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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
SANTA CRUZ

(IM)MOBILE GIRLS:  
LATINA RURAL GIRLHOODS IN THE UNITED STATES

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

SOCIOLOGY

with an emphasis in LATIN AMERICAN AND LATINO STUDIES

by

**Roxanna Villalobos**

June 2023

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## ABSTRACT

(IM)MOBILE GIRLS: LATINA RURAL GIRLHOODS IN THE UNITED STATES

by

ROXANNA VILLALOBOS

This dissertation examines how rural and agricultural contexts shape intersectional formations of racialized girlhood in the United States. The project investigates how Latina girls who grew up in California's Central Valley (CV) and who have ties to the region's agricultural job sector form their subjectivities and sense of home in these racialized rural contexts, and how in turn, these rural contexts inform different types of mobility for these girls. More specifically, I explore how rural-to-urban migration shapes their upward economic mobilities, as well as their future aspirations and sense of self. Findings from over 100 hours of interview data and 77 items of visual data via digital ethnography with 46 participants suggest that the social processes that encourage mobility for rural youth create push and pull factors that differ according to race/ethnicity, gender, class, and immigrant background.

Whether or not Latina rural girls become mobile depends on three interrelated elements of rural spatial production—the rural as material, the rural as discourse, and the rural as affect. First, the rural as material emphasizes how the Central Valley's agricultural political economy creates few pathways for upward economic mobility



via work and education, as rural spaces lack diverse market economies and higher education institutions compared to the rest of the state, pushing youth out. Second, the rural as discourse highlights how CV rural youth receive messages that urban cities are places where successful, exciting, and modern adulthood happens, making the CV less desirable. Latina girls, in particular, also associate traditional gender roles and heteronormative relationships with their small rural hometowns, which mark the rural as culturally distinct from their imaginations of and experiences with urban life. Lastly, the rural as affect may mitigate push factors as girls experience the rural as a place of tranquility, slowness, and family connectedness, motivating some young Latinas to return or stay home despite having desires to leave for better futures. *(Im)mobile Girls* contends with the political-economical, cultural, and affective dimensions of rurality to examine how subjectivity, social inequalities, and life outcomes are shaped by social-spatial production.

*Para las muchachas de la Valle Central*

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Completing a doctoral degree and dissertation project is a huge feat that is not done alone. I achieved this milestone of a lifetime with the unconditional love and support of my family and community. To my mami, Elena, and "big" sister, Joanna, the inspiration for all my scholarship. They raised me with fierce love, even in moments of great struggle and uncertainty, in our small rural town of Parlier, CA. Seeing the tired hands of my mom after packaging fruit for hours made me aware of the plight of the Central Valley farmworkers, giving me a critical consciousness —

even if that meant, at a young age, wanting my mom to never work again. While my mother worked two or three jobs, Joanna held my hand, raising me to be a diligent thinker and dreamer. Thank you both for everything. To my loving partner, Alex, for believing in me every day in all my shapes and shades. For holding me when I needed comfort. For cheering me on when I needed affirmation and validation in seeing this project through to the end. You were my rock, and I will always be grateful for you. And to my cats Melón and Uvas, aka the Fruits. Thank you for being the best companions and cuddle partners between writing sessions. I love you all.

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academia. I'm in awe of all that you do, from treating all your students with compassion, care, and honesty – as full humans with lives outside of the classroom, to creating space on campus for Latinx community building and human rights activism. I remember our independent study on Women of Color feminisms quite fondly because I felt at home in a classroom, a very rare occurrence in graduate seminars. And for the first time, I was being truly mentored and nurtured into becoming a feminist scholar in my own right, even with all its growing pains. That was because of your wonderful ability of putting into praxis your feminist politics in practical, yet caring ways. You have always been there for me, and I will forever be grateful for you.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Staying Home in Rural California**

*(Im)mobile Girls* emerged long before I conceived the study in concrete ways, prior to reading any scholarship on rural girls. Instead, it existed as a narrative I crafted as I grew up, which was then a story exclusively about me—my desires, sense of home, and future aspirations as a working-class Latina from California’s Central Valley, an agricultural and rural landscape imperative to the state’s agricultural political economy.

Growing up, school symbolized a boat I had to diligently build to set voyage at the age of eighteen. This voyage meant economic mobility for my immigrant family and me. For a long time, however, it primarily meant escaping the rural life that constricted my aspirations. As a young girl, I desired nothing more than to leave the rural flat lands that engulfed me. Endless fields of crops—oranges, watermelons, peaches, plums, grapes, and corn—were all that my eyes could see. A horizontal canvas of flat lands and a scorching heat. Into the horizon, a blazing sun. Between the agricultural fields, in small rural towns, farm-working immigrant families living and surviving, often struggling to make ends meet. As much as I loved home, it represented a lack I could not articulate, but deeply felt.

My need to escape my forgotten rural hometown motivated me to excel in school—from elementary school all the way to graduate school—until it could no

longer. After finishing my master's program in Boston, I had a transformative moment. One summer night, as I shopped in Star Market for groceries, I came upon a stand of nectarines branded with Moonlight. I thought, "I know this name." Then it hit me with shocking force. Moonlight was the name of the packing house where my mother worked at that time. I called her. The fruit she packaged in rural California stood in Boston. She was still feeding me from afar, even if that meant working at a strenuous low-wage job. Suddenly, a pang of guilt and longing hit me. Not only did I miss home, but I also realized I had escaped from its poor conditions rather than changing them. I decided to return home.

At first, returning home symbolized a subjective transformation characterized by a desire to change the social conditions that compelled me to leave in the first place. Though, I was not returning home completely. Instead, I came home through my scholarship, still from afar, with trepidation, exhilaration, and curiosity. As a feminist scholar, I embraced my lived experience of rural girlhood as a source of inquiry and knowledge, a social lens that I could critically investigate, reflect upon, and utilize to create new feminist epistemologies that considered the politics of space and place in the study of girlhood and mobility, leading me to the early stages of the study.

Once in the field, much to my surprise, I continued to transform. I transformed alongside the Central Valley girls that participated in *(Im)mobile Girls*. As girls recounted their own desires, lived experiences, and future aspirations, many of them expressed gratitude in having a space to pause, reflect, and articulate their girlhoods

in ways they hadn't before, though recounting their experiences wasn't always easy, but filled with contradictory and mixed emotions. On my end, I found myself reaffirmed in my commitment to rural Latinas while also embracing the multiplicity that existed across our experiences of growing up in the Central Valley, all while finding points of affinity I seldom shared with others.

Leaving and returning home to the Central Valley—the story at the heart of *(Im)mobile Girls*—was no longer only about *me*, but about *us*, about rural Latinas from the Valley. As I engaged in thoughtful and intimate conversations with other Central Valley Latinas, their *testimonios*—the stories of their lives—revealed my lived experience to be part of a larger history of Latina rural girlhood that remains largely untold. Inspired by the Latina Feminist Group (2001), I employed *testimonio* as a feminist research method and “as a crucial means of bearing witness and inscribing into history those lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the alchemy of erasure” (2). This dissertation bears witness to Latina girlhood in the Central Valley, with its contradictions and nuances, a story that will continue to unfold beyond what is captured here. I began *(Im)mobile Girls* with my own *testimonio* as a means to write myself into the story with full transparency, vulnerability, and solidarity with the Central Valley girls that shared their desires, struggles, histories, and complicated relationship with their families, homeplaces, and rurality with me for this research project.

As feminist researcher, *(Im)mobile Girls* allowed me to re-inhabit my home with a deeper understanding of how “the personal is structural” (Ahmed 2017: 30). I



learned how my desire to move away from the rural—a desire present in most Central Valley girls—derived from broader socio-historical formations of the United States (national), California (regional), and California’s Central Valley (local) that precede and succeed me, therefore shaping and animating my subjectivity and life trajectory in particular ways. However, the global structures of power that produce multi-scalar spaces and places within linear temporalities—wherein the rural symbolizes the past—do not overdetermine the subjectivities and lived experiences of Central Valley rural girls nor mine. This dissertation is a testament to that.

*(Im)mobile Girls* is a project of “anti-imperialist feminist praxis” of returning and staying home (Roshanravan 2012: 1) to critically examine racialized rural girlhood, a field largely studied abroad or outside of the United States. “Staying home” is a methodology rooted in U.S. Women of Color feminist epistemologies that entails “fracturing the familiar ideological and epistemic boundaries that constitute one’s sense of home by re-inhabiting one’s geographic home through the lens of the colonized and racially dispossessed” (2). Following suit, *(Im)mobile Girls* critically examines the production of rurality in California’s Central Valley—the place I call home—to unearth its embeddedness in discourses of Western modernity as well as global agricultural capitalist accumulation predicated on the disposability and invisibilization of Latinx immigrant farmworkers and their labor, as well as the systemic genocide and detention of Indigenous peoples beginning in the 19th century.

In acknowledging home as a place of contradictions—of intimate and state violence as well as feminist resistance to this violence, *(Im)mobile Girls* also resists the Occidentalist logic of "the West and Rest" that discursively conceptualizes the United States as a safe, homogenous, and democratic nation (Roshanravan 2012). The methodology of staying home defies the white feminist impulse to look outside of the U.S. for global perspectives on patriarchy, a global impulse that Chandra Mohanty and M. Jacqui Alexander call the "cartographic rule of the transnational as always 'elsewhere'" (2010: 33). I heed Mohanty and Alexander's call to enact a feminist epistemic ethic that, "critique(s) and move(s) away from this formulation of the U.S. Democratic state—a formulation that usually leads to the erasure of the centrality of the experiences of colonization in the lives of Third-World women and U.S. women of color" (1997: xxxiv). As a Woman of Color feminist scholar, I take up this challenge to de-Westernize feminist praxis, which "could be seen to begin at 'home'" (Kaplan 1994: 140).

### **Western Modernity as Discourse**

*(Im)mobile Girls* seeks to critically study Western Modernity as a discursive, affective, and material structure of power that shapes rurality and girlhood in the United States, rather than examining U.S. Latina rural girlhood as an apolitical lived experience. Grewal and Kaplan (1994) argue for "an examination of modernity as an important part of transnational feminist practices" because "modernity has participated predominately within discourses of the formation of nation-states" (22).

By employing transnational and intersectional feminist frameworks, *(Im)mobile Girls* refuses to locate the rural as outside of the “West” and instead shifts focus to modern nation-making at home in the United States. As such, it is important to first explicate what is meant by the concepts of “Western” and “modernity” and the discourses they conjure up when they are utilized together.

Colloquially, the “West” is typically utilized to demarcate specific geographical contexts, countries, and cultures, as a spoken or written short hand for a place or way of living. Far from neutral, “the West” casts a hierarchy and value-judgment through its utterance, connoting superiority in economic, political, and social terms that represent modernity and modern development. To this end, the “West” is not an objective material reality, but rather, it is a discourse that engages in relations of power. Stuart Hall (2018) examines the discursive formation of “the West and the Rest,” arguing that “the West” is an idea or concept, not an actual place; it is a language for imagining a set of complex stories, ideas, historical events, and social relationships. In his canonical essay, Hall asks: “How did the idea, the language, of “the West” arise, and what have been its effects? What do we mean by calling it a concept?” (142).

*(Im)mobile Girls* asks similar questions about “rural girlhood.” One can claim that rural girlhood is not a historical construct or idea, instead claiming it as an experience, identity, or reality. In fact, I conjure my early life experiences as a type of rural girlhood, as something that occurred to me as much as the girl informants in this study. The effects that Hall speaks of signal that social realities—experience, identity,

and places—are in fact real and that we must account for them. But as Joan Scott reminds us, experience alone cannot be taken as revealing a “truth” or suffice to understand functions of power. In this sense, I heed Scott’s claim to go beyond making difference visible—beyond solely documenting racialized rural girlhood in the United States—by instead aiming to uncover how *difference is created*:

Making visible the experience of a different group exposes the existence of repressive mechanisms, but not their inner workings or logics; we know that difference exists, but we don’t understand it as relationally constituted. For that we need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences. (779)

Hall explains how difference has been historically created through “the West and the Rest” discursive formation. The West and the Rest relegated colonized societies as inferior, underdeveloped, and undesirable compared to Europe (and later the United States), and in doing so, created real effects through the forced and violent extraction of lands and resources, as well as the systematic genocide of Indigenous people and the enslavement of African people. As an extension of this history and production of knowledge, rural girlhood is not only a material reality that signals difference and inequality, but also functions as a discourse of power, one that belongs under the umbrella of Western modernity. In other words, “rural” and “girlhood” belong to the signifying chain created by the West and the Rest and can reveal to us its intricate functions through the real-life effects it produces today via subject-formation, mobility trajectories, and life outcomes, which I illustrate through the participants of this study in Chapters 3 and 4. This project, then, contends that “the

West” is a global meta-narrative that relies on the historical intersections of gender and age to signify and materialize power relations in spatial and temporal terms, wherein the rural plays a crucial role in the valorization and normalization of an “adult or developed” urban life.

In accordance with Hall, I am intentional about delineating rural girlhood as a discourse. But what is meant by the term “discourse”? Drawing on Foucault, Hall summarizes discourse as “the production of knowledge through language” (155) that produces real effects via social practices. More precisely, discourses are:

ways of talking, thinking, or representing a particular subject or topic. They produce meaningful knowledge about that subject. This knowledge influences social practices, and so has real consequences and effects. Discourses are not reducible to class interests but always operate in relation to power—they are part of the way power circulates and is contested. The question of whether a discourse is true or false is less important than whether it is effective in practice. When it is effective—organizing and regulating relations of power (say, between the West and the Rest)—it is called a “regime of truth.” (156)

A discourse functions through the production of knowledge, a system of languages and images that represent a subject in a specific way, creating dominant and persistent narratives. The knowledge alone is not sufficient to enact power, but rather, solidifies power relations through repetitive practices. The West and the Rest discursive formation produces and animates power by functioning as a schema of intelligibility utilized to learn, understand, and value all societies—to “know” others and thereby ourselves. Once this schema of intelligibility is believed and utilized as being universal, scientific, and objective, it produces “truth” through its real-life effects.

The West and the Rest is a master binary system used to “know” societies, subsequently organizing people, places, and cultures as characteristic of particular societies. This discourse became the dominant way of conceiving the world, and over time, became taken for granted, often viewed as the inherent way the world works.

Hall describes the West and the Rest as a system of representation with the following four criteria:

1. A conceptual tool that organizes and classifies societies into different categories
2. A system of representation or a complex set of languages and images that create a composite picture of societies
3. A model of comparison utilized to explain difference between societies
4. A criteria of evaluation to rank societies within a hierarchical system

Thus, to “know” a society is to organize, classify, and rank that society within a hierarchical system that always-already positions the West at the top, as the ideal prototype that is different, and thus better, than *all* societies outside of its defined parameters. What are those parameters? Hall describes it as such: “By ‘Western’ we mean the type of society that is developed, industrialized, urbanized, capitalist, secular, and modern” (142). These parameters become the criteria to evaluate and rank societies based on any difference that deviates from it, which casts value-judgments based on those differences. Hall summarizes these value judgments as a signifying chain that dichotomizes societies into the following oppositional binaries:

- “*Western*” = *industrial* = *urban* = *developed* = *good* = *desirable*

- “*non-Western*” = *nonindustrial* = *rural* = *agricultural* = *underdeveloped* = *bad* = *undesirable*

Hall traces this system of representation as originating during the discovery of the “New World” and subsequent European colonization, but argues that the age of Enlightenment solidified the West and the Rest as an objective and scientific reality that supported a meta-narrative about the economic, political, and cultural modernization—or lack thereof—of the world:

The Enlightenment aspired to be a “science of man.” It was the matrix of modern social science. It provided the language in which “modernity” first came to be defined. In Enlightenment discourse, the West was the model, the prototype, and the measure of social progress. It was Western progress, civilization, rationality, and development that were celebrated. And yet, all this depended on the discursive figures of the “noble versus ignoble savage,” and of “rude and refined nations” which had been formulated in the discourse of “the West and the Rest.” So the Rest was critical for the formation of Western Enlightenment— and therefore for modern social science. Without the Rest (or its own internal “others”), the West would not have been able to recognize and represent itself as the summit of human history. (177)

Manichean<sup>1</sup> binaries of civilized/uncivilized, rational/irrational, and human/animal procured the West and the Rest discursive model that defined the modern self and

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<sup>1</sup> A Manichean model “divides the world into compartments and people into different “species.” This division is based not on reciprocal affirmations, but rather on irreconcilable opposites cast into good versus evil, beautiful versus ugly, intelligent versus stupid, white versus black, human versus subhuman modes... Its logic is a categorical either/or, in which one of terms is considered superfluous and unacceptable. Yet in reality, this duality of opposites in the Manichean outlook are interdependent. Each is defined in terms of its opposite and each derives its identity in opposition to the other (Bulhan 1985, 140).

Other in oppositional, yet relational terms. This Western hierarchy of modern development gained legitimacy and validation through the scientific paradigm of positivism and empiricism during the Enlightenment period, which applied scientific understandings of the natural world to the social world of human beings and human societies (Tuhiwai Smith 2012: 92). Understanding became conceptualized as being akin to observing, measuring, and ranking development.

The Western model of development is a temporal-spatial schema of linear progression—a forward movement of time along an established order—constructed as natural and universal over time. This linear schema of progress characterizes both human and national modern development. That is, the development of modern capitalist economies and modern nationalisms (or the making of the nation-state) parallel the linear progression of human development at both the evolutionary and individual level. Theories of human evolution characterize child growth as inherently different from animal development due to the steady period of significant growth during adolescence:

Whereas several human growth processes are identical to those found in the animal kingdom, hominids' life history is markedly different. Humans are born immature, helpless, and defenseless; have a relatively short period of infancy; and are the only species that has a childhood — a biologically and behaviorally distinct and relatively stable growth interval between infancy and the juvenile period that follows. We are also the only species to have true adolescence as a period devoted to puberty and accelerated growth. (Hochberg 2012: 1)

In other words, adolescence—typically defined as ranging from age ten to nineteen—is what sets humans apart from animals because it's the period of human development



that fully transcends the human from the animal-like characteristics of infancy and childhood; this can be said both of the human *species* and human *individual* evolutionary growth. Accordingly, adolescence represents the tumultuous, yet promising in-between period of transformation that must be carefully managed to ensure a prosperous adult life, making adolescence “an important cultural project” (Rickman 2018: 6) for nation-making.

In turn, these biological models of aging function as naturalized schemas to understand and manage the development of modernity. Notably, economic modernization mirrors the transition from a precarious, dependent childhood to a successful, self-sufficient adulthood; that is, the process of national modernization is broadly conceptualized as moving forward and crossing categorical boundaries from developing to developed capitalist economies. The initial period of Western Europe modernization beginning in the late seventeenth century—the “original” place of modernity—is characterized as an economic phase of “adolescence” that set in motion a universal process of capitalist modernity. Modernization theorist, W.W. Rostow, proclaimed that all societies could be categorized as belonging to one of the five stages of economic growth: 1) the traditional society, 2) preconditions for take-off, 3) the take-off, 4) the drive to maturity, and 5) the age of high mass-consumption (1960: 4).

Interestingly, these stages conceptualize modernization as a progression in which a traditional society that must “take-off” in order to reach economic “maturity” – reminiscent of an adolescent period in transition towards adult maturation. More

precisely, stage one and two represent a traditional society driven by a limited agrarian economy in transition to take-off into a modern society. Stage three and four represent modernization or the active cultivation of a capitalist economy via technological innovations, wherein “new industries expand rapidly, yielding profits of large proportion of which are invested in new plant” (8); this economic growth is sustained over time, wherein “the economy exploits hitherto unused natural resources and methods of production” (8). And finally, stage five is a fully fleshed capitalism of mass consumption and new political powers produced by “a command over consumption that transcended basic food, shelter, and clothing” (10).

In this historical account of modernization, Britain is described as the first country to take-off into modernity from the West: “Among the Western European stages, Britain, favored by geography, natural resources, trading possibilities, social and political structure, was the first to develop fully the preconditions for take-off” (Rostow 1960: 6). Evidently, Rostow draws on the West and the Rest discourse to cast Britain and Western Europe as the original place of modernity and as the pinnacle of modern development. And yet, the West and the Rest is not necessarily historically accurate. Post-colonial and post-modern scholars, including Hall, have challenged the idea that Western societies were developmentally ahead of “the Rest” (Fabian 2014) or that there is a single universal modernity and its local iterations (Rofel 1999; Sivaramakrishnan & Agrawal, 2003). Instead, these scholars argue that “modernity ought to be understood as ‘multiple’ – as composed of ‘alternative’ and indigenous social formations and politics” (Weinbaum et al. 2008). These scholars,

thus, attempt to deconstruct and dispel the simplification and dichotomization of the societies nested within the Rest part of the binary.

As Hall contends, the West and the Rest discourse drew its roots from European Colonization, making a “regime of truth” about power, rather than being accurate or universal although it presents itself that way. Rostow’s functionalist model provided “scientific” and “objective” developmental criteria for evaluating modernization, but in doing so, validated the colonization of “traditional societies”:

Colonies were often established initially not to execute a major objective of national policy, nor even to exclude a rival economic power, but to fill a vacuum; that is, to organize a traditional society incapable of self-organization (or unwilling to organize itself) for modern import and export activity, including production for export. (Rostow 1960: 109)

Couched in “neutral” economic terms, the colonization of non-Western societies was described as a central part of expanding capitalist modernity: “Modernization aroused the ‘moral commitment, energy, and resources’ of the so-called developed North to ensure that developing nations modernized in a fashion appropriate for capitalist development” (Moeller 2018: 65). Evidently, the naturalization of modern linear development is deeply imbricated in the histories of settler-colonialism, white-supremacy, and the rise of global capitalism—systems of power that depend on temporal and spatial borders that define and enclose the “modern.”

## Rural Girlhood in the United States

The U.S. is an *imagined* modern metropolis implicitly defined in opposition to the rural, a geography often mapped onto the Global South via images of poverty-stricken, underdeveloped landscapes and people, typically of children. While the United States varies immensely in terms of its geographic landscapes, the global image of the U.S nation is the modern city, often materialized through images of Los Angeles or New York City in U.S. popular culture, which is globalized via television, social media, and music.

For instance, Mexican rural girls from Soto's study (2018) were motivated to migrate to the U.S. by a strong desire for modernity, which they believed could only be obtained by migrating alongside their families to *El Norte* or the United States. Soto highlights how the imagination of the U.S. as a modern metropolis not only produces girls' desires but also produces broad patterns of migration: "For Leti, El Norte meant skyscrapers, concrete, steel and modern machinery. These ideas of modernity perhaps came from Hollywood films delivered to her television set before her migration" (180). Much to their surprise, Soto's girl informants that migrated from Zinapécuaro, Mexico to Napa, California experienced the shock of racialization as immigrants (undocumented and documented) and the lack of "modernity" in their class status, surprised to find "so many trees" instead of skyscrapers, concrete, steel, and modern machinery (180). Even after migrating from Mexico to the United States, Mexican rural girls retained their "Third World" social status, finding themselves in an agricultural context that contradicted their imaginations of the modern United States.

Girls from Soto's study drew on globalized discourses of girlhood that promise modernity via transnational rural-to-urban migration, from a "pre-modern" Mexico to a "modern" United States. These global discourses of girlhood draw on oppositional binaries, which conceptualize girls in the Global North as modern feminist subjects with desirable lives and manifold freedoms. Upon migrating to the city, rural girls find a different reality than they expected, though these broader discourses of oppositional girlhood remain powerful in shaping girls motivations to leave their rural homeplaces. In addition, discourses of oppositional girlhoods relegate the rural girl of color as located outside of the United States.

Bentz and Switzer, along with other critical girlhood scholars (Khoja-Moolji 2018; Moeller 2018; Switzer, Bent, and Endsley 2016), utilize a politics of location to question the oppositional binaries "that mythologize the differences and similarities" (Kaplan 1994: 138) between Global North and Global South girls, which overwhelmingly homogenize girls in sexist, classist, and racist terms. Broadly, girlhood scholars identify a dichotomization between Global North and Global South girls as either empowered, educated, and upwardly mobile girls or victimized, uneducated, and poor girls, the difference materialized by images of poverty-stricken and racialized Global South landscapes (Valdivia 2018).

Further, the dichotomization of girlhood is legitimized via girl-power discourse:

Girls are often constructed as having limitless power and opportunities, as reflected in Girl Power discourse that captures the idea of individualized female empowerment and constructs a world

in which social inequalities and the need for political change do not exist (Pomerantz et al. 2013). By contrast, girls, particularly those in the Global South, are also often depicted as victims in need of rescue and protection... (Vanner 2019: 121)

Girl-power has been criticized by many scholars for similar reasons that transnational and Women of Color feminists have criticized white Western feminism: feminism is weaponized as a tool for “saving” Global South women and girls of color from their “traditional, pre-modern” cultures and nation-states, a justification for imperialist projects by the U.S. state and global corporations (Moeller 2018, Mohanty 2003). Hegemonic discourses of feminism and girlhood, thus, collude with U.S. imperialism through portrayals of Third-World women and girls of color as located outside of “West” and in need of rescue.

Thus, I contend that the differences purported to exist between Global North and Global South girls rely on imaginations and discourses attached to the rural. More specifically, the discourses of rurality that give fodder to oppositional girlhood are relationally produced via the modern city, wherein rurality is designated as backward, innocent, or uncivilized. In essence, the figure of the girl in the Global North is imagined as "urban" and the figure of the girl in the Global South is imagined as "rural," an opposition that fails to represent the experiences of girls in both sides of the hemisphere. Because "girlhood studies within the Western context remains predominantly urban in focus" (Cairns 2015: 477), girlhood scholars reify the "cartographic rule of the transnational as always 'elsewhere'" (Mohanty and

Alexander 2010: 33), where rural remains imagined outside of the Global North, especially the United States.

While some girlhood scholars focus on the intersections of rurality and girlhood, these intersections are often devoid of an analysis of race/ethnicity and immigration status and tend to focus on countries outside of the United States, such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. When rurality and girls are studied in the U.S., it is largely done in the Midwestern and Appalachia regions with a large white majority. A few scholars are exceptions to this overwhelming pattern. *(Im)Mobile Girls* extends this scant, but critical literature. The objectives of this qualitative investigation on rural girlhood are, in part, designed to partake in dialogue with the following ethnographies on racialized rural girlhoods in the United States.

In *Women Without Class: Girls, Race, and Identity*, Julie Bettie (2014) conducts an ethnography that examines Mexican American and white girls' experiences of class difference and racial/ethnic identity within high school peer contexts in a rural town in California's Central Valley. This study explicitly "uncouple(s) the study of working-class and poor youth from an urban setting, since in media accounts they are so often portrayed as one and the same" (9), thus consciously shifting the gaze to rural youth to complicate studies of identity formation. More specifically, Bettie investigates how racial/ethnic identity informs cultural performances of class across girls' different socio-economic statuses, conceptualizing class as "*performative*, in the sense that class as cultural identity is an effect of social structure" (51). In other words, Bettie finds that class is performed and

materialized overtime as a cultural identity, not solely materialized via economic formations. As classed subjects (in addition to being gendered and racialized in specific ways), Latina rural girls in this study performed their class subjectivities in ways not always tied to their socioeconomic status, also known as “class passing” (50).

This work is pertinent to understanding how rural girls of color negotiate their racial/ethnic, gender, and class identities within rural contexts, which Bettie finds are shaped and constricted by social inequalities experienced by working-class communities in California’s Central Valley. For instance, Bettie finds that second-generation Mexican-American girls (or “Las Chicas”) from have limited options for economic mobility as “most girls wind up in low-wage clerical or retail jobs” (82) and because “going to college is not a possibility for most of these girls” (83), direct consequences of changing labor formations in a postindustrial U.S that leave working-class communities in economic and social precarity. However, Bettie notes that the structural conditions that inhibit Latina girls from succeeding in school are not recognized by both school personnel and parents; instead, girls are blamed for “failing” to keep up with their wealthier, white peers who excel in high school and enroll in four-year universities.

In *Adolescence, Girlhood, and Media Migration*, Aimee Rickman (2018) conducts an ethnography of “ethnically, economically, and racially diverse female, rural adolescents aged 14 through 19 from Midwest region of the United States” (2) to understand how they utilize social media to address and mediate the social



inequalities and spatial, political, and personal constrictions they face in their offline rural lives. Rickman calls on readers to ask: “What are young women, acting from containment and subordination of gendered U.S. adolescence, willing to do and to sacrifice online in an effort to gain increased social power, respect, and relevance?”

(3). Moving beyond essentialist discourses of girls as victims of social media, this book sets out to trace nuanced accounts of girls’ online involvement to understand how girls “affirm their subordination and further marginality” while also “claiming social spaces, demanding new social understandings, and finding new ways to exist in the present” (3). Rickman’s study is also pertinent to understanding how rural girls (especially rural girls of color) negotiate feelings of containment, social isolation, and distance unique to rural contexts via their digital lives:

Living geographically far away from school, from town, from theaters, malls, skating rinks, swimming pools, and other physical spaces where teens might regularly spend out-of-school time, they felt cut from things they imagined were important. “There’s nothing to do,” 17-year-old Noel explained. “There’s nothing—not stores or anything. You can’t shop. Everything is so far away.” Other teens in other small towns agreed. (26)

Because they’re far removed from teen-sanctioned spaces where girls can socialize, explore their identities, and form relationships, Rickman also notes that girls simultaneously felt crowded, or highly surveilled with little to no privacy from adults and parents: “spaces teens occupied felt crowded by oversight as adults policed their involvements and identities” (31). While rural girls are not alone in feeling simultaneously isolated and crowded, this study shows that this tension common

amongst U.S. teen girls is further compounded by rural contexts since geographic distance and lack of girl-friendly spaces left girls with much fewer options for self-exploration. As a couple of girls noted: ““You’d have more friends if you were in a bigger city,” Noel stated. And as Violet explained: ‘People and teens in cities, they live closer to civilizations. They probably get more recognitions than people that live in the country.’” (28). Evidently, the turn to social media feels more urgent and necessary for rural girls given that their offline lives overwhelmingly consist of only school and home spaces. Via social media, girls can gain 1) information, 2) social relevance, and 3) control over their lives (46-60), all of which contribute to forms of empowerment and agency, albeit in limited ways.

Taken together, Bettie and Rickman’s ethnographies highlight how girls living in U.S. rural and agricultural contexts have limited opportunities for subject-formation and mobility, findings that mirror the experiences of Central Valley girls in this study. Taken together, these studies provide multidimensional accounts of racialized rural girlhood in the United States. However, the limited scholarship on rural girls of color in the United States points to a larger political impulse to relegate the rural outside of the U.S. Overall, the rural girl of color is imagined outside of Western contexts within girlhood studies and beyond, perpetuating the idea that rurality belongs to a colonial distant past. This impulse to disassociate the U.S. with rurality derives from the temporal and spatial logics characteristic of an imperial global capitalist modernity.

Evidently, one of the most pervasive myths of Western modernity is that the United States is *the* emblem of modern democracy and a leading nation of the “First World.” This ideal has been shattered in many respects under the Trump administration, as the Pew Research Center found in 2017. Thirty-seven nations were surveyed shortly after Trump’s 2016 presidential election and expressed the following: “Most like American entertainment, but there is little consensus about U.S.-style democracy and many oppose the spread of American ideas and customs around the world” (Wike et al. 2017). This research points to a shift in global views of the United States when comparing opinions between the Trump administration and the previous Obama and Bush administrations: “At that time, positive views of the U.S. climbed in Europe and other regions, as did trust in how the new president would handle world affairs” (Wike et al. 2017). This change in global attitudes about the U.S. reveals that even as the real world predominately functions within “pre” or “post” time-frame of modernity (evidenced by the persistent “developed” and “developing” categories that economically describe nation-states), the global framework of Western modernity is not a given nor is it always successful.

### **The Study**

Thus, this research study departs from this premise: Western modernity is a discursive field of power that produces an imagination or ideal of the way the world (as a space and place) *should be*; it attempts to structure the world through spatial and temporal logics of binary and linear thinking for the purpose of (re)producing

capitalist accumulation and power hierarchies. However, *(Im)mobile Girls* does not treat Western modernity as enduring or deterministic, but rather embraces it as a place of struggle between social actors across socially and politically produced spaces/places, from social institutions to rural geographies. Accordingly, I contend that studying real-life rural girls may help us understand both modernity's failures and the social mechanisms of its continual reproduction. Studying real-life rural girls may unearth the multiple, contradictory, and complex reality that struggles with global capitalist modernity—whether that is living in a 'post-modern' (urban) or 'pre-modern' (rural) place.

