It was a placid Saturday in June 2005 when I arrived to interview Jesús Peña, a farm executive at Agrícola San Simón, one of the largest producers of tomatoes for export to the United States located in Baja California’s San Quintín Valley. Situated atop a hill in a rural colonia, or squatter settlement, in the northern part of the valley, the company’s building has an elegant round shape of Mediterranean design with white walls, dark windows, and a large central dome. Surrounded by a well-manicured lawn irrigated by a sprinkler system, this structure contrasts sharply with the shacks and modest homes of the farmworkers who live in the nearby colonias, which lack basic services and are served by dusty, unpaved roads. As I walked into the office and sat in a comfortable air-conditioned waiting area, some farmworkers came to the front desk. One of them, a man in his forties, asked for a “medical pass” to see the company’s doctor, but a young secretary behind the counter told him, “The doctor only sees patients on Mondays”; he would have to wait until then. A few minutes later two other field laborers came to pick up their paychecks from the previous week, explaining to the young woman that they could not come the previous Saturday. She replied that they needed to come back on a weekday because Saturday is payday only for the current week.

After a few minutes Jesús Peña, a man in his early forties, arrived and invited me into his private office. Peña’s office was neat, clean, and decorated with functional modern furniture and a panoramic bay window from which he could see some of the fields and greenhouses owned by Agrícola San Simón, which extend several miles along the Pacific Ocean. As I looked through the window, he pointed to a big packing plant that stands between two greenhouses from which thousands of tomato boxes are shipped every day north of the border to San Diego and which

Introduction

Export Agriculture and Its Predicaments
was built only a few years ago. Peña, who has an accounting degree, was quite attentive and open to talking, exhibiting self-confidence quite different from the more guarded and reticent attitudes I encountered when interviewing older growers with deep roots in the region. He had arrived in the San Quintín Valley in 1987, and, speaking in Spanish, he told me about the changes the company he manages had undergone, from cultivation in open fields to greenhouse production. “Back in the 1980s,” he said, “we used to plant thousands of hectares of land and employed thousands of workers who kept coming year after year and anybody could find work immediately. . . . Everything was massive, and the goal was to produce and export as many boxes of tomatoes as possible. And if we didn't have enough workers we would send a bus [to Oaxaca] to bring more workers, just like that.” Then, he continued, things started to change and get more complicated. After years of intensive cultivation on large parcels of land, the aquifer used to irrigate the fields started to dry up, and growers were forced to begin cultivating in smaller areas in green- and shadehouses that required less water. Moreover, American companies that used to buy their tomatoes started to be more restrictive regarding the chemicals and pesticides growers could use and banned several of them. As he explained, “It was in the late 1990s that we started to invest in technology to produce more efficiently, to avoid water evaporation. We became more specialized . . . and started to more carefully plan how much to produce. . . . We developed a much closer relationship with our American partners as the globalization trend had already arrived. . . . They began to tell us what they wanted . . . and we realized they didn’t care where the tomatoes came from as long as they met certain requirements.”

The technological changes Agrícola San Simón introduced to adapt to the new export requirements affected how many workers were hired and what types of farm laborers were needed. As the amount of land planted significantly declined and was gradually replaced with greenhouses, Peña explained, fewer but more skilled workers were needed. Moreover, he added, “many people have settled down here, many workers live here so for many people San Quintín is now their home. . . . Most of our workers live in the colonias of San Quintín, have their homes, a land lot they own where they started building a home. They are settled down.” This more stable and settled labor force affected how Agrícola recruited its workers. Field supervisors, or mayordomos as they are known in the valley, were now in charge of recruiting and transporting farm laborers to work, he explained, dramatically reducing the need to bring workers from southern Mexico.

