo J. Majka, *Farmers' and Farm Workers' Movements: Social Protest in American Agriculture*, Social Movements Past and Present (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995). 152.

learned to maneuver these racial scripts in ways that maintain their cultural identities and values. Curtis Marez cites the creation of an “oppositional brown aesthetic,”¹¹⁶ by the UFW which worked as both a critique of the predatory laboring business and acknowledgment of the community building and recreational moments that emerged throughout the resistance movements. José M. Alamillo’s work on a farmworking community in Corona, California emphasizes how recreational moments were “alternative spaces of autonomy and community,” a reminder that the lives of farmworkers are much richer than what the state or their employers imagine them to be.¹¹⁷ The positioning of farmworkers’ leisure time as counter-hegemonic narratives is crucial. Emilia Cordero Ocegüera’s work interviewing farmworking women also works against dominant narratives of the suffering migrant woman experience. One subject stated that “her work as mother and farmworker was doubly important. On one hand, it provided a service to society... on the other, it served her family at home.”¹¹⁸ The women speak of how their job allows them access to foods that might be more difficult to come by otherwise, being able to be a better provider for their family in a way that gives them pride. These counter-narratives are formed in the everyday and are examples of de Certeau’s tactics used to maneuver exploitative laboring environments while retaining a strong sense of self and connection to community. They do not allow the job to disqualify the aspects of themselves that are important to how they understand what they value.

It’s these responsive tactics that I identify as exemplary of labor scripts. Labor scripts are a response to racial scripts and claim agency within dehumanizing working environments. Racial scripts are a top-down construction, created by hegemonic powers to validate a precarious labor

¹¹⁶ Marez, *Farm Worker Futurism*.

¹¹⁷ Jose M. Alamillo, *Making Lemonade out of Lemons: Mexican American Labor and Leisure in a California Town 1880-1960* (University of Illinois Press, 2006).

¹¹⁸ Ocegüera, “The Daily Struggle.”

force. Labor scripts emerge in response, from the bottom up. They are created by the laboring people to work against the dehumanizing environment they find themselves in. In the way that racial scripts evolve over space and time, labor scripts also build on previous experiences and come to be rehearsed and reiterated across generations. They emerge from a previous mode of laboring. My grandmother worked in the fields by relying on and building off a labor she learned from her family, which she then turned to educate them on how to do agricultural work in the US, which then moves me to work in a specific way in the academy.

In Paul Willis' 1981 work with children of blue-collar workers, he illuminates this explicit intergenerational laboring practice being formed.¹¹⁹ The "lads" revere the work culture that their fathers do on the shop floor and actively work against their own upward mobility because of it. Willis emphasizes how the cultures that emerged from these working-class environments is something much more complicated and active than should be assumed:

[T]his class culture is not a neutral pattern, a multicategory's set of variables impinging on the school from the outside. It comprises experiences, relationships, and ensembles of systemic types of relationship which not only set particular 'choices' and 'decisions' at particular times, but also structure, really and experientially, how these 'choices' come about and are defined in the first place."¹²⁰

While Molina's work highlights the ongoing re-construction of racial identities for the purposes of capital, Willis provide an intra-family examination of laboring experiences. Thinking through these scholars' contributions together provides a way of engaging with the cultural practices of racialized labor across generations and how they continue to orient us in particular ways to different institutions. While the children of farmworkers may not have the same aspirations of following in their predecessors' footsteps, there is still a strong connection to that labor as

¹¹⁹ Willis and Aronowitz, *Learning to Labor*.

¹²⁰ Willis and Aronowitz, *Learning to Labor*.1

something foundational to their families experiences and important to their understanding of themselves¹²¹.

These farmworking cultures live beyond the fields and move into the academy, influencing how we maneuver this differing site while still relying on specific practices we inherited. Labor Scripts can be used to examine the different relationships to a particular labor we may have, and what influences why we do our work the way we do. Labor Scripts are an evolving tactic created in response to racial capitalism that relies on the interpersonal and community-based ways of working and understanding one's position. Farmworkers are deeply knowledgeable about their subjugation and harmful working environment. Academic workers with this laboring background are doubly aware of their subjugation (see my previous chapter on *Ensuing Alienation*) and we maneuver it in ways that pull from a previous generation. In the ways that racial scripts build off of previous modes of racialization to mark a new "other" for laboring purposes, I argue that labor scripts are also a living response that continues to expand and work against hostile working environments that attempt to erase our cultures and identities.

Doing work that is "Familiar"

Going into the academy, I never intended to do work on my family's history of labor. In my gap year before earning my Master's, I reflected on the kinds of work that would feel exciting for me, and ultimately settled on something that was invested in the kinds of immigrant experiences my family had encountered. Because of the recent loss of my grandfather, I really began to feel time was precious with my grandmother. I spent a lot more time with her during that year and felt that a project focused on her work experience as a farmworker would allow me

¹²¹ I understand that these "tactics" do not always work against the structures of farm labor, but it works in the everyday to make it less dehumanizing by centering community learning and connecting to each other.

to stay close to her while continuing my academic journey. I was looking for something that would help bring me back home after feeling so distant from my family during my undergraduate years. My grandfather wasn't alive to see me finish my degree, and I wonder about how he would understand the experiences I was going through and my ideas as they evolved. I still had time with my grandmother, and if there was any way that my academic success could mean something to her in a tangible way, I wanted to make it happen.

I am not alone in this endeavor to bridge the isolation of academic work with our families' experiences. For some of us it emerges from a place of feeling like the experiences of our community have not been given the time or space they deserve. Carla shares that she had a realization about the kinds of work she wanted to do during her undergraduate years:

... I ended up doing the senior thesis on the history of the Bracero program because I had taken a US history survey course and the only week when we covered Mexican American History was during the Bracero program period, in the 20th century. And so that kind of stuck with me, because I knew probably from my mom that my grandfather had been a Bracero. And I'm pretty sure I heard that my dad was a Bracero too.

This was similar to Lily's experiences: "I was so disappointed to not find published work on the history of 4.2 million men coming to the US during World War II." The decision to do work on undiscussed histories is not just an intellectual pursuit, it is also a personal reaction to the isolation many experience in academia. When asked by his advisor about his dissertation topic, Mark justified his decision on doing his research on his hometown: "I didn't want to leave myself. I didn't want to write a study that... that was not familiar to me, right?" The terminology of familiarity is crucial to my analysis of labor scripts. We all have a sense of feeling like something is missing from our experiences in higher education. There is a sense of absence where we work, and we make an effort to remedy this through what we choose to work on. We

think back on a laboring environment and community that is “familiar” to understand this absence.

I recognize this call toward familiarity as a pull towards the *labor scripts* our family relied on when working in the fields, the familiar tactics that helped them maneuver through their working environment. In the way Willis’ lads revered the factory shop floor, we in the academy also feels this call to the labor of our community and the cultures that emerged there. We feel this need to bring it with us, to continue to be around it in some capacity. There is a familiarity to the work our families did in the fields, a comfort in what it provides against the odds of racial capitalism that tries to strip it away from us. To do work that is familiar, is to make the choice to retain a sense of self through your academic encounter. In choosing to do work that is “familiar,” and speak to experiences that feel relevant to us, we are bringing the familiar into the unknown. We have managed to create ways of doing that, through labor scripts that have been reiterated over and over.

The Absence that Motivates Labor Scripts

Labor scripts form as a response to being marked as other and deemed worthy for only a particular kind of work due to racial capitalism. We feel this mark of otherness in the academy as URM (underrepresented minorities). It leads to an absence we feel in our everyday that pulls us to reconnect with the work our families have done. We fall back on these labor scripts that are invested in community to maneuver the academy. Relationality and being around certain people who have a shared experience come to be as integral in the academy as they are in the fields. This relationship to learning and laboring can be identified through the work of Etienne Wenger

and his discussion of communities of practice.¹²² By focusing on the four components of meaning, practice, community, and identity in how we learn, Wenger expands the scope of what should be taken into consideration when discussing how we learn and labor in our everyday life. Vanessa Ribas's work on "prismatic engagement," is also useful to expand on this conversation of the everyday by focusing on the racialized experience of laboring under capitalism and how that experience orients us to each other. Ribas examines the everyday lives of Black and Brown people working at a slaughterhouse in North Carolina and emphasizes how their understanding of the job and their position in the larger market of labor are deeply affected by their identities. It is this acknowledgment that Ribas identifies as prismatic engagement, they explain that it:

...recognizes that intergroup relations--- especially among subordinate groups--- are mediated by the statuses and signifiers that dominant groups, here white Americans, overdetermine. Yet encounters between such groups are ongoing, and the position they occupy within a shifting and stratified system of belonging are necessarily emergent rather than resolved. The position of whiteness at the core of this system means that subordinated groups' relations with one another are refracted through their relations with whites and whiteness.¹²³

While Ribas focuses on the interactions between Latine migrants and Black Americans, I would argue that this prismatic lens of understanding is applicable to exploring relationships between people of the same identity. There is some knowledge we have about our positionality to each other because of white supremacist structures. Even if it is not our conscious understanding of a moment, it is something that we orient ourselves and each other around. This recognition of the ongoing, emergent relations aligns with the more active response of tactics in the workplace as well. This evolving understanding of how-to labor is crucial to labor scripts that continue to change over time and space. Our relationality to our family and their labor shifts when we enter

¹²² Wenger, *Communities of Practice*.

¹²³ Ribas, *On the Line*. 8

the academy, and we must then build off their laboring in the fields with our laboring in the academy.

Prismatic engagement can also examine how whiteness influences our own understanding of ourselves and responsibility to each other. This experience of seeing ourselves through other people is an insight that Gloria Anzaldua¹²⁴ and W. E. B. Du Bois¹²⁵ have both acknowledged for people of color, but prismatic engagement blends that into a relationship with labor and between different marginalized groups. By focusing more specifically on the interpersonal experiences in a working environment to understand ourselves, we can then examine how the practices of these sites play a profound role in the construction of ourselves. These kinds of relationships built around labor are consciousness raising and move us to interact with each other differently in the everyday as well. I believe it is an integral part in the construction of labor scripts as a response to racial capitalism. We feel this absence of certain populations in the university, and that absence of certain people and lived experiences are what move us to do work that is familiar. It is this absence that moves us to reflect on our families' history of labor and reconnect with those labor scripts. It is in the critical understanding of one's position to whiteness that we build a practice of labor with others in similar positions.

Because of the emphasis on the everyday in understanding labor scripts, affect theory becomes integral in its formation. Similar to prismatic engagement, affect theory allows greater insight into recognizing how these everyday interactions associated with our labor as graduate students and educators operate. Thomas Csordas's "somatic modes of attention" emphasizes the importance of being attuned to those around you. As he explains:

¹²⁴ Anzaldua, *Borderlands / La Frontera*.

¹²⁵ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction; an Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*.

a somatic mode of attention means not only attention to and with one's own body, but includes attention to the bodies of others. Our concern is the cultural elaboration of sensory engagement, preoccupation with one's own body as an isolated phenomenon.¹²⁶

From this standpoint, those we work with are integral to how we experience our labor. Danilyn Rutherford recognizes these affective experiences in the more active “ways that passions pass between bodies.” They are experiences that “breach the boundary long presumed to exist between passion and reason, body and soul.”¹²⁷

I understand affective labor as these strong feelings that occur through relational experiences between people; they are not experienced singularly. Equally important within these understandings is whose bodies are absent while laboring as well. Sara's experience in the fields reflects this inter-relational and inter-generational attention. My university speaking to our parents about their need to detach from us also speaks to this understanding of relationality as affecting our ability to labor in the academy. Those of us doing research recognize that certain bodies are missing and take on this responsibility to include them in some kind of way. We do work that is “familiar” because we seek to remedy this absence in our working environment. These examples demonstrate this responsive attunement to each other's capabilities and change how one does their labor in a moment's notice determined by who is and isn't laboring alongside us. I extend this attention to more formalized academic work and recognize how integral this attention to those around us is for many of us in the academy. This understanding allows engagement with all labors through the examination of who we are working with and our relationship to them in the everyday.

¹²⁶ Csordas, “Somatic Modes of Attention.” 139.

¹²⁷ Danilyn Rutherford, “Affect Theory and the Empirical,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 45, no. 1 (October 21, 2016): 285–300, 287.

We see our cultures and experiences lacking in our education. There is an absence that affects us. It is an affective experience of not being around what is familiar and normal to us anymore. We don't see ourselves or our loved ones reflected in these spaces and feel called to bring them in through what we choose to do our work on. I understand these affective experiences that move us to research close to home as part of the labor scripts our families have practiced, a desire to work with or help each other's inclusion. While we labor under circumstances that are dire and harmful, we at least retain this feeling of needing to justify it through the inclusion of people that matter to us. I understand how this act can be read as a *cruel optimism*¹²⁸, but I also understand it as a radical choice to work against the erasure of our experiences. It feeds the machine, but it also retains our sense of self. It keeps alive experiences and histories that are constantly overlooked. It does not solve the problem, but it does keep us together.

The Weight of Absence

Doing work that is familiar is grounding for us in these ensuing alienating experiences. This does not necessarily mean that it makes the work easier though. There is also the baggage of doing work that is so personal, and the kind of responsibilities we place on ourselves to do the work justice. We engage with the histories of racism and labor abuse, its persistence and transformation, and how it has ultimately led up to our experience. It is often difficult to work through. It does not only exist in the books we read, but we also see it in the bodies of our grandparents, in the kinds of work readily available to people who look like us, and in the access to the experiences we are having in the institution. It can be a struggle to disengage and have a

¹²⁸ A reference to Kathleen Stewart's work discussed in the previous chapter.

healthy distance from the work we do when it is something that is felt in our everyday lives.

