Migration and Labor in the Americas: 
Praxis, Knowledge, and Nations

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We each teach, at our respective institutions (Cornell University and the University of Connecticut), a course on the lives and labors of migrants in the United States. Both courses focus on the histories and hemispheric experiences of migrant workers, within and between the United States, Latin America, and the Spanish Caribbean.¹ Both courses are interdisciplinary, drawing on cam-

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¹. Given the hemispheric approach to our work we would be remiss not to acknowledge the history of north-to-south migration from Canada to the United States. Although we do not directly treat these migrant populations, the states of New York and Connecticut have long histories of Canadian immigration, especially by francophone and First Nations Canadians. Examples of studies that treat that long history include Yves Roby, Les Franco-Américains de la Nouvelle-Angleterre, 1776–1930 (Sillery, Quebec: Septentrion, 1990); Gerard J. Brault, The French Canadian Heritage in New England (Hanover: Univ. Press of New England, 1986); Victor Konrad and Heather N. Nicol, Beyond Walls: Re-inventing
pus resources and faculty in departments such as history, literature, agriculture, applied economics, sociology, and labor relations, as well as local advocates, organizers, and practitioners. Both courses are service-learning courses that require students to commit to regular active community service directly related to the needs of migrant workers in our respective regions, in addition to attending weekly seminars with extensive reading and discussion. We consider the subject of both courses to be Latin American and Caribbean history (as well as US and Latino history) and strive to convey this to our students. At the end of our courses we hope to have left students with a distinct unease about geographically bounded units of analysis.

Given their distinct locations in upstate New York and central Connecticut, each course emphasizes different migrant populations and their unique experiences, concerns, and contexts. Students in the Cornell course study and at times work with laborers primarily from Mexico and Guatemala who are employed predominantly in seasonal agriculture and year-round dairy production. In comparison, students in the University of Connecticut course examine the lives of migrants in the urban setting of the greater Hartford region, the state’s capital and legislative center. In both locales, students have opportunities for an array of service projects such as teaching English as a second language or working with advocacy organizations, organizing events and raising local awareness through workers’ rights centers, or engaging in participatory action research.

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2. Both courses are multiply cross-listed and affiliated with interdisciplinary programs such as honors programs, Latin American and Caribbean studies, and Puerto Rican and Latino studies (at the University of Connecticut), and industrial and labor relations, city and regional planning, Latino studies, and Latin American studies (at Cornell).

3. The Campus Compact provides this definition: “The goal of service-learning is development of civically minded students who possess analytical problem solving abilities and self-identify as community change agents as a direct consequence of their community-based learning experiences. The epistemology of service-learning is a promising revolution that has sparked an instructional evolution where access and success are equated with teaching and learning practices that effectively link students with each other and with their communities as critically engaged learners.” See http://wwwcompactorg/resources/future-of-campus-engagement/defining-a-service-learning-pedagogy-of-access-and-success/4229/ (last accessed 31 Oct. 2011).

4. This refers to the concept initially developed by Kurt Lewin in his article “Action Research and Minority Problems” (Journal of Social Issues 2, no. 4 [1946]: 34–46), which
In this article we discuss the conceptualization, development, and implementation of our courses. We use our courses as a means to think more broadly about what it means to teach courses on Latin America (or, for that matter, North America or the United States of America) in the twenty-first-century context of the transnational turn in scholarship, the vociferous and all-too-often vituperative debates over immigration and its reform, concerns over the future of labor organizing, and efforts to seek social justice. We begin with an examination of the courses’ epistemological and pedagogical foundations, stressing in particular two things: first, the primary historical and epistemological goals of the course readings and discussions; and second, the manner in which we approach praxis education (or service learning). We then discuss the local geographic and social contexts and histories of each region and how each shaped the design and structure of the respective courses, and then shift to a discussion of our course assignments.

**Epistemological and Pedagogical Foundations**

Both of our seminars are interdisciplinary, team-taught courses. We coordinate weekly sessions taught by different faculty from across our respective institutions and by members of various community organizations, combining short lectures and discussions of assigned readings. Instructors encourage the students, in both their written work and in class discussions, to make the effort to speak and to be understood across disciplinary boundaries. Both seminars are introductory; we assume that most, if not all, of the students are unfamiliar with much of the basic literature pertaining to migrant life and labor. Although the courses focus on migrant labor, students discuss other aspects of migration, including refugee and asylum petitions, family and child migration, health care and education accessibility, legal status and legislation, human trafficking, religion, and activist art. In addition we spend some time each semester introducing students to basic histories of economics and economic thought. Weekly involves students in learning by doing in a collaborative, reflective process of identifying and solving problems.