Peña’s account of Agrícola San Simón reflects the structural transformation of the fresh-produce industry that started in the early 2000s in San Quintin. Growers shifted from producing a high volume of produce to less quantity but higher-quality products of prime market value. This was a game changer in the region, requiring companies to invest heavily in new production technologies and reorganize the work process to meet the new standards demanded by consumer
markets in the United States. Many small local growers were put out of business, while others had to forge commercial partnerships with companies in the United States to access capital to invest in expensive technologies and ensure access to export markets. The new production system also triggered important labor and social changes. Farmworkers’ jobs became more specialized, scripted, and monitored to ensure the “product quality” demanded by international markets. Meanwhile farmworkers—most of them indigenous Mixtec, Zapotec, and Triqui immigrants from Oaxaca, Guerrero, and other regions in southern Mexico—began moving in massive numbers from labor camps where they were previously housed by large companies like Agrícola San Simón to makeshift colonias, building shacks in which to live with their children and families. This assured that company managers like Jesús Peña did not need to recruit and transport thousands of indigenous workers from southern Mexico; instead, they could rely on local contractors to hire workers in colonias in San Quintín, bringing labor costs down.

**FOCUS OF THE BOOK**

This book examines the ecological, social, and human consequences of export agriculture through an ethnographic study of the growers and farmworkers in the San Quintín Valley who produce fresh produce for consumer markets in the United States. Located about 300 kilometers south of the Mexico-U.S. border, San Quintín is one of the most technologically advanced, productive, and economically dynamic agroexport regions in northern Mexico, dominated by companies like Agrícola San Simón. A dormant valley until the 1960s, its population, fueled by the expansion of export agriculture, exploded from 8,600 in 1970 to 38,000 in 1990 and to 93,000 in 2010, the increase largely driven by Mixtec, Triqui, Zapotec, and other indigenous workers. Between 1980 and 2000, thirty-three new colonias were founded by newcomers in the valley. With residents spread around four delegaciones (districts)—Colonet, Camalú, Vicente Guerrero, and San Quintín from north to south—the region specializes in the production of fresh fruits and vegetables for North American and other international markets.¹

Rather than an isolated phenomenon, the agricultural and demographic boom in the San Quintín Valley reflects the consequences of larger structural changes in the agrarian policies in Mexico. Favored by neoliberal principles, export agriculture in Mexico has become a strategy for regional and economic development (Álvarez 2006; Echánove 2001; Sanderson 1986; Lara Flores 1996). These outward-oriented agrarian policies were part of a neoliberal economic reform by the federal government to foster maximum integration into the global market by eliminating barriers to foreign investment and trade (Sanderson 1986). In the process, the Mexican government reduced subsidies for traditional crops such as corn and beans for domestic markets while increasing support to higher-value fruits and
vegetables bound for the United States and other international markets (Raynolds 1994; Llambi 1994). The internationalization of fresh fruits and vegetable production led to the weakening of the state in designing food security policies, the concentration of agricultural decision making in the hands of a few transnational corporations, and increasing dependence of Mexican growers on transnational capital for credit, technical assistance, and access to consumer markets in the United States (Sanderson 1986). While the push for export agriculture started in the 1980s, the effective start of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) / Tratado de Libre Comercio (TLC) in 1994 made it easier for U.S. agribusinesses, attracted by the ready access to land, lower-cost labor, and lax environmental regulations, to expand in Mexico. NAFTA promoted the notion that Mexico had natural advantages over the United States and Canada for the production of winter fruit and vegetables and that Mexican farmers should turn to these crops to compete successfully in the international market. The Agrarian Reform Law of 1992 further advanced this neoliberal policy change. The reform privatized formerly communal ejidos—lands that combine communal ownership with individual use that could not be sold and were ruled by collective councils—giving private investors access to them. The reform enabled international companies to buy or rent land for commercial agriculture, especially in the northern states that could readily export fresh produce to the United States and Canada. In the north, farmers reap the benefits of government programs developed in the 1940s to the 1970s to promote a prosperous export-oriented agricultural sector, paving the way for the emergence of a powerful new class of modern capitalist farmers (Grindle 1995). In the end, commercial agriculture for export markets was expected to generate jobs, reduce rural poverty, and curtail labor migration to the United States.2

But the growth of export agriculture in Mexico is also a result of the demand by middle-class consumers in the United States and Canada for fresh vegetables and fruits year-round. More conscious than previous generations about their health and eating habits, Americans’ and Canadians’ appetite for more green vegetables and fruits, including organically grown crops, has provided an incentive to large U.S. agribusinesses to outsource production to Mexico and other Latin American countries to ensure a continuous supply of fresh crops. In California, horticultural companies sought an opportunity to expand production south of the border to deal with the increased cost of land due to expanding suburbanization and population growth. Droughts, environmental restrictions on pesticides, and water restrictions for irrigation provided additional incentives for U.S. transnational companies to invest in production in Mexico. Other companies developed commercial partnerships with Mexican growers to buy their produce for U.S. markets. As a result, today tons of fresh fruits and vegetables are brought every day by large trucks equipped with the latest cooling technologies to major U.S. nodal
distribution centers, from which they are shipped to supermarkets around the country fast enough to arrive fresh at consumers’ dining tables.

