



**CULTIVATING COMIDA:
 PUSHING THE BORDERS OF FOOD, CULTURE, AND POLITICS**
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**Farmworker gardens and food sovereignty
 in the northern borderlands**

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For Maria, the small kitchen garden that she tends behind her house brings a sense of balance to her family and a sense of agency over the food that sustains them. As she explained to me, “The garden balances us. What we harvest from the garden is healthier for me and my kids and my family because it is fresher. My kids also help in the garden with preparing the soil, learning

how to plant. And maybe in the future, they will continue doing it.” A mother of five from the southern Mexican state of Guerrero, Maria has lived in the United States for the past 13 years, supporting her husband who has worked on industrial dairy farms, first in New York and now in Vermont. While she raises her children and tends to her garden and free-range chickens, she acts as the primary caretaker and cook for their

Dr. Teresa Mares is associate professor of anthropology at the University of Vermont. Her research focuses on the intersection of food and migration studies, and particularly how diets and foodways of Latino/a immigrants change as a result of migration. She is currently examining border politics and food access issues among Latino/a dairy workers in Vermont and is writing a book on this topic, entitled *The Other Border: Sustaining Farmworkers in the Dairy Industry*, under contract with University of California Press. Recent publications include “Navigating Gendered Labor and Local Food: A Tale of Working Mothers in Vermont,” in *Food and Foodways*, and a co-authored chapter, “Eating Far from Home: Latino/a Workers and Food Sovereignty in Rural

Vermont,” in *Food Across Borders: Production, Consumption, and Boundary Crossing in North America*.

Outside the classroom, Dr. Mares has led a number of community food projects. She is co-director of *Huertas*, a food security project for Latino/a dairy farmworkers connected to UVM Extension’s *Bridges to Health Program*, and was previously co-director of the *Food Justice Project for the Community Alliance for Global Justice in Seattle*. She is devoted to experiential, transformative modes of teaching and has advised dozens of students who seek to make a difference in the contemporary food system. She can be reached at Teresa.Mares@uvm.edu.

household during the long hours that her husband spends in the milking barn. Maria has some serious skills in the kitchen, and she loves to share dishes that remind her of Mexico with her children, whose only memories are of rural Vermont. And yet, despite having a relatively stable household income, Maria's family still struggles with severe food insecurity. The vegetables and eggs that Maria harvests from her garden and chicken coop, along with support in the form of WIC benefits and free school meals, have been essential in keeping her children fed.

Maria's husband is one of the estimated 1,000 to 1,200 farmworkers from Latin America who help to sustain Vermont's dairy economy. Over the past six years, I have studied issues of food insecurity within the state's farmworker community and the strategies they engage to access food for their households. As I described in my previous *Cultivating Comida* column (Mares, 2017), farmworkers' access to food and other basic needs is compromised by border proximity and the fears that many farmworkers experience because of regular surveillance from Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) personnel. However, despite some of the particularities of the Vermont context, food insecurity is not unique to farmworkers in the state. Researchers before me have documented the severity of food insecurity and other inequalities in food access among farmworkers across the country (Borre, Ertle, & Graff, 2010; Brown & Getz, 2011; Cason, Nieto-Montenegro, & Chavez-Martinez, 2006; Essa, 2001; Harrison, Stormer, Herman, & Winham, 2003; Kilanowski & Moore, 2010; Kresge & Eastman, 2010; Minkoff-Zern, 2014; Moos, 2008; Quandt, Arcury, Early, Tapia, & Davis, 2004; Sano, Garasky, Greder, Cook, & Browder, 2011; Villarejo et al., 2000; Weigel, Armijos, Hall, Ramirez, & Orozco, 2007; Wirth, Strohlic, & Getz, 2007). Collectively, these studies reveal that the incidence of food insecurity among farmworkers is as high as 3 to 4 times the national

average, with a disproportionate number of households experiencing what the USDA terms "very low food security with hunger." Based on the food security survey I conducted with Maria, I know that her family is grappling with this most severe form of food insecurity. This food injustice represents a glaring contradiction of our food system: those who put food on our tables are disproportionately experiencing food insecurity in their own homes.