#### *Testimonio as Latina Feminist Method*

Not only does *(Im)mobile Girls* complicate discourses of Western modernity through an intersectional analysis of rural girlhood, but this study also complicates homogenous discourses of Latinidad by extending literature on U.S. Latina girlhood. I employ the Latina feminist methodological approach of *testimonio* (or testimonial) to "reveal the complexity of Latina identities in the United States" (Latina Feminist Group 2001: 2), thereby creating knowledge and theory about Western modernity from the personal experiences of Latina girls from the Central Valley. *Testimonio* originates from liberation movements in Latin America as a political form of expression that bears witness to oppression, demands justice, cultivates critical consciousness, and expands notions of community and identity (Latina Feminist Group 2001; Pérez Huber 2009). *Testimonio* has been taken up by a variety of scholars within and beyond academia as political praxis and a critical methodology

that formulates knowledge about social structures, political struggle, and power hierarchies from lived experience, crafting a bottom-up approach to documenting collective experiences and histories.

Pérez Huber (2009) underscores how scholars across disciplines utilize *testimonio* in a number of ways, noting that “Women of Color scholars... have found the use of *testimonio* to document and/or theorize their own experiences of struggle, survival, and resistance, as well as that of others” (643-44). Accordingly, *testimonio* may be utilized as feminist methodological praxis that documents the political conditions, challenges, and injustices faced by Latinas while simultaneously disrupting homogenizing discourses and stereotypes historically attributed to Latinas and other women of color in the United States. Therefore, I primarily draw on the feminist approach to *testimonio* as conceptualized by the Latina Feminist Group (2001): “It is crucial, at this stage, to move beyond essentialism, which assumes a common Latina experience. Latinas must be placed in their varied histories, illuminating their positions within intersecting systems of power” (4). *(Im)mobile Girls* moves beyond essentialist depictions of U.S.-born Latinas by accounting for the political-economical, cultural, and affective dimensions of rurality in shaping their lived experiences as daughters of immigrant and farmworking parents. Thus, this project contextualizes Latina girlhood through an analysis of the political and social/cultural production of rurality in California.

A total of forty-six Latinas shared their *testimonios* of growing up in California’s Central Valley and their mobility experiences as they transitioned into

adulthood between summer 2019 and summer 2022. Central Valley Latinas shared their testimonies through 1) in-person and online informal interviews and 2) digital images and videos. Overall, I collected approximately 100 hours of interview data and 77 files of visual data in total. Initially, the study was designed as a qualitative study of in-depth, semi-formal interviews that would be supplemented by in-person participant-observation in select Central Valley counties between 2021-2022.

However, in-person field work posed health risks for both informants and I due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of data collection, different COVID-19 variants caused spikes in infection rates and increased the likelihood of infection. Therefore, the majority of the study's interview and ethnographic data was obtained digitally via the Zoom platform, which proved to be more accessible for participants going to college across the state. In addition to interviews, I recruited six girls from the larger pool of informants to participate in an exploratory phase of a digital ethnography in the summer of 2022. Participants of the digital ethnography documented their everyday lives in the Central Valley throughout the span of two to six weeks by digitally uploading images and videos via Google Forms (see Appendix B to view forms for Week 1 and Week 2). Visual uploads were supplemented by informal interviews where participants casually described the significance of the images or videos. All interviews lasted between one to two hours, with an average of an hour and a half across all testimonials. I met with sixteen girls more than once to continue their *testimonios* via a follow-up interview, while I engaged in several informal conversations with girls participating in the digital ethnography.

Qualitative data collection and analysis followed a grounded theoretical framework. That is, I remained open to the patterns that emerged from interview and ethnographic data without imposing any expectations based on existing scholarship on rural girlhood or from my own personal lived experience. Once I embarked in the field and held intimate conversations with young Latinas from the Valley, I soon realized that each girl was sharing the story of their lives or *testimonios*. Interviews covered the span of their entire lives, beginning with early childhood memories, including many accounts of girls growing up in rural Mexico and migrating to California's Central Valley, to navigating their current lives away from home in college, and everything in-between, as well as looking onward towards the future. I began interviews in chronological order, starting with questions about where and with whom they first lived, though girls jumped around in natural ways typical of informal conversations between confidants. We lingered whenever each girl felt it was necessary to describe a memory in detail, while I asked many follow up questions to get a deeper understanding of how their lives unfolded as they grew up. Across the girls' *testimonios*, homelife and school became focal points of their lives, emerging as the primary spatial contexts within their rural communities that shaped the girls' mobilities, as well their sense of self, sense of belonging, desires, and future aspirations.

### *Participants*

Commonalities organically emerged across participants' testimonials since I recruited participants with a specific demographic background (see Appendix A for

recruitment flyer), such as growing up in California’s Central Valley and having farm-working parents or family members (see Chapter 3 for more details on their home locations and ties to the agricultural industry). In addition, they share other important demographic characteristics. For instance, all participants were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, with an average age of twenty-one. I selected participants from this age range because it represents a pivotal phase in the transition from adolescence to adulthood in the United States, as the age of eighteen marks the end of high school, legal adulthood status, and the beginning of post-secondary education, including but not limited to college. Capping participant age eligibility at twenty-five allowed me to include experiences of girls that graduated college and were in the midst of making decisions about their futures, including whether or not they would return home to the Central Valley for work.

All participants self-identified as female or woman, though two participants expressed being gender fluid—which included using she/her pronouns—at the time of the interview. However, all participants identified as a “girl” growing up. Even as participants expressed themselves as young adults or young women in their contemporary lives, I utilize the term “girl” when referring to each participant for a couple of reasons. First, participants refer to themselves and other feminine-presenting people as “girls” regardless of age, as colloquially it may represent a term of endearment that expresses intimacy or a bond between two people across gender and age. In some instances, participants referred to me as “girl” throughout their testimonials to emphasize a point or express camaraderie with me as they shared



details about their personal lives. Second, participants engaged an active process of subject-formation as current or former “girls” via their *testimonios*, as they shared and reflected on their early life experiences and connected them to their current selves. In other words, participants actively constructed narratives about who they are based on an account of themselves as young girls via their *testimonios*, illustrating how the research process can be a transformative process for both participants and the researcher. In recounting their lived experiences in relation to gender, age, and rurality, participants crafted themselves as “Central Valley girls”—rural girls from this region of the state—and therefore, I use this term throughout the dissertation as a way to name the intersections that animate their subjectivities and mobilities.

All participants also shared a Latin American and immigrant background. In relation to ethnic-identity, girls self-identified in a variety of ways, including but not limited to: Latina/x, Hispanic, Mexican/a, Chicana, and Mexican American. All participants shared Mexican nationality with the exception of two Salvadoran American participants. As such, I utilize the term “Latina” when referring to participants as an inclusive ethnic term that underscores the intersection between their gender and ethnic identities and experiences growing up. Many girls found it difficult to identify their race, noting how the U.S. Census does not count Latinx/e/a/o self-identification as a racial category, leading many girls to select the “white” racial category though they don’t identify as white. Participants varied in their phenotype, although it was difficult to make any formal distinctions about their racial appearance through our digital interfaces. As such, processes of racialization included in the

study refer to the ways that nationality, ethnicity, geography, labor, language, and immigration status were utilized to mark racial differences between people and places—as opposed to individual forms of racialization. In terms of language, all participants spoke English and Spanish to varying degrees. As such, girls spoke a combination of both languages or *Spanglish* throughout their interviews. Further, the majority of participants were second-generation immigrants. Meaning, they were U.S.-born to foreign-born parents who migrated to the United States. I share the demographic breakdown of immigrant status in more detail in Chapter 3.

#### *Insider/Outsider Positionality*

As illustrated by my *testimonio*, I share many similarities with the girl informants of this study. I grew up in the small rural town of Parlier, CA in Fresno County to an immigrant farm-working mother. At the same time, we also embodied different social positions with varying forms of privilege that highlight the intersectional complexities of subjectivity and power. Though I was a working-class Latina from the Central Valley researching girls with similar backgrounds, we were far from being exactly the same. Following Latina feminist Patricia Zavella’s ethnographic approach, I will share the insider/outsider dilemmas that emerged as I engaged in this research to make my social location as researcher transparent in its multiplicity:

“Without ‘marking’ the social location of the ethnographer and informants (their status based on class, race or ethnicity, sexual preference, or other relevant attributes) and with little presentation of the negotiations of differences between feminist fieldworkers and

their informants, we cannot judge whether and how the ethnographer indeed has more power and privilege than those being researched. This lack of context leaves us with the impression that researchers and subjects are more similar than they really are...” (1993: 56)

I began every initial interview by sharing my background, in addition to being transparent about the purpose of the research, which I explained as documenting broad experiences of rural girlhood in the Central Valley. Upon mentioning my hometown, a handful of girls immediately shared either having lived in Parlier or knowing about it, while other girls had no idea where it was located. Alternatively, I would let girls know if I never heard of their small hometown, which we would chuckle at since they, in return, did not know about Parlier themselves. We would then recognize how many small rural towns across the Central Valley remain isolated and separate from each other due to geographical distance, but also due to the lack of rural representation in California. Structurally, our girlhoods shared many commonalities even if we lived in rural towns neither one of us knew about, revealing how Central Valley rural communities are binded to agricultural production, U.S.-Mexican migration, and global discourses of Western modernity via popular culture, and therefore, craft the contours of our subjectivities as rural girls. Like them, I yearned to leave home to pursue upward economic mobility, though leaving was difficult and filled with mixed emotions. Like them, I grew up in a working-class family and had limited access to resources, educational opportunities, and constricted spatial mobilities. I share more about these similarities in a vignette in Chapter 3.

However, there were limits to our commonalities. Differences in our social positions also became apparent throughout the research process. From the beginning, I reflected on my position of privilege as a Ph.D. candidate tied to the UC institution. I leveraged the power I held given my social status as a researcher by acknowledging that I had institutional knowledge and experience about higher education and graduate school that the majority of participants did not have. Consequently, I always ended each interview by affirming to girls that I'd always be available to them as an informal mentor in relation to pursuing graduate school, navigating higher education, and seeking other professional development opportunities. Although girls received financial compensation for each informal interview, I ensured to also extend myself as a resource that girls could leverage as they continued to pursue upward economic mobility. In this way, I did not seek to remain "neutral" in the research field, as feminist methodologies recognize the inherent power hierarchies in all social scientific research that engender far from neutral exchanges between researchers and participants. In other words, I attempted to be explicit about the power I held as a researcher, extending opportunities, knowledge, and resources to girls if they wanted or needed it. For girls involved in the digital ethnography, I explicitly offered professional development mentorship as one of the incentives for participation in addition to financial compensation. One girl participated in the digital ethnography for six weeks, which allowed us to develop a close relationship of both friendship and mentorship. Given the level of comfort we built throughout the span of two months, 22-year-old Linda was the only one to ask for a letter of recommendation for a

graduate program. I gladly accepted and wrote the letter. Shortly thereafter, Linda was accepted into a master's program in counseling. I see this as a fair exchange since the girls' *testimonios* would also help me with my upward economic mobility as the completion of the dissertation would lead to a Ph.D. degree and a higher-paying job.

Though I had power and privilege as a researcher, I also found that girls had power and privilege in other ways that I did not share with them. Namely, girls expressed a high sense of belonging in their tight-knit rural communities that I could not relate to because of my Salvadoran nationality. I also experienced rurality in relation to the economic and structural relations between Mexico and the U.S., but I navigated that connection as a Central American outsider in Parlier. Because my town is predominantly made up of Mexican immigrants and their descendants, I felt culturally displaced for most of my girlhood. As a young girl, I let others assume I was Mexican and engaged in cultural celebrations and traditions specific to Mexico at school and other social contexts. I recall first publicly sharing that I was Salvadoran-American in my Spanish class in eleventh grade, upon which students gasped. One girl remarked that my Spanish accent did sound a little different than theirs. Generally, I felt close to Mexican culture in positive ways as my childhood friends were all Mexican or Mexican American. However, I later learned that it came at the expense of my cultural identification and embrace of my Salvadoran heritage. As girls recounted their own experiences, I recognized that our relation to home and family differed in key aspects, as I did not always feel at "home" in the Central Valley as a Salvi girl in a Mexican American rural town. The two Salvadoran

American girls had similar experiences to mine, though not to the same degree, as they lived in towns with larger Salvadoran immigrant communities and culture. I share this specific difference to underscore the heterogeneity of Latina rural girlhoods in the Central Valley, as well as my insider/outsider positionality in this study.

### **Overview of *(Im)mobile Girls***

As a whole, *(Im)mobile Girls* examines: (1) how the material-political, discursive, and affective productions of rurality and girlhood—and their embeddedness in nation-making projects of Western modernity—impact real-life girls’ subjectivities and mobilities (and vice versa); and (2) how Latina rural girlhoods may further understanding of imperialist nation-making “at home” in the United States, revealing how California’s Central Valley—as a racialized rural context—is characteristic of an urbanormative capitalist social order in the United States and beyond. In order to address these critical feminist inquiries, I implement a bottom-up approach: I centralize Latina rural girls within the national context of the United States, the regional context of California, and the local context of the Central Valley to critically examine global modern capitalism, which emerges as an economic, political, and cultural terrain that shapes the degree and form of girls’ (im)mobilities, access to resources, and desires, rather than being an amorphous, disembodied, all-encompassing entity of power. In other words, *(Im)mobile Girls* does not assume that Western modernity impinges on rural girls in a top-down fashion, nor does it assume that rural girls counter modernity through stark oppositional forms of agency. In this

way, this study complicates the structure-agency binary framework common to the sociology of youth (Oswell 2013). Therefore, this bottom-up approach examines how real-life rural girls reproduce, negotiate, *and* resist the spatial and temporal logics of Western modernity to understand how projects of modernization are reproduced *and* contested over time, often simultaneously.

Moreover, this project moves away from monolithic conceptions of rural girlhood that assumes all girls experience rurality and Western modernity in the same way. The purpose of this research is to advance complex understandings of rural girlhood through a feminist framework of “politics of location”:

A politics of location that theorizes the histories of relationships between women during colonial and postcolonial period, that analyzes and formulates transnational affiliations between women, requires a critical practice that deconstructs standard historical periodization and demystifies abstract spatial metaphors. We need critical practices that mediate these most obvious oppositions, interrogating the terms that mythologize our differences and similarities. (Kaplan 1994: 138)

Following Kaplan, this dissertation aims to demystify the rural-urban opposition and its accompanying Global South/Global North and childhood/adulthood significations, all of which have been historically utilized to mark differences between people, places, and nations (further illustrated in **Chapter 1**). I approach girlhood as contingent upon different experiences of the rural as well as being responsive to and mediated by migrations from the rural to urban contexts, movement often propelled by desires for “modern” life.

Accordingly, I draw on Latina feminisms' borderlands theory to examine the complex set of relations that exist across and in-between the borders that delineate the rural from the urban within the specific histories of California and the Central Valley, as well as broader historical formations of Western modernity. Specifically, I examine how Latina rural girls navigate the economic, discursive, and affective differences between rural and urban through their spatial and economic mobilities, which highlight how they make sense of their rural hometowns and sense of selves in California's Central Valley. In doing so, I illustrate how Central Valley girls live within what I call the *rural-urban borderlands*, a term that signifies living in and navigating rural spaces within a world that idealizes, normalizes, and values urban (i.e. modern) life. Even as the rural-urban borderlands conjures similar lived experiences for rural girls across global contexts given the derision of rurality within global capitalism, it also takes on local, regional, and national meanings given a location's specific histories.

Consequently, I find that Central Valley girls experience the rural-urban borderlands specific to the Central Valley's agricultural political economy, which binds girls and their families to circulations of agricultural labor and capital across regional, national, and transnational scales. More precisely, Central Valley girls live in rural spaces produced by economic and structural ties between Mexico and the United States. In **Chapter 2**, I illustrate how international trade agreements, such as the North American Free-Trade Agreement or NAFTA, lead to poor economic conditions in Mexico that largely displace rural and Indigenous people, who then



engage in transnational migration to the United States, arriving in California's Central Valley to work in agriculture. As agricultural workers, Mexican immigrants produce agricultural products that get exported back to Mexico at cheaper prices than local agricultural products. In this vein, the U.S.-Mexico border and economic relations produce rurality with direct ties to Mexico within the Central Valley as I demonstrate in **Chapter 3**. In addition to the structural relationship between Mexico and California, Central Valley girls also experience the rural-urban borderlands in relation to broader discourses of Western Modernity that conceptualize the city as modern and containing manifold freedoms as I show in **Chapter 4**.

Whether or not Latina rural girls become mobile depends on three interrelated elements of rural spatial production—the rural as material, the rural as discourse, and the rural as affect. First, the rural as material emphasizes how the Central Valley's agricultural political economy creates few pathways for upward economic mobility via work and education, as rural spaces lack diverse market economies and higher education institutions compared to the rest of the state, pushing youth out. Second, the rural as discourse highlights how Central Valley rural youth receive messages that urban cities are places where successful, exciting, and modern adulthood happens, making the CV less desirable. Latina girls, in particular, also associate traditional gender roles and heteronormative relationships with their small rural hometowns, which mark the rural as culturally distinct from their imaginations of and experiences with urban life. Lastly, the rural as affect may mitigate push factors as girls experience the rural as a place of tranquility, slowness, and family connectedness,

motivating some young Latinas to return or stay home despite having desires to leave for better futures.

As such, staying home—as an anti-imperialist feminist praxis—is not exclusive to me. Across their *testimonios*, I found that Central Valley girls return and/or stay home in opposition to the broader discourses of Western Modernity that relegate their rural hometowns as less desirable and economically and socially precarious, in turn seeking to transform the social conditions that procure precarity in the Central Valley. At the same time, many girls harbor contradictory desires to leave their homeplaces as they pursue upward mobility, modern future selves, and manifold freedoms related to gender and sexuality. Rural Latinas simultaneously vie to enhance their own lives as well as the lives of their loved ones, communities, and the broader Central Valley, encompassing contradictory desires that result in complex and non-linear mobility trajectories between the rural and the urban. Therefore, *(Im)mobile Girls* employs an intersectional and transnational feminist approach that reveals "home places as global sites of struggle" for women and girls of color (Roshanravan 2012: 18) that cannot be neatly described through oppositional binaries of power.

## CHAPTER 1: THE RURAL GIRL AS A SPECTACLE OF WESTERN MODERNITY'S TRANSFORMATIONS, BORDERS, AND MOBILITIES

*“The country girl is a figure for a sense of distance from modernity  
that is proper to modernity itself.”*

(Driscoll 2013: 198)

Set in 1918, *Pearl* (2022) is a slasher horror film that depicts the coming of age of the titular character, a country girl who increasingly becomes suffocated by the isolation of living and working on her family's farm during the influenza pandemic in Texas. With an ailing, immobile father befallen to the flu, Pearl and her German immigrant mother struggle to keep up with the unending labor required by both their farm and homelife as they daily count their pennies. Pearl struggles to maintain focus on her domestic chores as she begins to follow the whims of her desires, which culminate in her dream to join a dance troupe that would take her away from her farm life to the endless possibilities of city life.

Pearl's *yearning for a modern femininity*—symbolized by the scantily dressed dancing girls that enthrall her on film—and Pearl's *transgressive sexuality*—materialized through her affair with the projectionist who showed Pearl the dancing

girls at the local movie theater—both position Pearl as a country girl to be feared. Pearl’s unfulfilled and “deviant” desires drive her to murder both her parents and the projectionist, the people in the way of fulfilling her dreams and who also reject her for them. Ultimately, Pearl succumbs to the farm life and eagerly awaits her husband who is away serving in World War I, hoping to atone for her sins by re-embracing the heteronormative country life, though the farm ends up becoming a source of terror as evidenced by the film’s sequel, *X* (2022), where Pearl surfaces as a sociopathic serial killer in her elder age.

Quite gruesome, *Pearl* sensationalizes and dramatizes the discourses and affective meanings that have circulated *rural girlhood* – both as concepts apart and together. The film converts the familiar tale of a country girl yearning to leave home for the city into a tale of dangerous and perverse girlhood that spawns from rural farmland in a moment of great social and political upheaval and transformation, changes brought upon modern capitalism. Specifically, the film depicts rural girlhood as *outside of and distant from modernity, and therefore, threatened by and as a threat to modern society*, a meta-narrative that has historically circulated rural girlhood as documented by youth scholars, such as Driscoll (2013) quoted above. In addition, the figure of the rural girl is often depicted as always desiring to be *mobile*, to yearn to leave to the city for a better life, which translates into rejecting the rural. Not only is the figure of the rural girl outside of modernity, but she must move outside of the rural to reach modern femininity (i.e. being sexually liberated) and a modern life (economically mobile) altogether.

This chapter opens up with *Pearl* to illustrate the dominant discourses of rural girlhood that continue to permeate U.S. popular culture and imaginaries today, meanings and values that derive from the conceptual framework of Western modernity. The film offers the following provocations: *What or who is considered to be modern? How does one become modern? What makes a girl modern? What does a modern place look or feel like? What does a modern life promise or threaten?* This chapter engages these critical questions by explicating the discursive and affective formations of “the rural girl” to understand how societies make sense of, engage with, and struggle with modernity and its implications of mobility, as well as shifting meanings related to gender, sexuality, age, and space/place that circulate these fields of power. By engaging in an interdisciplinary exploration of Western modernity, this chapter will discuss the discursive formations and affective dimensions of rurality and girlhood across all scales.

Youth scholar Nancy Lesko (2012) argues that the *modern citizen* is not only “adult,” but a particular type of adult: white, masculine, urban, middle-class, and heterosexual, and I would add, cis-gender and able-bodied. This hegemonic figure of modernity has functioned as an unmarked normative standard contingent on the systematic Othering of people based on race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and age. Van Vleet (2003) aptly notes that women, ethnic minorities, and children “are materially and symbolically crucial to the construction and maintenance of borders between places and categorical distinctions between kinds of people” (349) in the production of modernity. At the turn of the twentieth century, the category of

adolescence and youths' embodied presence in particular spaces became constructed as material manifestations of “developing” or “developed” along lines of gender, race, class, and sexuality, creating symbolic and embodied borders that defined “the modern West.”

In alignment with critical youth scholars, I contend that adolescence and nation-making are intimately and inextricably linked to linear models of modern development and social progress that function via forward movement or mobility. I advance a critical analysis of Western modernity by demonstrating how linear models of child and national development depend on discourses of gender, age, and rurality to materialize and symbolize modernity *and* mobility. At the intersection of Otherized categories, we find the figure of the rural girl who is gendered and racialized in precise ways. Because modernization has been measured historically through the urbanization of space via the economies of industrialization and post-industrialization, rurality has also played an unmarked yet crucial temporal-spatial device in the development of modernity. The borders that define urbanity in geographic, cultural, and political terms exist relationally to the rural. Therefore, the convergence of rurality and girlhood manifests as a crucial symbolic terrain of modernity-making and its social changes, shaping the mobility trajectories of rural subjects, which include internal and transnational migration away from the rural.

Driscoll (2013) argues that the figure of the girl and her existence in the countryside or rural spaces illuminates our understanding of modernity: “If the

country has an ambivalent relation to modernity, both necessary to it and yet set apart from it as what modernity will transform, the girl is a spectacle of modern transformation, of change and of what change puts at risk” (201). The discursive merging of rurality and girlhood reveal what is stake with modernity, what is to be won or lost in a world grappling with multiple crossroads of contradictions produced by late capitalism: a world simultaneously fragmented yet globalized, in perpetual crisis yet technologically advanced, plural yet divided. Rural girlhood exposes these contradictions because it stands at a distance of, outside of, or in tension with modernity, discursively constructed as “not yet there,” the “there” being the pinnacle of modern adult life at both the individual and national level. Consequently, rural youth scholars find that real-life rural girls experience the intricate relationship between gender, age, rurality, modernity, and mobility as a particular “structure of feeling.” Rural girlhood procures a structure of feeling that is at distance from modernity, which produces “subjects of distance” (Driscoll 2013) that must move towards, desire, and approximate modernity. In order to move towards modernity, the rural girl must be mobile and engage in rural-to-urban migration at all scales in order to successfully reach the pinnacle of modern citizenship, adulthood, and femininity. Because rurality carries cultural imaginations of traditions both threatened by and threatening modernity, the rural girl becomes a spectacle or signifier tasked with materializing and resolving the instability of modernity within a larger scale. So, the rural girls’ upward mobility trajectories not only promise the personal embodiment of

modernity, but also promise national development and the (re)production of Western modernity.

### **Adolescence and Western Power**

Adolescent youth—as discursive figures and “flesh-and-blood” bodies—embodied the temporal and spatial manifestations of modernity needed to establish new forms of state and imperial power. Critical youth scholar Nancy Lesko (2001) traces the genealogy of adolescence as a discursive and cultural formation at the turn of the twentieth century—the period of rapid social changes into the “modern” age—explicating the precise ways in which adolescence became imperative and conducive to bio-political and colonial national regimes. In doing so, Lesko further explicates how human and economic development models legitimized colonial and social control endeavors by the state<sup>2</sup> via Western scientific racism broadly, and recapitulation theory specifically, paradigms that encapsulate the theories put forth by scientist Hochberg (2012) and economist Rostow (1960) as noted in the previous chapter.

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<sup>2</sup> I draw on Foucault’s broad definition of the state to underscore a particular type of power and population control: “But most of the time, the state is envisioned as a kind of political power which ignores individuals, looking only at the interests of the totality or, I should say, of a class or a group among the citizens. That’s quite true. But I’d like to underline the fact that the state’s power (and that’s one of the reasons for its strength) is both an individualizing and a totalizing form of power” (Foucault 1982: 782).



In late nineteenth century England, following the industrial revolution—a moment of manifold transformation in all areas of life—the future remained uncertain and with it came both the dangers and promises of a changing social order. Revolutions in commerce, industry, and transportation brought economic and political innovations and spatial, temporal, and social changes. While organized labor markets brought economic promise, it also brought new social formations due to rapid urbanization and immigration, reconfiguring family relationships, masculinity and femininity, generational expectations, and the role of children (Lesko: 32-38). These shifts in the social order incited panic of degeneration and contagion due to the proximity of different racial and ethnic groups in urban cities.

The social category of adolescence was critical in providing material evidence and a biological rationalization for early 19<sup>th</sup> century scientific racism and Western empire-building. The West and the Rest drew legitimacy from classical recapitulation theory, which stated "that each individual child's growth recapitulated the development of humankind" (Lesko: 27). This theory contended that a child's growth and its stages of development recapitulated or reflected the evolutionary stages of human species development. This meant that children were constructed as containing animal-like characteristics of savage and uncontrolled instincts and behaviors. This theory argued that youth needed to be carefully regulated and controlled to secure their successful development along the pathway to adulthood, lest they become "arrested" in development and cause social degeneracy. The pathway towards development followed the sequence of animal > savage > child > adulthood.

Equating the child, which was implicitly imagined as the boy figure, to "savage tribes" lent itself to paternalistic approaches to non-Western societies, racializing them as developmentally inferior to white European cultures, not only in economic terms, but biologically as well. Lesko states that, "Indians or Brazilians or Indonesians became like children who needed to depend on adults/Westerners" (27). Recapitulation theory recapitulation theory was constructed as objective truth that legitimized colonialism abroad and population control at home. This theory belongs to the broader discursive formation of the West and the Rest, illustrating how a discursive chain of knowledge continually builds on itself to both legitimize its own system and cultural archive, as well as to build new knowledge about societies and the people that comprise them. Children and youth were instrumental in shaping and validating the West and the Rest. Lesko summarizes the modern construct of adolescence as follows:

First, the modern concepts of child and adolescent development have a color and a gender. Second, recapitulation theory links ideas about developing children and adolescents to a paternalistic and exploitative colonial system, which endlessly reiterated the inadequacies of the natives and the need for Western rule. Finally, recapitulation theory's intimacy with colonialism suggests that knowledge will provide a continuing gloss of and cover for the exercise of subordinating power that speaks of immaturity, emotionality, conformity, and irrationality. (30)

Recapitulation theory harnessed the development-in-time framework naturalized in the social construction of adolescence to systematize and institutionalize Western modernity and its dependency on the systematic colonization

of other societies. The logics of recapitulation conceptualized depicted the forced extraction of land and peoples as a "benevolent paternalism" of cultures and societies characterized as childlike and, therefore, inherently savage and in need of "help," which underscores how Rostow's casual talk of colonialism might be read as paternalistic. In sum, the construct of adolescence drew symbolic and material borders between the modern self and Other on a micro-scale and the modern nation and uncivilized land on a macro-scale, a dualism leveraged for conquest and control.

In addition to rationalizing paternalistic projects of colonialism, Lesko argues that adolescent development also functioned as a site of state intervention to build discourses and strategies for "racial progress, male dominance, and national strength and growth" (5) at home. Adolescence was functional to the reconfiguration of power that gave rise to the nation-state, in which gender and race became central systems in which to organize categories of people and mark borders between spaces. Overall, Lesko highlights how adolescence was raced, gendered, and instrumental for modern nationalisms.

Drawing on Foucault, Lesko describes how the regulation of populations and the individual body became imperative to the development of Western modernity. If modernity is characterized by Foucault as a shift from sovereign power to bio-power, adolescence became the embodied manifestation of this power shift in the social order. Foucault (1979) argues that the gradual shift into modernity can be characterized by a shift in power relations from sovereign power (a juridical form of power characterized as a force of deduction, or *negation*) to bio-power (systematic

managing and optimizing of life, or of *addition*). A power over life succeeded the right of death characteristic of sovereign power. This type of power attempts to foster a prosperous and thriving life by organizing, maintaining, and controlling life trajectories. This power over life involved two primary forms: disciplining the human body (for it was viewed as a machine whose capabilities needed to be optimized) and regulating the population (as biological processes were heavily predicated on the national body and its trajectories).

Consequently, bio-power created a wide range of techniques and discursive knowledge formations that allowed what Foucault terms an "entry of life into history" (141). Biological existence became interconnected with political existence as a historical shift marked the end of vicious plagues and the randomness of death into a controlled trajectory of life. Technological innovations in population management coincided with advancements in economic relations, namely the rise of capitalism: "This bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes" (140-141). With bio-power, the capitalist future was now foreseeable and manageable.

Adolescence became a discourse and embodied site to cultivate the desirable modern future. The social category of adolescence embodied a symbolic and material site to identify and solve the flux, instability, and transitions brought by capitalist modernity. For that reason, adolescence produces great political and social anxiety; it

marks the crucial stage of developing ideal (re: productive) adult national citizens, and thus, incites much management, control, and surveillance by the state. At the time of initial modernization, adolescence had to first and foremost be shaped and regulated compulsorily and systematically to harness the wide-ranging shifts that came with the modern world.

In the early twentieth century, the figure of the boy became a central site of management since masculinity and nation-making became inextricably tied together. Adolescence became the age in which the boy contained the potential to fulfill the desires and promise of the nation: "If a national needed tough, courageous, and patriotic young men to broaden its reach, then new scientific methods were necessary to raise both strongly willful and team-oriented citizens" (35). This translated into investment in white boys' compulsory heterosexuality and hypermasculinity since recapitulation theory entrenched the discourse that an individual's intrinsic characteristics and qualities could be carefully channeled for building a prosperous modern society. The modern citizen possessed innate attributes conducive to optimal economic and political productivity. More importantly, the body needed to be objectified as a machine by the state and regulated at the level of the self (Foucault 1975). Youths' bodies "revealed" inner truths that could and should be made docile, self-regulating, and managed to optimize the nation's vitality, creating a racialized and gendered regime of bio-power. The modern nation necessitated that the white, middle-class, heterosexual, urban boy transition successfully towards a strong, willful, and obedient modern manhood.

How, then, did the figure of the girl, and in particular, the poor girl of color in the Global South, become the site of late modern capitalist intervention in the structuring of a (post)modern world, becoming the symbolic figure of the future nation-state and its prosperity?

### **Girlhood and Development**

Western adolescent masculinity and femininity were both instrumental for Western modernity, albeit in different ways: “Boyologists and protectors of girls uniformly recommended close monitoring of their bodies to protect against precocity; boys’ regimens mandated team sports and the building of strong bodies, while girls’ programs were directed toward high culture and domestic skills” (Lesko: 75). Even as Lesko focused on the bio-political investment in white, heterosexual boys in the U.S. and Europe, she notes that discourses of patriotic masculinity occurred relationally and alongside domestic femininity, spatializing the figure of the boy in the public realm and the figure of the girl in the private realm. Thus, the figure of the modern girl also emerged as a “harbinger of both the possibilities and dangers of modern life” (Weinbaum et al. 2008: 8), as girlhood was understood relationally to modern boyhood.

However, even as the co-formation of the figure of the modern boy and girl reflected the “rise of modern nationalisms” in the early twentieth century, the modern girl’s “emergence was not always synchronic with the development of nationalism, nor did it necessarily coincide with the development of the bourgeoisies” (Weinbaum

et al.: 8). Meaning, the power hierarchy between adolescent boys and girls (which I contend is further stratified further by race, class, sexuality, and space/place) produced differing effects in the representation of the modern girl and how modern nationalist projects would treat real-life girls.

