

**A HOME OF OUR OWN:
SOCIAL REPRODUCTION OF A PRECARIOUS, MIGRANT CLASS**

by

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my nephews, Franco Daniel and Diego Orlando, for teaching me how to hope for and imagine a new future.

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INTRODUCTION

MOUNT OLIVE, NC – SEPTEMBER 2003

I remember realizing that the strong, pungent smell seeping through the bus windows on the way home from school was actually hog manure. I was seven years old, and I had just made new friends at my new school after having moved to rural, Eastern North Carolina with my parents from Honduras. As my bus got close to dropping us off in the trailer park where we lived, we would collectively belt “ewwww” as we lifted our shirts to cover our noses. I was just learning English, so I turned to my friend and asked in Spanish, “What’s that awful smell?” To which he replied brashly, “*mierda.*”¹

When I got home, I told my mom about the exchange, and after warning me to not repeat curse words, she explained that farmers in the area used the hog manure from farms nearby to fertilize the tobacco, cotton, and soy beans. These fields surrounded our homes. Both the smell and the fields enveloped us.

It was not until I turned eight years old that my father told about how he had worked in those fields that produced that smell. He told me about the repetitive and skilled way in which he had to pull the tobacco leaves from the plant, bound them up, and prepared them for transport. He also detailed how his black hair would turn a burnt blonde from the overbearing sun and heat during the summers. In the years since, I have continued to uncover the ways in which my migrant journey was intrinsically connected to the agricultural laborers who I would see bending over crops from my school bus window.

¹ Spanish for “Shit.”

My sites of ethnographic study, rural towns across Southeastern North Carolina, are all located one to two hours away from my hometown of Mount Olive (or *Monte Olivo* in Spanish).² The similarities are striking: the towering forests behind the fields, with brown-skinned workers hunched over, donned in hats to protect them from the harsh sun; the trailer parks with older mobile homes surrounding the fields; and always the strong smell that volatizes from the ground and seeps into migrants' homes. The children of the agricultural workers play in the front yards of the homes, throwing balls to one another and laughing as they wait for their parents' arrival, staring at me as I drive towards the nearby fields.

I had many friends in middle and high school who followed their parents into the fields during summers to make extra money. I was fortunate enough to avoid the fields, as my father prohibited me from entering the space from which he wanted me far removed. The irony of it all is that my journey in migration studies led me back to the same fields. Just as many children of agricultural workers end up being agricultural workers themselves, my father's time in the fields drew me back to them, although as a scholar, rather than as a harvester.

To understand this phenomenon, I returned to the rural, agricultural communities similar to mine in Eastern North Carolina. Specifically, my thesis focuses on the familial forces that socially reproduce these migrant, agricultural workers. I aimed to answer the following research questions:

What is the role that the family plays within the reproductive process of revitalizing a precarious migrant class? Furthermore, what is the role of gender within the families and homes in relation to the social reproduction of these migrant workers? How does social reproduction occur within the homes of these migrants?

² *Monte Olivo* is an attempt at translating "Mount Olive" into a Spanish town name. That is what my parents call the town when speaking in Spanish, and it is the same phrase I use when I talk to the laborers about where I hail from.

From October 2018 till March 2019, I drove to different rural towns in Eastern North Carolina to meet and speak with two migrant families, both undocumented, that work in North Carolina's agricultural fields during the year. I also met and talked to one H2A worker, who travels between North Carolina and Mexico every year as a seasonal laborer.

Drawing on anthropological theories of home, hope, and precarity contextualized with the history of U.S.-Mexican and U.S.-Honduran labor relations, I studied these reproductive patterns and relationships. By utilizing these frameworks, I hoped to augment the understanding of the autonomy and strategic decisions that both mothers and fathers make in an attempt to end generational precarity within their families and to recreate intergenerational families in North Carolina. In addition, I relied on techniques of autoethnography, an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experiences (Ellis 2004; Holman Jones 2005). To contextualize the relationship of agricultural labor in Eastern North Carolina to Honduran and Mexican migrants, it is vital that the relationships between the United States, Honduras, and Mexico are further explained.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

North Carolina has been a site of large-scale agricultural production since the arrival of colonial powers (Griffith 2011). Throughout the centuries, different groups of people have worked the fields all along the Atlantic Coast including Indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans, African-Americans, European migrants, and Latin American migrants (Hahamovitch 2010). As historian Cindy Hahamovitch argues in *The Fruits of their Labor* (2010), the vulnerability of these different peoples is central to the success of the U.S. agricultural industry. Carolina fields were initially prepared and harvested by enslaved Africans brought over during the Trans-Atlantic Exchange alongside Indigenous peoples (Griffith 2011). African-American and Indigenous peoples were denied legal personhood within the political framework of colonial United States, leaving them unable to receive any form of legal protections. Furthermore, enslaved African-Americans in the agricultural industry were rarely paid for their labor, hence not being able to “enjoy the fruits of their labor” (Hahamovitch 2010, 5-6). Inaccessibility to higher wages, labor rights, and protections from exploitative treatment are conditions that have been purposely replicated by farm owners and policymakers with the goal to keep agricultural laborers in vulnerable conditions. This purposeful replication of abusive conditions serves as a tool to produce higher profits by exploiting vulnerable populations.

Following the abolishment of slavery, Post-Civil War North Carolina’s agricultural industry was saturated with sharecroppers, mostly African-Americans, and then tenant farmers (Griffith 2011). These conditions in the agricultural industry resembled, in terms of legal protections and wage compensation, the conditions of slave-operated agricultural production (102-3). Decades later, African-American tenant farmers from the 1920s through the 1960s struggled to unionize to achieve improved working conditions and higher wages (Hahamovitch

2010, 5-6). One of the main reasons why these unionization efforts failed was because U.S. federal agencies intervened, prompted by lobbyists, farm owners, and Congressmen who sought out to protect their own interests and wealth held in the agricultural industry (Hahamovitch 2010, 10-11). To this day, agricultural workers throughout the United States face legal obstacles that impede them from successfully unionizing and achieving higher wages and improved labor conditions (Thompson 2004, 4). The federal government has protected farmowners in enacting such exploitative conditions, which has allowed North Carolina's agricultural industry to produce more than 59 billion U.S. dollars in profits each year (Student Action with Farmworkers 2019). Most of the people working within the agricultural industry today in North Carolina hail from Mexico and Honduras (Clemmons 2013).

A recent study by Michael Clemmons (2013) delves deeper into the demographic composition of North Carolina's agricultural laborers. Clemmons' study analyzed the rates of foreign-born and U.S.-born agricultural workers in North Carolina fields managed by the North Carolina Growers' Association (NCGA). The results of the analysis showed that fields managed by the NCGA mostly employed foreign-born laborers compared to U.S.-born laborers. For example, in 2011, when more than 6,500 of the agricultural workers supervised by the NCGA were foreign-born, only 7 were U.S. citizens (10). Thus, the fields of Eastern North Carolina are worked by an imported class of laborers. A migrant population, the majority of North Carolina's agricultural workers are extremely vulnerable, making them ripe for exploitative treatments that cut costs and raise profits for agricultural corporations (Griffith 2011). Two important histories that are vital in understanding the cause and mechanisms that facilitate the importation of Mexicans and Central Americans as the main class of agricultural labors in North Carolina.

These histories are: 1) the history of U.S.-Mexican and U.S.-Honduran labor relations and agreements and 2) the history of U.S. intervention in Honduras.

The Bracero Program³ was an initial attempt of importing Mexican and Central American labor into the United States' fields (Thompson 2002). The Program operated from 1942 until 1964, in which more than 4.5 million Mexican men were contracted to work in the United States for months at a time as migrant workers (Bracero Archive 2019). This program was a bi-lateral agreement between the United States and Mexican governments. This collaboration was prompted by a lack of U.S.-born agricultural workers during the United States' involvement in World War II. The Mexican government allowed the exportation of their labor force as means to support the Allied Powers during the War. Most of the Mexican nationals that participated in the Bracero Program were agricultural laborers in Texas and California. Many men that were part of the Bracero Program never received full compensation for their labor in the United States, as well as faced other exploitative measures such as poor living conditions and inaccessibility to health services (Thompson 2002).

A similar program was implemented with the ratification of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA). The IRCA, implemented during the Reagan Administration, was a policy that militarized the U.S.-Mexican Border, granted a path to U.S. citizenship for certain undocumented individuals and migrant workers, and formalized the guestworker program in the U.S. This formalization process took the previous Bracero Program as example and established a specific visa, the H2A visa, that would be granted to foreign-workers looking to work in the

³ *Bracero* is a Spanish word that most closely translates to “strong-armed.” A recurring trope amongst migrant workers is the way in which the United States government places value on the physical strength of the workers in relation to their labor. See Oscar Martinez’s (2014) book *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail* (52-3). It is particularly interesting to note that the U.S. is not the only party viewing migrant life and labor as a commodity – migrants perceive and internalize this as well. In *The Beast* (Martinez 2014), a migrant tells the story of a man that killed himself on the undocumented journey to the United States after he lost a leg, which would leave him incapable of working in the U.S. If he could not work, then he was just as good as dead.

agricultural fields. The establishment of the H2A visa was meant to mitigate the exploitative nature of the previous Bracero Program. (Bracero Archives 2019).

The H2A visa allows non-U.S. citizens to migrate to the U.S. for two to eight months per the year to work in the agricultural industry (Thompson 2002). The H2A Program is known for its high-rate of abuses and labor violations (4). The H2A visa is convenient for farmers because they receive a labor reserve, foreign workers, that is barred from unionizing and is forced outside the purview of the general U.S population (4). Farm owners benefit from the low wages that migrant workers are offered to participate in this labor force (Ferguson & McNally 2015; Hahamovitch 2010). The less amount of money farm owners spend on migrant workers, the more they profit. In 2015, more than 150,000 H2A visas were granted across the United States (Martin 2017). Although the number of agricultural workers has decreased in the last 30 years, the number of migrant workers in North Carolina has doubled (Student Action with Farmworkers 2019). North Carolina is the sixth largest employer of migrant workers in the United States (Student Action with Farmworkers 2019). Thus, to maintain the low costs of producing food, the U.S. agricultural industry, that is supported and largely subsidized by the U.S. government, utilizes imported labor from Mexico and Central America to tend to its fields.

Although Mexicans comprised a large portion of agricultural laborers in Eastern North Carolina in the 1980s through 1990s, Central American nationals from the Northern Triangle – Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador – began migrating to North Carolina more frequently (Pew Research Center 2014). By 2014, North Carolina had a Latino population of 890,000 people (Pew Research Center 2014). From that demographic figure, 300,000 of those people were of non-Mexican origin, most of them hailing from the Northern Triangle (Pew Research Center 2014). Honduras' relationship with the United States has been an important factor in the

emigration of its people to places such as North Carolina (Meyer 2014). The influence that Washington has had over Honduras for the last four decades has led to the destabilization of the Honduran economy and democracy, a key factor in the upheaval of Hondurans from their homes (Ruhl 2010; Forde 2014). Through this destabilization, the United States induced the initial waves of migration that replenished its migrant labor pool.

In the 1980s, Honduras served as a military base for U.S. military and CIA agents during the Contra War in Nicaragua (Meyer 2014). As of 2014, Honduras allowed the U.S. government to own a military base near the capital city of Tegucigalpa, and three other military bases focused on eliminating drug-related crime and violence. Since 2008, the United States has invested more than 490 million U.S. dollars in reducing crime by funding the “vetted” national police force (Forde 2014, 11). The vetting performed by the CIA only goes so far, as reflected in 2002, when the head of the national police force was found to have been involved in death squad and drug-trade activity. U.S. aid to prevent and deter drug and gang-related violence has proven ineffective for the past decade, leaving more Honduran civilians dead (11). Thus, Honduran citizens have been fleeing their countries to find relative safety elsewhere, most of them focused on the United States (Forde 2014; Sieffe et al 2018).

Another action that further destabilized Honduras was the 2009-Coup of the democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya; a coup that was supported by the Obama Administration (Ruhl 2010). Unfriendly to the United States, President Zelaya was part of the left-wing party and was a known supporter of former President of Venezuela Hugo Chavez.⁴ Washington disliked Zelaya for attempting to nationalize the mining and agricultural industry,

⁴ President Manuel Zelaya was part of the “Pink Tide” in Latin America. During the first decade of the new millennium, many democratic elections throughout Latin America led to the election of various left-wing candidates, alarming politicians in Washington (Ruhl 2010).

driving away many U.S. business leaders (Forde 2014). The 2009-Coup began to unravel Honduras' weak democratic state (Ruhl 2010). Following the coup, several right-wing candidates were elected, including current president Juan Orlando Hernandez (Kinosian 2017).