Jace, a professor in urban studies, reminds us of the toll this can take:

...You're almost like, "I wish I was you sometimes because I study something really tough. I study about housing precarity in a state that has tremendous housing precarity... I study agricultural workers; I come from a family of this background." So, then you see a friend and they're like, "oh my gosh tell me about your research." You're like "Oh my god please I just want to watch TV." You'll go somewhere and someone's like "[Jace] does ethnic studies and planning." They're like "Do you want to talk about racism and housing?" I'm like "I kind of just want a good beer, to be honest."

We are doing the work because we know it is important to discuss these topics, but it is not easy.

Jace captures these moments with colleagues that I feel as well. How we know our work is important, but how it is also difficult to engage with it in these kinds of casual ways that our other colleagues might be able to engage with their work. We see it as important work, not because we have read about it, but because we have experienced it first-hand. Our motivation and drive are not produced by the university, but by our community. While this is a powerful force, it does put a pressure on us in ways that are also more deeply felt. Jace adds: "So like you carry it with you all the time, kind of like social workers. And I don't think academics have learned to turn it off.... We come with this added... weight. Because we're thinking about it all the time."

All academics feel the weight of their work, and those of us doing work on our own marginalized populations can feel it even more. To have to research and sit with all the ways a group of people are hurting and the limited things we can currently do can be frustrating and demoralizing. The connection to social work feels apt in understanding what it is we can do given our positionality and access to services and aid. We are often left with a feeling that we should be doing even more. An aspect of ensuing alienation we experience orients us in this very immediate way to our labor. We see our positionality to the academy differently, refracted

through these prismatic engagements with the people here, but also more importantly the people not here. We understand the bigger picture of our work, but there is also an urgency to our interests that can often feel overwhelming. To combat these feelings, we rely on the labor scripts that emphasize the importance of moving together, and the ways we learn from and with our communities. The decision to do work that is familiar builds from this history of collective labor and understands how our work even in the academy is never singularly our own.

I lived in graduate housing when I first arrived at my doctoral program. It was a very quiet and looming environment with massive dorms that would block the sun and create these shaded environments between them. I remember how it would feel during the peaks of summer walking into the in-between spaces of the buildings and immediately feeling the temperature drop around me. I would not see many people walking around, and if I did, they were always looking down at their phones on their way to campus. There was a bar on the ground floor of the 8-level building, though I would never call it lively. I would often go down there to read and occasionally see a group of four discussing some lab experiment. I was honestly shocked by how little I ran into people at this place. I have learned that being granted graduate housing can be very competitive and yet you wouldn't think that many people lived there day-to-day. I assume, most of the time, everyone is away working on campus and immediately returns to their room. The building I lived in had 1105 units, with 853 of those being 275-square-foot studios.¹²⁹ The studios are cramped and dark with cement walls that were cold to the touch, and they have a single window that whoever designed them made sure would not to open all the way. The studio was isolating, lonely, and made me consistently question why I was even here. Was this what It

¹²⁹ "Mesa Nueva," accessed May 8, 2026, <https://hdhgradfamilyhousing.ucsd.edu/communities/mesa-nueva.html>.

was supposed to feel like being a graduate student? I live where I work, and yet, I don't even see my co-workers often.

The most sign of life I ever saw, aside from the crowds that would form outside from the regularly triggered fire alarms, were the janitorial services. All the laborers that I saw cleaning in the hallways were Latine women. I would pass then on my way out or in, always making sure to smile and say "hola," as some desperate way of signaling to them and myself that I wasn't just another graduate student. They would always be on a phone call when working, and I would hold my laughter as I heard them speaking in Spanish about the latest *chisme* going on in their circles. There was part of me that was jealous. Like they had found a way to stay in touch and maintain some connection while I struggled to feel grounded in a much more privileged position. I would feel so embarrassed walking past them because of these feelings I had of just wanting to talk to them about anything. Just to hear something that felt more *familiar* to me in this place. Coming back after a long day on campus and seeing two cleaning ladies laughing with each other near the entrance to the building would bring me so much joy for some strange reason. It felt like they had figured it out, like they tapped into some kind of way of working that I hadn't figured out yet. I was so happy to see them happy; I wondered if and how that absence was felt for them. My interview subjects and I are deeply attentive to who and who isn't around us, who we do and do not labor alongside.

When asked about her experiences coming into the academy, Sandra begins by speaking about her background: "I was born and raised in South Texas, and Spanish was my first language... like 97% of the people where I'm from are Latino, Latina." She felt that her experiences, and ways of looking and speaking had been so normalized to her than when she entered college, she was shocked that others find some of her characteristics strange:

Like I never knew I had an accent until I went to [the university], which is like six hours north of where I grew up. And I met people from different places, different cultures and... they were like “Oh your accent,” and I was like “your accent? What do you mean I have an accent? Everybody talks like me.” I realized, “oh, I do have an accent and I’m this... and that...”

When we discuss exposure to difference in the academy, it is this dominant, white, English-speaking culture that might be very new for many of us. Sandra had never questioned how she talked or looked before this point. This new space had changed the perception she had of the world and how people were expected to interact. Mark had a similar experience starting his undergraduate studies: “I thought my vocabulary was good until I heard other people speak, right? Full monolingual English speakers, right? And people who didn’t code switch, like that boggled my mind.” Both Sandra and Mark were shocked by the completely different experiences even just to the English language at the university. To be met immediately with this unfamiliarity sets up a radically different relationship to this new laboring environment and how we are expected to learn in it. This is a place of learning in English, and a specific way of speaking English. Accents work against inclusion and code-switching becomes normalized.

This culture shock is an eye-opening experience for many of us coming into the university, and it sets up a relationship of outsider from the beginning. No matter how long we stay in it, there is always that initial introduction that colors how we think of ourselves in this space. Somatic modes of attention and prismatic relationships recognize how affecting this would be to our experiences here. Not just how we feel an absence, but how we must learn to work in a different way because of that absence. This is where labor scripts come in. We come up with tactics to maneuver through this space that relies on the ways of learning our families and communities have used prior. This is not to claim that the move to the university isn’t a

shock for everyone who enters it, but there are some whose family have already labored here and that were raised with a different labor script. Jace speaks about his experiences during his PhD:

I didn't have parents who had PhDs. And so, a lot of my colleagues did, my peers, their parents could help them with all sorts of stuff, and read drafts, and things. I was like, oh my gosh, like I am at a deep deficit with trying to stay like afloat.

We are then not only feeling othered by the language and new population, but by our families' historical relationship to the academy. For many others, the kind of people they find themselves with and the kind of ways they are expected to work feels very normal. They might have been raised in a household with a similar laboring environment. Higher education is a solitary experience, it also carries a history of labor, and a particular understanding of what kinds of people and experiences are valued here. It is one that is seemingly so at odds what we recognize or look for in our laboring environment. We don't have that same labor script that others do coming into this.

Within this conversation about class and our families' history with the academy, there is a more specific conversation to be had about race. Jace joined a support group for men of color in graduate school where he learned that 60% don't make it through the program. "And so, there's these huge gaps. You know, just like for native men, it's like it was hard to attract them to PhDs. Latinx and Black men, they were like yeah, you're all quitting." Jace's university had this specific space for men of color to meet and discuss how they were feeling about their program and share their experiences of losing hope in seeing it to the end. It is seemingly common knowledge then that it is a struggle for us to see this thing through. We are welcomed as subjects, but not as students. The university brings underrepresented minorities into these institutions and but then struggles to maintain support for their growth or endeavors. It is on us to find that community and remedy that absence. We should be grateful for these opportunities, but they also

bring loss and invite harm. They are separating us from the people we feel closest and most supported by. How are we expected to create systems of support for people like us when we might not have ever experienced support in this space to begin with? It is this conundrum that orients us to look back to the fields and how our family labored in even more precarious environments with even less institutional support. This place is not conducive to learning for people like us, and so we look to the places that have been conducive to our learning. The ones that had people who spoke our language, who looked like us. We move with that “unskilled” environment our communities labored in to maneuver these new structures of laboring.

The Labor Scripts of Skill Acquisition

This recognition of those absent moves us to do a particular kind of work in the academy. We attempt to follow a labor script that emerges in response to racial capitalism and relies on one’s community and personal relations to survive. In the university, we seek out mentorship and help from those who have a similar background to us. We want to learn from each other and learn the ways to maneuver this foreign environment from people who have struggled in similar ways to ourselves. My grandmother tells me stories about the ways they she would show my great aunts and uncles where to work when they first arrived to this country, and how to work once they made it into the fields. Carpooling together in the morning and working in units as they picked rows and rows of fruit. People do not just show up in the fields, there are lineages of knowledge that connect across the border. Like my grandmother, learning how to do the labor can happen even before working in the fields.

Immigrant families have had to learn how to navigate and labor under abusive circumstances. Jennifer Najera’s work on collective memory speaks to how this experience

places a greater emphasis on aiding each other as opposed to seeking aid from outside of the community. As Najera states, “Mexican and Chicano/a families provided not only financial support, but also trust, emotional succor, and cultural refuge in a hostile society that included an exploitative agricultural industry.”¹³⁰ The importance of community and collective struggle cannot be overstated for farmworkers. In *Skills of the Unskilled: Work and Mobility among Mexican Migrants*, Jacqueline Haan, Ruben Hernandez-Leon, and Jean-Luc Demonsant discuss how so called “unskilled” laborers come to the job with a variety of skills that have been acquired through a history of kinship networks and lived experiences:

...the implications of skilling processes extend beyond individual labor market experiences because the acquisition and transfer of skill is also a process embedded in social relations, cultural practices, and distinctive labor markets in Mexico and the United States. The linkage between individual labor market experiences and social chance in local communities is especially characteristic of entrepreneurs in the return safe of migratory circuit.¹³¹

While it is back breaking and exploitative labor, it is also important to make space for the deep knowledge and work experience that farmworkers bring with them. Thus, against the tendency to see migrants as highly exploited and passive unskilled labor, farmworkers are far more agentic and cognizant of their position in the labor market. This reflective understanding of their positionality in the labor market, similar to prismatic engagement, then moves them to seek skill acquisition in informal ways from those within their community. Their collective struggle becomes a rich resource. There is a history of laboring that they can rely on, a labor script that has existed in response to oppressive conditions that they can tap into when it comes to learning how to labor.

¹³⁰ Jennifer R. Najera, “Remembering Migrant Life: Family Collective Memory and Critical Consciousness in the Midcentury Migrant Stream,” *Oral History Review* 45, no. 2 (2018): 211–31.

¹³¹ Hagan et al., *Skills of the Unskilled*, 10.

This reliance on each other works against the dominant narratives of skill acquisition as well. Bonnie Urciuoli has written about how the language around skill acquisition for the purposes of work has become a way of selling an ideology of the self to individuals, a way of capitalism to market and profit off creating an ideal worker through hefty fees for skill workshops.¹³² The myth of the skilled individual versus the unskilled individual relies on skill to be something separated entirely from a social context. Mexican migrants acquire their skills through informal means that rely on the everyday social contacts that they are familiar with rather than sources external to their communities. The “unskilled” laborer comes to be unskilled solely because the skill acquisition is not made through the formal channels. I argue that these informal channels of skill acquisition carry an even greater weight on how one understands their value, but it is tied to being skilled in the eyes of one’s peers. Somatic modes of attention are emblematic of this sentiment. There are deep cultural practices and moments of understanding oneself through how you relate to the people around you doing the same work.

This reliance and responsibility to each other is a labor script that we practice over and over again. It is a response to the racist industries that attempt to dehumanize and transform us into machines. There is something human and immediate being practiced in the everyday life of these systems of oppression. While this chapter is not reliant on the language of skill acquisition, this relationship to learning from one’s community is important in how the afterlives of farmwork manifests in the academy. How we choose to do our labor in the academy is learned informally and builds off of these scripts that have been practiced prior to our laboring. In this move to a more “intellectual” and “distinguished” kind of labor, the children of farmworkers in the academy rely on informal means of skill acquisition rooted in community and learning from

¹³² Bonnie Urciuoli, “Skills and Selves in the New Workplace,” *American Ethnologist* 35, no. 2 (2008): 211–28.

others that we feel a connection with through our shared experiences. While the formalized labor of academic work is supposed to have some sort of learning component, it is the somatic modes of attention that drive us to professionalize.

Familiar Modes of Skilling in the Academy

Familiarity is not only found in our areas of study, but also in who we choose to work with and learn from. Labor scripts are formed around these patterns of labor that rely on community. Farmworkers have been historically racialized and dependent on people with a precarious background. All of these factors come to create a laboring community that is not only racialized in a specific way, but also labors in a specific way and around specific people. As made clear through prismatic engagement and somatic modes of attention, who you labor with is just as important as what your labor is. When we labor in a community with shared struggle, specific modes of learning emerge that challenge the dominant narratives around skill acquisition. This move from the fields to the academy is dramatic not just because of the change in who we are around, but also because of a change in the way that we are expected to learn because of that. All the ways of understanding our labor shifts, we must learn how to work around different people and cultures. This can be exciting. This exposure to different ways of life is what draws many to the academy. But for those of us who have historically relied on community to understand how to navigate an unfamiliar space, it can bring negative affects.

All of my participants who chose to continue in the academy speak about the ways that they have wanted to either be the mentor that was unavailable to them or to be like the ones they had. This was also true for me. I would often use that as a motivator to justify graduate school. I have had some very supportive advisors who want to see me succeed but I have also felt

incredibly misunderstood and isolated. I wanted to help someone in ways that I wasn't helped, to be able to reflect a kind of experience or history that was often missing from many departments. I wanted to be that bridge from the fields to the academy, and not just another person guarding the door. There is this universal understanding that there are not many people in the academy who have experiences like ours, and that has made it really difficult at different points in our careers. It has led to feelings of incredible self-doubt, questioning why we were even brought into this situation if we were not going to be supported through it. We understand our value to be a resource to those who come next, to make it easier for the next person so that they don't have to fight as hard. We feel that there isn't a script for us to follow here, and we want to help build one. A labor script that is more familiar, one that acknowledges a history of community support that we have seen growing up. We acknowledge the ways that there is no reliable support in the institution, yet we also want to stay here and make it easier for people because we believe that this is a space where we should be.