In the age of modernization, the modern girl was not constructed as inherently conducive to the modern nation-state's prosperity, but instead, was regarded as an imminent threat— a discourse alive and well today as evidenced through *Pearl*. Although adolescent youth posed threats of degeneracy via recapitulation theory, the figure of the boy also contained the optimal bodily qualities for ideal modern citizenship. On the other hand, the modern girl incited insurmountable national fears and anxieties of public condemnation via her potential sexual transgressions (same-sex relations, reproduction outside marriage, interracial coupling, etc.). As future mothers or the "biological reproducers of national subjects and populations," girls' sexuality was deemed a source of threat for the coherence of the nation state (Weinbaum et al.: 16).

Weinbaum et al. (2008) trace "the multiplicity of mobilizations" of the modern girl as a heuristic device across different global locations, resisting a universal representation or idea of the modern girl. Instead, they argue that "the Modern girl was an effect of globe-straddling multidirectional citation practices" that were "reworked as they were locally deployed" (10). This meant that the modern girl took on regional meanings and values, attaining racial, gender, and class representations concerning their respective nation-state and local contexts. In some

locations, she was objectified and commodified, her image symbolic of the national desires and ideals of economic power. In contrast, in other locations she was denigrated as embodying anti-national threats to social cohesion. These variations depended on socio-historical and contextual factors, such as "presence or absence of social revolution, colonialism, indigenous nationalist and anticolonial struggles, and alternative models and icons of femininity" (17). Overall, the modern girl as an image and real-life girls were heavily policed and scrutinized because modern nationalisms worldwide invested and focused on boys for their economic and political promises, indicating an oppositional, yet relational sexualization of modern boys and girls.

This discourse of modern global development shifts at the turn of the twenty-first century, as a conglomerate of government institutions, charities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and multinational corporations would begin to specifically invest in poor, racialized girls and women from the Global South to end poverty and resolve global financial crises. The premise of these international development campaigns claimed that "girls hold the key to ending world poverty and transforming health and life expectancy in the developing world" (Koffman and Gill, 2013: 84). This historical conjecture is also known as the "Girl Effect," named after Nike Foundation's campaign of the same name and proclaimed movement with a mission to promote "girls' visibility globally" (Bent and Switzer 2016). Launched in 2008 in partnership with United Nations Foundation and the NoVo Foundation and with the support of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), Nike led the Girl Effect as an orchestrated project of "corporatized development." Corporatized



development is defined by Moeller (2018) as, "the practices, processes, and power relations of corporations and corporate foundations operating in and through the institutionalized regime of power of the post-World II project of international development as it is embedded within broader historical processes of capitalism" (23).

Moeller argues that, after receiving insurmountable accusations of exploitation and questionable ethics for its overseas production, Nike's corporatized development efforts invested in girls as a philanthropic strategy that would target "the very demographic it was accused of exploiting" (25). Moeller describes Nike's Girl Effect campaign as part of a larger project of "strategic philanthropy" led by global corporations in response to transnational labor movements demanding global labor rights in the late 1990's<sup>3</sup>. By investing in poor girls from the Global South, Nike could appear as good and benevolent company while also investing money for future profit. The figure of the girl was constructed as untapped labor and an efficient resource for solving global poverty and "opening new economic frontiers" for capitalist endeavors (Moeller: 27). At the time of the launch, Nike Foundation president and CEO Maria Eitel fittingly summarized this new shift in the gendered bio-political regime of Western late capitalist modernity and nation-making: "Girls

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<sup>3</sup> "In response to the anti-sweatshop and anti-globalization movements of the late 1990s, corporations were pressured to respond to the demands of transnational networks of critics concerned with their socially, morally, economically, and environmentally deleterious practices. The historical context was defined by mounting social, political, and economic pressures for corporations to remain accountable to "multiple constituencies," including labor, consumers, local communities, governments, and the environment" (Moeller 2018: 24).

are the world's greatest untapped resource for economic growth and prosperity" (Eitel 2010). When global capitalist modernity exhausted its profit-making potential in the figure of the boy, it turned to girls to solve late capitalism's crises and instability.

The Girl Effect draws on the popularization of *girl power* discourse. Girl power constructs empowerment through neoliberal paradigms of individualism and exceptionalism—all hindering on developmental models of personal growth and self-sufficiency. The idea that "'girl power' is the best way to lift the developing world out of poverty" (Koffman & Gill 2013: 105) remains pervasive in international development and is generally heralded as a positive form of intervention to remedy chronic poverty around the world. This message positions the figure of the girl as the most ideal and suitable actor with the capacity to uplift national economies. The solution to chronic poverty thus resides at the hands of girls; they just need the proper tools to transform themselves, which results in the transformation of the nation. On both ends of the global hemispheres, girls are called upon to embody and mobilize a "female exceptionalism" needed to fix their nation's economies. However, this broad narrative of empowerment is laden with colonial imaginaries and racialized tropes, procuring regional meanings. Overall, girl power "weaves together the language of liberal feminism and gender equity, colonialist images of third-world women who need to be saved, and neoliberal ideologies of individual responsibilities and self-production" (Taft 2011: 30).

The Girl Effect and girl power have been examined by a host of critical girlhood scholars and activists (Bent and Switzer 2016, Cobbet 2016, Khoja-Moolji

2018, Koffman and Gill 2013; Moeller 2018; Switzer, Bent, & Endlsey 2009; Taft 2011). These scholars posit that girl power homogenizes girlhood, offering negative and limiting forms of representation. This discourse dichotomizes girls into either “victims” or “heroines” (Cobbett 2014) or “can-do” or “at-risk” girls (Harris 2004), reifying sexist, racist, and classist stereotypes of girls and women that obscure their complex subjectivities. These tropes often have negative effects on girls—albeit in different ways depending on their positionality and location, but generally results in making girls’ voices, needs, and desires invisible. In general, the instrumental reasons behind the investment in girls can be argued to be bio-political nation-making, population control, and neoliberal capitalist expansion, not the actual cultivation of girls’ political and social agency and opportunities for advancement.

While girlhood dichotomies exist at the national and local level (as Anita Harris points out with the can-girl and at-risk racialized girl tropes in Australia), development discourse utilizes this oppositional model of girlhood to further entrench the development-in-time episteme and developed/developing binary from classical recapitulation and economic theories. That is, the bio-politics of modern development position girls differently according to race, class, and global location. Girls from the Global North are viewed as empowered, post-feminist subjects that can “have it all” (Harris 2004) due to living in “progressive” societies, and thus, positioned as the ideal “saviors” of their “sisters” in the Global South who are “victims” of their “regressive” patriarchal societies (Koffman & Gill 2013). This narrative conflates the poverty in the Global South with their supposed unequal treatment of women and girls in their

society. In other words, if investment was placed towards girls' "empowerment" via cultivating skills, prolonging their schooling, and creating a strong sense of self-efficacy, the economies of the Global South could improve:

girl effects logic overdetermines the empowered schoolgirl in the Global South who's potential has been harnessed in opposition to the vulnerable girl-child as an essentialized victim waiting for the transformative power of education and economic participation [67]. This framing reinforces ideas about development as a "remedial civilizational pedagogy" [68, p. 10] in which expertise circulates from the Global North through transnational processes like education that enable the Global South to 'catch up' with the rest of the world [61]. In this way, postfeminist beliefs that gender equality is now normative in the Global North [51] and therefore critically necessary in the Global South dovetails with current development discourses and policy. An investment in girls in this ideological context is understood as a panacea for economic growth and a commonsensical indicator of 'development' in the Global South. (Bentz and Switzer 2016: 128)

One of the most well-known and celebrated iterations of the Girl Effect is the *Half the Sky* (HTS) movement led by Nicholas Kristof. The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) 2014 documentary showcased high-profile celebrities visiting poor, rural locations in the Global South, letting the viewer tour alongside familiar faces to witness the poverty and lack of education experienced by local girls in need of "saving" (Valdivia 2018). Wealthy Hollywood actresses (America Ferrera, Olivia Wilde, Meg Ryan, Diane Lane, Eva Mendes, and Gabrielle Union) were depicted as the "can-do" girls (liberated, empowered Western women) that can cultivate the "can-do-ness" of the Global South girls "at-risk." This resembles a maternal benevolence reminiscent of the paternalism discourse utilized by masculinized bio-political

regimes of modernization in the twentieth century. Valdivia (2018) notes that even as *Half the Sky* is couched in neoliberal girl-power discourse, paternalism is the larger umbrella that gives credence to the benevolence of the can-do celebrities since they gained the tools from Kristof:

The documentary positions Kristof as the ultimate agent, and the gendered celebrities as inferior to him. The can-do girls and the Global South girls are eternally at-risk. Celebrities are positioned in the interstitial position between can-do girls vis-à-vis Kristof and maternal figures vis-à-vis the Global South girls who are the real can-do figures, even if they are not positioned as such by the mediated narrative. (92)

As a white man, Kristof's paternal benevolence further reinscribes the power of the Global North, which is positioned as the (white) savior of the Global South.

Further, education and the modern school are held as the sanctioned public realms to manage poor, racialized Global South girls. The Girl Effect model positions secondary and postsecondary education as the solutions to delay early motherhood, marriage, domesticity, and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. The "effect" of education gives girls the tools to become employed, earn wages, spend expendable income, and overall obtain economic and social mobility, a developmental pathway that is thought to lead to economic and national prosperity anew. The "educated Global South girl" trope has grown in popularity, evidenced by the wide celebration of Malala Yousafzai in U.S. popular culture and Girl Effect campaigns. Popular media "rallied around Malala to express support not only for her but also for the

education of girls more broadly in Pakistan and beyond" (Khoja-Moolji 2018:

1). Malala became the manifestation of the ideal educated girl as she stood against the Taliban regime in Pakistan to fight for her right to an education, her Nobel peace prize cementing her overall success and can-do-ness.

Thus, the Girl Effect bases its model of change on *girls' education*, and not children in general: "to educate a boy is to educate an individual but to educate a girl is to educate a nation" (Cobbett 2016: 313). The reason why girls are regarded as particularly helpful is due to the "myth" (potent and long-lasting discursive constructions) of girls and women as inherently altruistic, peaceful, and pervasively poor, which are beliefs "held dear for their capacity to move, inspire, and galvanize support" (311). This myth of girls essentializes them as future mothers to their families and the nation, indicating that their purpose as girls is premised on their capacity to nurture and cultivate others; meaning, their empowerment comes from and is bounded by motherhood. Therefore, girls must both control and optimize their reproductive and sexual capacities in the service of nation-building by extending their education and delaying motherhood. The poor, racialized girl embodies individual capacity that now needs to be harnessed, managed, and optimized to elicit a "ripple effect across multiple development indicators, including alleviating poverty, promoting economic growth, reducing rates and population growth, controlling the spread of HIV/AIDS, and conserving environmental resources" (Moeller 2018: 20).

According to this discourse, girls who can control their sexuality and reproduce families at an "appropriate" time are depicted as "heroines" since they

delay motherhood long enough to become productive neoliberal subjects that optimize the nation's economy. At the same time, girls that do not make appropriate choices to control their sexualities, resulting in early pregnancy, become essentialized into "victims in the international imagination" (Cobbet: 317). Overall, girls become framed first and foremost as conduits for the re/production of future citizens and their nation's future, as well as new economic markets. Real-life girls are thus subject to population control via their sexualities and reproductive capacities, while simultaneously symbolizing for what is "not yet" developed, and thus, harnessed for their economic and political potentiality.

Taken together, these scholars have deconstructed and contested the stereotypical depictions of girls in the Global South while also pointing to the contradictory and adverse effects of Girl Effect campaigns, which recreate the economic and social inequalities they ostensibly seek to resolve. The ineffective and oppressive results of the Girl Effect are a consequence of its superficial interventions that rest on essentialist understandings of racialized girlhood: "The current concerns in the field of international development are around getting girls *into* school; there is little to no discussion about the sort of learning that is offered in schools, nor an investigation into alternative, viable models of education" (Khoja-Moolji: 150). The idea that getting poor girls into school is enough rests on "girl power" discourse popularized by the collusion between global corporate development, post-feminisms, and neoliberal ideas of the self:

Oversimplifying these relations as chains of reasoning [45] hinged to western liberal notions of self-centered, individualized agency and “full human potential” yoked to education and economic productivity perpetuates the idea that ‘development’—both of human beings and economies—is the natural, linear, progressive movement from developing to developed. Within this schema, formal schooling is the panacea for the proper ‘development’ of girls and states. This rationality fails to account for the ways in which education itself is a transnational process and schooling is a cultural project embedded in local ways of being in and seeing the world [76, 66]. (Bentz and Switzer 2016: 135)

Koffman and Gill (2013) note that it is erroneously "assumed that education will invariably lead girls to choose to delay childbearing and that this crucial postponement will improve children's health" (95). The authors argue that the focus on girls' reproduction and domestic roles obscures the historical and structural factors that lead to poverty in the Global South, for instance, while also further making invisible the Global North's role in contributing to economic disparities in the Global South.

Critical girlhood scholars contest and deconstruct the oppositional girlhood discourse imposed by Girl Effect logic by foregrounding real-life girls' experiences, mediations, and rejections of girl-power and its associated stereotypes structured along the developed/developing Manichean binary representative of the West. Because Girl Effect development projects make invisible the very girls it purports to uplift, many of these scholars include qualitative research that highlights real-girls' desires, needs, and experiences. Girls' first-hand accounts often contradict the narrative that all poor, racialized girls from the Global South want an education and to delay motherhood. By interviewing girls in Kenya and Sierra Leone, Cobbet



(2014) finds that some girls preferred motherhood over education. At the very least, girls did not regard education as positively as the discourse depicts. Similarly, Switzer et al. (2016) find that girls in Kenya face violence daily in the context of schooling, which ranges from manipulation, intimidation, and coercion with intimate partners (44).

The contradiction in what girls ought to want and actually want or need is a result (and even failure) of Western modernity and its biopolitical nation-making agendas that depend on the regulation of gendered bodies. Western modernity as a discursive formation treats gender in a vacuum, proliferating discourses and implementing material conditions that strip the social category of gender away from local and regional contexts, bypassing genders' plurality, contingency, relationality, and historicity. In doing so, not only does Girl Effect—as a contemporary project of Western modernity—provide limited and problematic schemas of girlhood, but the binary framework recreates economic and social stratification that inevitably reproduces the cycle of economic crises characteristic of late capitalism.

And yet, I argue that girlhood scholars reify the developing/developed binary within the West and the Rest discursive formation when rurality is taken as a given reality—a container with little to no bearing on girls' desires, subjectivities, and lived experiences—and when the collapse between the Global South and rurality isn't sufficiently deconstructed. As such, rural girlhood remains discursively monolithic and positioned outside of the Global North.

## **Rurality as Discourse and Affect**

Critical girlhood scholars reveal the structural limitations, embedded power relations, and social stratification that shapes girlhood in contradictory and nuanced ways across race, class, and location. Yet this deconstruction runs short when rurality is not regarded as an discursive formation that can reveal and problematize the way Western modernity depends on configurations of spaces and places to divide, enclose, or reify the borders between the developed and developing, borders that can be geographical, political, social, and cultural. Even as the scholars above deconstruct the homogenizing oppositional girlhood model that “assumes reductive, apolitical, and ahistorical claims of divergence between girlhoods in the Global North and Global South” (Bent & Switzer 2016: 122), these scholars unintentionally reify the hemispheric binary by treating space/place as geographic description (or a given material, apolitical reality) rather than as social constructs conducive to Western modernity and its corresponding colonial logics.

In particular, the rural/urban dichotomy is largely unquestioned in girlhood scholarship even as the cultural borders that spatially divide the rural from the urban symbolize the “difference” in economic and national development between girls from the Global North and South, the figure of the girl serving as mimetic symbols of their nation and hemispheres. I argue that this dichotomy remains intact when rurality is imagined as belonging in the Global South and/or outside of the Global North, especially outside of the United States. Consequently, the figure of the girl in the Global North is imagined as “urban” and the figure of the girl in the Global South is

imagined as "rural," though this remains far from the experiences of girls in both sides of the hemisphere. Often the "regressive" signifier imposed on the Global South hinders on an imagination of a feminized, poor rural landscape within development discourse (Switzer, Bent, and Endsley, 2016), which inextricably conceptualizes the Global North as a metropolis wherein girls have access to the unlimited choices that urban, post-feminist landscapes are portrayed to offer in U.S. popular media, namely economic and sexual freedoms.

The rural/urban Manichean binary is reproduced when: 1) scholars treat the rural and urban as descriptive geographical regions or objective reality, thus occluding how these categories of place are historically produced as well as mutually constituted and relationally contingent; and 2) rurality becomes reduced to and synonymous to the Global South imagination. Both of these shortcomings illustrate how ubiquitous and deeply cemented the West and Rest discourse remains, as aspects of its signifying chain remain unchallenged or deemed as natural or given. The rural is inherently undesirable, not only noted as pre-modern economically, but further, noted as pre-modern because of traditional expectations around girls' and womens' femininity and sexuality (as I show in the next section).

These shortcomings could be remedied by deconstructing the Girl Effect and other biopolitical regimes of modern nation-making by accounting for rurality as a politicized and socially constructed space that exists relationally to the functional role of urbanity in modernization projects, past and present. At the same time, rurality cannot solely be theorized as a constructed juxtaposition to the urbanized imaginary

of the modern nation-state, as this reproduces the Manichean binary imperative to Western imperialism. More so, rurality should be explicated as complex, plural, and historically situated. On one end, the rural—as a social representation of a scale and place, an imaginary—cannot be understood outside of the hegemonic fields of the nation-state and world-economy (i.e. global capitalism); on the other hand, the rural also takes on context-specific, regional, and historical meanings and values that produce differing material effects at the local level. In explicating late twentieth century debates around the definition of “the rural” and whether there should be one or multiple definitions, Halfacree (1994) argues for a relational framework:

The key task may not be to define the rural social representation in the abstract – indeed, this is not the implication of the contextual model of society – but the apparently more relativist task of comparing and contrasting them, through their interpretive repertoires, with other spatial social representations. Hence, we must not be too eager to discard the idea of the social representation of the rural just because our research discovers that people do not hold a clear, well-defined and well-structured ‘image’ of ‘the rural’. (33)

The differences and similarities in the rural experience for real-life girls across the hemispheres draws from the broader discursive and political processes of Western modernity, their experiences becoming further invisible or mischaracterized when the rural isn’t unpacked alongside with girlhood. In Chapters 3 and 4, I contextualize Latina girls’ material, discursive, and affective experiences of the rural with the empirical evidence of other rural girls at different global locations in order to accomplish the relativist task of comparing different social representations and

experiences of the rural. Here, I describe the instrumental role of rurality in Western modernity as a discourse and affect.

The rural/urban Manichean binary is functional to modernity as spatial representations of the development-in-time framework where the rural symbolizes a pre-capitalist and therefore pre-modern society. To reach “progress,” societies must pass the threshold from the rural into the urban city to reach the pinnacle of capitalist modernity, also known as the White City. The Great Chain of Being and its hierarchies of race and gender became visualized as a masculinized metropolis of white superiority. Lesko (2012) highlights the iconography of the White City, the focal point of the World’s Columbian Exhibition that opened in Chicago in 1893. The White City is a visual that encapsulated the moral, political, and cultural progress of modernity, wherein urbanization became the spatial signifier of white men’s accomplishments: “The White City was an icon of the superiority of civilized white men and pointed towards the ideal, perfectable future of the race. The White City glorified the masculine worlds by filling the buildings with thousands of enormous engines, warships, trains, machines, and armaments, as well as examples of commerce” (Lesko 2012: 16). The urban city and its phallogentric imagery depicted the fruits of economic and political power of white, European modern nation-states. Doreen Massey (1994) also highlights the importance of urbanization to defining modernity:

The spaces of modernism which are mostly celebrated are the public spaces of the city. It was in the rapidly growing western cities, especially Paris, that modernism was born. And the standard literature from Baudelaire onwards is replete with descriptions of boulevards

and cafés, of fleeting, passing glances and of the cherished anonymity of the crowd. The spatial and social reorganization, and flourishing, of urban life was an essential condition for the birth of the new era. But that city was also gendered. Moreover, it was gendered in ways which relate directly to spatial organization. (233)

Because modernity has been historically defined as the urbanization of space via economies of industrialization and post-industrialization, rurality has also played an unmarked yet crucial temporal-spatial device in the development of Western modernity. The borders that define urbanity in cultural, geographic, and embodied terms exist relationally to the rural as well—this becomes more apparent through the gendering of individual and national bodies.

Rurality became the antithetical—but relational—symbol of Western modern civilization, attaining “structures of feeling” related to a pre-modern world, both romanticized and vilified but always in contrast to the modern city. In *The Country and the City* (1973), Raymond Williams describes how the varied histories of the rural and the urban in England becomes occluded by the discourse of Western modernity, resembling power hierarchies rather than actual historical formations of space/place:

powerful feelings have gathered and have been generalised. On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life; of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation... Yet the real history, throughout, has been astonishingly varied. (1)

Williams argues that the structure of feeling that surrounds the rural, then, is not historically descriptive, but rather, a response to “to the fact of change, and this has more real and more interesting social causes” (35). Over time, rurality became a nostalgic memory of a time before capitalism—of all its perils, uncertainties, and promise. The rural has been idealized *and* denigrated at different points in history, especially throughout modernization of Europe, as reactions to shifts in power relations. Williams highlights how the countryside in England in the 17th and 18th centuries was not an idyllic land of innocent economic relations, but instead, a feudal order of capital accumulation, class stratification between landowners and landless peasants, and peasant exploitation. However, the master narrative of Western modernity occluded this slow and seamless transition from feudalism to capitalism in order to portray modernity in stark developmental terms of achievement:

Following the fortunes, through these centuries, of dominant interests, it is a story of growth and achievement, but for the majority of men, it is was the substitution of one form of domination for another: the mystified feudal order replaced by a mystified agrarian capitalist order, which just enough continuity in titles and in symbols of authority, in successive compositions of a ‘natural order’ to confuse and control. (39)

The rural economies of pre-modernity, therefore, do not reflect the idealized virtues attached to “the rural” of pastoral proximity to nature and a quaint social order. Instead, rurality becomes a moralistic structure of feeling always in juxtaposition to the modern city, whether that is an idealization of the past in relation to the vices and fears of degeneracy instilled by the city (embodied via the policing of youth and their

bodies) or a condemnation of backwardness in relation to the promises of capital accumulation and imperial nation-building promised by urbanization. This brief and unfinished history of Western rurality reflects the durability and embeddedness of Western modernity as a discursive formation, where rurality becomes a memory and imagination in opposition to the urban.

Following Heley and Jones (2012), I seek to approach rurality and girlhood through different theoretical frameworks that remain flexible and open to its plural and contradictory manifestations, especially in explicating their discursive, material, and lived effects on real-life rural girls as I show later in this dissertation. Heley and Jones breakdown how the “relational turn” in post-modern studies of space/place have unfolded and debated in rural studies in particular, arguing that is not sufficient to only think of rurality as relational, but is also important to “at the same time (be) epistemologically relational or theoretically pluralist. That is, recognizing the co-constituent production of rural space through material and discursive phenomenon, processes and practices” (208). In order to enact a theoretical pluralism to studying rurality, Heley and Jones turn to Cindi Katz’ usage of ‘minor theory’ framework (1996), which accounts for Lefevre’s “spatial trialectic” (1991) of the co-constitutive relations between the global economy, social discourse, and embodied performances that shape space/place (Heley Jones: 209). Minor theory “embraces the critical perspectives of historical materialism, feminism, and other regimes of knowing at once” (Heley Jones: 208-209) to engage multiple methodologies of praxis that “pry apart conventional geographies and produce renegade cartographies of change”



(Katz: 487). In other words, minor theory aims to transform power relations through a radical, expansive account of space/places. In doing so, minor theory necessitates engagement with theories of praxis that include feminism, queer theory, Marxism, and decolonial theory. Places cannot be solely explained or adequately accounted for through one theoretical lens, especially in addressing Lefevre's spatial trialectic of the structural, discursive, and lived dimensions of spaces/places.

While Heley and Jones ultimately end with Katz' methodological approach of "countertopography" (2001), I instead turn to transnational feminists that theorize the politics of location and rurality in direct relation to Western modern projects of colonialism, imperialism, and global capitalism and its intimate intersections with regional patriarchies. Grewal and Kaplan (1994) utilize post-modernity as an epistemological tool to trace Western modernity's hegemonic productions across varied locations and to understand "how these cultural productions are circulated, distributed, received, and even commodified" (5). In tracing Western modernity's scattered hegemonies, Grewal and Kaplan posit that transnational feminist thinking can disrupt the global/local and West/non-West schemas of development while at the same time retaining categories of differentiation that acknowledge the asymmetrical links produced by transnational economic structures (15). In this vein, transnational feminists simultaneously reject white feminism's collusion with modernity in defining women's empowerment as individualistic and acontextual (the Girl Effect being a prime example), thereby reinforcing Western colonial logics. They also reject U.S. post-modernism that concerns itself first with "ambivalence, the decentered

subject, rather than as thorough critique of modernity and its related institutions” (21). It is from this initial epistemological premise of *rejecting of* and being *accountable to* Western modernity that transnational feminist proliferated. Therefore, transnational feminism allows us to retain rurality as Western modern construct that marginalizes girls and women in different, yet related ways without losing sight of rurality’s contingency to regional cultures, histories, and tradition.

### **Rural Mobility and Migration**

I turn to queer theory and sexuality literature on migration and mobility to understand how the rural becomes anti-thetical to the feminist and queer “modern” subject as shaped by the West and the Rest discourse. Studies of gender and sexual migration, in particular, illustrate the power of discourse and affect to compel the circulation and movement of people, specifically by showcasing how the rural as “pre-modern and undesirable” produces real-effects via subject-formation and transnational migration and mobility. While the rest of the dissertation will showcase how these discourses impact Latinas’ subjectivity and mobility trajectories in California, this chapter offers a broader framework of migration and mobility to understand rural-to-urban migration through an intersectional and transnational lens.

Prior to the 1990s, migration research worked within functional, biological, and economic frameworks of gender that followed positivist conventions of social science methods: gender was simply a “dichotomous” variable that characterized people as either man or woman. Research on migrant men sufficed to make

generalizations on all migrants (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2000) and research typified as “gender and migration” was “ghettoized” and reduced to women’s migration that reinforced sex roles (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2000, Donato et al. 2006). In large part due to the emergence of gay/lesbian and queer studies after the 90s, gender shifted from an essentialist and fixed model to thinking about gender as an historical framework with a dynamic and relational nature always-already imbricated in power relations. Viewing gender and sexuality as socially constructed and fluid in turn also shifted the meanings of migration (Manalansan 2006, Luibhéid 2008). Sexuality scholarship has unearthed assumptions of taken-for-granted public and private institutions and identity categories, leading to relational and contextual understandings of human behavior that centers– but does not stop at–sexuality, such as queering time and space beyond linear constructs.

Although queer studies problematize Western binary logics, sexuality research on migration and refugee asylum may still reify the settler-colonial divide of the West and the Rest that casts a hierarchy based on modernity. Once again, this illustrates the persistence of this discursive formation within Western knowledge production, even within fields that critically examine gender and sexuality via migration and mobility. The West and the Rest remains naturalized and taken for granted when scholars depoliticize both the rural and the urban. In this type of research, “the process of migration to the United States, Europe, and other metropolitan locations is figured as the movement from repression to freedom” (Grewal & Kaplan, 2001: 670).

Critical feminist and sexuality scholars, such as Grewal and Kaplan (2001), Luibhéid (2008), and Manalansan (2006), have noted how political organizing around HIV/AIDS and gay rights for immigrants in the United States institutionalized a legal discourse that constructed Latin America, and the Global South more broadly, as pre-modern due to harboring an alleged culture of sexual repression. Laws developed to grant asylum for undocumented immigrants seeking HIV/AIDS treatment in the U.S. in the late twentieth century, “required the asylum petitioners to assert and document the horrible conditions that existed in their home countries” (Manalansan: 232). These “horrible conditions” painted countries outside of the U.S. as inherently violent or repressive towards sexual minorities, constituting a linear and spatial migration narrative of repression-to-freedom from the Global South to the Global North within studies of sexual migration (Carrillo 2004; 2018). The representation-to-freedom discourse—a discourse built from the West and the Rest—constructs the Global North as the ideal location where people can live authentic sexually and gendered liberated lives, shaping people’s motivations for migrating and their migration patterns, as well as how their stories are told.

Discourses of sexual *and* gender freedom have functioned as symbolic markers of national modernity and modern subjectivity, wherein modernity stands in for the urban. While critical queer and feminist scholars have critiqued the traditional/modern binary in relation the Global South/North divide, the notion that people can only feel free to express their non-heteronormative sexualities and gender expressions in *urban or metropolitan cities* across both sides of the hemisphere

remains a powerful narrative in the studies of sexuality, space, and migration. Discourses that reify a stark and oppositional rural/urban dichotomy create geographic imaginaries that inform how scholars write about people's sexual- and gender-based migration trajectories *and* shapes people's sexual and gendered motivations to migrate.

It is hard to move away from this narrative of repression-to-freedom linear trajectory when discourses of the "rural-as-pre-modern" remain unproblematized, even within scholarship that seeks to paint the Global South as heterogeneous or as not inherently sexually repressive. For example, Carrillo (2018) argues that Mexico is undergoing a national sexual modernization due to the emergence of global gay cultures that take on local and regional meanings ("glocalized") in Mexico. While Carrillo's study openly critiques the traditional/modern binary, Carrillo inadvertently reinforces the idea that the "modernity" side of the divide is most desirable. One of the central questions guiding his study of Mexican gay men's pre- and post-migration lives illustrates how modernity remains unproblematized: "But if we consider the evidence that "glocalized" forms of "sexual modernity" have emerged in many countries of the global South, should we not also contemplate the possibility that those same countries may be putting into play their own forms of globalized sexual modernity within a global context?" (32). This inquiry itself is not problematic, but rather, would benefit from asking what it means to modernize Mexico and examine how these processes might create asymmetries of power for sexual minorities that are also impacted by race, gender, and class. Further,

“bringing” modernity to the Global South constructs other countries typified as developing and mostly rural as “behind” modernization, and thus, as sexually repressive.

Because the traditional/modern binary is spatialized across different scales, each scale—down to the localized rural—should be critically examined in studies of sexual migration. The local is conceptualized via a rural/urban binary and the global is conceptualized via a Global South/Global North binary along with its political derivatives of non-West/West, Third World/First World, and developing/developed, respectively. In these dichotomies, the modern-as-urban is held as the most desirable for its promises of different forms of liberation—often signaled via sexuality and gender equality. In surveying transnational studies of sexuality, Grewal and Kaplan (2001) identify how the traditional/modern binary functions to demarcate both the sexually liberated modern subject, as well as a feminist modern subject. Thus, modernity is always-already sexualized and gendered, in addition to designating developed or developing capitalist economies and democratic national governments, as the signifying chain of the West and the Rest materializes on the intersectional demarcation of bodies. Sexuality and gender within modernity discourses are also shaped by processes of racialization and class stratification.

Within feminist scholarship on “female genital mutilation” (FGM), Grewal and Kaplan argue that girls and women that undergo FGM in the Global South are viewed as traditional due to their culture’s “regressive” gendered practices. Thus, they are living “pre-modern” lives in comparison to their Global North counterparts,

which are imagined as modern due to the feminist notion of bodily autonomy: “the global feminist is one who has free choice over her body and a complete and intact rather than a fragmented or surgically altered body, while the traditional female subject of patriarchy is forcibly altered, fragmented, alienated from her innate sexuality, and deprived of choices or agency” (669-670). Evidently, feminist subjectivity and gendered freedom implies having agency over one’s body and sexuality. In this scholarship, the traditional/modern binary spatializes bodily and sexual autonomy as a right solely accessible in the Global North, even as the lived realities of women and girls in the Global North might contradict this conception of feminist and sexual freedom when analyzed in relation to race, sexuality, citizenship, and class. It is no coincidence that narratives about FGM highlight girls and women of color from poverty-stricken rural spaces in the Global South, who are largely depicted as passive victims in need of saving. As mentioned earlier, critical girlhood scholars have also noted how (white) feminist scholarship also reproduces a Global North/Global South divide via an oppositional girlhood discourse that racializes and sexualizes girls from the Global South.

