



# Seeing the workers for the trees: exalted and devalued manual labour in the Pacific Northwest craft cider industry

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## Abstract

Craft food and beverage makers regularly emphasize transparency about the ethical, sustainable sourcing of their ingredients and the human labour underpinning their production, all of which helps elevate the status of their products and occupational communities. Yet, as with other niche ethical consumption markets, craft industries continue to rely on employment conditions for agricultural workers that reproduce inequalities of race, class, and citizenship in the dominant food system. This paper interrogates the contradiction between the exaltation of craft cidemakers' labour and the devaluation of farmworker labour by assessing how craft beverage actors make sense of inequalities facing manually skilled agricultural workers. Through a focus on the emerging craft cider industry, this paper draws on in-depth interviews and ethnographic data with a range of urban and rural cider actors in the Pacific Northwest (British Columbia, Oregon, and Washington State). I find that actors in the craft cider industry engage with inequalities affecting farmworkers through three main patterns: (1) Justifications of the status quo; (2) Supply chain fog; and (3) Misgiving/critique. By using an analytical framework that integrates critical agrarianism and the politics of sight, this study provides insights into both barriers and opportunities to redistribute social recognition and material rewards across food supply chains.

**Keywords** Craft cider · Farm workers · Migrant farm workers · Pacific Northwest · Value-added agriculture · Farm labour

## Abbreviations

SAWP Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program  
TFWP Temporary Foreign Worker Program

## Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been a surge of popular, scholarly, and political attention to workers across the food chain. Documentary films such as *Food Chains* and *Migrant Dreams* have exposed coercive conditions facing precarious workers in food and agriculture, and high-profile #MeToo demonstrations have drawn attention to the widespread sexual violence facing predominantly racialized farmworker women. Many of those employed in precarious and low-wage sectors of the food chain such as farm labour, meat-packing, and dishwashing are racialized recent immigrants with a precarious immigration status, and the COVID-19

pandemic has amplified the spotlight on their weak workplace protections (FCWA and SRC 2016; Haley et al. 2020). As wealthy countries have become increasingly hostile to undocumented workers from the Majority World, many governments have expanded guest worker programs to supply labour-intensive food and farming sectors with workers who are categorized as low skill, but who often have extensive agricultural experience and expertise (Corrado et al. 2016).

While manually skilled labour across the food chain continues to be materially and culturally devalued, cultural sociologists have described the parallel emergence of a renaissance in craft livelihoods such as brewing, whole-animal butchering, and barbering (Jones 2015; Ocejo 2014). Craft workers are re-envisioning supposedly undesirable jobs as sophisticated careers that hybridize manual labour, expert knowledge, and interactive service work. Young, educated urban men are featured prominently in this small segment of 'new elite' occupations, in which the food and beverage sector takes centre stage. Artisanal<sup>1</sup> entrepreneurs often take pride in creating objects that reflect their signature creative vision and derive a strong sense of membership in an

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I am considering artisans and craft workers as broadly synonymous.

occupational community. This community is broadly understood to include craft producers and cultural intermediaries, along with consumers who are ‘in-the-know’ (Leissle 2017; Oejo 2017). While craft careers may not be secure or lucrative, many craft workers and entrepreneurs are driven by a desire to align their livelihoods with values such as respect for the natural world (Jones 2015; Oejo 2017). Moreover, craftspeople have described how using their muscles, morals, and minds to produce ‘good’ food with traceable ingredients allows them to live the ‘good life’ and concretely contribute to a better world (Jones 2015; Marchand 2008). In short, the craft occupational renaissance exalts masterful manual labour intensity as part of a vision of food system transformation.

To elevate the status of manual livelihoods and simple, handmade foods, the craft industry foregrounds transparency about the ethical sourcing of ingredients and promotes public performances of manual labour (Johnston and Baumann 2015; Oejo 2014). Producers like local artisanal chocolatiers argue their goods are distinct and command a price premium because they are handmade in small batches by skilled community members with high-quality, ethical ingredients (Leissle 2017). Consumers play an active role in this process of distinction (Oejo 2014). In the case of land-based craft enterprises such as rural destination cideries (Myles et al. 2020), consumers are invited to consume an aesthetic agrarian experience—to pull back the standard commodity veil and witness how human labour transforms the landscape around them into a product that becomes part of their own bodies. In this way, value-added agriculture not only encompasses transforming a raw commodity into a processed good like cider but can also involve marking a product as distinct through socially appealing attributes such as locality and ethical transparency (Wright and Annes 2016). Yet performances of transparency in the craft sector may obscure dimensions of the labour process that muddle the story of ethical sourcing. Whose labour gets to take the symbolic centre stage, and how are the material rewards of craft production distributed?

In this paper, I examine the craft cider industry’s paradox of exalting the manual labour of entrepreneurs while the manual labour of agricultural workers remains devalued. I draw on a qualitative case study of the craft cider industry in the U.S. and Canadian Pacific Northwest to understand how cider actors account for the labour of agricultural workers when transparency, the ethical provenance of ingredients, and manual labour intensity are part of the selling point. I begin by setting the stage for contemporary trends in farm employment and structural inequalities affecting agricultural workers today. Next, I draw on insights from critical agrarianism and the politics of sight to make sense of why alternative food initiatives have often struggled to grapple with these inequalities, and I outline the methodology

for this case study. I find that the craft cider industry faces ideological and structural barriers to addressing inequalities affecting farmworkers; I describe the latter as “supply chain fog.” Some cidemakers, however, are beginning to express a critical view of the status quo. I argue this critique can be understood as an entry point for integrating decent work, economic justice, and dignified immigration squarely within alternative food initiatives.

## Farmworkers and structural inequalities

Whether a glass of cider was made by an urban cidery sourcing ready-made juice from an industrial-scale processor of blemished fruit or by a rural destination cidery that presses antique apple varieties grown on site, in nearly all cases farmworkers are involved in bringing the raw ingredients to life. Only in exceedingly small scales of apple or related fruit production is it possible for U.S. or Canadian farmers (i.e. owners or operators) to manage a viable business without enlisting the labour of farmworkers. Even when I visited ‘estate’ cideries with a mid-sized orchard, it was common to see telltale mobile farmworker housing units on site or workers pruning bare branches dusted by late winter snow. Farmworkers engage not only in the labour of land-based production (e.g. pruning), but also associated agricultural activities such as fruit packing.