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5. The Cornell course receives important support from the Cornell Public Service Center, which assists with running the service options, provides a student liaison, and helps cover the expenses incurred by students in their service, as well as from the Latino Studies Program which serves as the institutional and administrative home for the course. At the University of Connecticut, the staff of the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies and Community Outreach and an undergraduate teaching assistant help facilitate the smooth functioning of all the seminar’s constituent parts.
readings thus include works of classical political economy; histories—political, agrarian, and social—of the United States, Mexico, and the Caribbean; histories of agriculture, industry, and migration; and works on contemporary immigration practice and policy. We intend the courses to provide a very broad and eclectic perspective on the world of migrant labor and experiences, while encouraging students to think historically and critically about migration, labor, and nation in the Americas both through intensive readings and discussions and through engaging in service and learning beyond the bounds of the classroom. Following Paulo Freire, we critically examine knowledge production by emphasizing praxis—“the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it”—and link the university and the community in ways that challenge commonplace orthodoxies of teaching and learning.

Drawing on the work of Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and subsequent studies, throughout our seminars we work to deconstruct four interrelated and seemingly fixed binaries: structure and agency, theory and practice, classroom and outside world, and teacher and student. At the core of these pairings are assumptions about the production and diffusion of knowledge. As an eminently political project, Freire’s pedagogical model argues that most systems of education serve to reinforce social hierarchies of power. The first task, then, is to examine how those hierarchies are formed and maintained. By understanding the historical formation of oppressive structures such as colonialism, national-ism, racism, and sexism, students can become both politically conscious (*conscientização*) and practically empowered, and consequently enabled to take action against such structures. This process of integrating theory and practice, Freire’s “praxis,” acknowledges the interplay between history and people: history shapes people and people make conscious decisions that shape history. The contested-ness and contingency of history enables the realization of freedom, “opening up choices among various ways of being within any given situation.” Freedom is

6. Because our courses draw on faculty from around our respective campuses, course content varies substantially from year to year. Many of the texts that appear in the footnotes have, at one point or another, figured in one or both of our courses.


8. Yet, Freire points out, it is equally important to avoid assuming rigid binaries between reified oppressor and oppressed groups, as in ICE agents and undocumented migrants. Within each social and political group there exist hierarchies of power that must be understood within their larger historical and structural contexts. Why, for example, might Cuban and Mexican migrants from older generations seek reduced rights or deportation for their recently arrived counterparts?
never a given but always a fragile possibility that requires resolute commitment “to struggle for one way of life or another.”

These hierarchies are replicated in the university and classroom contexts. Through close readings of Freire, as well as more recent interlocutors such as Nicholas De Genova, we reflect with the students upon the classroom as a mirror of social processes and hierarchies outside the university. Just as larger historical structures limit the possibility of agency and power among minority groups in society, the university is privileged over the community as a site of knowledge production and the teacher over the student as an authentic knowledge producer. The service/praxis-learning orientation of our courses seeks to move beyond the “banking model” of education by practicing “co-intentional education.”

For example, both of our courses are built on and around the participation of many different community members and academic specialists who bring their own particular areas of expertise to bear on specific issues and themes. This interdisciplinary and collectivist character of our courses means we, as instructors, become co-learners alongside our students, or, in Freire’s terms, the structure of the courses attempts to “reconcil[e] the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students.” Such reconciliation constitutes a primary aim in both our courses.

The same effort at reconciliation holds for students in their work outside of the classroom. For one, they acquire their own expertise in very particular topics through their outside work, expertise they then bring to the classroom discussion as the semester progresses. To take another example, when students teach English as a second language on area farms in upstate New York or facilitate health education seminars among migrant communities in inner-city Hartford, they are teachers; yet at the same time, they become students as the people they tutor and instruct show them, for example, how to operate technically sophisticated dairy machinery, or explain the logic of planting in


10. We emphasize praxis learning as well as service in order to avoid the implications that at times bedevil the notion of “service”: i.e., service learning as a static, monologic, and imperial practice of imparting learning to and helping others. In contrast, we want to stress our understanding of service learning as a dialogic, reciprocal, and ongoing process.

11. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 72; italics in original. Granted, the structure of the university makes the eradication of such a hierarchy difficult: after all, we must assign final grades. For an attempt to deal with issues of authority and authoritarianism (and grades) in a college seminar setting, see Martin Duberman’s discussion of his efforts at Princeton in the 1960s: Duberman, *Cures: A Gay Man’s Odyssey* (New York: Dutton, 1991), 108–10. See also the discussion in Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (New York: Bantam, 1984), 167–90.
particular ways or how community-based support networks can reduce disease among young mothers and their newborns. When they visit with workers at their workplaces, they learn as much from their hosts about the contradictions of neoliberalism, the realities that shape migration, and basic labor economics as they do from the various texts they read in class. Karl Marx, Adam Smith, Peter Kropotkin, and Karl Polanyi all acquire their particular power when translated into a personal and collective vernacular.

