

**The Campaign for Fair Food:**  
***Reflective Action to Change the World***

by

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## Introduction: The Fuel to my Organizer Fire

I first learned about the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and Student/Farmworker Alliance in the fall of 2009 when one representative of each organization came to my university classroom to give a presentation. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) is a grassroots organization comprised of farmworkers who harvest tomatoes in the sweltering fields of Florida that began organizing in the late 1990s. The CIW is currently leading a national Campaign for Fair Food (CFF) which aims to gain a livable wage for farmworkers, put an end to modern-day slavery, and to dignify the labor of picking crops. The Student/Farmworker Alliance (SFA) is a primary ally group of the CIW comprised of students and youth from across the country. SFA came to life during the time that the CIW launched the Campaign for Fair Food in 2001. The relationship between these two organizations and their organizing philosophies are embodied by their presentations: a CIW member speaks directly to the class in Spanish and the SFA member translates. This delivery intentionally demonstrates the SFA philosophy that “we work with—not for—farmworkers.”<sup>1</sup> Towards the end of the presentation, the SFA presenter talks directly to the class about why students should care about these issues, “our struggles are not the same but they converge.”<sup>2</sup> The particular way this presentation is conducted to illustrate separate but converging struggles was my introduction to what solidarity in action looks like.

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<sup>1</sup> “Only farmworkers can speak for themselves. SFA is dedicated to working with farmworkers for change but we will not act on their behalf, instead taking our lead from the workers themselves. Farmworkers’ daily experience of working in sweatshop conditions in the fields puts them in the best position to build movements to change those conditions—and the larger power imbalances they stem from. In turn, we take responsibility for organizing our communities and colleagues to understand—and act on—our role in this movement” (<http://www.sfalliance.org/orgphilosophy.html>).

<sup>2</sup> “Both farmworkers and young consumers are objectified by the corporate food industry: farmworkers are seen as tractors that harvest raw materials cheaply while youth are seen as mouths that obediently consume branded, unsustainable products. In an increasingly polarized global economy—where the growing concentration of wealth and corporate power threatens

The information shared with my class that day was my first exposure to the reality that modern day slavery is still alive in Florida. I was angered by the description of how hard the providers of our tomatoes have to work, and how little money or respect they receive in return. I was disgusted by the commentary of produce growers, who continue to view and even describe farmworkers as objects<sup>3</sup>, and I was appalled by the ignorance of tomato buyers—both corporations and consumers—who fail to acknowledge the farmworker’s vital role in bringing food to our tables. Our lack of gratitude for farmworkers, let alone the denial of their rights, is yet another example of how backwards our values are in this society, I thought to myself during the presentation. The presentation by the CIW and SFA left me with more than feelings of outrage and frustration, however. Rather than leaving the classroom that day feeling incapable of doing anything about yet another case of inhumanity, I felt hopeful. I could see that the CIW and SFA’s hard work and unique analysis were bringing real change. The successes brought about by the alliance between the CIW and SFA showed me that social movement is real and concrete, rather than an abstract thing discussed in my textbooks.

A few days after the presentation I attended a protest outside a Publix near Eckerd college (my first ever involvement in public advocacy). In December of 2009 I joined the CIW’s 2-mile march to Publix’s headquarters in Lakeland. The following Spring I organized for the Modern Day Slavery Museum (created by the CIW) to come to my school campus, and also organized another presentation by members of the CIW and SFA. In April I attended the three-

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nearly everyone—it is imperative that we unite in common struggles and create meaningful solidarity with one another” (<http://www.sfalliance.org/orgphilosophy.html>).

<sup>3</sup> “Let me put it to you like this: The tractor doesn’t tell the farmer how to run the farm” -Quote by an anonymous tomato farmer who answered a question about why Immokalee tomato growers refused to meet with the CIW even after six CIW members held a month-long hunger strike with one demand: dialogue ([http://www.ciw-online.org/sec\\_solis\\_visit.html](http://www.ciw-online.org/sec_solis_visit.html)).

day long Farmworker Freedom March, from Tampa to Lakeland, in its entirety. Towards the end of the summer I began brainstorming with a friend I met at the march and we, along with a few others, decided to form Tampa Bay Fair Food with the goal of motivating our community to join the CFF. In September 2010 I attended the annual *encuentro* or strategy retreat—a four-day gathering in Immokalee where the SFA unites to discuss topics such as organizing philosophy and popular education, then plans a calendar of actions for the up-coming year. In December of 2010 I was chosen to be on the 2011-2012 Steering Committee and also accepted for the internship position in Immokalee during the months of January through June, 2011.

The internship opportunity came at a time in my life when I had begun to feel this overwhelming obligation to be as productive as I could possibly be in terms of “making a difference.” I think this feeling came from the perspective that Anthropology and other classes like World Regional Geography put into focus: that I have certain privileges—namely, access to information and education—that must not go to waste. While I felt inspired to “make a difference,” the meaning of that goal was ambiguous. I felt that the phrase was over-used to the point of becoming a cliché, like the standard, safe answer to an interview question: Why do you want to pursue a career in [insert major]? I feel so passionately about human rights and bringing justice to all the atrocities that millions of people suffer because of the ideals of a few, that tears are in my eyes right now just thinking about it. I don't want to "save" the world, but I absolutely want to change it, in whatever way I can get my hands on—and that task feels as burdening and overwhelming as it feels exciting and rewarding. The internship position in Immokalee gave me a place to plug in my passion, and because I gained organizing experience

and was introduced to an entire network of support, I have the confidence to continuously be active and organize in my own community.

It's important to discuss here how I am defining "student organizing" and why I identify as a "student organizer." Tampa Bay Fair Food (our community group that organizes locally for the CFF) decided in a group meeting that in order to understand our identity as organizers, it is important to make the distinction between an "activist" and an "organizer." To be an activist in our eyes is to be an attendee of protests and other actions, perhaps to educate folks about the issue and invite them out to an action, and even to speak publicly or out-rightly about the cause. To be an organizer, on the other hand, is what we say is the "non-glamorous" side of activism, in the sense that most of the time is spent behind the scenes, monitoring the logistics of an action for example, meaning that there isn't much time to be in the midst of the action. In addition, as an organizer the success of an action depends on your ability to inspire people to take part and then follow up with everyone who shows interest in the movement so that they continue to be active. So if it's less work to be an activist, why organize?

There are several reasons why student organizing interests me, which fall in-tune with my personal, social, and academic goals. Prior to my involvement in the Campaign for Fair Food, *student organizing* was a term I associated with students who had interest in starting a club on campus. When I began organizing within the Student/Farmworker Alliance, the term took on a definition that I never imagined it could; "student organizing" in the context of the CFF is about building up yourself and others to be leaders that have a strong and important voice in the movement for fair food. The role of a student organizer grabbed my interest initially because of

the inspiring model the CIW uses to fight the system that exploits them *and us*, along with the invitation the CIW offers others to join their struggle. Student organizing continues to hold my interest in part because it nurtures aspects of my personal self that I was unhappy with in the past. During my first couple years of college I was afraid to speak up in class—even if there was a comment burning inside me, squirming to be set loose into the midst of classroom discussion, I held back. Once in a while I would take a deep breath and let my inner thoughts escape into the atmosphere of vulnerability but never with total confidence. I would purposely use a tone that sounded unsure in order to weaken my opinion and sense of authority on the issue and thus avoid at least some scrutiny in case I was wrong. I also couldn't help but notice that most of the strong voices—those that orated composed arguments with confidence—came primarily from my male peers. Once I made this observation I became determined to speak clearly and confidently on behalf of my passionate beliefs in front of my peers—a sort of long-term goal I figured would come with time and more years in school. Only a couple of months into my internship with SFA, during the Spring semester of my junior year in college, I was translating presentations led by Spanish speaking farmworkers in front of classrooms full of teachers and students. Some of the audience's questions were directed to me specifically, such as, "how did you get involved?" and "why is it important for students to be a part of this movement?" For the first time, I felt like I had a truly meaningful opinion that was valued by other students in the classroom.

It's no coincidence that I gained confidence and began to value my own voice once I began organizing. One aspect of the philosophy of SFA states:

“Young people have a powerful voice in our communities. Historically, we have been creative and forceful catalysts for change, and today young people are at the forefront of movements throughout the world confronting injustice” (<http://www.sfalliance.org/orgphilosophy.html>).

Not only is it empowering to be assured that as a young person you have a powerful voice in your community; as a woman, I feel a whole other level of empowerment due to the critical awareness the SFA network has of the many layers of oppression that prevent collective liberation. This awareness is present in the make-up of the SFA Steering Committee:

“The SC [Steering Committee] is comprised of at least 50% people of color and 50% women, with an additional focus on diversity in terms of class, sexual orientation, age, geography, campaign experience, and student/non-student status” (<http://www.sfalliance.org/sc.html>).

Though gender is a very important issue to analyze in the context of student and farmworker organizing, this paper will focus on how farmworkers have historically and presently been oppressed in terms of race and nationality, and how students have been oppressed primarily due to ageism. The goal of this thesis is to demonstrate how the CIW’s Campaign for Fair Food is an opportunity for farmworkers and students to engage in dialogue and to be truly active—a process that I see as humanizing as well as a healing. I will base the ethnographic content of my thesis paper on my experience in organizing with the CIW and SFA, my internship in Immokalee, and dialogue I’ve shared with many people in the CFF network. The working relationship between farmworkers and students to change the practices of the agricultural industry, and consequently the fast food and supermarket industries, creates opportunities for dialogue. “Dialogue, as the encounter among [people] to “name” the world,



is a fundamental precondition for their true humanization” (Freire: 1995, 118). The CIW realizes the importance of dialogue or *platicas*, as it “carries with it the implication of dignity, as its suggestion of talks among equals” (Asbed: 2008, 16).

Based on the dialogue I’ve had the privilege to share with CIW and SFA folks as well as others who have been a part of this struggle, I argue that both organizations exemplify what Brazilian educator Paulo Freire termed “authentic praxis”: “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire:1995, 33). Through direct action, e.g., brand busting<sup>4</sup>, protests, truth tours, marches, etc. the CIW and allies are bringing farmworkers’ struggle to the public eye while winning over the cooperation of major corporations and agricultural growers to transform the agricultural industry. Through reflection, e.g., on the histories, narratives and assumptions about farmworkers and students that attempt to deter the spirit of the struggle or work against its progress, farmworkers and allies have a space to ideologically resist stereotypes.

