Development, **2004**, **47**(1), (97–102)

www.sidint.org/development

Local/Global Encounters

The Gaze of Surveillance in the Lives of Mexican Immigrant Workers

LYNN STEPHEN

ABSTRACT *This article focuses on the embodied experiences and memories of Mexican immigrant agricultural workers as objects of surveillance on the US–Mexican border, the agricultural fields and labour camps of Oregon, and in processing plants. Key to understanding these experiences and memories is the floating nature of the border as the legality of border crossers is continually contested through the way they are structurally inserted into the transnational power relations of development and commercial agriculture and culturally interpreted as 'illegal'.*

KEYWORDS *United States; Mexico; farmworkers; immigrant workers; border controls*

Introduction

Commercial agriculture in the Pacific Northwest is profoundly dependent on Mexican immigrants. Oregon has more than 100 000 farmworkers, 98 per cent of whom are Latino, primarily of Mexican origin. The most recent immigrant farmworkers are indigenous from the states of Oaxaca and Guerrero (see Stephen, 2001). Many of these farmworkers live permanently in the state. Others work there temporarily and move on to other areas of the US and Canada as well. The newest arrivals often live in spartan conditions at best and squalid conditions at worst in labour camps.

As liberalization of trade, through agreements such as NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) and others has increased competition and pushed down the prices of many commodities such as fruits, berries, and vegetables, Oregon fruit and vegetable-processing plants have cut back on the amount of crops they purchase from growers, or have even failed to pay growers for what they already purchased. In turn, growers cut back on planting and pressure middlemen such as labour contractors and field supervisors (*mayordomos*) to get more out of their workers and to hire fewer people. Mexican workers at the bottom of the global economic hierarchy must absorb a significant part of the fallout of globalization. They remain largely invisible to US consumers who eat the food they grow, harvest, and process.

We now face a dilemma. While many are calling for stricter border controls and more stringent immigration legislation to prevent the entrance of 'terrorists' to the United States, we have a food economy that is highly dependent on recent immigrant labour–

much of it Mexican and much of it undocumented. While many now fear an increase in surveillance and a loss of personal liberties, undocumented workers and others who are read as undocumented in the US have been living in the world of surveillance and limited personal liberties for quite some time. Scholars such as Alejandro Lugo (2000) and Renato Rosaldo (1997) have questioned overly optimistic readings of the border that leave behind the militarized, policing, segregation, and surveillance aspects of border life for working men and women. While the border is perhaps the most intensive location of surveillance, for undocumented workers and even for those who have 'papers', being watched continues to be one of the most difficult parts of their work experience. In fact, for many confronted by racialist readings of all Latinos and Latin Americans as potential 'illegals', the border is 'indefinitely elastic and can serve as a barrier and zone of violence… anywhere they go in the United States' (Aldama, 2001: 135).

In this article, I focus on the experience and memories of two Mexican immigrant agricultural workers as objects of surveillance on the US–Mexico border. Key to understanding these experiences and memories is the floating nature of the border as the legality of border crossers is continually contested through the way that workers are structurally inserted into the power relations of commercial agriculture and culturally interpreted as 'illegal'.[1]

The politics of fear: keeping terrorists out and undocumented workers in

Since the 1920s, US immigration policy in relation to Mexico has served primarily as a labour policy – inviting workers in when they are needed and then showing them the door when it became politically expedient to 'defend' the border. While US immigration policy has consistently maintained the theatre of 'defending' the border from what are called 'illegal aliens', deeper historical analysis of particular policies such as the Bracero Program from 1942 to 1964, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) and the Special Agricultural Workers Program (SAW) of 1986 and a close examination of the accelerated integration of the US and Mexican economies under economic neo-liberalism and NAFTA suggest that US immigration policy towards Mexico has in fact encouraged and facilitated increased immigration (see Massey, 1997). In many ways, past US immigration policy is directly responsible for the increased level of undocumented immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s, in Oregon, and elsewhere in the country.

