

Into the fields: migrant labor, everyday pesticide entanglements, and Midwest plantation regimes

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Abstract:

This article examines migrant farmworkers' experiences of pesticide exposure in Illinois through a critical environmental anthropology perspective. Drawing on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted during the summer and fall harvest seasons of 2024 and 2025, the research combines outreach activities, survey implementation, informal conversations, participant observation, fieldnotes, and visual documentation across farms, orchards, labor camps, motels used as worker housing, and rural communities. Rather than approaching pesticide exposure solely as an occupational health concern, the article situates it within the broader political economy of agriculture in the Midwest.

Learning from migrant farmworkers from Mexico, Central America, and other regions reveals how pesticide exposure becomes entangled with migration, debt, climate uncertainty, labor precarity, and agricultural exceptionalism. Workers' experiences demonstrate that chemicals are not encountered simply as toxic substances but as everyday companions of labor within monocrop landscapes organized around agrochemical dependency within industrial agriculture. Drawing on concepts such as plantation regimes, racial capitalism, and chemical geographies, the article argues that contemporary Midwestern agriculture reproduces forms of labor exploitation and environmental inequality commonly associated with plantation economies elsewhere.

By examining the agricultural complex of Illinois through workers' voices and visual ethnographic insights, the article shows how the celebrated productivity of the Green Revolution continues to depend upon migrant labor, intensive pesticide use, land concentration, and uneven forms of vulnerability. The contemporary prairie emerges not as a flat landscape of abundance, but as a plantation frontier where labor, chemicals, capital, and nature remain deeply entangled.

Keywords: *Migrant Farmworkers, Plantation Regimes, Pesticide Exposure, Agricultural Exceptionalism, Chemical Geographies, Midwest Agriculture*

Intro: anti-plateau: migrant farmwork within and beyond those prairies

The U.S. Midwest is often imagined as the landscape where the promises of modern agriculture were fulfilled: endless corn and soy fields, technological efficiency, productive farms, and rural prosperity. A ready-made picture of prosperity and rural modernization to export the green revolution. Such representations flatten both landscapes and social relations. They turn the prairie into a homogeneous space while rendering invisible the labor regimes, environmental hazards, and forms of violence that sustain agricultural production. The Midwest emerged through processes that simplified landscapes and reorganized nature according to the needs of capitalist agriculture. The state gaze (Scott 2008), agricultural imperialism, and the legacy of a spring too silent (Carson 1994) continue to echo across those plateaus, shaping how the region is imagined and governed.

Yet beyond the apparent uniformity of corn and soy lies a far more complex social world. The straight lines of monocrops, roads, and railways suggest order and predictability. However, at another scale, they reveal histories of land concentration, migrant labor recruitment, agrochemical dependency, environmental degradation, and uneven forms of development. Research on plantation regimes (Barua 2024; Chao 2022; Li and Semedi 2021), monocrop governance (Hetherington 2020), the political economy of pesticides (Romero 2022), and migrant farm labor (Guthman 2019; Holmes 2013) provides a different set of tools for entering these landscapes. Through these glasses, the fields of Illinois appear not simply as productive agricultural spaces but as part of a broader plantation regime organized around the extraction of value from land, labor, and nature.

This article draws on multi-sited ethnographic research conducted among migrant farmworkers in Illinois during the summer and fall harvest season. The research emerged through outreach activities, survey implementation, informal conversations, participant observation, and visual documentation conducted across farms, motels used as worker housing, orchards, agricultural fairs, and the roads connecting rural communities. Following farmworkers across these sites made it possible to move beyond the image of the Midwest as a flat agricultural landscape and instead examine the social relations that sustain it. What initially appeared as a geography of corn and soy gradually revealed itself as a geography of labor mobility, chemical exposure, debt, displacement, and environmental uncertainty.

The workers at the center of this study are primarily migrant farmworkers from Mexico and Central America employed in corn, soy, orchard, ornamental plant, and livestock-related sectors. Their experiences reveal how the celebrated productivity of Midwestern agriculture depends on labor conditions that are frequently hidden from view. The visibility of agricultural commodities contrasts sharply with the invisibility of the workers who plant, cultivate, harvest, transport, care for, and, in some instances, pollinate them – as the fieldwork done in 2025 showed. Their lives unfold within a landscape marked by pesticides, temporary labor contracts, agricultural exceptionalism, and various forms of social isolation. Because they live in those green plantation islands, an archipelago that seems to be connected to them only through mobility flows, farmworkers of solidarity or the path of outputs needed to sustain big ag operations.

Rather than approaching pesticide exposure solely as an occupational health issue, this article argues that it should be understood as a structural feature of contemporary agricultural production. Exposure emerges through the articulation of agrochemical-intensive monocrop systems, migrant labor recruitment, land concentration, and legal frameworks that provide differential protections to agricultural workers. In this sense, pesticides are not merely chemical substances applied to fields. They are part of a broader regime of accumulation that connects environmental hazards, labor exploitation, and agricultural productivity.

Conceptualizing Illinois agriculture as a contemporary plantation regime helps illuminate these connections. Far from being a historical remnant associated only with colonial frontiers or tropical monocrops, the plantation remains a powerful framework for understanding contemporary agrarian capitalism. In the Midwest, land concentration, agrochemical dependency, agricultural exceptionalism, and migrant labor converge to reproduce both agricultural wealth and social inequality. The prairie, often imagined as flat and empty, emerges instead as a complex political

landscape shaped by competing interests, uneven vulnerabilities, and everyday struggles over work, health, and survival.

The sections that follow examine how migrant farmworkers experience and make sense of pesticide exposure while situating those experiences within the broader political economy of Midwestern agriculture. By tracing the connections among chemical landscapes, labor mobility, and plantation regimes, the article shows how contemporary agricultural capitalism continues to rely on racialized and disposable forms of labor, even in one of the most technologically advanced agricultural regions in the world.



Anti-plateau. Soy field. Sept. 28. Arcola, IL. 2024

Getting into the fields:

The ethnographic encounters that inform this article emerged through collaborative work with an interdisciplinary farmworker health and well-being research initiative in the U.S. Midwest. During the summer and fall harvest seasons of 2024 and 2025, outreach activities, survey implementation, informal conversations, fieldnotes, and visual documentation created opportunities to engage with migrant farmworkers employed across rural Illinois. Initially, these encounters were organized around concerns related to pesticide and heat exposure. The more time spent in conversations with them, the more they opened to broader questions concerning labor, migration,

environmental hazards, and the agricultural worlds that sustain contemporary monocrop production. Talking their language and being acquainted with plantations and rural life helped to find commonalities.

Outreach activities focused on sharing information about pesticide and heat-related risks, discussing prevention strategies, and piloting health and well-being surveys among farmworkers. The survey relied on cognitive interviews to explore how participants understood concepts and terms used in Spanish-language questionnaires. These conversations often moved beyond occupational health concerns to include wages, migration, debt, housing conditions, family obligations, climate uncertainty, and the everyday realities of working in the fields. Talking about pesticides often meant talking about much more than chemical fixes; it opened space to reflect on chemical uncertainties and precarious work conditions.