A final point here is worth noting: praxis pedagogy holds the possibility—and we stress possibility rather than fulfillment—of engaging students, in Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s words, “both as actors and narrators.” Students are asked not only to learn of historical and contemporary realities of inequality and injustice but to engage with those realities as “witnesses, actors, and commentators.” To follow Trouillot to his conclusion, “even in relation to The Past our authenticity resides in the struggles of our present. Only in that present can we be true or false to the past we choose to acknowledge.”12 Trouillot’s comments go to the core of our course goals: to empower students as active learners and teachers and to help them bring what they learn to bear on how they understand the past and the point of history itself.

With this in mind, we turn our attention now to a second set of goals that structure our respective courses: if the first goal seeks to blur the boundary between our universities and our broader communities and between teacher and student, the second goal broadly aims to critically examine the nation-state, or, more explicitly, the tendency toward “national” histories (self-contained and frequently exceptional) and the propensity to wield “Latin America,” the “Caribbean,” and “North America” as self-evident categories of analysis. Clearly national production and pedagogy are themselves intimately linked and frequently mutually reinforcing, a relationship our courses critique and attempt to untangle. Thus, in both courses we make a concerted effort to grapple with, understand, and surpass perspectives based on the nation-state through discussion of a broad array of readings (most of which appear in our notes in this essay).13 The transnational nature of migrant life examined in our courses

13. The literature on transnationalism is enormous and, to some degree, defiant of definition. Some scholars such as Roger Waldinger go so far as to reject the term, arguing that by simply placing new wine in old bottles, the term loses its explanatory power. Roger Waldinger, “Immigrant ‘Transnationalism’ and the Presence of the Past,” in From Arrival to Incorporation: Migrants to the U.S. in a Global Era, ed. Elliott R. Barkan, Hasia Diner, and Alan M. Kraut, 267–80 (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2008). While appreciative of his


15. In *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier, 1880–1940* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), Sarah Deutsch nicely articulates how a distorted picture can result from focusing on a community as fixed in a locale rather than as one that moves and shifts, through migration. Another clear example of this approach is Lynn Stephen’s *Transborder Lives: Indigenous Oaxacans in Mexico, California, and Oregon* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2007).

16. They transcend, we might add, any geographically delimited notion of borderlands. In some instances, studies of the border per se can inadvertently reify national spaces in their very effort to be transnational. In their study of the border, Justin Akers Chacón and
life, particularly in the context of systems designed to address labor market concerns without concomitant efforts to address citizenship issues.\textsuperscript{17} Indeed, given the historical array of contorted legal maneuvers designed to simultaneously reap the benefits of migrant labor without granting the privileges and rights that might come with such work, it is critical to deal with questions of nation and state as well as their seeming opposites (transnation and statelessness).\textsuperscript{18}

All of these various units of analysis are linked. By crossing perceived static national borders, migrants disrupt the self-contained narrative of national unity; they rupture the imagined national community, causing an anxiety that is most often remedied through their elision and subordination in an increasingly jingoistic national narrative.\textsuperscript{19}

Reinscribing the too-often-absent Latin American and Caribbean migrant into these national narratives helps us to understand the world in which all of us live.\textsuperscript{20} There are few issues of more importance today. In the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon and the subsequent creation of the US Department of Homeland Security, the formation of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE), and the heightened rhetoric regarding immigration reform, the stakes have been raised dramatically. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Bush administration turned

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to immigration policy to redefine its relationship with foreigners and foreign nations. The homeland security state that emerged established new levels of insecurity among Latino and Arab migrants; for example, more immigrants faced deportation than at any other time in US history (this trend has continued under President Obama's tenure). The heightened criminalization of immigrants reached its zenith with the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act (HR 4437, also known as the Sensenbrenner bill), which passed in the House of Representatives on December 16, 2005. Although ultimately voted down in the Senate, the act—the most punitive immigration legislation in US history—exemplified the political climate of the era. The bill would have criminalized all of an estimated 11 million undocumented migrants residing in the United States by summarily converting their “unlawful presence” into a felony and rendering them subject to mandatory detention upon apprehension.  

In the meantime, border states such as New York and non-border states such as Connecticut have seen an increase in enforcement activity in the form of immigration raids and detentions. Stories of federal immigration agents invading workers’ homes at night with weapons drawn; of racial profiling and stakeouts in the parking lots of local churches, grocery stores, and strip malls; and of family members detained with little or no opportunity to collect personal belongings or ensure adequate care for children prior to deportation are as commonplace as they are disturbing. Such tactics have created a climate of terror for many workers in parts of upstate New York and Connecticut. They have also caused anxiety among farm owners and operators,


particularly those who do not participate in the H-2A program and potentially employ unauthorized workers on their farms.\textsuperscript{23} At least in these two states, ICE and Homeland Security have fostered an extraordinary amount of insecurity.\textsuperscript{24}