It is often estimated that from half to 80 per cent of those who labour in Oregon's fields are undocumented.[2] The importance of undocumented Mexicans in Oregon food production is not an isolated case. It is estimated that there are at least 3 million undocumented Mexican immigrants in the United States (Milbank and Sheridan, 2001). These undocumented residents, in combination with those who are here legally, make a major economic contribution to their country. By the end of September 2003, Mexican workers had sent home a record US$ 12 billion. Remittances are 'our biggest source of foreign income, bigger than oil, tourism, or foreign investment', President Fox told reporters (Lugo, 2003). Thus Mexican workers in the US are important not only to the economy of the United States, but certainly to that of Mexico as well.

Prior to September 11 2001, immigration was one of the top priority issues of the Bush administration. Cabinet officials from the Bush administration and others had been discussing different types of arrangements that would allow those working illegally in the United States to gain some form of legal status as part of a revision of immigration policy. Such a plan was seen as necessary to win over Latino voters and to please employers seeking workers. Then, just days after President Fox left the country in early September 2001 stating that there had to be a new immigration policy by the end of the year, the September 11 attacks happened. There are now many calls for new immigration policy, but nothing like the one imagined by the Mexican president. Instead of an opening of US immigration policy that would have the effect of legalizing those who are here undocumented and perhaps finding ways to manage migration flows that are part of how an interconnected world functions, the response of

many Americans has been to call for an increase in resources devoted to border control and increased enforcement of current immigration laws (Camarota, 2001). For the millions of undocumented Mexicans waiting and hoping for a change in immigration policy that will allow them increased personal freedom and security, a new legalization programme appears to have scant political chances now.

The gaze of surveillance: worker views from the border

In the ethnographic descriptions and conversations with the two Mexican immigrant workers that follow, the elasticity of the border and the inability of people to believe they have ever safely crossed is remembered through experiences of surveillance on the border. The cultural framework through which Mexican immigrant workers are read is partially assimilated into their emotional memories of work itself. The reminder of being other, of being different, and of legal and cultural limbo is a constant presence, even after people have obtained official legal status.

Surveillance and limited mobility is a major part of the experience of Mexican immigrant workers. For many, repeated attempts to cross the border and, if they are successful, living in the US without the ability to return home freely, is a constraint woven into the daily fabric of their lives. Marina Bautista is a 27-year-old undocumented immigrant from the Mixtec region of Oaxaca who has been in the US on and off since 1991. In a life history essay she wrote to gain entrance into a GED programme in Oregon, the border assumes a significant role in her work experiences and ability to get ahead in the United States. The policing of the border bleeds over into all aspects of her life, as she struggles to establish herself.

Marina has worked in the fields, at NORPAC (one of the largest food processing companies in the West and the twelfth largest in the United States), in a nursery, and in a store. While her family migrated without legal constraints within Mexico as farmworkers, once in the United States her experience changed. She currently lives in Woodburn, Oregon.

> I was born on 13 February 1974. I am of Mexican nationality, originally from the state of Oaxaca… My family is made up of seven people, my parents and five brothers and sisters including four women and one man. We are of very humble origin and because of this we moved to the state of Sinaloa in 1975 and after that we moved from one place to another, wherever there was work. My parents were rural workers. We moved around until we got to Baja California and settled in a town called San Quintín. We stayed there and my parents bought a small piece of land and made a very small house. They stayed there.
>
> I didn't start to go to school in San Quintín until I was nine years old and then I only went for three years because my mother was gravely ill. I had to stop going to school because there wasn't enough money to pay for my uniform, my shoes, and my books and my father was one of those people who didn't worry about us. My older sister was the only one who was working so we could eat. So there wasn't enough money for us to keep studying. After I left school at age 11, I started to work in San Quintín until 1991 when I came to the United States. I got here to the United States at the age of 16 years, but I didn't go to school out of ignorance and because I thought I had come to earn lots of money to send back to my country. It didn't work out that way.
>
> I didn't find any work except working in the fields and I returned to Mexico that same year with very little money. In 1992 I tried to come back to the United States again, but I wasn't able to get over the border. It was very hard. In 1993, I tried to get over the border another time and I was able to get by. I came and worked for two years in a nursery and I went to visit my parents in Mexico. I came back to the US in 1996, but I haven't been back to Mexico since because I don't have a green card. Even though I really want to return to visit my parents, and sometimes they are sick, I can't leave to visit them because I am afraid I won't get back in. Right now I don't have any stable work either. Right now I am going to classes to try to learn English because you really need it. It is very hard to get work if you don't speak English and don't have permission to be here.