The broader collaborative research initiative was developed within interdisciplinary teams composed of medical anthropologists, environmental and public health specialists, and an occupational medicine physician. These collaborations revealed different approaches to pesticide exposure and farmworker well-being. Public health and ethnographic approaches live together. Public health frameworks tended to emphasize prevention, measurable outcomes, and risk reduction. Ethnographic approaches address different questions: how workers make sense of hazards, how exposure becomes normalized, and how pesticides are embedded within larger systems of labor, mobility, and production. Rather than appearing as isolated occupational risks, pesticides emerged as elements of broader social and environmental relations.

These questions are difficult to separate from the history of plantation agriculture. Across the Americas, plantations and monocrops have organized land, labor, and nature through extractive forms of production designed for distant markets (Li and Semedi 2021). Such regimes rely on large concentrations of land, intensive labor, significant agrochemical inputs, and forms of environmental transformation that frequently generate pollution, displacement, indebtedness, disease, and social inequality. Although the plantation is often imagined as a phenomenon of colonial frontiers or tropical export economies, many of its logics remain visible in contemporary agricultural systems.

This perspective was informed by previous research on pesticide-intensive monocrop production, plantation agriculture, and environmental justice in Central America (references withheld for anonymous review). In these landscapes, pesticides are never simply chemicals applied to crops. They become part of wider assemblages of land concentration, labor exploitation, environmental contamination, debt, and uneven development. Approaching Illinois from this perspective raised the question of whether similar dynamics could be identified within one of the most productive agricultural regions in the world.

Fieldwork took place across multiple sites in rural Illinois, including Carbondale, Cobden, Bloomington, Champaign, Carthage, Gilman, Ottawa, and surrounding agricultural communities. Although the crops varied from place to place, they were connected through a common agricultural economy dominated by corn and soy monocrops. Orchards producing apples and peaches, ornamental plant nurseries, and Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) formed part of the same productive landscape. Their commodities differed, but they shared two characteristics: dependence on pesticides and dependence on migrant labor.

The workers encountered throughout fieldwork came primarily from Mexico, although workers from Guatemala, other Central American countries, South America, and Africa¹ were also present. Their trajectories reflected broader histories of labor mobility shaped by recruitment networks, immigration policies, environmental uncertainty, and rural dispossession. Some arrived through the H-2A program and other temporary labor arrangements. Others moved through more informal labor circuits. Regardless of their migration pathways, most occupied positions characterized by mobility, vulnerability, and limited power within agricultural production systems.

Following workers across farms, labor camps, motels converted into worker housing, outreach events, rural roads, and agricultural fairs revealed a landscape that differs significantly from dominant representations of Midwestern agriculture. From a distance, Illinois often appears as a geography of efficiency, productivity, and technological sophistication. Seen from the ground, however, it emerges as a landscape shaped by labor mobility, environmental exposure, and everyday forms of inequality. The apparent simplicity of the corn and soy frontier conceals a much more complex world of workers, contractors, chemicals, machinery, transportation systems, housing arrangements, and state regulations.

Many of the conversations conducted during fieldwork returned repeatedly to similar concerns. Workers discussed declining purchasing power, labor-intensive workdays, pesticide exposure, heat stress, transportation difficulties, language barriers, and uncertainty regarding future employment. These issues were rarely experienced as separate problems. Instead, they appeared as interconnected dimensions of everyday life. Exposure to pesticides could not be separated from fears of losing employment. Heat exposure could not be separated from the need to work longer hours. Debt could not be separated from migration decisions.

Climate change also emerged as a recurring theme. Workers frequently described droughts, floods, crop failures, and increasingly unpredictable weather conditions in their communities of origin. These experiences complicate conventional explanations of migration that focus exclusively on wage differentials between countries. Migration often appeared as a response not only to economic difficulties but also to environmental uncertainty. In this sense, the labor force that sustains Midwestern agriculture is increasingly recruited from populations already experiencing the consequences of ecological transformations elsewhere.

The central concern explored throughout this research is how systems of labor exploitation become normalized as everyday forms of violence (Scheper-Hughes 2009). Declining wages, pesticide exposure, unequal access to information, hazardous labor conditions, and environmental uncertainty rarely occur separately. They converge in workers' lives and become part of the ordinary conditions under which agricultural production takes place. What, from a distance, appears to be the success of modern agriculture often relies on labor arrangements that continually transfer environmental and occupational risks onto migrant workers.

Researching rural Illinois also meant entering a region that occupies a privileged place within the history of modern agriculture. Few places have contributed more to the global imagination of the

¹ The only Central American workers included in these observations were Guatemalan Maya workers and workers from Rwanda. Communication in Q'anjob'al and other languages was facilitated through interpreters when available. Unless otherwise noted, the testimonies presented in this article are from Mexican farmworkers.

Green Revolution. Hybrid crops, mechanization, agrochemical intensification, knowledge production in place (knowledge production associated with major Midwestern land-grant institutions), and industrial forms of farming became normalized here before being exported elsewhere. The Midwest continues to function as a laboratory of agricultural modernization. Yet the closer one gets to the fields, the harder it becomes to sustain the image of a green utopia. Behind the productivity of monocrops lies a landscape saturated with chemicals and dependent upon the labor of a highly mobile workforce.

Viewed from this perspective, Illinois appears not simply as a landscape of corn and soy but as a contemporary plantation regime shaped by land concentration, agrochemical dependency, migrant labor recruitment, and agricultural exceptionalism. The farms, roads, grain elevators, labor camps, railways, motels, and worker transportation systems that compose this landscape are part of the infrastructures through which contemporary agrarian capitalism operates. Entering the fields, therefore, meant entering a world where pesticides, labor, mobility, and environmental uncertainty converge. It is within this landscape that the everyday pesticide entanglements of migrant farmworkers take shape.



Into the fields. Cornfield. Jul. 13. 2024 Odell, IL.

Crafting fieldwork experiences: between listening farmworkers' voices and creating visual narratives.

Researching rural Illinois became a way to think through the political economy of pesticides, migrant labor, and monocrop production at the particular scale of the U.S. Midwest. Few places in the world have been as influential in shaping the global imagination of modern agriculture. Here, the promises of the Green Revolution were designed, tested, normalized, and eventually exported as a model for the rest of the world. The corn-and-soybean landscape that dominates Illinois is not simply an agricultural landscape; it is also a historical center where industrial agriculture became common sense. Hybrid crops, mechanization, chemical-intensive production, and large-scale monocrops transformed the prairie into a laboratory of agricultural modernization. As Rachel Carson (1994) reminded us decades ago, many of the chemicals associated with this transformation were infused into the landscape long before their ecological and health consequences became publicly visible.

Seen from this perspective, Illinois appears as much more than a geography of productive fields. It can also be understood as one of the contemporary frontiers of what plantation scholars identify as plantation regimes: arrangements that concentrate land, labor, capital, and technology in the service of commodity production (Li and Semedi 2021; Barua 2024). The vast monocrop landscapes of the Midwest may look very different from the pineapple, banana, sugarcane, or palm oil plantations of Central America, yet they share important dynamics. Land concentration, agrochemical dependency, labor discipline, and environmental simplification remain central to both systems. Looking at Illinois through the lens of plantation regimes reveals continuities that often disappear behind narratives of technological innovation and agricultural progress.