Sexuality research on migration and refugee asylum similarly reinforce the idea that countries in the Global South drive people to migrate due to the violent and unequal treatment of sexual minorities, marking these nations as a whole as traditional and pre-modern as well. In this scholarship, refugees that seek asylum in Global North countries based on the fear of persecution over their sexuality must conceptualize their homelands as regressive and punitive in comparison to the

receiving nation-state. This Global North/South divide also draws on imaginations of the rural to signal a backwards traditional culture characterized as sexually repressive and violent:

That is, “backward,” *often rural subjects* flee their homes and/or patriarchal families or violent, abusive situations to come to *the modern metropolis*, where they can express their true nature as sexual identity in a state of freedom. This narrative is a hallowed one in domestic “coming-out” discourses as well as in a burgeoning international human rights arena. (emphasis added, Grewal & Kaplan, 2001:670)

The migration trajectory from repression-to-freedom constructs the Global South as rural, which further stands in for patriarchal and homophobic violence, and the Global North as a modern metropolis filled with promises of sexual and feminist freedoms. This dichotomization of the world into either urban or rural remains a powerful meta-narrative, as Aizura (2018) similarly points out in contemporary scholarship on transgender mobility: “the *urban* centers of the Global North are associated with freedom and democratic choice. By contrast, cities in the Global South are often lumped in *rural* or suburban areas into homogenous nations or regions, associated with poverty and/or religious or political oppression” (emphasized added, 98).

As such, I argue that the rural becomes a powerful geographic imaginary that represents everything that Western modernity should not be. Otherizing the rural, then, is an instrumental political tool that reinforces the conception that Global North locations like the United States and Europe are democratic, liberating, and welcoming host countries to migrants who experience human rights violations in relation to their sexualities and gender. Leela Fernandes (2015) and Chandra Mohanty (2003) note



that the United States has historically utilized the discourse of a progressive democracy that is sexually liberating and feminist to justify war and imperial expansion in the Middle East and other parts of the world in more recent decades. U.S. political expansionism and overseas economic intervention becomes justified due to its image of progress, democracy, and liberation, ideologies it claims to export to other countries, though it ultimately serves as a disguise for covert political domination. In these discourses, rural locations in the Global South provide the imagery of extreme patriarchy and homophobia, which is used in U.S. imperialist and settler-colonialist projects abroad.

And yet, rural spaces exist in the Global North and urban cities exist in the Global South that contain complex lived realities shaped by power structures that impact people in intersectional ways, not solely in relation to their sexuality or gender. In this regard, sexuality studies of migration experience a tension in how it frames the motivations and reasons that people migrate in relation to their sexualities. The traditional/modern binary is disrupted by critical theorists through the use of “queer” in sexuality and migration studies, such as Luibhéid and Manalansan, that specifically use queer to disrupt normative frameworks of power. These authors disrupt the ethnocentric view of queer migration from regression-to-liberation that posits countries like the U.S. as democratic and liberal by showing through their research that this is far from the experiences of queer immigrants in the U.S. Their research shows that queer migrants experience inequalities and processes of racialization in their host countries and within metropolitan cities. For example, the

Mexican gay men in Carrillo's study (2018)--who migrated from Mexico to San Diego, CA in hopes of living sexually liberated lives--experienced newfound fears of detention and deportation. While they left fears of having their sexual identities and practices exposed or policed behind in Mexico, processes of racialization via anti-immigrant sentiment and policies in the U.S. led them to feel fearful over their documentation status, which also impacted their ability to date and have sexual relations in the U.S.

If the metropolitan city exists as a desirable future within Western discourses of sexuality, modernity is also signaled by a temporality of forward movement. This forward movement in time towards the modern is materialized and spatialized by discourses of gender and sexual mobility and migration. Notably, queer subjects' geo-specific sexual practices not only mark metropolitan cities as ideal for incorporating queer identities within different spaces as noted by queer scholars, such as Halberstam (2005), but further, these practices construct queer subjects as being mobile within and across spaces, as well as mobile across class and social statuses. Mobility, thus, also contributes to conceptualizations of modern sexual subjectivity and practices. Here, it is useful to think of Aren Aizura's expansive definition of mobility (2018), which incorporates spatial, social, and economic conceptualizations of hierarchical movement that includes migration trajectories. Aizura defines mobility as the following:

Mobility has multiple meanings: it can signal geographical movement as well as movement between different spaces within a given architecture (a city, nation, or region). Yet mobility also traditionally signifies transcending the limits of class identity or background. Both meanings rely on and mutually support the other: the politics of individual mobility within contemporary liberalism dictate that movement

does not signify the mere traversal of space. *Individuals are exhorted to move “up the social ladder” by relocating themselves spatially: migration from the slums to the suburbs, from the third world to the first world.* (emphasis added, 2018:17)

This definition of mobility illustrates how space and time become symbolic tools for the advancement of an individual’s life trajectory, which positions migration as a specific necessity for sexual and other minorities that reside outside of “modern” cities, as well as outside of the Global North.

Implicit within dominant discourses of mobility is a migration trajectory from the rural-to-the-urban, as the rural represents a traditional or pre-modern past that has little to no opportunities for economic advancement, but more importantly, represents a hostile and oppositional space for non-heteronormative sexualities and gender expressions as discussed above. As such, the gay man in the city has been imagined and written about as either having migrated from a rural, small-town to the modern and sexually liberated city (or should at least yearn to migrate there) and/or as always have been in the urban. In other words, the urban has become synonymous with queer life (Halberstam 2005:14). Conclusively, all sexually liberated or “out of the closet” queer subjects are viewed as urban, implicating a migration journey for rural queer individuals away from the rural into the urban.

Halberstam aptly notes how the rural thus represents a geographic, cultural, and symbolic closet (a spatial metaphor in queer studies denoting the time prior to coming out as queer) that is inherently antithetical to being sexually liberated. Halberstam coins the concept of *metronormativity* to illustrate how the urban becomes conflated with queer visibility and freedom. Metro-normativity constructs

the coming-out narrative as a tale of spatial mobility or migration from the rural to the urban:

The metronormative narrative maps a story of migration onto the coming-out narrative. While the story of coming out tends to function as a temporal trajectory within which a period of disclosure follows a long period of repression, the metronormative story of migration from “country” to “town” is a spatial narrative within which the subject moves to a place of tolerance after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy. Since each narrative bears the same structure, it is easy to equate the physical journey from small town to big city with the psychological journey from closet case to out and proud. (Halberstam:37)

Metro-normativity utilizes the rural-as-closet as a spatial metaphor to underscore how the rural has been conceptualized as a sexually repressive place a queer individual *must migrate away from* in order to flee from secrecy and intolerance. In this regard, rural queer individuals become an oxymoron, an impossible way of life at the precipice of violence and even death as consequence of rural intolerance. Thus, an erasure of rural queer lives occurs within sexuality studies in the U.S. that do not unpack the spatial and temporal significations of the rural. Halberstam argued that up until 2005 (the publication of *In a Queer Time and Place*), gay/lesbian and queer studies had paid little attention to non-metropolitan sexualities, genders, and identities in complex and heterogeneous ways that went beyond constructing rural queers as traditional or pre-modern (34).

Halberstam utilizes metro-normativity to understand why the brutal murder of Brandon Teena, a transgender man, in Falls City, Nebraska in 1993 became a timeless event ingrained in the minds of queer communities in the U.S. More precisely, Halberstam sought to deconstruct how Teena became a popular tale of horror and violence of what can occur if a queer person chooses to live their non-

heteronormative sexual lives and gender identities openly in a rural location. The murder of Brandon Teena has been memorialized in dozens of mediums, but most prominently, in the documentary *the Brandon Teena Story* (1998) and the film adaptation *Boys Don't Cry* (1999). In analyzing the documentary, Halberstam finds that the film depicts the murderers and rural Nebraska as a whole through the discourse of *white trash and white supremacy*, which constructs white violence towards racialized and queer individuals as spatially located and contained within rural spaces in the U.S. Halberstam argues that the film allowed white queer viewers in urban locations to distance themselves from white supremacy, racism, and homophobia, as it did not acknowledge how these processes of marginalization and violence also occur in metropolitan locations, typically against queer people of color.

As such, within the context of the U.S., the rural represents a contained and distant white supremacy, and thus, the rural becomes reconfigured as characteristic of “backwards” cultural practices of “white trash” communities, which also adds a class dimension to the rural. These narratives about the rural create static depictions of rurality, while also making it synonymous to whiteness, poverty, and violence in the U.S. While these discourses of the rural homogenize massive regions within the U.S., creating simplified and unrealistic experiences of the rural, metro-normativity creates powerful geographic imaginaries that in turn shape the gender and sexual practices of individuals in the U.S. in ways that may reproduce social inequalities.

## The Figure of the Rural Girl

Because rural-to-urban migration is conceptualized as the movement from repression-to-freedom and from traditional-to-modern, modernity becomes synonymous with freedom and spatialized as urban, adding to Hall's signifying chain of the West and the Rest:

- “**Western**” = *industrial* = *urban* = *developed* = **modern** = **freedom** = *good* = *desirable*
- “**non-Western**” = *nonindustrial* = *rural* = *agricultural* = *underdeveloped* = **pre-modern** = **repressive** = *bad* = **undesirable**

The city promises freedom, but within discourses of rural girlhood, these freedoms are manifold. Economic, gender, and sexual freedoms mark a girl as “modern,” and thus construct urban life desirable and superior.

The rural and the figure of the girl function as discursive devices of modernization in spatial and temporal terms. Both rurality and girlhood have been constructed as signifiers of a pre-modern past that reflect the backward, traditional, feminine, and innocent qualities of uncivilized societies. Poor, racialized girls from Global South, in particular, are figuratively constructed as rural land of untapped natural resources with potential for future economic profit, as evident in the Girl Effect imaginary and corporatized development projects: “poor girls and women are imagined to be a new frontier for economic growth as potential future productive, reproductive, and consumptive subjects” (Moeller 2018: 38). The bio-political logic of Western modernity links the biological body, individual self, and economic

behaviors of girls to national prosperity. The Global South (re: “rural”) girl’s “developing” body is conflated with the “developing” national body of her respective country.

As illustrated in the Girl Effect, rural girls must end global poverty by becoming educated and upwardly mobile in order to enter capitalist labor markets and earn disposable income. In turn, compulsory education in urban places promises to cultivate gender and sexual “freedoms.” Gender and sexual freedom translates into the girls’ controlled reproduction and delayed motherhood and marriage, which are conceptualized as desirable due to the promise of bodily autonomy for young girls that are supposed victims of their patriarchal and repressive rural communities and nations within post-feminist, neoliberal frameworks. Overall, the rural girl is viewed as an economic frontier that must be conquered to (re)produce modernity and solve its inherent instabilities.

Constructing the Global South girl as a “frontier” is laden with colonial imaginaries of “discovering wilderness” at the edge of civilization. Take for example the Oxford English dictionary definition of “frontier”: “1) a line or border separating two countries; 1.1) the extreme limit of settled land beyond which lies wilderness, especially referring to the western U.S. before Pacific settlement; 1.2) The extreme limit of understanding or achievement in a particular area” (Anon n.d.). Poor, racialized rural girls symbolize the space in which the West can meet the outer “limit of civilization” and cross into the horizons that lie beyond to tap into new markets for capitalist accumulation—as Maria Eitler, CEO and president of Nike Inc., describes

the Girl Effect: “Girls are the world’s greatest untapped resource for economic growth and prosperity” (Eitel 2010).

It becomes clear that rural girls resemble both borders (the threshold of modernity) and borderlands (the uncultivated lands beyond the threshold of modernity), signifying *access* to the “strange” rural land of pre-modernity (spatial device), as well as embodying the development tools (temporal device) that transform their lands (the Third World) from poverty to economic prosperity. In sum, I contend figure of the rural girl broadly materializes and resolves the instability of Western modernity by symbolizing: 1) borders or spatial devices that signify the divide between pre-modernity and modernity of a given culture and nation; 2) a borderlands that must be cultivated to transition from pre-modernity to modernity of a given culture and nation; and 3) temporal devices via the forward movement from the rural to the urban that solidifies the arrival to modernity. In sum, the rural girl symbolizes both the outer limits of modernity and the transition into modernity.

Embedded within the proliferation of rural girlhood is the history of colonialism and contemporary imaginations of Western imperialisms:

Just as colonized girls’ and women’s bodies were a terrain upon which colonization violently occurred, the bodies of racialized girls and women in the Global South are the ground upon which corporatized development is imagined, constructed, and continuously negotiated through competing and often contradictory processes. Girls and women become a means by which corporations enter the development regime through the entangled discourses of bottom-billion capitalism, philanthrocapitalism, gender equality, and Third World difference. Girls and women are imagined to be instruments for achieving a whole set of development outcomes and a new frontier for corporate growth and profit (Moeller 2018: 34)



Western modernity and its colonial logics construct “frontier” as a place of discovery for the taking, but as Anzaldúa shows in her canonical book, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the metaphor of the frontier can also be counter-hegemonic since it reveals “contingent nature of social arrangements” (Cantú and Hurtado, 2012). *Borderlands* denotes two worlds clashing, creating “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants... Tensions grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus. Ambivalence and unrest reside there and death is no stranger” (1999: 25-26). Rural girls experience the rural as a structure of feeling of being distant or outside of modernity, and thus, the urban haunts their imaginations as an ideal and place to strive towards. As such, rural girls both experience and reveal the social arrangements structured by and conducive to Western modernity.

Accordingly, I find that young Latinas from rural California feel as if they are living outside of the “modern” world, which supports empirical findings on rural girls around the globe. Inundated with romanticized images of upward mobility consisting of college, cosmopolitan femininities, accelerated city life, and successful careers via hegemonic popular culture, rural girls experience rurality relationally to the affective discourses tied to the urban across all scales. Successful adulthood, it is believed, can only be found in the modern city, creating a linear pathway from the rural to the urban. As I will show, in reality the mobility trajectory of Central Valley girls is far from linear as they navigate complicated relationships to their rural hometowns and their immigrant families.

**CHAPTER 2: THE PARADOX OF EXCESS FRUIT AND PERSISTENT HUNGER: CALIFORNIA'S AGRICULTURAL POLITICAL ECONOMY IN THE CENTRAL VALLEY<sup>4</sup>**

*Es triste porque toda la familia sale afectuada. Mis hijas lloraban porque decían que me iba morir, y me quería abrazar. Si no fuera por la ayuda de los vecinos y unos familiares no tendría modo de obtener comida.*

*It's sad because all of the family is affected. My daughters have cried because they say I'm going to die and they want to hug me. If it weren't for the help of neighbors and some family members, I would have no way to get food.*

– Estela, 52, San Joaquin Valley Region, 2020<sup>5</sup>

Thus far, I have argued that rural girlhood signifies a pre-modernity that symbolically resolves the instabilities of late-capitalist modernity while reifying the power hierarchies of the West and the Rest. In particular, I argue that poor rural girls of color in the Global South symbolize rural land containing untapped natural resources that capitalism could harness for global economic profit. In this chapter, I investigate the material formation of rurality within California, accounting for the most profitable agricultural lands in the United States and the world. In doing so, I aim to illustrate the local, regional, and global material productions of rurality that give fodder to the lives of Latina girls that grow up in California's Central Valley.

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<sup>4</sup> California's Central Valley is also known as the San Joaquin Valley. As such, they will be used synonymously in this dissertation.

<sup>5</sup> Excerpt from a farmworker quoted in, "*Always Essential, Perpetually Disposable: Initial Impact Of The Covid-19 Pandemic On California Agricultural Workers*," a report on Phase One of the COVID-19 Farmworker Study (COFS) by Sarah M. Ramirez, Richard Mines, and Ildi Carlisle-Cummins, February 2021.

This chapter contextualizes their lives as unfolding in an agricultural heartland linked to a global circulation of capital and labor. As Parsons (1986) states, to discuss California's Central Valley is to "discuss agriculture" (380). Therefore, it is essential to uncover how the agricultural industry gives shape and color to the rural communities and Latinx migrant farmworkers in the Central Valley. Equally important, I also demonstrate the heterogeneity of rural production through a historical analysis of rurality in California. While rurality in California embodies the globalized discourse of the rural as pre-modern, the state's unique history of race and labor formations illustrates specific discourses attached to California's rural landscapes. Notably, rural California resembles a beautiful and seemingly "neutral" view that obscures a past about Indigenous colonization and the contemporary exploitation of migrant farmworkers—both done in service of high profits in agribusiness.

### **The Fruit-Hunger Paradox**

As the opening quote indicates, Estela, a Central Valley agricultural worker, worried about feeding her daughters as she faced job loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, Estela's daughters worried about their mother dying from the labor that *might* provide sufficient income to feed them. Estela's daughters live a rural girlhood shaped by the precarity of agricultural labor in California, from witnessing the deterioration of their mother's body to facing hunger and poverty at a young age. These material conditions inflect their daily lives with struggle and dreams of a better

life. As I will show in the following chapters, girl informants of this study have parents and grandparents who labored in the agricultural fields or packing houses in the Central Valley. Some of the girls themselves partake in agricultural work to supplement their family's meager income.

Latina rural girls in California grow up in economic and social precarity as a consequence of the neoliberalization of capitalist agrarian accumulation, which binds California agricultural communities to a transnational circulation of capital, as well as a circulation of people via urban-rural migration across all scales. Their lived experiences are in sharp contrast to California's popular images in media and tourism. The Golden State's prosperous wealth occludes the daily realities of the state's agricultural communities and, most significantly, makes invisible their labor in service of a sunnier and urbanized (i.e., "developed" and technology-advanced) portrayal of the state. How California is *made*—the social and economic spatial productions of its landscapes—is a story about agricultural labor, which differs from how the state's landscapes are *viewed* (Mitchell 1996; 2012). The disjuncture between the lived California and the imagined California draws its from the state's annexation into the United States during the country's westward expansion, a historical conjuncture that solidified the state within a white supremacist capitalist social order (Almaguer 1994). The dispossession of rural lands and the violent genocide of Indigenous people by white immigrant settlers in California made today's highly profitable agricultural political economy possible. Today, the agricultural industry

depends on the disposability and embodied deterioration of Latinx migrant farmworkers whose labor transforms the land into capital.

In 2020, California agriculture “earned \$49.1 billion dollars in cash receipts” (California Department of Food and Agriculture 2023). These staggering numbers reflect a 3.3% decline in revenue for California's agricultural economy due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, "California remained the leading state in cash farm receipts in 2020 with combined commodities representing 13.7 percent of the U.S. total. California's leading crops remained fruits, nuts and vegetables" (CDFA 2023). That same year in 2020, the California farmworkers who harvested, processed, packed, and transported the profitable produce reported job and income loss even as they were deemed essential workers by the state (Ramirez, Mines, and Carlisle-Cummins 2021). Because California farmworkers earn roughly an average of less than \$18,000 a year due to seasonal employment (Ramirez et al. 2021), the pandemic only worsened agricultural job availability and existing poor working conditions. Under normal circumstances, seasonal farmworkers in California and other U.S. states, such as Washington and Oregon, face a precarious life due to low wages, underemployment, food insecurity, chronic poverty, workplace violations, little to no healthcare coverage, and health discrimination (Holmes 2013; Ramirez et al. 2021).

**Figure 1:** *Regional Map of California, State of California Department of Justice*



Seven out of the ten most profitable agricultural California counties in 2020 came from the state’s region known as the Central Valley (See Figure 1), also known as the heartland of California, the “other California” or California’s “Deep South” (Haslam 1990; Johnson, Haslam, and Dawson 1993; Landon, Huang, and Zagovsky

2011; Essinger 2011). The monikers attached to the Central Valley reflect its designation as a rural and agricultural landscape that stands as an oppositional, at times picturesque, background to the more well-known urban and coastal regions of California, represented by cities such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego, which have come to represent the state in the U.S. and global imaginary. For instance, the highly popular depictions of Los Angeles highlight sunny beaches, surfboards, skyscrapers, palm trees, golden hills, and luxurious homes, images that represent a distinct California from the one in the Central Valley. California's Central Valley contains agricultural flatlands stretching for miles under unbearable heat populated by farmworkers who work from dawn to dusk and live in under-resourced rural towns in between the miles of crops. The Central Valley is home to a large population of low-income migrant farmworkers from Mexico, a significant proportion being Indigenous and undocumented (California Institute for Rural Studies n.d.).

While this region produces among the highest farm revenues in the country, the Central Valley contained some of the lowest earning counties in 2020. For example, Fresno County had “a median household income of \$57,109. The county earnings are 27.4% below the state average, and 12.1% below the national average, with 26.2% of households earning over \$100,000, while 12.1% of households earning less than \$15,000” (Montalvo 2022). Meanwhile, Fresno County made a total gross income of over \$8 billion dollars from agricultural production in 2021, which was about a 1.5% increase from the previous year in 2020 (Fresno County Department of Agriculture 2021). Thus, the Central Valley embodies an agricultural context faced

with an undeniable fruit-hunger paradox: “Those who produce our nation’s food are among the most likely to be hungry or food insecure” (Brown and Getz 2011). In other words, California’s Central Valley feeds a world growing increasingly urban while at the same time leaving those who produce that excess bounty in social and economic precarity. Rural farmworkers face persistent hunger, housing insecurity, poverty, ailing bodies, and a constant fear of deportation (Brown and Getz 2011; Holmes 2013; Ramirez et al. 2021).

The *fruit-hunger paradox* exposes how the Central Valley is necessary to modern life in the United States, yet those who work and live there struggle at the precipice of modern life. As a wine bottle pops open, wine pours down into a glass nestled beside a charcuterie board amplified with the vibrant colors of blueberries and strawberries, the delicacies in a home overlooking a shore; hardly those who consume the fruit and wine likely think of how their nourishment got there. Holmes (2013) poses an urgent provocation, “It is likely that the last hands to hold the blueberries, strawberries, peaches, asparagus, or lettuce before you pick them up in your local grocery store belong to Latin American migrant laborers. How might we respect this intimate passing of food between hands?” (43).

The Central Valley is functional to U.S. modernity because it produces the fruits and vegetables readily available in the numerous grocery stores in large cities across the country and the world. For example, “In 2020, California exported approximately 32 percent of its agricultural production by volume. In dollar terms, California’s agricultural exports reached \$20.77 billion for 2020” (CFDA 2021). The



European Union, Canada, China, Japan, and South Korea were the top five export economies in 2020 (Ibid). The global "modern" city presents consumers with various food options while being distant and removed from the agricultural spaces producing food. Consumers in large cities do not have to think twice about where their fruit comes from or the poor labor conditions that produce them. The Latinx immigrant majority that produces this bounty in the Central Valley cannot access any of the wealth produced from the lands that surround their homes and, most importantly, produced by their labor. Rural communities in this state region live in arguably "pre-modern" conditions, as many rural places in the Central Valley remain unincorporated. They lack basic needs such as access to clean water, paralleling the popular images of the Global South:

Unincorporated communities lacking municipal governments rely on often-distant county seats for their social services and political presentation. Many unincorporated communities lack basic services such as portable water, sewers, street lights, curbs, and gutters. These deficiencies can significantly affect the health and well-being of residents. (Landon, Huang, & Zagosky 2011: 17)

As of 2007, at least 220 low-income unincorporated rural communities exist across the Central Valley (California Rural Legal Assistance n.d.).

The production of hunger exposes how agricultural labor in rural California must be disposable, replaceable, and flexible to keep wages low and produce a surplus of a foreign-born and undocumented labor force. Immigration laws, neoliberal economic policies, and urbanization link the reproduction of the Latinx migrant

workforce to the displacement of Indigenous rural communities within and outside of the United States as I illustrate in the next three sections.

### **Urbanormativity via California's Rural Landscapes**

The fruit-hunger paradox that characterizes California's Central Valley is no coincidence. Persistent hunger in rural communities is not an unfortunate consequence of irresponsible spending or poor decision-making by migrant farmworkers and their families, as neoliberal narratives would indicate. Instead, the prevalence of food insecurity within rural lands that obtain a bounty of fruit is a direct result of prioritizing agricultural economic profit and reproducing social conditions conducive to the industry's demands and inherent instability, as scholars Brown and Getz (2011) argue:

We argue that this vulnerability has been systematically constructed within the political economy of agrarian capital accumulation, immigration politics, and neoliberal trade policy. Our goal is to expose the material relations that *produce* hunger. By choosing the term *produce* we emphasize that in a world of agricultural surpluses hunger is the result not of natural processes but rather of unequal power relations and resource access. (121-122, emphasis in original)

In alignment with Brown and Getz, this chapter unearths the unequal power relations that produce hunger amongst farmworkers in the Central Valley and broader social inequalities due to the precarity of agricultural labor and living in resource-starved rural communities. Before examining the historical production of the Valley's fruit-hunger paradox, it is equally important to approach agrarian capital accumulation as a

part-and-parcel of an urbanizing world. I turn to sociologists and geographers to understand the role of rurality in the global political economy and within California's agricultural industry. In doing so, I show how the region of the Central Valley informs how California gets made spatially and economically to be *urbanormative*.

The cultural and economic devaluation of the rural and the normalization and systemic prioritization of urban life is known as *urbanormativity*, a concept coined by sociologists Gregory M. Fulkerson and Alexander R. Thomas (2014; 2019). More specifically, this concept refers to how rural life is viewed as “archaic, limited, and undesirable, while urban life is hailed as the future, as a sign of progress and prosperity, and as the superior way to live” (2019: 30). Similar concepts that illustrate urban valorization have been conceptualized by other scholars. In the previous chapter, I draw on the concept of *metronormativity* coined by gender studies scholar Jack Halberstam (2005) to understand how rurality signifies pre-modernity in relation to gender and sexuality, revealing “the rural to be the devalued term in the urban/rural binary governing the spatialization of modern U.S. sexual identities” (37). The different variations of the concept illustrate the derision of the rural in service of Western modern development and its power structures, most notably settler-colonialism and imperialism. Each concept spotlights different but related oppositional binaries from the West and the Rest discursive formation as described by Stuart Hall (1992) (see previous chapter). The basis of such concepts underscore how “urbanization is understood to be the savior of rural communities” (Fulkerson and Thomas 2014: 9), whether that means, for instance, saving “closeted” queer subjects

from homophobic rural communities or saving Indigenous people from “heathenism” by rejecting their cultures and taking their lands.

I utilize Fulkerson and Thomas’ framework of urbanormativity since it draws on the three-fold model of rural space as conceptualized by Halfacree (2006): “(1) locality/materiality, (2) social representation, and (3) everyday life” (Fulkerson and Thomas 2019: 10). This conceptualization of rurality provides an all-encompassing framework that illustrates wide-ranging urban-rural inequalities and the normalization of urbanization across micro- and macro-scales. The *locality/materiality* dimension explains the materiality of urban-rural relations via the political economy and ecology. The *social representation* dimension explains the discourses and representations attached to the rural, akin to the analysis provided in Chapter 1. Lastly, the everyday life dimension explains how rural-urban material and cultural productions manifest in people's daily lives. This chapter largely discusses the material dimension of rurality concerning California's agricultural production and chapters 3 and 4 address all three dimensions to discuss Latina girlhood in the Central Valley.

The conceptualization of the rural as culturally backward, underdeveloped, and ignorant legitimizes an economic “urban dependency” on the natural resources found in rural spaces and the exploitation of cheap labor across urban and rural communities. Urban dependency refers to an economic and demographic cycle of “depeasantization” and “overurbanization” (Fulkerson and Thomas 2019: 20). Depeasantization refers to forced urban-rural migration that results from the

economic undervaluation of rural labor and capital as a result of neoliberal economic legislation and international free trade agreements procured by “First World” urban nations. This type of legislation, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement or NAFTA (discussed later in this chapter), leaves economic devastation in rural communities and “push” people to move to the city across national and transnational scales. Overurbanization refers to the overpopulation of urban spaces due to rural people migrating to the city, which further exacerbates the city’s need for resources. Urban dependency, thus, illustrates how “urbanization—the expansion of urban systems—is driven by the inherent need cities have to obtain rural resources such as food, fiber, wood, minerals, fuel sources, and land to accommodate their swelling numbers” (Fulkerson and Thomas 2014: 9). In turn, urban cities may exploit unskilled labor given the increasing competition for limited jobs and resources, while also depending on rural resources to accommodate its growing population, ultimately becoming incapable of being self-sufficient.

Overall, rural spaces must be perpetually exhausted of their natural resources to accommodate urban populations. Although the world is growing increasingly urban, Fulkerson and Thomas (2019) argue that reaching 100% urbanization is impossible given the need for rural resources. When it comes to agriculture, a nature-driven industry, urban demands for food translate into cultivating a disposable, flexible, and replaceable workforce. Today, cultivating a malleable workforce depends on the systematic exploitation of undocumented foreign-born agricultural workers. Across time, however, accommodating these demands meant implementing

coercive political tactics, such as the colonization of Indigenous lands and committing genocide of rural communities.

Capitalist political economies dependent on rural resources naturalize rural landscapes, making its labor invisible and cultivating the rural as distant from modern life both spatially and epistemically. Fulkerson and Thomas (2019) argue that urbanormativity binds the economic needs of urban communities with a cultural rejection of the rural through the phenomena of “epistemic distance.” Epistemic distance refers to “objects and phenomena that are distant and remote to our own lifeworld” (44). Rural communities must contact urban centers out of economic, cultural, and political necessity. For instance, many rural communities are food deserts and therefore require travel to the city for groceries (36). Some rural communities also have little to no communal spaces for entertainment, requiring people to travel to nearby urban centers to access movie theaters, museums, or shopping malls. Urban communities do not typically need to travel to, interact with, or work within rural spaces except for leisure activities. This means that people in urban centers rely on social representations of the rural, rather than direct experience, to understand and make sense of the rural. Dominant images of the rural—via popular culture—lead to a moral indifference over the plight of rural communities.

Urbanormativity not only produces the fruit-hunger paradox, but also cultivates a social apathy and indifference over the hunger across the Central Valley and other rural regions:

“When one lives in an urban setting, they many enjoy the comforts of urban life—the latest technologies, reliable access to energy, food, and a wide range of consumer goods fastened out of remote rural resources and invisible workers. The social and environmental costs are physically separated and psychologically distant. This leads to a deeper question of rural attitudes. Why would someone care what happens to rural people, especially in the absence of social ties?” (Fulkerson and Thomas 2019: 45)

The epistemic distance of rurality is not only a direct consequence of weak or fraught social ties between urban and rural spaces but also due to the discursive and material production of rural landscapes, a theoretical concept utilized to examine the power inherent in spatial production. In *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape* (1996), Marxist geographer Don Mitchell argues that the California landscape “structures relations of labor” (2) and vice versa while simultaneously concealing that labor. Similarly to Fulkerson and Thomas, Mitchell elides the long-standing debate in geography that proposes that space is produced through cultural representation (ideology) on one end or material formations (structure) on the other. Instead, Mitchell proposes to study landscape as an interplay between the two within specific historical conjectures of labor, such as California’s uneven capitalist development. To theoretically merge landscape-as-representation and landscape-as-formation, Mitchell argues that three criteria must be met, which entails illustrating 1) what landscape *is*, 2) how landscape is *produced*, and 3) how landscape *functions* (30-35). This threefold model illustrates how landscape is a “complex moment in the system of social reproduction” (35) of labor, meaning that

spatial productions are integrated processes that structure both social life and capitalist economies.

What *is* the California landscape? That question must contend with the way California is viewed through popular representations of the state versus how it is experienced by different social actors. Over time, different mediums have represented California's rural landscapes as idyllic and natural, as a freedom presented before travelers. Rural California has been presented as a distant background, a "neutral view" or blank canvas from atop designed for bourgeoisie desires of economic domination and an entitled sense of leisure. Essentially, California's rural landscapes have historically represented the American Dream, a countryside full of riches for the taking. Mitchell utilizes Jean Baudrillard's tour of California in the 1980's to illustrate how the Central Valley has been represented as a visual spectacle of economic and spatial mobility. Baudrillard's description of Porterville—a rural community in Tulare County in the Valley—emptied its rural communities of culture and depicted the working class as mimicking the mobility of the bourgeoisie (21). Conversely, Mitchell praises John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* for turning this empty view of rural California on its head. The book opens up with an aesthetic view of California, only for its protagonists to view a different California once descending into the rural lands to work:

Hidden in the bushes along the creeks and irrigation ditches is the other side of the California Dream, a side that has been there all along, but that is easy to overlook from atop the hill: the invisible army of migrant workers who make the landscape of beauty and abundance that awed the Joads. Supposedly quiet, pliable,



unorganized, they exist and reproduce themselves in landscapes of the most appalling deprivation. (1996: 14-15)

Capitalist development in California hinges on an idyllic view of its rural regions that hides the workers who produce the state's picturesque landscapes. As such, the California landscape is *produced* by workers, "quite importantly, army upon army of migratory workers planting crops, repairing railroads and highways, chopping down trees, mixing cements, and harvesting cantaloupes" (Mitchell 1996: 1). However, it is not only workers who produce California, but also social institutions, governments, and other social actors that possess the power to shape social reality and capitalist production. The production of California ultimately arises from emerging social struggles between different social actors. Therefore, a landscape entails a becoming that is never complete but rather ever shifting. For this reason, Mitchell claims that "nature is socially produced" (32) and in constant flux due to social contest. California landscapes, thus, *function* as "ideological renderings of spatial relations" (27), or as spatial formations that reproduce power by imposing a dominant way of seeing and experiencing social reality.