President Hernandez performed an unconstitutional referendum in 2013 effectively modifying the Honduran Constitution to allow unlimited terms to the Presidency by any candidate. In 2017, Juan Orlando Hernandez was elected to the Presidency for his third term, barely defeating left-of-center candidate Salvador Nasralla by a few thousand votes. The election raised alarm for the Organization of American States (OAS) as a possible case of voter fraudulence but was backed by the Trump Administration. The Trump Administration's approval of the vote count stopped any attempts by the Honduran Supreme Court of Justice to consider a reelection. This sparked protests and indignation across Honduras. These protests reached a peak in late 2018 when four-thousand Hondurans organized an exodus to the United States (Sieff et al 2018). The exodus, called the "Caravan," was organized by Honduran activist Bartolo Fuentes. The purpose of the Caravan was to use the high density of the group to travel in relative safety to the United States and to show dissatisfaction with the Honduran government. One of the flyers that circulated in Tegucigalpa, Honduras days prior to the exodus read:

"We aren't going because we want to, violence and poverty are driving us out" (Sieff et al 2018).

U.S. relations with both Mexico and Honduras has been a factor in the mass migration of both nations' peoples to the U.S. South (Ferguson and McNally 2015; Pew Research Center 2014; Sieffe et al 2018). By understanding the relationships between the United States, Honduras, and Mexico, scholars can comprehend how macro-factors such as transnational agreements and U.S. intervention have caused the displacement and mass migration of these

groups of people. These historical relationships point to the current moment in which thousands of Hondurans are making their way to North Carolina to find better economic and social opportunities (Sieff et al 2018). The historical relationships can be used to understand why Mexicans continue to partake in the H2A Program, often motivating sons and other family members to join (Schmalzbauer 2015). The migrants' "home" countries have become uninhabitable places because of economic and political reasons, thus forcing them to move north and search for a new home. Because of this loss of the home, I studied these migrant families' lives within their new homes in Eastern North Carolina, focusing specifically on the ways that their familial ties shifted why and how they chose to migrate to the United States.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Neoliberalism and Transnational Collaboration

According to historians Susan Ferguson and David McNally (2015), the United States government implements transnational policies and procedures that worsen socioeconomic conditions in Mexico and Central America to benefit the U.S. government and corporations. In order to replenish the shrinking labor reserve of U.S. citizens willing to participate in agricultural and other forms of labor, the United States government harnesses neoliberal policies to facilitate the process of importing precarious workers (Ferguson & McNally 2015). The prominent economic ideology today, neoliberalism asserts using government-supported policies and institutions that promote and facilitate free markets (Harvey 2005). These free markets are achieved by removing economic barriers, such as trade tariffs, taxes, and other forms of obstruction to competition. Furthermore, various industries that were commonly owned or public, are then privatized in an attempt to induce economic competition.

Neoliberalism extends this economic ideology to the social landscape for the sake of efficiency and maximization of profits (14-5). Social connections and relationships that had been thought to have been separate from economic rationalization are then thrust into a framework of free market competition. One such neoliberal policy that led to dispossession of land for rural Mexicans is the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) (Sears 2014, 676). NAFTA, alongside other policies, encouraged the continental flows to the Global North that replenishes the U.S. labor force (Ferguson & McNally 2015, 6-8). NAFTA removed export and import tariffs between Mexico and the United States, a neoliberal approach to trade agreements, and also provided subsidies for the growth of certain crops in the United States (Sears 2014). One of these crops was corn, or *maize*. These subsidies allowed U.S. corn farmers to grow and produce

corn at much lower costs than Mexican *maize* farmers. In turn, *maize* subsistence farmers in rural Mexican towns could not compete with this influx of imported U.S. corn, driving many of them out of business. Ferguson and McNally assert that the implementation of transnational policies by the United States and Canada is a tactic that “reproduces” migrant laborers (Ferguson & McNally 2015, 6-8). Legal scholar Natalie Sears (2014) concurs with this argument, specifically presenting as example the effects of NAFTA on migration. Before NAFTA was implemented in 1994, 2.5 million Mexicans resided in the United States, and this number quadrupled by 2006 (670-1).

Similarly, the United States also implemented the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) in 2005 (Morley 2008). CAFTA encompassed Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, the United States, and Canada. Just as NAFTA created free trade zones between nations, CAFTA did the same while also providing U.S. and Canadian agricultural producers with grain subsidies that decimated the competing rural markets in Honduras. Since its implementation, CAFTA has caused the doubling in imports of grains from the United States into Honduras, indicating the steep decrease of grain production in rural Honduras (1-3, 5). This led to higher rates of poverty in rural Honduras, which in turn increased the violence and drug-related activity in the urban areas (1-3). These higher rates of poverty and violence led to higher rates of migration, thus socially reproducing this group of migrants.

Precarity and Precarious Life

The concept of precarity is central to Ferguson and McNally’s argument (2015). Precarity has been explored in various avenues by scholars: as job insecurity, as a specific ontological experience in post-Fordist capitalism, or as an ever-changing range of conditions, economic and

ontological, that are representative of an insecure present (Millar 2017; Bourdieu 1998; Butler 2004; Thorkelson 2016). Pierre Bourdieu (1998) considered precarity a condition brought on by insecurity in employment and wages. Furthermore, Bourdieu (1998) conceptualized precarity as the economic conditions that originated from neoliberal reform in the 1980s which shifted the global economy from Keynesian-Fordist capitalism to that of neoliberal capitalism.⁵ This shift increased insecurity in employment for people across Western nations, reduced the availability to social welfare programs, and generally reduced socioeconomic mobility (Harvey 2005).

Guy Standing (2011) builds off of this conceptualization of precarity and asserts that neoliberal capitalism has produced a class of people living in precarity. Standing (2011) calls this class of people the precariat class. There exists heterogeneity amongst the precariat class. This means that a wide range of individuals from migrant laborers to non-tenured academic professors can be part of the precariat class. The intensified uncertainty and hopelessness produced by neoliberal capitalism is what unites the precariat class. Anthropologist Kathleen Millar (2017) deems this understanding of precarity as problematic. Millar (2017) is opposed to Standing's (2011) conceptualization of precarity since it is explained as an *exclusively* negative experience within neoliberal capitalism. Millar (2017) agrees with Standing's (2011) assertion that precarity can encompass the difficult and volatile conditions concentrated by neoliberal capitalism, but she argues that scholars must critically grapple with the understanding of precarious spaces. To Millar, people within precarious spaces and regimes perform actions and exchanges that give a

⁵ The premise of Keynesian-Fordist capitalism is understood as the modification of global capitalism post-Great Depression in the United States (Harvey 2005). As a strategy to salvage capitalism from its own destructive nature, the New Deal, introduced by President Franklin Roosevelt, focused on Keynesian and Fordist ideals of increasing employment across all people, securing wages and labor, offering welfare and social services, and offering socioeconomic mobility to all those participating in wage labor. In the 1980s, a coalition of Western nations led by the United States shifted the global economy to a neoliberal approach. This shift included the undoing of the gold-standard, which introduced speculative financialization to the global markets, which is known for its instability and volatility as a mode of accumulation.

glimpse into what precarious laborers value as well as what life outside of wage labor may manifest. As will be further discussed in the text, migrant laborers working in the precarious agricultural industry in Eastern North Carolina decide between different configurations of precarious living that gives us an understanding of the value that certain ways of life carry for migrant parents.

Thorkelson (2016) argues that precarity creates a set of experiences that engender emotions of insecurity, loss of hope, and “nostalgia” for a “secure past” (6). These affective experiences are not exclusive to citizens of the Global North. Millar (2014) asserts that although precarity has been the “norm” for those laboring in the Global South, it has its own ontological manifestation. In the Global South, precarity manifests as “an imagined future that now no longer seems possible” (6). Thus, citizens of the Global South are stuck in a cycle of precarity unable to imagine and hope for a different and better future. This is the form of precarity that Ferguson and McNally (2015) focus on when explaining the social reproduction of migrant laborers.

An experience of precarity that Ferguson and McNally (2015) and Menjívar (2006) contribute to the discourse is that of illegality and “liminal legality” (999). Menjívar defines liminal legality as a temporary visa, exemption, or other form of legal status that is easily revocable (Menjívar 2006, 1000-1). This impermanence of status creates uncertainty for those living in liminal legality, and thus is precarious. H2A workers occupy the space of liminal legality. The H2A visa allows its holders to reside in the United States for up to eight months as long as the farm owner is content with the labor provided by the laborer. H2A workers that produce unsatisfactory results for the farm owner can have their visa revoked, face immediate deportation without further pay, and be permanently barred from the program (1001).

Menjívar (2006) conceptualizes illegality as the complete absence of permission to reside or exist in the United States. Undocumented migrants fall into this category of illegality. Those who are undocumented, and therefore in the space of illegality, are open to exploitation by employers and vulnerable to deportations because of their impermanent state of living (1000-1). Therefore, the migrant, agricultural worker is not only precarious because of her affective experiences as a laborer in a difficult job, but also because of her legal status in the United States. My research focused on vulnerable migrants that were marked by liminal legality and illegality in North Carolina.

More than half of the agricultural workers in North Carolina are undocumented, meaning that their presence on U.S. soil is considered a crime that can lead to arrest and deportation (Student Action with Farmworkers 2019). Furthermore, undocumented migrants are barred from accessing social benefits such as unemployment compensation, Medicaid or Medicare, and food assistance programs (1000-1). In certain states, including North Carolina, undocumented people are not allowed to apply for state identification or licenses. Many of the migrants need to drive in expansive rural towns and are vulnerable to police license checks that can lead to expensive penalizations, arrests, and in some cases deportations (1000-4).

Additionally, undocumented migrants do not have employment authorization in the United States, forcing them to pursue low-wage work including agricultural labor (1001-4). Those fortunate enough to find jobs that ignore federal requirements for employment authorization are still at risk of being reported to their employer and being fired (1002-4). In comparison, the H2A worker must remain in the agricultural industry to maintain his liminal legality, consequently enforcing his permanence as a seasonal agricultural laborer. Thus, the

United States government utilizes these structures of illegality and liminal legality to keep undocumented and H2A migrants within a precarious regime of labor.

Although precarious in wages and labor rights, the agricultural industry remains a constant space where migrants return to work (Ferguson and McNally 2015). Many of these migrants, including my interlocutors, choose to enter or return to the fields. Although agricultural labor is difficult, tedious, and underpaid relative to other jobs in the area, the head of migrant households choose to participate in this mode of living in exchange for access and proximity to their families, as will be further demonstrated. This decision to join the fields further fuels the reproductive cycle that revitalizes the labor reserve of precarious workers. The glimmer of hope offered by the family within this precarious regime of labor is what fueled my interlocutors' decisions to migrate to North Carolina. My research focuses on the exchanges executed by migrant parents in this precarious regime in the rural Southeast, and how their ways of living can give me an understanding of what migrant families value.

Social Reproduction

The concept of reproduction stems from a feminist-Marxist understanding of production (Ferguson & McNally 2014, 4). Marx concerned himself with production, specifically theorizing that capitalism would continue to grow because birth rates would exponentially increase as they were doing in “typical early English capitalism” (4). Marx assumed this reproduction as a natural occurrence, stripping it of the social context that had shifted the birth rates throughout history (Ferguson & McNally 2014, 4). Marx's understanding did not prioritize the social forces that would continue to reproduce this working class.

Feminist scholars Margaret Benston (1969) and Peggy Morton (1971) intervene to explain the role of gender within capitalism and production. They explain that there are two spheres of production that exist within capitalism: productive and reproductive. Gender is the determinant for what sphere an individual will fall into, the domestic (unpaid) or productive (paid) sphere (Benston 1969). Women have historically been confined to the domestic sphere, which has limited their access to wages relative to men. Morton further articulates that the reproductive sphere is just as vital as the productive sphere in maintaining capitalism. The role of reproductive labor, mostly confined to domestic duties such as rearing children, cooking, cleaning, and maintaining the home, is labor that has allowed the productive sphere to continue to operate. Acknowledging the need for reproductive labor within capitalism is a major intervention within Marxist theory that augments the understanding of further societal factors in the role of capitalism.