Despite these developments, few ethnographic studies have examined the impact of export agriculture on the growers and farmworkers who grow fresh export crops in Baja California. Has employment in the fresh-produce industry enhanced the living standards and opportunities of indigenous laborers who have settled in San Quintín? How has it affected local growers in the region? Did employment in export agriculture reduce their need to migrate to the United States? What are the living conditions in the rural colonias where they have settled? The San Quintín Valley, I argue, is an ideal case to address these questions and examine the economic, social, and ecological effects of export agriculture on the region and the people who produce fresh crops for consumers in the United States. Weaving together ethnographic case stories, I discuss how the development of export agriculture has shaped the lives, challenges, and opportunities of the peoples who have settled in this arid region in Baja. Using an ethnographically grounded approach, I trace the varied social and environmental intersections and their human consequences that the model of transnational agricultural production has brought to the San Quintín Valley. As a new agricultural frontier in the Mexico-U.S. border region, I argue, the fresh-produce industry is predicated on the intense extraction of water as well as new production technologies and forms of labor control to increase worker productivity and meet certification standards.
required by U.S. markets for imported vegetables and fruits. As the book reveals, the production regime of export agriculture has externalized many of the ecological, labor, and social costs to the indigenous workers and families in San Quintín, who must cope with them in their everyday lives. I unpack the changes that have occurred in the fresh-produce industry and how they have affected growers and farm laborers in the region and discuss the struggles farmworkers confront as they moved from labor camps to their own land lots and homes. Examining farm laborers’ lives as workers and settlers, I contend, uncovers the process of social and class transformation that the labor regime of export agriculture has engendered for the farm laborers who live in this region.

**DECONSTRUCTING THE WORKPLACE REGIME OF EXPORT AGRICULTURE**

The production of fresh fruits and vegetables for international markets is one of the most lucrative sectors in today’s global agricultural industry. Generally known as “specialty crops,” fresh vegetables and fruits such as strawberries, cucumbers, tomatoes, and table grapes have a high market value and require large capital investments in irrigation systems, pesticides, genetically developed crops, and specialized machinery and equipment. Yet because these crops are perishable, delicate, and difficult to mechanize, they require large contingents of year-round farm laborers in specialized positions such as irrigation, weeding, and soil and crop preparation, as well as hand harvesting and packing. Experts in the study of agrofood systems argue that contemporary capitalist agricultural production is based on a new international division of labor in which the Global South specializes in the production of high market value crops for middle-class consumers in the Global North (Friedland 1994). The result is a system of transnational agriculture in which large agrofood corporations are intermediaries between agricultural producers and food consumers in a global commodity chain in which the most profitable role is distribution rather than the production of crops (McMichael 1994; Friedland 1994; Wright 2005). This production system has generated what A. Haroon Akram-Lodhi and Cristóbal Kay (2010, 274) call the “neoliberal agricultural export bias,” a model that promotes the production of nontraditional export fruits and vegetables at the expense of traditional subsistence crops to fuel economic and regional growth in developing countries. Between 1986 and 2007 alone, the share of exports in agricultural output for these countries almost doubled in size, and today fresh produce is processed and packed in countries like Mexico as a means to increase rates of capitalist accumulation (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010, 275–76).