The historical parallels are not lost on our students; we work with them to examine how the line between history and hysteria has (yet again) been blurred considerably. A significant amount of time in our classes is devoted to studying the histories of labor, land, and migration in the United States, Latin America, and the Caribbean. In examining such histories in detail we push students to see these purportedly distinct regions as historically deeply linked and codependent in very particular kinds of ways, and to strive for a more complex, historicized understanding of immigration and migration. In the process, they come to see, for example, how simplified understandings of Latin America, or simplified models of coherent civilizations, or racially whitewashed visions of the past are constructed, deployed, and exploited to combat the invasion that never was. Invocations of national character, tropes of clashing civilizations, and alarmist references to invasion may extend the lifespan of some imagined communities, but they make for poor history. The hemispheres—indeed, the world—have been for quite some time more connected, more migratory, and more “transnational” than many recognize.\textsuperscript{25} We do not suggest they have remained so evenly across time nor that this connectedness is smooth or everywhere always the same. Globalization, as Fred Cooper notes, is characterized historically by a “back-and-forth, varied combination of territorializing and de-territorializing

\textsuperscript{23} According to the United States Department of Labor, “The H-2A temporary agricultural program establishes a means for agricultural employers who anticipate a shortage of domestic workers to bring nonimmigrant foreign workers to the U.S. to perform agricultural labor or services of a temporary or seasonal nature.” For additional details visit http://www.foreignlaborcert.doleta.gov/h-2a.cfm. Maloney, Smith, and Dudley point to why some farmers have been hesitant to participate in the H-2A program: higher-than-minimum wage rates, paperwork and bureaucracy, and regulations requiring employers to provide farm workers with housing. This of course is not the case for dairy farm operators, who are prohibited from participating in the H-2A program. See Maloney, Smith, and Dudley, “Labor Outlook,” 8–3.


tendencies.” These tendencies, we would add, vary not just across time but in terms of the subjects to which they are addressed: simultaneous with efforts to tear down national borders with respect to the movement of capital and goods come efforts to more firmly erect them with respect to the movement of people. Questions of territory are further muddled when one considers that part of what compels folks to migrate are the economic and political effects of policies often enacted under US auspices.

While we seek to conceive a historical narrative not wedded to national strictures, in our classes we recognize that the nation is, nonetheless, a meaningful unit of analysis. We discuss the nation in part in order to “reimagine[e] an American [i.e., US] narrative with Latinos as meaningful actors,” always within a broader hemispheric frame. This approach to the study of Latin American/Caribbean–US migration follows the lead of scholars like Pedro Cabán and Frances Aparicio, who challenge the all too frequently insular, nationalist approaches of area and ethnic studies. This hemispheric orientation moves instead toward “contextualizing . . . research in relation to transnationalism, immigration, citizenship and globalization as a result of the demographic diversification of the Latino populations in the United States as well as of the hemispheric circulation of peoples, goods, capital, cultural texts, and labor.”

Examining Latin American and Caribbean migration to the United States while taking into consideration migrants’ transnational experience challenges us to confront a set of questions that at once stake claim to the epistemological importance of using multinational source material and expand our understandings.


27. In *A Century of Chicano History*, González and Fernández criticize studies that solely explain transnational migration in the hemisphere as a result of the position of human labor in global economic circuits. Instead, they argue that the deliberate expansion of the US economic empire since the late nineteenth century has been the fundamental cause of migration between Latin America and the Caribbean and the United States. Challenging traditional “push-pull” causality theories of migration in bounded national spaces, they contend that in order to understand the history of the Mexican American/Chicano migrant populations we must consider the economic dimensions of their migration intimately linked to a long-standing asymmetrical imperial relationship between the two countries. Gilbert G. González and Raúl A. Fernández, *A Century of Chicano History: Empire, Nations, and Migration* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

ing of Latin American/Caribbean–US relations. Such “remappings” and “border thinking” ask us “to re-imagine the nation as a site within many ‘cognitive maps’ in which the nation-state is not congruent with cultural identity.” Viewed in this way, the Mexico/Caribbean–US border and indeed Latin American/Caribbean and US history become sites of “thinking from dichotomous concepts rather than ordering the world in dichotomies.”

Finally, both courses attempt to broaden what it means to teach Latin American and Caribbean history, as well as US and Latino history. For us, the history of the United States is, in many respects, a part of the history of Latin America and the Caribbean (and vice versa). Over the decades, many scholars have dedicated themselves to analyzing in great detail how the United States has shaped the history of Latin American nations. Such work varies from analyses that seemingly sap Latin Americans of any historical agency to those that carefully see the interplay of internal and external forces and complicate even those designations. Our interest is less in critiquing or parsing through such works than in examining how people from Latin America and the Caribbean have shaped the history of the United States and how those histories empirically expose the exceptionalist tropes that pass for history and hint at a social history of a greater America.