Marxist theory's lack of understanding of gender within capitalism is further explored by Ferguson and McNally (2015). Ferguson and McNally thrust the concept of reproduction to a macro-policy level (4). They argue that the role of U.S. policies within the economies of Mexico and Central American nations are part of a macro-level reproductive mechanism within neoliberal capitalism. Policies such as NAFTA are part of this reproductive agenda within capitalism that revitalizes the reserve of a migrant labor force. Thus, the concept of reproductions pertains to this recreation of this working class. A large part of this reproduction relays on a migrant mass.

Theories of Migration

Political scientist Nicola Phillips (2011) complements Ferguson & McNally's (2015) theory arguing that many nations within Latin America and the Caribbean are creating informal institutions to facilitate the emigration of their citizens as a way to harness and increase remittances in their local economies. The process of migration can instead be viewed as a transnational process that is not just reproduced by the United States, but also facilitated by informal institutions in Latin American nations. These informal institutions include social connections and networks between communities, banks that receive remittances from the United States, and *coyotes*⁶ that assist individuals' journey to the United States (233). These policies are survival mechanisms that have been born out of the necessity to make some good out of the negative effects that foreign policy and emigration have caused onto the social, political, and economic order of these nations (241-2). My research further focuses on these social connections that are part of this informal process that facilitates in emigration.

The driving force behind migration in the 20th century had been linked to the concept of "push-pull theory" (Boyd 1989). This theory, dominant in social scientific accounts of migration until the 1980s, conceptualized migration as the "push" of an emigrating nation stemming from poverty, violence, and/or political repression. The "pull" within this theory stems from a hegemonic nation such as the United States creating conditions that entice migrants to leave their homes and make the journey north. This theory is part of the building block of Ferguson and McNally's reproduction of a precarious, migrant class argument. U.S. policies such as NAFTA and CAFTA create conditions that push migrants out of their home countries, such as widespread

⁶ *Coyotes* are individuals that are well-versed in the undocumented journey from Mexico to the United States. Individuals pay thousands of dollars to these coyotes to get to the U.S. safely, and quickly as possible undocumented.

poverty, and support conditions that pull migrants north, such as the subsidization of corn and the implementation of the H2A visa. Although vitally important in understanding the macro-political structures that capacitate migration, push-pull theory is not the only player in global movements (Boyd 1989, 639-40).

Migration scholars such as Boyd (1989) and Marquez (1997) further explore other factors within the mechanics of migration. From this exploration stems “network theory.” Network theory, Boyd argue, states that the “social contacts” are invaluable pieces of information and facilitate the migration process as well as revitalize the migrant pool after the effects of damaging economic reforms have subdued. Although migration is a social product that is largely influenced by economic reforms, these social connections are also important in the revitalization process (644).

Griffith (2011) argues that social connections, especially familial connections, are a vital mechanism for recruiting migrant, agricultural laborers. Griffith further discusses the way that recruiting practices in Eastern North Carolina’s fields are largely based on utilizing these family connections to revitalize their own labor forces. Migrant workers in the United States inform their family members and friends back home in Mexico and Central America of the jobs and opportunities available to them in the agricultural industry (102-3). These connections are vital in recruiting individuals as both undocumented and H2A laborers. Historically, the H2A program has mostly allowed only men to join the program, based on the expectation that men are better manual laborers (102-3). This expectation has shifted the ways in which family units are structured amongst migrant families (Schmalzbauer 2015). These familial connections coupled with gender are reinforcing gendered expectations of both men and women, as well as changing the dynamics of families.

Gender within Migration

Schmalzbauer (2015) states that the migration of men to the United States as undocumented or H2A laborers can be part of a ritual into manhood. The performance of masculinity and fatherhood is tied to migration (212). Schmalzbauer utilizes comparative studies of migrant fathers across the globe and details that fatherhood is an open expectation compared to motherhood. Schmalzbauer concludes that motherhood within migrant families requires a direct presence and emotional labor that cannot be performed transnationally (214).

Additionally, Schmalzbauer claims that “motherhood is constructed around omnipresence, direct care and nurturing” (222). This means that the burden of emotional labor falls on women in these transnational families. Thus, men have the ability to move transnationally to become part of labor forces that offers better pay relative than that obtainable in their home countries. Schmalzbauer calls this performance of fatherhood by migrant fathers “transnational fatherhood” (212). Wages and short conversations through phone calls are part of this transnational fatherhood. Meanwhile, motherhood is restrained to a tighter landscape of gender division within this transnational process (214).

Once thought as mostly a male labor force, the increasing feminization of migration offers the possibility of change within the performance of motherhood for migrant families (United Nations 2007). Migration scholar Gutierrez-Rodriguez (2014) explains the ways that migration rates, both globally and in the North American continent, have grown for migrant women. For example, in the 1960s, it was estimated that 47% of migrants were women, globally, but this has increased to 49% in the early 2000s, representing millions of women migrating (United Nations 2007). The reproduction of a migrant working class that has been facilitated by transnational fatherhood is suddenly shifting because of this change in migration demographics

(Gutierrez-Rodriguez 2014). This is where the significance of my research lies. I studied the reasons and the strategic decision-making made by mothers that led them to migrate with their children to Eastern North Carolina. Scholars like Ferguson and McNally (2015) thoroughly researched the macro-forces that displace and force Mexican and Honduran nationals to migrate to the United States, I studied the micro-forces of family connections and the contours of precarity that awaited behind the doors of the migrants' homes.

METHODOLOGY

To answer my research questions, I asked two undocumented families that have worked in the agricultural industry in Eastern North Carolina to help me understand these familial connections. I met an H2A worker from Mexico, Juan, who has worked in the tobacco fields in North Carolina for the last twenty years. Juan resides in Eastern North Carolina for eight months of the year, away from his family, and spends the remaining four months with his family in Mexico. The two undocumented families emigrated from Honduras, and each moved to the United States within the last year. These two families reside in Eastern North Carolina. I conducted participant observation and semi-structured interviews in their homes while they were off work. I record our interviews with their permission. The composition of each family in their homes in Eastern NC is as follows:

Family 1 – Transnational Family:

Mother: Amalia (MEX⁷) **Father:** Juan (MEX) **Children:** Two Sons (MEX)

Family 2 – Resides in North Carolina:

Mother: Anna (HND⁸) **Father:** Pablo (HND) **Children:** Two Sons (HND)

Family 3 – Resides in North Carolina:

Mother: Lidia (HND) **Father:** Miguel (HND) **Children:** Son (HND)
Daughter (USA⁹)

⁷ Abbreviation for Mexico. This person holds Mexican citizenship.

⁸ Abbreviation for Honduras. This person holds Honduran citizenship.

⁹ Abbreviation for the United States. This person holds U.S. citizenship.

I individually interviewed the father and mother of each family, guiding my conversations by having them tell me their life stories. I continued to delve into their familial connections and the connections' role in the labor recruiting practices by asking them about what led them to work in the fields, how they heard about current job opportunities, and the role that their families have played in this process. I also focused on understanding the reasons why mothers and fathers of each family decided to migrate to Eastern North Carolina. Lastly, I asked them about their future goals, what they hope for their families, and how they envision their future to be, whether it be in North Carolina, Honduras, or Mexico. All these interviews take place at their kitchen tables. I visited each migrant family three times, and I visited the one H2A worker – Juan – twice. Each visit ranged from two to four hours. The first chapter revolves around Juan, since he was the first person who I was lucky enough to meet at an event for farmworkers' rights. It was with the help of Juan that I was able to meet and connect with the other two families.

In adherence with my set protocol with Duke University's Institutional Review Board, I used pseudonyms for all members of each migrant family. I also have obscured the rural towns where these visits took place to protect the identity of each member. All interviews and visits were conducted in Spanish and all translations are my own.

I have also accompanied each chapter with autobiographic vignettes that parallel the arguments and experiences that I was able to observe from my interlocutors. Ellis (2004) and Holman Jones (2005) describe this type of methodology as "autoethnography" (Holman Jones 2005, 763-4). By utilizing autoethnography throughout this work, I examined my own experiences in relation to this phenomenon that I researched in the last year. Not only did I

harvest an understanding of the issues that were brought to light through my research questions, I also sought and found an understanding of myself.

CHAPTER ONE: THE FATHER

“I’ll be all aroun’ in the dark. I’ll be ever’ where – wherever you look. Wherever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there. Wherever they’s a cop beatin’ up a guy, I’ll be there... An’ when our folks eat the stuff they raise an’ live in the houses they build – why, I’ll be there.”

John Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath* (1939, 419)

PART ONE: THE RURAL HOME(S)

MOUNT OLIVE, NC – DECEMBER 2005

“Remember, if anyone asks you, you do not know where he is. He does not live with us. You are just as confused as they are.”

These are the words that my mother repeated to me as we cut rectangular ID’s into shreds. Each ID was plastered with the picture of a brunette man, staring straight at the camera, standing in front of a light-blue wall. I immediately recognized my father’s face on these ID’s. Across the top, it read “CAROLINA TURKEY EMPLOYEE ID,” and below, to my confusion, the name read “ALBERTO BORGES.”

This was not my father’s name. In fact, it was the name of a family friend who was classified by the American government as a Permanent Resident¹⁰ of the United States yet resided in Honduras. Borges allowed my father to use his Social Security number so that my father could work at the local turkey-processing plant.¹¹ A job at Carolina Turkey was a step up for my dad, who had been previously been working as a day laborer in sweet potato fields, for two reasons: the wages were higher, and he now had the opportunity to earn overtime pay.

The reason why my mother and I were desperately cutting through the IDs and removing any trace of my father’s name and face from our house was that after 59 years of living in Honduras, Alberto Borges had moved to the United States. After his move, he went to his local Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) office to get an official North Carolina identification card. Since my father had already used Borges’ identification and Social Security number,

¹⁰ Permanent Residents, or previously known as “green card holders,” are individuals who have been granted residency status on U.S. soil. Permanent Residents have access to Social Security benefits, employment authorization, and a pathway to citizenship after five years of continuous residency.

¹¹ In 2005, Carolina Turkey was acquired by Butterball, LLC, and is the largest producer of turkey products in the United States (Butterball LLC 2019).

Borges' request triggered an investigation into identify fraud – a federal crime. My father was at fault, having used someone else's identity because he was unable to procure his own due to strict immigration laws.¹² The North Carolina Sheriff Department had jurisdiction over his case, and if my father came into contact with police, they could arrest and turn him over to Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE).

From that moment on, my father was on the run. He would sleep at different friends' trailers across Duplin County, in case state police or ICE came looking for him. I rarely saw him on those days, except on the weekends. My mother and I slept over at whoever's home in the rural Duplin County. For me, home was nowhere without the presence of my complete family. Uncertainty became the new normal for the three of us.

¹² My father used Borges' identity for two years. In 1999, Honduras was designated a country with Temporary Protected Status (TPS) by U.S. Customs and Immigration Enforcement. That meant that my father and hundreds of thousands of Hondurans in the U.S. would have temporary employment authorization, albeit with no route to citizenship.

Pursuing Hope

From my conversations with Juan, I recognized that he and I shared similar experiences. He considers himself a person with two homes, one in Eastern North Carolina, where he resides eight months of the year, and the other in a small town right outside of Mexico City. The rhythms of Juan's home life in both locations provide insight into the mechanisms that enforce ways in which a father becomes a transnational patriarch. While anthropology scholars assert that certain macro-level mechanisms are at work in reproducing a precarious migrant class (Ferguson & McNally 2015), I extend their analyses in order to argue that the reproduction of this migrant class has some underlying microforces. I argue that ideas of home and fatherhood drive this reproductive cycle, as will be explained further.

French philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1964) wrote that the home is “a tool for analyzing the soul... Houses house the home – those we lived in, ever lived in, and conjure up in living in. This makes it a space that is part memory, part daydream, part physically domicile” (77-8). Anne Allison's work in *Precarious Japan* (2013) expands on this concept by detailing the ways in which precarious conditions of life for youth growing up in Japan today, including increasing homelessness, were caused by the downturn in Japan's economy. Without spaces of stability, homeless Japanese youth are left on their own to survive in a day-by-day way; creating a situation in which they have no opportunity to envision a future that exists outside of their precarious circumstances. Survival becomes the goal for these individuals growing up in an unstructured environment in which they do not know where they will sleep each night, or if they will find a meal. Without a stable home, the future can only be envisioned as a day-by-day project rather than a world of opportunity full of choices.