Chapter One will explain why a small group of farmworkers in the rural community of Immokalee, FL began demanding a livable wage and more humane working conditions. Sub-poverty wages, back breaking labor, exposure to verbal and physical abuse, and extreme cases of slavery where workers are forced to work against their will and are held captive in horrendous scenarios, are characteristics of farm labor in Florida both historically and presently. Chapter One begins to tell the story of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, an organized group of farmworkers who developed a goal to dignify farm work despite the fact

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<sup>4</sup> Brand busting is a method used by the CIW and SFA that manipulates corporations’ superficial slogans or images to reveal their true buying practices and ethics. For example, protesters made signs and chanted “No Quiero Taco Bell” during the Taco Bell boycott.

that they legally have no right to organize. The chapter will then discuss the organizing model and the necessary coalition building the CIW is using to make the changes they want to see in farmworkers' lives a reality.

Chapter Two is dedicated to discovering my personal connection to this national movement for fair food, as a foundation for solidarity. In my experience I have been treated with suspicion or have been attempted to be made to feel guilty for befriending Mexicans—the group of people who our national discourse says is nothing but “dirty wet backs” who are “taking our jobs.” Reflection is a key to understanding my positional relation to farmworkers, as in someone who desires to work *with not for* farmworkers to create change. For both farmworkers and allies, “reflection—true reflection—leads to action” (Freire:1995, 48). Assessing one’s purpose of involvement in this movement should be a constant process throughout the struggle; as we change the world so the world changes us.

Chapter Three will delve into the assumptions placed on farmworkers and on students, and how both groups are challenging their subaltern positions in the movement for Fair Food. Farmworkers are placed into a subaltern category due to their visible signs of difference, such as race, that pits them up against the definition of a “true American”, (which was defined in the U.S. constitution as “white,” “male,” etc.<sup>5</sup>), their often non-citizen status, and lack of English to name a few. Students are also placed in a subaltern position—for reasons that are very different and less obstructive to becoming a full autonomous being but are silencing nonetheless—due to ageism and assumptions that students are over-idealistic and do not have the capacity to be agents of change. Both farmworkers and students are challenging their

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<sup>5</sup> See (Rodgers:1991).

subaltern positions by forming an alliance to build power over corporations and other actors who play a role in the exploitation of farmworkers and consumers, by demanding that the corporations sign onto a code of conduct made by the workers, and by proving that they have the capability to accomplish all of this with victory after victory.

The Conclusions section is intended to give the reader a list of concrete examples on how the CIW's story of resistance is a tool that can be used to create counter-discourses to those that have dominated our conscience and to fight an industry that is inhumane. These counter-narratives are: One, the farmworker is a symbol of hope. Two, the penny-per-pound premium passed back down the supply chain by corporations is an example of how wealth and power can be re-distributed in this country. Three, we are all leaders, regardless of our age, place, or desire to become a politician, etc. Four, the case of the CIW gives us a vision into what our future could look like: a path of expanded decision-making power and human rights, as an alternative to the neoliberal path that has been paved. Throughout this paper as a whole, I aim to challenge discourse that has closed our minds to the idea a small group of "nobodies" can truly make a difference, that it is permissible for corporations to profit without responsibility for human rights in their supply chain, and that people can unite to fight a common cause—organize horizontally across social boundaries—despite differences in race, economic standing, gender, immigration status, or language.

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## [Chapter 1] The Campaign for Fair Food: A Brief History of Tactical Action

In 1996 in a rural farmworker community of South West Florida, outraged workers chanted the phrase “*golpear a uno es golpear a todos!*” (to harm one of us is to do harm to us all!). This was one of the organized farmworkers’ first major protests against violence, which was ignited by the near fatal beating of a 17-year-old farmworker, for asking his boss to get a drink of water. More than 500 workers marched to the house of the *patrón* (boss) responsible for the beating, the bloodied shirt clenched in their fists. This protest was one of several that ensued, including a labor strike, when workers refused to go to work for an entire week. The beating was the pinnacle of daily abuses in the fields, including exposure to extreme weather conditions and pesticides, and threats by the *patrones* to work harder and faster. A 19-year-old worker describes the working conditions in an interview:

*“Sometimes it was really hot, it was sort of like suffocating, we had to wear long sleeves or sometimes I had to wear a sweater so we wouldn’t get sun burned. Some of my uncles and cousins were having some skin disorder because of the sunburn. Sometimes we had to wear extra clothing and when it was really hot...you were really hot like suffocating...and when you were bending down [to pick the crops] you were bending down the whole time, you had to stand up every once and a while to get water to keep you hydrated. And sometimes it was the opposite; it was really cold. I remember during the season in the winter, we start working around 6:30 a.m. When it’s really cold your hands get so numb. And if [the produce] has water, from the mist in the morning, my hands would actually swell up. A couple of times my fingers got fat and they itch—I don’t know why—your hands turn so numb that it hurts, but after a while you don’t really feel your hand”* (Personal Communication: March, 2012).

When the workers marched to the house of the boss, they were demanding that the growers—the owners of the land on which they labor—create tolerable work conditions and improve

wages. To date, farmworkers in the state of Florida, a 'right to work state'<sup>6</sup>, do not have the right to organize:

“As a result of intentional exclusion from key New Deal labor reform measures, including the National Labor Relations Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act, farmworkers do not have the right to overtime pay or the right to organize and collectively bargain with their employers. Due to the seasonal and unpredictable nature of agricultural work, therefore, farmworkers face periods of long hours with no overtime pay and yet, “on average, experience rates of unemployment double those of wage and salary workers”) (<http://www.ciw-online.org/Resources/10FactsFigures.pdf>).

The response and overall mentality of the growers toward the farmworkers is captured in a “now infamous quote by an anonymous tomato farmer who answered a question about why Immokalee tomato growers refused to meet with the CIW even after six CIW members held a month-long hunger strike with one demand: dialogue. The grower responded: “*Let me put it to you like this: The tractor doesn't tell the farmer how to run the farm.*” ([http://www.ciw-online.org/sec\\_solis\\_visit.html](http://www.ciw-online.org/sec_solis_visit.html)).

In 2000, the group of organized farmworkers sharpened their analysis of farmworker exploitation and poverty; they redirected their tactics after coming across a local Immokalee newsletter called *The Packer*. The newsletter featured an article about the large quantity of tomatoes purchased in the fields outside of the small migrant worker community by the

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<sup>6</sup> “The right of persons to work shall not be denied or abridged on account of membership or non-membership in any labor union or labor organization. The right of employees, by and through a labor organization, to bargain collectively shall not be denied or abridged. Public employees shall not have the right to strike. (Constitution Amended by General Election, 1944; Revised by General Election November 5, 1968),” <http://www.nrtw.org/c/flrtwlaw.htm>.

multinational, multibillion dollar corporation, Yum Brands. “According to the agricultural industry journal “The Packer”, Taco Bell is a major client of the Immokalee-based Six L's Packing Co, one of the biggest tomato producers in the United States” (<http://www.ciw-online.org/2-tacobell.html>). This article sparked the realization that large tomato-buying corporations use their leverage to buy tomatoes at a cheap price; at the end of the day, corporations profit the most from the exploitation of farmworkers. Farmworkers’ sub-poverty wages and inhumane working conditions are a result of systematic oppression, as the agricultural industry squeezes them for cheap labor and the corporate buyers refuse to acknowledge them in their company code of conduct, (which in some cases even addresses the humane treatment of the animals in the supply chain, not the workers<sup>7</sup>). So in 2001, the CIW launched the nation-wide Campaign for Fair Food to pressure the large corporate tomato buyers into signing an agreement created by the workers themselves. This agreement requires the company to comply with the following:

- 1) Pay one penny more per pound<sup>8</sup> for the hand-picked tomatoes purchased from Florida. 2) Sign a code of conduct that requires the buyer to cut purchases from farms that do not comply

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<sup>7</sup> Before Yum Brands signed the code of conduct with the CIW in 2004, “in Yum’s own words, although they do not ‘own, raise, or transport animals... as a major purchaser of food products, we have the opportunity and responsibility to influence the way animals supplied to us are treated’ (“Animal Welfare,” [www.yum.com](http://www.yum.com)). With this campaign, we are only asking that Yum give the same consideration to farmworkers they already claim to give to farm animals” (<http://www.ciw-online.org/FAQs.html>).

Another example is on Chipotle’s website: “CEO Steve Ells shares his ‘vision’ for Chipotle, including his awakening to the extremely inhumane conditions under which the majority of pigs are raised in this country. He tells of a journey to witness these farm conditions for himself and his subsequent commitment to naturally raised meats” ([http://www.ciw-online.org/images/Challenging%20the%20Chipocrisy\[1\].pdf](http://www.ciw-online.org/images/Challenging%20the%20Chipocrisy[1].pdf)). “Steve’s vision” can be found at [www.chipotle.com](http://www.chipotle.com).

<sup>8</sup> The average farmworker salary according to the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) is \$10,000-\$4,999. (Federal Poverty Guidelines being \$10,210 according to the 2007 Department of Health and Human Services). Farmworkers earn less than 2 cents per pound, or 40-45 cents average per 32 lb bucket, which is virtually the same piece rate they have been receiving since 1980. To put this into perspective, if the 1980 piece rate of 40 cents per 32-lb bucket had simply kept up with inflation, it would equal \$1.06/bucket in 2010\* (<http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl>). One penny more per pound would nearly double wages, if all tomato buyers—all supermarkets, fast food chains, food service providers, etc.—sign on to the agreement with the CIW.

with fair labor practices, including a zero-tolerance for modern-day slavery. 3) Maintain a dialogue with the farmworkers so that they will finally have a seat at the negotiating table and information shared between the growers and the corporation will remain transparent to the workers.

### **The New Day**

"It is not a question of whether we will win, but when. And when we do win, we will not only help free workers from oppressive conditions in the fields, but we will also free Publix from the impossible burden of supporting and justifying that oppression."<sup>9</sup>

-Lucas Benitez of the CIW

To date the CIW has brought ten corporations to reach these agreements, including Taco Bell, Burger King, McDonalds, Subway, Aramark, Bon Appetite, Compass Group, Sodexo. Whole Foods and Trader Joe's are currently the only supermarkets working with the CIW, thus the focus of the Campaign for Fair Food has shifted to focus on bringing the supermarket industry on board. The changes that are happening throughout Florida farmlands are changing day to day working conditions as well and are immensely changing the workers' livelihoods. This 'new day' in the industry is also completely unprecedented; the history of farm labor itself in the US is rooted in slavery: In 1763, "South Carolina emigrant planters began developing large-scale commercial agriculture, particularly rice and indigo cultivation, along the St. John's River. Enslaved Africans and their descendents provided the main labor source during this time" (<http://www.ciw-online.org/museum/booklet0811.pdf>,1). In the 1920s, "grower-shippers expanded citrus, sugarcane, and winter vegetable production in central and south Florida.