Global patterns of inequality facing agricultural workers are manifest in North American employment and immigration practices. Historians have documented longstanding practices among both Canadian and U.S. farm employers of preferentially hiring groups of people whose social location limits their bargaining power and freedom of mobility to seek better jobs elsewhere, including persistent patterns of anti-Black racism and white supremacy (Satzewich 1991; Dunsworth 2018). Today, Canadian farm operators who produce apples for the commodity market are increasingly reliant on guest worker programs.<sup>2</sup> In response to grower reports of labour shortages, the federal government initiated the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program in 1966, which now falls under the broader Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) (Satzewich 1991). Agricultural workers employed in low-wage streams of the TFWP are typically racialized people from the Global South including Mexico, Jamaica, and Guatemala, and employers preferentially hire

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, ‘migrant’ farmworker refers to workers who migrate for temporary agricultural work either within their own country or across borders, and who cannot return to their permanent residence within the same day. Migrant workers include ‘guest workers,’ who are temporarily hired through government-authorized programs to cross an international border for farm work. Here, ‘immigrant’ refers to workers who are relatively settled in the destination country, either as permanent residents, naturalized citizens, or undocumented.

men (Cohen and Caxaj 2018). Unlike permanent immigration streams, the TFWP provides only temporary visas for guest workers, whose right to stay in Canada hinges on remaining employed on a farm. Employers have continued to hire citizens, permanent residents, asylum seekers, and workers without formal authorization (Perry 2020; Weiler et al. 2016).

Compared to Canada, U.S. growers have relied more heavily on undocumented immigrant farmworkers. In fiscal years 2015–2016, an estimated 49 percent of agricultural workers in the United States were undocumented (DOLETA 2018, p. 5). In recent years, U.S. growers and policymakers have begun to shift away from the agriculture sector's reliance on undocumented workers and toward guest worker programs like Canada's, specifically the H-2A program (Weiler et al. 2021). Between fiscal years 2008 to 2018, the number of H-2A visas issued grew by 205 percent (from 64,404 to 196,409) (Consular Affairs 2009; Consular Affairs 2019). Approximately 83 percent of farmworkers are Hispanic, with 69 percent born in Mexico, and males make up 75 percent of farm labourers, graders, and sorters (DOLETA 2018, p. 1; USDA 2020).

The annual income of farmworkers, particularly those employed in harvesting and packing positions, is low by Canadian and U.S. standards. An estimated one third of farmworkers report a family income below the U.S. poverty line (DOLETA 2018, p. 36). In Canada, the employment income for agriculture and horticulture workers is 42 percent of the median income or 44 percent of the average income for all occupations (StatCan 2017). Workers hired through the Canadian Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program, the dominant agricultural stream of the TFWP, must be paid at least the minimum wage. Although this is much greater than income opportunities in guest workers' countries of origin, their wages are automatically deducted for benefits to which they often lack access (Ramsaroop 2016). The significant economic gains guest workers derive from remittances are unstable and often come with significant costs to workers such as prolonged, painful familial separation (Preibisch and Grez 2013).

Because of grower lobbying, many U.S. and Canadian jurisdictions exclude agricultural workers from basic employment protections such as overtime pay and the ability to unionize (Faraday et al. 2012; Rodman et al. 2016). Both guest worker programs and undocumented streams construct farmworkers as deportable, which makes it difficult for workers to report concerns, access emergency services, or collectively organize (Paz Ramirez and Chun 2016; Sexsmith 2016). Farmworkers also face disproportionate occupational hazards such as workplace sexual harassment, and agrochemical exposure can affect both workers and their children (Griffith et al. 2019; Prado et al. 2021). Fundamentally, the options available to many farmworkers

are constrained by racialized global inequality, structural violence such as trade agreements that disadvantage Majority World countries, and multiple layers of colonialism (Holmes 2013; Laliberte and Satzewich 2008).

### Depictions of skilled and unskilled manual livelihoods in the New Economy

Because craftspeople foreground their skilled manual labour, they depart from a dominant contemporary work culture that enshrines formal intellectual training over hands-on labour and reinforces the Cartesian mind/body rupture (Klocker et al. 2020). Whereas mere 'labour' is seen as a de-individualized, substitutable input that can be poured into an economic engine, discussions of 'craft' assert that all labour is tied to unique expressions of human life, values, and aspirations (Meyfroidt et al. 2019; Polanyi 1944). Contemporary North American farmer livelihoods are similarly depicted as skillful occupations, and a nostalgic view of honest, self-sacrificing manual work plays prominently in new and beginner farmer movements (Calo 2020). Yet this re-imagining of manual labour in the New Economy remains heavily classed and raced.

While the labour of farmers and craft entrepreneurs is often portrayed through a romantic lens, the labour of hired workers is widely written off as a low-skill manual job that anyone could do (Weiler et al. 2016). Policymakers have drawn on this 'low-skill' logic to downgrade employment and immigration conditions for farmworkers (Hagan et al. 2015; Klocker et al. 2020). Many migrant and immigrant farmworkers are themselves former, current, or aspiring farmers, which further complicates the skilled farmer/unskilled farmworker dichotomy (Binford 2013; Minkoff-Zern 2019). Even when farmworkers' skills are recognized, they are often stereotyped as inherent racial or gender traits (e.g. pervasive references to women's 'delicate' hands in soft fruit harvesting) that do not command commensurate value because they are supposedly natural rather than attained aptitudes (Holmes 2013; Nieto 2014). A significant element shaping the perception of farmworkers' skills is that farms have shifted away from diversified plant and livestock cropping arrangements toward larger, more ecologically simplified, and technology-intensive production. Some scholars describe the shift as a form of 'deskilling' because it reduces opportunities for workers to express their skills and knowledge in diverse ways (Carlisle et al. 2019; Timmermann and Félix 2015).