The dominant way of seeing California has reduced the rural to a pastoral, natural view that can be owned and used in service of urban modern capitalist development. This conquering gaze keeps the rural distant geographically, but first and foremost, discursively distant and irrelevant to urban life though ultimately always necessary to it. The Central Valley, the state's heartland and agricultural powerhouse, has been altogether conceptualized as a rural landscape despite having a

handful of metropolitan and semi-rural cities. Ultimately, the Central Valley has been rendered as oppositional to an urban California as Parsons noted in 1986:

California is the most urbanized state in the United States. Most people are concentrated in the coastal metropolitan areas without personal ties with the agricultural interior. The 9 percent of the population of California that lives in the valley is “out there somewhere,” but coastal Californians rarely cross paths with them. The landscapes of the valley are most often perceived as endlessly monotonous, something to be put behind as quickly as possible on the way to Los Angeles, the Sierra, the attraction of Nevada, or eastward. (374)

Yet, landscape’s functions of power are always subject to transformation through its constant reproduction, as material production entails a struggle inherent in capitalist development. As I will show in a later section, Mitchell (2012) describes the bracero program as a historical conjecture pivotal to structuring California’s landscapes and agricultural industry, one that entailed social struggle. Before arriving in the 20th century, however, it is important to understand that labor was not only central to understanding the formation of the state of California. How was white supremacy and race central to configuring the state’s landscapes and agricultural industry?

### **The White Supremacist Formation of California**

The construction of the California landscape as representing the American Dream draws its roots from the period of U.S. western expansion and racialized capitalist development in the late 19th century. California’s rurality played a pivotal

role in the ideological formations of manifest destiny and free labor within the nation because it represented a landscape that needed to be conquered and harnessed for the economic prosperity of white immigrant settlers. Today, rurality functions as a blank canvas for bourgeoisie fantasies, but in the past, it functioned as a place to realize the white proletariat's aspirations of upward economic mobility. The white working class *and* ruling class have benefited from naturalizing rurality. Almaguer (1994) contradicts Mitchell's Marxist insistence that labor solely defines the spatial formation of California:

Contrary to Karl Marx's expectation at the time, the salience of racial status did not diminish in the face of the expanded nineteenth-century proletarianization of the working class and polarization of class forces. Although class divisions and conflict were manifested openly, these lines were not the primary stratification dividing California's diverse population. The tremendous immigration of European and non-European immigrants into the state after annexation resulted in a hierarchy of group inequality in which race, not class, became the central stratifying variable. (12)

As such, rural California's representative and material formations exist not only as an interdependent process of *reproducing labor*, but also as an interdependent process of *racialization*, specifically in codifying white supremacy in the U.S. The capitalist development of the Central Valley, in particular, entailed the dispossession of rural lands and brutal killings of Indigenous communities for the forced extraction of the region's natural resources. In addition to obscuring the labor of racialized migrant agricultural workers, the distant, naturalized view of rural California also hides its bloody historical origins of settler-colonialism and genocide.

Almaguer (1994) argues that California's annexation to the United States from Mexico in 1848 gave way to a distinct pattern of racial and ethnic social formations that were pivotal to the nation's transition from a semi-feudal economy to a modern capitalist economy. Almaguer's central argument is that racial formations in California were unique and different from the "black/white encounter" (2) that characterized the U.S. outside of the Southwest region during this historical period. California's capitalist development emerged from multiple racial fault lines rather than a singular divide between black and white.

After the U.S. Civil War, the nation's slave-based economy transitioned into capitalist order as Northern cities became industrialized and urbanization overall increased throughout the country. The economic development in the East Coast emerged from a dichotomous racial order characterized as black/white, wherein Black Americans continued to be economically and politically denigrated in the emerging capitalist order long after slavery was abolished. William Edward Burghardt "W. E. B." Du Bois (2013/1935) describes the era of U.S. Reconstruction with great detail, arguing that the white working class did not form solidarity with the Black working class due to the "psychological wage" of white supremacy. For Du Bois, class did not exist independent of race, but rather, became mutually constituted during the nation's capitalist development, giving race, and anti-Blackness in particular, material/economic value: "The psychological wage was to make the white worker feel superior because he was not Black even though he would have nothing material

to show for it” (Taylor 2008). Du Bois critiqued and built on Marx’s historical analysis of capitalism by showing that race impeded working-class solidarity and the destruction of capitalism.

Applying a similar framework to Du Bois, Almaguer (1994) shows that the solidification of U.S. capitalism entailed a dual process of ideological and material formations of race that supported a white supremacist social order. The racialization process in California had a distinct pattern of racial/ethnic divisions as a consequence of the U.S.-Mexico War, wherein the U.S. acquired about one third of Mexico’s lands through the Gadsden Purchase of 1853 (2). In addition, the U.S. acquired land colonized and claimed by European countries, such as France, Spain, and England during this time. Between 1803 and 1853, the U.S. obtained a total of 2.3 million square miles of land during its westward expansion (2). After the conquest of the Western U.S, European-American immigrants engaged in competitive struggles for resources, land ownership, and labor-market positions with Mexican people, Indigenous people, Black immigrants, and Asian immigrants (4-7). The multiple racial fault lines created in California forged a white supremacist hierarchy based on a solidification of a “white” racial category that unified different groups of European descendants and immigrants across class lines, categories previously distinguished from one another. Almaguer notes that “white supremacist practices, in other words, forged a collective identity among European Americans in the state that crystallized around their racial status as a “white population” (11).

The presence of a white population ensured that California and the U.S., more broadly, developed into a capitalist social order that afforded economic, social, and spatial mobility primarily to the white population on one end and economic disadvantage and social marginalization to non-white populations on the other. Almaguer (2004) highlights how the white proletariat class “monopolized the most converted employment opportunities” (32) during the state’s inception into the U.S. This was possible due to the cultural representation of white people as harnessing the superior ability and values necessary for a modern capitalism. More specifically, the ideology of *manifest destiny* legitimized the economic advantage accessible to white people, thereby establishing a capitalist society that is always-already based on white supremacy. Manifest destiny draws from West and the Rest colonialist logic of expanding European-American Christianity across “heathen-laden” rural landscapes of the Pacific coast in order to “civilize” non-white populations. This sense of white entitlement is also known as the “white man’s burden” (12) which describes white people’s mission to cultivate social progress by enforcing their values, culture, language, and customs through violent tactics that appeared benevolent and paternalistic to Indigenous societies deemed uncivilized. Ultimately, the white man’s burden was not so much about “saving” heathens. White expansionism sought to profit from the nation’s rural and agricultural lands, even if that meant overtaking “the Mexican and Indian populations that stood in their path” (Almaguer 1994: 33).

Further, the ideology of *free labor* legitimized the “white man’s burden” because it imposed a veil of an equitable meritocracy. That is, upward economic mobility promised by the free labor ideology to the working class across racial lines; though in practice, it was only the white proletariat that could climb the capitalist hierarchy. In essence, mobility became inherently racialized as white within the emerging capitalist order. It is therefore no surprise that, “white Americans of all classes—the European-American working class, petite bourgeoisie, and self-employed propertied class—accepted the social world this ideology promoted” (Almaguer 1994: 33). Free labor promoted the capitalist tenets of the right to private property and economic individualism, imposing a capitalist order of free wage labor that promised ascendance into the capitalist class. The idea behind these Jeffersonian ideals of democracy and individualism is that if individuals were free to sell their own labor for a wage, they could ascend into better paying jobs, buy property, and build their generational wealth. A battle over the ownership of land in California therefore ensued, supported by Enlightenment-based rationalism that promoted individual natural rights (Almaguer 1994, Shelton 2013).

However, the acquisition of private property and economic freedom was not afforded to non-white populations, even as these tenets were theoretically available to everyone in this new “free society.” Almaguer (1994) notes that European immigrants monopolized open labor markets that allowed them to ascend into semiskilled and skilled jobs, while “racial minorities, on the other hand, were largely denied access to the industrial jobs that enabled millions of white immigrants to attain a modicum of

social and economic mobility” (25). Racial ideologies of inferiority validated the white people dominating industrial jobs and eliminating job competition from non-white populations. In other words, this moment was pivotal to creating an economic system that today appears to be accessible to everyone in society, though it only cultivates the economic mobility of white people on a large scale.

It would appear that the racial fault line remained dichotomous between white and non-white people within California, but the hierarchy did not treat all non-white people the same according to Almaguer (1994). Even as California promoted white dominance, non-white racial groups obtained different values according to a group’s labor competition and proximity to whiteness in relation to culture, phenotype, and political influence. In the lower end were Asian and Black immigrants who posed different economic threats to the white working class and their economic mobility. Black immigrants represented symbolic threats to creating California into a free state because slavery threatened free white labor (36). White workers feared Black people would be enslaved or accept low wages due to slavery, thereby creating high competition for cheap labor during the gold rush era (40). Chinese and Japanese immigrants were a source of cheap labor for mining, railroad construction, agricultural work, but were treated in hostile ways by white people due to ethnocentrism and sexual hysteria (153-204). Both of these groups embodied symbolic, political, and cultural differences that European immigrants could define themselves against to form a unifying “white” category.



Below European-American white people were wealthy Mexican Anglos, who were deemed worthy of being integrated into society through an intermediate status. Because the wealthy Mexicans obtained some European ancestry, high class status, and practiced Christianity, Almaguer (1994) notes that they were racially categorized as “white.” In fact, many of the land-owning *rancheros* did have a light complexion and were likely “white passing” (51). In addition, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo granted Mexicans citizenship in the U.S. and afforded them “the right to vote, hold public office, offer testimony in U.S. courts, freely own homestead land, and ostensibly enjoy the same privileged political status of European Americans” (73). Even as they were categorized as white and obtained political power in California, Mexicans were given an intermediate status because the *ranchero* economic system opposed a free labor capitalist order (72). The transition from a Mexican California to an American California, therefore, entailed a contentious battle between white immigrants and the Mexican *ranchero* class over farmland, which resembled the political and economic control of the state in the wake of annexation. Notably, working class Mexican “mestizos” were not deemed as having the same value due to being darker skinned and were deemed as being “half civilized” (63-64). Thus, they were ambivalently integrated into society at the bottom, occupying similar social positions to the Black and Asian immigrant working class.

Lastly, Indigenous communities native to California were completely excluded from the emerging social order because they were classified as the antithesis of civilization and modern capitalism according to Almaguer (1994). While other

groups were treated in hostile ways by white settlers, they remained *within* the capitalist system at the bottom, whereas Indigenous societies were rejected entirely as a way to define the entire system in oppositional terms. Indigenous people were racially demonized as being “animal-like” or subhuman, therefore unworthy of social integration (114). White settlers also believed that Indigenous people were dirty and ugly due to their dark complexions (112). Additionally, white settlers deemed Indigenous economic systems of hunting and gathering as barbaric, backward, and lazy, which were viewed as ways of living that impeded the capitalist forms of production European Americans were vying to establish (114). These cultural demarcations of Indigenous people as non-white in cultural, racial, and economic terms rationalized the violent taking of rural lands, the genocide of entire Indigenous groups, and the spatial segregation of surviving Indigenous groups into federal reservations in the state.

Indigenous societies occupied rich agricultural lands settled across the northwestern and central regions of the state, notably in the Central Valley, which white settlers coveted for capitalist gain: “It was in the rural hinterlands of the state that Indians became the symbolic enemy in the white man’s mind—the ‘devils of the forest,’ as an Oroville newspaper article characterized them in 1863” (Almaguer 1994: 108). For white European immigrants seeking the American Dream, Indigenous societies native to California posed obstacles to realizing manifest destiny in the Pacific coast. In order to create rural California as a natural landscape that could be owned by white settlers, Indigenous societies needed to be eradicated from them by

genocide or forced segregation into native reservations, creating the seeds of an urbanormative California: “an ‘urbanormative’ cultural ideology... justifies rural invasion/exploitation as signs of progress, modernization, or perhaps even the extension of manifest destiny itself.” (Fulkerson and Thomas 2014: 9). Armed with the ideologies of manifest destiny and free labor, white Americans led military excursions into the rural hinterlands of the state, bringing utter destruction to Indigenous villages through violent massacres. These U.S. colonial excursions led to “over sixty-three percent of the original California tribes” becoming extinct by 1910 (Almaguer 1994: 130).

Evidently, Indigenous disappearances from locations like the Central Valley in the late nineteenth century were necessary to capitalist production, which parallels the way today migrant farmworkers are made invisible in California landscapes. Here, we see that central to capitalism is the spatial formation of rurality as a neutral frontier with natural resources reserved for an urbanizing (industrial and post-industrial) world: “The brutal killing of indigenous rural peoples exemplifies moral indifference and is predicated upon urban epistemic distance” (Fulkerson and Thomas 2019: 44). Thus, the formation of an urbanormative California is premised on dual, complex processes of labor *and* race relations that encompass a white supremacist capitalist social order. It is important to note that both race and labor cannot be solely explained as a material—that is, a physical, economic, geographical, or structural—production. In addition to entailing material processes, race and labor gain fodder from cultural discourses of power. As I show in the next section, the historical spatial

formation of California as both urbanormative and white supremacist cultivated the fruit-hunger paradox, in which foreign-born migrant workers must deteriorate their bodies in service of a booming agricultural industry in the Central Valley.

### **The Racialized Political Economy in California's Agricultural Heartland**

After battling the Mexican *ranchero* elite for farmland through federal land grants and violently dispossessing Indigenous societies from California's rural hinterlands, white capitalist settlers sowed the seeds for the highly profitable agricultural industry in the Central Valley. The establishment of free wage labor and market economic relations transformed the state's agricultural industry by the start of the 20th century:

Expansion of the domestic market, the organization of growers' associations, and the avoidance of exorbitant commission fees extracted by "middlemen" helped agriculture become an extremely profitable venture. In the process, California's farm labor force expanded dramatically, from 19,000 workers in 1870 to over 119,000 by 1900. (Almaguer 1994: 31)

During this transition, California began to export agricultural products to markets outside of the state—industrial urban centers in the East Coast and England—and established itself as a large-scale capitalist industry (Almaguer 1994). The state developed technological innovations and built infrastructure conducive to intensive, specialized agricultural production, which included new forms of crop mechanization, extensive transportation networks, and modern irrigation systems (Liebman 1983; Parsons 1986; Almaguer 1994; Henderson 1999). According to Almaguer (1994),

California's agricultural economy helped shape the state into "a quintessential capitalist society based on free wage labor" at the turn of the twentieth century (31). One of the reasons that California amassed a huge market in agriculture was due the region known as the Central Valley, which helped shift agriculture from being a small-scale family-owned farming business to a capitalist corporate-run business—also known as *agribusiness* (Halsam 1990; Walker 2004).

The Central Valley contains endless flatlands and a scorching heat ideal for wide-spread agricultural cultivation, therefore becoming the "heartland of the richest industry in California" (Dunne 2008: 3). Roughly the size of England, the Central Valley is one of the largest valleys in the world. Located in California's core, the Valley—about 430 miles long and 50 miles wide—covers about 15 million acres, making it one of "the richest farming regions in the history of the world" (Halsam 1990; Johnson et al. 1993). By the turn of the 20th century, California's agricultural industry quickly became a million-dollar industry due to the shift in production from grains to fruits and vegetables (Almaguer 1994). California's Central Valley dominated the production of fruits and vegetables by the late 20th century, becoming now a billion-dollar industry:

according to county agricultural commissioners' reports, Fresno County in 1985 yielded \$310,600,000, Kern produced \$231,200,000, while Kings contributed \$187,600,000 for cotton alone. Grapes contributed \$292,100,000 in Fresno, \$194,800,000 in Tulare, and \$152,700,000 in Kern... The roll could be much, much longer, its line of zeros ever less comprehensible, since nearly three hundred commercial crops are grown here, but the point is that agriculture is big business indeed in this domain—\$14 billion in 1986—and it is a vital link in America's food chain. As historian W.H. Hutchingson

points out, the annual value of agricultural production exceeds the total value of all the gold mined in the Golder State since 1848. (emphasis in original, Johnson, Halsam, and Dawson 1993)

Nearly thirty-four years later, California farmers made about 49 billion in agricultural profit though a global pandemic affected its labor force in 2020 (CFDA 2021).

Suffice to say, California's heartland remains one of the most profitable lands in the world, though the wealth has not been distributed equally.

A key component to the Valley's production of surplus agricultural value is the (re)production of a racialized migrant workforce, which is intentionally made pliable to meet industry demands of agrarian capitalist accumulation and competition. Growers in the Central Valley contend with an inherent problem in monocrop production: the gap between the growing agricultural crops and harvesting them. Mitchell (2007) explains that "for much of the production time of crops, labor is idle and so capital that is embodied in labor is also idle. Little or no labor is needed during the growing period, but significant amounts are needed for preparation and planting and often massive amounts are needed for harvesting" (565). The Valley's agricultural industry is distinct from others in the nation because it does not include mixed farming, which integrates multiple crops and livestock. Parsons (1986) notes that the "San Joaquin agriculture is a speciality, cash-crop type of farming in which the product is often perishable and subject to violent and unpredictable market fluctuations. It is dependent on a mobile labor force, adequate irrigation water, a long growing season, and relatively rain-free summers" (380). Because California agricultural production depends on natural factors outside of a grower's control, the

industry's racialized labor force has been molded to be as flexible and disposable as possible, ready at the helm for agricultural needs.

In other words, California farmers reproduce and maintain a mobile, seasonal, and disposable migrant labor force to obtain surplus value from a nature-driven agricultural industry. Processes of racial subordination have legitimized the labor exploitation of immigrant farmworkers, an exploitation inherently needed to “attenuate the gap between labor time and production time” (Brown and Getz 2011: 134). California agricultural workers, especially in the Central Valley, have undergone asymmetrical, but related processes of racialization via anti-immigrant and labor policies in order to meet the shifting demands of the agricultural industry (Almaguer 1994; Brown and Getz 2011). From the late nineteenth century to today, different groups of immigrants have made up the agricultural labor force in the Central Valley that include Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and Mexican immigrants, though this list is not exhaustive and includes other racial and ethnic immigrants (Parsons 1986).

Notably, Chinese immigrants made up one-third of the labor force in California agriculture in 1880, and therefore, became the primary competition for the white working class in rural California at the time (Almaguer 1994). The white working class developed hostile anti-Chinese sentiment in California to diminish the labor competition and political rights of Chinese immigrants across several industries, most prominently in agriculture, crystallizing in laws such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the California Alien Land Laws of 1913 and 1920. These federal

policies prevented Chinese agricultural workers from obtaining citizenship and owning land, driving Chinese immigrants out of rural California into the state's urban regions. However, Chinese immigrants faced other forms of ethnocentric discrimination in urban California, such as becoming targets of sexual hysteria (Almaguer 1994: 153-182).

Almaguer (1994) notes, similar to Du Bois, that the white working class found privilege in their racial status as “white” and did not forge class solidarity with non-white workers as capitalism became solidified in the state: “at the moment when capitalism created a common labor market and the basis for collective class organization, the white working class responded by narrowly defining their interests solely as *white* workers—rather than in more inclusive class terms (181). Successive waves of immigrant farmworkers have made up the agricultural labor force in California throughout the twentieth century, including white workers who arrived in California during the Dust Bowl era, but quickly left to access coveted industrial jobs in urban centers (Walker 2004). In California, belonging to the “white” race did not only afford a “psychological wage” of racial superiority, but it also gave access to higher paying jobs to the white working class that led to their upward economic mobility. As illustrated with the plight of Chinese agricultural workers in rural California, anti-immigrant and labor policies have prevented the upward economic mobility of its racialized labor force. Such policies have made the owning of land inaccessible, have kept wages exceedingly low, and have reproduced disposable



workers through a revolving door of displaced foreign-born migrants from the inception of California's profitable agribusiness.

Don Mitchell (2012) argues that the bracero program entailed a crucial period that solidified California agriculture into a large-scale, industrialized capitalist industry dependent on the systematic exploitation of its racialized labor force, largely composed of immigrants from Indigenous communities in Mexico who migrate to work in the Central Valley. The bracero program began in 1942 as "an emergency wartime program of agricultural and railroad labor importation" that lasted roughly twenty-two years (2). The program supported agricultural growers in meeting ostensible labor shortages that could not be filled by local labor by authorizing the importation of Mexican nationals for agricultural labor. Over the span of the program, roughly five million Mexican nationals were hired as agricultural workers in California, although unauthorized Mexican immigrants also made-up agricultural labor at the time (1). Mexican braceros were exploited through the denial of basic rights, such as low wages and spatial segregation through labor camps located across Central Valley farms.

Mitchell (2012) applies landscape theory (as described earlier) to illustrate how the bracero program produced the contemporary California rural landscape, which has been characterized by uneven and heterogenous forms of struggle between different social actors that arose from agricultural production and industry needs. A primary form of struggle occurred between braceros and growers in labor camps: "Worker intransigence—the early strikes—in other words, instigated landscape

change, in this case at the level of the labor camp” (9). On top of refuting low wages, agricultural workers protested poor housing conditions found in labor camps, short work hours due to the oversupply of workers, and labor camp guidelines that restricted worker spatial mobility, such as not being able to eat in town (54-55). Early labor strikes led by farmworkers informed subsequent forms of labor control and supply, however, leading growers to oversell wartime labor shortages to the U.S. government in order to crush labor protests with a new supply of imported labor from Mexico (49-73).

In addition to social struggle borne out of labor relations, Mitchell (2012) notes that rural California was produced through technological advancements, transportation development, labor policy, urban-rural social relations, and newly built infrastructure conducive to agricultural production, as Almaguer (1994) and Fulkerson and Thomas (2019) have also noted. Ultimately, the power struggles that characterize the bracero program led to the creation of an agricultural enterprise that learned how to produce a labor oversupply to meet production needs:

...labor supply—that reserve army growers nurtured so as to ensure both a high degree of flexibility and, for many tasks within the division of labor, labor disposability, wherein the goal was not to assure the reproduction of any one worker but rather that there would always be at hand a ready and willing replacement. It is in this last option that workers come closest to the capital ideal of a worker: as nothing more than embodiment of labor power, a mere factor of production—a hired “hand,” or in this case “arm” (bracero). (emphasis in original, 77).

While inroads were made to enhance the labor rights of California farmworkers in the wake of the bracero program—most notably through political organizing by the United Farm Workers Union (UFW) during the 1960s (Dunne 2008), California agribusiness tirelessly worked to dispel farmworker organizing through various tactics that include union busting, worker retaliation, and using third-party contractors to hire laborers (Brown and Getz 2011: 135). However, corporate farmers are not the only ones that make the labor force pliable; other social actors, such as the U.S. government, international organizations, neoliberal policies, and political agendas, have also shaped California’s agricultural landscape.

For instance, growing anti-immigrant sentiment in the U.S. and increased border enforcement has contributed to the vulnerability of Mexican farmworkers. Today, Mexican undocumented immigrants make up the majority of California agricultural workers: “An estimated 90% of California agricultural workers are foreign born, 85% from Mexico and 5% from Central America. Approximately 57% are unauthorized to work in the United States” (Ramirez et al. 2021: 3). Since the mid-20th century, Mexican migrant farmworkers have been the primary targets of immigrant and labor policies in California, from legal authorization to work in agriculture to strict anti-immigrant laws and increased border enforcement via detention and deportations (Brown and Getz 2011; Ramirez et al. 2021). Thus, the California rural landscape has been produced through the embodied labor of a racialized labor force made to be disposable, replaceable, and always available as a consequence of anti-immigrant policies and sentiment. But processes of racialization

via anti-immigration is one side of the coin; on the other side, international trade agreements also contribute to the circulation and oversupply of Mexican labor, from the rural towns in Mexico to the rural towns of the Central Valley.

As Brown and Getz (2011) astutely state, “Understanding the dynamics of agricultural production and the social reproduction of farm labor in California today (of which food and nutrition are clearly essential components), thus requires connecting geographies of poverty and inequality across international borders boundaries, from Fresno, California, to the southern Mexican states of Chiapas and Oaxaca” (125). Not only has the California rural landscape been transformed to meet agricultural production, but the Mexican rural landscape has also been transformed in the process. California’s agribusiness is linked to a global network of capitalist agrarian accumulation that hinges on the displacement and migration of workers in Mexico and the production of hunger in rural communities on both sides of the border. The Valley’s fruit-hunger paradox derives from uneven economic development between Mexico and the United States shaped by neoliberal economic policies, most notably the North American Free Trade Agreement or NAFTA.

NAFTA is part of a larger neoliberal restructuring of the Mexican economy that began in the 1980s that led to the privatization of communal landholdings among other reforms that prioritized capital gain over the economic and social well-being of Mexican citizens (Brown and Getz 2011). NAFTA led to the elimination of tariffs and other barriers to economic trade between Mexico and the U.S. These reforms removed the tariff on Mexican corn, one of Mexico's leading crop exports, while

inversely eliminating restrictions on the importation of U.S. corn to Mexico (Holmes 2013). The price of U.S. corn was “approximately 30 percent below the average Mexican cost of production, due to higher production and subsidies maintained by U.S. growers” (Brown and Getz 2011: 138). Ethnographer Seth Holmes (2013) notes that while doing field work in San Miguel, a town in the mountains of Oaxaca, Mexico, he “watched genetically engineered, corporately grown corn from the U.S. Midwest underselling local, family-grown corn in the same village” (25).

Overall, NAFTA has led to the displacement of small-scale subsistence agriculture in rural Mexico and incorporated Mexico into a globalized enterprise of capitalist production of cash-crops that has economically benefited the U.S. Unable to continue subsistence farming and with no other job prospects, Indigenous people in rural Mexico have been economically displaced and forced to migrate to urban parts of Mexico and ultimately to the U.S. Holmes notes that for Oaxacan Triqui people, “staying in San Miguel means not having enough money for food and not being able to buy the school uniforms required to allow your children to attend public schools” (26). Triqui people, therefore, risk a treacherous journey through Mexico and the U.S.-Mexico border to find agricultural jobs in California’s Central Valley, where they find themselves food insecure and geographically displaced (once again) due to the seasonal and exploitative nature of farm labor in California (Holmes 2013). The displacement of Indigenous people in rural Mexico and the economic and social precarity they find in rural California demonstrates how the economic and cultural devaluation of the rural functions to reproduce an urbanormative capitalist world, one

that produces massive profit for corporate-run agricultural enterprises at the expense of the humanity of its racialized labor force.

Agribusiness in the Central Valley produces widespread food insecurity amongst migrant agricultural workers and within the rural communities they belong to. However, Valley farmworkers experience far more than food insecurity as a result of agricultural production. In addition, they face poor physical health directly related to their embodied labor, as well as social precarity as a result of poverty, lack of healthcare coverage, poor air and water quality, housing instability, and underemployment (Landon et al. 2011; Ramirez et al. 2021). Higher rates of health illnesses—such as nonfatal injuries, stillbirth, congenital birth defects, asthma, malnutrition, and other related illnesses—have been linked to pesticide exposure, work-place abuses and discrimination, work-place injuries, poor sanitation and hygiene, and poor safety training as direct consequence of working in agricultural fields and produce packing houses (Landon et al. 2011; Holmes 2013; Ramirez et al. 2021). With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, lack of mask protection and social distancing has also led to increased risk of covid infection amongst California farmworkers (Ramirez et al. 2021). In addition, agricultural workers face economic hardships, such as struggling to pay for basic necessities, childcare, and medical care (Ibid). Overall, migrant farmworkers in the Central Valley face bodily deterioration as they produce fresh fruit for urban supermarkets around the country and world.

Not only do Central Valley migrant farmworkers experience broken bodies and an existence characterized by persistent precarity, but their labor is made invisible by an idyllic or neutral view of the rural Valley from outsiders looking in. On one hand, outsiders to the Valley may view its rural landscapes from a place of apathy: “The valley, first of all, means agriculture, and that is an activity increasingly beyond the ken of modern city folk. Who needs farms, as they might say, when we have supermarkets” (Parsons 1986: 374). On the other hand, outsiders might view the Valley from a place of fantasy, as Holmes (2013) admits: “In fact, even the vistas that were so sublime and beautiful to me had come to mean ugliness, pain, and work to the pickers. On multiple occasions, my Triqui companions responded with confusion to my exclamations about the area’s beauty and explained that the fields were ‘pure work’ (puro trabajo)”(89). Evidently, those who live in the Central Valley and who work its land have a different view of its rural landscapes. The fruit-hunger paradox has wider repercussions that extend beyond farmworkers, affecting their children in long-lasting ways. How do the daughters of farmworkers view the Central Valley? Are they impervious to the fantasies and discourses of the rural in California? How do they navigate the social precarity that characterizes the Valley more widely? These questions characterize the heart of this dissertation—the rural girls who entrusted me with their stories—as I elaborate in the next two chapters.

## **CHAPTER 3: GROWING UP IN EL RANCHO AND LOS FILES: CENTRAL VALLEY GIRLS LIVING IN THE RURAL-URBAN BORDERLANDS**

### **The Rural-Urban Borderlands**

Roxanna: How would you describe Reedley to someone who doesn't know anything about it?

Ximena: It's very small. Very, very small. Everybody knows everybody. It's more like a little Mexico, basically, because there's so many Mexican and Hispanic families there. The majority of everybody knows Spanish there. Just like here (Parlier).

In August 2019, I interviewed 22-year-old Ximena in a small public library in Parlier, CA. Ximena is a 3rd-generation Mexican American who grew up in Reedley, CA, a small rural town 15-minutes away from Parlier by car. Ximena packed fruit in a local agricultural company for three summers in a row as she pursued a bachelor's degree at California State University, Fresno. Her daily commute to Fresno from Reedley during the school year was a 35-minute drive, a drive that made apparent the contrast between the rural and the urban for Ximena. Not only did Ximena describe Reedley as a small rural town, but she also described it as a smaller version of Mexico, highlighting how rurality in the Central Valley takes on transnational, national, and regional meanings related to immigration, race/ethnicity, class, and language.



A majority of interview participants are daughters of Mexican immigrants, and therefore, grew up in transnational family formations shaped by the cultures, politics, geographies, and histories of both Mexico and the United States. Forty-four girls are Mexican or Mexican American, making up ninety-five percent of participants. From that group, seven girls were born in Mexico and migrated to the United States at a young age, while thirty-seven were born in the United States to parents who immigrated from Mexico. Five girls were third- or fourth-generation Mexican, like Ximena, meaning they were at least two generations removed from their family's migration to the United States. Across immigrant status, all girls had direct ties to the agricultural industry and grew up in California's Central Valley. The proportion of Mexican American girls in this study resembles larger demographic patterns in this region of the state. In 2020, Latinx immigrants made up the demographic majority in six out of eleven counties in the Central Valley, most of whom are from Mexican origin (U.S. Census Bureau). Many rural towns are ethnically homogeneous, made up predominantly of Mexican immigrants and their descendants, and therefore are materially and culturally experienced as "Little Mexico."

Central Valley Latina girls navigate multiple *sitios y lenguas*—or spaces and languages—as a consequence of living between and across the U.S.-Mexico border, constituting an existence in a borderlands filled with contradictions and multiplicities. *Sitios y lenguas* is a concept derived from intersectional Chicana feminisms. According to Aida Hurtado (2020), "*sitios* can refer to a geographical location, a

historical origin, or a philosophical space, while *lenguas* can refer to a specific language, a discourse, or literally a tongue that boldly asserts sexuality. These diverse spatial and linguistic attributes are central to the existence of Chicanas” (38). U.S. Latinas navigate a plurality of *sitios y lenguas* as they encounter competing and asymmetrical discourses of power derived from two or more nation-states. Therefore, Chicana feminists assert that U.S. Latinas embody liminal, insider/outsider social positions as they navigate physical and symbolic borders related to nationality, race, gender, class, and sexuality informed by two nation-states, such as Mexico and the U.S., which are binded by histories of colonialism, and I would add, contemporary global circulations of labor, people, and popular culture. While borders divide physical and cultural spaces into dichotomous categories of power valued as “good”/civilized or “bad”/uncivilized —under the signifying chain of “the West and Rest” as illustrated in Chapter 1—Latinas always-already exist in-between two spaces, forming a third-space or borderlands “where embracing ambiguity and holding contradictory perceptions without conflict lead to coherence” (Hurtado 40). Chicana feminists claim to be *ni de aquí, ni de allá*, neither from here (the U.S.) nor there (Mexico).