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<sup>9</sup> Quote from Benitez, who spoke outside a Tampa Publix at the Do the Right Thing Tour's culminating protest on March, 5 2011. More coverage on the action: <http://www.ciw-online.org/dotherightthing/>

These large-scale operations required a distinctly precarious workforce...Growers faced a choice: to attract workers through wages high enough to offset inevitable periods of unemployment and underemployment, or to rely on desperately poor laborers with few other options for survival” (Ibid, 5). In 1960, a Florida agricultural grower is quoted, “We used to own our slaves. Now we just rent them.<sup>10</sup>” To date, there have been 9 recent (1997-2010) cases of federally prosecuted modern-day slavery<sup>11</sup> in the agricultural industry. In one of the cases (2008), “the employers were charged with beating workers who were unwilling to work or who attempted to leave their employ picking tomatoes, holding their workers in debt, and chaining and locking workers inside u-haul trucks as punishment”(http://www.ciw-online.org/slavery). The CIW notes in the booklet they created to accompany their self-crafted, mobile modern-day slavery museum<sup>12</sup>: “Though the extent of slavery in Florida agriculture has diminished over the centuries, one thing has remained constant: farmworkers have always been, and remain today, the state’s poorest, least powerful workers. If we are to abolish slavery once and for all in Florida agriculture, we must pull it up from the roots by addressing farmworker poverty and powerlessness” (http://www.ciw-online.org/museum/booklet0811.pdf, 1).

Some of the rights that have been afforded to Florida farmworkers under the Fair Food Agreement are: Minimum wage and the use of punch clocks to keep track of how many hours are worked beginning at the time of arrival to the field; The right to fill buckets with the proper

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<sup>10</sup> See the 1960 CBS documentary “Harvest of Shame.”

<sup>11</sup> It’s important to note that the “when the CIW uses the word slavery, we do not mean ‘slave-like’ or ‘resembling slavery’ --rather, we are referring to conditions that meet the high standard of proof and definition of slavery under U.S. federal laws” (http://www.ciw-online.org/slavery.html). For detailed information on each one of the slavery cases, visit the website cited above.

<sup>12</sup> Visit <http://www.ciw-online.org/museum/> to see where the museum will be next.



amount of tomatoes and to be paid for every bucket that is filled up to the rim—(in the past, the patrón would often require workers to over fill the buckets, even though workers only got paid for 32 lbs. worth); The right to make a complaint about a serious problem without fear of being beaten or dismissed from work; The right to work in safe and healthy conditions, for example, to work in an atmosphere free of lightning or pesticides that have just been sprayed; The right to work with dignity, in this case without sexual harassment; And finally, the right to work voluntarily, free of forced labor and slavery.

### **Coalition Building**

When I first became involved in the Campaign for Fair Food, the CIW was spearheading a campaign to bring our state’s largest supermarket, Publix, (that is also the largest privately owned corporation in Florida and the 8<sup>th</sup> largest in the country) into the realm of a changing agricultural industry where corporations are finally being held accountable for their buying practices. As the most popular and populous supermarket in Florida—and rapidly expanding throughout the South Eastern U.S.—Publix has an enormous buying power over agricultural growers, meaning they can actually set the price at which they want to buy their produce. Today, nearly three years later, Publix continues to deny their role in the exploitation of farmworkers and refuses to meet directly with the CIW. However, these individual battles with each stubborn corporation offer the opportunity for more and more people to get involved. The CIW literally goes from university, high school or even Elementary school classrooms, to church services, to one-on-one meetings with individuals, educating listeners about the reality of agricultural labor and animating them to take action. Their story of struggle and victory is

one that includes the participation of consumers at the core because of the fundamental connection we all have to food:

“...food is never just about caloric intake: Food is always ritual, it *always* carries the weight of family. We hunger not for the “right ingredients,” but for magic — a spark of connection. But if the CIW can marshal hundreds of supporters around the country...it is perhaps because they’re also offering consumers that connection. Their popularity suggests that in the face of corporate seduction, we maintain our authenticity not through disengagement, but engagement. Contact, not dropping out. Because the ones who bring us food *are* family, in a way...Tomatoes aren’t “magic”: They come from somewhere. Before they form the “right ingredients” for a television grandma’s recipe, those tomatoes are grown and harvested by people...”<sup>13</sup> (Savage: 2012).

With each presentation, public action, and dialogue, the CIW strengthens consumers’ conscious tie to food, thus strengthening their conscious tie to farmworkers as a means to gain new allies and to grow solidarity across the country. The CIW recognizes that human rights belong to everyone, everywhere, at all times, which makes coalition building an all-inclusive process.

“The [Taco Bell] boycott was able to weave together a remarkably diverse and decentralized—yet highly coordinated network of alliances, due... [to] the tremendous effort [put] into building awareness among consumers, awareness that has allowed us to weave together a powerful, national network of allies committed to struggling shoulder-to-shoulder with farmworkers” (Asbed: 2008, 22-3). The CIW’s decision to build alliance with and create

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<sup>13</sup> Article written by SFA steering committee member, Katy Savage, to hype up the publicity for the Fast Four Fair Food, which took place March 5-March 10, 2012 on the front lawn of the Publix headquarters in Lakeland. More information on the Fast: <http://www.ciw-online.org/fast/index.html>.

awareness among consumers, contributes to the sustainability of the organization while encouraging others to become pro-active. In particular, the strategic alliance with people of faith has brought a strong moral voice to the movement, while reaching out to students and youth has brought bountiful energy and resistance to marketing ploys that target young people<sup>14</sup>. For those of us “consumers” who are moved to action due to the consciousness-raising efforts of the CIW, it is essential to the success of this movement that we have a deep understanding of solidarity and move forth with the principle that we have ‘separate but converging struggles’ (<http://www.sfalliance.org/orgphilosophy.html>).

“Contemporary community organizing approaches have traditionally frowned on service provision, viewing it as “doing for others” as opposed to teaching them to do for themselves and putting band aids on deep social problems” (Fine: 2006,72). The philosophies and praxis of both the CIW and SFA point to several alternatives to simple service provision—which, as noted by Fine, doesn’t target the roots of oppression. The Campaign for Fair Food, for example, is “an opportunity to see activism and education through the lens of the workers’ personal narratives, ultimately leading to a deeper analysis of power, a real understanding of solidarity, and long-term involvement” (SFA: 2010, 68). When solidarity is intended as a means to create social change, an analysis and/or constant awareness of power relations among the players involved in the movement is vital. The practice of feminist consciousness-raising throughout the U.S. during feminist grassroots movements in the 1960s, for example, shows that an analysis of

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<sup>14</sup> See the following link for a description of how this analysis of consumer (particularly youth) exploitation was used to win the Taco Bell Campaign: [http://www.utwatch.org/archives/issue/issue3\\_bootthebell.html](http://www.utwatch.org/archives/issue/issue3_bootthebell.html).

power and a plan to openly discuss intra-group power relations leads to a stronger, sustainable coalition.

Feminist consciousness-raising was a “method that began in a study group dedicated to understanding the ways that sexist oppression shaped women’s lives and choices....the study group turned to what each woman could know and trust: her own thoughts, feelings, and experiences.” The key to raising a feminist consciousness was to create an atmosphere where all participants’ thoughts and experiences were respected on an equal level. The consciousness-raising practice presented in the 1960s “stress[ed] the value of each woman's experience and knowledge, serving to build nonhierarchical and transformative spaces for thinking about and acting upon one's own and each other's different situations” (Keating: 2005, 87, 90).

However, “by failing to incorporate close attention to racial, class, sexual, national, and other differences and the unequal power dynamics among women themselves that have been linked to those differences into feminist analysis and practice, the movement failed to build or sustain long-standing feminist coalitions across lines of race, class, sexuality, and nationality” (Keating: 2005, 91). Keating quotes Elsa Barkley Brown’s argument that in order to build effective and inclusive feminist coalitions, “we need to recognize not only differences but also the relational nature of those differences...white women and women of color not only live different lives but white women live the lives they do in large part because women of color live the ones they do...[For her] women are closely linked but not innocently so: we are all connected because of our relational insertion into hierarchies of power and privilege, hierarchies that we also can resist and transform” (Ibid, 93). Ideologies are an important part of

the discussion of power relations because they are needed to justify hierarchies of power and oppression. “Elites control the ‘ideological sectors’ of society and can thereby engineer consent for their rule” (Freire: 1995, 39). In order for people to be disregarded as something “other”—as sub-humans rather than humans with inherent, equal rights—myths must be created.

In the context of modern day slavery in Florida’s agricultural fields, there are several myths and ideologies that position farmworkers as “other” and plague the progress of human rights for farmworkers. One of the myths—or distractions from reality—that the Campaign for Fair Food is aiming to debunk is that ‘farmworkers are illegal immigrants’ so it justifies them being exploited. In response to the issue of modern-day slavery in our agricultural fields, people often bring up “illegal immigrants” as an excuse for all of us to not pay too much attention; people tend to frame the plight of farmworkers as an “immigration issue,” rather than a human rights issue. Not only does the label “immigration issue” divert our attention away from real, systematic issues of inequality, but it also reinforces the idea that human rights are situational and belong only to select people. “While the majority of farmworkers in Florida and the US today are immigrants, it’s impossible to know what percentage are documented or not. And it really doesn’t matter: Growers are equal opportunity exploiters, meaning that all workers make the same low wages and receive the same poor treatment, regardless of status” ([www.sfalliance.org/resources/10FairFoodFAQ.pdf](http://www.sfalliance.org/resources/10FairFoodFAQ.pdf)). Corporations profit from the exploitation of farmworkers; therefore, the farmworkers’ fight for economic justice and humane treatment is a threat to the economic standing of those decision makers on top. For the oppressors, “having more is an unalienable right, a right that they acquired through their own “effort,” with their “courage to take risks.” If others do not have more it is because they are “incompetent”

and “lazy”, and even worse, the have-nots are unthankful towards the “generous gestures” of the upper class. Precisely because they are “ungrateful” and “envious,” the oppressed are regarded as potential enemies who must be watched” (Collier 1994:41).