But the transnationalization of the fresh-produce industry in Mexico has also transformed the workplace regime in which export crops are produced. At the
heart of this change is the homogenization and standardization of planting, picking, and packing practices of fresh fruits and vegetables to meet safety certification requirements for fresh produce for U.S. and other international markets (Phillips 2006, 16; Bonanno and Constance 2001). While food safety regulations existed before, a renewed emphasis began in the late 1990s, when the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) launched the Produce and Imported Food Safety Initiative to enhance hygiene and phytosanitary conditions to prevent food contamination (C. de Grammont and Lara Flores 2010, 235). After September 11, 2001, the U.S. government imposed more regulations under the Bioterrorism Act, requiring growers exporting produce to the United States to register with the USDA and pass tests for phytosanitary control. At the same time, large supermarkets also developed new standards for “food quality” for fresh produce imported from Mexico and other Latin American countries. These norms focus on what Edward Fisher and Peter Benson (2006, 29) call “cosmetic quality,” namely, external aesthetic traits such as size, shape, and color of fruits and vegetables arriving on supermarket shelves. The homogenization of “quality standards” by large distribution chains has created a “supermarket governance” (Rogaly 2008), a production regime that has increased the power of large multinationals over the growers of export crops and their workers in Latin America and other developing countries.

In the book, I deconstruct the production model of export agriculture in Baja and discuss how it shapes the experiences and working conditions of farm laborers in the workplace. I pay particular attention to the shift from horticultural production in open fields to cultivation in greenhouses and shadehouses, the epitome of modern capitalist agriculture that seeks to replicate the model of factory production. I also discuss the culture of certification that permeates the fresh-produce industry—the set of technical codes and rules, beliefs, and practices surrounding the production of export crops passed top-down from managers to supervisors—and how it affects the conditions in which farmworkers perform their everyday jobs. The production of fresh produce in Baja, I contend, has generated a workplace environment in which farm labor has become more intensive, regimented, and standardized than ever before. This regime has also created a new class of transnational farmworkers trained in the skills and requirements on which the affluent U.S.-Mexico fresh-produce industry relies as a source of lower-cost and flexible labor.

GROWING WATER-THIRSTY CROPS IN ARID BAJA

The production of water-intensive crops such as tomatoes, berries, and cucumbers in one of the most arid regions in Mexico raises the issue of the ecological logic and social consequences of export agriculture as an engine for economic development. Up until the 1960s, limited water resources and San Quintín’s arid
climate prevented the development of large-scale agricultural production. The neoliberal agrarian reforms of the 1980s, along with an increasing appetite by U.S. consumers for fresh vegetables and fruits in their daily diets, broke these barriers, unleashing capital investment in water-extraction technologies by transnational corporations to engage in large-scale horticultural production. The arrival of the fresh-produce industry for export markets drastically transformed the political ecology of the region. Unlike other regions along the U.S.-Mexico border that rely on irrigation infrastructure built by the Mexican government since the 1930s (Walsh 2009; Radonic and Sheridan 2017), commercial agriculture in San Quintín mostly depends on underground water, which is tapped by companies and growers with little government oversight. A new water law in Mexico further facilitated the exploitation of the region’s aquifer for the development of export agriculture. Amid neoliberal reforms aimed at liberalizing the economy and reducing the role of the government—particularly the regulation of access to land and water—the Mexican government approved the National Water Law in 1992 to decentralize and transfer the administration, distribution, and conservation of water to the private sector (Radonic and Sheridan 2017; Whiteford and Melville 2002; Nash 2007).

The development of the San Quintín Valley as a major agroexport enclave producing water-intensive crops is part of a larger transborder economy marked by transnational capital flows linked to powerful agribusiness interests in the United States. In the 1960s, Mexico launched the Border Industrialization Program to attract foreign investment in the manufacturing sector, generating what is commonly known as the maquiladora program that gave rise to hundreds of assembly plants in major cities along the Mexico-U.S. border. In 1986, the Mexican government extended this program to the agricultural sector to bolster investment in rural areas to foment the development of commercial agriculture and generate employment. As a result, foreign investment engulfed several agricultural regions farther south in Baja, including the San Quintín Valley. This change allowed agribusinesses in California to export farming equipment, seeds, chemicals, and other production technologies to the region free of duties for the production of fresh produce for U.S. markets (Goodman and Lizárraga 1998, 19). After the approval of NAFTA, large U.S. companies began to invest heavily in water-extraction technologies in San Quintín to expand the production of fresh crops, particularly berries, for export markets.