In my previous writing, I have examined how gardens serve as a significant source of sustenance and the maintenance of cultural identities, especially in the midst of migration and settlement

(Mares & Peña, 2011; Mares, Wolcott-MacCausland, & Mazar, 2017). It is also the case that immigrant gardens are an important site to cultivate food sovereignty, particularly in the face of assimilatory forces and xenophobia. In her book *The Earth Knows My Name*, Patricia Klindienst (2006) observes that garden metaphors have long been used to describe the migration experience, particularly in metaphors of

being uprooted or transplanted. She proposes to reverse the metaphor, to focus on the immigrant as a gardener rather than an uprooted plant: "a person who shapes the world rather than simply being shaped by it" (Klindienst, 2006, p. xxi). Through presenting beautifully descriptive case studies of U.S. ethnic and immigrant gardeners, Klindienst argues that "to garden is to claim a portion of American soil as their symbolic home, even when they can never hope to own any land" (Klindienst, 2006, pp. xxii–xxiii). For Maria's family, the connection they have with the land they cultivate is indeed tenuous, yet it still fosters a sense of food sovereignty and belonging.

While food sovereignty is at the heart of large-scale social movements, it is also crucial to recognize the smaller, more immediate instances of food sovereignty that marginalized communities practice on a daily basis. In her 2017 book *We Want Land To Live*, Amy Trauger connects the larger vision of

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food sovereignty to this more intimate scale, arguing that,

“the material struggle for land, food, and seed advances on multiple fronts, mostly on small farms and in local communities, and through small, but significant acts of defiance, as well as through acts of kindness and love—the “practice of freedom” (hooks, 2006), made in everyday ways by ordinary people.” (Trauger, 2017, p. 2)

Through her garden, Maria practices acts of defiance and of love as she fosters a deeper connection between her family and their food, even amidst the serious food insecurities they encounter. And yet the freedom and agency that she cultivates are perhaps even more important than the food she grows, and she hopes that this agency is passed down to her children as they develop their own relationships to food.

As the Huertas project (see sidebar) works to enhance the sovereignty that farmworker families like Maria’s have over the food that sustains them, we are well aware that our efforts represent just one small, and seasonally dependent, dimension of household food access. For many families like Maria’s, government support in the form of WIC and free lunch programs supplement the wages earned from the dairy industry and are essential in maintaining even the precarious household food security they experience. Seen another way, this reliance on governmental support represents another hidden cost of industrial food production

Since 2011, as I have studied these food security issues, I have served as the co-director of the Huertas Project (<https://huertas.w3.uvm.edu/>), part of University of Vermont Extension’s Bridges to Health (BTH) program. Huertas began as an informal project in 2010 when my colleague, Naomi Wolcott-MacCausland, started to distribute extra seeds and plant starts to farmworkers during routine health outreach visits with the hope that these plants would help to improve access to more localized and culturally appropriate sources of food. Over the years, Huertas has worked on approximately 50 of Vermont’s dairy farms with families and individuals from both rural and urban regions of Mexico and Guatemala, prioritizing the cultivation of culturally familiar varieties of herbs, vegetables, and fruits. I initially became involved with Huertas as a way to become more familiar with the issues with food access that Vermont’s farmworkers encounter, so that I could guide my research in an applied and community-based manner. Since then, my faculty position at a land-grant institution has also allowed me to leverage university resources to strengthen our work and create opportunities for student volunteers and interns to become involved. One of the most significant changes to our project is that we now conduct early-season surveys with all participating households to develop an inventory of requested seeds and starts that we use to solicit donations from local growers and seed suppliers, rather than distributing extra plants that may or may not address farmworkers’ needs or priorities. We have done so with the goal of increasing the choice and agency that growers have over the gardens they cultivate, transforming the guiding principles underlying our work from those informed by a discourse of food security to one of food sovereignty.

that is not accounted for in the price we pay for milk. However, this contradiction is not unique to the dairy industry; across the food system, poverty-level wages keep food and farmworkers in vulnerable economic positions. National organizations like the Food Chain Workers Alliance and local organizations like Vermont-based Migrant Justice are tackling these issues head-on as they demand justice and sustainable livelihoods for the workers who bring food from farms, factories, and restaurants to our tables. In my next column, I will delve further into these worker-led efforts to transform our food system and how they bring greater dignity to families like Maria’s. 

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