Like those Japanese youth, for me, home was nonexistent during the year that my father was on the run. In order to rescue my mother and I from the possible legal repercussions of housing someone who had committed a crime, my father decided to leave the single-wide trailer we lived in, one of the places that we called home after moving to the United States. This action shook the platform that made home “home” for me. The precarious realm of illegality that my father existed within forced us all into a state in which we just hoped to see each other every weekend without being separated by ICE or state police. School, playing with friends, watching my favorite television shows – all those typical childhood activities – became unimportant to me. I just wanted my family to remain together, and I could only hope for a reality where the charges against my father would be dropped.

The precarious state of our family trapped us in a cycle of survival, and we had to adapt to the obstacles the U.S. government put in our path. At that time, to imagine that my family could one day become U.S. citizens seemed impossible, unworthy of even making an attempt. I envisioned a life in which an undocumented person could live in a typical family situation, one without fear of separation. Similarly, as I retell the stories that Juan and others in the agricultural community have shared with me, I recognize the “precarious present” that these workers endure – just as my life was constrained by the volatility of being undocumented (Millar 2014, 49).

In the following section, I will describe my first encounter with Juan’s home in Eastern North Carolina. I will also analyze Juan’s role as a transnational father within the reproductive cycle of this migrant class. This section will also analyze the exchanges made by Juan while working and living in a precarious regime of labor.

PART TWO: THE FATHER'S HOME(S)

NOVEMBER 6, 2018 – EASTERN NORTH CAROLINA

Interstate 40 was enveloped by the autumn evening. As I got closer and closer to my exit, I hoped finding Juan's home would be an easy task. The dark interstate was illuminated by my car lights and those traveling near me. We were all heading east together. As I approached the appropriate exit signaled by the female GPS voice, I knew in five minutes I would arrive at Juan's home. I was nervous, excited, and overwhelmed. Juan had been such a helpful figure in my research since he was a leader within his cohort and was always willing to speak up. After getting to know him for some time, I would finally get to see where he lived.

The roads were smaller now, and I traveled completely in the shadows. The rural setting of the small roads reminded me of the winding paths to my house in Mount Olive. There were no street lights to guide my path, the only thing I could do was follow my GPS' directions, making sure to be attentive to the possibilities of turns coming up. Finally, the GPS announced to turn left onto a dirt road, a road that I would have completely missed without its guidance. I looked ahead and my eyes were met only with the silhouettes of trees. I drove forward slowly, gripping the steering wheel as my car shook back and forth at meeting deep holes in the dirt road. Was I headed in the right direction? Would I make it to Juan?

Finally, a gray-walled brick building came into view. Arid, dense, and heavy, the bricks had only a few windows that held white curtains with a bright white light that streamed through. The building was rectangular, 20 feet wide 50 feet long with a tin roof that even in the dark night I could see had oxidized to a bright red. As I approached the building, I saw in my periphery a man standing in the darkness on a cellphone staring at me. I rolled down my window and said in Spanish:

“Is Juan here? I’m here to talk to him.”

He remained silent. He was trying to focus on my face, so I turned the light of my car on, and I asked him again if Juan was inside. He stumbled a bit, and almost in a whisper, I was lucky to hear him say:

“He’s inside.”

I drove my car closer and parked in front of the building. Immediately, I saw Juan come up. He was waiting for me. I stepped out of my car to greet him. His face and hands were masked with dust, while his eyes were bloodshot red. I thought he was probably tired from the early mornings and late nights working in the fields. He seemed nervous and excited. I asked him if we could talk inside the building, to which he responded:

“No... everyone is eating right now, and it is too crowded.”

I offered to speak on the steps of the house, but he insisted on speaking inside my car. It seemed that to keep the conversation honest, Juan wanted to speak in a private space, where his coworkers would not overhear. We stepped into my car and I turned on the lights, so we could see each other. He smiled at me, asked me how I was doing, to which I told him that the dirt road was intimidating, especially in the dark and with the surrounding trees. He laughed, and said,

“They have us hidden back here.”

He continued on and began telling me that he was from a small town outside of Mexico City, where “the violence had not” reached his people. He first came to work in Eastern North Carolina, in 1997, as an H2A worker. I asked him how his time in North Carolina has been that current season, which had lasted eight months. He was scheduled to fly back the next day, flying to Mexico City, with one of his family members waiting to pick him up from the airport.

“[Rural North Carolina] reminds me of back home. [In my town back in Mexico], we are away from the city, in the woods. You can hear the roosters in the morning. It is really quiet, and you are away from the noise of the city.”

After that, Juan dove right into his critiques of his rural home in Eastern North Carolina:

“There are forty of us here... The tensions in the house run high. It’s a lot of us in a small home. Forty men and twenty bunked beds. Forty men and only two bathrooms.”

I had heard about how difficult it was to live in this home from other H2A workers who had experienced it, but to finally see it myself - the gray brick, prison-like; the overcrowded rooms and lack of privacy; the humid and musty air that was impossible to push out with two air-conditioning units – I was blown away.

What surprised me even more though, was the fact that Juan said he considered this place one of his homes. He did, in fact, live there most of his life for the last twenty years.

“It is home. Up until the day that I find a different job, I will call it one of my homes.”

He explained that he had tried to find other jobs in the area to improve his circumstances. In fact, for a time, he was an undocumented worker at a factory in Tennessee. He decided to return to the fields an H2A worker, though, because his prior status as an undocumented migrant prevented him from returning back home to Mexico. If he wanted to see his family in Mexico, he had to come back and work here.

“I missed my family, you know? It was difficult to think about being without them.”

Precarious Home

In this ethnographic observation of Juan's life, I focus on the lived reality of precarity rather than on the economic circumstances that have brought it about. The H2A home in Eastern North Carolina is a reflection of the precarious nature of life for Juan and other H2A workers. Hidden behind trees and accessible only through a pothole-ridden dirt road, the house itself even looks starkly different from the other homes on that road. Right around the corner sits a two-story home lit up by high beam lights that are set out on the freshly trimmed lawn whose centerpiece is a cross made of white Christmas light. The other homes look like places where people live. This one looks institutional. Just as Millar (2014) confronted a different world within the garbage dump right outside of Rio de Janeiro while studying the urban poor who work there, I confronted the world of the precarious agricultural worker in North Carolina in the H2A home. Out of sight and out of reach, the migrant workers live in shameful conditions, and they feel the shame, as Juan stated:

“With all due respect, I do not believe that performing agricultural labor here is a talent... If anything, we have to realize that we [the workers] are here because we failed.”

Besides the physical condition of the H2A home, the treatment that Juan and his co-workers face at the hands of the fields' foreman further shows the precarious conditions that surround migrant laborers. The foreman, working directly under the farm owner, is an English-speaking individual who previously worked in the fields, and likely has “legal status,” as explained by Juan:

“The foreman... is always repeating over our backs ‘the boss is not happy, work harder!’ He is in charge of instilling this mentality within us that we are not good enough workers, that

this work can be done by someone else. He makes us feel as if we are not worthy. It is his method of control: making us feel bad for all the wrongdoings that have occurred in the fields.”

Made to feel disposable, Juan is careful and attempts to perform his best at work, fearing that any complaints that he makes will lead to the loss of employment. Feelings of uncertainty pervade Juan and his co-workers. Their lives are shaped by this feeling, which leads the workers to be perpetually obedient to the foreman. The feeling of uncertainty is used as a tool to increase profits for farm owners.

Family Networks

The lack of opportunity in his hometown of Cholula is what drove Juan to undertake the difficult job of an H2A worker in the first place. He was one of eight siblings, and he had to find a way to help his family financially after his father had fallen ill. He was twenty-three at the time when his brother-in-law told him about the opportunity to work in Eastern North Carolina:

“In Mexico, work is not readily available... So, my brother-in-law told me about this job [as an agricultural worker] with the field owner that I am working with now. So, I decided to come work here.”

Familial connections are vital to the maintenance of steady supply of migrant laborers to the United States (Griffith 2011; Boyd 1989; Marquez 1997). Once his decision was made, Juan was able to come to Eastern North Carolina and swiftly acquire his H2A visa because his brother-in-law had referred him directly to the farm owner. For North Carolina farm owners, the North Carolina Growers’ Association (NCGA) is the organizing body that facilitates the recruitment of H2A workers. One of the mechanisms that the NCGA utilizes in their recruitment efforts is to hire an ombudsperson who visits certain pre-identified towns in Mexico. There, the

ombudsperson is in charge of interviewing interested men and assisting candidates in their application process.

However, those individuals who already know someone working as an H2A worker can bypass this process. In Juan's case, the brother-in-law was working for the farm owner who currently employs Juan, and Juan's brother-in-law referred him directly to his boss. The boss, trusting Juan's brother-in-law's recommendation of Juan as a good worker, approved Juan's application directly. Social connections, especially familial ones, are crucial in maintaining the flow of H2A workers from rural Mexican towns to North Carolina's fields. Precarious conditions enforced by farm owners and largely unregulated by state and federal institutions are the mechanisms that render H2A workers a precarious class. The workers are constantly under pressure to produce more, to make their *jefe*¹³ more money.

Exchanges for the Family

In his precarious present, Juan envisions a future of returning back to Mexico to see his family. Although he had the opportunity to remain in a different form of employment that paid better at the factory in Tennessee, he sacrificed that opportunity to be able to return to Mexico and see his family every year. The comfort of a higher paying job as well as the higher status as an industry worker were forgone in order for Juan to maintain his family structure and to fulfill his role as a transnational father. H2A workers only make up a small percentage of migrant workers across the United States, and Juan's decision was to detach from the general migrant labor class and to become a precarious laborer (Student Action with Farmworkers 2019). Even though he lives in a precarious situation in Eastern North Carolina, he can still perform

¹³ Spanish for boss.

fatherhood transnationally – a role which he would not be able to perform as a permanent undocumented worker residing in the United States. Juan says that during the eight months that he is away from his family, all he can think about is getting back to them:

“The act of being here with unknown people, after a long day of work... All you can do is think of your family and value each member.”

This makes the five months in Cholula, Mexico especially valuable to Juan. Without employment options in Mexico, Juan can only continue to move back and forth, in a cycle, between Cholula and Eastern North Carolina. Enticed by the idea of being with family even if only for a short amount of time, Juan is forced to continue being an H2A worker. Family is vital to the reproduction of a precarious migrant class.

PART THREE: THE TRANSNATIONAL FATHER

CHOLULA, MEXICO

“Juan! You need to tell our son to start behaving better with me! He’s been ignoring me about going out to play with friends without permission.”

“*Amor*, you know I can’t reprimand him. The short amount of time that I spend here, I can’t spend screaming at them, telling my sons what to do. I’ll support you. I’ll tell them to listen to you more, but you know I can’t become their enemy. I already spend too little time here.”

These are the type of conversations Juan tells me that he has with his wife when he visits his home in Cholula, Mexico for the few months of the year that he resides there. Having two sons, one fourteen, the other three, Juan attempts to create positive interactions and moments with his sons that they will remember fondly when he is away. He fears that if he does not do this, they will not appreciate him as a father – especially since he spends more than half a year in the United States working in the fields.

Juan recalls the way his brother-in-law convinced him to come to North Carolina and work in the fields:

“The pay is good, you know. You just have to fill some paperwork out. I know the boss up there, I’ll just tell him I know you.”

He says he often wonders: “Should he have taken the job? What drove me to accept such a role?”

He recalls the fact that his father had just become ill, so money was tight at home with eight other siblings. He was twenty-three years old at the time. No girlfriend and no family – his only responsibility was himself.

“I had to think about progress, though. I wanted to build a family. I didn’t have a permanent job in Mexico, I needed to go to the United States to wait for something better,” he tells me.

Twenty-one years ago, he accepted the journey north. After saving up some money to pay the visa fee, he had officially been granted his status as an H2A worker. In April of 1997, he flew to North Carolina to begin his work in the agricultural fields. He knew back then that the work was tough, but he did not fear it. He wanted to believe that it would only be an intermediate step toward his goal of building a family and a life for himself back in Mexico.