Local Contexts

Our courses tack between hemispheric and very local perspectives. The different local geographic and social contexts and histories of central Connecticut and upstate New York shape the design of our respective courses. Given the local contexts and demographic trends, our courses focus on migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean. However, we could imagine a broader focus that includes migrants from other regions (such as Asia and Africa) and examines their historical relationship with Latin American and Caribbean migrants.

People of Latin American and Caribbean origin in the United States have experienced a demographic explosion since the 1960s and now number over 50 million, or 16 percent of the country’s total population.33 Their presence has profound implications for the political, economic, social, and cultural future of this country and for the countries from which they originally came.34

Central Connecticut

Connecticut, once imagined as the land of steady habits and racial and ethnic homogeneity, has a long history of receiving Latin American and Caribbean migrants. Although the current total number of people from Latin America and the Caribbean in Connecticut is still small compared to other groups, they have one of the fastest rates of growth of any migrant population in the state. Connecticut has received more Mexicans than any other state in New England in the past decade.35 With over 40 percent of Hartford’s population identifying

33. This number includes Hispanics from Puerto Rico, the US Virgin Islands, and other US territories.
as Latina/Latino (most from the Caribbean) and with a recent history of ICE raids, the state capital provides an example of the nationwide debates surrounding immigrant rights and state enforcement. Indeed, the shifting demographics in Greater Hartford have much to teach us about broader national patterns in which the arrival and incorporation of Latin American and Caribbean migrants are reshaping social and political relations.

Latin American and Caribbean migrants have been coming to the Nutmeg State since the colonial era, most arriving during two periods in the latter half of the twentieth century. The first wave arrived from Puerto Rico following the initiation of Operation Bootstrap in 1948, an agreement between the governments of Puerto Rico and the mainland United States to provide tax breaks and other financial incentives for US companies to establish industrial manufacturing on the island. Although the program was meant to stimulate employment, new industrial jobs could not offset losses in agriculture. As a result, thousands of Puerto Ricans migrated to the mainland in search of work. During the same period, US agriculturalists were searching for laborers, whose numbers had dwindled since the 1920s when a series of federal laws severely limited the number of immigrants into the United States. Following World War II, few US residents were willing to labor in agriculture. Both island and mainland government officials viewed Puerto Ricans as a solution to the labor needs of US growers. In 1947, the Department of Labor of Puerto Rico established its Migration Division to arrange contracts between mainland farmers and unemployed Puerto Ricans. By 1955, the Migration Division had also established an office in Connecticut. Since then Puerto Ricans have arrived by the thousands to work in the state’s declining manufacturing industry in factories such as Wilimantic’s American Thread and in tobacco farms in the central valley. Most Puerto Ricans settled in the state’s larger cities, with Hartford eventually claiming the largest per capita US mainland population of Puerto Ricans outside of Puerto Rico.

The second wave of Latin American and Caribbean migrants differed from


the first in the number and legal status of the migrants. In 1986, the passing of the US federal Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) granted legal resident status to millions of Latin American and Caribbean migrants, most from Mexico and Central America. By 1990, for example, 2.3 million Mexicans had acquired legal status in the United States. This fact and that of an increasingly militarized border have fundamentally restructured the migration and settlement patterns of people from Latin America and the Caribbean through the present day. A more securely guarded border dissuaded immigrants from returning to their countries of origin for fear of capture upon return to the United States. New legal status empowered immigrants to move themselves and their families beyond historically established communities. It was during the post-IRCA era that Connecticut began to receive a large influx of Latin American and Caribbean migrants. Today mostly Mexican, Central American, Peruvian, and Jamaican migrants work in locations once held by their Puerto Rican predecessors. However, unlike Puerto Ricans, the majority of these new migrants are not US citizens and often have precarious legal status in the state. Additionally, the new arrivals encounter an entrenched social and racial hierarchy that historically has not included Latin American and Caribbean migrants of non–Puerto Rican origin. As Robert Smith has argued in his study of new Mexican migrants in New York City, it is likely that Latin American parents and their Connecticut-born children will have to consider whether their futures will align with “Puerto Ricans and blacks or more like the upwardly mobile lives they associate with [the state’s] white ethnic populations” such as Italian and Polish immigrants.

Connecticut’s complex historical relationship with Latin American and

Caribbean migrants fundamentally shapes the University of Connecticut course. Three of the migrant service organizations involved in the course demonstrate the range of interaction the students have with the state’s migrant population. Established in 1978 in response to a healthcare crisis in the Puerto Rican community, Hartford’s Hispanic Health Council integrates public advocacy, community-based research and service to provide care to the capital region’s Latino population. Course participants conduct research on preventive health care and help to disseminate their findings in the capital city’s migrant communities. Greater Hartford Legal Aid (GHLA) is a not-for-profit law firm that offers free legal assistance to immigrants and their families. Students work to help coordinate and promote a statewide citizenship day that brings together immigration lawyers and immigrants with legal resident status to process their application for citizenship. Windham Area Interfaith Ministries (WAIM) is located in the city of Willimantic, a short distance from the university campus. There students staff WAIM’s community service center, which provides basic living services to migrants in the area. Much of Willimantic’s resident migrant population works in landscape agricultural industries located throughout the region. WAIM is also an example of church-based service organizations that provide migrant assistance and advocacy.