Against dominant depictions of farm work as unskilled or low skill labour, some researchers have begun to liken it to a form of craft. Focusing on Australia, Klocker et al. (2020) compare the tacit, embodied knowledge of farmworkers to the craft that artisans or factory workers hone through years of reflective practice. They illustrate how veteran

farmworkers adapt their practices in conversation with the more-than-human ‘plant agency’ of crops (Brice 2014). Experienced agricultural workers have developed dexterity and acumen in activities such as pruning, trellising, and harvesting crops that cannot easily be mechanized. In other words, the skills of experienced farmworkers are far more than merely physical (Hernández-Romero 2012; Klocker et al. 2020).

Alongside debates about what counts as skilled work, researchers have highlighted tensions between sustainability-oriented farming practices such as agroecology and job quality for farmworkers. Timmermann and Félix (2015) argue that by diversifying cropping arrangements, agroecology can shift drudgery into meaningful “craftsmanship” (p. 535). They posit that agroecology may promote the acquisition and development of multiple skills or capabilities for farm workers, their recognition as peers, mutual influence and non-redundancy, and self-determination. Nonetheless, empirical research has not supported the widespread belief that labour conditions are necessarily better on farms that are smaller, diversified, family-owned, and organic (Dumont and Baret 2017; Harrison and Getz 2015; Reid-Musson 2017). In some cases, conditions may be demonstrably worse based on farmworkers’ own criteria (Soper 2020). Beyond farm-level characteristics, people’s relationship to capital, whiteness, and power mediates job quality and the craft knowledges one can express.

### Alternative food imaginaries and farmworker inequalities

Craft food and beverage makers can be understood as part of alternative food initiatives to advance local, ethical, and sustainable production. Given their emphasis on social sustainability, how have alternative food initiatives engaged with inequalities affecting low-wage workers across the food chain? A persistent challenge is that many of the alternatives advanced by alternative food initiatives are firmly rooted in capitalism, and thus tend to reproduce capitalism’s inherent exploitation of workers (Goodman et al. 2012). Popular food system sustainability efforts have centred farmers, environmental sustainability, and the concerns of predominantly white middle-class consumers (Smith 2019). Meanwhile, farmworkers’ precarity restricts their access to communicative resources to participate as peers in public conversations about food system change, leading to scant awareness of their own political organizing (Madrigal 2017; Perry 2019). Moreover, popular local food and community food security projects have historically neglected to recognize, collaborate, or share resources with parallel alternative food networks led by groups affected by distinct forms of subjugation (Gibb and Wittman 2013; Smith 2019).

Critical agrarian literature provides insight into why the labour of hired workers is often erased from alternative food imaginaries. Alternative food initiatives draw heavily on a romantic agrarian ideology that frames settler-colonial farming as inherently virtuous, positioning smallholder farmers as heroes who achieve success through individual grit (Calo 2020). While romantic agrarianism peddles the logics of meritocracy and self-sufficiency, this ideology belies a history of heavy lifting by North American governments to secure enslaved and indentured labour, water and transportation infrastructure, and white male land acquisition through Indigenous dispossession (Calo 2020; Kepkiewicz and Dale 2019). Romantic agrarianism continues to be a powerful political force because it upholds ‘agricultural exceptionalism’ (Buttel and Flinn 1975; Weiler et al. 2016). Namely, farm businesses are exempt from many of the standard labour protections governing other businesses on the premise that they meet society’s basic need for food through self-sacrifice. Small or medium-scale ‘family farms’ are often imagined as relying on the labour of normatively white farmers and perhaps family members. Yet hired workers—who are disproportionately racialized—remain core to the viability of both alternative and so-called industrial farms (Cairns et al. 2015; Gray 2014). Because farmworkers are excluded from the nostalgic imaginary of settler agriculture, romantic agrarianism can be viewed as a tool to shore up material flows of white wealth and ownership; an estimated 95 percent of U.S. farmers are white, and by acreage they own 91 percent of all owned land in farms (USDA 2019, pp. 19;62;73;81). Such material flows stabilize not only industrial-scale operations self-styled as family farms, but also smaller and more economically marginal enterprises.

While it would be tempting to dismiss all forms of agrarianism as a romantic ideology that conceals class and ethno-racial inequalities, Carlisle (2013) compellingly argues that a *critical* agrarianism can remain cognizant of agrarianism’s at-times violent and exploitative past without being endlessly constrained by it. Rather than simply being critical of agrarianism, critical agrarianism calls for a constant reimagining of affective ties between all humans and the land through locally relevant, historically informed practices that support racial and gender justice, ecological well-being, and shared agrarian prosperity (Quisumbing King et al. 2018). For example, farmworkers who founded the Washington State farming cooperative Tierra y Libertad have articulated that the purpose of the enterprise is not only to avoid exploitation by bosses, but also to maintain their cultural practices of organic farming and pass this legacy onto their children (USSEN 2018).

Alongside insights from critical agrarianism, the concept of the politics of sight provides a second analytical plank for understanding barriers to engagement between alternative food initiatives and farmworkers. A core



strategy for alternative food initiatives is de-fetishization: attempting to peel back the commodity veil and make the social relations of production transparent, and therefore open to scrutiny (Besky and Brown 2015). Inequalities for food workers can be reflected and reinforced through spatial segregation in the workplace based on race, class, gender, and immigration status, along with spatial and temporal isolation from surrounding communities (Horgan and Liinamaa 2017). Both employers and workers may naturalize racial and gender traits to justify why some people work in ‘front of house’ positions such as restaurant serving, and why racialized workers are more likely in low wage ‘back of house’ positions such as scrubbing pots and pans (Sachs et al. 2013). Sachs et al. (2013) argue that this spatial segregation reproduces systemic inequalities for food workers because it obstructs the development of solidarities between consumers and workers: “As long as consumers do not see the faces of marginalized workers it is hard to empathize and to be motivated to change inequality regimes in food work” (p. 16).