From a political ecology perspective centered on water, I examine the ecological and social effects that the production of fresh vegetables and fruits has had on the local communities and peoples in this region. I analyze the connections between the neoliberal economic policies behind the growth of the fresh produce industry and the ways in which they shape differential access to water along class and ethnic lines. As I show, small growers who cannot afford expensive water
extraction and desalination technologies have been displaced by large companies that systematically engage in the overextraction of water from the aquifer. While commercial agriculture has fostered employment opportunities for indigenous farmworkers, I argue, it has also contributed to the overexploitation of underground water resources and a decline of water for the people who have settled in the region. I describe the inequalities generated by this model with regard to the ability by different social groups to access water and the hardships residents endure to have access to this basic resource for their human needs.

SETTLEMENT AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

We are not migrants but indigenous people who live here; we have been living here all our lives and we are [thus] Baja California natives. We are not migrants; the blond-haired men who came here as growers are the ones who are migrants.

—A TRIQUI LEADER AND MEMBER OF THE FREnte DE UNIFICACIÓN PARA LA LUCHA TRIQUI (FILT) AT A PUBLIC RALLY IN COLONIA NUEVO SAN JUAN COPALA, SAN QUINTÍN, 2005

In spring 2005, shortly before I interviewed Jesús Peña at Agrícola San Simón, I attended a political rally in Nuevo San Juan Copala, a colonia founded in 1997 and named after a town in rural Oaxaca where many Triquis who had settled in the region come from. The rally was organized by several indigenous and political organizations, including the FILT, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), and the Ejército Popular Revolucionario (EPR). Officials from the federal, state, and municipal governments and the main delegate of Vicente Guerrero, to which the colonia belongs, had been invited to listen to their demands. Around 150 residents attended the demonstration, including Triqui women in their traditional colorful huipil dresses. Their faces masked like the Zapatistas of the Chiapas revolt of 1994, the leaders of the indigenous organizations presented a list of grievances and demands. It included an end to sexual harassment of Triqui women farmworkers by their mayordomos, a request to pave the rutted and muddy access roads to the colonia, and authorization of a public space where Triqui women could sell handmade crafts to tourists. But the main complaint the leaders presented was that despite the fact that Triquis had lived in the region for many years, often decades, local government officials and the media still portrayed them as seasonal migrant workers rather than local citizens. Addressing this grievance to the government officials attending the meeting, a Triqui leader of the FILT proclaimed forcefully they were tired of racial discrimination that cast them as “migrants,” and demanded the right to be treated as full-fledged citizens.

The political rally openly exposed the harsh conditions in which indigenous farm laborers lived and the sharp class and ethnic inequalities that prevailed in the
region. The Triquis’ public demand to be recognized as full-fledged citizens in Baja also reflected the demographic growth and settlement of indigenous workers and families propelled by the labor requirements of the expanding fresh-produce industry. As this sector developed in the early 1980s, it started to require a more permanent labor force to tend the diversity of fresh crops grown in the valley. This change mirrored a similar trend that had started in California in the late 1970s, when the production of high-value specialty crops such as table grapes, strawberries, melons, and citrus fueled growers’ increasing dependence on an immigrant rather than migrant labor force (Palerm 1989, 2002; Du Bry 2007; Santos-Gómez 2014; Hernández-Romero 2012; López 2007). In Baja, farmworker settlements began in the 1980s as the result of more stable, although intermittent, labor demand in export agriculture. The rural sociologist Antonieta Barrón (1999, 273–74) identified the San Quintín Valley as one of the first regions of early settlement, showing that growers openly facilitated land invasion by squatters or even allowed workers to settle on growers’ lands to ensure a stable and reliable labor source. A similar trend toward settlement also developed in other regions in Mexico specialized in export agriculture. In Culiacán (Sinaloa), Morelos, and, more recently, Baja California Sur, indigenous farmworkers who in the past lived in labor camps have moved to colonias and built new settlements (Lara Flores and C. de Grammont 2011, 64–65; Sánchez and Saldaña 2011; Saldaña Ramírez 2017; Velasco and Hernández Campos 2018). Despite this trend, horticultural enclaves in Baja and other regions in northern Mexico are commonly conceptualized as “migratory landscapes,” spaces for commercial agriculture devoid of social community in which indigenous workers formed a permanently mobile, unattached, and flexible labor force (Lara Flores 2010).