In Marina's self-history she and her family moved freely from Oaxaca, Mexico to San Quintín, Baja California across state borders, but these borders do not constrain their movements. Their economic status does this. Once Marina came to the US in 1991 with the hope and expectation of earning money to send home, the border and permission to work begins to figure significantly in the construction of her life story. She went back to Mexico in 1991 after earning a little money working in the fields and tried to come back to the United

States twice. Successful in her second attempt to cross the border, she stayed for 3 years in the US, returned once to Mexico in 1996, and has not been back again despite the fact that her parents have been quite ill. She does not have a 'green card', the document required to legally pass the border, and will not return to Mexico to visit her parents because of her fear of not being able to get back into the United States. The border separates her from her parents and also from a legitimate status in the US. The border remains a constant geographical, cultural, and legal feature in Marina's life, pursuing her all the way to Woodburn, Oregon where she still struggles to 'cross'.

Even for workers who were able to legalize, the border shifts positions in their stories, but still remains important and present. In all of the interviews I have done with migrants to the US, their experiences crossing the border are painted in graphic and detailed ways while they are talking. Most of them suffered considerably in their undocumented crossings and lived through continued hardship in their first months and years in the US as 'illegals'. These intense experiences of fear and surveillance remain permanently etched in their sense of self – not now a present danger, but vividly remembered and sometimes recreated in other situations where they feel categorized as 'illegal'.

Fernando Martínez is now a US citizen. He received his residency through the amnesty programme of the 1986 IRCA. He worked for many years as a landscaper in California, laboured in the citrus groves of Yuma, Arizona, and eventually moved to Eugene, Oregon where he began a job in the University of Oregon food service. For nine years he lived close to the border and was undocumented. When we recorded his life story, he became visibly sad while recalling his early border crossings and experiences living and working in the US. We spoke for several hours in October 2001. An excerpt from that conversation follows.

> **Fernando**: We left North, towards Tijuana, and then we arrived to find out that it wasn't so easy to come to the United States. We started inquiring. We were kids, I was 14 or 15 years old. The first time we tried they caught us. We said, 'We want to go to the United States and they said, 'you need legal documents.' So they sent us back. Then we decided to try again in Tecate. We thought that would be a better place and that we could avoid the border patrol. It was a big mistake. We were lost in the mountains for a couple of days without food. Someone fed us. We crossed the border and came out somewhere later by El Cajon, Lemon Grove, around there. A lady fed us. We were starving, two days out there without food and cold. It was in January. The nights were cold… it didn't work… We had to go south…
> **Lynn**: … So you didn't get over the border?
> **Fernando**: Well, we did. We were in El Cajon for a couple of days. A lady fed us and we pruned her bushes and stuff like that. Then we decided we wanted to go to San Diego. I asked her if she would take us there. She said, 'no, it's too risky. Why don't you get a ride on the road there?' So we did and someone picked us up. Unfortunately, it was the border patrol so they sent us out again. They got us. We had to go back to Mexicali and work there for a while… We stayed there for about six months until about June and we decided to try again. We were split up. My friend and I decided to cross together. We got together with a bunch of people in San Luis Colorado. But the group of people divided and he ended up in Phoenix, Arizona. I ended up in Indio, California…
> **Lynn**: What did you do there?
> **Fernando**: I went to a … I started working there. I was walking on the streets of Indio where I found a bunch of people working on a roof, roofers, and I asked if they would employ me. They said no, they couldn't because I was a kid. There was a guy there who had been married and he said, 'if you want, you can live at my house until you get some work.' I lived with him and he took care of all of my needs for six months. He bought me clothes. He was a good guy. Then I started to work in a church in Escondido. I was the landscaper there. I started doing lawn mowing. Then they decided that they wanted to make a bigger church so we started working. I was friends with the contractor who was doing the project and we almost finished the project. But the contractor ended up doing heroin. He started smoking pot then he started doing heroin and didn't do anything. He couldn't finish the job. The only one who knew other than him in terms of finishing the landscaping and the church was me. The pastor employed me as a full-time employee of the church to finish up the landscaping. This was in April 1980. I made a lot of money, about $9,000. I was able to rent, well not an apartment, but a kind of hut in Escondido.

