



CJS
CHICAGO
JOURNAL
OF SOCIOLOGY

CHICAGO JOURNAL OF
SOCIOLOGY

Volume 9
2026

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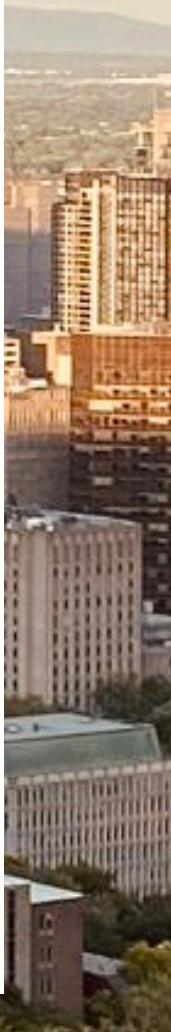
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Foreword

Dear Readers,

It is my honor, as Editor-in-Chief of the *Chicago Journal of Sociology*, to present the ninth volume of our publication. First and foremost, I want to express my sincere admiration and gratitude for the undergraduate students who collaborated diligently to craft this volume. The care they showed for the subject matter, attention to detail, and eagerness to engage with the authors' arguments was inspiring and made the process of putting this journal together feel supportive and exciting.

For me, the study of sociology has always been about not taking things for granted. It asks us to look again at what feels familiar or inevitable and to consider the histories, institutions, relationships, and meanings that shape our everyday experiences. Sociology reminds us that the world around us is made through human action, and because it is made, it can also be questioned, challenged, and transformed.

The four papers selected for this volume reflect that spirit of inquiry by examining how identity and resistance play out across varied social contexts. What unites these works is a commitment to asking thoughtful questions about how people create meaning within constraint, sustain communities amid uncertainty, and imagine futures in the face of change. They demonstrate that undergraduate scholarship is not defined by limitation, but by creativity, urgency, and intellectual courage.

And with that, I invite you to read these papers with the same curiosity espoused by our editors and take seriously the assumptions they question and the possibilities they put forth.

Sincerely,

Jadyn Lewis
Editor-In-Chief

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Stripping Beyond Gender: Money and Embodied Translation

Catalina Garcia

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the strippers who participated and/or helped in the making of it. I am forever grateful for the vulnerability that they demonstrated in our conversations which ultimately gave shape to the project. Although they are continuously referred to as ‘strippers’ or ‘dancers’ throughout this writing, I do not wish to reduce their being to a label. Outside of the club, all interviewees continuously engage with their communities through art, entrepreneurial projects, and or solidarity networks. I highlight this, not because it’s wrong to ‘just be a stripper’, but rather because within the circles that this thesis will be read in, there is a disconnect in which I wish to make emphasis of the multiplicity of beings and identities that strippers have. With this, I also wish to note that I do not think this project’s audience is strippers. In my interactions with them, they showed more lived and embodied knowledge on the topics and theoretical frameworks discussed here, demonstrating that academia is not necessarily needed to understand the complexities of our social fabric. As such, my intention with this thesis is, in part, for academia to learn from the lived and embodied experiences of strippers. In doing so, I hope to push—even just a tiny bit—in a direction in which knowledge is not merely produced through thinking and writing, but rather through living and experiencing it. Following this, I wish to particularly thank Delilah who, in our conversation, ultimately gave me the framework with which to develop my analysis and discussion. Similarly, I wish to thank all those who helped in the process of writing and editing this thesis—some of whom were strippers, others who were friends, and lastly, others who were mentors. Lastly, I wish to thank KS, my thesis advisor, and BK, my major advisor, who, despite all my shortcomings and mistakes throughout the years, continue to believe in my vision and my commitment.

ABSTRACT

This research explores the performativity of gender among strippers, examining how they navigate and challenge conventional gender norms in their professional lives to earn money and how these gender performances might be in tension with their identities outside of work. Drawing upon theories of gender performativity and affect theory, this study investigates how strippers ‘read’ their clients in order to construct and deconstruct their gender identities catering to their needs and ‘selling the fantasy’. By analyzing strippers’ use of dis-

cernment, adaptation to customers' needs, and boundary negotiation through semi-structured in-depth interviews, this research demonstrates the roles that money and power have on manufacturing desire through gender fluidity and performance—and the consequences of these—while also illuminating us on the not yet realized possibilities that sex work presents for society. use of discernment, adaptation to customers' needs, and boundary negotiation through semi-structured in-depth interviews, this research demonstrates the roles that money and power have on manufacturing desire through gender fluidity and performance—and the consequences of these—while also illuminating us on the not yet realized possibilities that sex work presents for society.