Fieldwork across multiple sites reinforced this perspective. Farms, labor camps, motels used as worker housing, grain elevators, orchards, towns, roads, and transportation infrastructures appeared not as separate sites but as interconnected spaces within the same productive landscape. Following workers between these locations revealed how the agricultural complex extends beyond the fields themselves. Agricultural production is not confined to the moment of harvest. It is sustained through housing arrangements, transportation systems, recruitment networks, chemical applications, state regulations, and labor practices that connect distant places and populations.

The harvest season provided a particularly revealing window into these relations. During the summer and fall months, migrant farmworkers occupied a central place within the agricultural landscape. Their labor sustains the productivity of Illinois agriculture, yet their presence often goes unnoticed. Cornfields, machinery, and grain silos are visible everywhere across the prairie; the workers whose labor moves through those spaces are far less visible. This invisibility is not simply spatial. It is also social and political. The public image of Midwestern agriculture often celebrates productivity, technology, and efficiency while overlooking the labor conditions that enable such productivity.

Listening to farmworkers' voices enabled a different approach to the landscape. Conversations about pesticides often turned to labor, migration, debt, climate uncertainty, family responsibilities, and the everyday challenges of living and working far from home. Exposure to chemicals rarely appeared as an isolated occupational hazard. Instead, it emerged as one element within broader experiences of precarity and environmental uncertainty. Workers described navigating multiple risks simultaneously: pesticide exposure in the fields, heat stress during the summer months, economic pressures, bureaucratic ecosystem of contracts and regulations, the migration regime, and changing environmental conditions in their communities of origin.

Visual documentation became another way of engaging with these realities. Photographs of fields, roads, grain elevators, worker housing, transportation systems, and agricultural infrastructure functioned as more than illustrations of the landscape. They became ways of noticing how plantation logics materialize in everyday spaces. The seemingly endless rows of corn and soy, the roads cutting through monocrop territories, the labor camps hidden from public view, and the infrastructures built to move commodities across continents all point toward a broader system of production. Visual narratives helped situate farmworkers' experiences within these landscapes while revealing the material dimensions of agrochemical-intensive agriculture.

The more time spent moving through rural Illinois, the more difficult it became to sustain the image of the Midwest as a successful green utopia. Beneath the endless rows of corn and soy appeared labor camps, contractor networks, school buses transporting workers along invisible routes, housing facilities hidden from public view, and fields saturated with chemical inputs. What appears from a distance as an orderly geography of abundance reveals itself, at ground level, as a terrain marked by pesticide exposure, labor precarity, environmental uncertainty, and forms of everyday violence that frequently remain hidden from view. Attending to farmworkers' voices and the infrastructures that surround them offers a way to move beyond the surface of the prairie and into the social relations through which contemporary agricultural capitalism is organized and reproduced.

On visual anthropology, self-reflection, forms of violence, and state practices

As mentioned, visual documentation became an important part of the ethnographic process. Photography functioned not simply as a method of recording landscapes but as a way of paying attention to the agricultural worlds that surround migrant labor. Following Anna Tsing's (2015, 2022) invitation to cultivate "arts of noticing," photographs became a means of registering the infrastructures, landscapes, and everyday details that often disappear within dominant representations of agricultural production. The fields, roads, trains, grain elevators, labor camps, machinery, and monocrops that compose rural Illinois reveal far more than productive agriculture; they also reveal the social and environmental relations through which agricultural production is organized.

Each field visit unfolded as a visual immersion into the Midwest's landscapes. Movement between farms, towns, and agricultural corridors made visible connections that are difficult to perceive from a single location. The view from a train or car window often resembled a continuous film reel composed of cornfields, soy monocrops, railroads, grain silos, chemical storage facilities, and rural infrastructures. At first glance, these landscapes appear repetitive and stable. Yet careful observation reveals a geography shaped by historical processes of environmental transformation, land concentration, and industrial agriculture. The apparent simplicity of the prairie conceals highly complex arrangements of labor, capital, chemicals, and state intervention.

Visual observation also highlighted the persistence of the Green Revolution as both a material and ideological project. The Midwest remains one of the places where the promises of agricultural modernization became most visible. Mechanization, hybrid crops, agrochemical dependency, and monocrop production transformed the landscape into a model and visual pedagogy that would later travel across the world in pamphlets, machinery leaflets, and inputs for industrial agriculture, rural

development, or just agrarian business. The orderly rows of corn and soy continue to symbolize productivity, efficiency, and abundance. But the same landscapes also bear witness to the environmental contradictions of industrial agriculture. Pesticides, fertilizers, and other chemical inputs have become so embedded in agricultural production that they are often perceived as ordinary features of the landscape rather than as products of specific political and economic decisions.

Looking at the landscape through a visual ethnographic lens reveals what dominant agricultural narratives tend to overlook. Grain elevators, railways, warehouses, irrigation systems, and transportation infrastructures are not neutral components of rural life. They are material expressions of broader systems of accumulation. They connect distant markets, organize the movement of commodities, and structure the daily rhythms of agricultural labor. At the same time, they reveal the uneven geographies through which agricultural wealth is produced. Migrant workers often remain absent from these visual narratives, despite being essential to the functioning of the agricultural complex. Their relative invisibility reflects broader processes through which labor is obscured while production itself is celebrated.

Visual documentation also made visible forms of violence that do not always appear dramatic or spectacular, like a form of slow violence (Nixon, 2011). Rather than emerging through isolated events, they often appear as ordinary features of everyday life. Long distances between worker housing and towns, isolated labor camps, endless monocrop landscapes, chemical-intensive environments, and infrastructure designed primarily for commodities rather than people all point to forms of structural violence embedded in agricultural production. Following Scheper-Hughes (2009), these conditions can be understood as everyday forms of violence that become normalized through repetition and routine.

Viewed from this perspective, the landscape itself becomes an archive of state practices and agricultural capitalism. Roads, monocrops, chemical infrastructure, transportation networks, and labor arrangements reveal how states and markets have actively shaped rural space to meet the requirements of agricultural production. What appears to be a natural agricultural landscape is better understood as a political landscape: one shaped by policies, technologies, and forms of governance that organize both nature and labor. Visual ethnography offers a way to read these landscapes and trace the connections between migrant labor, agrochemical dependency, and the plantation logics that continue to shape the contemporary Midwest.



Corn infrastructure. Sept 26. 2024 Champaign, IL.

Migrant farmworkers and the agricultural complex of Illinois

The agricultural industry plays a central role in Illinois's economy. Generating roughly \$19 billion annually and relying on an estimated 55,000 migrant farmworkers, the state's agricultural sector depends upon a highly mobile labor force recruited largely from Mexico and Central America (Research Center 2023). Yet the importance of migrant labor is often obscured by dominant representations of Midwestern agriculture that emphasize technological innovation, productivity, machinery, and scientific expertise. Grain elevators, combines, genetically modified seeds, and precision agriculture tend to receive more attention than the workers whose labor remains essential for planting, harvesting, maintaining crops, tending orchards, and sustaining agricultural production throughout the growing season.