Sandra speaks about an important moment of being represented in this new environment that she was dealing with:

I started working with this professor... and she spoke Spanish, like every other word. So, I gravitated to her, She's like my academic mom. I went to her and I was like 'I want to work with you; I want to be you when I grow up.' And so, I just remember the way she made me feel, which is a beautiful thing, being away from home, by myself at 18 never like having those experiences and so I just love what she represented for me.

The use of the term "academic mom," made me laugh in the moment because it's something that I've also used endearingly to express a sense of familiarity and support from faculty. It also connects back to this relationship to labor that is not separate from family, but instead reliant on it. I must have felt it in different ways though, since I do remember wanting to find somebody who feels reflective of my experiences and that I can communicate with in a way that feels

familiar. I have had experiences where I have left meetings with potential advisors completely defeated and feeling stupid. Like any ideas I was having or how I was understanding material were too underdeveloped and a waste of their time. These meetings would feel so cold and detached, and for those of doing this work that is so familiar, this rejection comes to feel incredibly personal. As if it not just us as individuals who don't belong here, neither do the experiences of our family and community. When we are already feeling so othered by everything around us, and then the people who are supposed to help fail to make space for that, we internalize it. That's why meeting someone who understand our work can feel overwhelmingly affective, and we're quick to make that connection in a familial way because those are the people that we have felt most supported by in the past. It is a gesture towards a labor script, a way of understanding the necessity of our community in our labor. To find an advisor that feels familiar and like family is a tactic.

This story Sandra shares encompasses many of the concerns of this project. My research centers the ways that we as the children of farmworkers become so disconnected in this transition into the university. We don't lose our mothers or family members entirely, but we do lose this semblance of having them as that everyday support system in our lives. In losing that, we lose an understanding of ourselves and how we should orient ourselves to the world around us. We are suddenly in a space devoid of familiarity, a place that was not made with our experiences in mind. Farmwork requires this constant communication and support from one's community not just in the everyday work in the fields but also in the transition between job sites. It requires teaching and the explanation of systems to incoming family members and workers. It feels natural to seek this academic family in the university because we are more accustomed to learning and being taught by those that are closest to us. Mentorship is a prevalent and

institutionalized part of the academy, but for us who feel as though we are carrying the weight of generations, it becomes so much more personal.

Sandra acknowledges again here the role of language being something key to making her feel like she could participate. She speaks about this same professor:

Somehow for me, Spanish was not to be brought into the classroom. I don't know where I... I guess because they teach us English in school. So, hearing Spanish in the classroom... just felt safe. Those were like my safe spaces and so I just gravitated towards them. And that's not to say that my other professors that didn't speak Spanish were not amazing, they were. It was just something that I cannot describe what they meant to me and to my education. And so going back to your question about me in the classroom, I want to be them for my students.

She brings up what safety feels and sounds like. Hearing Spanish in the classroom came to carry a distinct affect. The classroom had become a particular kind of space because of the dominance of English language. Gloria Anzaldúa captures beautifully the power and violence that language carries in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Anzaldúa's work reminds us how the classroom in particular is a space of reinforcing hegemonic power. When we engage with faculty and educators that push back against that, it opens a space of understanding that this space does not have to be a particular way.¹³³ Hearing and speaking English created a different kind of environment and orientation to it, one that felt less safe for Sandra. In the university, where she wasn't able to return to her family or this safe space as easily, hearing Spanish in the classroom felt like an even bigger deal. These two things that have been kept separate her whole life are now able to come together. Meaning, she would also now be able to meld these two halves of herself instead of trying to keep the personal and the academic separate. But it was tethered to these kinds of mentors that she would continuously try to work with. It wasn't a feeling of safety that was always present in every classroom. This drive to be that mentor for someone else has been

¹³³ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera*.

common because of this continuous struggle for us to find people that we feel understand our experience and acknowledge our different orientations to the academy. Here we see how this labor script of learning from each other on how to navigate and succeed in an oppressive environment comes to be re-made and reiterated in the university. We have this drive to help others because we know how hard it still is for a lot of people to make sense of this space.

This fulfilling support system is rare to find. Carla was a graduate student in a history department, and she shares the serendipity of her experiences:

I was lucky that when I started...the US history department had three US historians that focused on Mexican American History. Completely rare, I think. So, there were three Chicana historians in our department, and I applied hoping to work with [a specific professor] and he was instrumental in kind of convincing me to head to UCSD instead of the other program that I was considering.

Even Carla who had multiple people of a similar background on her committee is aware of how rare it is to be able to do that. Often times faculty of color are already so overworked because many students of color gravitate towards them and they can't advise all of them.¹³⁴ Jace speaks about his own experiences with mentorship:

I remember talking to my master's advisor, who ended up being my PhD advisor, about a few ideas and he kept saying 'I think this migration and planning Latino community thing is valuable and I think you should explore that. Our department doesn't necessarily always have people who do that, so you're gonna have to spend a lot of time finding those people.

While Jace's advisor was supportive of his work, it still required looking elsewhere for the kind of academic support that would be most valuable. Unlike Carla, he had to search outside of his department like many of us typically do. There usually isn't a Chicano person in a department, and so we tend to have to look to ethnic studies or Chicano studies to find people who can understand our work. We see the ways that we become separated a lot of the times or forced into

¹³⁴ Joshua Dolezal, "Why Faculty of Color Are Leaving Academe: Too Many Find Themselves Disenfranchised, Exhausted, and Isolated." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 69, no. 3 (2022).

these ethnic studies/chicano studies departments although our interests are varied. It is a way that the institution is able to make space but a specific kind of space that is often separated. All of the people interested in race tend to be pushed into these ethnic studies departments even if their work is on something discipline or field specific.

Jace speaks about how his struggles as a PhD student led him to want to make it easier for others, so that others would feel they had somebody they could reach out to if they every needed support.

I didn't expect in the PhD to go through all the things that everyone says people go through. So, they're like the loneliness... and the stress like 'oh my god am I going to make it in time before the funding runs out?' Funding gaps? How am I going to pay for a plane ticket? So, in seeing all that, I realized how much was going on... Maybe I didn't always feel like it was talked about publicly... I feel like five years later it's a little bit more open.

This point is interesting to think about considering the other experiences that Jace has shared about his feelings of isolation and doubt in the program, particularly the experiences the group for men of color were concerned with related to dropping out. Others were feeling these anxieties around finances and capabilities, but it wasn't shared publicly or to the point where faculty close to them would make an attempt to help. This is the opposite of the labor in the fields where there is attention placed on each other and how aiding each other is crucial to the work. In the academy, it is a hinderance.

These conversations around mentorship build off these concerns of populations and the people we seek to be around. We might come from communities that rely on each other more. Communities that understand work as a more communal act. My mother has spoken about how much she loved going to work with her parents because it meant getting to be around everybody even though she herself wasn't making money yet. She was able to connect with other people who also kept an eye on her and in this way, mentorship expands from being just from one's

family to being from a whole community that one is raised around. These laboring sites become refracted through the people we labor with. The labor in the academy is different for each of us depending on who we are laboring with and their own relationship to this site. We are in constant acknowledgment of who is and isn't here. It's this somatic mode of attention that colors our own value of the labor and our experiences of it.

I don't mean to end this section with glamourizing the kind of labor that happens in the fields, but I do want to emphasize the stark differences that occur in regard to mentorship and learning across these different spaces. Mentorship in the university is so often scattered and hard to reach. It's so much emailing and scheduling and pushing things off because we become overworked. Helping each other becomes the labor we have the least time for. Labor becomes offloaded to workshops put on by different departments entirely or put on by the university itself. We come in knowing nobody and are expected to carve out time to build relationships and find the people who are excited about our work. It is a long, tiring process. It is an additional labor on top of our responsibilities as students and educators on both ends. Finding your people should be an exciting process but we so often default to whoever is most convenient to get the work done. When I think about farmwork, it is impossible to not think about the community and familial aspects to it, and how family would teach other family how to do the work. Where the work was and would help them to get to the workplace. Its whole system requires this mentorship aspects from the community, and they do it because they care about each other. There is a labor script constructed and reiterated daily that seems to lack in the academy where everybody labors differently and our life experiences are so varied.

Conclusion

When asked about how her work in the fields influenced her teaching practice, Sara responded:

That sense of community. That's another big piece as farmworkers... I think we look out for each other... There's not sometimes that big unity, but at the end of the day, if there's an injustice for one, we all try to stand up for others... and so I think I also bring that. That is part of my experience with working.

She is making that connection between the practice of labor in the fields and how she tries to work in the academy. Although these are incredibly different laboring sites with vastly different histories, there is an attempt to connect them through a practice of labor that is invested in community. My other subjects may not have made that connection as directly, but it is clear that the investment in those we labor with continues to be foundational to our labor practices in the university.

This investment in community is a response to the oppressive racial scripts that have been wielded to dehumanize and subjugate people into serving solely as a laboring body. But our labor does not designate how we live our lives necessarily, and farmworkers have historically complicated and pushed back against narratives that attempt to minimize their humanity and agency throughout history. I identify labor script, as a mode of laboring that responds to this oppressive environment, politically and socially, and works against their subjugation as non-actors. It builds off of prismatic engagements and somatic modes of attention to speak directly to an intrafamily experience across generations. These labor scripts are comprised of a continuous investment in the familial and the communal, in the informal ways that we educate and learn from each other that undermines the more “formalized” or “skilled” laboring sites. The emphasis on our communities as integral parts of our laboring practice work against the neoliberal state

that sees each of us as disposable. How we labor is continuously at odds with the imagined ideal laborer.

These labor scripts, like racial scripts, continue to be reiterated on and expand with each generation. We carry them into the academy and attempt to rehearse them here. We seek that same kind of community investment in our research topics and the people we choose to work with. It is not to shelter ourselves or limit our understanding, but a move towards a more communal and somatic way of working in an industry that is increasingly harmful in its practice. As "first-gen" scholars, people with working-class backgrounds, people of color with a sordid history to the university, we recognize the university for what it is. We know it is not the fields, but we also know that it is not the kind of space that it sells itself to be. Many people suffer here, are left behind, and are taken advantage of by its arbitrary systems through the justification of "good scholarship." At the end of the day, we understand that we are producers and managers, and that it is only through these labor scripts that we are able to make it through and retain some semblance of ourselves. We seek work that is familiar not just because we know it is important to discuss intellectually, but because it also works against the systems of capitalism that try to turn us into non-human machines for profit.

It is easy to make the argument that at the end of the day all labor under capitalism only reinforces it and that we are inevitably integrated into the machine. I understand that perspective but do not believe that it means we can disregard the everyday ways we struggle against it both vocally and in our laboring practices. I offer a more human understanding of laboring under our given conditions. I want to make space for the complicated and *ugly* feelings we have. We see our families laboring, knowing whole heartedly that it is the result of imperialism and ongoing struggles surrounding immigration, race, and labor, and yet we still have a reverence and

yearning for it. The labor is not just the labor, but the people. Here we are in the university that emerges from that same history, and we work and admire each other because we also on some level know that it is the people here and the non-sanctioned actions, that motivate us.

Chapter 3:
**The Unskilled and the Unprofessional: Where do we turn to after DEI in the
Neoliberal Academy?**

I am six years into my PhD program at the time of writing this chapter with the hope of graduating in the Spring. What comes after has been at the forefront of my mind. The dream of being a tenure track faculty that I had as an undergrad has slowly faded. Firstly, by having more of an understanding of what that role actually entails, and secondly by the dwindling opportunities in academia.¹³⁵ I am incredibly grateful for all of the experiences I have had in the university and the opportunities to grow and reflect on myself and matters of deep personal concern that are at the center of this dissertation. Yet, I am increasingly made aware of the state of the university and the increased labor being placed on the academic worker with no real guarantee of financial security or academic freedom. I am now looking away from this ivory tower, with a sense of relief. It has raised a new question though: what was this all for? I feel the need to justify this endeavor as something bigger than myself for whatever reason. My family has labored in the fields so that I wouldn't have to, and so for who and what did I labor in the academy for?

This chapter focuses on the role of the institution and its policies in my experiences and the experiences of other kinds of farmworkers. My current predicament about what this was for, is deeply invested in the history of the university and its relation to what Cedrick Robinson

¹³⁵ Just a few articles I've collected over the years addressing this issue: Kelly Ritter, "Working Conditions for College Professors: The Impossible Choice between Mobility and Community.," *Slate*, October 30, 2023, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2023/10/faculty-mobility-academic-job-market.html>. Alcino Donadel, "'Overworked, Undercompensated, Devalued': Contingent Faculty Face Tight Salaries and Job Insecurity, Report," *University Business*, November 9, 2023, <https://universitybusiness.com/overworked-undercompensated-devalued-contingent-faculty-face-tight-salaries-and-job-insecurity-report/>. Lexi Lonas Cochran, "Universities Slow Hiring, Faculty Navigate Rocky Future amid Trump Attacks on Higher Education," Text, *The Hill*, March 14, 2026, <https://thehill.com/homenews/education/5780973-trump-immigration-dei-universities-college-professors/>. Damien Reed, "'We Just Don't Know:' AI Limbo in Academia and the Job Market," News, *Technician*, n.d., accessed May 8, 2026, <https://technicianonline.com/156104/news/we-just-dont-know-ai-limbo-in-academia-and-the-job-market/>.

identifies as racial capital.¹³⁶ This dissertation started with an internal examination of the ways that the kin of farmworkers feel about their labor in the academy. I examined the intra-family tension that emerges from these ensuing experiences of alienation. I then followed up on that by discussing how this internal world moves us in our work within the academy. I offered an alternative understanding to how practices of labor informed by previous generations can still be relied on even unconsciously. This chapter zooms out more to examine the systems of racialized labor in which we have found ourselves entangled. Up until this point, I have been focusing on how we navigate the university and come to make sense of it through our family and the experiences they have had in the field. I will now shift to how the university has engaged and navigated our admission. Our families have gazed at the ivory tower, we now look back to them in the fields for inspiration, but the ivory tower looks down on both of us.