The idea that food production can be transformed by rendering the hidden visible, what Pachirat (2011) calls the politics of sight, comes with limitations. The politics of sight rests on the premise that if people could see repugnant practices such as industrial slaughter, the power of their instinctive emotional responses such as shock and pity would lead to social change. As Pachirat demonstrates through participant observation as a slaughterhouse worker in various spatially segregated zones of killing, people’s moral perceptions can become compartmentalized and desensitized. Violence may be hidden in plain sight. Pachirat acknowledges that efforts to uncover objectionable practices are important. He contends, however, that broaching what he calls ‘zones of confinement’ could lead to more successful modes of confinement, or simply apathy (pp. 247–255). Likewise, Carolan (2016) stresses it is not enough for alternative food initiatives to reduce visibility gaps and *spatial* distance between consumers and workers. To establish more-than-farmer justice, he argues it is also crucial to address the empathy gap associated with wealth disparities and *social* distance, which involves people’s willingness to interact across differences (p. 219). In sum, literature on the politics of sight underscores that inequities for food workers are partly maintained through concealment, but that simply exposing these inequities to public scrutiny does not ineluctably spark emotional concern or political will for change.

Taken together, insights from critical agrarianism and the politics of sight provide an analytical framework that illuminates why alternative food initiatives’ engagement with class and racial inequalities among food chain workers has been limited. What is less clear is how actors in local, artisanal food networks make sense of inequalities for food workers

when transparency and performances of manual labour intensity are explicitly part of the selling point.

## Methods

To investigate how craft food and beverage actors account for the labour of agricultural workers, I engaged in a regional analysis of craft cider production in the U.S. and Canadian Pacific Northwest. Although the full boundaries of the Pacific Northwest are considered larger, I focused on craft cider producers across British Columbia (B.C.), Washington State, and Oregon. Craft cidemakers commonly describe a cider culture that is particular to the Pacific Northwest, and the Northwest Cider Association actively promotes ciders from this cross-border region. The very conception of the Pacific Northwest as a region is contested; the area of my study encompasses numerous Indigenous territories that are not reflected in either the term Pacific Northwest or settler-colonial place names and borders.

This paper draws primarily from in-depth, semi-structured interviews and participant observation between 2017 and 2019, which was conducted with university research ethics approval. This included 28 cider actors (12 women and 16 men; 23 rural and 5 urban; 15 in B.C., 2 in Washington State, and 11 in Oregon), including two interview participants who did not own the cidery but were engaged in orchard work. The project also draws on interviews with four apple producers who do not make cider and one agricultural extension agent specializing in apples. Labour was only one of numerous cider and agriculture-related topics discussed in interviews, and it emerged as a more focused point of discussion in later interviews. Six rural cidemakers personally hired racialized recent immigrant or guest workers, while others either had orchards small enough to manage themselves or relied on local non-immigrants, visitors working informally, and family labour. Rural cideries were typically structured in one of four forms: (1) A farm diversification strategy, with cider or cider apple-variety production as a complement to other revenue channels; (2) A business that gleans fruit from abandoned, underutilized, or naturalized (‘pippin’) trees; (3) A commercial-scale farm shifting away from primary production for the commodity market and toward cider; (4) A tiny farm that produces nominal amounts of on-site fruit and sources the remainder from commercial apple or juice production. Some rural cideries used fruits produced on-site other than apples (e.g. pears or cranberries), often in combination with apple juice sourced from off-site. Urban cideries typically sourced apples or juice from rural areas, including apples produced for grocery stores that did not meet the exacting aesthetic retail requirements.

As a white settler researcher with experience in farm work, my social location helped me build rapport with predominantly white cidemakers and farmers. Simultaneously, it limited my connections with racialized recent immigrant farmers. Although I spoke informally at cider events with producers who were people of colour and actively solicited interviews with producers reflecting diverse ethno-racial backgrounds, all but one interviewee identified as white (or ‘Caucasian’). The demographics of interviewees reflect racial and class inequities in U.S. and Canadian agriculture at large, which stem from ongoing settler-colonialism, institutional racism such as discriminatory lending practices, and intergenerational land transfer (Rosenberg and Stucki 2019; Rotz 2017).

Producers often toured me through their orchards and production facilities as part of interviews. In addition, I took fieldnotes while attending numerous cider gatherings, tours, and workshops, and while engaged as a hired worker on a small organic apple orchard in B.C. I use pseudonyms throughout, except for a publicly recorded panel discussion. I analyzed interview transcripts through initial inductive coding followed by more deductive coding in MaxQDA software, which I used to select interview excerpts that represented broader patterns described below.

## Findings

How does the craft cider industry engage with inequalities facing farmworkers in its supply chain? Through my interviews with craft cidemakers and participant observation, I observed three major patterns that characterized how the craft cider industry accounted for the labour of agricultural workers: (1) Justification; (2) Supply chain fog; and (3) Misgiving/critique. First, cidemakers used several frames to normalize and justify inequalities affecting farmworkers, such as employing the adage that employment on farms offers ‘win-win’ benefits to workers and employers. These frames are significant because they contribute to the material reproduction of inequalities. Second, even for craft cidemakers who actively attempted to source fruit from farms whose labour practices aligned with their values, the design of the commodity chain made it very challenging or nearly impossible to do so. This supply chain fog throws into question the premise of transparency about the ethical sourcing of ingredients in craft enterprises. Third, despite these ideological and structural barriers to addressing inequalities affecting farmworkers, many actors in the craft cider industry expressed a sense of unease or even candid critiques of the status quo. The practical consequences of such misgivings and critiques are unclear under current political-economic conditions. Nonetheless, they can be understood as

cracks in the ideological foundation that underpins profound, intersecting inequalities for hired workers across the food chain.

## Justification

Based on interviews and observation, the first major pattern I observed was that many actors in the craft cider industry perceive contemporary employment and immigration conditions for agricultural workers as broadly justifiable. This overarching justification was expressed through four frames (Benford and Snow 2000), which often overlapped and complemented one another:

1. Farm employment is win-win and provides significant benefits for workers
2. Conditions for farmworkers aren’t so bad here
3. Farmworkers are needed to resolve producers’ crisis conditions
4. Farmworkers are noble people—and sometimes like family

As an example of the first and second frames of justification, Josh, an urban Oregon cidemaker with a background in the wine industry, asserted that apples offered better labour conditions than wine grapes. He commented that he did not have any concerns about conditions for farmworkers in the apple industry:

Even if there was [problems for farmworkers], they’d figure it out on their own. [laughing] Maybe that’s kind of messed up. I’m sure in California, there’s a lot of issues. But yeah, in my little white world, a lot of the guys are super happy. A lot of the guys that I grew up with in the wine industry saved up money and are back in Mexico and excited, like, stoked.