However, this liminal existence described by Chicana feminists does not represent an all-encompassing or generalizable experience for all Latinas living in the United States, especially when accounting for Latinas that grew up in rural and agricultural communities in California. Rurality remains undertheorized in U.S. intersectional feminist theory, including Chicana feminisms, as canonical U.S.

feminist texts tend to implicitly represent metropolitan spaces when noting the political organizing and economic disadvantages of U.S. women of color (Villalobos 2023). That is not to say that urban Latinas are all-together different or more/less advantaged economically and politically than rural Latinas in the United States. In other words, I do not seek to illustrate whether and how Latina rural girls are different or unique than their urban counterparts in relation to social, political, or economic forms of marginalization. Comparing urban and rural Latinas in stark terms would procure an either/or dichotomy that might reify an urbanormative discourse of the rural-as-less-than.

Instead, I complicate Latina girlhood and its intersections with immigrant background, race, and class by accounting for the social production of space and place. More precisely, I account for the material, discursive, and affective contours of spatial production of both the rural *and* the urban—as co-constructed, relational spaces derived from larger histories of modern capitalism. Race/ethnicity, gender, and class do not override the production of social space, but instead inform and shape one another in intersectional ways as structures of power and stratification. As such, I seek to explore the role of rurality in shaping the lives of Latina girls—and vice versa—in the Central Valley. Latina girlhood varies due to asymmetrical processes of racialization and marginalization related to citizenship status, class, language, nationality, and sexuality as they take shape in socially constructed spaces, not in a vacuum or blank, apolitical locations. Similarly, Norwood (2002) argues that intersectional analyses of power should account for the production of space and place,

stating “Intersectionality is concerned with power and identity, but power and identity are inherently connected to space and place. Where people live shapes who they are and their access to resources and power. It also shapes life quality and life chances” (141). How can intersectionality and borderlands theory account for the rural?

According to Anzaldúa (2012), the U.S.-Mexico border demarcates the “first world” from the “third world” within North America in political and geographical terms. As I have argued elsewhere (Villalobos 2023), the borders that demarcate the rural from the urban similarly create spatial dichotomies of power within everyday localized life, where the rural signifies the opposite of the urban in negative terms. In other words, the rural exists as the negative space that defines the urban as ideal, normative, and desirable, spatializing subjectivity and mobility in relational terms. Because the urban has been historically constructed as the pinnacle of modern civilization and social progress under capitalism, a forward movement from the rural to the urban presents itself as a linear trajectory towards modernity across all scales. The rural-to-urban trajectory promises economic, gender, and sexual freedoms as I have explained in Chapters 1 and 2. Therefore, the rural embodies “a powerful geographic imaginary representing everything that Western modernity *should not be*” (Villalobos 260). What I term the *rural-urban borderlands* marks an existence in-between pre-modernity and modernity, of the past and present, within a global late capitalist society. The rural-urban borderlands refer to living between spatial and cultural borders of modernity across multiple scales—from the local to the

transnational—and across multiple histories of settler-colonialism and white supremacy that expand beyond the U.S.-Mexico border.

On one hand, global discourses of modernity inflect Central Valley girls with structures of feelings of 1) feeling “stuck” in the rural, and 2) desiring a future in the urban that compel them to move away from home as they transition into adulthood in ways similar to rural girls across the world (as I explore in Chapter 4). On the other hand, their experiences of growing up in the rural-urban borderlands reflect how rurality is a heterogeneous material reality produced by regional histories and political economies. In particular, Central Valley girls experience rurality in unique ways due to California’s agricultural industry, which displaces rural communities in Latin America and forces them into migration, binding them into cyclical circulations of capital and labor due to neoliberal economic policies. Mexican rural families migrate to California’s Central Valley and transform the land into capital through their labor, producing cheap commodities that are exported back to Mexico, which rendered them unable to create sustainable livelihoods back in their Mexican *ranchos* in the first place. In sum, Central Valley girls experience the California rural-urban borderlands in relation to transnational migration and regional market-economies. Broader urbanormative discourses of Western modernity animate the rural-urban borderlands, but Central Valley girls navigate these discourses as they materialize in their everyday lives.

In this chapter, I describe in detail the intricate material relationship between rurality and agriculture, which procures a dichotomous path towards economic (im)mobility for Central Valley girls as they transition into adulthood: either work hard in agriculture doing exploitative, physically demanding labor for meager wages (economic immobility) or work hard in school, go to college, and build a professional career (economic mobility). Following a somewhat chronological order, I illustrate how growing up in poverty-stricken rural towns and witnessing first-hand the precarity of agricultural labor formulates two extremes for economic (im)mobility for Latina girls. These extremes function as local discourses, rather than structural realities, that shape girls' relationship to education and future aspirations. However, each extreme does reflect the limited market economies and opportunities available to rural girls as they pursue upward economic mobility in the Central Valley. As I explore in the next chapter, the path towards successful economic mobility implies moving away from home—away from their small rural towns or the Central Valley altogether, a region conceptualized as rural compared to the rest of California despite having geographical and demographic heterogeneity. While Central Valley Latinx youth from an immigrant, farmworking background navigate either extreme across gender, each pathway draws on gendered discourses of mobility. More specifically, rural Latinas must navigate patriarchal expectations related to family and home as they decide where to go to college and whether or not to leave home (Chapter 4). What does “home” look like for Central Valley girls? Even though staying or leaving home is a decision all youth make as they transition into adulthood, the way home

spaces and places are spatially and materially produced informs whether or not (and how) they become spatially and economically mobile.

Before exploring their transitions into adulthood and negotiations related to mobility, I highlight how Latina girls from California's Central Valley must navigate the rural-urban borderlands as they make sense of their homeplaces, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and the agricultural industry, which shape the choices they make about their futures in relation to education and work. Their lived experiences illustrate that the Valley's agricultural political economy produces rurality as a heterogenous, relational, and contextual material reality, thereby complicating a simplistic urban-rural dichotomy.

### **Muchachas del Rancho / Girls from the Ranch**

Although living in the borderlands constitutes an existence of contradictions and difference, it also constitutes points of affinity and coherence for Central Valley Latina girls as illustrated through their use of *el rancho*. Girls refer to their rural homeplaces as ranchos, the colloquial term for the rural countryside located outside of *pueblos* or small towns in Mexico, which are differentiated from *ciudades* or larger cities. 23-year-old Juanita illustrates how the Mexican concept of *el rancho* informs the way girls make sense of and differentiate rural spaces in the Valley, such as the small town of Delhi:

*Roxanna:* How would you describe Delhi?

*Juanita:* Delhi? Well, (my) first (home), like I said, it was a rancho. There were a lot of houses. Because I mean, I said ranch, but, I mean, you know what I mean by ranch in Mexico, right? Because it's not a pueblo, but it's smaller than a pueblo, you know what I mean?

While girls make sense of their rural hometowns in opposition to broader imaginations of the modern city drawn from local discourses and popular culture (Chapter 4), they also complicate the simplistic binary between the rural and urban by drawing on multiple scales to differentiate rural places and locations in the Valley, a region that is altogether viewed as agricultural (i.e. rural) despite having metropolitan centers. For example, Fernanda, 22-years-old, describes how outsiders to the Central Valley imagine one of the largest cities in the Central Valley, “Whenever I tell people I (am) from Bakersfield, especially when I went to Cal State Northridge for one year, people would be like, ‘Oh, do you guys just ride horses there?’ They just make jokes like that like, ‘Oh, do you guys even have cars?,’ or whatever.”

Evidently, the spatial and economic mobility trajectories of Central Valley girls and their immigrant families illustrate complex meanings and values attached to the rural across multiple scales. Specifically, *el rancho* embodies 1) a point of affinity between rural Mexico and rural U.S. as many rural families migrate to the United States to work in agriculture in the Central Valley, which position them within global processes of neoliberal privatization and asymmetrical circulations of labor and capital that displace rural communities; and 2) a point of differentiation between the countryside, the small rural town, and the metropolitan city within a larger



agricultural region deemed different from other metropolitan and coastal regions in California.

**Table 1:** A list of the Central Valley hometown locations and their population size in 2021 represented in this study. Locations account for the hometowns of all 46 participants.

<b>Location</b>	<b>2021 Population</b>
Woodville, CA	1,836
San Joaquin, CA	3,689
Pixley, CA	4,322
Keyes, CA	5,691
Woodlake, CA	7,577
Waterford, CA	9,158
Orange Cove, CA	9,619
Winton, CA	11,619
Delhi, CA	11,837
Mendota, CA	12,735
McFarland, CA	14,459
Parlier, CA	14,691
Lemont, CA	14,724
Kerman, CA	16,174
Arvin, CA	19,669
Dinuba, CA	25,139
Reedley, CA	25,232
Ceres, CA	49,282
Delano, CA	52,173
Porterville, CA	62,742
Tulare, CA	70,733
Merced, CA	89,308
Visalia, CA	142,978
Bakersfield, CA	407,615
Fresno, CA	544,510
<b>Average</b>	<b>65,100</b>

A majority of girls grew up in locations with populations under 50,000 people, the smallest location having under 2,000 people and the largest location having over 500,000. See **Table 1**. The differences in population also reflect differences in wealth, resources, and racial and ethnic diversity, which procures varied local discourses about rural places. Smaller locations with a Latinx immigrant majority tend to be less wealthy, lack important infrastructure such as hospitals and schools, and are in closer proximity to environmental

toxins and hazards due to being located near agricultural fields, having dire consequences for the health of Latinx rural families (Landon et al. 2011).

It should be noted that the U.S. Census Bureau would classify most of the girls' hometowns as urban. Specifically, the rural is defined as "all population, housing, and territory not included within an urbanized area or urban cluster" (Ratcliffe et al. 2016: 3). An urban location is a territory that has 2,000 housing units or has a population of 5,000 or more. And yet, growing up in Reedley feels qualitatively different than growing up in Fresno as Ximena, 22-years-old, recalls of her hometown, "You're not going to see skyscrapers there like you do in Fresno. It's nothing compared to a city. I guess it's strictly just a town. Everything's old." Though a small-town rural girl, Ximena experiences Reedley in relation to the imagery of the city of Fresno, placing her in a rural-urban borderlands.

25-year-old Luna, a first-generation Mexican immigrant, best illustrates living in *el rancho* as a complicated *point of affinity* between the Central Valley and Mexico. Luna describes her first home in the United States as a rancho:

We lived in three different houses in that rancho. Eventually we did move out closer to town, closer to school, closer to the grocery store. So I feel like that's one of the most fascinating things. Even though I had a phenomenal childhood in the rancho... because there were tons of trees. We were always up in the trees. Other kids from the neighborhood would come over to our rancho. We would play make our own soccer teams and we would play hide and seek. There were tons of car garages or storages, and we just climbed the roofs and jumped off. And we had dogs and the whole thing. Our whole childhood at the rancho was very nice. To this day I remember it well. A lot of close friends, a lot of sleepovers... But yeah, everything was just a matter of getting used to. But it got better every time. Got better every time we moved.

Luna and her family migrated to the United States from Mexico when she was six years old. Previously, Luna lived in a small rural town or rancho in Michoacán, Mexico with her mother, siblings, and extended family, while her dad worked seasonally as an agricultural worker in *El Norte*, or the United States. Luna remembers growing up in el rancho in Mexico quite fondly, “We were from a very small town, so everyone knew everybody. Everyone knew each other's kids, and the neighbors, and the family. The neighborhood was very calm. Everyone was very friendly, very familiar.” She went on to describe her schooling experience in el rancho as pleasant, yet unpredictable given that teachers would not show up some days. Luna explained that teachers would often go on strike to protest low pay and a lack of school supplies. She attended school in Mexico until the start of first grade. One day, Luna’s dad decided to move his family to El Norte, a sudden move that Luna and her siblings were not aware of until the day before it happened, “I guess that was always kept between adults. You don't tell the kids that.” Luna had no choice but to move to the United States, expressing resentment over her dad making that decision on her behalf, “I tell him to this day, ‘You never asked me if I wanted to come here.’”

Luna’s migration experience is not unique. Soto (2018) illustrates that many Mexican rural girls grow up in father-away transnational families that entail fathers commuting regularly to the U.S for work. Despite their father’s absence, girls in Soto’s study grow up in patriarchal homes as “hijas de familia” or family-centered

girls that “fully depend on their parents—especially their fathers—for any decision-making” (28) regarding dating, school, career, and migration. It is common for migrant Mexican fathers to decide abruptly to migrate their whole families to El Norte as was the case for Luna’s family. Luna recalls that her mother was also taken by surprise by their abrupt migration: “The move was also a surprise to her. She didn’t think we would move that early or my dad was just like *de un dia para el otro* (from one day to another), oh we’re leaving. *Prepara todo, los vamos* (Prepare everything, we’re leaving).” Mexican girls also live within rural-urban borderlands across a transnational scale, as girls in rural Mexico image El Norte to be urban—as being modern and having skyscrapers—only to be disappointed when arriving in rural and agricultural regions in the United States. I explore these larger discourses and affective imaginaries of the urban-as-modern in Chapter 4.

Luna and her family traveled from Michoacán to Tijuana and then to Los Angeles, eventually landing in Delhi, a small rural town in Merced County in the Central Valley. Luna would spend the rest of her girlhood growing up in Delhi as both of her parents worked as agricultural workers in the fields for decades. Luna’s parents remained working in agricultural fields at the time of our interview. Although Luna would describe an idyllic girlhood similar to the one she experienced in Mexico, Luna expected el Norte to look differently, although she states having no specific image in mind given their abrupt migration. Upon asking her what she thought of Delhi, she explained, “when we got to Delhi, the place or the rancho where we came to live in, it was just not what I expected. It was in December when we made the

move. (In) December, everything's pretty dry. There's no color to anything. It was pretty foggy all the time and cold. It was pretty depressing. I think I can speak for all my family regarding that time where it was just... *estaba feo* (it was ugly)." Central Valley winters are known for extreme foggy conditions—in fact, I remember fondly having foggy school days, or days when school started 1-2 hours later than usual given the hazardous driving conditions produced by dense fog—something I bonded over with many girls. For Luna and her family, however, it made for a depressing Christmas season as rural Delhi did not partake in the festivities they were accustomed to in rural Mexico.

Luna describes living in the outskirts or countryside of Delhi, a town with a population of 11,837 in 2021 (U.S. Census Bureau), as living *en el rancho*, whereas the most populated centers of Delhi were “in town,” even if the town itself was quite small. In other words, Luna made a clear distinction between living in *el rancho* and living *in town* within Delhi, expressing a multi-layered scaling within the rural informed by Luna’s experience of rurality in Mexico. Across both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, *el rancho* was idyllic, though quite poor and distant from important places, such as supermarkets and schools. Luna’s early memories of Delhi illustrate this dual aspect of *el rancho*: “But the first house we ever lived in was in very bad conditions. So none of us liked it. None of us liked being there. But what made it a nicer or more enjoyable experience of living there was the fact that we had these little neighbors that we were around the same age.” Aside from being distant and isolated, Luna and her family did not like their time in *el rancho* because they lived with their

extended family who also worked in agriculture, cramped up in spaces shared by multiple people, a common experience for most girls who migrated to the Central Valley from Mexico. Luna shared a room with both parents and three siblings while living in her uncle's house. Aside from the lack of privacy and space, Luna and her siblings could not make noise, watch television, or have lights on at night, "since everyone would work, lights would have to be off by eight because everyone would wake up early." On the flipside, Luna, her siblings, and neighborhood friends spent time in the ample countryside, playing in the trees, on trucks, and on roofs as described by the quote above.

Luna expresses the contradictions and complex experiences of growing up in el rancho. Though she explains that she "had a phenomenal childhood in the rancho," she also described that moving to their own home in town was a dream come true, "Eventually we made our way out of that rancho. My parents did everything they could to purchase their own home. So I think that was by the time I was in high school, when we moved closer to town, closer to walking distance from school, walking distance to the closest grocery stores. So then that was just a dream come true for everybody." For Luna, being in close proximity to central locations in town and having their own home space signaled a positive change in their lives, as access to resources and locations led to an enhanced quality of life. Notably, Luna's parents could now afford their own home in Delhi after spending many years living with relatives and working in agricultural fields. Though their wages were meager, they saved enough money to buy a home at an affordable price in Delhi. The Central

Valley has been known for lower housing costs compared to the rest of the state, although housing costs are now rising due to the influx of Californians that cannot afford to live in the coastal regions of the state due to gentrification and the exponential rising cost of living (Public Policy Institute of California 2004; San Joaquin Council of Governments n.d.).

Many of the girls born in the United States also utilize *el rancho* to describe the countryside, further illustrating how they experience the rural-urban borderlands across multiple scales due to being immigrant and farmworking daughters. The following 3 girls illustrate this point:

- 22-year-old Noemi, a second-generation Mexican immigrant, moved to a home in the outskirts of San Joaquin, one of the smallest rural towns in Fresno County, during her teenage years. Similar to Luna, Noemi fondly recalls living in *el rancho*, although she also lamented being so far from school and having limited spatial mobility:

We moved to a home in the rancho, which was my parents' boss' old home. We moved there, and we were there for a couple of years. It was out in the fields, and it was nice. I liked living there. It was just hard to participate in extracurricular activities at school because my mom had to be available to take us and bring us back. And she was also working, so it was difficult to transport us. But I enjoyed living there while I was there.

- 22-year-old Lesly, a second-generation Mexican immigrant, lived in a home in the outskirts of Parlier for the first half of her life. Lesly's parents worked the fields surrounding the home and therefore did not pay rent. Even as Parlier has a moderate population (14,691 in 2021), living in el rancho was qualitatively different than living in town since it was far removed from other homes, people, and schools, among other central locations:

Through elementary and junior high, me and my family lived in el rancho. It was right outside of Parlier. We still went to Parlier, like the Parlier schools. It was right on the borderline. I remember we had to walk to my neighbor's house and it was a pretty long walk, probably two streets or a street down... Yeah, I was struggling because we weren't in the city and we were far from everything. And now that I look back on it, it was pretty hard because I wouldn't see anyone or anything because, well, my parents worked and I couldn't drive. I was really young.

- 23-year-old Susana, a 3rd-generation Mexican immigrant, lived in two different rural towns—Parlier and Orange Cove—growing up, inhabiting the outskirts of each town, going from one rancho to another. Susana and her family relocated as her father changed agricultural jobs, moving into homes close to packing houses and fields where her father worked. She recalls the first rancho she lived as isolated:

My neighborhood, I lived in a ranch. So I didn't have neighbors. So it was just me and my brother in a house. Well, obviously my family, but we didn't really have neighbors. I was just in el rancho out in Parlier.



Though Mexican American girls did not grow up in Mexican ranchos, their conceptualizations of space—in particular the rural countryside—draw on their transnational family formations via their immigrant families’ Mexican roots and migration histories, as well as their own travels to Mexico throughout their girlhood. In essence, el rancho is a point of affinity between rural Mexico and rural California, though this point of affinity also accentuates differences and contradictions for girls. Luna described both ranchos across the border as idyllic yet poor, as close-knit yet isolated, while Christmas in Delhi was not the same as Christmas in Michoacán. In fact, Delhi *estaba feo* (was ugly). As Chicana feminists assert, Central Valley rural girls embrace the ambiguity of that third-space between the rural and the urban materialized across transnational, national, regional, and local scales in order to make sense of themselves and their homeplaces in coherent ways. Like Luna, many other rural girls with farmworking parents describe having pleasant girlhoods even as they experienced poverty, housing insecurity, and geographical isolation due to living in ranchos with other low-income Mexican immigrants. 23-year-old Carlota describes how girls experience idyllic rural girlhoods despite experiencing economic, geographic, and social precarity:

For some context, Woodlake is a town of like 7,000 people. I jokingly say that I'm related to everybody because I'm sure I am in some way. Because that's how folks from countries outside of the United States, that's how we find these small locations that are not even on the map. It's like somebody moves there, and then just by word of mouth (people move there). Honestly, I don't think I ever really thought of my experience growing up as something very unique until I left. Like the fact that Woodlake has no stop lights or the fact that everybody that I went to school with... like, I didn't

know, Roxanna, that people paid for school lunches because my whole life everybody got in the same line! And like, nobody paid for school lunches. Everybody looked like me. Everybody had parents who were also immigrants from Mexico. Honestly, I didn't know growing up that I was low income because everybody else was low income. And I think (that) also having that small town feel made me feel very supported by my town.

Living up in homogenous rural towns with other Mexican immigrants informed how girls perceive themselves in relation to their class status growing up, creating local points of reference that normalize poverty and poor infrastructure. Though girls grew up poor and faced economic precarity, they often described not having major financial problems since they compared their livelihoods to other agricultural, immigrant families. As 23-year-old Dulce described working in agricultural fields with her siblings and parents at a very young age to make ends meet, she denied growing up poor: “It was just (about) getting more of us out there so that we can help them make more *cajas* (boxes) so that they can have more money for stuff that we needed around the house. We didn't grow up poor, anything like that. I had an amazing childhood, but my mom was definitely more strict with money.”

In addition, girls utilize *el rancho* to conceptualize rurality in ways that are particular to the Central Valley's landscapes, leading to local and regional *points of differentiation* informed by the region's agricultural industry. The girls learn to differentiate between the countryside, small rural town, and metropolitan city due to differences in geographical distance. Living in ranchos, in many cases, meant closer proximity to the agricultural workplaces of their farmworking parents and greater distance from schools, markets, malls, and other social spaces within and beyond

rural towns. Girls made sense of rurality through their spatial (im)mobilities from one location to another, shaping their sense of place and future aspirations. As we have seen thus far, living in town was much better than living in el rancho, though towns themselves were insufficient to meet all their needs, and therefore, living in town still required frequent travels to larger metropolitan areas on a regular basis. 22-year-old Noemi explains why she preferred to live in Kerman to San Joaquin due to its proximity to Fresno:

I honestly prefer to live in Kerman because it's closer to more stores and to Fresno. Because growing up, you know, in these smaller towns, we always had a commute to Fresno for everything. And it was a 45-minute drive. And now it's only 30 minutes. So, it feels a lot closer because I am still commuting to Fresno almost every day. So, I just like the proximity to, you know, more things.

However, large metropolitan centers in the Central Valley where smaller towns clustered around, such as Fresno or Bakersfield, were not ideal or proper cities in the imaginations of girls. Discourses of popular California cities, such as Los Angeles or San Francisco, constructed the Central Valley altogether as undesirable, lacking, and traditional, which take on gendered and racialized meanings for girls, as I explore in-depth in the next chapter. In general, cities in the Valley were not comparable to other cities in the state as 22-years-old Fernanda expressed: Me and my family would sometimes (spend) the weekends in LA and that's when I knew. I was like, "I'm in the city. This is completely, it's a different vibe." Even I could tell... oh, this is a different vibe than Bakersfield. I could tell. And I knew."

In addition to spatial distance, geographic contrasts in wealth, resources, and racial/ethnic demographics within and across rural towns also created poignant points of differentiation. Namely, less wealthy rural towns made up predominantly of Mexican immigrants and their descendants were racialized as “ghetto” compared to rural towns that had a sizable white population and more resources. Coincidentally, rural towns that had more wealth as illustrated by modern infrastructure, parks, and well-resourced schools had “diverse” populations according to girls, diverse being code for having a majority of white *and* Latinx populations. Schools were social contexts where girls encountered racial discourses and stereotypes about certain rural towns that informed how Latinx youth from those locations were perceived by outsiders, which took on gendered and sexual meanings. 23-year-old Dulce illustrates how her hometown of Orange Cove was labeled as ghetto by students from Reedley, a town that had a majority of both Latinx and white populations:

Well, I just remember always meeting people, specifically people from Reedley, that were like, "Oh, Orange Cove was ghetto." Before, we didn't have a high school, so my oldest sister went to Reedley High School. And I remember her telling me that they would get bullied and stuff. People would tell them, "Oh, you need to go back to Orange Cove." Or like, "Why don't you guys just make your own high school?" Type of thing. And I was like, "Dang, that sucks." I wouldn't want to be told that. And even growing up, playing softball and meeting everybody on different teams, people would always be like, "Yeah, you guys are just...All you guys are gang members." Or, "You guys aren't smart. All the girls are hoes." All this stuff. And I'm just like, "You've clearly never met anyone from Orange Cove, but okay, if that's what you want to believe." And I get it because I hear things about other cities too, and people from those cities. If you told me someone's from Orosi, I'd be like, "Oh, Orosi, ghetto." Whatever. But no, in reality, Orosi is not ghetto. It's Orosi. It's just a town. I think it was mainly just... I don't know, different cultures meshing

and they just didn't want to mesh because Reedley has a very strong, predominantly white (population). In Orange Cove, I didn't go to school with any white people. Everyone was Hispanic or Mexican, and everyone knew how to speak Spanish.

According to Dulce, whether or not white people lived in a rural town determined if a place was ghetto, which correlated with a place having more wealth and resources.

Girls living in towns with white populations like Reedley were not immune to processes of racialization related to space, class, and immigrant status. Girls that lived in Latinx neighborhoods on the “wrong side of the tracks” encountered wealthier white students at school. In some cases, white students had parents who owned the farmland and agricultural companies where their immigrant parents or relatives worked. Three girls illustrate this point:

And usually all the land, like agricultural land, is most likely owned by a white person in the Central Valley — 23-year-old Eva from McFarland, CA

I grew up very poor, and in a trailer, so I compare myself to literally everybody. But even then, among the white students versus the Latinos, I guess they were the ones I was talking about how they went on these week-long trips... And their family were like business owners or had a lot of land. They went skiing and snowboarding, and had big trucks. You could tell they just owned more, whether it was land, cars, etc. — 25-year-old Renata from Ceres, CA

I feel like because a lot of them (white people) own the dairies and the fields that we—our parents or our family members—pick. They feel like they have some privilege over us because they have the land. They have the money. They have the power. And we're just the ones that are working it. You know what I mean? We're not taking the credit for all the food that we all deliver. — 22-year-old Julia from Tulare, CA

Many girls in small rural towns described becoming cognizant of class differences through their experiences with white students and white teachers, at times experiencing discrimination based on racial and class stereotypes in high school classrooms. Other girls encountered white people in their agricultural job for the first time. Many girls, however, did not have experiences with white people until they went to college. In those cases, girls experienced acute forms of culture shock and a low sense of belonging when they moved to wealthier locations for college. Across all groups, girls expressed becoming cognizant of their low-income class status through their interactions with white, wealthier students in high school and college, which collapsed race and class together in their perceptions of themselves and others.

Overall, Central Valley girls underwent different processes of affinity and differentiation as they navigated through the rural-urban borderlands. Differences in spatial distance, racial/ethnic demographics, class, and immigrant background produced different, yet related material realities in *el rancho*. While *el rancho* represents the girls' homeplaces, *los files*—or the agricultural fields where they worked—also played a pivotal role in constructing their material sense of home.

### **Muchachas Campesinas / Farmworker Girls**

#### *Vignette*

In late July of 2019, I drove on roads sizzling from an overbearing sun and its radiating heat, weaving through miles of almond trees, orange trees, and grape vines to meet 22-year-old Martina in Selma, CA. We were meeting at the Selma Public

Library at 3PM, one of the hottest peaks of the day with 102F weather. By the time we had finished our interview, the weather had gone up to 103F, though either of us had hardly noticed. The weather was normal for Valley summers. I drove there from my hometown of Parlier, CA, where I stayed in my childhood home as I did exploratory fieldwork that summer.

The drive from Parlier to Selma was all-too familiar, a mundane commute that was central to my own girlhood growing up in Fresno County. Over the first eighteen years of my life, my family and I would regularly drive to Selma to buy household and school supplies from Wal-Mart, a trip I would eagerly look forward to as a self-described good student. Parlier did not have any shopping centers or stores like Wal-Mart, except for a handful of local markets with a limited selection of groceries with less-than-competitive prices. In addition to being home to an aunt, Selma also had a McDonald's, a movie theater, and lively parks, among other "things to do" largely missing in Parlier. Only a fifteen-minute drive, Selma became a staple location for my family and me. Though Selma and Parlier were small rural towns within Fresno County, their differences in size, wealth, and resources were glaringly apparent to me from a young age. Data from 2021 shows that Parlier has a population of 14,691 and Selma has a population of 24,625, while Fresno has a population of 544,510 for comparison (United States Census Bureau). In addition to being larger than Parlier, Selma also has less people living in poverty. These contemporary differences have persisted over time, something I regularly paid attention to when driving to Wal-Mart for pencils, notebooks, toothpaste, and snacks in the early 2000's.

All my life, Parlier was poorer, somehow more “ghetto,” than Selma according to locals. As a young girl, I yearned for nothing more than to leave that place, that place being the Valley altogether. And I would go on to accomplish that by staying in school and eventually leaving for school. Now, I’ve come back to do my dissertation research in my late twenties. All that comes to mind when driving to meet Martina in Selma. See Figure 2. We chose the Selma Public Library because it was nicer and more spacious than the public library in Parlier or Dinuba, CA, where Martina currently lived, a neighboring rural town. Though currently living in Dinuba, Martina had grown up in Reedley, another town 15-minutes away from Parlier. Because we both grew up in the area, it was common for us to drive from one rural town to another in Fresno County. In other words, meeting up in a town neither of us lived in was not out of the ordinary.

**Figure 2:** *Google Maps Street View of Manning Avenue, the main street taken from Parlier, CA to Selma, CA. August 2022.*







### *Stay in School*

During our interview, 22-year-old Martina illustrated the way agriculture and education were intimately connected for Central Valley girls growing up:

I would see all my tias and tios (when) they would come to my grandma's house and they'd be like, "How's work?" And it's like, "Oh, work's work. I hate it, but what's new?" And they're like, "Oh, I do not miss the packing house." And everyone's like, "Oh yeah, stay in school, you don't have to do it." And I was like, "I know, I know, I know." And even some of the ladies at the packing houses, they're just like, "Yeah, you don't want to do this forever, stay in school." And I was like, "Yeah."

Martina had recently graduated from college with a bachelor's degree from a private university in Arizona a few months prior to our interview. Martina decided to work for a local farming company in the Central Valley the summer after graduating with a bachelor's degree. Meanwhile, she was looking for a better-paying job and hoping to apply for graduate school in the fall. She planned to apply to a master's program in Marriage and Family Counseling to become a family therapist, putting her on a

trajectory towards upward economic mobility. Though she had a degree and could apply for professional-level jobs at the time, she decided to work as a fruit packer along with her sister, who was new to working in the agricultural industry. However, this was the fourth—and hopefully the last—summer that Martina was packing fruit in the Valley. She started working in agriculture the summer after her freshman year in college, returning every summer thereafter to earn money for school and personal expenses. Most importantly, she worked in agriculture to fulfill the rite of passage instilled by her family. Her dad, a long-time agricultural worker, imparted a hard-work ethic on his children, often telling them, “I want you to get a job where you’re going to appreciate your money,” something many girls heard growing up.

As a 3rd generation immigrant from Mexico, Martina followed the footsteps of her father, aunts, uncles, and grandparents by working in the Central Valley’s agricultural industry. Now, she was supporting her younger sister in doing the same. Martina’s sister had recently graduated from high school and begrudgingly was going to start packing fruit in the summer. Their dad exclaimed, “Alright, time to go work” once her sister graduated. Working in agriculture was a tradition passed down from generation to generation in Martina’s family. Though, Martina had it easier than her dad, as he often told her, “You should be thanking me that I’m not making you pick grapes or tie vines work(ing) in the fields.” Martina’s dad grew up harvesting grapes off the vine, which was presented as a job more difficult than packaging fruit. The U.S. Department of Food and Drug Administration (FDA) defines harvesting or picking as “removing raw agricultural commodities from the place they were grown

or raised and preparing them to use as food,” and defines packaging as “placing food into a container that directly contacts the food” (2016). Martina would not deny her dad’s claim that harvesting was more difficult labor than packaging. However, she went on to describe in great detail her first summer in agriculture, where she worked 12-14 hour shifts a day for seven days a week in unbearable heat. During our interview, Martina often told me, almost exasperated, that she would never forget the first summer she worked in agriculture. She said, “Thinking back now, it wasn’t an easy job. It’s never an easy job. It’s just the jobs that no one wants to do, but we do them. They have to get done.”

Central Valley girls, including Martina, grew up in rural and agricultural towns dispersed between endless miles of agricultural fields—or *files*. Thousands of trees filled with almonds and pistachios and vineyards ripe with grapes and tomatoes—among the top ten commodities from the Valley in 2021 (CFDA)—surround their homes. See Figure 3. Los files don’t exist as neutral or beautiful backgrounds to their everyday lives. The distant bodies dispersed in the fields that girls view as they commute to work or as they drive to another town for a quick bite to eat are very likely their parents, aunts, uncles, friends, or neighbors. Instead, agricultural fields represent back-breaking work, suffering, and ailing bodies as demonstrated by 21-year-old Linda from Mendota, CA:

*Roxanna:* And for you, (since) you have to drive basically through a sea of fields when you go from one town to another, how do you... When you see the fields, how

do you feel? Or are they just something that's so normal that you don't think about them?