Departing from this approach, an important goal of my analysis is to examine the experience of farmworkers who settled in San Quintín in response to the labor demands of export agriculture. From a diachronic perspective, I discuss the challenges workers confronted as they sought to establish roots in the region and the economic, social, and political strategies they deployed to claim full citizen rights. I describe and analyze this as a process of community formation, paying special attention to how they cope with the economic costs of building their homes, sending their children to school, supporting their families with low wages as farm laborers, and mobilizing to bring basic services such as water to their colonias. I conceptualize this collective experience as a new territorialization, a social and political diachronic process by which farm laborers employed in the agroexport sector collectively claim land and citizenship as settlers in the region. This is a highly creative endeavor in which they have built new rural settlements relying on their ingenuity and mobilizing their social, cultural, and political resources. In so doing they have contributed to populating this arid land on the Mexico-U.S. border, forging a new sense of belonging and identity. The experience of territorialization, however, is a
contested political process in which nativist ideologies espoused by many growers and government officials present indigenous workers as either outside migrants or immigrants with backward cultural traditions and values that stand in the way of progress in the region. Contesting this portrayal, indigenous ethnic leaders and organizations have a long history of collective mobilization claiming full-fledged rights as citizens. In this endeavor, I argue, they often rely on political experience and skills they developed contesting ethnic discrimination in their home communities in southern Mexico, using and transforming some of their traditional cultural and political institutions to mobilize for their demands in Baja California.

I also discuss the new forms of labor migration that have emerged in the recent past among farmworkers in the region. As the book reveals, the increasing militarization of the Mexico-U.S. border and new enforcement policies that criminalize undocumented Mexican workers in the United States have fostered the recruitment by U.S. growers of farm laborers in San Quintín under a federal program for seasonal workers. Settlement and migration are thus deeply intertwined in the lives of many farmworkers in the region, shaping their economic, social, and political strategies to capitalize on the opportunities and respond to the challenges entailed in the transnational fresh-produce industry.

RESISTING THE LABOR REGIME OF THE FRESH-PRODUCE INDUSTRY

In the early morning of March 17, 2015, ten years after the rally the Triquis organized in Colonia Nuevo San Juan Copala, thousands of farmworkers in San Quintín launched a massive labor strike to protest their poor wages and treatment in the fields. This was the largest labor protest the region had ever seen, and it was coordinated by a new organization, the Alianza de Organizaciones Nacional, Estatal y Municipal por la Justicia Social. The leaders of the Alianza presented a pliego petitorio, a list containing their major demands, including higher wages, inclusion in the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social (IMSS), the government agency that provides public health and social security benefits as well as pensions, and an end to the sexual harassment of female field workers. They demanded the approval of an independent labor union to represent the voice of workers and negotiate directly with growers and government officials. To gather the support of sympathizers in Baja and the United States, farmworkers organized a march to the international Tijuana–San Diego border in Playas de Tijuana in coordination with transnational indigenous organizations in California. Unlike previous smaller labor protests, this labor strike attracted national and international attention in the media, with news reports in the United States depicting the harsh working and living conditions of indigenous farmworkers in this border region few people had ever heard of before. The strike revealed the fracture lines that for years had been building in
the labor regime of export agriculture in San Quintín. Having witnessed the largest economic growth for agricultural companies in the modern history of the region, field workers employed in this sector felt they had hardly benefited from this bonanza and that their employers were exploiting and putting increasing pressure on them.

The ways in which farmworkers cope with the labor conditions of employment in industrial agriculture occupies a central place in the anthropological scholarship of work and labor resistance. As Miriam Wells (1996, 11) pointed out in her classic study of California’s strawberry industry, farmworkers’ engagement in different forms of resistance convey an opposition to oppressive forms of labor management and the struggle for “workplace justice.” Building on James Scott’s study of “everyday forms of labor resistance” by peasants in England, Wells identified different ways by which Mexican immigrant workers opposed labor management methods in California’s strawberry fields. She argued for the need to document ethnographically the individual and collective forms of worker resistance that emerge in advanced capitalist agriculture rather than solely analyze the structural changes this sector experiences over time. From this theoretical perspective, more recently a new body of scholarship has emerged that analyzes how farmworkers cope with the requirements of the fresh-produce industry that has expanded throughout the globe. Moving beyond the classic formulation of everyday forms of labor resistance, these studies have uncovered a repertoire of more structured “offensive strategies” that field workers employed in global export agriculture have developed in different countries (Rogaly 2008; Lara Flores and Sánchez Saldaña 2015; Alonso-Fradejas 2015).