Twenty-one seasons of sweet potato harvest pass. He has two sons now: one is thirteen, “almost a man himself”, and the other is only three. Juan’s only option is to continue working in the fields. If anything, it is consistent as long as you do the work and you do not anger the foreman. Juan tells me:

“I represent the big money [for my family, while the money my wife makes] represents little money, money for little things... That is why I have to keep working in the fields.”

The Transnational Family

Juan's journey to the fields in North Carolina, from his home in Mexico, represents a ritual for his family. One of his main justifications for applying to become an H2A worker was to have the possibility of establishing a family and a home. He would use the money he had made harvesting sweet potatoes in the fields to do this. This justification also serves as an example in the way in which hope for a family and home fuel part of this reproductive cycle of migrant labor forces (Ferguson & McNally 2015). Juan states:

“I was looking for a way to start a family. I didn't have any great job opportunities back in Cholula, so of course you look north.”

Yet even after earning money and establishing a family with two children now, Juan is still preoccupied with fears of financial instability. This fear fuels an H2A worker's time within the fields. Juan's anxiety stems from the fact that he still has a young child, so he will have to keep working in order to provide for him. The family is the key to this reproductive cycle of precarious migrant labor; without it, new migrant fathers would not have to keep ritually returning to the U.S. fields year after year. Without it, the laborers would not have to continue their participation in the H2A program for years without end. After acquiring the H2A visa for the first time, renewal is basically guaranteed for H2A workers as long as the farm employer deems their labor worthy. This reproductive cycle maintained by the idea of family, is still easier than it would be to acquire a sufficient wage job back in Mexico (Ferguson & McNally 2015). Thus, the H2A workers become entrapped in a cycle of working eight months of the year in the United States.

Gender within the Transnational Family

The gendered aspect of this decision-making becomes visible when the conversation moves to the topic of the role of Juan's wife within the home. Juan's comment points us towards an argument delineated by Benston (1969) and Morton (1971). Motherhood is expected to occur in proximity of the child, while the performance of fatherhood can occur with distance (Schmalzbauer 2015). Juan is allowed, in terms of societal expectations, to perform his fatherhood transnationally. His fatherhood, as defined by his child rearing methods, occur through phone chats, video chats, gifts of material goods, and remittances. This difference between genders allows Juan to become the transnational figure within this reproductive process, while Amalia, his wife, must remain at home.

This point is made explicit when Juan details that Amalia once worked as a seamstress. The birth of their first son "required" that Amalia stay home and rear the child. Amalia wanted to continue to work, and as a compromise, Juan bought her four sewing machines so that she could work from home while still taking care of their two children. Although Amalia became part of the formalized working class, the requirement of rearing the children still remained. The child rearing must be continuous for women like Amalia; she cannot be outside the home, for her presence is vital for the rearing of the new precarious, migrant worker.

An Intergenerational Family

Juan and Amalia's childrearing methods include an intergenerational aspect. Juan comments that he feels lucky that his house in Mexico "is right next to [his] parents' home." More so, Juan's brother, "who is an engineer," visits Juan's wife and children every day. Amalia is not the only person looking over their children; Juan's brother and parents are also involved.

Intimate childrearing can be a shared duty not only performed by Amalia but also performed by the children's paternal grandparents and uncle in lieu of the transnational father. Family is thus a collaborative effort that arises from a necessity to protect Juan's children. It is the image of Juan's brother, Miguel, that protects his two kids from envisioning a future as agricultural workers in the United States. Juan comments:

“My [fourteen-year-old] son wanted to come to the United States to work as an agricultural laborer. In a way, it was because I was his only hero back home [as a man], so he wanted to follow my directions. Now that his uncle visits every day, he looks up to him. He tells me, ‘I want to be an engineer when I grow up.’”

For the male children, the image of man in the household ignites a hope that envisions a future outside precarious migrant labor. For this family and many others like it, it is the responsibility of the man, or father, to create hope for future labor opportunities for the children. The home, grounds for hope and innovation, is therefore gendered. The father is expected to inspire the male children to look for a future in labor. Miguel, who stands in place for Juan, represents this hope-making by inspiring Juan's children to look for a future in something “more stable.” Now Juan's children are inspired to become engineers, like their uncle, instead of pursuing work in the Carolina fields, just as their father did. However, not all children of migrant laborers experience such collaborative upbringing, Juan comments:

“Many of my coworkers have brought their children over to work in the fields with them. Without the father in the home, the children grow up in a different environment than if we were there. [My coworkers] bring their kids over, not because of necessity, but because they were losing them in Mexico... They were losing them to the streets.”

With the lack of the intergenerational family model, many of Juan's coworkers are left only with the choice to have their sons join them in Eastern North Carolina as H2A workers. Juan points to the violence that has become more prevalent across Mexico when he comments on losing children to the "streets." Interestingly, the loss of children to violence, poverty, alcoholism, and drug addiction cannot be stopped by the mother or other figures in Mexico, according to Juan. It can only be stopped by the transnational father, one that lives and works far away. This is particularly important because the ritual of leaving home to join the transnational father becomes a remedy for losing children to addiction and violence. In this way, transnational fatherhood, becomes a tool for reproducing a migrant labor force within this changing environment in Mexico. The act of "saving" a child by bringing them across borders also feeds the migrant labor pool that is induced by transnational policies.

CHAPTER TWO: THE MOTHER

“To rescue our children we will have to let them save us from the power we embody: we will have to trust the very difference that they forever personify. And we will have to allow them the choice, without fear of death: that they may come and do likewise or that they may come and that we will follow them... A little child will lead us back to the child we will always be, vulnerable and wanting and hurting for love and for beauty.”

June Jordan, *Some of Us Did Not Die* (2003, 283)

PART ONE: THE SCARLET LIPSTICK

MAY 2003 – TEGUCIGALPA, HONDURAS

The firm mattress that I lay on groans and caves slightly as the body next to me shifts off the bed quietly. The light from the early morning sun seeps through the vertical iron bars on the bedroom window. The dream that had taken hold of my attention started to disappear in my mind's eye when I hear someone shuffling through the bedroom closet. I turn over to look at the silhouette of the figure. I spoke:

“Buenos días, mamá.”

“Buenos días hijo. Go back to sleep. It's only five AM.”

I felt tired and hazy, but I would not miss out on my watching my mother perform her morning weekday ritual. I watch as she sits in front of her vanity mirror. She then smears foundation across her face, applies a light-pink blush in wide strokes across her high-set cheekbones, then applies a light eyeshadow across the eye lids that resembled my own, and finally, to my excitement, she dabs a scarlet shade lipstick across her lips – the same shade of nail polish that she has on. She then pouts while looking at herself in the mirror and stands.

She puts her high heels on, that morning they were black to match her black pant suit. With her purse now lightly placed on her shoulder she looks at me and says:

“I love you very much. Go get in bed with your sister and have a good day at school.”

I get out of bed and hug her. I receive a light-kiss on my cheek, light enough to leave her lipstick masterpiece untouched. I go to my sister's room to snuggle in bed with her until she wakes me up to get ready for school. Within three months' time everything would change.

JANUARY 2004 – MOUNT OLIVE, NC

I wake up to the sound of my mom playing music from the radio in the living room. I wrap the blanket around me as my body shivers in its comfort – it helps me shake off the cold from my bones. Five months have passed since my mother and I moved to the United States to reunite with my father, but I had not gotten used to the cold and bitter North Carolina winter. I get up reluctantly and drag my body to the bathroom where my mom laid out the clothes that I would wear to school that day. I get ready, brush my teeth, and finally meet her in the kitchen where she swiftly switches from skillet to pot.

“Eat your breakfast and hurry up, the bus is going to be here soon.”

No “good morning, hijo.” No “I love you.” She was more stressed these days. I eat my food and hand off my plate to her. As she washes the dishes, I watch her lather and rinse the utensils. Her nails are chipped, and the polish was missing. I had not seen her in a business suit since we landed in the United States. I missed the ritual of watching her get ready in the morning. A ritual that I knew she loved herself.

In the afternoons, after I got off the bus and made my way to the end of the trailer park to get to ours, my mom was taking care of someone else’s child. A neighbor’s kid, my father’s coworker, or a random person’s kid, it did not matter, my mother was babysitting children to make ends meet. She gave up her job as an operator at the nationalized telephone company in Honduras to reunite with her husband and for me to reunite with my father. I felt guilty and jealous as I watched her pick up the kids, love them like she did me when I was younger. I missed my sister, who had stayed in Honduras. She was my second mother, and I was learning to build a relationship with my father. Although I had visited him various times before moving in, the relationship was different than the one I had with my mother. All I knew at that moment is

that I wanted to go back to Honduras. I wanted to be back home with my sister. I wanted to watch my mom take care of herself again.

The Sons and Masculinity

I was diagnosed with a rare kidney disorder when I was four years old. It caused me to get high fevers almost every thirty days and put me at risk of going into seizures. Doctors in Honduras were not able to fully cure it and they gave my mom two options: undergo complicated surgeries either in the Cuba or the United States. My father already lived in the United States, so my parents saw it as a perfect opportunity for our family to reunite while also treating my disorder. Unfortunately, the U.S. Embassy in Tegucigalpa had denied any humanitarian visa we petitioned for, so we made the decision to use our tourist visa and overstay it.¹⁴ This would deem us as undocumented immigrants six months after we entered into the United States. My sister was denied her renewal of her tourist visa, thus she stayed behind in Honduras.

Reunion was one of my mother's goals when we made the journey to the United States. Recently, my mom opened up about how difficult her first few years here had been. She gave up her profession, her career, and part of her autonomy to become a full-time caretaker. My mom never officially entered the U.S. workforce because my father feared that if the opportunity to become documented presented itself to us, working illegally would ruin it.¹⁵

¹⁴ Officially known as the B-2 Visa (United States Department of State 2019).

¹⁵ At that time, E-Verify was not the norm for various employers in Eastern North Carolina. E-Verify is a government tool that 1) verifies that a new hire has employment authorization in the United States and 2) verifies whether someone's identification and social security documents actually belong to them (E-Verify 2019). Many people, including my aunts and uncles, used people's identities that were sold on the black market in order to gain access to better paying jobs at local factories. Working with someone else's identity was very common in Duplin County at that time (E-Verify 2019).

My mother's decision to move to the United States to reunite with my father was an act of restructuring our family. My mother's decision-making was heavily influenced by her desire to raise me in proximity to my father, something that both my parents deemed as important for my development as a successful son. My mother could have chosen for us to temporarily move to Cuba, where I would have received treatment and be cured of my disorder. We would have then returned to our usual lives in Honduras.

Her decision to treat my disorder in the United States rather than Cuba carried the weight of losing her job, losing the autonomy she had found by working that job, and leaving what was her home. By deciding to move to the trailer in Mount Olive – our new home and a space of precarity for the both of us – my mother relinquished some of her autonomy, a seemingly middle-class life, and remunerated labor. The value of raising me in proximity to my father outweighed the benefits of my mother's opportunity to maintain her job and prior way of life. My mother, as well as the mothers that I met through my research, believed that the son would only become successful by living in closeness with their father. Masculinity and success are equated, reflecting the idea that sons learn masculinity only through fathers in proximity. This contradicts Schmalzbauer (2015) and her findings stating that fatherhood can be performed transnationally. It seems that although fatherhood was once upheld from a distance, migrant parents from Central America are finding it vital to raise their sons in proximity to their fathers. This will be further analyzed and explained in the next sections through the conversations and interactions I had with Anna and Lidia.

Anna and Lidia are both mothers from Honduras. They moved to the United States to live alongside their male partners and most importantly to reunite their sons with their father. Both of these mothers live as undocumented women in Eastern North Carolina. Mothers make this

exchange based on the idea that to raise “good men,” as Anna told me, they must rear their sons near their fathers so they can learn what it means to be a good worker within the productive sphere. Since most undocumented people are rarely given the opportunity to achieve any form of legal status in the United States (Menjívar 2006), sons later become part of the undocumented labor pool. Thus, the mothers and fathers of transnational families become agents that assist in the social reproduction of this class of workers.