The presence of migrant workers in the Midwest is not recent. Contemporary labor recruitment systems can be traced to longer histories of agricultural migration shaped by state policies and labor demands. Programs such as the Bracero Program, initiated during the Second World War, and later visa systems such as H-2A created institutional mechanisms through which agricultural employers gained access to temporary labor from outside the United States. While these programs have changed over time, their underlying logic remains remarkably consistent: securing a workforce that is mobile enough to meet seasonal labor demands while remaining politically and economically vulnerable.

Agricultural production requires workers, but the systems through which those workers are recruited often limit their ability to negotiate wages, demand safer working conditions, or challenge employers.

The H-2A program currently constitutes one of the most visible forms of labor recruitment in Illinois agriculture. Workers arrive with visas tied directly to specific employers, often for periods that range from a few months to the duration of a harvest season. Their legal presence in the country is intimately linked to their continued employment. This arrangement creates a labor force that is simultaneously necessary and precarious. Workers possess legal authorization to work, yet their ability to remain employed often depends upon maintaining good relationships with employers and contractors. Several workers described a common concern: complaining about wages, housing conditions, excessive workloads, or occupational hazards could mean not being invited back the following year. The threat is rarely expressed directly. It operates instead through anticipation, rumor, and collective experience. Silence frequently becomes a strategy for preserving future employment opportunities.

Beyond H-2A workers, the agricultural complex also includes workers on H-2B and J-1 visas, permanent residents, and undocumented laborers operating in informal labor markets. These different legal categories produce varying degrees of protection and vulnerability. Workers without regularized status often experience greater labor precarity, lower wages, and more hazardous working conditions. Their employment may occur "under the books," making it easier for employers to avoid liability for injuries, illnesses, wage theft, or pesticide exposure. Occupational risks do not affect workers equally; they are distributed through legal regimes that position some workers closer to protection and others closer to disposability.

Seen from this perspective, immigration status becomes part of the labor process itself. It shapes who performs certain jobs, who receives training, who can file complaints, and who bears the consequences of occupational hazards. Pesticide exposure provides a useful example. Workers operating outside formal employment arrangements often reported receiving limited information regarding pesticide use, protective equipment, or exposure risks. In these cases, exposure becomes inseparable from broader structures of labor inequality. The issue is not simply the presence of chemicals but the uneven distribution of protection, knowledge, and accountability.

The workforce is highly diverse, yet certain patterns persist across agricultural sectors. Most workers encountered during fieldwork were men between the ages of eighteen and forty employed in field labor, crop maintenance, harvesting, and machinery-related tasks. Women were more commonly employed in greenhouses, fruit-picking operations, packing facilities, and concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs). Although these divisions are neither absolute nor fixed, they reveal the gendered organization of agricultural labor. Different sectors assign workers to different forms of risk, mobility, and exposure.

Many of the Mexican workers interviewed came from Guerrero, Michoacán, Jalisco, Guanajuato, Chihuahua, San Luis Potosí, and the State of Mexico. Their migration trajectories reflected long histories of labor mobility linking rural Mexico and the agricultural regions of the United States. These movements are often understood through economic explanations centered on wages and employment opportunities. However, conversations with workers suggested a far more complex reality. Migration was frequently linked not only to labor demand in the United States but also to environmental uncertainty, declining agricultural livelihoods, indebtedness, and changing rural economies in their

communities of origin. Agricultural workers often move because crops move, labor opportunities shift, environmental conditions deteriorate, or survival strategies require mobility.

These dynamics place migrant farmworkers within what Holmes (2013) describes as transnational labor circuits and what Torres (1997) conceptualizes as transnational enclaves. Recruiters, contractors, growers, transportation systems, housing facilities, and state institutions connect distant rural regions into a single labor geography stretching across national borders. The Illinois cornfield is therefore connected to a community in Michoacán or Guerrero not only through migration but also through labor relations, environmental change, and economic necessity. Workers carry experiences, knowledge, and vulnerabilities across these geographies.

Within these circuits, expectations of efficiency and productivity are taken for granted. Employers often assume that workers already possess the agricultural knowledge necessary to perform demanding tasks with minimal training. As a result, instruction regarding pesticide safety, heat exposure, or occupational health frequently occupies a marginal place within broader workplace orientations. Workers repeatedly described training sessions as brief moments embedded within larger discussions of production goals, legal requirements, and workplace rules. The expectation is that experienced workers will learn on the job. But this assumption overlooks the complexity of contemporary agrochemical regimes and the risks associated with exposure.

The agricultural complex of Illinois thus depends upon far more than productive land and technological innovation. It relies upon the continuous circulation of labor across borders, the recruitment of workers through temporary visa systems, and the uneven distribution of occupational risks. Migrant farmworkers occupy a central position within this system. They sustain the productivity of one of the most important agricultural regions in the world while simultaneously confronting conditions of uncertainty, mobility, and environmental exposure. Their experiences reveal that the celebrated efficiency of Midwestern agriculture is inseparable from the labor regimes that enable it. Beneath the visible infrastructure of grain elevators, machinery, and monocrops lies another infrastructure: a highly mobile workforce whose labor continues to sustain the agricultural heartland while remaining largely invisible within dominant narratives of agricultural success.



Fieldnote voices²: Migrant labor, migration reasons, and working in the fields.

Some of the most revealing conversations about migrant labor took place not in the fields themselves but in the spaces surrounding agricultural work. During an outreach event held in a motel used as seasonal housing for farmworkers in Champaign, several workers discussed blisters, muscle pain, exhaustion, and the physical demands of agricultural labor while waiting for a free medical checkup. Daily routines frequently involved walking between fifteen and twenty-one miles through fields and crops, a reminder that even within highly mechanized agricultural systems, labor remains profoundly bodily. The aches, injuries, and fatigue associated with this work are often treated as ordinary features of farm labor, yet they reveal the extent to which contemporary agriculture continues to depend upon workers whose bodies absorb many of the costs of production.

The conversation soon shifted from physical labor to migration itself. Román explained this transition with a simple observation: “Some days the work can be hard here, but there, in Mexico, we couldn’t work the land.” Such statements challenge explanations of migration that focus exclusively on wage differentials or labor demand in the United States. Economic opportunity remains important, but workers repeatedly connected their decisions to migrate to the growing difficulty of sustaining agricultural livelihoods in their communities of origin. Migration appeared less as a search for prosperity than as a response to uncertainty.

Discussions about the weather³ quickly turned to survival. Pedro described increasingly unpredictable agricultural conditions in his community: floods one year, droughts the next, and a growing sense that seasonal patterns could no longer be anticipated. Facundo recalled years in which investments in seed and agricultural chemicals (pesticides)⁴ were followed by the complete loss of harvests. These accounts point toward environmental instability as an increasingly important factor shaping labor mobility across the Americas. Harvest failures generate economic losses but also lead to debt, food insecurity, and pressure to seek alternative livelihoods elsewhere. Migration emerges from these conditions not simply as an economic calculation but as a strategy for navigating environments where agricultural futures have become increasingly uncertain.