Fernando continued to work for the church as a landscaper, saved some money, and bought a car. That, he said, was a big mistake. While the car allowed him to get out and get around, eventually it led to his deportation from the US and a horrific experience with the Federal Judicial Police in

Mexico. When he eventually got back into the US, everything was gone from his house and his car was impounded. He had to start over again, living in a garage. Our conversation continued:

> **Fernando**: One day I was going to San Diego to a concert. I came back at night and my car broke down in the middle of the freeway. So the police came. They asked me for a driver's licence, insurance, well Ididn't produce any of those. So they called the immigration and I didn't produce any documents either so they kicked me out of the country. They drove me back to Tijuana. I had money and things…
> **Lynn**: What happened to all your things in Escondido?
> **Fernando**: Well, I have a bank account there. … When they drove me to Tijuana I spent about a week there and then I tried to cross a couple of times and it didn't work. And then one day I said I will go up to Mesa Otai and cross there. … And so I was about 2 blocks from the border when the Mexican Federal Judicial Police caught me. And I didn't know that they had a plan. They had caught someone who sneaks people in, a coyote, and they had him framed. And all they needed was witnesses. So they picked up a bunch of people and threw us in this building and they started beating everybody. And after the beating they put a paper in front of us and said, 'Sign this paper that this guy was the coyote and that he was taking you to the United States.' And if you didn't sign, you would get another beating… It was just very convincing.
> **Lynn**: Judicial Police?
> **Fernando**: Yes. They are bad… I spent about a week in jail in Tijuana. They call it La Ocho. It was hard. They charge you for your food. If you have money they sell you the food, the police. I had about 200 dollars with me and by the end of the sixth day I only had like 18 dollars left. They took us to the judge. He said, 'there is no cause to prosecute.' He let us go. It was against the rules what happened, but it didn't stop me from spending eight days in jail. They let me go so I went and called my friends in Escondido and they sent me money to buy clothes and stuff. And then one day I went over to Otai Mesa, close to the border. All you had to do was run a couple of miles, you know just pass the check gate and you were in. I got to El Cajon and called for a taxi to take me to San Diego. And then I took a bus to Escondido. It wasn't hard back then. Now it is so hard to cross the border. So I went to San Diego and caught a bus to Escondido. When I arrived there my car had been impounded… I owed 800 dollars in fines and stuff. I said hey, I don't want the car back. I went to where I used to live and they had broken the door and taken all of the stuff. They took everything I had, clothes, shoes, stereo, little TV. Everything. I was disillusioned. I felt really bad.

Fernando was unable to return to his former job and began to work harvesting lemons, and oranges. He continued in this work until 1987. In 1986 he became a legal resident as part of the Special Agricultural Workers Program. He moved to Washington State and later to Portland and Eugene, Oregon. He finished a high school equivalency in the late 1980s and then began to work in the kitchen at the University of Oregon where he continues to this day as a unionized employee. He became a US citizen in 1998. He is also a member of the National Guard and his unit will most likely be going to Iraq in the coming months. While reasonably happy with his current job, Fernando has strong memories of the many difficult years he passed in the United States.

The border and the kind of life Fernando lived under surveillance are permanently with him. On the day of our conversation he remembers what it was like, pointing out, 'there are many undocumented workers around here in the fields, factories, food services, and other places.… That used to be me. I lived like that…' As he spoke these words, he looked out the window and sighed. A minute or two of silence followed and then he looked at my face. He was back to the present, but still deeply connected to his years as an undocumented worker.