The “golpear a uno es golpear a todos” principle voices a commitment to “active, committed farmworker organization responding to abuses against individuals as a community,” (Asbed 2008: 15). The principle also highlights “a much more holistic idea that is rooted in a fundamental belief in the equality and dignity of all human beings” (Asbed: 2008, 11). One of the well known teachings of Gandhi and the principle of non-violent action is that ‘all beings are one;’ by harming another, you consequently harm yourself. This principle points to an ethic of care and compassion. Canadian professor of political science Richard Devlin suggests that the ethic of care “is a consciousness of the constitutive interconnection of self and other...a cognate of solidarity” (Devlin: 1993, 994). Because an ethic of care creates harmony and sustainability, it is a foundation for coalition building.

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## Chapter [2] “Mexican Lover”

My experience organizing with farmworkers through the Student/Farmworker Alliance has taught me the basic philosophy behind effective relationships of solidarity. Since this is a movement lead by the workers, anyone who takes the step to work with the CIW will be met head on with this basic principle: The Coalition does not want sympathy nor pity or charity; instead, the Coalition asks that allies seek to understand how they are also connected to and affected by our food system. Allies of all ages, faiths, races, etc. are united in this struggle as consumers who also face exploitation by corporations: We are seen as mindless shoppers who will buy things because of an attractive label. (This analysis of consumer exploitation is of course important to the analysis of the CIW’s Campaign for Fair Food as a whole). I’ve had the opportunity to talk to many allies of the CIW, and through these conversations I see what I believe is most beautiful about solidarity—that it is vibrantly colored with each ally’s personal narrative of why they feel connected to this movement. As I myself became more and more involved—reading the CIW website daily and finding any excuse to bring up the Campaign in conversation or in my classes—and as people started to ask me why I got involved with this campaign, it was necessary for me to take the time to dig into my personal experiences and find my own unique connection to this struggle. The following section is dedicated to that reflection.

I got a job as a hostess at my favorite restaurant, a casual family roadhouse in St. Petersburg, when I turned 16. The hosts and hostesses occupy the front most space of the restaurant; they are the first faces to greet the guests and are responsible for giving the first

impression of the customers' out-to-eat experience. After the customer is seated by the host, they are approached by a server, who is probably the only other employee the customer will interact with, unless a manager stops by to apologize for a disappointing meal or another server happens to bring the food to the table. The events that take place before and after the placement of a meal in front of the customer are generally unknown. "Please don't seat us by the noisy kitchen," many customers request with a glare of disapproval towards the back of the house. I imagine that many of my front-of-the-house co-workers feel similarly towards the kitchen—removed to the point of total apathy.

The architecture and design of restaurants vary greatly, but the layout is generally the same: In a secluded area behind the open dining area where hosts, servers, bartenders and managers dwell, is the kitchen. About 2 weeks into my job I had learned the names of all the hosts, servers, managers, expo workers and most of the bussers. I had only caught an occasional glimpse of the kitchen staff upon venturing into the back to retrieve something from the walk-in cooler or to dump off some dirty dishes. I don't think management even knew the names of all of our cooks, dish washers and prep cooks. It wasn't until two years into my job, when I turned 18 and began waiting tables, that I learned all of the kitchen guys' names. (Well, I thought I had learned their names until about four years into my job, when I began to distinguish birth names from nicknames and aliases).

It doesn't take but one trip to the kitchen to notice the stark demographic contrast between the workers that occupy the front and back of the house. For the first 5 years I worked at this restaurant, the front end staff was but two people shy of being entirely US-born and



completely Caucasian—except for one black guy who worked there for a few months. My sixth year working at the restaurant we re-located. A Mexican-American lady was hired as a hostess and two Latin American women were hired as bussers. There are still at least twice as many female servers and bartenders than males. With the exception of the one young Salvadorian guy who was recently hired, the kitchen staff has always been 100% Mexican and 100% male. The blatant racial, gendered, and economic (most of the kitchen employees ride bicycles to work), divide between the two ends of our restaurant staff struck me. I had lots of questions for the kitchen guys: Do you like working here? Is this where you see yourself working for the rest of your life? Why did you leave your home country? What do you think crosses my mind when I look at you? I didn't entertain nearly as many questions about my other co-workers. I felt I already had most of them figured out quite early on—many of them lived quite public lives that were carried by gossip during work. But I felt that I knew nothing about the brown-skinned guys and was just plain curious about them.

After my shift I would normally eat dinner and socialize with the other servers in the patio area. With my limited amount of Spanish vocabulary I would greet the kitchen guys, who would be seated at a different table, also eating dinner and relaxing with a beer after work. One night, the most extroverted guy out of the group initiated a conversation with me in English. We talked for a long time. It was my entry point to begin asking the myriad of questions I had stored up in my head for the two years prior. Not long after, I began eating dinner with “the Mexicans”—as the kitchen staff is referred to by the rest—instead of with the other servers. Hanging out with the Mexicans was the most exciting part of my week to be honest. I got help with my Spanish homework while playing cards for peanuts, tasted new foods that one of the

guys would prepare—homemade *salsa, chicharrones, ceviche, sopa de camarón*. I also got to listen to reminiscent stories about Guanajuato, their far away hometown in Mexico. Once in a while I would even go out with a group of the guys and a couple of my friends. Not only was it entertaining to spend time with the Mexicans, but according to my academic interests it made sense. Around the same time I started passing hours every week with the guys, I was taking a course titled *Mexico and Central America*. In class we discussed the disturbing history of *mestizaje* or *blanqueamiento*, (the process of whitening entire indigenous populations by promoting an ideology of racial hierarchy where whites are the most civilized and dark-skinned peoples are the most barbaric) throughout Latin America. I wanted to find out at what level this ideology seeped into present-day *ciudadanos de Mexico* (Mexican citizens) and whether it affected their identity.

“What is an *Indio*?” I asked the guys. (Indo refers to an indigenous person).

“*Por lo regular la gente llama a los indios ‘indios ladinos.’ Ladino significa terco, necio, mañoso, o que tiene malos hábitos. Salvaje es un significado también.*” [Normally people call indios “*indios ladinos*.” *Ladino* means stubborn, stupid, difficult, or having bad habits. Another meaning is “wild”].

The co-worker who gave me this definition identified his grandmother as *indígena* (indigenous), making him at least half blooded Indio. Academically, I was enthralled that I had the opportunity to connect what I was learning in school to real life, and personally, I was happy that I was making friends with people who were socially set a world away. My relationship with

the Mexicans, however, would not go unnoticed or unscrutinized by the rest of my co-workers—or by the rest of the world for that matter.

One of the servers with whom I had a pretty close friendship outside of work started growing distant when I began spending a lot of time with the Mexicans. I thought maybe he was just disappointed that I was hanging out with the guys after work instead of with the servers. Then one day at work he told me to my face exactly how he felt: “Mexican lover.” I can’t remember how the words sounded when they came out of his mouth but it doesn’t matter, my feelings were hurt. Immediately, questions started to arise within me like blood rushing to the site of a wound after a hard blow. I remembered the time I was playing a game of catchphrase with my friends and the word we had to guess happened to be “farmworker.” Someone finally guessed the word when the clue was given, “Amanda loves these people!” I also recalled the time I went to play soccer with one of the Mexicans. We were riding our bikes back from the soccer field when a car passed dangerously close to my friend and the passenger chucked a large McDonalds soda at him while yelling something obscene that I didn’t comprehend because I was dumbfounded. *Mexican lover*. “Is that how the world sees me? As a person who is trying to fit in as someone they are not?” The term “Latin lover” is a popular one—it’s what you call the Hispanic guy for whom a self-indulgent white girl is lustful. But “Mexican lover” I’d never heard before. “Do people think I’m lusting after Mexicans because they are “exotic”?” My mind was racing to find a defense against what I had been labeled.

I do not identify as a “Mexican lover.”<sup>15</sup> However, the term had the power to make me pause and question my choices and even made me feel a sense of guilt. I realized that I wouldn’t be able to come up with a good defense until I understood the origin of the emotions behind the label—or definition—that had been slapped on me. I knew it would take time to craft a defense against the label since I was still trying to figure out for myself what exactly I was doing, besides just being curious, by spending time with Mexicans and eventually joining a struggle for farmworkers’ rights, (which is lead primarily by Mexican migrant workers).

As I mentioned in my thesis statement, this paper will intend to show how organizing with the CIW is a healing process. For me, being a part of SFA has been healing because I feel that I’ve become part of something bigger and stronger than the individual judgments passed about my reasons or intentions for joining this movement. As a “white” “female” “student” who was born a “citizen” of this country and comes from a “middle economic class” and who is organizing with the lesser privileged, I have experienced privilege guilt—which needs to be reconciled in order to move forward in my active involvement with this movement. The CFF creates the open space for dialogue with farmworkers, an opportunity I believe allows for the reconciliation of privilege guilt. Through dialogue we have a magnificent chance for white U.S. Americans and brown immigrants to just talk, human to human. I might even like you and you might like me and who knows, I might even see you as an equal, as a friend, as a member of my human family who does not deserve to be treated as a disposable tool.

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<sup>15</sup> Even though “Mexican lover” is completely demeaning, it is probably more socially acceptable for me to self identify with this term rather than as a “farmworker and consumer freedom fighter” or something of the like because one, our culture is more receptive to a humorous flair than to any other emotion and two, because the latter is too long and our culture prefers brevity to lengthy explanations.

Dialogue as the opportunity to truly see farmworkers as equals—as people who make their own decisions and are crafty in whatever way they can to fight systematic oppression—eliminates the feeling of guilt. Those who truly do not see farmworkers as equals, for example the corporations who refuse to allow farmworkers a seat at the negotiating table, are the ones who should feel guilty. Through dialogue with CIW, I learned that the last thing the workers want us, as outsiders who care about farmworkers' plight, to feel is pity for them. Instead, I was exposed to concepts such as “solidarity,” “ally,” and “collective liberation.” These terms eventually became my defense against the ignorant assumption that I care about a minority group or that I am part of a movement because I “love” [Mexicans, immigrants, etc.] The next chapter will delve into the imposed differences between farmworkers and “us” (the majority), which attempt to make dialogue seem unwarranted.

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### Chapter [3] Farmworkers & Students Working Against Ideological Assumptions

“There are two ways of looking at differences between you and somebody else. One way is to figure out that the differences are the tip of the iceberg, the signal that two different systems are at work. Another way is to notice all the things that the other person lacks when compared to you, the so-called deficit theory approach” (Agar: 1994, 23).