In the Western hemisphere, men and women have different rates of migration due to remunerated jobs being less accessible to women because of the gendered expectations of labor (Lawson 1998). My interactions and conversations with Juan produced a similar understanding. From Juan and his colleagues, I learned that mainly men journey to the United States to become precarious migrant workers in comparison to women. Although the importation of laborers has been historically catered to and been readily more accessible to men, there is an increasing rate of women that are taking the journey to become migrants, documented and undocumented (39-41). My mother became one of these women that decided to become an undocumented migrant in the United States. Her journey was largely prompted by her desire to raise me in nearness to my father. My mother thought it vital to my success that I cultivated a relationship with my father, instead of growing up in a single-mother household.

Abandoning the Intergenerational Family Model

For the first seven years of my life, I was raised in an intergenerational family. My sister, Icela, is sixteen years older than me, and would often look over me. When my mom left for work in the morning, it was my sister who slept with me and helped me get ready for school. When my mother was struck in traffic after work, it was my sister who would be at the corner of our block,

waiting for me to arrive on the school bus. This intergenerational family model allowed my mother to join the productive labor force since my sister would undertake a significant portion of the reproductive labor expected from my mother. My mother decided to undo this intergenerational model in order to reconstitute our family into a nuclear family, at least initially.¹⁶ This decision to abandon the intergenerational model might be understood as a product of the idealization of the nuclear family. I argue against that claim. I argue that the split between paid (productive) and unpaid (reproductive) labor across the globalized markets further solidifies for migrant parents' the belief fathers are the only ones that can teach masculinity. Aforementioned, the migrant mothers and fathers I had the opportunity to meet view productive labor as equivalent to masculinity. Thus, according to my mother, my father was the only person that was able to train to become a successful laborer and therefore man.

As the following sections further explain, Anna and Lidia also choose to undo their intergenerational families to move to the United States. The act of abandoning the intergenerational model by Anna and Lidia was largely provoked by the lack of opportunities and rise of violence in Honduras. Breaking apart their intergenerational families in Honduras is a byproduct of an attempt to save their sons from “the streets,” as stated by Anna. The act of saving the sons is vital, as reflected by mother's and my interlocutor's decisions to abandon their intergenerational family models that allowed them to achieve autonomy in the productive labor sphere. The mothers make an exchange between two different modes of precarious living: to escape violence and possible loss of sons to drug-related crimes, mothers forgo their legal

¹⁶ The nuclear family is a model for social reproduction that is mainly observed in Western nations post-World War II, especially in the United States (Asis et al 2004). A nuclear family is organized so that there is a mother, a father, and children. The mother is responsible for maintaining the home – cleaning, cooking, etc. – and rearing the children. The father is tasked with being the wage earner. Within capitalism, this family structure allows for the maximization of profits through the wage theft of nonremunerated reproductive labor.

personhood and certain forms of autonomy by becoming undocumented people in rural North Carolina.

PART TWO: THE REPRODUCTIVE MOTHER

DECEMBER 2018 – EASTERN NORTH CAROLINA

Photographs in frames the color of violins hung neatly and equally spaced from one another. My first quick glance at them makes me involuntarily smile, as I see joy shooting from two young boys' smiles in the photos. The bright coral paint on the trailer walls bled within the space between the picture frames. The sunset rays rushed through the windows and warmed my back as I sat in front at the small kitchen table in front of Anna. The air felt stuffy through the December evening. Anna had just finished cooking some food for her husband and two kids. Anna's husband, Pablo, would be home in an hour. He made a one-hour commute both ways to work at a local farm. Pablo assisted the farmer not only with the harvesting of the vegetables but also with preparing the soil with a tractor for the new season. Anna's kids played on the ground behind us. Both were boys: one was nine while the other was six years of age. Anna offered me *horchata*¹⁷ to drink. I accepted. A week before, Juan was able to get in contact with a family he knew and who was willing to hear me explain my project over the phone. After telling Anna through the phone that I was Honduran, she quickly warmed up to me and within three minutes of the phone call, I was welcomed to visit her home.

“I'm glad you were able to come today [Thursday]. I will be busy tomorrow going to buy groceries since it's pay day.”

Anna continues to tell me about how busy she is with her kids. The six-year-old boy began kindergarten that year, which alleviated the amount of time she was busy with the kids. I tell her about how my mother used to babysit different people's kids from our trailer park when I was younger. She responds:

¹⁷ A common Latin American drink made from rice.

“My husband and I decided that it would be best if I stayed at home to take care of the kids. I came here a year ago, and the first few months were very difficult. I felt so alone in the house. I was just running around taking care of the youngest. I feel like I had a bit more flexibility in Honduras.”

Anna mentions that she considered going to work in the fields alongside some of her neighbors. She tells me that the money she would earn from that could go to remittances. She has one more child, Natalia, that had just turned seventeen back in Honduras.

“My mother and Natalia take good care of each other. Pablo and I decided that it was better that she stay back home to take care of my parents, since they’re getting to an old age. It was not easy to leave her behind, but it was better for the family. Pablo was working here with TPS, and I was able to fly often to visit him [with my tourist visa].”

She decided to bring her two boys to the United States with a tourist visa and then overstayed it. She wanted her family to finally be reunited once again. One of the main reasons that her new life in North Carolina was so difficult for her was because she was no longer working a formal job. In Honduras, she did marketing work at a local water company. From work, she had her work friends, and although a small salary, she earned enough for her to feel as a “contributor.”

“Above anything. Family is what matters. That’s why I sacrificed so much and came here. That’s why I made the decisions that I made... For my boys, having their father at home has been very beneficial.”

Saving the Sons from the Streets

Similar to the way that Juan accepted his status as an H2A worker in order to perform transnational fatherhood and thus protect the structure of his family, Anna and other migrant mothers sacrifice their autonomy in order to migrate and reunite with partners working in the United States. As Anna mentioned, raising their sons alongside their father was vital to this migrant family. For Anna and other migrant parents raising the son in proximity to the father increased the son's likelihood of becoming "successful," as she mentioned:

"Being in a [united] family provides kids with structure and allows them to feel normal around other people. I know many kids back home who have gone into gangs, selling drugs, and other violence because they felt like their fathers abandoned them in Honduras."

Anna stated that if her sons had remained separated from their father, then their proximity to drug and gang-related violence would have led the sons to join such violence, or "the streets." Anna further explained that the proximity to the father increased structure for the sons. This structure is based around productive labor, since masculinity and labor had been equated by Anna. It is within this structured environment that the sons become successful because labor disciplines, according to Anna. Anna also commented that the lack of opportunity back in Honduras creates an environment where young men are enticed to join gangs and its drug-related violence.¹⁸

Productive labor being a tool for discipline is further delineated as being an important foundation for the process of building a family. Anna explained that success would be any form

¹⁸ Interestingly, political scientist Dennis Rodgers (2006) performed an ethnographic study amongst young men who were part of gangs in Managua, Nicaragua. His findings attributed the main motivator for joining gangs as the undoing of a structured democracy. With increasing corruption in Nicaragua between 1996 to 2002, the local structures of these youth fell apart, leading them to look for structure in these gangs. This could be a future avenue of research for my project.

of employment that allowed each son to start their own family and “provide for them.” Thus, masculinity for migrant families is additionally equated to the ability to furnish wages that maintain and feed a family. Furthermore, the labor would also allow them to provide for family back in Honduras in the form of remittances. Anna commented:

“I want [my sons] to be hard workers like their father. That way, they would be able to provide for their families... I want them to be able to do more work than in the fields, but if they are good men, the fields pay well enough.”

As Anna had reiterated, a good laborer is a good son and man. Masculinity teaches how to be a good productive laborer. That masculinity, as mentioned by Anna, can only be taught by the father in proximity. The fatherless son is left to the street, unable to find labor that makes him a good man, and therefore unable to provide for his family and future family. This illuminates the idea that becoming part of the productive labor sphere is part of a ritual in which boys in the family become men. To become part of the productive labor sphere for these precarious, migrant populations, they have to journey north, where jobs are available.

Anna chose to move to North Carolina to improve the condition in which her sons are raised. This decision is one that stripped her of the autonomy and fulfillment that she found within the productive labor sphere in Honduras:

“I miss being able to see friends at work and know that I was providing for my family in some way, but this is a sacrifice that is worth it... being at home with their father serves them with a good example to follow.”

The Dutiful Daughter

What is left unsaid throughout these conversations is the life of the daughter. Natalia, Anna's daughter, was not given the opportunity to move with them because she had to become a caretaker for Anna's mother and father. It seems that the daughters never need saving, according to these migrant families. The boys of transnational families can only learn to be "good men" from their fathers, while the migrant parents believe that daughters naturally know their way around the home. This coincides with the concept of "dutiful daughters," a categorization studied frequently with transnational families in the Philippines (Asis et al 2004, 200).

Filipino mothers are often the transnational parent since nearby job markets in Singapore and Hong Kong frequently request caretakers, maids, and other forms of household workers that employers import from the Philippines (200-1). According to Anna, as a dutiful daughter, Natalia understood her mother's decision to migrate and saw the benefit that this move would give to her brothers. Serving her duties as a daughter, Natalia's responsibility within the family is to stay back and assist in any child rearing or home labor that is left undone in the absence of the mother. I continued asking Anna about why Natalie stayed, or was left behind, in Honduras.

"She was older than the two boys. We also wanted her to stay home and watch over my parents. They are older now and I wanted to make sure that they had someone that could tend to them. She knows what to do. She is fine back home."

Caretaking as a Form of Social Reproduction

The conversations above demonstrate some of the gendered aspects to the social reproduction of precarious migrant workers that I focus on. With the male-dominated field of agricultural labor, women are generally excluded from being a precarious migrant (productive)

laborer. Aside from not being in danger of falling into the violence of the streets, the daughters of transnational families are expected to continue the reproductive labor in their homes. Whether that means raising younger siblings or cleaning the home that was left behind by the parents. The reproductive mothers, like Anna, become part of a reproductive labor force in the United States, which serves to raise the new class of workers.

Anna adds to this reproductive cycle by becoming the caretaker of many of the farmworker's children. Although she accepted the role to gain money and a sense of autonomy in her new living situation, Anna further provides and maintains reproductive labor that forms new precarious workers. The same children that Anna babysat alongside her children can become migrant workers in the future. Precarious laborers are not only reproduced by the structures of transnational policies between the United States, Mexico, and Honduras, but also by the women and families in these communities.

With limited employment options as undocumented migrants, the sons know that the fields can be part of a sustainable life. A route to citizenship or other forms of legal status within the United States is generally out of reach for children like that of Anna's (Marquez 1997). Similar to how Juan accepted the H2A Visa to maintain and upkeep his family, sons of agricultural, migrant workers choose precarious employment to have a source of income to form and maintain their families. These children then fall into the cycle of becoming precarious laborers because of the obstacles created by the United States government that stemmed from migration induced by transnational actions and policies. The mother plays the significant role of becoming the caretaker, or the individual that feeds, cares, rears, and raises the child who will become an agricultural worker.

The expectations of who provides for the rearing of a successful child is one largely based on gender. Successful sons can only be raised by successful fathers. Dutiful daughters, conversely, are innately successful in the home. The intergenerational family structures are abandoned back in Honduras to get the sons to their fathers. The daughters of the migrant families are thus tasked with the role accomplishing the remaining reproductive labor needs back home.

PART THREE: THE PRODUCTIVE MOTHER

JANUARY 2019 – EASTERN NORTH CAROLINA

The wooden stairs that led to the entrance of the trailer were lopsided, sliding to the left and throwing you off balance if you let it. Two pairs of work boots were set on the staircase. They were both covered in dirt and mud. Some of the mud had yet to dry. Both pairs were brown boots, one significantly bigger than the other. The air was crisp, the sun setting earlier around that time of the year. The trees that surrounded the trailer park were brooding more and more as the sun went down. I knocked.

A woman came to the screen door, her hair was tied back in a pony tail. Her hair was still dripping wet, I assumed from a shower. She wore sweat pants and a sweater. She smiled at me and opened the screen door, while in the back of the living room I heard a young boy's voice say:

“Quien es mami? [Who is it mom?]”

She greeted me inside and hugged me as I entered. We had spoken over the phone a week prior when Juan had connected us. I introduced myself and we spoke about how she was also Honduran. A little boy was on the floor playing with cars. I could tell that he had his mother's eyes when he glanced up at me. I waved at him and smiled, he waved back and ran out of the living room into a bedroom.

“He's just a little shy, don't mind him.”