INTRODUCTION

Sex workers have long held a place in both popular and academic conversations. Nonetheless, they are often the topic *of* conversation rather than participants *in* it. As a result, sex workers have been continuously reduced to narratives of deviance, danger, or victimhood—narratives that reveal more about society's anxieties around sex, desire, and gender than about the lived realities of the workers themselves. Within all this noise, the voices of those at the center are often lost, distorted, or misrepresented.

Consequently, we have continually lost important narratives that reveal deep connections to many of the topics persistently discussed in academia, such as global economic networks, gender theory, migration, and socio-cultural systems of thought, to name only a few. In focusing primarily on the difficulties sex workers experience, rather than how they navigate them, these conversations strip away the agency, complexity, and knowledge embedded in sex work itself.

By focusing on the labor of strippers, this thesis seeks to center their embodied knowledge, arguing that they must actively navigate complex physical and emotional networks, ultimately

positioning them as what I call *body intellectuals*. As such, at the center of this project is a simple, but often overlooked, question: How do strippers come to know, translate, and embody the desires of others? In investigating this, I argue that stripping is not merely a performance or a commercial exchange, but an intricate process of *embodied translation* — a complex negotiation between social ideologies, individual affective experiences, and bodily intuition.

Drawing upon theories of gender performativity and affect theory—particularly Richard Dyer's idea of “experiential knowledge of the body”—this study investigates how strippers ‘read’ their clients in order to construct and deconstruct their gender identities, catering to their needs and ‘selling the fantasy’. By analyzing strippers' use of discernment, adaptation to customers' needs, and boundary negotiation through semi-structured in-depth interviews, this project demonstrates the roles that money and power have on manufacturing desire through gender fluidity and performance while also illuminating us on the yet unrealized possibilities that sex work presents for society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sex and desire have long captivated societal attention. For centuries, desire was assumed to be a natural phenomenon—an innate, private matter tied solely to the individual. However, over the past century, scholars have increasingly shown that desire is not merely personal or organic. Instead, it is socially constructed and strategically shaped, often serving as a mechanism for the exercise and maintenance of power (Foucault 1976). Historically, we have been indoctrinated into believing, as Gayle Rubin (1984) argues, that there are “good” ways of having sex: “heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial,” and “bad” ways: “homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, or commercial” (Rubin 1984:152). As a result, when we think of sex work, these same dynamics of controlling desire reappear, shaping the ways in which sex (or the idea of sex) is commodified.

These fantasies and illusions, however, are further complicated by the fact that they are also shaped by structures that define how gender is constructed. This concept, although pioneered by Judith Butler in 1990, was previously approached by researchers such as Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman in “Doing Gender” (1987), where they argue that gender is neither an innate attribute nor a fixed property of individuals but is instead actively constructed and performed through routine social interactions. West and Zimmerman emphasize that “doing gender” involves ongoing, methodical activities where individuals manage their behavior in accordance with normative conceptions of masculinity and femininity. This

process is deeply embedded within social arrangements and institutional structures, which both enable and reinforce specific gendered behaviors. As a result, in their work, strippers *reproduce* societal fantasies that have been defined and ingrained within society to be understood as desirable. Similar to what Lorraine Gamman and Merja Markinen write in *Female Fetishism* (1995) that “in post-modern terms, gender is the perfect simulacrum, the exact copy of something that never existed in the first place” (1995:217), fantasy and arousal serve as simulacra of a sexual ideology that, as Foucault assures, has been continuously enforced onto social systems and structures.

The ideologies of gender and sexuality, then, have narrowed the ways we understand and experience desire. As Richard Dyer notes in “Male Gay Porn: Coming to Terms” (1985), “we learn to feel our bodies in particular ways, not ‘naturally.’” This “unnaturality” stems from a disconnect between the ideological impositions of society and the body’s affective experiences. Building on this, researchers like Susanna Paasonen (2014) have argued that language plays a crucial role in mediating affective experience: shaping how individuals articulate their emotions and interpret their encounters with pornography—and, in the case of this project, stripping. The language we use to describe feelings influences not only how we communicate them but also how we come to understand them. As a result, emotions can be seen as constructed and systematized within dominant social frameworks. Thus, by relying on language to express and comprehend affective experiences, we inevitably limit

our understanding of embodied feelings, such as desire, because we remain tied to the ideological structures that define them. In this sense, as Dyer suggests, we struggle to “transcend our material circumstances,” remaining bound by the socially imposed ideologies of desire.