By relying on the field of Critical University Studies, Critical Race Studies, anecdotal experiences from my interview subjects and myself, this chapter examines the current social and political moment in academia and the role it has played in the lives of under-represented minorities who have labored in it. It is in the neoliberal era of the university where we see a more vocal support for initiatives such as DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) and HSIs (Hispanic Serving Institutions). It is through these kinds of diversity initiatives that we see how the university has imagined prospective underrepresented students and their role here. I connect these initiatives to the work of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney on what they term the “under commons” to suggest a re-examination of the professional/unprofessional dichotomy during the dismantling of DEI programs.¹³⁷ Programs they might have rightly identified as “A recruiting

¹³⁶ Robinson and Kelley, *Black Marxism*.

¹³⁷ Moten and Harney, “The University and the Undercommons.”

booth at a carnival... to turn the insurgents into state agents.”¹³⁸ I connect their unprofessional/professional dichotomy to the skilled/unskilled language used to justify the devaluing of labor done by migrant workers. I argue that the working culture of the university can be thought of as an inverse to that of farmworking. Whereas farmworkers have crafted a lifestyle and culture to maneuver their abusive laboring industry, the university itself sells a kind of lifestyle to obscure its more insidious laboring practices. As graduate students, we are invited to be part of a community of scholarship and are meant to feel grateful to be included in ongoing discourses. And yet, our position and future employment is incredibly precarious. There is little investment in the individual and we are constantly put in competition with each other for scarce resources. The unskilled and the unprofessional in dialect point to how no matter the scale, institutions find ways to punish and limit what is available and who gets to have mobility. I may not have made it as far out of the fields as I had imagined.

This intent behind this chapter is not to suggest policy change or concur if there is a way of solving the structural issues of academia through inclusion initiatives. What I want to do is highlight how these initiatives have affected us, and specifically the lived experiences of first-generation graduate students. What roles have DEI initiatives and HSI designations played in our understanding of what the university can provide? How has the devaluing of academic labor coincided with DEI initiatives and how does that speak to a reverberation of the forms of racial capitalism our families have maneuvered? In thinking through this intergenerational lens, what comes next for us and what are we working towards for those that come after? These discussions will ground the previous chapter more clearly, demonstrating the stakes and current political moment we find ourselves in. I suggest examining the loss of DEI not as an attack on racial

¹³⁸ Moten and Harney, “The University and the Undercommons.” 111.

equity entirely but as another example of a constantly reactionary and volatile working environment that has become increasingly hostile to its laborer, in a society that has become increasingly hostile to the individual. Additionally, I suggest this as a somber moment of reflection. I speak about those that have come before us, have fought for us to be here (both in the fields and in the academy), and what that means for us now in it. To simply think that we should be grateful only does a disservice to the long-term goals of those who came before us and continues to obscure how the university has responded to our struggle for validation. The goal is not to undermine the “progress” made, but to reflect on what was the purported intention behind these initiatives and if they have been met. Have we settled for less in ways that have undermined the original intention behind the work of scholars and activists?

The “Elephant In The Room”

I recently returned from the Southern Regional Education Board’s Institute on teaching and Mentoring. On paper, it sounded like a great opportunity for my research. It is a yearly conference that offers professionalization workshops and a place for networking as a graduate student or academic worker. It promoted itself to be primarily concerned with issues of race and aiding underrepresented communities in higher education as well, identifying itself as the “nation’s largest gathering of racial and ethnic minority Ph.D. scholars seeking faculty careers in the academy.”¹³⁹ Although I wasn’t sure about the “professionalizing” angle of the institute, I was curious how a space like this understood the university and our place in it as populations who have been deliberately left out. There was a clear recognition that we, as minorities, have a specific experiences of and relationship to the university that deserves recognition.

¹³⁹ A link to download the Southern Regional Education Board 2025 Final Institute Agenda can be found here: <https://www.sreb.org/agenda>

I relied heavily on other Ph.D. students to learn more about what the institute has offered on a personal level. The first evening's mixer took place in a small room on the second floor of the hotel lobby. There was an ice sculpture, various finger foods and what seemed like too many tables for the space. Service workers hovered around cleaning plates and pouring drinks with a noticeable blank expression. For some reason, in this space, I was more aware of their presence. Soon after I arrived, various speakers got on stage to speak about how special this institute is and how we should really be taking advantage of this opportunity to make lifelong connections. They made a point to reiterate the importance of this institute and made knowing gestures to the current social and political landscape in the US. We were then given time to mingle, and almost immediately some people began to leave. I stuck around for a while and quickly learned how different the attitude of students was in contrast to the speakers. Many students were there as a requirement for a scholarship they received. Others, like me, were not sure why they were there other than they had received an invite with free accommodations from a department at their school. Unlike me, all the students I spoke to all happened to be STEM majors, and their work wasn't directly tied to issues regarding race necessarily. I spent my first night puzzled and genuinely confused as to what I was supposed to be doing there. I was told by the event organizers that this was a place for me, and yet it felt like we were all there out of obligation rather than out of genuine interest in the kinds of solidarity building that the speakers seemed to promising was happening here.

The following day was the keynote, a panel discussion between scholars and policy makers titled "*The Elephant in the Room*." I had assumed that the "elephant" referred to people of color in higher education. The ways that we often feel like the person that sticks out or that we always see the obvious inequalities and power dynamics in the classroom. I thought the elephant

in the room could also be a reference to the disconnect between the predominantly Black and Brown service workers at the event and this institute that is relishing in uplifting racial experiences in the academy. Is the elephant in the room the irony that we are here as intellectuals of color discussing issues of exclusivity, yet we are being waited on by the people we have more in common with?

All of my initial ideas were wrong. It was a panel about the attacks on DEI and what we should be doing now. One panelist rightly observed that the elephant had always been in the room, and how many of these initiatives were like a house made from straw, just waiting to catch on fire. But the majority of the panel's time was spent discussing how it is our job and duty to fight through this, to not lose faith in the academy and that we will prevail through hard work and commitment. I wrote my thoughts down immediately after the panel in frustration:

“The panel called “The Elephant in the Room” was about the political climate, but I thought it should have been about the irony of us being weighted on by Black service workers. Does something like this event and what it stands for mean anything to them? Is this just patting ourselves on the back for “making it out?” Bussing tables and pouring drinks while we mourn the loss of DEI and define what “brilliance” means to us. Both these things can exist at the same time, but should they? Shouldn't our focus be (and should have always been) the dismantling of these systems of separation? Why do we not cheer for the janitor as loud as we cheer for the Black legacy student getting tenured?”

In re-reading this, I still feel those same frustrations I had then. I felt let down. I imagined that an event that was invested in helping spotlighting the struggles of URM in the academy would be more critical of this system as opposed to just the “attacks” on the system. Instead it felt so self-congratulatory for those of us who have succeeded, constantly re-iterating that “you can do it too if you just stick to it!” I spent the next day going to panels and hearing about how people made it out and were able achieve their dreams. I do not mean to discredit their achievement, but I did not need to travel across the country to eat something that I am fed every single day.

The professionalizing institute did not do much to instill my faith in the academy. Instead, it relied on a baseline understanding that being here is good and we should never give up on it regardless of how it treats us. Even my interactions with other graduate students seems to imply that there was this generational gap in that investment. We were there because we had to be, not because we necessarily wanted to. I can't help but think of this as emblematic of the shifting attitude and landscape of the university over the years.

The Neoliberal University

I offer this excerpt not to judge those who are concerned with the current presidential administration's undoing of DEI initiatives but to invite a more critical understanding of the stakes of the situation in academia as a whole. I do not subscribe to the understanding that the erasure of DEI initiatives inevitably equates to the erasure of all URM's in the academy. That sentiment admits defeat and heralds these initiatives as the sole reason for our inclusion, erasing a long history of scholarship and activism on the parts of BIPOC that came before it. That sentiment may also not be rooted in reality, based on a recent study finding an increase in Black, Latine, and Native Americans in states with anti-DEI legislation.¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, if an institution sees this time as an opportunity to enact suppression more bluntly, then they were never on our side to begin with. I would like to frame these initiatives in a longer history of the neo-liberalization of the university to identify how these pushes to diversify were happening with the general expansion of a workforce for the academy.

¹⁴⁰ Jessica L. Schachle-Gordon et al., "Fighting Back? The Contradictory Effects of Anti-DEI Laws on DEI Centers and Student-of-Color Groups at U.S. Colleges and Universities," *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 11 (August 2025): 23780231251325642, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231251325642>.

The developing field of Critical University Studies (CUS) highlights how the university has increasingly shifted to a corporate business model. Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades use the term “academic capitalism” to capture this continuous shift towards neoliberalism that began in the 1970s.¹⁴¹ Neoliberalism generally refers to the push for a free market with less government regulation or oversight. This leads to an increased amount of privatization across various sectors of society, particular public goods like education. This shapes new subjectivities under capitalism. In this study, I do not try to expand or challenge any notion of neoliberalization but merely rely on the terminology used by CUS scholars to capture a current moment in the academy. Adrianna Kezar identifies how this neoliberalization within the backdrop of the emergent gig economy has only intensified the already strained academic system¹⁴² and Zachary Brown captures its effects succinctly:

“Under neoliberal regimes of higher education the prioritization of individual and institutional competition for money and resources, the destabilization of education as a public good through privatization means, the proliferation and exploitation of graduate and contingent labor, the commodification of knowledge, and the general reproduction of racial and class inequalities all serve as prime examples of its lingering consequences.”¹⁴³

When we speak of the university in the modern day, it is with this understanding of it as a mechanism for capital first and foremost. It relies increasingly on a business model of decision making that reinforces scarcity and competition.

Marc Bousquet and Cary Nelson use the application of “Job Market Theory” in academia to identify the managerial thought process that is spread to faculty and graduate students and comes to dominate our understanding of academic labor in this ongoing neoliberal period. They state:

¹⁴¹ Slaughter and Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy*.

¹⁴² Kezar et al., *The Gig Academy*.

¹⁴³ Zachary Brown, “Black Feminism and the Failures of the Contemporary ‘Neoliberal’ University Critique,” *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 47, no. 1 (2023): 173.

“Job-market theory separates the workplace issues of the graduate employee from the workplace issues of the faculty and sweepingly defines the workplaces relation of faculty to students in paternal, administrative, and managerial terms. Whatever actions faculty might take to secure their own working conditions, job-market theory defines their responsibility toward graduate students and former graduate students not as a relationship of solidarity with coworkers but, instead, as a managerial responsibility... the tenured saw their responsibility to graduate employees through the lens of participating in the administration of the “market.”¹⁴⁴

Indeed, I never imagined how much of my academic career would be about the concerns over my future employment and not about my education in the moment. This overt concern with the job market feeds into the hyper-competitive attitudes for positions that are regularly being terminated. When these jobs do not materialize, the onus is on us for not doing enough. The university sees the economic scarcity and exploitation as part of the job. The university is able to offset any kinds of labor of professionalization while also continuously extracting our time spent teaching and producing work for it. Kezar notes that “Universities need for highly trained workers meant that they must produce their own cheap workforce. For years, they have simultaneously expanded the number of doctoral degrees granted while constricting the number of stable academic jobs,”¹⁴⁵ ultimately leading to a surplus of workers with a shortage of jobs that has naturally led to the gig academy that we find ourselves in now. As of March 2025, the UC system which I labor under has implanted a system-wide hiring freeze in response to potential loss of federal funding.¹⁴⁶ An already precarious laboring environment for many of us has only become more dire.

The effects of this are felt in the everyday for those of us laboring in the academy without the comfort of full-time, guaranteed employment. We as graduate students come into these

¹⁴⁴ Bousquet and Nelson, *How the University Works*.20

¹⁴⁵ Kezar et al., *The Gig Academy*. 19.

¹⁴⁶ Michael Drake, “A Message from UC President Michael V. Drake on the University of California’s Financial Outlook,” *UCnet*, March 19, 2025, <https://ucnet.universityofcalifornia.edu/employee-news/president-drake-on-the-university-of-california-financial-outlook/>.

universities, wanting to learn only to end up laboring. Michael Gallope acknowledges how the university incentivizes graduate students to produce work:

“Universities, in economic competition with one another, can multiply production by inflicting a double violence to the work of young scholars: 1) by structurally excluding most PhD holders from tenured positions, and 2) as a result, enforcing early professionalization on graduate students with the haunting specter of an unstable and highly competitive future. What is so incredibly powerful about the latter is that this enforcement can be left to faculty, advisors, other graduate students, and the academic community at large.”¹⁴⁷

Peter Fleming notes that this “Hyper competitive careerism” is the natural result of the neoliberal university.¹⁴⁸ Yet, we as graduate students are also in the process of learning how to labor while simultaneously expected to labor. Arjun Shakur recognizes how the current state of the university has significantly suspended student learning in this move towards a more corporate model.¹⁴⁹ They identify how the university functions more as a “holding station” for students who would otherwise put increased strain on the job market. Speaking from my own experiences, I have never been taught how to teach a seminar nor how to write a qualifying exam and yet these two expectations are essential to my funding. If I am to run out of funding, it is then on me (not my employer) to figure out how to acquire money to stay in the program and continue producing work for the university. I have been told that this is “just part of the job” to be constantly seeking funding, while also staying on top of my work load as a graduate student in the dissertation process. This holding station feels more like a hamster wheel.

Bousquet and Nelson go on to suggest that we subject ourselves to this because of some romanticization of the “bohemian” ideology: “large new sectors of intellectual labor have proved willing to accept... the super exploitation of the artists, in part because of the characteristics of

¹⁴⁷ Michael Gallope, “The Professionalizing of Graduate ‘Students,’” *Workplace* 14 (May 2007).

¹⁴⁸ Peter Fleming, *Dark Academia: How Universities Die* (Pluto Press, 2021). 26.