Josh’s comments exemplify the first frame by emphasizing that workers are “super happy” because they can generate an income in U.S. currency that offers greater purchasing power in Mexico. This frame co-existed with the second frame, which involved downplaying and normalizing inequalities for farmworkers through the idea that farmworkers could address any potential problems on an individual basis. While self-deprecatingly qualifying that his observations stem from his “little white world,” Josh asserts that issues for farmworkers occur mainly outside of apple production, or outside of Oregon. This exemplifies the second frame of deflection.

Farmers in both Canada and the United States called attention to challenges with hiring productive, qualified, and dependable agricultural workers, and they indicated a need for guest worker programs or other cross-border flows of farmworkers. Brian, a B.C. orchardist-cidemaker,

described how labour shortages and bureaucratic lags associated with Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) shaped his production practices:

So, it gives us great pause in expanding. 'Cause if we can't get labour, I'm gonna plow this all under and be done with it. Labour is *such* a problem. If the foreign program for the farmers . . . If we lost that in this valley . . . It would be absolute chaos, the guys [farmers] would never survive. . .

So, we've had situations where I needed five, six workers 'cause of a bunch of rain and I just said, "Ah, fu\*\* it. Doesn't matter. I'll never get them here. It's not worth the three hours tonight to do the paperwork. And it's *brutal*. It's brutal. We've left twenty, thirty, forty thousand pounds of fruit on the tree 'cause you can't get workers.

By juxtaposing employers' ability to quickly hire guest workers against the threat of plowing a productive orchard and letting fruit rot on trees, Brian conveys the third frame based on urgency and crisis. He reasons that because farm employers have become structurally dependent on the SAWP, it is necessary to continue the program and reduce regulatory requirements that employers experience as a bureaucratic hassle. This frame echoes employer and agriculture industry claims documented in other studies, namely, the idea that farms and domestic food security would collapse without the SAWP (Weiler et al. 2017). Such claims of exceptionalism and urgency underpin the premise that unfree labour migration programs are the only means to uphold public goods like food security, and that these programs should consequently be "made even more employer-friendly" (Binford 2013, p. 193).

Excerpts from an interview with a white orchardist-cidermaker who operates an organic farm illustrate several frames under the first pattern of justification. Their farm employed six SAWP workers and 54 Canadian workers. The cidermaker explained that they still had not fully "transitioned over" to employing predominantly SAWP workers, but that an increasing number of larger organic farms were "going that direction":

We were very reluctant to get involved in the program, just for the social aspect of it, taking someone away from their family. But after trying it for a year and realizing that the program is very beneficial for them and for us, we decided to go that direction because we saw the benefits for everybody. They make in one year what they would make in four years at home. And they're really here to work. And they put their heads down and get it done.

By foregrounding the significant benefits workers derive from labour-migration and praising their diligence, the

orchardist-cidermaker's comments illustrate both the first and fourth frames. Researchers have argued that guest workers' productivity and discipline arise from a highly coercive immigration context; workers know they can receive a negative end-of-season employer evaluation, be repatriated, and forego future earnings if they fail to perform the expected script for an 'ideal' worker (Binford 2019; McLaughlin 2010). Emphasizing the win-win-win benefits of labour-migration for employers, workers, along with sending and receiving-country governments is a widespread framing used by international institutions such as the World Bank and United Nations to justify the expansion of unfree labour-migration programs (Binford 2013, pp. 190–194). Labour-migration clearly offers monetary benefits to workers and their families through remittances. Simultaneously, researchers have consistently documented how these benefits can come at an enormous cost (McLaughlin et al. 2017). The framing of win-win-win benefits flattens the context of racialized global inequities and obscures how guest workers' agency has been reduced to a narrow set of choices.

When I asked the same orchardist-cidermaker if there were any changes they would like to see in Canada's SAWP, they contended that a small number of employers were tarnishing the reputation of the program. The cidermaker felt organic farms treated workers differently because organic farmers do not see food simply in terms of its monetary value as a commodity, but as a whole system that encompasses consideration for food security, the environment, and other values:

It [the SAWP] definitely has a bad rap where the few farmers that are not adhering to the regulations make it look bad for everybody. But in speaking to the few organic farms that are bringing in S-A-W-P workers, it's a different mindset because in organic farming we think of things more sustainably. . . I think that if you talk to seasonal agricultural workers on organic farms versus conventional farms, you'd see a huge difference in just the way they're treated—just the whole overall morale of things.

By redirecting attention away from systemic critiques of Canada's farm labour migration program and toward individual non-organic employers, the quotation above exemplifies the second frame of deflection. As noted, the belief that conditions for workers are necessarily better on organic farms is widespread despite evidence to the contrary.

Likewise, the cidermaker redirected attention toward Indo-Canadian employers as problematic by pointing to a "cultural gap" and "mindset gap" in how Indo-Canadian farmers treated workers: "I think that sometimes the Indo-Canadian farmers that bring workers in look at the workers just as workers. Whereas when we hire temporary farmworkers or seasonal agricultural workers, they become part of

our family.” The perception that recently immigrated Indo-Canadian farm employers in B.C. offer worse labour conditions has been widely circulated among workers, advocates, and mainly white employers (Otero and Preibisch 2015, p. 95), yet it remains unsubstantiated and serves to recast white farmers in a virtuous light. The cidemaker’s characterization of workers as “part of our family” exemplifies the fourth frame. Scholars have observed that positive employer assertions of care and familial affection are often intertwined with a powerful form of paternalism that can shape workers’ sense of obligation to employers and constrain their freedom of mobility (Gray 2014; Reid-Musson 2017). Such rationales echo longstanding dynamics of power expressed through family care (Bakan and Stasiulis 1997), which can relieve powerholders of the discomfort of coming to terms with racial, class, and colonial inequalities. To be clear, I am not questioning the sincerity of employers’ stated emotional regard for workers; my analysis instead underscores that such expressions can operate ideologically in ways that support dominant class interests and buttress the status quo for agricultural workers.