Seen from this perspective, the labor force sustaining Midwestern agriculture is recruited from landscapes already marked by environmental and economic pressures. Climate variability, rural dispossession, declining agricultural productivity, and indebtedness have become part of the social conditions that structure migration. Following Han's (2012) discussion of debt, migration can be understood as one response to the accumulation of vulnerabilities that exceed any single crisis. Workers often arrive in Illinois carrying histories of failed harvests, financial obligations, environmental instability, and efforts to maintain rural livelihoods under increasingly difficult conditions.

² The fieldnote voices are excerpts of informal conversations while I was doing outreach or piloting the survey

³ The word “climate” and “tiempo” is used to follow this conversation, which I recalled here as the environment because the word makes more sense in English.

⁴ Parenthesis is used inside a quote to clarify what the interlocutor was referring to.

The connection between these distant agricultural worlds becomes especially visible through workers' narratives. The fields of Illinois and the milpas⁵ of rural Mexico may appear geographically disconnected, yet they are linked through migration routes, labor recruitment systems, commodity chains, and shared experiences of environmental transformation. Labor mobility functions as one of the mechanisms through which these landscapes become connected. Workers move between them carrying knowledge, experiences, and vulnerabilities that reveal the transnational dimensions of contemporary agriculture.

Life in rural Illinois also highlights another dimension of migrant labor: relative isolation. Many workers live in housing facilities located on farms, at the edges of towns, or in motels converted into seasonal labor camps. These spaces often function as small islands within much larger monocrop territories. Workers travel between fields, housing, and stores while maintaining limited interaction with the broader communities surrounding them. Social and linguistic barriers reinforce these forms of separation. In many rural towns, Spanish-speaking workers navigate environments largely organized around English-language institutions, services, and everyday interactions.

The situation becomes even more complex for Indigenous migrant workers. In some agricultural regions of Illinois, Guatemalan Maya workers communicate primarily in Q'anjob'al and other Indigenous languages rather than Spanish (Wilson 2020). Their presence complicates simplistic understandings of migrant labor and reveals the cultural diversity hidden within agricultural labor forces. The category of "migrant worker" often conceals multiple histories, languages, and experiences of displacement. Despite these differences, workers frequently encounter similar forms of marginalization, labor precarity, and social exclusion.

The border, in this context, extends far beyond the geopolitical boundary separating Mexico and the United States. Temporary labor contracts, recruitment systems, transportation networks, and housing arrangements create additional forms of separation that shape workers' lives long after migration occurs. The H-2A system, labor camps, contractor networks, and seasonal employment arrangements function as infrastructures that regulate mobility, employment, and access to rights. Crossing an international border frequently means entering a different set of boundaries that structure daily life.

Monocrop landscapes themselves physically contribute to these processes. During the growing season, cornfields frequently rise above human height, transforming workers into barely visible figures moving through corridors of green industrial agriculture as they perform corn detasseling, pollination, harvesting, cutting, caring for, or applying pesticides. The field becomes more than a productive space; it becomes an infrastructure of invisibility. Labor disappears within the landscape even as production remains highly visible. Grain yields, commodity prices, and agricultural technologies occupy the center of public attention, while the workers whose labor sustains those systems remain largely out of sight.

Following Malm and Hornborg (2014) and Hetherington (2020), these landscapes can be understood as part of the broader infrastructures of the Capitalocene. Cornfields, labor camps, transportation systems, agrochemical regimes, and temporary labor programs operate together as components of a

⁵ Family or community little farms in which people in rural areas of México farm maize, beans, tomatoes, and squash. Weeds and animals are allowed, and the harvest can be shared, bartered, or gifted among community or family members.

system organized around accumulation and productivity. Migrant workers occupy a central place within this system while simultaneously being rendered peripheral within dominant narratives of agricultural success.

The stories shared by Pedro, Román, Facundo, and other workers reveal a reality that exceeds conventional discussions of migration. Labor mobility cannot be understood separately from environmental uncertainty, debt, climate change, and the transformation of rural livelihoods. The workers who harvest, maintain, and sustain Illinois's agricultural economy arrive carrying histories that begin long before they enter Midwestern fields. Their experiences reveal how environmental crises, agricultural restructuring, and labor migration have become deeply entangled. The fields of Illinois, therefore, begin not at the edge of a cornfield but in distant communities where the possibilities of working the land are increasingly shaped by uncertainty, dispossession, and change.



Inside the fields. Cornfield. Jul. 13. Odell, IL.

Fieldnote voices: Everyday pesticide entanglements, Migrant Farmworkers codes and the Green Revolution

Some of the most revealing encounters with pesticides took place far from the fields themselves. During an outreach visit to a motel used as seasonal housing for migrant farmworkers in Champaign, Illinois, the first signs of workers' presence did not appear through people but through objects. Along the corridors, dozens of work boots rested outside the rooms. They were arranged in rows as workers

returned from the fields at the end of the day. The boots carried traces of soil, dust, and agricultural labor, but they also carried something else: the unmistakable smell of agrochemicals.

The smell did not belong to plants, mud, or sweat. It belonged to the chemical landscapes surrounding contemporary agriculture. In Illinois, glyphosate⁶ remains one of the most widely used herbicides, accompanied by compounds such as atrazine, propiconazole, bifenthrin, and hundreds of other chemicals applied throughout the agricultural cycle (Nowell et al. 2018; Benson and Zaya 2024). The odor lingering on those boots suggested that pesticides do not remain within the boundaries of the field. They travel with workers in buses, housing facilities, laundry rooms, kitchens, and everyday life. Exposure extends well beyond the moment of application.

The boots offered a small but powerful glimpse into what can be understood as everyday pesticide entanglements. Agricultural chemicals appear not as abstract toxicological categories but as materials embedded in daily routines, work practices, and forms of care. Workers return from the fields and immediately begin strategies to manage contamination: removing boots, changing clothes, washing hands, showering, and separating work garments from everyday clothing. These precautions reveal that exposure is not simply experienced through dramatic accidents but through a constant awareness of the chemical presence surrounding agricultural labor.

Workers often described pesticides using their own categories. The most common expression was *los químicos* (the chemicals). The term was practical and direct. It grouped together herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, and other substances under a single everyday category. But this apparently simple language concealed a complicated relationship with exposure. During one conversation, a worker named Pablo responded to a discussion about pesticides by saying, “They would not be a problem if I did not apply them.” The statement was followed by a refusal to accept information about pesticide exposure.

Such reactions reveal the contradictions that characterize agricultural labor. The issue was not necessarily ignorance about risk. Rather, pesticides were inseparable from work itself. Avoiding chemicals would also mean avoiding the labor process through which wages are earned and families are supported. For them exposure becomes part of the price of employment. In this sense, pesticides are experienced not only as environmental hazards but also as unavoidable companions of agricultural labor.