¹⁴⁹ Arjun Shankar, “Developing Annihilationist Strategies,” *Radical Teacher* 131 (Winter 2025): 11–19.

casual employment can so easily be associated with the popular understanding of normative rewards for “creative” endeavor.”¹⁵⁰ Gallope identifies how university administration frames the life of a graduate student as “a *gift*: something generous, precious, human, timeless, and free.”¹⁵¹ We are *chosen* to be a part of this thing bigger than us. Everything we do, should be in service of that bigger goal of education, even if it means sacrificing our own wages and income to be in service of it. Andrew Ross identifies this logic as “sacrificial labor,” making a connection back to that bohemian ideology noticed by Bousquet:

Like artists and performers, academics are inclined by training to sacrifice earnings for the opportunity to exercise their craft. While other traditional professional industries, like law or medicine, depend to some degree on intern labor, none rely economically on the self-sacrifice of their accredited members to anything like the same degree.¹⁵²

I have never had the privilege to romanticize an artist’s life, and a TA stipend has been a step up from my previous jobs. Yet I have also fallen into the trap of feeling that I should be grateful to be here and not in the fields, reiterating this mantra that has been perpetuated to me since I was a child. I see the ways my interview subjects and I have fallen into this way of romanticizing some qualities of our labor here. We find our heroes and “academic moms,” that then make us idealize what we can do by participating in this system of exploitation. We see our job to be making spaces for narratives and experiences that have been overlooked and ignored. I have felt this feeling of righteousness, thinking that I am somehow doing this exploited labor in a way that is more meaningful than others around me. And in these moments I am reminded of that tension I felt with my grandmother, about how she failed to recognize her own exploited working environment in the fields with her daughters. I imagine a mimicry in our logics of focusing on

¹⁵⁰ Bousquet and Nelson, *How the University Works*.63

¹⁵¹ Gallope, “The Professionalizing of Graduate ‘Students.’” 33

¹⁵² Andrew Ross, “The Mental Labor Problem,” *Social Text* 18, no. 2 (63) (2000): 1–31, https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-18-2_63-1.

what is provided versus what is not. At the same time though, she imagined a better future for her kin that extended beyond the fields. In reflecting on the current state of the university, I believe academic workers must make imagining beyond the institution a core value of their work. Lest we stay in, only hoping more of this for our kin.

DEI and HSI: A Reinforcement of Normalcy

It is in this neoliberal state of the academy that we can then begin to analyze the role of DEI initiatives that many have been mourning. I will rely on Justin Mogilski, Lee Jussim, Anne Wilson, and Bryan Love's definition of DEI, described as a:

“set of values, norms, programs and policies aimed at promoting fair treatment and equal representation for historically and currently disadvantaged groups... to ensure that the true talent and potential of members of these groups are not overlooked due to bias or structural barriers, thus serving humanitarian principles of fairness, equal opportunity, and unbiased assessment of merit.”¹⁵³

While DEI as an ideal can be tied back to the civil rights movements,¹⁵⁴ many have attributed the boom of DEI in institutions to emerge after the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in 2020. Scholars have noted this mode of implementation in response to cultural or political moments, painting DEI as a reactionary initiative.¹⁵⁵ In their examination of the implementation of DEI programs, Michael Reish and Jayshree Jani discuss how opaque vocabulary and different interpretations come to muddle the success of such initiatives.¹⁵⁶ Diversity, equity and inclusion become buzzwords with no real consensus and substance even amongst those employed to

¹⁵³ Justin Mogilski et al., “Defining Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) by the Scientific (de)Merits of Its Programming,” *Theory and Society* 54, no. 6 (2025): 1173–86, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-025-09646-y>. 1174

¹⁵⁴ Aldon D. Morris, “A RETROSPECTIVE ON THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT: Political and Intellectual Landmarks,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 25, no. 1 (1999): 517–39, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.25.1.517>.

¹⁵⁵ Jacobs, “Why Diversity, Inclusion and Equity Initiatives in Higher Education Really “DIE”.”

¹⁵⁶ Michael Reisch and Jayshree S. Jani, “Deconstructing DEI: Unmasking Its Complexities, Contradictions, and Challenges,” *Journal of Teaching in Social Work* 45, no. 2 (2025): 250–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2025.2469550>.

further those specific goals. Tiffany Chambers and Bridget O'Brien work interviewing BIPOC scholars who have participated in DEI trainings acknowledge that there has been little evidence to support that belief that DEI efforts uplift URM in institutions.¹⁵⁷ Their interviews resulted in what they identify as a "counterstory," identifying three main themes across the respondents' experiences of these trainings:

*The DEI training Extracted and Instrumentalized Racial Trauma to Teach White Learners at the Expense of BIPOC Learners, The DEI Training Stirred up Racial Trauma and Failed to Provide Space and Community to Process It, and The DEI Training DID Not Create Transformative Change, but Maintained Institutional Image.*¹⁵⁸

Chambers and O'Brien come to the conclusion that these DEI trainings actually seem to harm BIPOC participants in how they come to perpetuate whiteness and reproduce racism.

I suggest not to see DEI initiatives as a form of inclusion for the sake of reparations, but as a means of producing more profit in a system that has become so hyper individualized and devaluing of its workers. In this sense, the university is an organization that relies on a romanticized idea of cultivating knowledge and learning in community in order to acquire a base of workers that can come to justify their own exploitation. The university can then over work, underpay, eliminate and easily replace us when needed. It is a highly stratified system that has become anti-thesis to its own ideals. It is under these circumstances that we can recognize why Jennifer Bay and Josephine Walwema identify DEI as "a tool of capitalism that values the capaciousness of ethnic and gender difference as a plurality of people which can be exploited for purely monetary gain."¹⁵⁹ With this perspective, I want to focus on a particular type of institution

¹⁵⁷ Tiffany Chambers and Bridget O'Brien, "'This Is Not For Me': A Counterstory on BIPOC Experiences of DEI Trainings," *Teaching and Learning in Medicine* 37, no. 4 (2025): 468–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10401334.2025.2471393>.

¹⁵⁸ Chambers and O'Brien, "'This Is Not For Me.'" 472.

¹⁵⁹ Jennifer Bay and Josephine Walwema, "A History of DEI: How Regulatory and Compliance Rhetorics Influence Organizations," *Technical Communication Quarterly* 34 (May 2025): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2025.2508710>.

invested in DEI initiatives that has been most evident in my academic career: The Hispanic Serving Institute.

HSIs have a distinct history from other institutions intended to serve specific populations (Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Tribal College and Universities). Their emergence and rapid growth has occurred much more recently in response to the shifting immigration practices introduced in the late 1900s.¹⁶⁰ The definition of an HSI is accredited to the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) that identify them as a “accredited, degree-granting, public or private, non-profit college and universities with 25% or more total undergraduate full-time equivalent Hispanic student enrollment.”¹⁶¹

Patricia Marin and Stephanie Aguilar-Smith discuss the dramatic increase in HSI Status achieving schools across the country, as a radical leap in such a short time. Yet they also remind us that the amount of scholarly work examining HSI curriculum has not kept up with it.¹⁶² They argue that what would be most beneficial would be more diverse studies of HSI’s, which “will allow for the proliferation of articles more representative of HSIs, the development of more HSI experts who can then serve on editorial boards and as reviewers, and the needed expansion of HSI scholarship.”¹⁶³ They suggest our attention should focus on the structure of these HSI’s as opposed to settling on the idea that an enrollment rate determines how successful a school is in serving Hispanic students. HSIs also suffer from the same vague and abstract terminology that more general DEI initiatives use.

¹⁶⁰Berta Vigil Laden, “HISPANIC-SERVING INSTITUTIONS: WHAT ARE THEY? WHERE ARE THEY?,” *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 28, no. 3 (March 2004): 181–98.

¹⁶¹ Laden, “HISPANIC-SERVING INSTITUTIONS.”

¹⁶² Patricia Marin and Stephanie Aguilar-Smith, “The Evolving Portrayal of Hispanic-Serving Institutions? A Systematic Review of More Than 20 Years of Research,” *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* 22, no. 4 (October 2023): 446–59.

¹⁶³ Marin and Aguilar-Smith, “The Evolving Portrayal of Hispanic-Serving Institutions?” 457.

An emphasis on enrollment rates demonstrates how the main indicator of such a diversity inclusion is about hitting a quota and not about the kind of experiences that these populations have at these institutions. Kaitlyn Stormes and Lizzet Rojas identify how “Higher education institutions aim to improve students’ social mobility, but differences in persistence and graduation rates can present economic challenges for students and institutions.”¹⁶⁴ “Serving” Hispanic students is then equated to a certain level of demographic inclusion. They go on to remind us that:

Increased access alone is insufficient. College affordability remains an obstacle for students, but this is particularly true for Black and Hispanic students, who are more likely to cite financial considerations as a reason for not completing a four-year degree. In addition to affordability issues, the college environment can also present some challenges. Students from marginalized racial and ethnic identities are subject to more campus climate issues, microaggressions, and racism during college. Students may also feel they are only there to meet a diversity quota and lack a sense of belonging, as their racial or ethnic identities do not match those of their peers, faculty, or staff.¹⁶⁵

Inclusion, particularly at this moment in time in the university no longer guarantees any kind of economic security or upward mobility. The Postsecondary National Policy Institute reported that “Ten years after receiving a bachelor’s degree, Latino graduates who reported having an income averaged a gross income of \$66,830, compared to the national average of \$76,370.”¹⁶⁶ They also found Latino graduates to have a lower percentage of home ownership and lower percentage of some form of retirement.¹⁶⁷

I attended an HSI for my undergraduate degree and didn’t even know it until years later. I was awarded the SEED fellowship in my PhD program, which has a requirement of having

¹⁶⁴ Kaitlyn N. Stormes and Lizzet Rojas, *Do Graduation Rates Improve Once Universities Become Hispanic-Serving Institutions?: An Essay for the Learning Curve* (Urban Institute, 2023), <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/do-graduation-rates-improve-once-universities-become-hispanic-serving>.

¹⁶⁵ Stormes and Rojas, *Do Graduation Rates Improve Once Universities Become Hispanic-Serving Institutions?*

¹⁶⁶ Latino Student Fact Sheet, Apr25, Postsecondary National Policy Institute.

¹⁶⁷ Latino Student Fact Sheet, Apr25, Postsecondary National Policy Institute.

attended an HSI for undergrad. It was then that I looked into my undergraduate university and learned that it had been an HSI since 2012. I had just never been made aware of that. I was surprised by this because there was really nothing about the university, other than its proximity to a farmworking hub, that ever felt that it was serving Latine students in any way. All of my professors that I can remember were White or Asian, as were most of my TAs. I don't remember any curriculum in any of my courses, required or otherwise, that covered Latine experiences. My only point of comparison would be to my current university, and neither really stand out as being more or less inclusive of Latine peoples.

Leslie, a current PhD student, shared a similar acknowledgment of her HSI experiences in her undergraduate education: "Chico State, during like my span there, became an HSI... Which is great. It's wild to me, because I did not see myself represented. But I mean, I'm at UCLA now. And in many ways, I feel the same way." There is this disconnect between the celebration and branding of schools attaining HSI status or working towards it, and our experiences in them. When I learned what an HSI was, I had already graduated from one with my identity feeling sidelined regularly and with the majority of my educators not being reflective of my lived experiences. As Latine people who were born and raised in California, shouldn't our experiences in these HSI feel more meaningful?

Our experiences aren't uncommon. In "Hispanic Student Experiences at Hispanic Serving Institutes," Christina Medina and Carols Posadas interview Latine students at New Mexico State University about their experiences on that HSI campus.¹⁶⁸ All of the participants shared their initial discomfort with the space and how they relied on peer-to-peer¹⁶⁹ support to

¹⁶⁸ Christina A. Medina and Carlos E. Posadas, "Hispanic Student Experiences at a Hispanic-Serving Institution: Strong Voices, Key Message," *Journal of Latinos and Education* 11, no. 3 (July 2012): 182–88.

¹⁶⁹ An example of a *Labor Script*.

navigate the unfamiliar environment. One student shared, “[I] stuck to one of my high school friends like glue because I was going through total culture shock...” And another states, “I felt like I didn’t fit in. I felt like I just had to deal with it.” A third student made the observation that “It seemed as if the Hispanic population felt that they didn’t know what was going on.”¹⁷⁰ They have an understanding of how culturally different this space is immediately and how it differs from the more communal kind of environment that they were used to. The support and aid in navigation does not come from the institution, but from their peers within it. Posadas and Medina acknowledge that “It can no longer be assumed that the growth of Latino students at a given institution will translate into increased efforts by the institution to adapt its mission to better serve this student population.”¹⁷¹

The discussions of what “serving” has meant and can mean in this context are ongoing. Cynthia Villareal’s work focuses on the faculty’s role in serving specific student populations¹⁷², and Garcia et al discuss a multi-dimensional perspective that focuses on 4 different dimensions of serving.¹⁷³ Along with the issues identified by previous authors, it is clear that the HSI as an inclusive institution has had a complex history and present. As a former HSI student myself, I can only add my voice to the discontent felt by underrepresented minorities in the academy, regardless of how their school has been identified by the federal government.

These attempts to diversify and include feel hollow. It can often feel like these initiatives are meant to be more of a talking point and demonstration of the university's acknowledgment of an issue than a real attempt to better the lives of its students. This concern has been recognized

¹⁷⁰ Medina and Posadas, “Hispanic Student Experiences at a Hispanic-Serving Institution.” 184.

¹⁷¹ Medina and Posadas, “Hispanic Student Experiences at a Hispanic-Serving Institution.” 183.