While I could quite possibly write an entire ethnographic study on my experience working in the restaurant, this chapter will reflect on experiences in organizing for social change that confront race, gender, and class norms—which transcend the space of a restaurant and transcend the six years I have been employed there. The restaurant atmosphere itself did not breed the offensive label *Mexican lover*; the term is a product of years and years of building a social hierarchy where boundaries dare not be crossed. It is because of the ideologies that sustain or justify this hierarchy that peoples’ place in society become natural and thus legitimate, (hence why most of my co-workers most likely do not think twice about why the Mexicans occupy the back of the house). It is also because of this hierarchy that natural curiosity about people who are marginalized is grounds for suspicion of one’s character and may be condemned to the extreme that it is considered betrayal. French philosopher Jacques Derrida argues that the Western philosophical tradition rests on binary oppositions: unity/diversity, identity/difference, presence/absence, and universality/specificity” (J.Scott: 1988, 37). American historian Joan Scott points out that “the antithesis itself hides the interdependence of the two terms, for equality is not the elimination of difference, and difference does not preclude equality” (J.Scott:1988, 38). As people who stand in solidarity with farmworkers and thus value true *difference*—not just the superficial perks of *diversity* like music, cuisine, or fashion—in a society that is largely concerned with protecting our borders

from “illegals” and preserving the definition of an American citizen, we must be familiar with the ideologies that work against our fight for equally afforded human rights, i.e., the inclusion (not elimination) of people who are “different” as equal fellow humans.

As I was formulating my thesis around the solidarity between students and farmworkers, my primary question was focused on these perceived differences: “how [do we] behave and what must [we] do to maintain solidarity in the face of class [or racial, gender, ethnic, etc.] difference?” (hooks: 2000, 151). Although I had connected myself to farmworkers by tracing the tomatoes I purchase back to the people who harvested them, I still envisioned myself as a social being far from similar to farmworkers. I hadn’t visualized how “students and farmworkers are both located (though with fundamental differences) in subaltern positions: farmworkers due to their poverty, lack of English, documentation, etc., and students due to their age, lack of power, etc.” (E. Schmidt. Personal Communication, 2011). There are a number of assumptions placed on both farmworkers and students; the core of these assumptions discredits both groups with autonomy, power and authority. In the following sections I will first discuss how we have historically viewed the migrant farmworker in this country and the present consequences that obstruct the workers’ autonomy. Secondly I will discuss the experiences of student organizers in the CFF to draw a parallel subaltern treatment to that of the farmworker.

## Farmworkers

A look at “Anglo Perceptions of the Mexican immigrant during the 1920s” will form a base analysis and explanation as to why farmworkers presently face exploitation in the fields as well as social discrimination:

“The 1920s was the decade when the political controversy over Mexican immigration reached fever pitch...Both proponents and opponents of [immigration] restriction...believed that most Mexican immigrants were Indian peons whose characteristics and potentialities were racially determined. Both groups...described Mexicans as docile, indolent, and backward. [The two groups] clashed only over the question of whether permitting such people to labor in the United States would prove ultimately advantageous or disadvantageous to the nation” (Reisler: 1996, 23-5).

Two of the strictest social ascriptions which mark Mexican immigrants in the US apart from White Americans and create a supposed incommensurability of human character are race and citizenship status. Mexican men and women are not “white” by U.S. standards; many of them wear the mark of a foreigner because of the way they look. “Mexicans were not recognized as simply another alien white nationality group like the Poles and Italians...the word Mexican is used to indicate race, not a citizen or subject of the country” (Gutierrez: 1996, 29). This racialization of both European immigrants and Mexican (and other non-white workers) works in different ways: “It helps white-ethnic immigrants to ‘pass’ and eventually become part of the mainstream and prevents non-white immigrants from integrating as they are always considered ‘foreigner’ (they don’t fit the definition of ‘citizen’ (i.e., white))” (E. Schmidt, Personal



Communication, 2012). Playing into the exclusion of minority groups from the definition of a “real” American is non-ethnic whites’ “unique claim to being American” and the “reluctance to expand the boundaries of “Americanness”” (Tuan: 2001, 29). So what is the essence of uniqueness that separates a White American from a non-American? The uniqueness is expressed within a cultural mythology that recalls “an earlier time when one’s ancestors traveled great and unfamiliar distances to seek a new life, the difficulties they faced, their eventual triumph over adversity, and their contributions to toward building a new nation” (Tuan: 2001, 159). The non-white ethnic or racial Other is denied claim to Americanness because of a presumed difference in beliefs, culture, language, food, interests, likes and dislikes, etc. The question of who is an American is based on “a Western, colonialist notion of commonality, the capacity to tolerate others only if they are seen “just-like-us”” (Hsu: 1996, 47), therefore white (which is the assumed racial standard).

“The characterization and denunciation of immigrants as either a radical threat or an inferior stock that undermined the welfare of American workers was based on a stereotypical image of all newcomers” (Portes & Rumbaut: 1996, 98). Immigration or citizenship status (lack of citizenship meaning that one is labeled “illegal,” “undocumented,” “alien,” etc.), causes many Mexican/Latin American immigrants live on extreme sub-poverty wages working in the shadows of the secondary labor pool.<sup>16</sup> “They are especially overrepresented in agriculture and construction work—some of the most unregulated sectors of the labor market. Only 4.3 % of all workers in the U.S. are unauthorized migrants, but they constitute 19 % of workers in

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<sup>16</sup> “The secondary labor market consists of jobs that are generally not regulated. Wages are low, and working conditions are dangerous and often harmful to workers’ health. Not only are the jobs unpleasant and poorly compensated, they are also a dead end: there is little or no room for advancement” (A.Chomsky: 2007, 14).

agriculture” (A. Chomsky: 2007, 60-1). It is also important to understand the history of attitudes towards Mexican immigrants because many *Estadounidenses*<sup>17</sup> conclude that the exploitation of farmworkers on our soil is a result of their “illegal” immigration status, or a result of their ‘brownness,’ (“wet backs”) ‘indianess,’ (which implies they are “backwards”) or poverty, (which in this country is often seen as a choice and implies failure to pull oneself up “by the bootstraps”). There are several layers of identity that get imposed literally onto farmworkers’ bodies—not excluding borders, which also get inscribed on their bodies (E. Schmidt, Personal Communication, 2012). For all of these reasons, it’s ‘their fault’ they are exploited.

Now, nearly a century later, stereotypes still exist that Mexicans are inherently harder workers than Americans or that they are obedient and pliable—that’s why they get hired. Or the opposite also circulates as fact, that Mexicans are lazy—that’s why they get paid less. Either way, the stereotype is used to justify an action; the former being the hiring of “illegal” immigrants (which is manipulated by politicians to anger Americans who can’t find jobs and plays into the myth that immigrants are “taking our jobs”) and the latter being so that bosses don’t have to pay them minimum wage, health insurance, or so they can’t organize, etc. In other words, our cultural narratives about Mexican presence in the US have not significantly changed in the past hundred years.

“Even though Mexicans are not alone in their labor as farmworkers, they certainly comprise the great majority of farm labor hired in Florida, especially in the citrus, tomato, and strawberry industries. Moreover, they have replaced black labor in the fields, and have been ideologically

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<sup>17</sup> I prefer to use the Spanish language term *Estadounidense* to refer to people who live in the US over the English language word *American* simply because it is a more accurate; the U.S. alone does not comprise a single, homogenous “America;” rather, at least 36 diverse countries make up the Americas.

put in the subservient, sub-human category that previously stigmatized the descendants of ex-slaves. This degrading concept, this value or attitude...is still alive and well in Florida. The social distance between “them”—in this case Mexican farmworkers—and the rest of the society (certainly with great exceptions) protects the ideology and perpetuates farmworker stereotypes as lesser human beings” (Schmidt: 2009, 28).

I interviewed a farmworker to get a better idea how these assumptions look presently:

Me: If you could change the perception that most people have about farmworkers, what would you want them to see or what would you want them to understand?

Farmworker: *If I could change something about their perspective, it would be the way they look at farmworkers as contributors to society, because they take it for granted. We’re actually the ones—the farmworkers—are the ones putting the food in stores and on our tables. They’re the ones who provide for us. Nobody’s really going out there anymore, like they used to have their own little farm and pick their own produce, there are people out there who do this for a living, and it’s taken for granted. They aren’t really seen as key players, like they don’t provide enough to the community, they’re just there. I would like them to say that because of that person, I’m able to go to the store and buy these [fruits or vegetables] and get my groceries without a hassle. And because of them, our lives are easier; but they don’t see it that way. If it wasn’t for them, we would be going back to the old ways, so they deserve respect too. They’re not just there, they actually do contribute to society and they do impact us, even if they seem that they don’t.*

Another prevalent assumption about farmworkers is that they can’t speak for themselves; they need someone to represent them. This belittlement that strips farmworkers of their agency is linked to the farmworker’s undocumented status, lack of English proficiency, lack of knowledge of the law and their rights, etc.—which of course are all structural conditions that do not reflect their incapacity as human beings to be able to talk for themselves. Spivak, an Indian literary critic, argues that “for the ‘true’ subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself” (Spivak: 1988,

285). In other words, the subaltern position denies one agency—for example, it is assumed that the subaltern does not know their position, and also denies humanity—for example, the subaltern is not given the legal right to organize, as is true for farmworkers in the state of Florida<sup>18</sup>. University of Florida professor J. DiMaggio argues that whether or not structural conditions give the subaltern the opportunity to speak—to claim that they have rights—it is only if they are heard—that the institution will take their claims seriously and allow them to outright denounce their situation—that they become true participants in human culture, which is “the key to the Western subject” (DiMaggio: 2007, 426). Since the Western approach to the subaltern “is either to speak for or to silently let them speak for themselves” (Ibid, 422), DiMaggio calls us to question, under what conditions will the subaltern, or the oppressed, the “other” be heard? How can we, as people who desire to communicate with (and about) the subaltern, avoid silencing while truly listening? A place to start is with an understanding of “the positional relations of the dominant to the subaltern” (Ibid, 422). SFA, (who I would not identify as a group of “intellectuals” because they are not given a voice either, but as a group made up of young folks who are aware of their privilege, whatever amount it may be, and are concerned with the right and effective way to use it), addresses this question of positional relations through their organizing philosophy, which aims to accomplish a relationship of solidarity. According to French philosophers Foucault and Deleuze, “the oppressed (in the First World, under the standardization and regimentation of socialized capital...), if given the chance, and on

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<sup>18</sup> “As a result of intentional exclusion from key New Deal labor reform measures, including the National Labor Relations Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act, farmworkers do not have the right to overtime pay or the right to organize and collectively bargain with their employers” (Kandel: 2008, 7).

the way to solidarity through alliance politics, can speak and know their conditions” (Spivak: 1988, 283).