Given the suppression of affective experiences around desire that results from these imagined limits and restrictions, strippers must move beyond dominant emotional and social scripts in order to cater to a variety of clients throughout the night. In doing so, and as past research shows, strippers must continuously engage in a complex interplay between illusion and reality, as they attempt to manifest and embody the fantasies that their clients seek. As part of their research, Gigi Otálvaro-Hormillosa describes strip clubs as liminal spaces that, precisely because of their liminality, allow fantasy to take place (2024:130). For this fantasy to take place, however, it requires two parts: the client and the stripper. On the one hand, clients attend strip clubs in search of particular fantasies. On the other hand, strippers are the ones who continuously give life to these fantasies by embodying them at the club. Thus, both the client and the stripper rely on each other’s fantasy: without the client, the stripper would have no work, and without the stripper, the client would have no space in which to enact their own.

Nonetheless, the fabrication of fantasy depends not only on the participants but also on the environment of the club itself. The club, an alluring and mysterious space that promises pleasure and privacy, acts as a third element in this dynamic. Through its carefully curated ambiance,

lighting, atmosphere, and assurances of privacy, the club establishes a framework that allows the interplay of desire, illusion, and reality to unfold. As Katherine Frank writes in *G-Strings and Sympathy* (2002), “strip clubs are designed to appeal to the customers on a sensory level, not limited to the visual but also including the tactile, olfactory, and auditory” (2002:134). In controlling these multiple sensory registers, the club can be compared to the camera lens in pornography: it frames, directs, and filters experience, setting the tone for the narrative—the fantasy—that strippers are tasked with building. The client, in attending the club, offers their body and affective sensibility as a site of experimentation, while the stripper, as an architect of illusion and affect, works to produce embodied experiences.

To better understand how illusion, fantasy, and reality intertwine with bodily and affective experiences, it is useful to consider Susanna Paasonen’s analysis of focalization, perspective, and modes of looking in *Carnal Resonance* (2011) in terms of viewers’ relationships to pornography. First, focalization refers to the lens through which narrative or visual content is presented, determining whose viewpoint is represented and how much insight the viewer is granted into the characters or events depicted (2011:167). Second, perspective encompasses the broader angle from which a scene is depicted, influencing not only what the viewer sees but also what that perspective seeks to emotionally and ideologically convey (2011:171-172). Third, modes of looking refer to the various ways in which viewers emotionally, cognitively, and sensorially engage with

and interpret visual content (2011:176). In emphasizing modes of looking, Paasonen underscores that viewing is never a passive act but always involves active interpretation and emotional participation.

Although Paasonen applies these concepts specifically to pornography, other scholars, such as Katherine Liepe-Levinson (2002), suggest that a similar framework can be applied to strip clubs. In her work, Liepe-Levinson introduces the concept of ‘mimetic empathy’ to describe the complex emotional interaction between stripper and client (2002:16). She argues that the spectator mirrors the performer internally, imaginatively stepping into the performer’s role. This mirroring is not merely intellectual but also emotional and embodied, allowing spectators to become active co-creators in the meaning-making process of the encounter.

In my observations of past research, however, I found a notable absence of deeper engagement with the processes through which strippers identify and manifest the desires of their clients. Thus, my project centers on exploring how strippers move beyond dominant societal frameworks of thought and meaning, reaching into the liminal space where body and social consciousness meet—where language falters and embodied knowledge begins. To conceptualize this, I draw from Richard Dyer’s notion of “knowledge of the body,” suggesting that strippers must transcend language and conventional systems of meaning in order to bring to life the fantasies that customers seek. I term this process “embodied translation” throughout my project, framing it as a vital way to re-

think both the workings of desire and our broader understandings of stripping and sex work. Through their labor, strippers continuously navigate complex physical and emotional networks, a process that, as I argue, ultimately earns them the designation of *body intellectuals*.

METHODS

The aim of this project was to center the voices of strippers and their embodied experiences as a pathway into a new kind of theory making, one that centers the body as a source of knowledge production that goes beyond language. To do so, I conducted ten (10) in-depth, semi-structured interviews with strippers who generally had been working in the industry between two and five years. Participants were twenty-two to thirty-five years old. Knowing that the voices of Black and Brown queers are often heard last, I made a conscious effort to bring those voices to the front by choosing to focus on the experiences of Black and Brown strippers.