Building on this recent scholarship, I discuss the individual and collective resistance strategies farmworkers in San Quintín deploy to address their labor demands and to improve conditions in their colonias. As I show, as transnational companies devised new forms of labor intensification, workers also developed a variety of forms of labor resistance, which provides an analytical window into class politics in today’s capitalist agriculture. The study of farmworkers’ political mobilization, I contend, requires a theoretical approach that does not simply reduce them to the analytical category of labor, but captures the deep integration between labor and community politics in their everyday lives. As the study reveals, settlement has enabled farmworkers to advance new and more resilient forms of labor resistance and community organization. The push for independent unions articulates a political approach that combines labor demands with community-based claims to improve conditions in their colonias. In this process, the political experience and capital of some indigenous labor and community leaders in their home communities in Oaxaca, Guerrero, and other states in southern Mexico, along with their ability to transform and adapt to the new reality and needs in Baja California, are central resources farmworkers use to mount their demands. Examining
farm laborers’ lives not only as workers but also as settlers is thus a central research strategy I use to interpret the class transformation and political struggles the production regime of transnational agriculture has elicited in the region.

**DISCOVERING THE SAN QUINTÍN VALLEY**

This book is the product of a long-term study I conducted in the San Quintín Valley starting in 2005 and continuing on an intermittent basis until 2017. While during the first two years I spent several months at a time in the field, the rest of my fieldwork was conducted in the summers after finishing my teaching assignments. Yet one of my earliest contacts with the region took place earlier, in 1998, when I traveled with my now wife to visit Agustín, one of her uncles from Oaxaca who had been living there since the mid-1980s. Unlike farmworkers in labor camps, Agustín was living in a small colonia in Colonet in a small house made of wood and cardboard he had built himself on a lot he bought after long years of hard work and saving. He was proud of having his own place; he had transformed his arid lot into a beautiful garden by planting tomatoes, chiles, a few fruits, and colorful plants using water from a well he had built.

Later, after starting my field research, I regularly visited with Agustín on numerous occasions until July 2006, when he decided to go back to his hometown, Huaajuapan de León in Oaxaca. At the time, he was in his mid-sixties and felt his employer might not give him as much work as in the past. His adult children in Oaxaca convinced him to come back and spend his late years with his family, which he had left more than twenty years before. In preparation for his trip back, Agustín went to the local IMSS office in San Quintín to check his pension benefits. While not expecting a big allotment, he thought it would help him restart his new life in Oaxaca, as he had been working as a farm laborer in San Quintín for more than two decades. I offered to drive and accompany him to the office. After he provided his name and all the information about his employer, the woman at the counter told him that his name had never been registered in the IMSS system, which provides health and pension benefits to workers. Agustín had been working for Agrícola Colonet for the past fourteen years and considered himself a trabajador de planta, a permanent worker rather than a seasonal one, because he worked almost twelve months a year. But his employer had never registered him in even one of those years, either as a permanent or a seasonal laborer. With a mixture of resignation and grace, he left the office, telling me that, while disappointed, he was not surprised as it was well known in San Quintín that agricultural companies hardly ever registered their field workers in the Seguro Social, systematically cheating them out of the health, pension, and other benefits mandated by the law. When a few days later I accompanied him to the local bus station for his thirty-six-hour ride to Oaxaca, he only carried a few pesos in his pocket, leaving his home—
his only possession after more than twenty long years of hard work—in the care of a friend while he decided what to do with it. Rather than an anomaly, Agustín’s story was common in San Quintín and among many farm laborers in the region. In fact, as the book reveals, the systematic abuse of workers by many companies and local growers was a central grievance that fueled farmworkers’ labor and political unrest long after Agustín had left the region.