I take a seat at the kitchen table and notice the photos on the wall. One of them was a family portrait: Lidia's husband behind her, his hands wrapped around her waist, and the young boy I just saw run away sitting to her left. In the photo, Lidia was also carrying a baby, draped in a pastel pink dress, eyes closed and peacefully asleep. This photo reminded me of a similar one

that my family and I took at a Sears the day I was diagnosed with my kidney disorder. My mom revealed few months ago that even though I had a fever that day, my father insisted that we all take photo together, just in case “something happened” to me. It was important to keep a memento. My mind snapped back into the room with Lidia and I told her:

“You have a beautiful family,” to which she replied with a soft giggle and followed:

“Thank you. We took this one just two months ago and sent it to my family back in Honduras. They were excited to see the baby girl. She was born here so they didn’t get to see her in person. Photos will do.”

As she mentioned those last words, her eyes clouded over as she looked behind me. She turned her attention back to me after a few seconds of silence. I asked her how the *pepinera*¹⁹ was that past summer, to which she replied:

“It’s the *pepinera*!” she laughed and shrugged her shoulders, “It was really tough, but you know I had to go and work and make some money. It feels good to make money for the house. I can buy the kids some extra toys or food. I met a few other women working with me, so we all talked a lot while [we sorted cucumbers].”

I had a few friends that had worked at the *pepinera* back home in Mount Olive.²⁰ I visited it one summer to take photos for the local newspaper. In the middle of July, the shaded open-air building still sulked in moist air. I started sweating through my shirt after five minutes of standing under the fans of the building. She continued:

“You work nine to ten-hour days there, but it is only a summer job anyways.”

¹⁹ Coming from the Spanish word for cucumber, “pepino,” the *pepinera* is an open-air building where many undocumented migrants work during the hot summers. They sort and package cucumbers that will then be sold to corporate stores or pickle companies.

²⁰ Mount Olive is the headquarters for Mount Olive Pickles, a large buyer of cucumbers.

Intergenerational Families and New Communities

Lidia's descriptions of the work she did at the *pepinera* pointed to the harsh and abrasive nature of the agricultural labor in which she participated. She told me:

“You have to look at the cucumbers so fast while they're rolling on the quality line in front of you. You have to find the defective ones and if the boss figures out that you missed one, you can get fired. The heat is what makes it the worst. I wear two shirts, one long sleeve, and a short sleeve over it so I don't drip sweat on the cucumbers.”

The line that Lidia mentioned is a conveyor belt on which the cucumbers are rolled on for inspection before being packaged for delivery. The station where Lidia stood for eight to ten hours a day had fans above, but they barely pushed the humid air away, leaving suffocating heat. She sweated so much that she has to wear two shirts. Instead of finding a way to cool the open-aired structure so the workers would not sweat on the cucumbers, the owners found it easier (and more profitable) for the workers to dress in layers. The constant feeling of underperforming in conjunction with these physical conditions describe the precarious nature of the job. Although working at the *pepinera* is both difficult and low-paying, Lidia found a form of autonomy within the space.

“I get to make friends at work. There are a lot of other women who work with me, and many of them are from Honduras. We all get to discuss how our kids are doing, how are families back home are doing, and what are plans are for the future. Besides that, I get to make a little money that I can send back home... I get to have some of my own money rather than just waiting for my husband to pay for things.”

Lidia, similar to Anna, worked an office job as a receptionist in Honduras. She told me that it did not pay well, but that she got to wear “nicer clothes to work.” That status of higher-

class was stripped away when she moved to Eastern North Carolina. Furthermore, the autonomy of working for herself and as a main provider for her boy was also taken away. Working at the *pepinera* allowed Lidia to regain some form of autonomy. She chose to be part of this precarious job so that she could regain this autonomy. Additionally, and more importantly, Lidia exchanged her time at home for the friendships and connections she found at the *pepinera*.

“I did not want to be away from my kids for so long. Working for three months of the year gives me enough experience and money to feel better. It also gave me friends, which I think is more important. It allowed me to meet other women in the same situation that I’m in.”

The same situation that her coworkers shared with Lidia includes their undocumented status. Most of them are mothers, Lidia commented, and they all worked to feel like they were contributors in their homes. As a member of the productive labor sphere for a quarter of the year, Lidia and her coworkers formed new social connections that give them the ability to restructure communities after moving to North Carolina as recent migrants. Although she found the wages earned from the work at the *pepinera* beneficial, Lidia still wanted to participate in the reproductive sphere for the remaining nine months of the year. She told me that she wanted to be part of her kids’ lives.

“My [coworkers] and I recommend other women in our trailer parks that can babysit our kids. The only reason I was able to come work at the *pepinera* was because I have an aunt that lives a few miles away from us. She agreed to take care of my boy and girl when I went to work.”

It is through this community building that Lidia was able to work at the *pepinera* during the summer. In lieu of the intergenerational family structure that migrants had back home in Honduras, the women at the *pepinera* employed other migrant women in their own community.

Lidia's comments revealed that a new family structure was formed with her aunt. Her aunt assisted by caring for the kids while she worked, something that was absent for Anna.

Furthermore, Lidia's comments showed how her coworkers worked to find ways to continue their labor at the *pepinera*. They recommended babysitters for each other, giving each other phone numbers and addresses of women that lived near each person. The informal economy of babysitting amongst these undocumented women was fueled and facilitated by these social connections. Anna was a babysitter for the kids of migrant workers in her trailer park, and Lidia's coworkers are the women that solicited her labor.

New migrant farmworker communities were built this way. Intergenerational family models are not as common in these migrant communities due to the separation between extended family members. Lidia lived with her mom in Honduras and her mother helped care for Lidia's son. Her aunt then replaced Lidia's mother in North Carolina. In absence of the intergenerational family models, migrant women utilized and collaborated to create a network of care within their community

A New Hope

Lidia's motivation to migrate to North Carolina was similar to the one given to me by Anna: she wanted her boy to grow in proximity to his father. Different from Anna though, Lidia wanted to have another child:

“It had been more than a year since my husband moved here. I wanted to have another kid, and I knew that it was the right time to have one. I wanted my kids to be similar in age. I also wanted my kid, now my daughter, to be born in the United States.”

A child born in the United States, regardless of gender, is a child of opportunity.²¹ Lidia is relieved that her daughter is a U.S. Citizen. Lidia's daughter has a stable legal status, in contrast with her brother, and in the future will be able to petition for legal status change for Lidia, her father, and brother. For Lidia, her daughter living as a U.S. Citizen represents an escape out of illegality for her family. The future possibility of becoming Permanent Residents and later on U.S. Citizens has created hope within the family that allows them to continue their day by day routine. Lidia made the sacrifice of moving to the United States for this possibility, and to seek the opportunity for her daughter to live a life void of legal precarity.

“She’s a U.S. Citizen. No one can touch that. Not even Trump,” she tells me stoically. “I hope that one day I will be able to buy my own house here. I don’t want to live in Honduras as it is right now [with so much violence and corruption]. Maybe I can bring my mom over. We can all live together.”

A glimmer of hope is found in the depths of precarious living for this migrant family. By submerging herself into a way of life that stripped her of autonomy in order to escape a different form of precarious living in Honduras, Lidia opened a path of possibility that has reinvigorated her family with hope, albeit minimal.

²¹ Derogatorily called “anchor babies,” children of undocumented parents born in the United States are born U.S. Citizens (Elbel 2019). This gives them the opportunity, when they turn twenty-one, to petition for legal status change for their parents. For some parents, it is a pathway to U.S. Citizenship.

CHAPTER THREE: THE HOME

“Knowing that there was such a thing as outdoors bred in us a hunger for property, for ownership. The firm possession of a yard, a porch, a grape arbor. Propertied black people spent all their energies, all their love, on their nests.”

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970, 12)

SECTION ONE: A HOME OF OUR OWN

MARCH 2019 – MOUNT OLIVE, NC

As my anthropological fieldwork for this project was coming to a close, I had an epiphany of sorts as I drove from the *tortillería*²² in Mount Olive back to my house. I was visiting home while on break, and my mother had sent me to grab some tortillas for lunch that day. I noticed that the green of spring had begun its return. Spring's return reminded me of the way that migrants are displaced and leave home, just as my interlocutors did. After being displaced, these families attempt to recreate their past homes in a new location, thereby beginning a new season. The grass looked livelier, the trees started growing leaves, and its flowers began to blossom. I tried to savor the moment since I knew that the colors of spring always rush forward suddenly without warning in Eastern North Carolina. The swiftness with which the seasons changed in North Carolina is the same swiftness by which migrant families adapt and recreate home in rural communities.

Despite the burgeoning green around me, the agricultural fields were still barren. I knew that this particular field that I had passed would eventually grow tobacco during the summer months. Having lived with tobacco through my childhood, I began to think of the tobacco as a metaphor. My favorite part of the tobacco plant was the lavender-tinged flower that sprouts from the top. The concentrated mass of blooming tobacco plants created a rich lavender cloth that expands for acres across the fields. In a few months' time, agricultural workers would break the flower off the top of the plant by hand in order to stimulate the growth of tobacco leaves: the usable part of the plant that produces profits for the season. I thought, just as the lavender flower is broken and the plant suddenly bursts with new growth, the displaced people's home country is

²² Spanish word for tortilla store. Most of these stores also sell other types of Latin American products.

also purposely broken to induce growth and recreation. Home connections are “broken” through a process of destabilization stimulated by globalization. The destabilization of the home occurs through the macro-level policies and economic conditions created by transnational policies and agreements (Ferguson & McNally 2014). As Ferguson & McNally (2014) explained, the action of destabilizing markets in the Global South through policy is a deliberate action taken by nations of the Global North, including the United States and Canada.

By destabilizing markets, states and governments become further strained, and the structure of society begins to fall apart. The next best option for migrants is to enter a precarious regime of labor in rural North Carolina. This submission into a regime of labor that is deemed precarious by my interlocutors is a calculated decision that can sometimes produce a glimmer of home. This glimmer of hope is the stimulated growth that occurs as migrants attempt at recreating their past home and community in rural North Carolina. In order to create profitable conditions, the homes in Honduras and Mexico are destabilized so that new precarious workers decide to make the journey to the United States and then undertake the labor that sustains the agricultural industry. This was the same agricultural industry that produced the beautiful blanket of lavender flowers.

It took me years of living in the United States, and my separation from my community during my years at Duke, for me to begin to step back and appreciate the scenery in the community that my family and I saw expand through the years that we have lived in Mount Olive. Even though I saw my family pulled apart sixteen years ago when I moved to the United States, I have also lived to see the creation of a new form of transnational family – the new growth - that is prevalent in our community. My new family is one that consists of my mother, father, sister, my sister’s husband, and their two boys.

In 2012, my sister, her husband, and their child moved in with us after an increase in gang-related and state violence in Honduras. My sister's son, Franco, was born in the United States, which granted him U.S. Citizenship. This was a fact that my sister and her husband tried to keep private because of kidnapping threats and attempts made by gang members in Honduras. It was assumed that if your child was born in the United States, you were someone of a higher status, with access to money that *pandilleros*²³ could extort from you. The final straw that pushed my sister and her family to move was when she received a phone call from an unknown number on her work phone. The caller, with a raspy male voice, told her that they knew who she was, her son's name, and the school that he attended. They were watching her and her family. Within a few months, Icela, her husband, and Franco had moved in with us in Mount Olive, North Carolina.

Now, seven years after their move, and six years after the birth of my second nephew, Diego, we finalized our plans to have a two-family home built on the property that my father bought thirteen years ago. We are building a home where all of us can live, a home where my nephews have the opportunity to create a space of their own, and a place where my parents will be able to retire in comfort, around individuals that support them. We will finally be able to have a home of our own. I will be able to call Mount Olive home in a new way. The breaking of the flower led to growth elsewhere.

²³ Spanish for gang members. In Honduras, another common word for gang member is *marero*.

Becoming Permanent and Ending Transience

My family's yearning for the establishment of a home is not a unique goal amongst immigrant communities residing in the United States. Many immigrant families, just as non-immigrant families, consider owning a home and property as part of the American Dream (McConnel and Marcelli 2007). As real-estate lawyer Chandrasekhar (2004) has shown, homeownership provides advantages in many aspects of an immigrant's life. Besides amassing wealth through time, homes for immigrants "symbolize the achievement of prosperity, stability, and success" (170). The acquisition of homes though comes with many obstacles, especially for Latino immigrant families. Besides facing predatory lending when purchasing mortgages, undocumented immigrants are unable to legally purchase a mortgage.²⁴ According to the United States Census Bureau (2000) more than sixty-five percent of foreign-born homeowners were naturalized citizens, which was significantly greater than the 33.5 percent of noncitizen homeowners (175). Lacking a Social Security number and proof of legal residence, undocumented people have an extremely difficult time establishing credit (McConnel and Marcelli 2007). Furthermore, many undocumented migrants are unable to report their earnings in annual income taxes, furthering their inability to furnish proof of income to financial institutions.