Upstate New York

Ithaca, according to a local bumper sticker, is ten square miles surrounded by reality. That reality is largely agricultural and this is the context that structures the course. Farms of varying kinds and sizes pepper the landscape. In central and upstate New York one finds vineyards that take advantage of lake-formed microclimates, dairy farms, orchards, and farms that cultivate sweet corn, squash, cauliflower, and onions. Much of the work on these farms is seasonal and the demands for labor during the harvest are particularly high, with some limited opportunities for continued employment during the winter packing. Dairy farms, in contrast, require a permanent labor force year round. Regardless of the kind of farm and the type of labor, the vast majority of farm


41. The federal definition of a farm, according to the Office of Management and Budget, is a place with an annual production valued at $1,000 or more. We thank Nelson Bills who covered this material in his presentation to the Cornell course (29 Mar. 2006).

42. Dairy accounts for over 50 percent of total farm receipts in New York State, dominating the agricultural industry.
workers are from Mexico (particularly the states of Puebla and Veracruz) and, increasingly, Guatemala.

Nationwide and in New York State, the power of the agricultural industry combined with the high demand for labor during the harvest period has meant that farm workers continue to labor as exceptional workers, denied many of the labor rights granted workers in most other industries.43 A few examples from New York State will suffice: farm workers have no protections vis-à-vis collective bargaining, no provisions for overtime pay, no disability insurance, no right to a day of rest, and they are not covered by state health and safety laws in the same way as other workers. Only in 1996 and 1998 did New York State require that safe drinking water and sanitation be made available to workers in the fields; only in 2000 did the state finally implement a minimum wage provision for farm workers. Such exclusions are not new or unique to New York State. Many were codified in the Fair Labor Standards Act during the New Deal as Roosevelt compromised with southern Democrats eager to sustain racially organized agricultural regimes in order to garner support for his legislative agenda.44 Shortly thereafter the Bracero program reinstituted contract labor, which had been outlawed at the end of the Civil War, in order to ensure an overabundance of labor for western and southwestern farmers during the war.45 By 1960, Edward R. Murrow, in his documentary Harvest of Shame, could note dryly that not only did cattle have better protections during transport than migrant workers, but that the federal government in 1960 would spend $6 million studying migratory wildlife and nothing on the education of migratory children.46

43. Even gathering statistical data on farm workers is difficult. The definitions vary, even within the federal government: the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Labor have different methods of defining and calculating farm labor. Moreover, such work involves unpaid family labor, the labor of undocumented workers, and that of a highly mobile population, making data collection that much more difficult.


45. Ngai, Impossible Subjects, and Moorehead, Human Cargo. The creation of categories such as guest worker and contract worker fits squarely into a broader story of verbal and legal contortions designed to reconcile the contradictions of rhetoric and practice on issues of freedom and citizenship. Think for example of the early twentieth-century Supreme Court determination that the newly acquired “insular possessions,” including Puerto Rico, were, in the justices’ words, “foreign but in a domestic sense.” The legacies of such tortured logic persist to this day. On the insular territories see Cristina Duffy Burnett and Burke Marshall, eds., Foreign in a Domestic Sense: Puerto Rico, American Expansion, and the Constitution (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2001).

46. The episode, part of the “CBS Reports” series, aired the day after Thanksgiving in 1960.
Farm labor demographics have changed over the course of the century. Although Mexican laborers could be found on area farms prior to the 1980s, it was in that decade that upstate New York saw a significant shift away from Anglo, African American, and Haitian labor to laborers from Mexico and Guatemala. This trend mirrors national trends: according to the National Agricultural Workers Survey of 1997–98, 71 percent of all farm workers laboring in the United States were born in Mexico. Currently Mexican and Guatemalan workers comprise the largest percentage of the agricultural labor force in upstate New York.

The importance of agriculture and the agricultural workforce means that the service aspects of the course focus primarily on workers in agricultural operations. Many are migrant workers, moving with the harvest or cobbling together various jobs at different times of the year in the same region. A number of excellent organizations operate in upstate New York on behalf of migrant workers and have graciously agreed to take on students from the course. Farmworker Legal Services of New York (FLSNY) is one of the most important organizations serving migrant and seasonal farm workers in New York. In existence for more than 30 years, it has worked on behalf of migrant workers by running pesticide education programs, through direct representation in civil matters regarding employment and wage issues, and by defending members of the migrant community who have been victims of domestic violence and human trafficking. Students working with FLSNY have built databases, updated the Web site, and in the spring of 2009 filmed a documentary. Students also work with Rural and Migrant Ministry, doing outreach for its Justice for Farmworkers campaign, and for the Tompkins County Workers’ Center, raising awareness about worker issues in Ithaca and surrounding areas. Students have the opportunity to teach English as a second language to workers who have stable employment on dairy farms. The program is coordinated through the Cornell

47. UN ambassador Heraldo Muñoz notes that he was organizing Mexican and Puerto Rican farm workers in Oswego, in upstate New York, in the early 1970s. See Muñoz, The Dictator’s Shadow: Life under Augusto Pinochet (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 105.