¹⁷² Cynthia D. Villareal, “Servingness in the Borderlands: A Study of Faculty Hiring at a Hispanic-Serving Institution on the Border,” *AERA Open* 8 (January 2022)

¹⁷³ Gina A. Garcia et al., “Toward a Multidimensional Conceptual Framework for Understanding ‘Servingness’ in Hispanic-Serving Institutions: A Synthesis of the Research,” *Review of Educational Research* 89, no. 5 (2019): 745–84, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319864591>.

by various scholars,¹⁷⁴ with Don Trent Jacobes pointing out how DEI initiatives ultimately “die.”¹⁷⁵ It is tragic that these attempts to do better come after the loss of lives like the reaction to the Black Lives Matter movement. It almost feels like it is a way for the university to defend itself from criticism on a subject by being able to point to somebody or a group of people they recently hired. Treveine Harris and Nozomi Saito also acknowledged this reactionary relationship to inclusion noting how it always happens after the fact, “Which is to say it is because we are out of place that people of color have to be folded back into a hostile structure. Thus the gap between commitments and material change becomes ever more unbreachable for people of color...”¹⁷⁶ This kind of relationship to inclusion initiatives is then one of fleeting support, not one of meaningful lasting change. This “support” also translates to increased and unrewarded labor placed on those it is meant to help. Ravyn Stringfield shares her own experience as a graduate student:

“Black women, for example, are often expected to take on extraordinary amounts of extra uncompensated service labor, which can include anything from mentoring BIPOC students; to directing centers or programs; and to being asked to split our time between various Diversity, Equity and Inclusion committees and panels to represent one of the handful of Black women at our institution. And while it must be said that many of us do love and cherish the work we do to support our students and fight for better campus environments for all, much of that work goes unnoticed, unappreciated, and does not count towards tenure and securing a job.”¹⁷⁷

I commend the hiring of Committees on Diversity (CODs) and the implementation of DEI’s in their ultimate goals to make the space of the university more inclusive of UMIs. At times,

¹⁷⁴ Alex Pittman et al., “Critical of/with/for DEI: An Introduction,” *Radical Teacher* 131 (March 2025), <https://doi.org/10.5195/rt.2024.1383>.

¹⁷⁵ Jacobes, “Why Diversity, Inclusion and Equity Initiatives in Higher Education Really “DIE”.”

¹⁷⁶ Treviene A. Harris and Nozomi Saito, “On the Limits of Institutional DEI Work,” *Asian American Writers’ Workshop*, June 24, 2021, <https://aaww.org/on-the-limits-of-institutional-dei/>.

¹⁷⁷ Ravynn K. Stringfield, “#BlackScholarJoy: The Labor, Resistance and Joy Practices of Black Women Graduate Students,” *DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (2022).

though, it can feel like it is disregarding the already documented concerns in favor of a kind of a spectacle to be part of.

This is not to discredit the efforts made by students or instructors alike to create a more inclusive schooling environment as Stringfield pointed out. Chandani Patel, a director of a DEI program, recognizes how harmful buying into these initiatives can be and suggests working on a smaller and individual scale of how we can be better to each other within the institution.¹⁷⁸ She asks, “What if school, as we used it on a daily basis, signaled not the name of a process or institution through which we could be indoctrinated, not a structure through which social capital was grasped and policed, but something more organic, like a scale of care.”¹⁷⁹ This scale of care emphasizes a bottom-up approach to understanding how to make change here, similar to the tactics of labor scripts identified in the previous chapter. Dr Frederick Engram and his sophomore student Kathleen Mayer discuss how performative DEI doesn’t “hate white supremacy enough,” but that they continue to invest in their own practices as a student and educator.¹⁸⁰ Engram frames his teaching by asking students “what are you willing to give up?” in order to emphasize how real change requires disruption. He adds:

“We know that history has ebbs and flows, and for every African Americans suffered there was also advancement. The generation behind those who fought for liberation are able to enjoy the fruits of their ancestors and elders’ labor, but some of them do not always understand that the fight must continue. Helping my students visualize the work of disruption and liberation allowed them to see that the fight must continue.”¹⁸¹

There is recognition that DEI has not been enough and that regardless of whether it persists or is done away with entirely, there is real work that needs to be done in the academy to make it a

¹⁷⁸ Chandani Patel, “DEI as a Practice of Assembling: Translation and Transformation,” *Radical Teacher* 131 (March 2025), <https://doi.org/10.5195/rt.2024.1300>.

¹⁷⁹ Patel, “DEI as a Practice of Assembling,” 27.

¹⁸⁰ Frederick Engram and Katie Mayer, “Ya’ll Don’t Hate White Supremacy Enough for Me: How Performative DEI Prevents Anti-Racism and Accountability in Higher Education,” *The Vermont Connection* 44 (2023).

¹⁸¹ Engram and Mayer, “Ya’ll Don’t Hate White Supremacy Enough for Me: How Performative DEI Prevents Anti-Racism and Accountability in Higher Education.” 63.

more hospitable and supportive place for URM. I am also deeply and personally invested in the inclusion of marginalized voices in the academy. There are people here trying to work against harmful practices. I have wanted to be that advisor for someone that struggles to see themselves reflected in their curriculum. I have been exposed to such phenomenal scholarship that has fundamentally shaped my personhood. There have been great moments in my academic career because of those that have continued to fight and make space for someone like me here. I am immensely grateful for every single person here, at any level of employment, that has helped create a space for me to learn and grow as an individual.

I can have all those feelings and acknowledge that the system has also contorted social justice movements for inclusion into a mechanism of exploitation. It was not until I became a graduate student that I started to see this more. In her discussion of her own experiences in the academy as a graduate student and worker, S. Tay Glover addresses how campaigns to diversify the academy are rooted in perpetuating a kind of mentality that has and continues to be incredibly harmful to those people they claim to aid:

“Diversity campaigns were strategic distractions from the fact that the university and its programs maintained demographic disparities of students and faculty of color through admissions and hiring / retention practices, uneven allocation of resources to support STEM fields over the arts and humanities, the student as consumer paradigm, and the myth of safety, comfort, and community for all students across difference. I also learned that these Black elitist appeals to prestigious ego and excellence in the academy were a guise for a sick exploitation of slavery, Southern Horrors, and Southern politics of resistance, as I sat in course after course in which they eulogized them (us) as central to the Black studies canon, our very lives, and our future (even as they also only gestured to the South as stuck in the past.”¹⁸²

Returning to the elephant in the room, many of us knew that the elephant was already there before this administration. Elitism has never kept us safe from harm and only perpetuates a

¹⁸² Tay S. Glover, “‘Black Lesbians---Who Will Fight for Our Lives but Us?’: Navigating Power, Belonging, Labor, Resistance, and Graduate Student Survival in the Ivory Tower,” *Feminist Teacher* 27, no. 2–3 (2019): 157–75.

neoliberal narrative that harms the communities many of us come from. There is a voice in the back of my head that winces when thinking about the university “serving” me. At times it feels like I’m being served a sentence, or that this “serving” that I should be so grateful for is conditional on me perpetuating a harmful practice of laboring. Understanding the state of the university in this current moment should shape our understanding of the initiatives of inclusion. DEI and HSI should not be seen as separate and inclusive initiatives but as a tool by the universities to maintain a momentum of growth under capitalism.

With the sunseting of these programs both in and outside the university, it’s good to remember why these initiatives can collapse so quickly. Bay and Walwema explain:

DEI gets adjudicated within or by institutions – if a *company* establishes a DEI policy or series of initiatives, then it is assumed that DEI policies are successful at establishing equity and complying with the law. However, because DEI is adjudicated by institutional organizations and is not codified by law, it becomes much easier to shutter. Despite the best of intentions by some, DEI always functioned as a corporate, rhetorical construct, rendering it easy to dismantle without legal recourse. The ease with which corporations and the government have erased DEI demonstrates that it was never a strong, legal insurance of equity.¹⁸³

DEI is a house of cards, that can be blown away the second it stops being valuable for a business. These initiatives are never a fundamental change within the institutions that are essential to their operation. Diversity, equity, and inclusion, no matter whatever definition each institution comes up with, have not been incorporated as integral part of their practice. How do we make meaningful change when the vocal support of inclusion can be so readily discarded after years of work by communities of color? We cannot look to these initiatives to save us and we should be critical of how we let them use us.

¹⁸³ Bay and Walwema, “A History of DEI.” 418.

Dwelling on the Future

I have been told directly and indirectly to think about my every day in the academy with the future in mind. That what I am teaching and writing now is important for my future career if I wish to stay here. I struggle with this in so many ways. A major one being that what is valuable here is so subjective and I am often times pulled in different directions depending on who I am speaking. Another reason is the shaky industry of higher education that so many of us continue you invest in with little to no reward on the horizon. It is hard to imagine a future here when people who I know are working a lot harder than me are not hearing back from any jobs they've applied to. A more personal issue for myself, is how I have never felt that my work and my investments have an allegiance to the university itself. And so to imagine a future in the ivory tower feels limiting. I try to imagine alternative worlds and potentials, ones that are rooted in the way my family works and speak about the fields. It's these alternatives that are pulling me away from the university. When I think about my family's relationship to the future and the work they were doing, it was always with the idea that it was a temporary work to only be done by one generation so that the next one never has to do it. What am I reaping here, in this neoliberal factory where those that "pick more fruit" are supposed to make more money? I can't and do not want to imagine that my future, and the future of those who come after me, is just more of this... If my family looked towards the ivory tower as a means of progress, where do I look to now? Staring back at the fields, only to feel the weight of it and not the motivation for it. I want more, not for myself, but for all of us.

DEI as Professionalization

The reactionary inclusion of marginalized peoples and the subsequent reactionary exclusion speak to the historical struggle of Black and Brown people in the university. Now, we can either take this as an opportunity to think more critically about our relationship to the university and its role in society, or we can wait until another murder and see if that kickstarts a new diversity hire hunt. I suggest a re-examination of Moten and Harney's use of the undercommons in the university at this current moment. Moten and Harney are adamant that "it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment," and that the only ethical relationship to it is a criminal one, "to be in but not of..."¹⁸⁴ We can situate ourselves here, not as scholars, but as those who labor in "scholarship." It is this designation that is most integral to their argument of the undercommons in the university, a radical orientation to the institution from within that recognizes it as a site of colonial violence and pushes against the inevitable perpetuation of it. They suggest hiding within the university, choosing to not agree nor disagree with its practices and instead recede with hands "full into the underground of the university, into the *Undercommons*..."¹⁸⁵ Subjugation is avoided in the undercommons, because down there, we are deemed as unfit and unworthy to be part of the university's legacy. We cling onto our unprofessionalism like shield.

I will be relying on a discussion of the undercommons and the experiences of graduate students to further examine how the undoing of DEI programs is reflective of an ongoing marginalization that has existed in the university in perpetuity. Moten's use of the professional/unprofessional dichotomy as a reasoning by the academy to exclude certain peoples connects to the skill/unskilled dichotomy that many farmworkers and other immigrant laborers

¹⁸⁴ Moten and Harney, "The University and the Undercommons." 101

¹⁸⁵ Moten and Harney, "The University and the Undercommons." 103.

have dealt with in their own experiences of racial capitalism. In identifying the similar models used for justifying the exploitation of workers, I challenge this dominant understanding of the academy as having aided communities during the time of DEI. To be recognized as “unprofessional” and “unskilled” by state apparatus designates us a challenge to the social order. We become a hinderance in that we do not perpetuate an understanding of labor that strengthens the neoliberal university. Even in critiquing the university, there is a subjugation of the self that comes to perpetuate a mode of professionalism:

... to be a critical academic in the university is to be against the university, and to be against the university is always to recognize it and be recognized by it, and to institute the negligence of that internal outside, that unassimilated underground, a negligence of it that is precisely, we must insist, the basis of professions.¹⁸⁶

To be professional demands negligence of peoples and experiences, of the service workers waiting on us during the discussions of DEI. Professionals “constitute themselves in opposition to the unregulated and the ignorant without acknowledging the unregulated, ignorant, unprofessional labor that goes on not opposite them but within them.”¹⁸⁷

It is with this framing that we can understand modes of critiquing the universities practices, such DEI initiatives and HSI designations, as a mode of professionalization: “An antifoundational critique of the University or a foundational critique of the university. Taken as choices or hedged as bets, one tempered with the other, they are none the less always negligent.”¹⁸⁸ The ease and speed of the dismantling of these programs and the subsequent reactions that many critical scholars have always had of those programs point to this “negligence” in their creation. They were an attempt to professionalize a cultural moment, to absorb these critiques into its system of capital. And yet, that act of professionalism is so

¹⁸⁶ Moten and Harney, “The University and the Undercommons.”105.

¹⁸⁷ Moten and Harney, “The University and the Undercommons.” 106.

¹⁸⁸ Moten and Harney, “The University and the Undercommons.” 107.

negligible in its ignorance of the greater experiences of labor within the project of the neoliberal university. It's little more than temporary window dressing. When it is no longer deemed "professional" it is discarded, re-relegated to an "unprofessional" state until the pendulum swings back.

Moten and Harny understand this act of professionalizing as a form of colonial violence. They suggest understanding it not as narrowing, but as "a circling, a circling of war wagons around the last camp of indigenous women and children."¹⁸⁹ It is in the capturing of this "other" that DEI initiatives are less of an invitation, and more of a way of integrating the critique, cutting it off from the outside. To make it into this vague, amorphous language that can't harm the system any longer. The school designated as an HSI gets a trophy for capturing the most, extracting the wealth, and caring very little about their success once they're through with them. Olúfẹ̀mi O. Táíwò terminology of *Elite Capture* similarly echoes this colonial violence.¹⁹⁰ Táíwò identifies how with popular social justice movements, the elites "will capture the group's values, forcing people to coordinate on a narrower social project that disproportionately represents elite interests."¹⁹¹ To give oneself fully into the academy is to be rewarded with success under the pretense of a perpetuation of a kind of violence and divestment from more radical work. Those who are able to become professional by their standards are the ones who can continue this, who can be used to corral others. We are taught to police each other and our students and protect the integrity of the institution. Our goal here is to maintain and protect an image of a harmful system. The best and the most professional are rewarded for doing so, and if not, it is because someone else was more professional. I feel this constant pressure to be better all the time here.