### Supply chain fog

In seeking to understand how actors in the craft cider industry come to terms with inequalities facing agricultural workers, the second major pattern I observed was that farmworkers’ labour was obfuscated even from cidemakers who actively attempted to procure from farms with labour practices they felt were ethical. As noted, the craft cider industry is premised on transparency regarding the provenance of ingredients. Many nodes of the cider commodity chain are readily identifiable and spotlighted, including cidemakers, orchardists, and ecological regions where ingredients are grown. Through stories on their websites, social media, and other marketing materials, some cideries even allow a person to transparently trace their cider’s origins to specific fruit trees that represent a rare variety or historical moment rooted in the landscape. Designing the craft commodity chain in a way that supports claims of transparency is crucial for buttressing both a price premium and the cultural capital associated with participating in the craft scene. For land-based cideries, profiling the story of the farmer associated with the source of cider ingredients is especially prominent in marketing materials and media coverage. Hired workers, however, are often absent from such displays. Traceability to specific agricultural workers is typically only feasible in exceptionally small-scale cideries. The craft industry’s selective transparency is in tension with the material structure of a craft cider commodity chain that typically makes it difficult or nearly impossible to identify the specific hired farmworkers who have contributed to a given cider, let alone

to evaluate their employment conditions. I use the term “supply chain fog” to refer to the difficulty of clearly ascertaining the conditions of production—a difficulty that arises both from the complexity of the commodity chain and the legacy of societal choices about what to illuminate along that chain.

The gap between the value of transparency in craft cider and the reality of supply chain fog became especially evident in the case of urban cideries. Many urban cidemakers explicitly emphasized taking pride in ethical, transparent sourcing practices. Yet being geographically distanced from the complexities of farm labour dynamics in surrounding rural regions makes it even more difficult to evaluate practices upstream in the commodity chain. I asked James, a B.C. urban craft cidemaker whether he had any concerns about conditions for hired workers in the apple industry. He noted that while his business did most of its own labour, they made a point of paying at least a living wage on the occasions when they did hire people (plus tips, if it involved service work). In the case of agricultural workers, however, he described a context of supply chain fog:

I’m not in the best position to answer that question because I’m not an orchardist. We’re working with orchards who we trust are making the right decisions on that file. But obviously we don’t have full insight and understanding of that. I think that anybody we work with at the very least is complying with labour laws and so on. Right? I would hate to hear, and I hope I never hear, that an orchardist that we bought apples from is doing something sketchy on that file.

James noted that despite caring about agricultural workers, supply chain fog made it necessary to rely on grower self-reporting or simply assume growers were engaged in ethically and legally sound employment practices. That is, even for cidemakers who might wish to foreground the labour of agricultural workers as a valued part of their craft product, traceability to the potentially large number of workers involved makes this a daunting or unfeasible task.

Rural cidemakers who actively sought to evaluate the labour practices of specific farms from which they sourced apples faced similar difficulties. While interviewing Ryan and Laura, a male and female orchardist-cidermaking couple, I asked if they had any concerns about the next generation of orchard workers. They purchased a small proportion of their apples from other growers. Ryan expressed: “We’re conscientious as apple buyers. If we’re buying from the Okanagan, we like to know the relationship between the farmworkers.” He and Laura reflected on complex issues of freedom of mobility and vulnerability for two major groups of farmworkers in a sub-region of B.C., travelling French-Canadian Quebecois farmworkers and Mexican SAWP workers. Chuckling, Ryan joked that self-reported supplier information about labour conditions offered only tentative



reassurance: “[The grower] always says the right answer. It’s kind of like, ‘Oh, that makes me feel better.’ I don’t want to hear of any...” The tone of his joke was self-deprecating, underscoring the dilemma at hand for cidemakers who care about farmworker equity. Their account suggests that even for cidemakers who demonstrate a nuanced awareness of regional power dynamics between employers and workers, the design of the commodity chain hinders access to a clear picture of labour-migration conditions on farms from which their fruit originates. In the absence of vigorous employment standards enforcement by a government that anticipates the worst, a neoliberal context encourages economic actors across the supply chain to rely on self-reporting from employers and hope for the best.

The persistent fog between the point of production and consumption became conspicuous during the 2020 Washington State Cider Week. In a rare move, an online public panel brought together craft cidemakers from Finnriver Cidery and farmworker organizers from Familias Unidas por la Justicia (FUJ). Members of FUJ described their organizing efforts focused on eastern Washington’s Yakima Valley amid a confluence of COVID-19 outbreaks, wildfire smoke, and bargaining power undermined by immigration and employment conditions, which affected predominantly Latinx workers in apple packinghouses and orchards. Finnriver Cidery is based on the West Coast, where it produces some of its own apples, but it also sources many organic apples from eastern Washington. As a gesture of conviviality in a remote webinar panel, Finnriver had sent panelists a bottle of its blackcurrant cider. In response to FUJ organizer Rosalinda Guillen’s praise for the cider, Finnriver cidemaker Andrew Byers offered a qualifier:

We’re hitting an organic standard, but we are not hitting that social justice in agricultural labour standard. We are pushing to make something that is pure and beautiful, and has heart, and has deeper connection, which is one of the points that brought us all to this conversation, a hundred percent.

But this bottle I chose specifically because it’s made with Yakima Valley Granny Smith and Pink Lady apples, and it’s made with blackcurrant juice that is packaged and produced in the Yakima Valley. And those things together, this represents our connection to the people who work in the apple industry across the board. From the folks who are running irrigation lines, or harvesting, or into the packinghouses, and into the apple pressing and the processing world, all the way into the truck drivers who are bringing it to my doorstep so that I can make my value-added product, and make it look beautiful here. And I would really like to be able to track back to make it look beautiful all the way through the process.

Andrew Byers’ comments underscore that some craft cideries are actively seeking to build connections with farmworker justice organizations and develop sourcing practices that advance social justice for workers. Finnriver panelists hinted, however, at the structural challenges of doing so, particularly in the absence of a readily available certified label for apple production labour standards similar to a certified organic standard. To that end, researchers have questioned the extent to which workers themselves democratically oversee private ‘domestic fair trade’ labels, pointing out that such labels can co-opt activism and undermine government enforcement of employment standards (Zoller et al. 2020).