Friends of Farmworkers Program, which runs a year-round ESL program on area farms. Students receive an intensive training course at the beginning of the semester and tutor weekly for the semester.

**Coursework**

In addition to the service opportunities discussed above, students must fulfill a number of other class assignments. These assignments are invariably oriented toward pushing students to integrate their classroom and praxis learning. For example, both courses ask students to write a single-spaced, one-page response to the readings every week. In its earliest instantiation at Cornell, the class included a final research paper assignment, but this proved too unwieldy given the structure and aims of the course. Service requires a significant investment of time. The key issue the course confronts each year is how to ensure that students take seriously both the service and classroom aspects of the course and work persistently to integrate them. Thus, reading responses encourage students to read the assigned material each week and reflect on the readings in class discussion and in explicit relation to their service work. Other assignments include having students research and present a brief history of one family member that places that individual's story of migration to the United States within the context of the major themes and issues of the course. Conducted at the beginning of the term, the assignment helps break down prevailing notions of difference that can at times circulate in the room, and instead emphasizes shared histories of migration and labor and integrates their own families' historical praxis into the structure of the course. Students are asked to approach a member of their family and ask a series of open-ended questions that indirectly require the interviewer and interviewee to define thorny concerns of the course on their own terms: Why did you/your family come to the United States? (How) did your family become American? What does it mean to you to be an American/US citizen? The family histories are shared with the class in the context of some of the introductory readings outlined above. The assignment delivers lively and personally grounded histories that engage many of the fundamental conceptual and historical themes of the course.

In the Connecticut course, students craft two letters focusing on migrant issues targeted at state and federal politicians with differing political orientations. Students then hand-deliver their letters to legislators during a field trip to the state capital during the last week of class and send the letters to the Washington, DC, offices of federal legislators. This culminating exercise draws on the knowledge students have gained in their classroom and service-learning experiences and connects it with urgent contemporary realities. Furthermore,
the process of leaving the classroom to visit the offices of state politicians provides a basic lesson in civic engagement. In sending letters to federal officials, students are required to differentiate the levels of political functioning and accountability, further complicating unitary notions of the state and its relationship to the lives and rights of migrants.

Early in the semester the Cornell class makes a daylong visit to the offices of CITA (Centro Independiente de Trabajadores Agrícolas) in Albion, New York (located between Rochester and Buffalo). CITA is a vocal and supportive advocate of migrant farm workers’ rights. Each year the director has arranged the visit so that students and workers have the opportunity to share a meal. Students also visit workers at their homes. There is always a risk of students engaging in voyeurism: this is why the trip is organized with CITA, an organization that has the trust of workers and which shapes the day’s schedule in accordance with the desires of the workers themselves. The visit comes relatively early in the semester in order to introduce students to the human and physical landscape of upstate New York (which can be quite isolating and difficult in February), to offer them the opportunity to hear firsthand of migrants’ experiences; and to provide students a sense of the scale and context of agricultural labor.

The University of Connecticut course provides students with the essential practical experience and intellectual tools required to participate in an optional field study course in Mexico. The study abroad program in Oaxaca, Mexico, is offered in the winter intersession semester (December–January). In addition to receiving an introduction to Mexico’s history and culture, the program exposes students to the cultural and historical origins of Mexican migrants in the United States. Students visit communities of origin, talk with researchers studying migration in Mexico, and observe the economic, environmental, and social conditions that affect Mexican migrants at their points of origin. In addition to reading in the classroom some of the growing social scientific literature on Oaxacan migration to the United States, students spend time volunteering in the Centro de Orientación del Migrante de Oaxaca, A.C. (COMO). Run by

Maryknoll missionaries, COMO works to aid the transition of Central American migrants on their route through Mexico to the United States. These experiences provide a transnational context for the students to better understand the relationship of Connecticut’s Mexican migrant community (some of whom are from Oaxaca State) to their communities of origin and why they leave their homes for the uncertainties of the *el otro lado*.