¹⁸⁹ Moten and Harney, "The University and the Undercommons." 107

¹⁹⁰ Olúfẹ̀mi O. Táíwò, *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics* (Haymarket Books, 2022).

¹⁹¹ Táíwò, *Elite Capture*. 28.

The university does such a good job at making you feel so small and worthless for not dedicating more and more of your life to it. As Moten and Harney explain:

“any attempt at passion, at stepping out of this skeptical of the know into an inadequate confrontation with what exceeds it and oneself, must be suppressed by this professionalization. This is not merely a matter of administering the world, but of administering away the world... Any other disposition is not only unprofessional but incompetent, unethical, and irresponsible, bordering on the criminal.”¹⁹²

You must always feel “skeptical” not entirely sure. We are forced into having a more muted ambivalence. To be open to being malleable. We are invited in because of our perspectives and ideas, but must quickly be able to align ourselves within what has been deemed appropriate by the university to be validated. To become professional is to strip away what is deemed to be “other.”

There is a strength in witnessing that relationship and receding from it. To turn away from this professionalism and into the undercommons. Whereas critique of the university has become incorporated into its system, a rejection of critique then becomes more antagonistic. Moten and Harney state “the undercommons might by contrast be understood as wary of critique, weary of it and at the same time dedicated to the collectivity of its future, the collectivity that may come to be its future.”¹⁹³ To refuse to critique is not a divestment from the belief that things could and should be better. My frustrations with DEI initiatives and HSI designations stem from a place of pessimism of the university, but not of those trying to do meaningful work within it. When thinking about the unskilled practice of my family in the fields, the notion looking ahead stands out to me. This understanding of their field work being a struggle they must endure in order for this imagined easier future for their next of kin. There is a collective investment in something that comes after even as their labor is consistently

¹⁹² Moten and Harney, “The University and the Undercommons.” 109.

¹⁹³ Moten and Harney, “The University and the Undercommons.” 111.

undermined and deemed unskilled. The undercommons, those of us are actively choosing to undermine the goal of the university, also look towards a futurity. Whether that exists within the university or not is more of a personal decision.

To think with the undercommons and the fields when engaging with labor in the academy is to understand the ways that we are still relegated to a particular kind of labor practice. A different working and laboring environment physically, one that is understood as radically upward in mobility, but both still operates under the constraints of a kind of policing. In one, you are rewarded for how many boxes of fruit you fill in a day. In the other, you might be rewarded with something tangible if you just keep publishing, teaching, and presenting at conferences- both without job security. You work in the fields if you are unskilled and you labor in the academy to one day be seen as “professional.” You are not competent until designated by another who has shaped themselves to be acceptable. It is no wonder then why our families come to struggle with our continued investment in this. They also recognize that we too are in a state of constant struggle with an unclear end goal in sight.

Moten and Harney invest in a mode of disavowal to productivity in the academy. In some ways, they suggest an understanding of the graduate student as a non-student in the undercommons, someone who does not “learn” in the ways expected and thus is not able to perpetuate the institution’s agenda. Gallope also recognizes this non-student space that the graduate student takes in the academy, suggesting a delimitation of the graduate student status entirely.¹⁹⁴ For Gallope though, this non-student experience is inherent to the graduate student lifestyle:

“Universities hope these aggressively-recruited students will be no old-fashioned graduate students who follow their mentors’ scholarship closely; quite the contrary, they need to act like professionals, who think independently, present papers at conferences,

¹⁹⁴ Gallope, “The Professionalizing of Graduate ‘Students.’” 38

lead colloquia and publish their work in journals, with the university's brand name attached to their work. These very best graduate students will stand up to the relentless haunting, like the proper individuals they ought to be, and find jobs."¹⁹⁵

Although published almost 20 years ago, these observations have grown more acute in the current neoliberal iteration of the university. Gallope is also recognizing the demarcation of the professional graduate student versus the unprofessional, how the "good" ones are those that ask nothing from the university and take on all the labor of educating and preparing themselves for an increasingly shrinking job market. Both identify these two different experiences and relationships to the university, the unprofessional non-student that resides in the academy. To orient the graduate student as laborer first, student never, we can understand the stalling positionality of the undercommons on an economic level as well as an intellectual one. To turn away and not professionalize is to work against the degradation of the graduate student as a student. To perpetuate the idealized versions of us is to maintain this dehumanizing labor practice that has long existed.

Though unprofessional, this does not mean unskilled or unlearned. In the ways that our families working in the fields are highly skilled and organized even without certifications or formal educational programs, we too work in ways that are beneficial to us without regard to what is deemed to be correct. This did not always happen in the classroom, but in the spaces other students and I created for ourselves in the university. It might not have been at an institutionally designated space, instead it was sneaking away to our office in between classes to laugh at some of things we heard in class. Discussing grants to apply for in order to cover rent during our unpaid summers while walking across campus to our cars in the furthest parking lot because of how overcrowded the university is. In advisor meetings commiserating about just

¹⁹⁵ Gallope, "The Professionalizing of Graduate 'Students.'" 37

how truly horrible the qualifying exam process is. Spaces that are not designated by the university to be used in these ways, but nevertheless, truly real and integral to the working life experiences of graduate students. It is in these moments, the in between-ness of the job, the moments that are not part of the job but wouldn't exist without it, where I am reminded of the reasons why I stick to this labor. Leaving it behind, dropping out of the program, that would mean leaving behind these shared experiences of struggling through the work together, of still finding ourselves and our values within all of these experiences that are pushing us towards a kind of thinking and being.

In the undercommons, we turn away from the university, but not from each other. We do not invest in production, but in learning. The overarching concerns of job-market viability are turned into jokes, with the shared understanding that no matter how hard we work and produce, nothing is guaranteed or secure in the neoliberal academy. A microcosm of capitalism, a factory floor in shambles, a field of fruit with everybody stepping on each other to fill a basket. The unprofessional "student" sees this and responds in turn by looking away. Looking back into the fields, understanding the ways that people maneuver through the day not as individuals but in community.

While farmworkers may not have the same active disavowal of professionalization that Moten and Harney suggest for the academic laborer in the undercommons, there is a shared sentiment of maneuvering around these expectations. We see this investment in the familial and communal ways of learning that underscore the market of skill acquisition discussed in the previous chapter. Likewise, the academic worker must also learn to work without supporting and reinforcing a system that perpetuates neoliberal ideals for the profit of individuals that have little investment in the treatment and future of educators. The university wishes that we learned from

each other, that it did not have to train us, and that we would just find jobs on our own. Yet, it has created the perfect circumstances for that to only be increasingly improbable. It imagines itself to be this place where we can learn from each other and foster a sense of community, only to be left to fend for ourselves with a budget that shrinks every single year while the pay of those at the top continues to increase. The chancellor at my university was recently awarded a 1.2 million yearly salary¹⁹⁶ and the UC campuses have been pouring even more money into military grade equipment listed as “routine agenda items,” such as pepper balls to suppress student protests against genocide.¹⁹⁷ In disavowing the expectations placed on us, we are rejecting the normalization of this kind of university. One that has always and most recently demonstrated a genuine lack of investment in equity and diversity. At least in the fields, the laborer knows where they stand, and the next time they’ll have work.

We are caught in this crossroads of being raised by our families to believe that education is important, that it helps us stay out of the fields. But it is only valued to a certain extent, a graduate education or career in the academy begins to raise concern. Do we really need to be here that long? If so, it must be because we are going to be making a lot of money, right? All of our time here should result in something deemed culturally worthy. We are also told by, either institutions themselves or society, that higher education is not something that is attainable by people like us unless we professionalize. We may also have an investment in family and familiarity that sees the university and its individualizing success as something that brings anxiety and gives us pause. To be separated from what we know and those we have been raised

¹⁹⁶ Teresa Watanabe, “UC Chancellors Get Big Raises, Putting Them between \$785,000 and Nearly \$1.2 Million,” California, *Los Angeles Times*, September 20, 2024, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2024-09-20/uc-chancellors-get-big-raises>.

¹⁹⁷ Teresa Watanabe, “UC Police Seek Approval for More Pepper Balls, Sponge Rounds, Launchers, Drones,” California, *Los Angeles Times*, September 19, 2024, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2024-09-19/pepper-balls-sponge-rounds-launchers-drones-uc-police-ask-for-these-weapons>.

to support does not sound like something that should be pursued. Then, there is the actual experience of being in school, being in graduate school where we are meant to be professionalizing and learning to labor within this academy that we have already carried so much baggage about before even understanding what the day-to-day of it actually is. And within this, we are forced, at every turn, to engage critically with our positionality as an outsider lest we be deemed “unprofessional.” We are pitted against each other and to not be the “other.” The creation of DEI programs and HSI schools is meant to alleviate this additional exploitation in the academy, but has in practice furthered it by placing the work of creating a more inclusive environment on those who are excluded by it. This obviously fails and then becomes the fault of URM faculty. The creation of an inclusive pedagogy in the academy would benefit inclusivity, but that my risk being recognized as “unprofessional,” and lead to greater criticism of the instructors performance. All of this points to how the university does not support a kind of laborer, even in its performance to be more inclusive.

Conclusion

The issues of the university at this current moment are not unique and can be better navigated by connecting to the experiences of “unskilled” laboring sites under racial capitalism. Graduate students with a farmworking background come into the academy with the relationship to labor that is both highly revered and incredibly specific. We have a deep, emotional understanding of the kinds of work that our family has done and how lucky we are to have the opportunities we do. To be able to sit at a desk and feel misunderstood. Our work may not always feel fulfilling or as rewarding as we have been taught to understand our situation, but there is an underlying faith we carry. A perspective that allows us to see the university and our

existence in it for what it is. We know that this place was not made for us, that it took generations to get us here. We know that it values a kind of individuality that is anti-thesis to our upbringing and the kinds of work our family has done in the past. It feels uncomfortable to be here and to value it in the ways that it wants us to. The university expects us to help ourselves through DEI initiatives, and when those fail, the blame is on us for not being professional enough. The university, with its increase diminishing abilities to guarantee financial security, puts the weight of that on us to work even harder for them. If we don't get a job it is because we didn't work hard enough, not because of the lack of job openings due to budgets.

Our faith remains. Not a faith in the academic institution as a "good" site of labor or for how it expects us to act, nor necessarily a faith in these kinds of diversity and equity initiatives. But faith and hope in each other and those who will be following us into the academy. We see what it wants us to be and how that continues to fail us, and so our investments lie in helping those like us who are also struggling through making sense of this space that has been sold to us as a place of opportunity. We don't look to the institution to diversify this space or to make it more hospitable as much as we look to each other. What we look for is to be recognized on our terms, and to be validated in our understanding of the institution for what it is. Some of us find that by relying on labor scripts, choosing to do work that is familiar and on the communities that we come from. We also find this through a kind of mentorship relationship, and that really cements this space as a place for us to be able to do good. Not just to do good work, but to be that bridge for someone else. Someone who understand their positionality within this system and looks to help those that are also struggling with learning the different systems at play. Again, much like previous immigrant labor experiences, this laboring site is one of solidarity and mutual aid. At least, that is what we make it to be for ourselves, and how we come to understand that

even though this won't get us the security our family has so long desired, that it feels important to keep doing it not for ourselves, then for others.

This is why DEI initiatives and HSI designations fail to support students, because it continues to prioritize maintaining a system of harm over structural change. DEI initiatives are about upholding the notion of distinction. But we, and our families, understand that value does not come from being separated from others. Value does not come from advancing past others, it can come from a place of aiding others through the knowledge you acquired. This is distinct from the problem-solving methods of DEI and HSI because those work from a place of re-investing in a system that continues to fail the worker. The increased neoliberalization of the school has further separated us and put us increasingly in competition with each other. To think more critically about our work and who we do our work for is integral. To think of labor not as something forced onto us, but as something that means different things to different people, and how can choose to navigate it in more meaningful ways that look around as opposed to up.

By moving into the undercommons, we make the active choice to turn away from the university in its efforts to perpetuate a colonial violence. The act of turning away naturally applies a turn towards something. If our families turned towards school as a means of upward mobility and a kind of security that they would never get in the fields, where do we turn to in that same effort? My turning away is not an act of giving up on the academy, because I do not believe one can have hope for it in its current state. But I have always believed in the efforts made here for a better world. I cannot in good faith call for an abandonment of the academy. I can, though, remind readers, and myself, of the value we all inherently carry separate from what is deemed worthy by an institution. In the ways my families labor is deemed unskilled, I can understand how our unprofessionalism is not a marker of scholarship within a system that is

increasingly devaluing of human experiences. I make the decision to then look towards people, and the alternatives that we create within these hyper exploitative systems. I judge more harshly those working to maintain the façade of the university than those of us struggling to pay rent while writing a dissertation and teaching 4 classes a week. I am tired, and I'm sure so are you. What if we worked harder to help each other get through each day than policing and subjecting the whims of a harmful system onto each other. Let me hold the ladder so you can reach the fruit higher on the tree. Let me show you the correct way to hold the shears as to not cut yourself. We need each other more than I need a job.

Conclusion or “I Really Thought They Made More Money...”

The 2026 school year is coming to an end and my defense date is now set. I created a reminder to purchase the \$200 regalia tomorrow. It will go off after the reminder to pay \$7 for parking on campus, lest I get another \$80 parking ticket. I should feel more excited about all this, but its more like a prolonged sense of relief. As I write this, I am supervising my students while they complete an assignment reflecting on the violent dismantling of the UCSD encampments alongside the price center walk way a couple years ago.¹⁹⁸ The space that used to be full of people protesting and fighting for the safety of others now has rows and rows of hammocks instead. Canvas was just held ransom by a hacking group, and I figured that since we cannot rely on the privately owned platform to access the assignments securely, that I take my undergraduate class outside to engage more directly with the space of the university. It always struck me how many church groups there are here canvassing along this main walkway. I wonder if one person standing next to a shelf of literature on the occupation of Palestine would be allowed to stand similarly. Maybe somebody tried and they were already erased with a hammock. How many more hammocks could they reasonably fit here before it becomes the fire hazard justification they love to use as a way to suppress?