In summary, my data demonstrates the structural constraints that prevent transparency about farm labour conditions in craft cider—an industry that is otherwise premised on transparency about the conditions of production and the ethical provenance of ingredients. While some cidemakers hoped employers would self-report problematic labour conditions, others actively confronted supply chain fog by seeking out information about the labour conditions of orchards from which they sourced fruit.

### Misgiving or critique

While the first theme shows how the craft cider industry has downplayed disparities facing farmworkers and the second shows how their conditions are obscured by supply chain fog, I also observed a countercurrent in which cidemakers and orchardists were critical of farmworker inequalities. Their responses ranged from a mild expression of unease to outright critiques of what they viewed as racial and class inequities. When queried on what they saw as solutions, cidemakers who felt farmworker inequalities were a problem tended to propose one or more of three general solutions: (1) Immigration reform (they were often vague on specifics, but broadly cited changes such as a route to permanent residency for guest or undocumented workers and the option of settling in receiving countries with their families); (2) Changing people’s cultural values around the esteem granted to agricultural labour in North America; and (3) Providing agricultural workers with access to farmland as a mechanism for upward mobility and nonalienation from the fruits of their labour.

In many cases, craft cider actors’ misgivings or critiques overlapped with frames that justified the status quo. For instance, cidemakers would defend current conditions for agricultural workers as a necessary evil or explain that employment for low-income workers from the Majority World offers win-win benefits. In the same breath, they would express unease with the treatment of farmworkers in their industry. Jacob, a craft cidemaker who co-owned a

cidery in Oregon highlighted the farming industry's strong need for (im)migrant workers and their contributions to food security:

I can tell you, from experience, apple picking is skilled labour. You think that it's just a thing that anybody can do, but it's *very* difficult . . . I very much view the immigrant and/or migrant labour force as a skilled labour force, that is very much needed, and is undervalued in our society and, I think, our political system. That it's just like, replaceable, or not really needed, and I think, if you talked to any farmer, you'll realize that our entire food security is based on having people that can do this job.

Here, Jacob critiques how U.S. society and government policies have devalued migrant and immigrant farmworkers' manual skills, and he asserts that this workforce is structurally necessary for American food security. He goes on to offer both justification and misgiving:

While it's debatable about the standards of their [farmworkers'] pay and living situation, and the working conditions, I think one thing is clear, is that they are making better money than they would be at home. . . . I think that if there was better opportunity, where they were from, they would stay there. They wouldn't *come* and work in... right? Now, do they deserve more, or better conditions, or there needs to be more regulation, in whatever form or fashion? That's totally, probably, up for debate and everything. . . . We need a labour force for the agricultural industry. And where does that come from? It just is very apparent to me that it's not coming from within the United States. It's also apparent to me that, I think, the pay probably needs to increase, and conditions need to be better, and that there's *things* that can be improved, in general.

Echoing the first frame of justification, Jacob highlights positive economic benefits to workers and compares U.S. farm labour conditions favourably to opportunities in workers' countries of origin. Portraying U.S. farm employment as a supply-and-demand relationship for industry and migrating workers assumes free choice for workers, rather than economic coercion and at-times unfree employment conditions. Later, he shifts from an initial ambivalent stance on farmworker wages and accommodations as "debatable" to concluding that conditions ought to improve. Other cidemakers similarly exemplified an overlap between critique and the first pattern of justification, with a strong emphasis on agricultural workers' skills. Travis, a hired orchardist at a Washington State cidery acknowledged that certain individual farms might be "absolute hell" for Latinx workers with a precarious immigration status, who could be deported for failing to comply. He provided the caveat that his firsthand

knowledge was limited because he did not live in eastern Washington State's major apple growing region. Nonetheless, Travis felt apple harvesters earned a decent living on a piece-rate basis (bonus wages based on the amount picked) because of their skills and work ethic:

I've seen the workers over [in eastern Washington State] — and they're incredible, hard working folks that actually end up making a pretty good salary. But that's based on the fact that they're really good workers and it's a skill. It's like an art form. You don't think of it that way, but you watch them work and it's like, "Holy crap."

In this instance, portraying apple workers' manual skills as an "art form" aligns more with justification than critique. When cidemakers described their own fermentation or orcharding labour as a form of craft, they talked about applying their creative vision through the labour process to create a product bearing their unique human imprint. By contrast, even if apple workers are highly skilled, they often lack creative control over the labour process.

Other cider actors were more overtly critical of their industry's dependence on orchard workers hired under labour and immigration conditions they found objectionable, and a few explicitly discussed racial inequalities. Interviewees often mused aloud that they had never given much thought to this issue. This was particularly the case for cidemakers who did not personally hire farmworkers. Consequently, their responses often conveyed a degree of candor and in-the-moment contemplation rather than a pre-packaged, carefully scripted response. For instance, Greg, a rural Washington State craft cidemaker who operated on what he referred to as a "token" half-acre orchard, reflected on some of the differences in intergenerational upward mobility his white family had in the orcharding industry compared to Latinx workers today:

[My family members] were fairly affluent, you know. Caucasian, European descent . . . [Farmworkers today] aren't as affluent because they are not compensated based on physical output. My grandma and great-aunt, they told me about doing cherries. Then my mom talked about growing up doing cherries. And she's pretty blunt that she literally was a quarter of the efficiency of other labourers out there. Right? So, she's like, "If I had to feed you guys by doing that, you would not be alive." I'm trying to be polite. I mean like, [farmworkers] are grossly underpaid.

Although he identified as a proud capitalist, Greg proposed cooperative ownership by Latinx orchard workers to address the racialized barriers to upward mobility. Instead of trying to normalize the contradictions of capitalism, Greg offered

critiques that were at odds with personal worldviews he had articulated in other parts of the interview.

A willingness to wrestle with ambiguity was also evident in the following deliberations from Ron, a rural Oregon cidemaker, farmer, and farm employer, who openly critiqued his industry and expressed a sense of uncertainty about the path forward. He began by pointing out the shrinking availability of seasonal workers, and the difficulty of addressing this through conventional approaches to immigration policy:

The amount of labour just in the last three years that we see available during harvest, specifically, is shrinking dramatically. And it's not gonna change very easily. Not with our current immigration program. . . Agriculture, like so many production industries, has relied on inexpensive labour for a long time. Disproportionately — it isn't sustainable anymore. I'm aware of that . . . and I don't think it's fair, anyway. We can't support an industry off of underpaid labour. That's not good.