Connecticut class participants compete for a Migrant Farm Worker Clinic Summer Intern Fellowship jointly funded by the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies and the Honors Program. Interns work with physicians and medical students from University of Connecticut’s Farm Worker Clinic to provide quality, community-based, primary health care services to migrant and seasonal farm worker populations in Connecticut. Students assist with primary care screenings and health education outreach among migrant farm workers. In the academic semester following their fellowship, interns present their work and contribute an article to the CLACS newsletter.\(^51\) Cornell students can continue their service by working with the Friends of Farmworkers program or with the Cornell Farmworker Program, which offers summer internships for students interested in outreach to migrant communities and area farms.\(^52\)

Service work and assignments in the course are clearly oriented toward analyzing and discussing the histories and circumstances of migrant laborers. We have also worked in each course to expose students to the diverse perspectives of the state and employers/growers on immigration and labor issues (while at the same time striving to be cautious about compromising the rights of migrants, especially those without documents). In the field trip to a local farm, for example, students meet with a grower and his legally documented employee. The guarded presentation and discussion that inevitably ensues concentrate on the congenial and supportive working conditions on the farm and the multiple benefits laborers receive each season. The employee dutifully confirms the owner’s depiction of life and work on the farm. This dynamic provides rich fodder for analysis among the students, especially when it is compared to interactions

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51. Over 17,000 migrant farm laborers annually work in Connecticut. For more information on the University of Connecticut Migrant Farm Worker Clinics, visit http://publichealth.uconn.edu/aboutus_mfwc.php.

52. For more on the Cornell Farmworker Program, see http://devsoc.cals.cornell.edu/outreach/cfp/.
with migrant workers at their service sites.

Similarly, the course at Cornell emphasizes workers, and service projects are oriented toward interacting with, providing services for, and learning from agricultural workers in the region. However, the course also strives to bring in employer and owner/operator perspectives by inviting area farmers to speak to the class. Moreover, faculty from around the campus invited to lead sessions in the course bring to the classroom an array of perspectives and expertise from labor economics to farm management. Cornell students have the opportunity to hear from area dairy farmers about the pressures they confront, from the difficulty of staffing a dairy 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to increased ICE raids, or efforts to learn Spanish in their limited free time. Such presentations offer students the chance to query employers in order to understand better the structural constraints they face and to see the diversity of perspectives regarding immigration reform that exist within farm communities. Even so, service courses and programs oriented primarily toward the historical and contemporary realities of workers, especially agricultural workers, run into opposition.53

In an effort to build enduring and sustainable relationships with community organizations, we intend both classes to continue indefinitely, permitting the development and improvement of our communication and interactions over the long run. We also integrate the evaluation of each organization’s supervisor into the students’ final grade. Each class concludes with a dinner and roundtable on student service-learning projects with all participating faculty and organization supervisors. Students at Cornell are required to put together a PowerPoint presentation for the final dinner. These presentations are saved on a CD-ROM and each student receives a copy at the end of the course. In effect, a course archive is being developed, organized around student service projects.

Conclusion

At a time when state politicians enact narrowly focused anti-immigrant legislation, such as Arizona’s much-condemned SB 1070, and their federal counterparts balk at discussing new laws for comprehensive immigration reform, our

courses and others like them challenge students to reconsider their intersecting roles as learners and citizens in the context of a hemispheric history of migration.54 Our courses set out two broad goals for learning that encourage students to examine the interrelationships of knowledge and practice, and content and methodology. By critiquing how we learn and where we learn, the first goal disrupts commonplace binaries that segregate teacher from student and university from community. Inspired by Freire’s notion of praxis learning, students transgress these seemingly fixed boundaries and designate themselves and their communities as spaces of active learning. The interdisciplinary, service-learning structures of the course permit students to “migrate” across and outside traditional spaces of acquiring, generating, and sharing knowledge.

Similarly, the second course goal asks students to critically examine notions of a bounded nation-state and exclusive and exceptional national histories in a Latin American/Caribbean/United States context. Based in the thick local and regional contexts of upstate New York and central Connecticut, our classes work to reread national narratives through transnational lenses. In so doing, our courses endeavor to teach Latin American and Caribbean, US and Latina/o histories as often overlapping and mutually constitutive histories.

The unorthodox nature of our courses has resulted in an exciting and dynamic learning forum for our students and for us. Although on occasion students require some time to adjust to the novel class format, we have found that once they do, they achieve a very high level of investment, interest, and satisfaction in their work. Few come away from the course without strong opinions and varying ideas about migrant work, migrant workers, and the systems within which they labor—international, national, regional, and local. They do not always agree in their conclusions about the historical roots of inequity or what is to be done to remedy it, but we find they all would agree that, in Daniel Rothenberg’s words, “there is great power in simply recognizing farmworkers and thinking seriously about the impact of their labor upon our lives.”55

54. As the courses become well established, we have shifted to working together toward establishing a national network of similar service courses that compares the variety of realities of Latin American and Caribbean migrants in the United States and, in particular, facilitates collaboration among the students who participate in them. We would appreciate hearing from faculty who coordinate, teach, or participate in similar courses at their own institutions. Please contact us at rbc23@cornell.edu and mark.velazquez@uconn.edu. For a related effort that works to provide postsecondary education for undocumented migrants, see Freedom University, http://freedomuniversitygeorgia.org.