The assumption that farmworkers cannot speak for themselves leads to charity work led by non-farmworkers that may aid farmworkers temporarily, such as handouts or donations, instead of solidarity work, which positions farmworkers as the analysts of their own situation and targets the roots of oppression that keep farmworkers in need of assistance. As Freire says, “When the situation calls for action, that action will constitute an authentic praxis only if its consequences become the object of critical reflection...To achieve this praxis, however, it is necessary to trust in the oppressed and in their ability to reason;” (Freire: 1995, 48) otherwise, we continue to speak for them. When a socially diverse group of people is working to change the institutions that perpetuate inequality, those who are directly affected by forms of systematic oppression must be given room to make mistakes; trial and error is an essential part of “authentic praxis,” which is a humanizing process for the oppressed. One of the obstacles to “authentic praxis” is of course, the assumption that farmworkers are uneducated or “ignorant.”<sup>19</sup> Here is a real life example: During a presentation by the CIW and SFA, an audience member made a comment at the moment they realized that the presenter actually works in the fields, “Wait...you’re a farmworker?! Wow, you’re really smart.” Why someone would be shocked that a farmworker has a grip on reality and an analysis of their own oppression has at least two possible explanations: People have said that farmworkers *like* working in grueling

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<sup>19</sup> Due to poverty and the need to work daily to help the family survive, the reality for migrant youth is that they often fall behind in school and cannot complete the school year. See the 2011 film *La Cosecha* and the 1997 book “The Circuit” by Francisco Jimenez.

conditions, or that it is what they're "good at."<sup>20</sup> The following is a quote from the 1960 documentary *Harvest of Shame* where reporter Edward R. Murrow asks an employer of hundreds of migrant laborers if the farmworkers are "happy people":

"Well I guess they got a little gypsy in they blood—they just like it. A lot of them wouldn't do anything else. A lot of them don't know any different. That's all they want to do; they love it. They love to go from place to place. They don't have a worry in the world—they're happier than we are. Today they eat, tomorrow they don't worry about. They are the happiest race of people on Earth."

In other words, farmworkers like doing menial jobs and don't desire to go to school or to do work that requires a college degree. Farmworkers are not credited with having the smarts to even "go find another job;" therefore, they are seen powerless and not in control with their lives or realities and thus they are also seen as lesser. It is also assumed that "farmworker" is equivalent to "undocumented Mexican." To be "undocumented" (i.e., alien, illegal foreigner, etc.) in the U.S. is to carry a whole other set of assumptions, such as criminality.<sup>21</sup> Their foreignness results in constant questioning of their intentions and origins and an automatic suspicion of their loyalty to the US, which is heightened in times of global tension or domestic economic downfall. Moreover, our food system completely severs the consumer from the

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<sup>20</sup> Coming from Latin America where landownership and tending to land is an important part of identity and pride—whether one is a doctor, school teacher, or farmworker—farm work is something that many migrant farmworkers do enjoy and are proud of; however, farm work in the US *is not* dignified work.

<sup>21</sup> Mexicans and many other Latin American immigrants crossing the border "illegally" is all over the news. Simply put, this is "because they are not allowed to cross the border legally" (A. Chomsky: 2007, 187).

origin of the product so that we have no idea who the people are who help make things/food available to us, let alone the wealth of knowledge that those people possess—which causes an even further alienation of the farmworker. So for those of us who want to truly know the farmworkers through dialogue, solidarity, etc., are we also viewed with suspicion? What criticisms to students face in their active roles as organizers and advocates in the Campaign for Fair Food?

### **Students**

In our society students are placed in a subordinate position in terms of authority—that we are “mistaken” when we speak out about something that angers us in our society, and in terms of responsibility—that we do not make responsible, well-thought out and planned decisions; rather, we are just “loud” or “disruptive.” Here’s an example that happened to one of my co-organizers, a 20-year-old female student:

Me: Do you have any example of when you tried to educate someone about farmworkers’ struggle and you were met with a really strong rejection?

Student: *Yes. I was talking to one of my best friend’s dad...in his mind it was the farmworkers who are selfish, they should be thankful for the jobs they have and they’re just trying to live luxurious lives. Then I mentioned the work conditions and modern day slavery and that I’d actually visited Immokalee and he responded, “Well so have I.” So he didn’t believe that slavery was happening [because he didn’t see it in while in Immokalee]. So he told me to do research about the other side when he had no idea about all the core [slavery] cases (Personal Communication: March, 2012).*

This example also illustrates how young people are easily silenced. My friend had to work up a lot of courage to speak to this person about an issue that she predicted he would not see eye to eye on. Her anxiety was heightened I’m sure by the fact that he is in older person and a man. Even though the person she spoke with is someone she knows and trusts—he is her

best friend's father—the conversation ended with him telling her that she didn't have her facts straight. This experience of being shut down or discredited—even though we have done our homework and our research—is a common for student organizers. I've participated in several actions where a group of students goes into Publix supermarket and ask to speak directly to the manager, so that we may show our concern for the treatment of the farmworkers who harvest the store's tomatoes. Despite our rehearsed statistics and dead on facts, the managers seem to allow the information to flow one ear and out the other, while mocking laughter fills their unsympathetic eyes. However, despite these experiences of being ignored or feeling embarrassed for speaking up, our personal roots in this struggle and instances of being heard keep us strong:

Me: You mentioned to me earlier that you would become afraid or nervous to talk about the campaign because you've gotten so much negative reaction about the CFF but you've made such an effort to talk to people that you now have seen different world views—how are you feeling right now about all that?

Student: *Since I've been rejected so many times or have gotten negative responses to the campaign, you get used to it. And it's actually more practice—whatever people say, you end up figuring out a better reason to be for it, and if anything you build up even more knowledge about it. You find out more ways people are against it and then you find come backs for all of those so then—I'm gaining more insight as to how other people think about it and then find better explanations to give them so they can understand that they're wrong. I think that's a part of leadership...people are going to say awful, terrible things but you can't let it get you mad, you to respond in a mature way (Personal Communication: March, 2012).*

Students are often dismissed as over-idealistic. The assumption placed on us is that we will eventually out grow our rebel spirits and join the “real world.” Here's an experience I had: A few months ago I had two customers at the restaurant where I work; one was running for mayor of St. Petersburg and the other was his campaign manager. They asked me if I thought welfare recipients should get drug tested. My immediate reply was, “no.” They looked at me



with shock and confusion before the campaign manager reasoned aloud, “Ooh, that’s right—you’re still in college so you are all about the goodness of humanity.” My friends and I get the “hippie” label a lot too; people either use it as a cute, innocent way of describing a limited understanding of our worldview, as in, “they love peace and like to eat veggies, they are such *hippies*”—which is an insult when what we really feel is a burning desire for social justice that is more like a religious calling to do the right thing—or it is used in a negative way to crush our hopefulness, as in, ‘have fun pretending it’s the ‘60’s now, but you will calm down when you grow up.’ “Young people in their rebellion are denouncing and condemning the unjust model of a society of domination...students soon discover that in order to achieve satisfaction in school, they must adapt to the precepts which have been set from above. One of these precepts is not to think” (Freire:1995, 133). The concept of “rebellious” youth is a tricky perception; it implies that questioning the system is only a stage in life, which successful individuals will overcome in order to become respectable adults.

Another set of assumptions about student organizers is based on the student’s race: For student organizers of color, they have been called “racist.” As people of color organizing with other people of color, (i.e., farmworkers), it may be prematurely concluded that minorities are conspiring against the white majority. The real goal—basic human rights for all—thus becomes utterly distorted as a racial quest for power. The following dialogue is from an interview I did with a co SFA student organizer, who happens to be Latina:

Me: What do you think are some of the assumptions that people have about you when you talk to them about the campaigns?

Student: *People usually think that my family is farmworkers, or some people think I’m doing it because we are the same race—that we are all “latinos” or whatever.*

Me: How do you respond?

Student: *Yeah, these are “my people” but at the same time it should be everyone’s responsibility. Like that quote, “No one is free when others are oppressed.” These are people—all of us living on this planet, and all of us living in this state or country or whatever—so everyone should care about it.*

Me: If you could change the perception that many people have about farmworkers and students—or people who are organizing with farmworkers—what would you want them to see or understand?

Student: *If the racist perception was gone, it would be a lot easier for people to care a lot more. Because of the negativity towards Latinos [especially] recently, it’s been a lot harder to get through to people* (Personal Communication: March, 2012).

As for “white” student organizers, it is often assumed that you are the organizer of the people of color, (since it is already assumed that farmworkers are too ignorant or lack the agency to speak for themselves), or that you are some sort of “Mexican lover” and are acting out of place by taking their side. So, as a “white” “female” “student” who was born a “citizen” of this country, and comes from a “middle economic class,” why would I continue to be interested in organizing for social justice with an organization of primarily “brown” “low class” “laborers” who are also mostly “non-citizens,” if I am not the one who suffers direct abuse, low wages, etc. as a result of the agricultural industry that we are fighting to change? We are exploited by our food system in a different way than farmworkers and as individuals we carry with us our own bundles of disempowering experiences. The next section will further delve into the question of why is it important that students organize and continue to be in relationships of solidarity with those who are less privileged.

A college student who has participated in CIW actions and has supported the CFF related that the opportunity to organize with and learn from the people who we usually view as

in need of charity, puts forth the opportunity to understand the sources of privilege and therefore the willingness to work for equal treatment:

*“Basically the difference between solidarity and charity is doing it [solidarity] because you have an understanding of peoples’ situation versus doing it [charity] to feel good. And what’s cool is that the more I understand about people’s situations, the [more I realize there’s no need to feel] guilty [because] I am able to take them as people. It’s not about me [taking part in order to clear my own guilty conscience or to “feel good”] anymore because it’s not charity” (Personal Communication: November, 2010).*

In a similar vein, one of my co-organizers in the CFF relates how student organizing became the avenue through which she could take action and thus meet her personal goal to show genuine respect for others:

*“I definitely got [my curiosity about other cultures] fulfilled in my classes but I think the transition from just being interested in and curious about cultures...and wanting to satisfy that, turned into not only curiosity but more of a respect for those people. I don’t just want to learn about these people, because it’s like I’m consuming their culture—wearing cute little things from their country or putting pretty paintings on my wall, rather, knowing these people have a history, have a story, I want to respect that, not just exploit it. And I felt like for me to really respect it aside from just talking about it, I felt like I had to take action and do something because there are things right now, still pending, that need to be done. So that’s sort of how I became an organizer” (Personal Communication: July, 2011).*

Many student organizers in the CFF also experience the opportunity to take on an “oppositional identity,” which sociologist Mary Waters defines as “traits and characteristics which are the opposite of those valued by the majority group” (Waters: 1994, 816). An archetypal example of oppositional identity is when African Americans are “accused of “acting white” if they don’t speak black English and behave in particular ways” (Ibid, 807). This term is helpful in dissecting the backlash that students often get for supporting the Campaign because they may be acting out of their ascribed gender, racial, ethnic, etc. role. For another co-organizer of mine, being a part of the SFA-CIW network has been an important means of re-

connecting with her ethnic roots and identity, which in her past experience have been devalued. This friend of mine had shared with me on a prior occasion that when she was younger she was hesitant to go to the pool or beach with friends sometimes because she didn't want her skin to get darker. She grew up in Lakeland, FL, which (according to the 2010 general demographic report for Lakeland) is 12.6% Hispanic or Latino.