Conclusion: surveillance, and the new world of 'security'

US immigration policy itself has been a major factor in constructing Mexican immigrants as 'illegal aliens', particularly since the end of World War II. This category has been symbolically generalized to all Mexican immigrants, regardless of their technical, legal status. Renato Rosaldo describes this phenomenon in terms of all Latinos in the US stating: 'A significant number of people in the United States, for example, have come to question the citizenship of Latinos by declaring undocumented workers to be "alien" or "illegal". By a psychological and cultural mechanism of association, all Latinos are thus declared to have a blemish that brands us with the stigma of being outside the law' (Rosaldo, 1997: 31). Having the experience of spending years of their lives full of tense, stressful

moments when they actually were 'undocumented', many workers I talked with never really relax despite the fact that they 'have their papers', because of the continued presumption by some non-Mexicans that all Mexicans who are in the state of Oregon are undocumented and as such potential criminals.

In the changed climate of post-September 11, this fear has intensified and even prevented some legal US residents (and many undocumented residents) from returning to Mexico for fear that they will not be able to re-enter the US and may be mistaken for 'terrorists'. The inability to ever really 'cross' the border has returned to haunt them. The current political situation suggests we will be getting more restrictive immigration policies, not more open ones. Because of delays at border crossing stations where all pedestrians are now subject to having their IDs checked against 19 federal databases and rumours that the border overall has tightened, more Mexican immigrants are likely to stay in the United States and return less frequently to Mexico.

At the same time, US agriculture and food-processing plants continue to depend on Mexican immigrant labour to care for, harvest, and process much of the food we eat – some of the cheapest food in the world. Our food security depends in significant measure on the labour of Mexican immigrant workers while our new national security policies appear to discourage further immigration and to step up surveillance of those who are already here. In the new world of post-September 11, we need to be able to distinguish between potential terrorists and those who come to this country to do the crucial work of producing our food. The politics of visibility and invisibility, of surveillance and security, have to be made flexible and transparent so that the complex reality of the global economy in the US can be approached at a human level.

Notes

1 This article is based on fieldwork carried out from September 1999 to September 2001 in the Willamette Valley of central Oregon. The ethnographic material comes from two collaborative projects carried out with Oregon's only farmworker union, Pineros y Campesinos Unidos (PCUN, Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United). The theme of this article came out of conversations with Mexican immigrant farmworkers and others, where we reflected on the meaning of the events of September 11 for Mexican immigrant workers in the United States.

2 The Mexican Consulate in Portland estimates that there are about 80,000 undocumented Mexicans in Oregon (The Oregon Story: http: //education.opb.learning/oregonstory/ag-workers/issues.htm).

References

Aldama, Arturo (2001) *Disrupting Savagism; Intersecting Chicana/o, Mexican immigrant, and Native American struggles for self-representation*, Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Camarota, Steven A. (2001) *'Zogby Poll on Immigration and Terrorism: Americans think lax immigration enforcement helped the terrorists'*, Washington DC: Center for Immigration Studies.

Lugo, Alejandro (2000) 'Theorizing Border Inspections', *Cultural Dynamics* 12(3): 353–374.

Lugo, Luis Alonso (2003) 'Fox Says US–Mexico Remittances Hit High', *The Associated Press* 24 September.

Massey, Douglas (1997) 'March of Folly: US immigration policy after NAFTA', *American Prospect* 37: 1–16.

Milbank, Dana and Mary Beth Sheridan (2001) 'Fox Presses for Immigration Agreement: Mexican leader seeks pact with US by year's end', *Washington Post*, 6 September.

Rosaldo, Renato (1997) 'Cultural Citizenship, Inequality, and Multiculturalism' in *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights* edited by William V. Flores and Rina Benmayor, Boston: Beacon Press.

Stephen, Lynn (2001) 'Globalization, the State, and the Creation of Flexible Indigenous Workers: Mixtec farmworkers in Oregon', *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 30(2–3): 189–214.