Other workers deployed a different vocabulary. Alfredo referred to pesticides as *venenos* (poisons). While discussing daily routines after returning from work, he explained that he kept his boots outside his room and that washing immediately after work was part of his efforts to protect himself from contamination. Unlike the more neutral category of *químicos*, the term *venenos* directly acknowledged danger. Together, these categories reveal how workers negotiate the tension between necessity and risk. Chemicals and poisons are not simply different words. They express different ways of living with a hazard that cannot easily be avoided.

⁶ Glyphosate is the most common of the 180 chemical compounds in the Midwest (Nowell et al., 2018). In Illinois is Glyphosate leads (Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, 2020; Jefferies, 2022; US EPA, 2014), and the most common product associated with it is Roundup, produced by Bayer-Monsanto, a company famous for creating DDT and Agent Orange (Adams, 2023). The effects of glyphosate are carcinogenic and can also disrupt hormones and alter the gut microbiome (International Agency for Research on Cancer, 2015).

These distinctions also illuminate how structural violence becomes normalized through everyday practices. Following Scheper-Hughes (2009), violence does not always appear in spectacular forms. It often emerges through ordinary conditions that become accepted as part of daily life. Pesticide exposure operates similarly. The danger rarely takes the form of a single catastrophic event. Instead, it accumulates through repetitive contact, contaminated clothing, chemical residues, and long-term occupational exposure. Over time, the extraordinary becomes ordinary.

Farmworkers develop sophisticated forms of practical knowledge to navigate these conditions. Workers often know when fields have been recently sprayed, which chemicals generate stronger odors, how wind conditions alter exposure, and which bodily reactions signal potential contamination. Their strategies include changing clothes immediately, storing boots outside living spaces, avoiding direct contact with treated vegetation, and paying attention to weather conditions during application periods. These forms of knowledge emerge not from regulatory manuals but from embodied experiences of working within chemical-intensive landscapes.

The ubiquity of pesticides also reveals another dimension of the Green Revolution. The dominant narrative presents the Green Revolution as a success story of technological innovation, increased productivity, improved seeds, and scientific progress. Yet from the perspective of migrant labor, a different reality appears. The Green Revolution was not simply a transformation of agriculture; it was also a transformation of landscapes through chemicals. Herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, fertilizers, hybrid crops, and monocrops reorganized both nature and labor. The result was not only increased production but also the creation of vast territories dependent upon agrochemical interventions.

Viewed from this perspective, the Green Revolution becomes a regime of chemical production and environmental exposure. The endless rows of corn and soy that dominate Illinois are inseparable from the chemical inputs that sustain them. These landscapes often resemble what Arturo Escobar (2011) described as development projects organized around promises of progress, productivity, and modernization. But beneath those promises lie uneven distributions of environmental risk. Some groups benefit disproportionately from agricultural productivity, while others bear a greater share of its ecological and health costs.

Chemical geographies⁷ offer a useful way of understanding these dynamics. Following Barry (2017) and Werner, Berndt, and Mansfield (2022), chemicals actively participate in the production of space. They circulate through soils, waterways, crops, infrastructures, sediments, animals, and human bodies. They leave archives not only in environmental systems but also in medical diagnoses, regulatory records, and workers' memories. Illinois can therefore be understood not simply as an agricultural landscape but as a chemical landscape whose history is inscribed in bodies as much as in fields.

Migrant farmworkers occupy a central position within these chemical geographies. Their labor sustains one of the most productive agricultural systems in the world, yet they are also among those most directly exposed to its environmental consequences. Despite narratives celebrating automation,

⁷ Chemical geographies are a way to name the production of spaces marked by events in which chemicals play a formative part. Chemical geographies generate material and textual archives (Barry, 2017). The material archives are recorded in sediments, buildings, plants, animals, and bodies. The textual ones in registers of pesticides, chemical formulas, and medical diagnosis of exposition to pesticides. I use the approach of Werner, Berndt, and Mansfield (2022) that focuses on glyphosate.

precision agriculture, and technological innovation, contemporary agriculture continues to depend upon human labor. Crops require workers to plant, harvest, maintain equipment, inspect fields, transport commodities, and apply agricultural inputs. Behind every discourse of efficiency stand workers whose bodies absorb many of the risks generated by the system.

Seen through the lens of racial capitalism, this uneven distribution of risk is not accidental. As Robinson (2019, 2020) argues, capitalist accumulation frequently relies on racialized forms of labor organization that allocate exposure, vulnerability, and protection unevenly across populations. The agricultural sector reproduces many of these dynamics. Migrant workers perform the labor required to sustain commodity production while occupying positions characterized by legal precarity, occupational hazards, and limited access to power. Pesticide exposure thus appears not simply as an environmental issue but also as a labor issue and a question of social inequality.

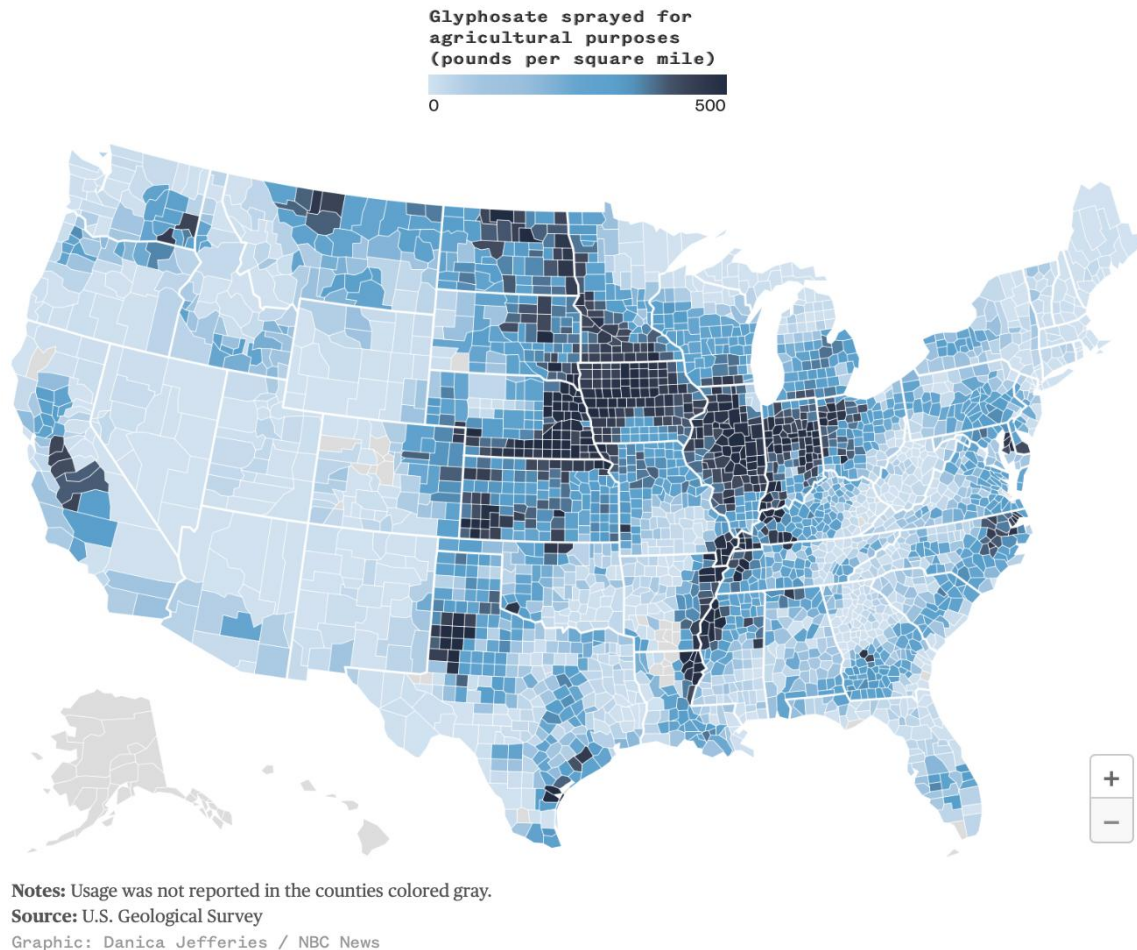
At the visible level, the agricultural complex produces corn, soybeans, fruits, vegetables, ornamental plants, and other commodities. At another level, it produces chemical geographies and uneven vulnerabilities. Corn becomes ethanol, livestock feed, processed food ingredients, and industrial products. Soy travels through global commodity chains that connect the Midwest to distant markets. Yet embedded within these commodity flows are workers who move daily through landscapes saturated by herbicides, fungicides, and insecticides.