A week ago, my mom was visiting town and I took the opportunity to have her help me with some translations in my dissertation. She was eager to help, and we went back and forth on whether or not to correct the Spanish so that it sounded more “proper,” or to just leave the kind of Spanglish that was more accurate. We went with the more accurate version. I hadn’t seen my

¹⁹⁸ Gary Fields, “ERASED! The Eradication of Encampment Protest at UCSD,” Photo Essays, *The UCSD Guardian*, n.d., accessed May 8, 2026, <https://ucsdguardian.org/2025/01/14/erased-the-eradication-of-encampment-protest-at-ucsd/>.

mom since winter break and it's been a whirlwind setting everything up for this dissertation to be completed within the academic year. She was so excited when I told her that I would be finishing this school year, planning the celebration was the most important part. I could hardly think about how I wanted to celebrate with so much logistical stuff still left to do. I could see a light at the end but it still didn't feel guaranteed by any means. After we finished translating sections, I talked to her about how she was feeling about all of this as it was coming to an end. She was still excited and proud, talking about me walking across a stage for the last time. As we spoke though, it was clear that she was still under the impression that I was looking to continue some kind of career in the academy. Almost as if I feel that it is my job to pop that bubble now, I shared some of the issues that had experienced regarding the livelihood of this work. I even pointed out the bigger systemic issues of the UCs specifically, as well as the experiences of those in higher positions. I shared how much the salaried professor I work for currently makes in a year, to which she responded: "Oh my gosh, that's scary. I really thought they made more money... like our second-grade teacher makes more than that."

The UC campuses have recently averted a UC-wide TA strike. The emails I have been receiving speak about the power of coming together and how when we fight, we win. I was also surprised to see the summary of these "wins." This is not to discredit the bargaining team and the work that has on gone into trying to have a more equitable contract, but based on the voting breakdown across UC Teaching Assistants, it seems maybe it was one of the more controversial settlements. It received 91% of votes, yet one of the more activist campuses voted in favor of rejecting it. It's not that nothing was won, closing the pay discrepancy across campuses and creating a legal fund for international students is great. But that now means that we cannot bargain for a certain amount of time, unless the contract is broken again. I am proud of what the

UAW has been able to achieve, but it feels like we really cannot keep up with the speed at which the University seems to be decaying. As I registered for commencement, I learn that UCSD has been using AI to read names at the campus wide commencement ceremony for the last few years. Another causality in the increasing automation of the university, though I'm sure whoever's normally responsible was feeling some kind of relief when it was announced. It's Week 5 of spring quarter and we just had a TA Meeting about how there is no guarantee for work for anybody who is past their funding or even still within it. The college writing programs have long been where those who have taken too long to finish have been funneled to, and now that well is seemingly running dry. It's not that the university doesn't have the money. My undergraduates inform me that they are paying roughly \$40,000 a year, more than I get paid to as a Teaching Assistant for a year. It's just that like every big business; the university prefers to make cuts closer to the bottom rather than the top.

I have moved away from critiquing my grandmother's labor in the fields, to instead critiquing my own in the academy. This is all to try and understand this lineage of laboring that has always imagined something better off in the horizon. Yet here I am, in the horizon, and all I can do is look backwards.

Key Findings and Contributions to Literature

I proposed three questions at the beginning of this dissertation: How do the children and grandchildren of farmworkers who have found themselves in the academy understand and reflect on their families' history of labor? How does this reflection come to influence an understanding of their own labor practice within the academy? How does the academic setting work against some of the ideals and cultural practices that manifest from a history of farmwork? Each

subsequent chapter has focused on engaging with one of these questions. Before delving into each chapter's findings, I would like to return to the fields of study originally introduced in the beginning and how I understood their role for this project. I designated between four fields of study: critical race studies, labor studies, affect studies, and critical university studies. I hope that it has become clear that it is not so easy to detangle these from each other, at least in my own work. Critical Race Scholarship is deeply connected to how we understand labor, particularly in an empire that was founded on chattel slavery and continues to rely on racialized labor. I don't believe one can understand the university and its shifting politics without recognizing its racist roots and ongoing racist practices, particularly in how that affects those who labor under it. One's labor is deeply affected by the everyday experience of conducting that labor with and without one's community. How one understands their identity within a site of labor moves them to a particular kind of practice. These different fields all connect back to each other, clarifying and complicating how we understand each of them. While I believe that you can find each discipline within each chapter, I understand each as focusing on one.

Chapter 1 engages most directly with the field of affect studies and the experiences of alienation at multiple intersections. I suggested the concept of *Ensuing Alienation* in order to capture the myriad of ways that the kin of farmworkers experience alienation within the university. Alienation through our labor, our race, and our family all come to create this experience of compounding alienation that we must then maneuver all at once. We are not just contending with our own alienation, but that of our families as well. Understanding their alienation in the fields, and how they misunderstand and do not take seriously our labor in the academy. My participants and I shared how our academic labor is often overlooked or devalued by our family, and we contend with that while also making space for their laboring experience in

the fields. Work looks and feels different to them, and we understand that in a very real way. We do not necessarily try to change their minds about our labor, but their perspective does influence how we then come to understand it. We are forced to situate ourselves along a lineage of labor. In that way, one cannot seek to solve the alienation of academic laborers without understanding how the university itself exists within a larger system of othering that we have been contending with for generations. To see it merely as this place of greater access to something or as a moment of overcoming a laboring history does a disservice to those of us still grappling with a kind of loss. I suggest that each of us understand our own alienation within the academy more critically, and how that moves us to engage with ourselves and each other. All I have known is alienation and constant reflexivity.

Chapter 2 is more focused on the field of labor studies, though still continues to engage with affect as well. I identify how we contend with this loss and separation of what was once familiar through the concept of *Labor Scripts*. By building off the Natalia Molina's concept of "Racial Scripts," I suggested understanding a mode of laboring through an on-going, generational practice that is in response to the dehumanizing practices of racial capitalism. The conceptualization of the "Mexican" and the dominant narratives around immigrants persist even after they leave these racially designated laboring environments. The socially constructed "Mexican" exists within the academy, designating what we study and in what departments we work. Although originally constructed to justify a laborer in the fields, other "skilled" and "professional" sectors have increasingly come to look like those fields. In that same framing, I believe we should engage with histories of labor by also engaging with what comes after them for the laborer. Although some Marxist scholars might believe that the investment in identities ultimately comes to weaken any kind of labor solidarity, I understand it as only expanding it.

Labor is tied to our identity, our identities are what have historically determined the labor made available to us. If we are able to “overcome” our identities and make it out a more clearly designated racialized space, that labor continues to be in the back of our minds as something to avoid and not go back to. Labor Scripts takes all of this into account and provides a means of taking seriously how we respond to these histories in the everyday. The agricultural industry does not stop affecting us once we leave those fields, they persist and affect our work in the academy. To understand labor in this expansive way challenges how we understand the role of it for ourselves personally as well.

Chapter 3 relies on the field of critical university studies, though this literature is also deeply engaged with labor studies as well. Chapter 3 situates these experiences of Ensuing Alienation and Labor Scripts more concretely within higher education in it’s current state. I understand this project as capturing a specific historical moment of the academy from someone who is currently laboring within it. I am, in theory, some representation of the imagined person that the anti-DEI movement sees as a threat to a way of life. I can say that for all the DEI initiatives, I do not think that I have come away with a sense of belonging or greater access to something that others do not have. It has always been the history of the institution to delegate who is and is not worthy, and these initiatives have served primarily to reinforce that we might be worthy, but only in specific ways. I have experienced the rise of these since the Black Lives Matter movement in my undergraduate education, and am living through the formal divestment in them now during the second iteration of a particularly volatile administration. My subjects and I reckon with this current moment and the ways that it has moved our work and investments in community. This project captures the conflicted feelings around these initiatives and the different ways that people have suggested navigating it. Some see it as a time of re-investment, others

reconstruction. I feel like I need distance and space, looking to build a future outside of this institution that has historically treated URM in harmful ways. It is in times of crisis where a return to the undercommons can feel like a salient way of imagining what our labor can and should look like within these colonial systems. I do not condone anybody who feels the need to defend the institution and its place in our society during this moment, but I do suggest making space for engaging with how the institution as thought about your place in society.

It is in the everyday that we deal with all these overlapping experiences of race and labor, the afterlives of farmwork. Our ensuing alienation and labor scripts are created out of understanding the affective ways we are moved by the histories we come from and how those experiences are not left in the past. My hope is that through this intergenerational examination of labor between these two laboring sites that are imagined to be so distinct from each other, we can each come to have a more holistic understanding of labor. I urge future scholarship to not think about labor narrowly as a singular experiences and to understanding it as always having a history. Understanding where we labor and who is absent. Although this project has focused on the labor of farmwork and the labor in the academy, I believe that this kind of engagement can be done by anybody and anywhere. As more and more spaces begin to reflect the factory floor, the examinations of their culture and how that affects families will continue to be integral.

Closing Remarks

“That’s not okay...you can make that much if you work at a grocery store,” my mom says when I disclose how much I make for being a Teaching Assistant for a school year. “It’s kind of like education used to be up here,” she makes a gesture raising her hand above her head. “But its kind of... leveling itself out,” she says as she slowly brings her hand down. In many

ways, it feels like I've made it out just in time. It's hard to imagine how this space will look even a year from now with the aggressive cuts being made by the university at every single level, except the top. I worry for my friends who are still struggling to get through, waiting on responses from their advisors or scouring for funding opportunities outside of the department. I want to feel pride for making it this far, but it's hard knowing what others continue to go through. I shared these feelings with a fellow TA. They still have more time here and responded by saying that it's very "gracious" of me to be thinking about those who will still be here, but that I should try to enjoy it for others. I mostly feel lethargic. I have to imagine that the space will haunt me in similar ways that the fields do to some degree.

Part of my inability to feel pride might also be because of just how exhaustive it has all been to get to the end of this. I would be lying if I said that I felt totally supported through this dissertation. I understand and have documented the ways that the university continues to overwhelm faculty and particularly faculty of color. They are tasked with solving problems by the people who create and reproduce them. There have been moments where those conditions lead to poor treatment of myself and other graduate students just trying to finish within their funding window. We have been blamed for not already knowing how to write and not having figured out how we are going to pay rent. We've had to make space for the experiences of faculty and not take it personal but still make deadlines for our own progress. To be completely honest, it has been overwhelming suddenly feeling so much support and affirmation as this is coming to an end. It still really feels like the rug could be pulled from under me at any moment. The feelings of inadequacy in the eyes of the university feels impossible to shake. I hate to come off ungrateful though. I am grateful for what people have been able to do for me, and I am sorry for adding to your plate. I hold no resentment, and I leave this project very satisfied with what I

have been able to make under these conditions with the help that was able to be given. I promise I will no longer bump up emails in your inbox.

I shared with my mom all these feelings I've been experiencing and how hard the process has been on me emotionally. Although she didn't know just how much this was all effecting me, it makes a lot of sense to her:

"You were not born into it. For example, my mom and her field work and my dad and his field work... they were born into hard labor and hard work and that's how they grew up. That's in their core. But you were not born into all this University talk. You were born into "we're gonna go cut some peachers, we're gonna go and cut some wood, and we're gonna go pick strawberries. And that's what was in your core. You were not one of those children who were born into professionals who were gonna go work at an office. If you grow up with that, that's what you take pride in. You disconnected from your roots to go here."

It's affirming hearing her words, and she's able to reflect the dilemma that is at the heart of this project. I have had to disconnect from a way of working and understanding of myself in order to succeed in this space. This project has felt like a very intentional return to those roots. To tending to the lineage I and many others come from in the academy. I would never make the claim that leaving the academy is going to solve this disconnect, nor that this project has necessarily provided some roadmap for connecting back to where we come from. But I hope that it provides some reassurance to anybody who has questioned their worth in this space. Just simply speaking with others so frankly about our shared experiences has brought me so much validation and hope.

I am equally inspired by the histories of alternative schooling practices that have long existed outside of institutions as well. African-American communities created "Freedom Schools" during the Jim Crow era in order to retain history and culture that was (and continues

to be) under attack by federal institutions¹⁹⁹. Mexican communities in the Southwest created “escuelitas” during the 19th century to combat the educational disenfranchisement they faced. These schools, similar to freedoms schools, focused on pedagogies that centered their community’s culture and language²⁰⁰. Both of these historical examples demonstrate how communities have come together to work against hegemonic ideals of knowledge and knowledge formation. Alternative schooling models demonstrate to how we have always worked to provide each other with sources of knowledge that are centered in the experiences of our people and not dependent on funding from governing bodies that are quick to divest from particular groups when it is no longer profitable or politically convenient.

We’re still here, and we’re still working for something better in whatever ways we can. I am inspired by the closing lines of Doug Foley’s book: “In spite of my critical perspective, I have no political ideology. In an epoch when our ideal models of society and culture are blurring, I am left celebrating people and profane culture--- until we invent something better.”²⁰¹ I will similarly be celebrating with the unprofessional and the unskilled, whether it’s those still struggling to get funding in their 6th year of graduate school or those harvesting almonds in the central valley. The fields and the University are not as far apart as we think. For some, it can be a frightening reality to content with. For others, it’s a reality that we have seen people persevere through before. Let it guide us in how we labor and take care of one another.

¹⁹⁹ Robin D. G. Kelley, “On Racial Justice, Black History, Critical Race Theory, and Other Felonious Ideas,” in *Our History Has Always Been Contraband: In Defense of Black Studies* (Haymarket Books, 2023).

²⁰⁰ Philis M. Barragán Goetz et al., “Mexican American Educational History: A Moment of Recognition,” *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education* 125, no. 10 (2023): 144–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01614681231216526>.

²⁰¹ Foley, *Learning Capitalist Culture*. 205.

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