Here, Ron declares that agriculture's prevailing practice of hiring "underpaid" workers is both unsustainable and unfair. He went on to question how society might fundamentally rethink its approach to farm labour and immigration while ensuring farm viability:

So, how do we one, maximize production and change some of the practices? And make it profitable enough that labour gets paid a fair price for what they do, and have that mutual respect? 'Cause you can't do it without people, and this is going to be a real paradox. I mean, I don't think it's a real fix to the agricultural side to . . . make the borders open so we can get inexpensive labour. Because that's just an *immediate need*, it doesn't have anything to do with people's needs. . . I don't know! I don't know how to be very optimistic about it because I don't find just finding a cheap labour source from outside of the country is an answer.

Unlike many farmers and cidemakers, Ron interrogated the idea that it was ethically supportable to continue hiring people from lower-income countries whose labour has been constructed as cheap. While he did not prescribe a straightforward solution, he articulated a hope for cultural change in the esteem granted to manually skilled farmworkers. For interviewees like him who were both cidemakers and farm employers, grappling with such inequalities was more than a theoretical exercise. Rather than denying any social problem existed or attempting to reconcile contradictions, some cidemakers openly acknowledged the contradictions at hand and expressed a lack of resolution.

## Implications and conclusion

In this qualitative case study of the Pacific Northwest craft cider industry, I find that despite the exaltation of manual labour intensity in craft occupational communities, the industry tends to overlook or obscure the labour of racialized, precarious and low-wage agricultural workers who produce the raw ingredients of value-added products. How do actors in the craft cider industry negotiate the paradox of exalting the manual labour of predominantly white entrepreneurs while the manual labour of predominantly racialized agricultural workers remains devalued? This research provides evidence of three partly overlapping patterns of engagement.

Under the first pattern of justification, rural and urban actors in craft cider used several frames to justify contemporary immigration and employment conditions for farmworkers as unproblematic. Insights from critical agrarian literature help to explain frames that defend contemporary farm labour conditions. For example, one frame that actors in the cider industry commonly invoked was the idea that the status quo for farmworkers is necessary to ward off a looming labour shortage crisis for farmers, as vividly portrayed by the threat of fruit rotting on trees or ripping out orchards. This frame can be understood in relation to longstanding agricultural exceptionalism; farm workers are exempt from certain labour standards to stabilize an exceptional, self-sacrificing industry that prevents society from going hungry (Weiler et al. 2017). More broadly, the various defenses of prevailing conditions for mainly racialized farmworkers can be understood as a form of "white ignorance" that is structurally produced through oppressive systems designed to prioritize white group interests (Mills 2007). In wealthy Global North contexts like Canada and the United States, this structural form of ignorance entails a collective disavowal of the idea that racial, colonial, and capitalist dispossession and displacement continue to actively shape people's access to social recognition and material well-being (Calo 2020). Accordingly, the justifications observed in this study may reflect a broader societal impulse to paint over the contradictions of a violent social hierarchy from which select groups benefit.

Despite its emphasis on transparency and traceability, the design of the craft cider commodity chain distances cidemakers and consumers from migrant and immigrant agricultural workers and obfuscates inequalities that shape their lives. This second pattern, supply chain fog, mirrors socio-spatial inequalities captured in the idiom of 'front of house' and 'back of house' workers (Sachs et al. 2013). The politics of sight on its own may be insufficient to realize transformation; if one is a beneficiary of dynamics such as capitalism and whiteness, simply being aware of those dynamics may

yield little more than the mild misgivings and ambivalence observed in this study. Yet spotlighting food chain workers as active agents, contributors, and political organizers behind many of the foods and beverages people enjoy could form a powerful countercurrent in shifting the tides of food system inequities.

My findings highlight how even for cidemakers who buy apples locally and actively attempt to learn about the conditions of workers employed by their farm suppliers, the fog of complex commodity chains can make the goal of transparency difficult to execute. Increasing the scale and complexity of cider production lends itself to a thickening of supply chain fog. Without well-funded public institutions that proactively enforce all farmworkers' rights and support democratic leadership by workers, cidemakers who wish to support farms engaged in ethical farm labour practices typically rely on employer self-reports. In essence, commodity fetishism reproduces structural inequalities because farmworkers—unlike craft cidemakers—are positioned not as subjects, but as objects of labour in service of capital accumulation. While supply chain fog cannot be reduced to any one person or group's active intentions or choices, neither is it natural or accidental. The design of the craft cider commodity chain shows which actors are considered worthy of transparency.

A core insight from this study is that ideological tensions related to farmworker inequalities in the cider industry are neither unidimensional nor static. Many craft cidemakers and farmers openly acknowledged socio-economic disparities, voicing their support for cultural and political-economic change such as immigration reform. Justifications for labour exploitation were not universally accepted or uncontested. Several interviewees voiced the idea that a sweeping transformation of immigration policies could support dignity for workers and their families. To a limited extent, some actors in the craft cider industry identified racial inequalities affecting farmworkers and called for a livable wage, which contrasts with dominant efforts by grower organizations against wage increases. Agrarian and urban entrepreneurs sometimes go beyond mere ideological reproduction by grappling with contradictions and inequalities that make their own craft livelihoods possible.

While modest, the critiques expressed within the craft cider industry could serve as an entry point for what Carlisle (2013) calls critical agrarianism. Critical agrarianism posits that alongside ecological priorities, people's land-based livelihoods and practices of mixing their labour with the soil can be a venue for establishing racial justice, decent work, and economic well-being. Future research could explore the conditions under which such misgivings and critique could translate into concrete moves toward land-based livelihoods that enable everyone to thrive. Appeals to crisis circumstances and a sense of

urgency—like those documented in this study and during the COVID-19 pandemic—could be summoned to reproduce prevailing farm employment conditions and further downgrade workers' bargaining power. Yet critical agrarianism also points to the possibility that crises could serve as a moment for fundamentally rethinking how labour across the food chain can be a venue for a fairer distribution of wealth and social recognition.

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