The boots resting outside motel rooms provide a useful way of thinking about this relationship. They are ordinary objects within a vast agricultural system, yet they carry traces of everything that system requires: labor, mobility, chemicals, and exposure. The smell of agrochemicals lingering on leather and rubber reveals how pesticides transcend the boundaries of the field. They travel through bodies, housing facilities, transportation networks, and everyday routines. In that sense, the boots become small archives of the contemporary plantation regime, reminders that the productivity of industrial agriculture rests not only upon land and technology but also upon workers whose lives remain deeply entangled with the chemical landscapes they help sustain.

Glyhosyte map.

Glyphosate usage in the U.S.

Herbicides containing glyphosate are most used in farmland counties, with areas in Texas topping the list.



Glyphosate chemical geographies. USA Map showing concentrations⁸.

⁸ The map produced by (Jefferies, 2022) suggests that there are places in Illinois, like Edgar, with concentrations of 526 per square mile.



Monocrops monoliths. Sept 26 2024, Loda, IL. On route to Carbondale, IL.

Fieldnote voices: Agricultural Exceptionalism and Farmworkers' Lives

A cloudy September morning, during a train journey to Carbondale, the landscape unfolded through a succession of fields, grain silos, storage facilities, barns, rail lines, and machinery yards. Some structures appear active and busy; others seem abandoned, remnants of earlier agricultural cycles. The infrastructure is constant. Agriculture emerges not simply as crops in the field but as an organized system of roads, warehouses, factories, transportation corridors, and labor. The prairie is threaded together by the material architecture necessary to sustain industrial production.

These landscapes are also sustained by policies. Agricultural exceptionalism refers to a set of legal and political exemptions that historically removed farm labor from protections commonly guaranteed to other workers, including overtime regulations, collective bargaining rights, certain child labor protections, and other labor standards (Farmworker Justice 2024; Guarino 2023). Such policies are not merely legal arrangements; they help create the conditions through which low wages, labor precarity, and occupational risks become normalized in everyday agricultural life. They shape the environments in which pesticide exposure, heat stress, workplace injuries, and long working hours are experienced by migrant farmworkers.

The material consequences of these arrangements become visible in everyday conversations. On a rainy morning in Anna, Illinois, Jorge, a Mexican farmworker, spoke informally about his work while

standing outside worker housing. He operated tractors and frequently applied pesticides. Asked whether the work was dangerous, he paused before responding: *"Sometimes it is dangerous because I need to check and make adjustments in the pesticide compartment of the tractor (...) I've been exposed to the chemical a couple of times (...) I applied herbicide, paraquat."* Paraquat is among the most hazardous herbicides used in contemporary agriculture and is often discussed alongside glyphosate in debates surrounding pesticide exposure. The conversation unfolded as we looked across a tree farm spread over an uneven terrain. Hills, depressions, and eroded sections interrupted the neat appearance of the rows. The landscape itself seemed to underscore the instability of agricultural labor. Under conditions in which workers depend on long hours and continuous productivity to secure income, accidents do not appear as isolated events but as predictable possibilities embedded in everyday work.

Agricultural exceptionalism becomes most visible when it is transformed into routine practice. Contractors occupy a central role in this process. Throughout Illinois, many migrant farmworkers arrive through labor contractors or recruitment agencies that recruit workers in Mexico and facilitate H-2A visas. These intermediaries connect workers to agricultural employers while also mediating responsibilities, wages, housing arrangements, and transportation. When injuries or workplace disputes occur, responsibility can become difficult to trace through the layers of employers, recruiters, and contractors that structure labor mobility.

The effects of these arrangements surfaced again during conversations with farmworkers outside a motel in Mount Vernon, Illinois. One worker explained that payment was calculated per box harvested, earning eight dollars for each box filled with vegetables. The figure contrasted sharply with hourly wage estimates reported by other farmworkers in the region. Such differences reveal how labor conditions vary significantly across farms while remaining tied to broader structures of labor recruitment and agricultural production.

Taken together, these conversations suggest that agricultural exceptionalism is not simply a policy framework but a lived experience. The dynamics observed in Illinois resonate with labor regimes found in other monocrop landscapes. Low wages, labor intermediaries, concentrated land ownership, and intensive pesticide use frequently converge in ways that reproduce forms of inequality and vulnerability. In this sense, the industrial farms of Illinois resemble what plantation scholars describe as plantation regimes: landscapes organized around concentrated landholdings, chemically intensive production, and labor arrangements designed to maximize profitability while transferring environmental and occupational risks onto workers. The Midwestern prairie, often imagined as a landscape of abundance, reveals another reality when viewed from the perspective of those who labor within it.

Visual insights: The prairie lab, land concentration, and the visible infrastructures of the green revolution

Movement across the prairies of Illinois reveals multiple forces that shape agricultural landscapes, rural towns, and the infrastructures connecting them. Grain elevators, barns, machinery depots, processing facilities, rail corridors, and monocropped fields stretch across the horizon, giving the impression of a landscape organized exclusively through technology and productivity. However,

another force remains present throughout these spaces: migrant farm labor. Farmworkers participate directly in the production of agricultural landscapes by planting, harvesting, applying pesticides, irrigating, and maintaining. Despite their central role, they often remain socially and spatially invisible.

This invisibility is produced through the organization of agricultural space itself. Worker housing is often located on farms or in facilities out of public view. Daily routines are largely confined to fields and housing facilities, with occasional trips for supplies. Linguistic barriers, transportation limitations, and demanding work schedules further reduce opportunities for interaction with surrounding communities. Many workers describe social worlds centered on co-workers and fellow migrants rather than the towns in which they temporarily reside. Isolation becomes a structural condition rather than a personal choice. Plantation regimes have long relied upon forms of labor separation that keep workers physically present in production while socially absent from public life. In this sense, invisibilization becomes part of the infrastructure of agricultural labor itself.