*Linda:* It is normal. At the same time, when I see farmworkers working out there in 10 pieces of layers of clothing in hundred-degree weather, I'm like, that's not normal. It is normal for me to see those fields every single day. But it has a history, farmworkers and everything. They have a history in the Central Valley. And for the most part, even though we take very much pride in being campesinos (farmworkers), as my mom calls them, but I think they've been through a lot. And I don't think that's normal to see a 71-year-old elderly person working that long in the heat. A lot of people have heat strokes. They suffer from Valley fever due to working in the sun for so long and stuff. They don't get paid as much. Restrooms are far, so... Back problems. So yeah.

Linda drives through miles of agricultural fields every day, and yet, they don't cease to represent the embodied deterioration of agricultural workers. Girls grow up transforming that land into capital through their labor and/or witness their parents and family members deteriorate working the land for years.

Twenty-three girls, or half of participants, worked in the agricultural industry growing up, while all forty-six girls had parents, grandparents, and other relatives who worked as farmworkers in the Central Valley. Girls worked in agriculture for two overarching reasons. First, they worked in agriculture to earn money for themselves, as many of them noted not wanting to depend on their parents' limited income for food, clothes, school supplies, and other expenses related to school and extracurricular activities growing up. It was common for girls to accompany their parents at work from a very young age during weekends, holidays, and summer

vacation to increase their parents' income. During harvest season, agricultural workers may work 7-days a week anywhere from 8 to 12 hours a day. If their children were too young to stay home alone, parents had no choice but to take their children to the fields. However, taking their children to work also meant easing family expenses. At work, children were allowed to pick fruit as supervisors looked the other way.

Two girls shared about working in fields from a young age to earn money for food:

When you look back, you're like, "Oh, my parents took me to work because they needed more money," or, "They took me to work so I wouldn't take their money." If you ask your parents for Burger King and stuff, they're going to be like, "No, that's going to cost like 30 bucks for just..." And not even 30 bucks. It's like \$10 per person. We were six. That's like 50,60 dollars. They're going to be like, "No, we're not going to Burger King." But you're working and you get your own check, you're like, "Dad, can you take me to Burger King?" They're like, "Okay, but you're paying." They didn't even tell you you're paying. You're like, "Oh, I'll pay. I have money." —23-year-old Liliana from Pixley, CA

Even when we were younger, before we were allowed to work, we would go and help on the weekends if we wanted to have anything, like buy any toys or anything like that or snacks. My mom would be like, "Well, come to work with me and I'll give you \$20 and you're good." I'm like, "Oh, \$20. Yeah, I'll go pick oranges." —23-year-old Dulce from Orange Cove, CA

As girls began to pursue college, the greater financial necessity forced many of them to return home (if they left) every summer to work in packing houses or picking fields. 19-year-old Isabella from Delano was beginning her second year at California Polytechnic State University during our interview. She began working in agricultural fields to support herself through college:

The reason why I started last summer is because I applied to college. And last summer was (the) summer before my first year in college. So I just wanted to be able to save up some money, just so I had something to fall back on. I didn't want to be a large burden on my parents financially. I wanted to be able to pitch in a little bit, at least, when I could. So I worked over the summer in the fields, and then I picked up a second job. So I was working two jobs during the summer trying to save up money for college.

Second, Central Valley girls also worked in agriculture as a tradition instilled by their agricultural families in addition to economic necessity. Farm-working parents expressed wanting their children to learn the value of money, to understand the back-breaking labor they do for a living wage. 23-year-old Perla also worked in packing houses every summer between college. Initially, it was not her choice to do agricultural labor:

Roxanna: Why do you choose to do this job as opposed to another job?

Perla: Well, the first summer I decided to work there because my parents actually forced me to.

Roxanna: Why did they force you?

Perla: Because they wanted to make me realize what's the difference of having everything handed to me than to actually work for it... They don't give everything to me. I have to literally beg on my knees for anything.

Roxanna: Did they choose that specific job because... Did they work in agriculture?

Perla: Yes. Both my parents actually worked in the fields

In sum, girls worked in agriculture to financially support their educational pursuits and to avoid being “financial burdens” on their farm-working parents. Although girls could work in the service-industry, families encouraged them to work in agriculture to experience firsthand the labor that went into earning each dollar.

Additionally, the agricultural industry was far-more accessible—yet more precious—than the service-industry to Central Valley girls. When girls applied to work in fast-food, for instance, it could take weeks to hear back on the status of their applications. Alternatively, agricultural jobs are far-more accessible as the hiring process can be expedited if relatives vouched for applicants. Agricultural companies have little work requirements for their “unskilled” job positions and tend to have job openings given the disposability and replaceability of seasonal workers. For example, Martina explained to me that if a person did not show up to work for three days in a row at the packing house where she worked, it was considered voluntary quitting. She also explained that workers did not have set work schedules and would rely on word-of-mouth to know if they were working on a given day. Many people would miss work if they did not receive a phone call from a company representative or from a friend or relative. Martina was expected to notify her sister about work: “Since me and my sister are working (together), they won't call my sister individually, they'll just be like, "Oh yeah, tell your sister.” Girls also needed to have reliable transportation to commute to work, especially if they lived in rural towns far from the workplaces they applied to. Reliable transportation meant having their own cars or catching rides with friends or family, as there is limited to no public transportation

available within and across small rural towns in the Central Valley. It was easier, therefore, for girls to commute with farm-working relatives to agricultural workplaces than obtaining their own cars to work at McDonald's.

Lastly, working in agriculture also presented itself as a quick way to earn a large sum of money in a short period of time. Because summers are peak harvesting seasons, hours are long and translate into higher weekly paychecks compared to what girls could earn in service jobs with limited hours at minimum wage. For college-going girls, doing back-breaking work was much more bearable knowing there was an end in sight. In the span of two or three months, girls could earn enough money to support themselves throughout the academic year. The difference between college-going girls and older agricultural workers is their duration and purpose in doing agricultural work. Girls used the money they earned for personal and school expenses, while people like their parents relied on the income earned from working six to nine months out of the year to support entire families. Martina illustrates this point:

We have like the really busy day where like fruit was falling everywhere, and we had to pack it, and like we were just being yelled at from the ladies (to), "pack it faster!" And so I have to take a step back and go like, "It's okay. I'm done in August. I'm finishing in August." I would look over at my friend and she'd be all stressed. I'm like, "Okay, it's fine. We're quitting in like a couple of weeks." I was like, "This is their life. This is where they stay." And then she's like, "I know, I know." She's like, "I get it."

Witnessing first-hand the exploitation of agricultural workers and navigating poverty in resource-starved rural communities informs the girls' relationship to



education. Two paths are laid before them: either 1) work endlessly doing physically-demanding, intensive seasonal agricultural labor or 2) work hard at school, go to college, and build a professional career. While these two paths pose an extreme at either end, they serve as local discourses in their families and communities to motivate them to pursue upward economic mobility via education as illustrated by the adults in Martina's life, "You don't want to do this forever, stay in school." Many girls that worked in agriculture describe it as an eye-opening experience that compelled them away from working in the industry for a long period of time. Two girls illustrate this point:

A lot of the ladies from plant four are good friends of mine. They would give me so much advice about school, about life, just because they've gone through all that. When I would talk to them, they were just like, "Go finish school. Don't fall into this." They were like, "We have to do it, but we have kids for them not to fall into this so they do something better." I was like, "I'm just not feeling school anymore." I just went through a phase. I don't know why... I think after that (first) summer, I definitely had a different perspective in life in general. I was like, "You know? I'm going back to school." I was like, "I have two years left." — 22-year-old Perla from Reedley, CA

What kind of motivated me the most to not want to stay in agriculture is how hard it was. Honestly, it was pretty depressing. Even though I was so young, I couldn't fathom how people did this for years because I would come home exhausted. I would just come home, shower, eat, and then sleep until the next day of work just because of how tiring it was. I think I mentioned before, too, when I would shower, my skin would burn because of the pesticides because I didn't properly cover my arms or my face while I was at work. So I just couldn't imagine how other people's skin might have felt after years of doing that. — 23-year-old Eva from McFarland, CA

At the same time, the limited market economies of the Central Valley substantiate girls' fears of working forever in agricultural fields or packing houses, ingraining in them that they are privileged to have either option—school or agriculture, economic mobility or immobility. The majority of Latinx immigrants in the Central Valley work in agriculture and therefore expose their children to the industry in intimate ways. Girls that did not work in agriculture witnessed the health-effects their parents faced from working in agriculture, which also instilled a hard-work ethic among this group of girls. In other words, it was not necessary to experience first-hand the severity of agricultural labor to appreciate the opportunities afforded by education:

To this day, I'm very proud of what they do because if it wasn't because of that, I mean they always made the sacrifice of always getting up early, getting home, making food, making sure we had everything. But it was always just like you could see the tiredness in their (cries)...That makes me emotional. You know you could see the tiredness in their eyes and still to this day. And something that I did learn from that was the hard work. My parents never complained to this day. I don't hear one complaint from them. What I saw based off of that was that they were just working hard for us. And through that I learned sacrifice. They sacrifice a lot of the things, a lot of what maybe they could have had, to give everything to us... I always wanted to be a good student, especially because I always wanted to make my parents proud because like I said, they would always tell us that education came first. We don't have any other job, but to be good students — 25-year-old Luna from Delhi, CA

This direct exposure to the exploitation and precarity their farmworker families undergo for a living wage motivates them to become economically mobile for themselves and their families. Girls feel a high sense of responsibility in helping their

parents as they grow older and become less physically capable of continuing agricultural work.

It should be noted that all girls in the study were college-going and on a pathway towards upward economic mobility, as most described themselves as “good students” like Luna. As such, they represent a select group of good students that are always-already “good girls” as discourses of Latina teen pregnancy also inform their relationship to education as 23-year-old Dulce explains: “I could keep doing all the fun stuff that I was doing as long as I followed my mom's rules, which was pretty much to not get pregnant like my sister and to focus heavily on my education.” For Latina girls, the pathway towards economic mobility implies delaying motherhood and marriage in service of their education. However, the appropriate window of time for delaying motherhood can be constricting for many girls once they graduate college and contemplate returning to the Central Valley. In other words, they also faced pressures to fulfill gendered expectations of family obligations. In addition to living in poverty, gendered expectations related to the Latinx value of *familismo* shape whether or not girls decide to leave home for college and whether or not they return home once they obtain degrees and pursue professional careers.

Even as girls describe idyllic rural girlhoods, they also view the Central Valley as limiting their potential for economic, gender, and sexual freedoms. Because girls experience limited access to higher education, market economies, and general infrastructure in the Central Valley, their ranchos are viewed as places where girls

“get stuck,” an affect and discourse that takes on racialized and gendered meanings for Latina girls. In the next chapter, I explore how girls navigate the gendered discourses implicit in the rural-urban borderlands once they make decisions about leaving, staying, or returning home—spatial mobilities—in the Central Valley in their pursuit for upward economic mobility.

## **CHAPTER 4: GETTING STUCK AT HOME: LATINA RURAL GIRLHOOD AND THE MOBILITY IMPERATIVE IN THE CENTRAL VALLEY**

### **The Mobility Imperative**

24-year-old Olivia is attending graduate school at California State University Fresno, pursuing a master’s in business administration (MBA). She also attended Fresno State as an undergraduate student, regularly commuting from her hometown of Reedley to Fresno, a total of 30 miles or roughly a 40-minute drive. Never having left the Central Valley, Olivia expressed ambivalence about staying or leaving once she graduates and establishes a business career. Olivia fears “getting stuck” in the Central Valley due to the stronghold of agriculture in this region. She’s acutely aware of the possibility that her MBA degree might not translate into a viable job and long-term professional career in the Valley:

I met with a counselor (during) my senior year for my bachelor's. And what he told me... I cried because he was showing me the statistics. He was like, "This is why we tell everyone to start looking for jobs early." We have a low amount (of jobs available) that matches the graduation (rate). They don't find jobs. The sectors we have here are ag (agriculture), healthcare, education, and a lot of blue-collar work.

The landowners control the land. They have the most money and wealth. And that's just kind of what it comes down to. And I'm like, well, why don't we get more fun stuff here? And make better jobs or tech, stuff like that. Well, you gotta get those people to give up the land and they're not going to do it. And this is our economic hold. And I think there's a responsibility because we're considered the fruit basket of the world. But also I think it's just land. It's so precious. And you just get all these blue collar people... I think it's just unfortunate.

There's just not a lot of happiness here. I wouldn't say there's a lot of happiness. People that are happy know they can go somewhere else and they're here by choice. Not the ones that are here because this is the fields and this is their life. I just feel, and it made me cry because it made me feel like, well crap, am I going to be like them? I don't know. Am I going to get stuck?

As I illustrated in the previous chapter, growing up in Central Valley *ranchos* and *files* establishes two pathways towards economic (im)mobility for youth—agriculture or education, but pursuing higher education in the Central Valley isn't sufficient for upward economic mobility, as Olivia fears.

Even as girls may work hard at school, the Valley does not guarantee them the opportunities they need to establish successful careers. The Central Valley's agricultural political economy creates little to no accessible pathways for upward economic mobility, as the Valley lacks diverse market economies and higher education institutions compared to the rest of the state. As such, pursuing economic

mobility implies *moving away from home* altogether, a trajectory that entails migration from the rural to the urban—whether real or imagined through their desires. Otherwise, girls may risk getting stuck in the rural, an affective sense of immobility that is at once spatial and economical. Although economic motivations drive urban-rural migration, non-economic reasons also drive rural youth to the city as urbanormativity encompasses the cultural idealization of city life. I find that Central Valley girls receive messages that urban cities are places where successful and exciting adulthood happens, making the Valley less desirable because “there's not a lot here, obviously,” according to Olivia.

Such findings align with the “mobility imperative” conceptualized by David Farrugia (2015). The mobility imperative refers to social processes that “encourage or mandate mobility” amongst rural youth, which include “increasing urban/rural youth inequalities in a global context, and the valorisation of metropolitan lifestyle in popular culture” (836-837). The mobility imperative considers the interrelated forces that necessitate youth to leave their rural hometowns to access resources, job opportunities, and other social and cultural capital to become successful adults or upwardly mobile, as well as to construct their subjectivities as they transition into adulthood. Drawing on an interdisciplinary theoretical approach from studies on space, mobility, and youth, Farrugia conceptualizes the rural youth mobility imperative as having three dimensions: 1) the structural, 2) the symbolic, and 3) the non-representational. These three dimensions aim to capture how the mobility

imperative is produced and experienced by youth growing up in rural contexts within a global context of late modern capitalism.

The structural dimension of rural youth mobilities refers to “young people’s position within the flows of labour and capital that make up the social structures of rural and urban spaces” (837). In alignment with Mitchell (1996) and Fulkerson and Thomas (2019), Farrugia argues that the circulation, accumulation, and divestment of economic capital contribute to the production of space and spatial inequalities. More specifically, the mobility of capital produces social life in rural and urban spaces asymmetrically, creating structural inequalities that push rural youth to leave the countryside to find education and work opportunities in cities. Although cities are not “homogenous spaces of privilege” (838) and also experience economic and social disparities, rural contexts comparatively lack service economies that support youth employment and contain fewer higher education opportunities than those found in larger cities. To this end, rural youth are encouraged to migrate from rural towns to larger cities, where flows of economic and cultural capital are concentrated and inscribed in national and transnational networks of capital accumulation.

The symbolic dimension of rural youth mobilities refers to the “positions that rural young people may take up within flows of symbols and discourses that make up youth cultures and define the most valorised youth subjectivities” (841). Farrugia describes mobility as the flow of symbols and discourses across spaces and places that inform youth subject formation and cultural meaning-making. Spatial discourses conceptualize the rural and the urban as oppositional binaries, as previously

illustrated through the West and the Rest discursive formation. The metropolitan city is characterized as “the place where modern life happens” (841), and thus, constructed as cultured, elegant, innovative, desirable, and therefore, as the aspirational place for youth. The rural is characterized as pre-modern, conservative, simple, and idyllic, thereby less desirable or less aspirational for youth transitioning into adulthood. Farrugia notes that the city is positioned not only as aspirational because of the economic and educational opportunities it affords youth but also because it has been conceptualized as the ideal space through which youth can imagine their future selves and realize their life aspirations. In addition to economic capital, youth value the metropolitan city for its cultural and social capital (real and imagined), such as opportunities for leisure, consumption, and “cool” youth subcultures. Popular culture spatializes contemporary youth subjectivity and subcultures as metropolitan, and thus, “rural young people are positioned outside of what it means to be young and cool” (842). Therefore, rural youth must be mobile—via migration or imagination—to embody or fulfill contemporary youth subjectivity and popular culture.

The non-representational dimension of rural youth mobilities refers to “embodied and affective ‘entanglements’ between young people and the spaces and places which contribute to the formation of their subjectivities” (845). As a social process, mobility is also about the affective embodiment of a space or how youth experience themselves affectively in particular spaces. Non-representational mobility refers to the “felt sensations of the body” (845) or states of being and becoming as



youth move from one space to another. The felt sensations of the body translate into youth's attachments (or lack thereof) to spaces, as well as experiencing feelings of belongingness, shame, discomfort, fear, safety, joy, or excitement within spaces and through their mobility trajectories across space.

In this chapter, I draw on Ferugia's three-fold model of the mobility imperative to analyze Central Valley girls' negotiations related to economic and spatial mobility. However, I reconceptualize each dimension as the *rural-as-material*, *rural-as-discourse*, and *rural-as-affect* as girls' experiences with mobility directly draw on broader discourses of Western Modernity as it pertains to rurality and girlhood (Chapter 1). Whether and how Central Valley girls become mobile depends on the complex interaction between all three dimensions of rural spatial production as it relates to girlhood, which complicates the linear uni-directional trajectory implied by the mobility imperative.

### **The Rural as Material: The Central Valley Brain Drain**

In alignment with Farrugia, youth scholars note significant patterns of out-migration by rural youth across global contexts that cause "brain-drain" anxiety in rural communities (Butler 2020, Alston 2004). Central Valley rural youth mirror global patterns of out-migration. The region faces low levels of college completion, though "many high school graduates bound for college leave the valley" (Johnson and Hayes 2004). In 2018, the Hanford-Corcoran area of the Central Valley was number one on the Bloomberg Brain Index, which "tracks outflows of advanced degree

holders and business formation, white collar job losses and reductions in pay in the fields of sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics” (Foster, Lu, and Del Giudice 2018). The Central Valley brain drain derives from a lack of job opportunities and a loss of manufacturing largely attributed to agricultural economic dominance.

The agricultural industry monopolizes the Central Valley's land, wealth, and infrastructure, thereby pushing youth out as they pursue economic opportunities.

Not only do Central Valley girls contend with this material reality as they obtain higher education, but they also become aware of the Central Valley's limited economic opportunities from a young age. As demonstrated by three Central Valley girls, becoming successful or economically mobile means pursuing higher education away from home, a pathway towards upward mobility that shapes girls' future aspirations and desires throughout their lives:

You hear like that there's not a lot of opportunities, right? If you don't have a degree here, then you're gonna be working in the fields. Like that's essentially where people end up. Now that I'm older, I understand that there's other jobs besides the field. But at the time that was it, right? Like, if I don't leave and get a college degree, then I'm just gonna be in the fields. I think it's just because there's a lack of opportunities. But at the same time, like, no one really explains where opportunities are. Because opportunities can be anything, right? But I don't know. I think it is that mentality that, like, if you don't leave, then you're not successful. And if you don't have a degree, then also you're not successful — 25-year-old Paulina from McFarland, CA

I love Winton. That's my home. But I don't think that it offers a lot of opportunities. I'm thinking, “What would I be able to work in?” There's literally no opportunities for employment there. Within the community and within my friends who are in the community, it was

always like, “Okay, in order to be able to accomplish our goals, accomplish our dreams, we need to get out, get out of Winton for sure.” — 22-year-old Julieta from Winton, CA

With my degree, there's nothing really much in the Central Valley that I could use it for. If Fresno, it's going to be a small, small company. I'm like, "What am I going to do with that?" — 22-year-old Perla from Reedley, CA

On the one hand, the Valley’s agricultural political economy attracts international migrants, pulling them into precarious labor in service of billion-dollar profits. On the other hand, the region’s fixation on agricultural development pushes away college-bound youth due to the limited job opportunities available outside of this industry. International migrants arriving in the Central Valley tend to have lower levels of education, lower incomes, and high poverty rates compared to the region’s younger out-migrants (Johnson and Hayes 2004). As such, the college-going children of farm-working immigrants who successfully pursue economic mobility mainly do so outside the Valley. Meanwhile, the region’s rural communities remain impoverished, lacking access to resources and opportunities related to health, education, work, and environmental sustainability. In simple terms, cheap agricultural labor flows into the Valley and educated non-agricultural labor flows out, validating the dichotomous pathway of economic (im)mobility experienced by the children of migrant farmworkers.

The influx of international migrants and the exodus of educated youth derives from the state’s urban dependency on the production and importation of Central Valley agricultural commodities, which takes precedence over the economic and

social well-being of the region's low-income rural communities. The circulations of labor and capital that characterize the Central Valley emphasize how California continually reproduces an urbanormative capitalist social order. The prioritization and expansion of urban development drive urban-rural migration within and beyond the state: "rural products wind up undervalued, leaving dismal economic conditions in rural communities. The most logical thing for rural people to do, in the face of these adverse conditions, is to migrate to the city, leaving behind their dwindling rural livelihoods" (Fulkerson and Thomas 2019: 20).

Many interview participants have contributed to the region's brain drain of college-going youth. All forty-six participants were college educated: twenty-five participants had graduated with a bachelor's degree, and twenty-one were completing either a bachelor's or associate's degree. Of those who graduated with a BA, six enrolled in graduate school, and six expressed plans to apply to a graduate program soon. Twenty-seven girls, over half of all participants, left the Central Valley for college, with four girls attending school outside the state. At the time of the study, sixteen girls were not currently living in the Central Valley; some were completing school and had no plans to return, while a portion of this group had obtained jobs in locations outside of the Central Valley upon graduating. The majority of participants, however, stayed or returned home to the Central Valley during or upon completing college. Despite having varied mobilities, all girls expressed tension and contradictions in their *desires* and *abilities* to stay or leave their rural hometowns as they pursued higher education. Economic reasons both pushed them away from home

and pulled them back. In the same breath, however, many girls expressed non-economic motivations for staying or leaving, illustrating that youth simultaneously negotiate all three dimensions of the mobility imperative. Further, navigating all three dimensions of rurality also hinges on youth's gender and sexuality.

Thus far, I have demonstrated how the Central Valley's political economy creates a dichotomous path of economic (im)mobility that is always already *spatialized*: 1) staying in agriculture means getting stuck at home or being immobile economically and spatially, and 2) pursuing education means moving away from home or being mobile economically and spatially. However, these two pathways are also always already *gendered* and *sexualized* as intersecting structures of power constrict or animate mobility. Thus, rural youth mobility cannot be solely attributed to circulations of capital and labor from one space to another. In addition, circulations of rural girlhood as a discourse and affect also drive the mobilities of Central Valley girls. Therefore, I adopt a feminist approach to urban-rural migration with the understanding that "migration assumes mobility and not all individuals are mobile" (Fulkerson and Thomas 2019: 41). Specifically, I treat both gender and sexuality as "constitutive elements of migration" (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2000), noting how gender and sexuality intervene to shape whether and how girls stay, move away, or return home as rural *hijas de familia* or family-centered Latina daughters from farm-working and immigrant backgrounds. To this end, I employ an intersectional analysis of mobility that accounts for the material, discursive, and affective dimensions of both rurality *and* girlhood as they converge together in the everyday lives of Central

Valley girls. Moving to and fro within the rural-urban borderlands is not a unidirectional linear mobility trajectory for rural girls. Instead, girls' mobilities encompass complex negotiations related to home and family and their imaginations of the city and its manifold freedoms.

### **The Rural as Discourse and Affect: Central Valley Girls and the City**

Thus far, I have illustrated how Central Valley girls both 1) make sense of rural homeplaces and 2) draw on local discourses of (im)mobility concerning the region's agricultural political economy, which binds girls to circulations of labor and capital across regional, national, and transnational scales. Furthermore, girls' local experiences demonstrate multiple scales of the rural that are inscribed in these extensive structural networks, which produce rural-urban borderlands specific to the U.S.-Mexico border and North American transnational economic ties as illustrated through their use of *el rancho*. In addition to the structural relationship between Mexico and California, Central Valley girls also experience their homeplaces in relation to broader discourses of rural girlhood and imaginations of the city as produced through the discursive formation of Western Modernity.

In Chapter 1, I demonstrated how rural girlhood procures a structure of feeling at distance from modernity, producing "subjects of distance" (Driscoll 2013) that must move towards, desire, and approximate modernity. In order to move towards modernity, the rural girl must be mobile and engage in rural-to-urban migration at all scales to successfully reach the pinnacle of modern adulthood *and* modern femininity.

Rural girls across the Global North and Global South encounter these temporal and spatial discourses related to modern subjectivity given Western modernity's durability as a hegemonic power structure. Accordingly, youth scholars find that real-life rural girls feel stuck in the rural and therefore imagine and desire freedom in the city regardless of mobility. That is, girls may construct and imagine future selves as elsewhere, beyond the rural, even if they never manage to leave their rural hometowns. As such, girls across different global contexts experience contradiction, flux, and hybridity due to being caught in and embodying the rural-urban borderlands.

In alignment with such findings, Central Valley girls also grow up as subjects of distance that desire city life for its promised freedoms. Central Valley girls had limited first-hand experiences with big or “real” cities growing up. What counted as a legitimate city for them, however, was a location outside of the Central Valley. Therefore, girls drew on representations of the city from popular culture to cultivate their aspirations and future selves in gendered ways. 23-year-old Juanita from Delhi, CA describes how she learned about the city: “My ideas of what the city was like were mainly through TV or movies. One of the things that always attracted me when I was young was the fashion. I always felt like people in the city dressed all preppy and fashionable, and that's something you don't really get to see here.” Central Valley girls also experienced the rural-urban borderlands through their desires and imaginations, highlighting how the existence in-between the *rural-as-premodern* and *urban-as-modern* is a subjective experience that does not necessitate mobility or

migration. However, affective ties to the city may lead to urban-rural migration if girls encounter conditions that make economic and spatial mobility accessible and viable in the Central Valley.

Most Central Valley girls could not pursue economic mobility away from home due to financial constraints. Counter to their desires, girls stayed or returned home to attend local community colleges or state universities as it was more affordable than living away, especially if girls continued to live at home with their families (in some cases rent-free). Many girls also felt ill-prepared for college because their poorly funded schools in their rural towns did not sufficiently prepare them for university-level course material, leading some girls to attend “less prestigious” higher education institutions in the Central Valley. Not leaving the Central Valley—even if living in metropolitan locations—felt like a failure for rural girls, illustrating how discourses of rurality construct this state of the region as pre-modern or as lesser than other urban and coastal areas of the state. Though girls named material and economic factors as preventing their mobilities, their expressions illustrated feelings of being “stuck” in a place where “there’s nothing to do,” leading to persistent desires to leave the Central Valley and feeling like failures if they couldn’t. Four girls illustrate this point:

Growing up, like you always hear how this town is like, excuse my language, but it's shitty. There's nothing to do here. Or how there's so many other things to do in cooler cities like San Francisco, LA, or San Diego just because they're cities. So my senior year, I was determined to leave. Like I really, really wanted to leave. I actually got accepted to Stanislaus (State) and Northridge (State). I really wanted to go to Northridge. But I didn't. I didn't understand the



financial aspect. I just didn't understand how I was going to be able to fund my four years. If I would have understood that aspect a little better, I would have left (after high school). I was ready to leave the small town and see what was out there. — 25-year-old Paulina from McFarland, CA

I wanted to leave because a lot of us think that the Central Valley is like... you need to leave in order to make it. Or if you stay, it's kind of like you're a failure. When I got into (UC) Merced, I didn't want to tell people because a lot of times people see Merced as like this school you go to if you couldn't go anywhere else. I was even ashamed to say that. One time, I even cried because I was like, "Damn, I'm going to Merced." You know, there were people going to UCLA, Cornell, and Berkeley, all these other schools. I was embarrassed in a way at the time. And so I felt like I did have to leave the Central Valley. — 22-year-old Antonella from Arvin, CA

I don't like that there's nothing to do. There's only very little things you can do. — 22-year-old Fernanda from Bakersfield, CA

I felt like there wasn't a lot to do. I felt like it was small and I wanted to see more. And I felt like the only thing that was here was just agricultural workers, and I felt that if I stayed here... I don't know, I guess I always wanted to leave. — 25-year-old Roma from Bakersfield, CA

Though youth across space/place might express wanting to leave home to fulfill their dreams and aspirations, rural girls experience this desire specific to discourses related to rurality and girlhood. Girls feel distant from or outside of modern life as if somehow they're missing out on a life happening elsewhere from the rural. As subjects of distance, they yearned to experience "what was out there" in cool cities like Los Angeles or San Francisco, as Paulina explained. For Central Valley girls, modern life was only accessible by attending higher education institutions outside this region. For instance, Antonella was accepted into the University of California in Merced, arguably a more rigorous and prestigious college than a state

university. And yet, attending UC Merced felt like a failure because it is located within the Central Valley. Meanwhile, Paulina desired to attend a state university outside the Central Valley, constructing these schools as more desirable simply for being outside the Central Valley. Even if girls lived in large Valley cities, such as Bakersfield, they felt like there was nothing to do there, as illustrated by Fernanda and Roma.

Rural girls also express the affective sense of “nothing-*else-to-do*” in the Australian countryside according to Driscoll (2014)—regardless of whether they lived in cities or not, suggesting that the modern city as discourse and affect shapes how girls experience themselves in rural contexts across the globe. Similar to Central Valley girls, Driscoll notes how Australian rural girls also state that there’s nothing to do in the rural: “This place is ‘the pits,’ she says with relish. ‘Who’d live here if they had a choice?’ Candace moved here a few months ago with her mother, who thinks this a better place to live in a safe and affordable life with her daughter. Candace feels she is miserable beyond belief. ‘There’s nothing to do.’” Driscoll also finds that discourses and structures of feelings related to modernity shape the mobility imperative for rural youth. However, the author argues that the discourse of “nowhere to go, nothing to do” is specific to rural girlhood: “The significant popular assumption in Australia is that country life is lived at a distance from active engagement with the contemporary world, an assumption with considerable influence for over the tendency for country youth to drift from the country to the city. But this is a specifically *girl* situation” (emphasis in original, 122).

Driscoll argues that girls function as “symbols of town success and as management problems” (124) within the rural countryside. Specifically, being bored (having nothing to do, nowhere to go) is presented as a danger specific to girls, as it may lead to pleasure-seeking behaviors—such as drinking and sex—which are presented as behaviors indicative of cool urban youth subcultures to rural girls. The rural girl is “presumed to be a danger to herself” (131) when she is bored, leading to local forms of anxiety over what girls will do outside of school contexts. Driscoll argues that rural boredom or the *rural-as-dull* functions as an antithetical discourse and affect to the *rural-as-idyll*, two oppositional ideals that work together to generate “migration flows as well as local social practices” (126). Although urban girls may also be represented and treated as dangers to themselves, rural girls experience time and space specific to the countryside since they imagine themselves in relation to the modern city: “City girls may often be bored and contemptuous of the familiar. But they can believe in myths of opportunity and change within their present-tense everyday lives that country girls find hard to sustain” (126). Girls in rural towns may experience time as stagnant, indefinitely waiting in ambiguity for their adult lives to start somewhere else in the city.

In alignment with Driscoll’s findings, I found that Central Valley girls experienced limited spatial mobilities and low independence in their rural hometowns. While geographical distance did impede girls from “doing things” in their rural towns during their free time, many girls were also policed closely by their families, which made them feel constrained and controlled or spatially immobile.

Girls yearned to leave the Central Valley because they craved freedom to engage in pleasurable activities. Like many other girls, 21-year-old Miranda from McFarland, CA explained that her parents did not want her to leave the Central Valley:

My parents wanted me to stay in Bakersfield. They wanted me to apply to CSU Bakersfield. And I never wanted to go. I was like, "Hell no, I need to get the hell out of here." When I decided to go to school, I tried to be as far away as possible. But it was still emotional and still hard to be outside of the Central Valley and like, be away from home. Because it's all I've known, you know? I would never sleep over my friends' houses. I would never sleep over other people's houses, not even like my familys' houses. "Can I stay here? Can I go to my friends?" So once I transition(ed) to finally living by myself, it was so weird. When I did go to college, I went to Sacramento State. But I mean, I only lasted there for a year.