**SAN QUINTÍN AS RESEARCH SITE**

My research interest in the San Quintín Valley started in 2003 when, along with two faculty research colleagues at El Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Tijuana, Marie-Laure Coubes, a demographer, and Laura Velasco, a sociologist, we decided to launch a collaborative interdisciplinary research project in the region. Our exploratory field trips revealed major changes in motion: modern greenhouses were expanding and replacing horticultural production in open fields, new state-of-the-art packing and cooling plants were being built, and many companies were installing desalination plants to irrigate the crops after water wells had gone dry from overexploitation of the aquifer. Even more visible was the rapid expansion of new colonias throughout the valley, along with the gradual decline of labor camps that, until the 1990s, housed the majority of farm laborers employed in commercial agriculture. Most workers were now living in small shacks made of cardboard and plastic, often lacking basic services such as electricity, water, and sanitation. Our goal was to document these changes and the settlement experience of indigenous farmworkers who were seeking to put down roots in the region.

To gain access to the colonias where farmworkers lived when I began my fieldwork, I first relied on the support of social workers employed by the Programa Nacional con Jornaleros Agrícolas (PRONJAG), a government agency charged with attending to the needs of migrant farmworkers in Mexico. At the time, this agency was busy responding to the new needs of farm laborers who had settled in colonias and lived in poor housing with few or no public services. This approach allowed me to map out both old and new rural farmworker settlements and strategically choose the colonias where I would conduct in-depth ethnographic fieldwork. In the colonias, I introduced myself as a college professor conducting a study on the economic and social changes that had taken place in the San Quintín Valley in the recent past. At first my white skin, beard, and red hair led some people to believe I was one of the many American missionaries who lived in or periodically came to the region to build houses for poor farmworkers and preach the Bible to local residents. Speaking Spanish (my native language) and being familiar with Mexican culture after having lived in Tijuana for several years helped to dispel the first impression some residents had, allowing me to develop rapport with them. Among people in the community, my position as college professor was generally translated into the cultural category of
maestro (teacher), which gave me a socially recognized position and created a space to interact and socialize with residents on a regular basis. With time, and after going back to the region almost every summer, my relationships with workers and families evolved, often turning into close friendships, especially with those families I visited more regularly. I was often invited to family and community celebrations such as weddings, quinceañeras (fifteenth birthday celebrations), children’s birthdays, school graduations, and indigenous patron festivities, allowing me to meet more people in the colonias. I regularly participated in their community meetings, some organized by the colonias’ elected committees and others by government programs as well as international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that provide assistance for housing, job training, nutrition, and health. My regular involvement in community affairs allowed me to observe farmworkers’ social and political lives beyond the workplace, how they negotiated with government institutions to improve conditions in the colonias, and the role of the state in settlement as a political process.

My entrée with growers and horticultural companies was different, demanding a more elaborate and time-consuming approach. This reflected the general suspicion with which many growers saw outsiders, especially journalists and academics. Until the early 2000s, local growers had occasionally attracted negative publicity in the national and international media for labor abuses of indigenous workers. One such report was a Hispanic TV news story broadcast in the United States that showed the use of child labor by Los Pinos, the largest company growing tomatoes in the region. Although the company denied the veracity of the news in the press, the report led numerous supermarkets in the United States and Canada to stop buying produce from the company temporarily. Not surprisingly, when I arrived in the region many growers were suspicious of researchers, especially from the United States, and afraid their public image could be further tarnished.

To overcome this obstacle, I began to reach out to different growers and companies through local government officials as well as agronomists at the Secretariat of Agriculture (SAGARPA), the USDA counterpart in Mexico. At SAGARPA, I accompanied agronomists on their inspection visits to farms across the valley, allowing me to meet with numerous growers and managers. After this initial contact, I generally followed a two-step approach. First, I scheduled an interview with the owner of the company and/or the top manager to gather basic information about the company’s history, production, and labor and commercial arrangements. After developing some basic rapport, I followed up with farm visits whenever possible, usually accompanied by head agronomists and supervisors. Most of the time growers responded well and accommodated interviews and guided visits to their production facilities in open fields, greenhouses, and packing plants, which allowed me to observe and talk with on-site managers, supervisors, specialized farm laborers, and field workers. With time, and after spending considerable effort reaching out to and meeting with growers, I was able to cultivate the trust of