Me: "In a movement where people who are darker skinned are more dignified, do you think that has to do with [your newer confidence]?"

Student: *"Yeah, definitely. It's a sense of community and family that you're happy and proud to be a part of and in Lakeland it's not like that at all. I've learned through all the different types of people I've met—people from different backgrounds, from different struggles—it's cool how we all connect and are working together on this campaign. I learned a lot about myself, about my background. I became more proud of from where I am and I even listen to Latin music now—my parents always listened to it and I never really cared about it until now. I think about the campaign and everyone I'm with and it's all I want to listen to. I've opened my mind a lot more. I think I'm a lot more confident in who I am and the person that I am and that's all because of this campaign and the people in it"* (Personal Communication: March, 2012).

As I mentioned in the introduction, despite assumptions placed on farmworkers that they're ignorant (too ignorant to analyze the systematic ways in which they're oppressed for example) and assumptions based on student organizers, (for example, that their idealism will either get them into trouble or eventually fade out), both groups are challenging these assumptions and thus their subaltern positions. The next section will give some examples to illustrate how these groups are resisting ideologies of power (who has the right to make demands or to assert their rights and police those rights) through the Campaign for Fair Food.

## **Resistance**

"Concepts such as unity, organization, and struggle are labeled as dangerous...for their realization is necessary to the actions of liberation" (Collier 1994:122).

-G. Collier in Basta: Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas

Hegemony—“the process of ideological domination” (Scott: 1985, 316)—works through definitions, or labels, which we put on ourselves and on one another and create identities. Identity is indeed negotiated (Nagel: 1994, 152); we self-identify with certain ethnic/cultural/racial groups but are always mindful of what the rest of society will allow us to identify, to the extent that we feel wrong for identifying with a certain social group that society has decided for us is unfitting. No one is immune to stereotypes—social norms will try as they might to put us back in our places if we act out or challenge presumptions about our identities; however, when “ideologies and behaviors are imposed; consequently, there is ideological and behavioral resistance, which are inextricably joined” (Scott: 1985, 304). CIW and SFA each represent primary examples of this ideological resistance.

The CIW (again who is made up of over 4,000 farmworkers, the core organizing group and full-time staff also being primarily farmworkers), is leading a national campaign that directly confronts this country’s (and even the world’s) largest corporations, demanding initially that they sign a code of conduct—created by the CIW—and continually that they hold up the responsibility of compliance, which is also monitored by the CIW. In addition, the CIW has become an authority in working with law enforcement and other organizations to identify and prevent human trafficking and slavery.

“The CIW is a founding member of the national Freedom Network U.S.A to Empower Victims of Slavery and Trafficking. As a regional coordinator for the Freedom Network Training Institute on Human Trafficking (FNTI), the CIW trains state and federal law enforcement and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) throughout the Southeastern U.S. on how to identify and

assist people held against their will in slavery operations. In 2009, the CIW was appointed by the Florida legislature to the Statewide Human Trafficking Task Force. The CIW also helped develop the curriculum for the Florida Department of Law Enforcement's course on Advanced Investigative Techniques in Human Trafficking, and contributed to the National Sheriffs' Association guidebook on first response to victims of crime" (CIW website: <http://www.ciw-online.org/slavery.html>).

The work of the CIW is helping to change the popular image of the farmworker—who many of us still envision as a white guy on a tractor, or the lesser known reality—that they are humans, exploited for their labor and work in grueling, often inhumane conditions. Through the CIW's efforts, not only is the reality of farm labor seeping into our consciousness, but farmworkers have been afforded at least some trust in positions of authority. For example, in November of 2010 the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange (FTGE) signed an agreement with the CIW "to extend the CIW's Fair Food principles – including a strict code of conduct, a cooperative complaint resolution system, a participatory health and safety program, and a worker-to-worker education process – to over 90% of the Florida tomato industry" ([http://www.ciw-online.org/watershed\\_moment.html](http://www.ciw-online.org/watershed_moment.html)). The CIW is now solely responsible for going out to the fields and educating workers about these historical changes, including what the workers' new rights and responsibilities are under the Fair Food agreement.

As consumers, and as the primary target for fast-food related advertisement, young people are also exploited by the corporate food industry; we are seen as mindless shoppers who are sold purely on catchy jingles or attractive slogans. However, "students and young

people have been an indispensable part of the CIW's struggle, contributing and learning; changing the world while being changed by this struggle and by our relationship with the workers" (<http://www.sfalliance.org/about.html>). SFA has been at the forefront of a resurgent farmworker solidarity movement, organizing around the CIW's Taco Bell Boycott extensively for four years. By the time Taco Bell ultimately caved to the CIW's demands, students at 25 colleges and high schools had "Booted the Bell" from campus. This incredible wave of student activism was a key factor leading to the CIW's victory. The student-organizer network, in my experience, enables students to live out and express counter-ideologies to the dominant ones that attempt to convince us that they are the one and only way of living, thinking and acting. When provided with an outlet for creative and tactical defiance, students move "from a position of complicity to one of agents of change" (SFA: 2010, 67).

Together, farmworkers and students are challenging their subaltern positions by forming an alliance to build power over corporations and other actors who play a role in the exploitation of farmworkers and consumers, by demanding that the corporations sign onto a code of conduct made by the workers, and by proving that they have the capability to accomplish all of this with continuous victories—again, there are 10 major corporations to date that have signed the Fair Food agreement, including the *world's* largest fast food chain (McDonald's). Authentic praxis is the means by which everyone involved in this movement may engage their own experiences of oppression to the broader structures that oppress us as a human race, thus creating a unified front to (non violently) combat corporate power.

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## Conclusions: Changing the Story

“Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, the power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts.”

-Salman Rushdie

The CIW’s story of resistance offers many alternative analyses to certain narratives that we hear and repeat, often without stopping to think who created the story and for what purpose. For those of us who are working to be agents of change, we must “understand the histories and institutions that underlie contemporary social systems, as well as how these histories and institutions shape culture and ways of collective meaning” (Reinsborough:2010, 18). The narratives we often use do not require the individual (the speaker or the listener) to reflect on their own role in the story and whether or not the outcome of the story is malleable. The stories we tell rest on a slippery slope similar to the one that James Scott suggests creates false-consciousness: “...the argument is that a system of social domination often appears to be inevitable. Once it is considered inevitable, the logic goes, it is apt to be considered natural even by those who are disadvantaged by it, and there is a tendency to consider whatever is natural also to be just or legitimate” (Scott:1985, 322). To re-imagine the world as a place where we can truly be agents of change, as advocates for story-based strategy Reinsborough and Canning have suggested and the CIW has demonstrated, we must re-write stories and re-vision our individual positions within the system of social relations. The world—the context in which we are working for change—Freire relates should not be taken as “a static and closed order, [nor] a *given* reality which [humankind] must accept and to which [it] must adjust; rather



it is a problem to be worked on and solved” (Freire: 1995, 14). Re-visioning our relationship with reality is thus a precondition to ideological resistance.

British sociologist Richard Hoggart notes in his analysis of English working-class culture, “When people feel that they cannot do much about the main elements of their situation, feel it is not necessary with despair or disappointment or resentment, but simply as a fact of life, they adopt attitudes toward that situation which allow them to have a livable life under its shadow, a life without a constant and pressing sense of the larger situation” (Scott:1985, 322). The CIW is actively fostering agents of change by showing us just what we *can* do about a situation—in this case, our a food system—that farmworkers and allied consumers alike are not content with. The goal of this thesis has been to demonstrate how the CIW’s Campaign for Fair Food is an opportunity for farmworkers and students to be truly active or to participate in what Freire calls “authentic praxis.” The final section will give examples of how the CIW’s story of resistance is a tool that can be used to challenge dominating narratives about social place, distribution of wealth, leadership, and the future.

## **The Farmworker is Our Hope**

*Yo fui a la Revolución  
a luchar por el derecho  
de sentir sobre mi pecho  
una gran satisfacción.  
Pero hoy vivo en un rincón  
cantándole a mi amargura  
pero con la fe segura  
y gritándole al destino  
que es el hombre campesino  
nuestra esperanza futura.*

*I joined the Revolution  
to fight for the right  
to feel within me  
a great fulfillment.  
But now I am overlooked  
singing to my bitterness  
but with the certain faith  
and crying out to fate  
that it is the farmworker  
who is our future hope.<sup>22</sup>*

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<sup>22</sup> Written by Arcadio Hidalgo.

The lyrics above come from the *Son Jarocho*<sup>23</sup> style song *Luna Negra*, which folks in the Student/Farmworker Alliance network have called “the unofficial theme song of SFA.” To state that *the farmworker is our hope* is to completely reverse the prevailing attitude and perception that we have historically and presently held towards migrant farmworkers in this country: “culturally if not always legally defined as immigrant “aliens,” outsiders, foreigners, almost always the “other,” poor, and invisible to many” (Schmidt: 2009, 40). Farmworkers work and live in some of the most marginal places of our society—in the rural outskirts of towns where even many Floridians do not have a sense of familiarity. “Even though farmworkers perform an important role in the local, national, and global economy, they occupy a space that reflects their marginality, their ethnicity, and their class” (Ibid, xxii). These structural ways in which farmworkers are kept out of our conscience—that they are not deserving as equals nor hard-working people who contribute to this country—are the foil to which the CIW is building a different understanding of the farmworker.