As I have argued, the home is an important space of social reproduction for this precarious class of workers. The home is a space in which hope is reproduced and a space where members of the home can envision a better future (Allison 2013). Without an adequate home, the reproductive cycle that creates precarious workers continues. The hope that the home can garner can be one that can undo and end a precarious cycle for those families. That is why my sister and

²⁴ The subprime mortgage crisis (2008 Financial Crisis), fueled by predatory and irresponsible mortgage lending, heavily affected Black and Latino families (Rugh and Massey 2010). Many of the Latino and Black families lost their homes, but people in my community were rarely affected by the crisis, since it was rare to see an undocumented immigrant with a home mortgage.

I decided to create a home for our intergenerational family. Our parents, partly because of immigration status, were unable to purchase or build a home in the United States and thus our years living here have been marked by uncertainty. It is within this period of time that uncertainty is at its highest, and hope is at its lowest for migrant families.

My father never bought a home because he feared, before he became a Permanent Resident, he would one day be deported and would lose all the money that he invested on said home. This is why my father, and many other members of our community, purchased trailers. Trailers, specifically pre-owned trailers, can be bought at significantly lower prices than homes. Many of the families that I interviewed, including my own, purchased these mobile homes with cash. The lack of a home led my family members and me to feel further displaced. Just as the name implies, “mobile homes” are transient spaces, nonpermanent, and this solidified our transitory lives in North Carolina and the United States. Contrary to wood frame and brick homes, mobile homes depreciate in value through time, further alluding to its impermanent state (Chandrasekhar 2004).

To combat this impermanence, my sister and I finally agreed to build a home of our own. To do this though, we had to establish a different form of viewing our family. We had to reconstitute an intergenerational family with mixed status.²⁵ We are a mixed status family because my sister and her husband are still undocumented, while my nephews, parents, and I are citizens or on the path to citizenship. My father and I would financially contribute for half of the money to construct, and my sister and her husband would pay for the second half of the home in

²⁵ In terms of legality, “mixed status” is a term used to describe families composed of family members with different levels of documentation (Menjívar 2006). For example, my sister and her husband are undocumented, while everyone else in our home is documented.

form of a mortgage. Because my sister and her husband are still undocumented, my father would finance the loan under his name as a U.S. Citizen.

This intergenerational family that did not exist in Honduras suddenly sprouted to life and became permanent through these actions. We all agreed to contribute to this home and to bring it to life with our labor and love. This home would not belong to just one person in the family, it would belong to each of us. As a displaced family, we are placing our stake in the ground and becoming permanent, whether we are deemed legal or illegal by the government. Globalization forced my father to move to the United States in order to financially support us in Honduras. Globalization also enticed my mother and me to move to the United States and to pull apart the intergenerational family that existed in Honduras. My family though, just as the other families I got to know during this study, are attempting to recreate intergenerational families in Eastern North Carolina. It is the mixed status family that can overcome the many obstacles that a single undocumented family would face.

Collaboration amongst intergenerational families is necessary to overcome the social conditions that induce precarious living. These families are making a strategic decision when moving to the United States not just as an attempt to save their sons from gang and drug-related violence, but to also put an end to the social reproduction of precarious workers within their families. My sister moved to the United States to protect her son from any kidnapping or violence, but she also did it because Honduras became inhospitable for her. That displacement and the trauma that we had faced as individuals can be undone by our decision to stay as a family, to remain permanent, and to create a home of our own.

As the next section will show, the families I got know are also attempting to end the impermanence and transient-way of living that they face by creating a home in Eastern North

Carolina. Various migrant families in Eastern North Carolina are establishing homes and extending that into communities across the rural towns (Gill 2010). These communities are drastically shifting the economies and politics of rural towns (Gill 2010).

SECTION TWO: UNDOING

AUGUST 2014 – TEGUCIGALPA, HONDURAS

As I rode in the back of the taxi, I breathed a sigh of relief after receiving the news that my Permanent Residency application had been approved. I then looked up to a brightly colored billboard. With a bright blue background, a group of kids were pictured walking across the arid, desert ground. The billboard read in large, white letters “NO ARRIESGE LA VIDA DE SUS NIÑOS... NO DEJEN QUE EMIGREN DE HONDURAS.”²⁶ The billboard had the official stamp of the executive branch of the Honduran government. This was the summer when the news of unaccompanied children making the journey to the United States/Mexican Border had reached its peak (Meyer et al 2016). The spring of that same year U.S. Border Patrol had seen a 1,200% increase in unaccompanied minors from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala apprehended at the border (8). This news of this caused high alarm in the Obama Administration, prompting an increase in funding for border security and propaganda to be disseminated in the three countries with emigrating children (8).

It was assumed by U.S. Border Control officials that most of these children were attempting to reunite with parents who had emigrated to the United States years prior. Most of these children were running away from the homes that had fallen apart. Displaced by the increasing violence and poverty that affected many of the city youth, these unaccompanied minors saw their survival in journeying north to the United States. Honduras was uninhabitable to these children. Their best solution was an attempt at reuniting with their mothers, fathers, or other family members in an attempt at finding the home that was lost. Family reunification had been deemed as a solution not only by parents but also by the children.

²⁶ Spanish for “Don’t risk the life of your children. Don’t let them emigrate from Honduras.”

Recreating Home

The billboard and its message were juxtaposed in my mind with what had just happened to me on that day in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. After years of paying attorney fees, filing fees, and searching for a variety of legal counsel, my Permanent Residency had been awarded to me at the U.S. Embassy in Tegucigalpa. Almost eleven years after leaving Honduras, I had finally returned to be interviewed by an Embassy official. My parents and I had taken a huge risk: I would make the trip to Honduras in order to interview with the U.S. Embassy and seek pardon for my undocumented stay in the United States for the last eleven years. Because I was underage, a child in the government's eyes, I could be pardoned but only in person at the U.S. Embassy located in the country whose citizenship I held. If the Embassy officer found any discrepancy or sign of lie within my interview and application packet, my petition would have been denied, and I would have had to remain in Honduras indefinitely.

My petition was swiftly approved, though, and in a few days, I flew back to the United States, to be reunited with my family once again. At the same time, thousands of children were attempting to cross the border and attempting to find the permanence they once had in Honduras. I was finally given a state of permanence with the granting of my Permanent Residency. I was finally legitimized in the eyes of the U.S government.

Each of my interlocutors asked me how I had acquired my "green card" after I told them that I was born in Honduras and moved to Mount Olive at the age of seven. They wanted to know if that could be one of their sons. Maybe, they hoped, there was a way to get their children on the track to citizenship just as I had. The hope of getting on track to citizenship was preceded by the need to establish a home in Eastern North Carolina. The home is the first marker, to these

families, of belonging to the communities they live in, and to create permanence in their lives.

As Anna told me:

“Where would we go if we went back to Honduras? We have family back home, but it is hard to find a job and establish yourself again... [My husband] and I are thinking of buying a piece of land around these parts so that maybe later we can buy a bigger trailer that looks more like a house... Things are really difficult in Honduras.”

The establishment of the home represented by the purchasing of property by Anna and her husband is an important step in the lives of the migrant families met. For them, this act is of survival and hope. The home in Eastern North Carolina represented survival because Anna and her family cannot return to Honduras. The lack of opportunity and increasing violence makes them displaced peoples, homeless if returning to Honduras. The home they cultivated in Eastern North Carolina allows them to garner hope and envision a better future for the sons.

Furthermore, the establishment of the home represented a form a permanence for this family in times when government-sanctioned deportations and jailing of undocumented people were at an all-time high. As everything around Anna and her family represented uncertainty, the goal of the home and its creation grounded Anna and her family. Lidia spoke of a similar sentiment:

“If you have [a house or property] here, it makes you feel as if they can’t take you away as easily, you know? After a hard day at the *pepinera*, it is nice to come to a place that is yours. A place where you kids can run around and decorate their own rooms... Later on, I could help bring family members to work and move in with us. They would be coming to our house.”

The anchor in the sea of uncertainty, the home is a place where Lidia believed her family could heal. She had envisioned that she would bring different family members from Honduras into her home, welcoming that family member to a place that her and her family created. Most

importantly, Lidia envisioned her children creating their own space in the home. Having a home, to Lidia and Anna, represented the ability to procure stability to their children. That stability is priceless, as they see it as the end of the cycle, the end of the reproductive mechanism that made them move to the United States in the first place. Anna stated:

“To have a place that you work for and that you work to improve is important for [my husband] and I. I know that my son will be able to feel comfortable in a place that we call ours, then continue to go to school, graduate, get a job, and then get a family of his own... The home is the work of love.”

The goal of establishing a home has two sides: 1) to recreate an intergenerational model of the family and 2) to create a collaborative environment in which all family members focus on the making of a house into a home. Lidia wanted to bring more family members to the United States to live with her, including her mother. As previously stated, her mother helped take care of her while she was working in Honduras. “The home is the work of love,” is a powerful sentiment that represents not only the significance and power of the home for Lidia, but also the way in which labor is part of creating the home. To create a home that they are all happy in, Anna and Lidia’s family members will decorate, create, and make their spaces their own. The spaces are labored by each family member, birthing a collaborative network amongst each other.

AFTERWORD

When I began this research almost a year ago, I realized that the literature on social reproduction of migrant workers in the Western Hemisphere was missing insight into the role of the home. I wanted to know what happened after the workers got off their shift. I wanted to know what happened behind closed doors, and how all of that affects the cycle of reproduction. My research led me to conclude that the home is not only a space of reproduction of migrant workers, but also a possible space where this reproductive cycle can end. The mothers in the home attempt to save sons by bringing them in proximity with fathers. By exchanging the autonomy, freedom, and wages they once earned to move to rural North Carolina, the mothers hope to save their sons from street and gang-related violence in Honduras, and they hope to recreate the homes that were pulled apart in Honduras and Mexico. They believe that the home can be a space of ending the cycle of being part of a precarious, migrant class.

“How” the home can be a space of undoing, or what mechanisms are in place that lead to undoing, is still unclear. My interlocutors led me to believe that the mixed-status of the families they have formed and continue to expand is one of the mechanisms through which they will overcome the obstacles of anti-immigration policy. Through that, the establishment of the home can occur, although how that ends the precarious cycle is still unidentified. This is one of the aspects of research that I would like to continue. Studying these families and their development through time would increase my understanding of the mechanisms that they develop and utilize to overcome barriers of access to establish homes in rural North Carolina. Furthermore, the question of what happens to the “dutiful daughters” back in Honduras and Mexico is still lacking depth in academia. Performing an ethnographic study on what happens to them after they are left behind by their mothers and fathers can present a different aspect of the reproductive cycle that is

still underexplored. I also want to make the note of the heteronormative and patriarchal form of these families. I want to understand, in future studies, how Queerness exists within this framework of living. Do families of Queer migrants look different? Are their families chosen rather than families recreated through hierarchal and patriarchal beliefs? None of my interlocutors brought up any notion of Queerness within our interactions. In their eyes, their sons would marry women, their daughters would marry men, and their children's future lives would resemble theirs in terms of structure.

If the strategy presented by my interlocutors proves true – that the cycles of reproduction for precarious laborers can end through the home - I want to study what demographic will continue to undertake this labor in the U.S. agricultural industry. I want to continue studying what U.S. foreign policy and other transnational agreements will be borne out of future administrations, and how these policies and agreements will continue to create new precarious, migrant workers that become the workers that feed us and create profits for large agricultural corporations. A careful look at the history of the agricultural industry in North Carolina shows that the labor performed in the fields has shifted from and to different demographics. If precarious workers from Central America finds a way to escape the fields, and they relieve their children from agricultural labor, someone else will be burdened with the labor. Social reproduction is a cycle and it renews every spring. If the current global economic system is not changed or undone, U.S. Empire will find another field from which lavender flowers can be broken off the tobacco plant.

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