Growing up, Miranda could not sleep over any other home unless her parents stayed overnight as well, constraining her spatial mobility primarily to home and school. She managed to go away for school for one year but had to return due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Miranda did not believe it was worth paying tuition for a school she could not enjoy physically as she attended courses remotely online. Though she enjoyed being away from home for one-year, Miranda experienced challenges with her parents while living away from home:

It was hard being away from home, especially because my mom was always always calling me like every single day. I never wanted to talk to her, like be on the phone with her. They were always worried about where I was or what I was doing. But, you know, I was trying to have fun, trying to be out with my roommates, trying to do certain things I couldn't do at home. But I felt like I went to Sacramento State for the wrong reasons. I was to be away from home, which then didn't make me take scores as seriously. I enjoyed my freedom a lot. I liked that. You know, I was able to go anywhere and do anything

without anybody's permission. It was really, really fun. But again, it was bad because I was there for school and not to be having fun doing the things that I had done.

Miranda's parents attempted to control where she went while she was away from home. However, Miranda still enjoyed freedom in the form of spatial mobility, doing fun things she could not do at home in her rural hometown.

For Central Valley girls, freedom in the form of spatial mobility encapsulated other freedoms; that is, having spatial mobility meant that girls could engage in economic, gender, and sexual freedoms at once. Together, these forms of freedom construct the ideal figure of the modern feminist and feminine subject, always-already imagined in the city. 25-year-old Sofia expresses tension in her desire to leave her hometown of Kerman, CA, ultimately imagining her future self in the city as a “can-do” girl (Harris 2004) that can have it all—that is, economic, gender, and sexual freedom. In doing so, she conjures up one of the most popular girl-power television shows of the “post-feminist era,” *Sex and the City*:

There were two conflicting parts of me from when I was little where ... And I still have these feelings even now (that) I'm struggling with. I like the Central Valley because I like the animals. I like just being able to ... there's room to roam, basically. And it's relatively safe compared to a gigantic city. But then there's another part of me that's like, I want to leave. And I want to be a big city girl. And I want to do a big city job. And I want to do all these things. And I want to live my *Sex and the City* fantasy of just walking around Manhattan in freaking stilettos and just strut around whatever big city that I end up in.

The figure of the “can-do” girl is not only economically independent, but she also partakes in consumption practices that signal modern femininity and sexuality, as illustrated by Sofia’s emphasis on strutting in Manhattan in stilettos. Sofia articulates her future self in the city, imagining herself fulfilling her big city fantasy one day. At the same time, she articulates tension in her desire to leave, as she still feels affectively attached to the Central Valley, where she feels safe and connected to nature.

As illustrated by Sofia, popular culture conceptualizes the city as modern via post-feminist freedoms of girl-power. The city promises manifold freedoms for girls, thereby constructing city life as necessary for individual forms of liberation predicated on production and consumption. Though the post-feminist era of girl-power is arguably contested and debated by youth today, prior generations of girls grew up bombarded with popular discourses of female success predicated on the notion that they can reap the benefits of second-wave feminism: “Postfeminism culture works in part to incorporate, assume, or naturalize aspects of feminism; crucially, it also works to commodify feminism via the figure of the woman as empowered consumer. Thus, postfeminist culture emphasizes educational and professional opportunities for women and girls; freedom of choice with respect to work, domesticity, and parenting; and physical and particularly sexual empowerment” (Tasker and Negra 2007: 2). For rural girls, feminist empowerment and liberation is predicated on “having it all” *in the city*, leading to feelings of success or failure specific to their gendered and spatial subjectivities.

At the time of our interview, Sofía had returned to live with her parents in the Central Valley after graduating with a bachelor's degree from UC Santa Barbara. As a transfer student, Sofía spent two years away from home, but ultimately returned upon graduating due to financial necessity. She expressed dissatisfaction with being back home largely because she struggles to find a new job that pays well and that she enjoys. In addition, she once again feels constrained spatially both by the geographical distance of Kerman and her parent's gendered expectations, something she experienced growing up. After articulating her Sex and the City fantasy, she continued on:

So I had those aspirations from a very young age. And then also I wanted freedom. I felt like a lot of my parents' methods of parenting felt very patronizing. I didn't fend for myself or there were just a lot of restrictions. And I just wanted to do things that kids my own age were doing, just going out and hanging out. Literally. It didn't have to be that crazy. I just wanted to be able to hang out with people that were my own age.

And I wanted to, I don't know, just experience other things. That's why leaving the Central Valley was something so big for me. But I do think that it's the freedom aspect or being able to live independently was my biggest influence. Because even if I stayed in Kerman, but I moved out of my parents' home, I still feel like there would still be this... they still try to control what I do. Or if I'm going somewhere, they'd be like, "Why are you going over there? What are you doing?" Because I've seen it with my own sister. She got divorced, and as soon as she was divorced and didn't have a man in her life, my parents were like, "Why don't you come sleep over here? You can just move back in over here in our house," even though she has a perfectly good house where her kids have their own rooms and their house is just like, it's bigger. So it obviously makes more sense for all of them to stay over there. But they were like, "You don't have a man anymore. You can't be by yourself."

Similar to Miranda, Sofía had very limited spatial mobility while living at home. Simple things such as hanging out with other youth was not possible for Sofía, thereby excluding her from engaging in local youth cultures as well as modern forms of femininity, shaping aspirations for the city life from a young age to present day in her mid-twenties.

However, the limited spatial mobilities experienced by both Miranda and Sofía at home also derive from patriarchal gender norms and racializing discourses related to Latina gender and sexuality. Parra and Garcia (2023) find that college-going Latinas in the United States pursue higher education as a strategy for upward economic mobility, as well as spatial mobility as a means to access pleasure in the form of gender and sexual freedoms. More specifically, the authors note that low-income Latinas attend college to lessen family obligations of completing social reproductive labor, such as cleaning, cooking, and taking care of younger siblings. Accordingly, many Central Valley girls were expected to fulfill household responsibilities:

They expected me and my sister to do everything while my brothers get to relax and everything. Even my dad. I guess that's how they were raised and expected. Me and my sister would have to... we're in charge of cleaning. We would need to learn how to cook because I guess that was the responsibility of a girl to do. — 22-year-old Lesly from Parlier, CA

When I was around 10, I started having to put effort in cleaning and cooking. That's when I started seeing... I'm like, "What the hell? Why don't they (her brothers) have to clean?" — 19-year-old Elisa from Woodlake, CA



Although Latinx immigrant parents place domestic responsibilities exclusively on their daughters due to patriarchal gender norms, they also rely on them to fulfill such roles out of economic necessity. For instance, farm-working parents relied on their daughters to take care of their siblings after school and on weekends during peak harvesting seasons when parents would work for 7-days a week between 8-12 hours a day.

In addition, the authors find that Latinas aim to expand their spatial mobility at college as they face acute forms of surveillance and policing regarding their movements and behaviors while living at home with their parents (as previously noted by Miranda and Sofía). At the same time, Parra and Garcia find that pathologizing discourses of the Latina “teen mom” encourage young Latinas to control their sexual explorations while away at college to avoid compromising their aspirations for upward mobility. Latinas become cognizant of the racial and class stereotype of early motherhood from popular discourse, but also receive messages to avoid getting pregnant—as a means to pursue upward economic mobility—from their parents from an early age. Parra and Garcia note that Latinas, therefore, “constructed themselves as invested in their education and futures as a strategy to refute assumptions about their vulnerability to unplanned early motherhood” (15).

The authors highlight structural conditions that may lead to parents imposing strict gendered restrictions on their daughters, moving away from cultural-deficit models that tend to pathologize Latinx culture as exclusively patriarchal. For instance, Parra and Garcia highlight research by González-López (2004), who

suggests that parents police their daughters' sexualities and spatial mobilities to protect them from sexual and gender violence. They also note research by Espiritu (2001) to underscore how parents—cognizant of the racialized stereotypes of Latinas as hypersexual and hyperfertile—expect their daughters to be sexually chaste and family-oriented as a way to claim moral superiority over white women. As Central Valley girls sought freedom away from the Central Valley, they continued to negotiate family expectations related to sexual morality as illustrated by 23-year-old Juanita:

My mom always tells me, "*Portate bien* (behave), don't make yourself look a fool." I heard my mom's voice in the back of my head. Or my dad's like, "Oh, you have to respect yourself." Or "*A lo que vas*. You're going to go for your education, not to be messing around, not to be making mistakes." They know that I'm a genuinely good person, but I think they were always just alluding to that... (don't be) exploring your sexuality or staying in LA doing drugs or alcohol. I feel like most of the time they were just a little bit concerned that I'd be doing something like that.

Interestingly, Juanita's parents conflated the city with illicit behavior and sexuality, and therefore explicitly warned her not to go to a place like Los Angeles (LA), illuminating a spatial dimension to racializing discourses of Latina gender and sexuality. Cities are viewed as tempting girls into illicit behaviors while away from home, temptations that might derail their upward mobility.

Once Central Valley girls graduate from college, however, they also face expectations of returning home to resume family responsibilities, as well as to get married and start their own families. In other words, they are expected to live

independently and delay motherhood only in service of upward mobility during college. Once done with their education, Central Valley girls face pressures to settle down in the Central Valley, which equates rural hometowns with traditional gender norms and immobility. Therefore, many girls conflated getting stuck in their rural hometowns as failing to fulfill modern forms of femininity. For Latina girls, being modern (i.e. rejecting the rural) is rejecting Latina “teen mom” discourses, but also broader discourses of the traditional Latina that sacrifices her own needs in service of being a wife and a mother:

A stereotypical (Latina) would be like, getting pregnant, which is a big thing that people... (what) they push here is do not get pregnant, because I'm if you get pregnant, you're just gonna have a kid and you're gonna have more kids, and you're just gonna live here in Orange Cove. And you're not going to do anything with your life because you're just going to be raising kids. And in this poor city, you're not gonna have a career or anything like that. So that was technically like a typical Latina, someone that would just live to please other people, whether it's your husband, whether it's your family, your job. They make it seem like your job is to serve others only, and you don't have a life. And you don't have the thoughts in anything of your own because your job is to serve or you only exist to serve somebody else. – 23-year-old Susana from Orange Cove, CA

I feel like there's just a lot of weight being a wife... being a Mexican wife in Tulare County. I know that they don't mean it on purpose, obviously, but it just happens. I mean, it is part of the culture, but it's also awkward for me to say, without disrespecting anybody or anything like, "I don't want to do that. Please stop telling me to do that. You're putting the social pressure on me." — 22-year-old Julia from Tulare, CA

I feel like it's very typical for the Central Valley where you get... Whether you are educated or you're not, you get married very young and then you settle down. You buy a house and you do all these things. Actually, I was texting a friend about this. She was like, "Yeah." She's like, "My parents view me as a failure because I

dropped out of grad school. My brother has a wife now and he's having a kid. He just bought a house." I feel like we're at this narrative of like, "Oh, you have to settle down." I'm like, if that's something that you want, awesome. You know what you want. It's a life for you. If you don't, and you don't associate with that, you're viewed as a failure. I'm like, "No, you're not. It just means that you needed rest and that's okay. The fact that if you do or you don't want a family, it doesn't make you more or less valuable." I'm like, "I feel like that's the patriarchy just talking." I'm like, "Screw the patriarchy." She's like, "You're right. You're right." — 24-year-old Carmen from Pixley, CA

Overall, Central Valley girls' desires to move away from home for college derive from 1) Latinx gender formations, 2) modernity discourses of rural girlhood, and 3) economic conditions produced by the Valley's agricultural political economy. For Latina rural girls, fearing getting stuck in the rural and desiring the modern city is a structure of feeling coalesced at the intersections of gender, sexuality, class, race/ethnicity, immigrant background, space/place, and mobility as co-constitutive social forces. Central Valley girls navigate multiple *sitios y lenguas* or spaces and discourses as a result of living in a rural-urban borderlands that is at once material, discursive, and affective across multiple scales and multiple social locations. Latina girls navigate two or more cultures as they permeate in socially produced heterogenous spaces. Therefore, Central Valley girls experience limited freedoms and mobilities exclusive to working-class Latinas, which are further compounded by the geographical distance and hypervigilance experienced in their *ranchos*, their fear of working in *los files* forever, the Valley's agricultural economic stronghold, and their imaginations of the city. For Latina rural girls, rurality impedes their economic,

sexual, gender, and spatial freedoms in ways that mark them as failed in more ways than one.

However, Central Valley girls express agency by rejecting these negative discourses attached to their rural hometowns and the Central Valley more broadly, mediating between desires to leave, stay, or return home as they continue transitioning into adulthood. In some cases, Central Valley girls may change their desires for city life after moving away from home, in addition to cultivating desires to change the structural conditions that make the Central Valley a less desirable place to live in the first place. Therefore, the rural-as-affect may mitigate the confluence of factors that facilitate girls' desires for moving away from the Central Valley, pulling them back home to change the conditions that drive youth away.

Many girls that moved away from the Central Valley for college did not experience the manifold freedoms promised by the city. In this vein, the post-feminist modern subject proved to be illusory as noted by 22-year-old Fernanda. When I asked her how she imagined the city, she explained:

I don't know if you've seen 13 Going On 30. I love that movie. Basically something like that. Oh, living in the city, working. Obviously I'm not going to work at a magazine as an editor, but something like that. And just having the nicest things ever, not having to worry about a thing in terms of costs and rent, all that stuff. Yeah, I wasn't thinking about that. I was just like, "Oh, it's just going to be easy. You don't have to even pay. It's just free. Even though I'm working." But yeah, it was movies that influenced me to think, "Oh, that's how it is. That's how it is." But in reality, it's not like that. It's completely different.

Post-feminist and girl-power discourses create myths of modern femininity, that girls can do it and have it all, such as disposable income, luxurious material possessions, high-paying careers, romance, and sexual freedom as depicted by the film *13 Going On 30*. Yet, these discourses prove to be unrealistic and inaccessible, especially to working class girls of color such as Fernanda. Anita Harris (2003) argues that discourses of hegemonic girlhood are “deeply class and race stratified” (15) as successful “can-do” girls are implicitly coded as white, middle-upper class, and heterosexual. As mentioned previously, many Central Valley girls either stayed or returned home during college out of economic necessity, making their desires for modern femininity inaccessible. At the same time, girls that left home for the city struggled to feel empowered for multiple reasons, one of which was experiencing city life in the flesh. At the time of our interview, Fernanda was completing her junior year as an undergraduate student in a state university outside of the Valley. When I asked her how the city compared to how she originally imagined it, she responded:

I would say it's a little different just because of the traffic. There's more people. There's traffic. And that's a really good question because I did have an image, "Oh, I'm going to live in the middle of the city and it's going to be great." And now thinking I'm like, "That is not going to be great. That is not fun." But I don't live in an area that is not as crowded, which I'm very thankful for. But yeah, it is definitely different than what I had imagined.

Many other girls recounted difficulties with the spatial and temporal dynamics of city life, such as being stuck in traffic or feeling overwhelmed and overstimulated by other people and buildings. That is not to say that Central Valley girls did not experience freedoms in the city, but rather, to highlight that girls’ lived realities in the

city were radically different from the way they had imagined it, leading some girls to struggle as they attempted to adjust to their new surroundings while in college. If they did experience freedom, it came at the cost of feeling supported and safe in these larger and more diverse metropolitan locations in other parts of the state. In fact, many had negative experiences related to culture-shock and low sense of belonging during college that made their rural hometowns more appealing and desirable. Two girls illustrate this point:

I'm sure you've seen *Legally Blonde*, but I thought it was going to be this big thing. Where (when) I got there, I made a ton of friends. And I was going to be living my best life. I feel like that didn't happen. It was just a big adjustment. I think it had to do more with the cultural shock, and relocating, and finding your community, and just figuring out how to navigate a new system, and new place, and finding your support system on top of that was... I feel like it was everything all at once. I was just like, "Ah." It was hard. I think I imagined it where I was just like, "Oh, it's going to be so much fun. I'm going to be out having fun where we're going to go out partying. It's going to be this whole new experience, and I'm going to be enjoying it where I'm not going to be stressed. It's going to be this beautiful thing." Then, I was stressed all the time about school, having to deal with those very small microaggressions and all these different things. I was just like, "Oh, that's not what it was." I'm like, "Did I make a mistake?" — 24-year-old Carmen from Pixley, CA

Sometimes it was nice to be away from the Central Valley. But then again, I would find myself missing it a lot. I would miss seeing a lot of Mexicans. I missed seeing a lot of the corner stores. Or I missed hearing the music down the street, falling asleep to freakin' banda (regional Mexican music) playing at a party down the street. I don't know. It was all really different. It was all really weird for me because growing up the way I grew up and the way the city works, the city flows, and the way you see so many different people in Sacramento, like so many different people compared to here in the Central Valley. And then being surrounded by the fields and just seeing nothing, you know, seeing no field. Nothing. No type of

agriculture. That was really weird. —21-year-old Miranda from McFarland, CA

Central Valley girls that lived in homogenous rural hometowns experienced culture shock when relocating to places with wealthier white populations. In some cases, girls experienced racial and xenophobic forms of discrimination by other students, teachers, and community members while away at college. Girls also struggled to bond with students from different locations, even if they shared similar identities, such as being first-generation, Latinx, and/or from an immigrant background.

Even as fantasies of the city drove them away from home, the realities of living in the city made many girls appreciate their rural hometowns. This drove many to return, although they also returned home out of economic necessity and family obligations. Regardless of whether girls desired or not to return home, most girls expressed desires to change the social conditions that characterize the broader Central Valley, which meant that they didn't entirely reject the rural and felt empowered to enhance the living conditions of their ranchos out of a place of love and a desire for social justice. Going to college shaped girls' political and social consciousness about the different social issues that characterize their home, including the Central Valley brain drain:

As a Mexican daughter, I feel the expectation that I have to take care of my parents when they're older. So, I do want to go back to the Valley for that. But in terms of policy, California issues focus on just what's happening in LA, in San Francisco, but they don't really address what's happening in the Valley. Right? I think the issue with the Central Valley is (that) a lot of people will go to these universities, but they never go back. And I think that's why we



haven't done as much progress as we would like to. I think in Fresno, they have a lot of organizations that are doing really good work. So, I wouldn't mind moving back to moving to Fresno or moving back home. — 25-year-old Celeste from Waterford, CA

So, we should experience everything we can experience out in the world. If you want to move out of state, go to colleges, whatever. Always come back and bring that to your little community so we can grow from it too. Because a lot of us, we just leave and don't come back. Nothing ever changes in our little community. So, I do see myself coming home in five years and just really trying to see what I can do for my community. It's specifically my little neighborhood and stuff like that because we are seen as a very dangerous community, which we're really not. — 22-year-old Julia from Tulare, CA

By employing an intersectional analysis of mobility, I find that the rural may simultaneously push and pull Central Valley girls. Even as many girls desire to leave their ranchos and the Central Valley altogether—to pursue a better life and manifold freedoms, they are also pulled back home by the conditions that push them out in the first place, namely poverty and family obligations. In their small rural hometowns, girls feel a high sense of belonging, safe, and intimately connected to their community, and thus, express agency in their desires to enhance the poor living conditions that characterize the Valley. Although, gendered expectations further constrict their spatial mobilities while living at home as they provide financial and emotional labor to support their immediate families and as they navigate constricted social and romantic lives. These pull factors in some cases can become push factors once again.

Evidently, spatial and temporal instrumentalization of rural girlhood produces particular experiences, subjectivities, and desires for real-life rural girls. At the same

time, girls' also shape their gendered subjectivities and the places they encounter in ways that contest or negotiate the hegemonic structure of Western modernity. Modernity does not function as a top-down form of power, wherein girls become passively shaped and oppressed by the hegemonic configurations of rurality and girlhood. Instead, not only do they enact agency to resist limited understandings of girlhood—albeit in constricted ways—but girls also actively produce the rural places that give valence to their subjectivities and life trajectories. Central Valley girls aim to enhance their rural hometowns into the places they desire and strive for themselves and their communities, expressing agency by refusing to contribute to the region's brain drain.

## CONCLUSION

### **Central Valley Girls and Urbanormativity**

*(Im)mobile Girls* examines the lived experiences of Central Valley Latina girls growing up in *el rancho* (rural homeplaces) and *los files* (agricultural fields) and their mobilities as they transition into adulthood. Due to global capitalist economies that

prioritize urbanization and normalize metropolitan cultures—a global phenomenon known as urbanormativity, rural communities contain limited market economies, resources, and opportunities for social advancement. In California, agricultural capitalist production and accumulation take priority over the economic and social welfare of Central Valley rural communities, as urban dependency on the region's agricultural commodities creates billion-dollar profits annually for California farmers. Today, the state's massive profits in agriculture depend on the replaceability, disposability, and cheap labor of immigrants from Latin America, who are largely Indigenous and undocumented communities that are displaced from their rural homes and forced into transnational migration due to uneven global economic relations that primarily benefit the United States. Central Valley Latinas from immigrant and farm-working families grow up witnessing the embodied deterioration of their parents and families, many of whom partake in agricultural labor to economically support their families and their own educational endeavors in the pursuit of upward economic mobility. In addition, girls face economic and social precarity as they grow up with limited incomes in resource-starved, forgotten rural towns. California's urbanormative capitalist social order, thus, creates a dichotomous pathway towards economic mobility for the children of Latinx farmworkers: immobility via agricultural work or mobility via higher education.

This study accounts for the economic and political conditions that structurally push youth out from their rural homeplaces in the Central Valley, but moves beyond capitalist structures to reveal how discursive and affective formations of rurality as

“pre-modern” also influence the mobility imperative in this region of the state. In addition to having limited market economies, the Central Valley also contains limited access to youth subcultures based on consumption due to geographic and epistemic distance, as rural spaces remain socially isolated from vital infrastructure and places of entertainment typically imagined and idealized as urban. Furthermore, globalized discourses of Western Modernity via popular culture depicts rurality as outside of or distant from modern life, and therefore, as undesirable, antiquated, and traditional, sparking an affective sense of failure or getting “stuck” at home for Central Valley girls. These structural, cultural, and affective conditions create mobility imperatives that push rural youth to the city, which leads to a spatialization of economic mobility wherein youth must move away from the Central Valley altogether to become economically independent, as well as pursue to other forms of subject-formation and freedoms related to gender and sexuality.

In this sense, *(Im)mobile Girls* also accounts for gender and sexuality as structures of power that influence how and to what degree young Central Valley Latinas can become spatially and economically mobile, revealing a complex interplay between space/place and girlhood in shaping mobility. Taken together, the rural trifecta—as material, discourse, and affect—exposes how global capitalist economies intersect with heteropatriarchy and imperialism to form scattered hegemonies that incite, energize, or prevent mobility at varying degrees that differ across diverse spaces/places, temporalities, and social actors. An intersectional analysis of rural

youth mobility, therefore, reveals that Central Valley Latinas defy linear mobility trajectories of rural-to-urban migration across all scales.

Not only do girls seek economic opportunities via higher education away from home, but also desire access to modern femininities and sexualities in the city, where they imagine themselves as empowered feminist subjects that are once economically and spatially mobile—or free to pursue high-paying careers, romance, sexuality, independence, and curated modern selves. For rural Latinas from immigrant and farm-working backgrounds, higher education presents itself as a viable pathway to access the city life and its promised freedoms. However, amongst college-going Central Valley girls, it is not always economically viable to move away from home and attend college outside of the Central Valley. Alternatively, girls who attend college in cities outside of the Valley find a mismatch between their direct experiences with city life and their prior imaginations and expectations of the city as derived from popular discourse. Across both groups—those who stayed and left home for college—girls displayed tension and contradictions between their desire and ability to leave their *ranchos*, formulating non-linear spatial mobilities in their current lives.

For instance, Central Valley girls are critically conscious of the political conditions that keep their communities and families in precarious conditions. Therefore, they express desires and future plans to address the myriad forms of marginalization experienced by Central Valley communities through their different capacities and career aspirations—from financially and emotionally supporting their

immigrant families both from home and afar, to returning home to provide mental health services to rural communities or creating research on the exploitation of farmworkers (all real-life examples from participants). In the same breath, girls understand that their social advancement depends on accessing opportunities and resources seldom found in the Valley, necessitating them to leave the rural, although not entirely rejecting it as expected by dominant urbanormative culture. And yet, their gender and sexual selves might reject norms, traditions, and cultures associated with their rural homeplaces and Latinx families, in some instances prioritizing individual freedoms as they cultivate the adult selves they seek to be.

As such, imagined and real-life mobilities—including leaving, staying, and returning home—shape girls' future selves and plans, which defy the political and social borders that attempt to delineate the rural apart from the urban in oppositional terms—an agrarian traditional past versus a modern capitalist present. Central Valley girls continually navigate the rural-urban borderlands in their negotiations of home and family in their transitions to adulthood—never quite firmly “situated” on the rural or the urban, but rather always living in-between the rural and urban through their embodied sense of self in particular spaces and places—their likes, dislikes, fears, pleasures, longings, everyday practices, as well as the structural conditions they find themselves in—including the shifts that happen via their movement from one place to another. In other words, Central Valley girls formulate their girlhoods and adult selves in a third-space characterized by liminality, flux, contradiction, and multiplicity not inherent to ethnic or cultural identity, but rather, as consequence of

the politics of space/place in creating the contours of their subjectivities, embodiments, and mobilities as rural girls of color in California.

*(Im)mobile Girls* challenges the spatial discourses of Western Modernity that idealize metropolitan spaces and cultures to the detriment of rural communities. Instead, this study underscores how Central Valley girls struggle against an urbanormative California to assert themselves as desiring subjects with aspirations that extend beyond individualist aspirations for modernity, illustrating a collective will to transform the precarity that shapes the lives of their immigrant and farm-working communities—even if it only remains at the level of desire. In this way, urbanormativity does not foreclose pleasure and desire within the rural despite attempts to deprive these spaces of liveable conditions, as places of possibility rupture through to girls' future aspirations, and most importantly, through the enduring, albeit complex, love they have for themselves, their families, and the Central Valley as the following four girls beautifully demonstrate:

We're out here, trying to get our education, trying to be the American Dream, which is false. The American Dream is a myth. But I think there's something so powerful about how the Central Valley is, like, under-resourced. It's this part of the state that is constantly forgotten. If you look at the politics, it's a very red (Republican) area. And despite all of that, like, despite all these things that are stacked against us—“us” meaning low income people of color in the Valley—we're still out here trying to find ways to thrive and better ourselves and better our communities. I think young people in the Valley are so powerful. I just feel like there's gonna be a big shift and change coming. And it's all coming from young people that are recognizing (that) all this shit is fucked up. Like the fact that we don't have good public transportation. The fact that Woodlake doesn't have an ambulance, like that's an issue. We are demanding better. And I think there's that sense of, again, like resiliency that I see...

especially (in) younger people that are pushing for more. So that's why I have a lot of love for the Valley. The majority of people of color from immigrant backgrounds are all trying to survive out here. And yeah, it's very different from the Bay Area or Southern California... I'll always have roots in the Valley. I always feel very grounded when I go back to Woodlake. It humbles me in so many ways. I just... I love the Valley so much. I will gladly always introduce myself by saying I'm from the Central Valley. — 23-year-old Carlota

When I was younger, I always wanted to move out of the Central Valley. And I think that happens to a lot of folks, I think, um, because there's not much here. Even as an adult, there's not much to do, you know (chuckles)? But through organizing, one thing that I tend to say is.... I don't know if I'd move out at this point anymore. But the reason for that is because I grew to love the people of the Central Valley. Like, you grow to see the hard work, the effort, everything that goes into it. And at the same time, at least for me, I saw all the injustices, like the lack of resources, the lack of services, like everything that doesn't come here. And then it feels like if you're not helping, then who's going to come help? If you leave, then what's gonna be left? So you realize the struggles of families, everything that makes the Central Valley. So I just grew to love the people. And I think that's the main reason why I won't leave now. — 23-year-old Liliana

One thing I love about myself is the fact that I am a first generation (student). Yeah. I love that about myself. And I think that's one of the most beautiful identities that I have. Because what comes with it (is) being strong and being courageous and being able to step into rooms into settings that, yes, they make you feel uncomfortable, but you're there. And it also makes me be in touch with my roots, but also being able to accomplish my dreams. — 22-year-old Julieta

The pros of living in the Central Valley... I do think it's nice. Like, I don't know what the right word is. But I just love looking out and then seeing this flatland, and then all these trees. I feel like there is some closeness to the land. Even though I never really worked on the land, we did have a backyard where I helped my grandpa, plant corn, plant trees, *chiles* (chilies), *sandias* (watermelon), like all these different things. So I mean, in that case, I do. And maybe I wouldn't have that in a city where there's not really a lot of space. Unless there's some community that focuses on gardening. But I will say, having done that with my grandpa growing up was nice. And just



walking out, driving around, you see the orchards and there's something nice about that. You're like, "Oh, right! This is how we grow food." And my family (is) working there. I know how hard it is. I know where this comes from. And you could even smell it. Like you can just tell what season it is. So that's definitely a pro. I like that. — 25-year-old Renata

Evidently, girls are cognizant of the imperialist and neo-colonial power structures that deplete their rural communities from resources in service of U.S. agricultural profits and urban dependency, understanding full-well that they are being actively pushed out from the Central Valley, a brain drain that compounds the existing poor social conditions that plague their families and communities. As Carlota asserts, despite the fact that "everything is stacked up against us— 'us' meaning low income people of color in the Valley," Central Valley girls find joy in the land, pride in their resiliency and determination, and hope for the future of the Valley. Many Central Valley girls, therefore, in turn shape their *ranchos* into places of possibility via love, desire, and community-building, all while imagining themselves as women with high-paying, thrilling careers who strut in stilettos in the streets of New York City. Even if girls never end up in New York City, these imaginations propel their future aspirations and the choices they make to follow their dreams. Once mobile, they continue to transform their desires, never static, but rather, always negotiating their subjectivities and mobilities in the rural-urban borderlands. I end on a positive note to reclaim rural Latinas as desiring, complex agents that both reproduce, mediate, and negate an urbanormative world that renders the *ranchos* and *files* they grew up in as forgotten or undesirable rural spaces.



## APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT FLYER



UC Santa Cruz IRB Protocol #HS3431

# Latina Rural Girlhoods

## IN THE UNITED STATES

The purpose of the study is to examine the identities and life experiences of young Latinas living and working in communities across California's Central Valley.



**I'm recruiting young Latinas to participate in 60-90 minute confidential interviews.**

### Eligible Participants:

- identify as Latina/o/x, Hispanic, or of Latin American origins
- identify as female, woman, or femme
- between ages 18 and 25
- immigrant background (3rd generation or less)
- have lived in the Central Valley for 6 months or more
- have worked in the agricultural industry in the Central Valley OR have family members who have worked in the agricultural industry in the Central Valley

***You will be compensated with a \$30 gift card for your participation.***

### **Questions? Want to Participate?**

Contact Roxanna Villalobos  
Call/Text: (559) 825-5746  
Email: rvillalo@ucsc.edu



## APPENDIX B: DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY GOOGLE FORMS



### LRG Digital Ethnography [WEEK 1]

Week 1 LRG Prompt: What does living in the Central Valley mean to you? [Part 1]

This week you will reflect on your own lived experiences growing up and living in the Central Valley. Consider these questions as a form of guidance:

- What do you believe are the pros and cons to living in the Central Valley?
- Can you describe the most important issues that impact the communities living in the Central Valley and/or in your hometown?
- How are people like in the Central Valley and/or in your hometown?

In the next section, you can submit pictures or videos that address these questions. After your 2nd and 4th week of participation, you will be invited to participate in an informal interview about your submissions where you can address why you chose them and why they are meaningful to you.

If you have any questions, concerns, or need clarifications, you can reach me via text or phone call at (559) 825-5746, on Instagram (@roxanna\_bananaslug), Twitter (@roxvilla27), or via email at [rvillalo@ucsc.edu](mailto:rvillalo@ucsc.edu).

Thank you again for participating! I'm so excited to continue working with you :)

[rvillalo@ucsc.edu](mailto:rvillalo@ucsc.edu) [Switch account](#)



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\* Indicates required question



## LRG Digital Ethnography [WEEK 2]

Week 2 LRG Prompt: What does living in the Central Valley mean to you? [Part 2]

This week you will reflect on your own lived experiences growing up and living in the Central Valley. Consider these questions as a form of guidance:

- What do you love about the Central Valley?
- Do you feel like you belong in the Central Valley? Why or why not?
- Do you see yourself settling in the Central Valley when you are older? Why or why not?

In the next section, you can submit pictures or videos that address these questions. After your 2nd and 4th week of participation, you will be invited to participate in an informal interview about your submissions where you can address why you chose them and why they are meaningful to you.

If you have any questions, concerns, or need clarifications, you can reach me via text or phone call at (559) 825-5746, on Instagram (@roxanna\_bananaslug), Twitter (@roxvilla27), or via email at [rvillalo@ucsc.edu](mailto:rvillalo@ucsc.edu).

Thank you again for participating! I'm so excited to continue working with you :)

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\* Indicates required question



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