To get an idea of how this image of “the farmworker is our hope” is affecting farmworkers themselves, I interviewed a freshman from the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP), a program which aids students from farmworker families at the University of South Florida. This student began working in the strawberry fields of Mayaca City, Florida when he was 14 years old.

Me: What does the CFF mean to you as someone who knows how hard you have to work just to make that little bit? What does it mean to know that farmworkers are getting paid a penny more per pound by all of these corporations that are participating in the agreement?

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<sup>23</sup> “*Son Jarocho* is popular music with roots in the Afro-Mexican communities of Vera Cruz. This song and style of music became a staple at CIW events, [protests and celebrations too], courtesy of Son Del Centro, a collective of young musicians based out of a cultural center in Santa Ana, California” (Rodrigues:2006, 1).

Student: *“Whenever I see at stores that they’re selling [produce] for more than they pay us—that just hurts; all that hard work and then to see what they’re profiting. I think the CFF is great; I support it. As soon as I heard of it I supported it—I was like, “wow.” It affects me too; my entire family is farmworkers and it benefits us and everybody else that is in the same situation”* (Personal Communication: March, 2012).

The CIW has placed farmworkers at the center of a national movement for fair food, where farmworkers are envisioning, creating and monitoring the changes they want to see in the agricultural industry—which in turn, become the changes in their homes and their day to day lives. For the thousands of non-farmworkers who, through solidarity, have found purpose and voice in this movement, farmworkers have become a symbol of hope—a living example that “nobodies” can find cracks within the dominating structures of oppression and expose these flaws while creating a new model. An integral part of this new model is the process of gaining economic justice, which requires a re-vamp of how wealth and power is distributed among the corporations on top and the workers on the bottom.

### **Re-Distribution of Wealth and Power**

“Today’s immigration is structured by contemporary relationships among countries and regions, and by their history of economic inequality...High levels of migration are a symptom of a global economic system that that privileges the few at the expense of many. It could be called capitalism, neoliberalism, globalization, or neocolonialism. As long as it keeps resources unequally distributed in the world, you’re going to have people escaping the regions that are deliberately kept poor and violent and seeking freedom in the places where the world’s resources have been concentrated...” (A. Chomsky: 2007, 189).

Worldwide, people of all ages are exploited by large, often foreign but also domestic corporations that employ them as part of a “global economy.” In this “global economy”—which may sound inclusive and well-intentioned, but is anything but—people truly become disposable “expenses” in the name of an unequal distribution of wealth; wealth in terms of money,

education, etc., or the access to a better quality of life. The seven federally prosecuted slavery cases in Florida's fruit and vegetable industries draw several examples of this systematic impoverishment that targets the poor, whether citizen or non-citizen. The following excerpt illustrates why anthropologist James Ferguson has called for the need of "an unsettling shift from the question of cultural *difference* to the question of material *inequality*" (Ferguson: 2006, 20).

"In 2007, Florida employer Ron Evans [who worked for the 2004 Chairman of the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association] was sentenced to 30 years in federal prison... Operating in Florida and North Carolina, Ron Evans recruited homeless U.S. citizens from shelters across the Southeast, including New Orleans, Tampa, and Miami, with promises of good jobs and housing. At Palatka, FL and Newton Grove, NC area labor camps, the Evans' deducted rent, food, crack cocaine and alcohol from workers' pay, holding them "perpetually indebted" in what the DOJ called "a form of servitude morally and legally reprehensible" (<http://www.ciw-online.org/slavery.html>).

At the same time as workers are exploited for cheap labor, consumers worldwide, especially in the "developed world," are becoming less and less aware of where the things they purchase come from; even if there is a conscious effort to make this connection, the long, messy route of production is not readily transparent. Marx's concept of "fetishism of the commodity" suggests that disconnect between consumers and goods causes us as a society to place value on people-made/cultivated/etc. objects without placing value on the people who make the objects. We place value—how much we are willing to spend—on a thing, without

considering the human labor cost to produce the thing we want. Ultimately, “the process of production has mastery over [people]” (Marx: 1977, 175)—unless, of course, human rights take precedence. Thus, in order to humanize invisible laborers like the people who harvest the tomato fields of Florida, we must re-distribute the wealth and power of the tomato industry—which of course is top heavy—so that the workers on the bottom rise above sub-poverty wages and have a seat at the negotiation table with growers and corporations, i.e., a say in the decisions that end up affecting the workers directly. “The agreement that the Coalition of Immokalee Workers reached with Yum brands is precedence setting; never before in history has a fast food company paid money back down their supply chain so that it would address the workers’ sub-poverty wages” (2005: Rev. Noelle Damico in “The Battle Fields” from PBS NOW).

The CIW provides us with a view of what redistribution looks like: A worker-led decision making processes that demands corporations’ accountability to the labor issues within their supply chain, along with the distribution of money back down the supply chain, followed by a monitoring program run by the workers themselves—those most affected by the current oppressive system—which ensures that the demands continue to be met. bell hooks notes that when there are material strains and unequal access, we have to create “the best networks for figuring out ways to give and share [resources] with others [read: the poor] without causing embarrassment or shame... It’s the task of those who hold greater privilege to create practical strategies” (hooks, 40-8). In the case of the CIW, it didn’t take those who hold greater privilege to figure out how to create a practical, and indeed effective, strategy to win economic justice and human dignity—it was the workers—the underprivileged, the systematically oppressed, impoverished and enslaved, who made the blue prints for freedom from exploitation. The

CIW's model requires the tomato industry to finally put a face to the product—both in the minds of the corporations and the consumers—so that the workers are not alienated from the products of their labor, while fostering a philosophy of leadership that encourages farmworkers to have an active role in setting goals and strategizing to meet those goals.

### **Leadership**

“At the meetings each Wednesday it is an exchange of experiences. It is not a class to see who knows more. It is a class where we all know and we all learn from everyone. We are all students and we are all teachers in a certain way. People understand the principle that we are all leaders.”

—Geraldo Reyes-Chavez, CIW

Researchers Kidder and Bracy define an exemplary moral leadership as: Doing “the right thing even if it is not popular,” refusing to “stand idly by while others engage in unethical and harmful behavior,” and as an act that “can be practiced by anyone regardless of age, gender, physical ability, or surroundings” (Kidder: 2001, 2). In our society, however, leadership is often valued and practiced much differently. Leadership is seen as a role of a small group to make important decisions for the majority group; it is a job often awarded to a select few based on popularity or number of votes. (The Presidential hierarchy comes to mind; it is a style of leadership taught to us back in elementary school to run organizations such as student council). The problem with this style of leadership boils down to the fundamental question of education: Are we fostering students to be critical thinkers that can make educated decisions on their own then learn how to take responsibility for their decisions, or is the educational system shaping individuals who do not question the knowledge they receive?

Freire uses the “banking concept of education” as a metaphor for the top down flow of knowledge that we see in the normative student-teacher relationship: “The teacher...makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat...the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filling and storing the deposits” (Freire: 1995, 53). The CIW uses the philosophy *todos somos lideres* (we are all leaders) “to motivate new members to organize so that they can motivate others and organize themselves” (Lucas Benitez, CIW). This is an alternative to the “banking concept” that fosters true leadership development because it places trust in everyday people to be leaders—“...trusting the people is the indispensable precondition for revolutionary change” (Freire: 1995, 42).

“The Coalition is based on the philosophy that it is from the people, for the people and that we are all leaders. It is different from other movements because in our movement for dignity, respect, and just wages it is the workers who are in the struggle and it is their voices leading the movement”

-Francisca Cortez, CIW (Gonzalez: 2005, 25).

Ronald Heifetz, a Harvard professor who studies leadership, notes that because leadership is rarely carried out by those who are “supposed” to be leaders—those in positions of formal authority—we need to pay critical attention to “the adaptive successes of a polity that leadership be exercised by people without authority. These people—perceived as entrepreneurs and deviants, organizers and troublemakers—provide the capacity within the system to see through the blind spots of the dominant viewpoint.” (Heifetz: 1994, 183).

Informal leaders exemplify the creative wit and critical mind set it takes to challenge hegemony, or what the elite have defined as “common sense for all” (Reinsborough, 22). As young people—University students and farmworkers alike—and as the future, I believe we



should integrate the philosophy “we are all leaders” as an important part of the narrative we are creating about who we are as a generation.

## **The Future**

“Poststructuralists insist that words and texts have no fixed or intrinsic meanings...How do meanings change? How have some meanings emerged as normative and others have been eclipsed or disappeared? What do these processes reveal about how power is constituted and operates?”

-Joan Scott (1988, 35).

Authentic praxis is a process that challenges prevailing ideologies while requiring that new definitions and plans of action take precedence. Thus, authentic praxis is one approach that can truly change meanings, for us as individuals and, if our movements stay strong, could eventually change society as a whole. The process of authentic praxis widely distributes the power to change meanings since the individual reflects on their own condition, or the condition of a group of people suffering from a comparable source, while coming up with solutions. An SFA student organizer describes the solution or path that the CIW is creating through reflective action:

*“We are at a cross roads right now, increasing inequality in this country, but also increasing dissent...The current road that we are going down is increased corporate control over our politics and economy, and it will result in devastation for workers, the environment, communities and indigenous peoples...We can see an example of where that road will take us by looking at the agricultural industry and the situation of Immokalee specifically: Immokalee is the city that NAFTA created, (forced immigration, transient work force, very little rights, stagnant wages)...In the example of Immokalee we can also see hope for the future: CIW uniting with consumers, bringing corporations to the table, creating worker-led decision making spaces and power--leading to victory. What we have to choose between is the path of neoliberalism where decision-making power is concentrated into fewer and fewer hands, resulting in devastation; or the path where more and more are uniting, expanding the decision-making power into more*

*hands, expanding democracy, and taking the lead of those most affected by the current oppressive system” (Personal Communication; October, 2011).*

The CIW’s Campaign for Fair Food shows us that the creation of a more humane world is truly possible. Students involved in this movement come from experiences of being discouraged in the pursuit of social change because it does not fit the ideology of “success” while also carrying individual experiences of hurt and anger tied to supporting a marginalized group of people that is completely degraded by the rest of society. The CIW and SFA networks offer a space to talk about these experiences and use them to sharpen an analysis of the significance of this movement. “As a network comprised of people with diverse backgrounds and experiences, we [SFA] strive to keep a focus on collective liberation at the forefront of our work so that we do not reproduce patterns of oppression. We believe that organizing according to these principles is essential to building truly democratic and effective social movements that can win systemic changes which prefigure the type of world we want” (<http://www.sfalliance.org/orgphilosophy.html>).

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