The Illinois prairie functions as a laboratory for another experiment beyond the Green Revolution and agricultural exceptionalism. During a train ride back to Chicago, the conversation turned to patterns of land ownership across the state. Looking out across seemingly endless fields while assembling lists of major landholders transformed the landscape. What first appeared as a patchwork of individual farms increasingly resembled a geography organized through ownership, investment, and capital accumulation.

Illinois contains approximately 27 million acres of agricultural land, representing nearly 75% of the state's total area and distributed across roughly 72,000 farms (Illinois Department of Agriculture 2024). Foreign investors own approximately 2.7 percent of this agricultural land, including investors from Canada, Portugal, the United Kingdom, Italy, and China (Caughey 2024). At the same time, significant concentrations of ownership exist among institutional actors such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the University of Illinois and its Foundation, and private investors including Bill Gates (Spangler 2024). These figures illuminate the scale at which land functions not simply as a productive resource but also as a financial asset.

Viewed through this lens, the prairie becomes more than an agricultural landscape. It emerges as a terrain where commodity production, land concentration, and financial investment intersect. The visible infrastructures of the Green Revolution testify to decades of investment in productivity, storage, transportation, and agrochemical agriculture. Yet the priorities embedded within these infrastructures are uneven. Capital investment remains highly visible across the landscape, while the workers who sustain agricultural production remain comparatively hidden. The contrast reveals a broader tension within contemporary agriculture: the increasing commodification of land frequently receives greater institutional attention than the rights, health, and livelihoods of the migrant farmworkers whose labor makes these productive landscapes possible.





The farmworker's magic autobuses. Sept 27 2024, Mount Vernon, IL

Migrant Farmworkers' forms of invisibility: the magic buses

Across Illinois, from Ottawa and Champaign to Carbondale and the agricultural regions of southern Illinois, yellow school buses frequently appear parked beside labor camps and worker housing facilities. Many transport dozens of migrant farmworkers each day, carrying them between fields and housing sites in commutes that often last forty minutes or more. Their presence is ordinary enough to escape attention, yet they perform an important social function beyond transportation.

For most travelers on rural roads, these vehicles appear indistinguishable from the buses associated with schools and childhood. The workers inside remain largely unreadable to outsiders. In this sense, the buses participate in a subtle process of invisibilization. They move labor across the landscape while rendering that labor difficult to recognize within public space. Workers become visible only upon arrival in the fields, where they immediately disappear again into expansive agricultural landscapes.

These autobuses are also familiar across plantation economies beyond Illinois. Similar vehicles transport workers through monocrop regions in Central America and other agricultural frontiers. They function as mobile infrastructures of labor, linking housing, fields, and production sites. Viewed through this lens, the buses can be understood as material traces of unequal agricultural development, carrying workers through landscapes where labor remains essential to production yet often absent from public recognition.

(In)conclusions: Pesticides, Plantation Regimes, and the Midwest

This article emerged from two intertwined paths that constantly crossed each other in the fields, motels, roads, labor camps, and rural towns of Illinois. One path was grounded in outreach work, surveys, and concerns about occupational and environmental health. The other followed a broader question: what happens when the landscapes of the Midwest are viewed through the lens of migrant labor, monocrops, pesticides, and plantation regimes? Moving between these paths revealed that they were never entirely separate. Conversations about pesticides quickly turned to migration. Discussions about heat exposure opened questions about wages, debt, housing, climate uncertainty, and the difficulties of making a living from the land. The survey often ended where the ethnography began.

Listening to farmworkers' voices revealed that pesticide exposure is rarely experienced as a single occupational hazard. Chemicals appeared entangled with labor contracts, migration routes, family obligations, environmental uncertainty, and the everyday work of survival. For some workers, pesticides were simply *los químicos*, ordinary companions of agricultural labor. For others, they were *venenos*, substances demanding constant caution and respect. Between those two words lies an entire world of contradictions. The same chemicals that sustain production also produce fear, bodily vulnerability, and uncertainty. The same substances that maintain the green abundance of the prairie travel home on boots, clothing, skin, and memory.

The fieldnote voices presented throughout this article also suggest that migrant labor cannot be understood solely through economic explanations. Again and again, workers connected their migration stories to droughts, floods, failed harvests, debt, and the growing impossibility of sustaining agricultural livelihoods in their communities of origin. The fields of Illinois begin long before workers arrive in the Midwest. They begin in distant milpas, in communities facing environmental instability, and in landscapes where climate change has become part of everyday life. The migration corridor connecting rural Mexico and Illinois is not simply a labor corridor. It is also an ecological corridor linking different experiences of environmental uncertainty.

The closer the observations moved toward the fields, the harder it became to sustain the image of the Midwest as a successful agricultural utopia. Beneath the endless rows of corn and soy appeared labor camps, contractor networks, school buses transporting workers along invisible routes, housing facilities hidden from public view, and fields saturated with chemical inputs. The prairie increasingly resembled a laboratory. Not only a laboratory of the Green Revolution, but also a laboratory of agricultural exceptionalism, land concentration, financial accumulation, and labor mobility.

Plantation regimes proved useful for making sense of these connections. The Illinois countryside may look very different from the pineapple, banana, sugarcane, or palm oil landscapes of Central America, yet similar logics continue to organize production. Monocrops, agrochemical dependency, labor precarity, concentrated land ownership, and unequal exposure to environmental hazards repeatedly appear across these agricultural worlds. The landscape changes; the relations remain recognizable.

Visual documentation became another way of thinking through these questions. Grain elevators emerging from the horizon, cornfields taller than people, labor camps at the margins of towns, rows of boots outside motel rooms, and yellow school buses carrying workers through the countryside became visual archives of the agricultural complex. The photographs rarely captured the workers

themselves. Instead, they documented the infrastructures through which labor becomes invisible while remaining indispensable. They revealed a landscape full of traces, absences, and silences.

Several limitations remain. Many of the conversations were brief and emerged during outreach activities rather than through long-term interviews. The voices that appear here are fragments of larger histories. Likewise, the visual archive focuses primarily on landscapes, objects, and infrastructures rather than people. But fragments can be powerful. Sometimes, a pair of boots outside a room, the smell of pesticides in a hallway, or a conversation about a failed harvest reveals more than statistics alone.

What remains after moving through these fields is the sense that pesticides are not merely chemicals and monocrops are not merely crops. Both are part of broader social relations. The Green Revolution survives not only in seeds, machines, and herbicides, but also in the labor arrangements, migration systems, and forms of environmental inequality that sustain contemporary agriculture. Beneath the apparent simplicity of the prairie lies another geography composed of chemicals, workers, infrastructure, debt, mobility, and everyday forms of violence. Following migrant farmworkers into those landscapes reveals that the contemporary Midwest is not simply an agricultural heartland. It is also a plantation frontier continuously reinventing itself.

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