Out of the ten interviewees, seven were assigned female at birth (AFAB) and three were assigned male at birth (AMAB). However, gender identity among participants varied: four of the AFAB strippers identified as non-binary and/or gender fluid. Of the three AMAB strippers, while only one fully rejected the use of male pronouns, all three identified, to some degree, as gender fluid. Racially, three participants identified as Black, one as Afro-Latina, two as Latine, and four as white. Economic and educational backgrounds also varied, with four of the participants having completed some level of college education.

Recruitment for this project was con-

ducted primarily through snowball sampling, with initial outreach taking place via personal connections, pole shows featuring strippers, and other industry-related events such as panels organized by and for strippers. Social media, specifically Instagram, also played a key role in expanding the pool of participants via private messaging, enabling me to connect with strippers based in other states, including New York, Florida, and Missouri.

Given the small number of formal interviews, I also drew from supplementary forms of data collection. This included social media observations, primarily through Instagram, of public accounts geared toward stripper audiences. Additionally, over the six-month period in which the interviews were conducted, I engaged in informal conversations with approximately five other strippers. While not formally recorded, these exchanges provided valuable context and nuance, ultimately enriching the depth and quality of my findings.

To schedule interviews, I contacted strippers through their Instagram accounts, allowing them to choose the time and format that worked best for them. This flexibility ensured that interviews accommodated their availability without interfering with their work schedules. All but two in-person interviews were conducted via Zoom for accessibility and convenience, with each session lasting between one and two hours.

Given the sensitivity of the research and the vulnerability that could arise during the conversations, I made it a priority to build trust with participants. I openly shared as much of my background as they requested and clearly

outlined their rights at the outset of each interview. Participants were informed that they could skip any questions or stop the interview at any time. All interviews were fully anonymized to protect privacy, and participants were invited to select pseudonyms or preferred names.

Finally, participants were encouraged to contact me after the interviews if they wished to add, remove, or revise any part of their contributions. This ongoing consent process was central to ensuring that participants retained agency over their stories.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

“In the Search of Fantasy”: The Club as a Liminal Space where Fantasies are Carried Out

In their 1998 publication *Sex in Public*, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner argue that heterosexuality is continuously re-affirmed through the social—and political—imposition of sex within the private sphere¹ as it ostensibly ‘neutralizes’ the public sphere² of sexuality. However, the privatization of sex fails to account for the ways in which sexual culture—cis-heteronormative, monogamous sex—is already public and actively promoted. As a result of this contradiction, we often fail to recognize how public mediation of intimacy shapes our desires and relationships and, ultimately, the way we approach sex. The construction of desire within the private sphere becomes most apparent in places where sex—literal or fantasized—is commodified. From geographic location to interior decoration, these spaces are intentionally built to simulate the private sphere within a

commercial context that seeks to satisfy specific demands from the public, demands which are inherently rooted in the broader culture of the public sphere. As such, this section focuses on how strippers must continuously navigate the complex boundaries between these two spaces, from both professional and personal perspectives, in order to make money.

The assigned female at birth (AFAB) strippers I interviewed who worked in ‘straight’ clubs³ noted that in the industry there’s a variety of places in which you can work at, the main three being: gentleman’s clubs, fully nude clubs, and ‘booty’ clubs or ‘titty’ bars. Although the different types of establishments might share certain aspects, their differences largely lie in three areas: the type of clientele it seeks to attract, how much nudity is allowed, and the type of services offered⁴. Interviewees noted that although there is no explicit distinction in the audiences that the different clubs cater to, ‘gentleman’s clubs’ seem to attract a generally whiter and wealthier clientele. In Phoenix’s words: “If we’re asking how would you describe a gentleman [referring to those that attend gentleman’s clubs], it actually has nothing to do with how they act and everything to do with their perceived wealth, how they walk in, and dress codes.” In another interview, Kitty, who identifies as Afro-Latina and dances in a club in Florida, argued that race plays a significant part in the distinction of clubs stating that ‘booty’ clubs often cater to majority black audiences while affirming that ‘gentleman’s clubs’ cater to majority white, wealthy businessmen audiences.

In contrast, the few assigned male at birth (AMAB) strippers that I was able to

interview talked about the difficulties of finding spaces in which they could work. Unlike AFAB people who can work at straight clubs, there are very few queer strip clubs⁵ in the U.S. As such, AMAB strippers noted that stripping was not their main source of income due to the lack of money in the few spaces that do exist. Additionally, they expressed the hardships of working in largely white gay spaces that still uphold hyper-masc beauty standards. Wolfie, a queer stripper from Chicago noted that “they [the gay audience] don’t always love femininity. A lot of the times they are looking for hyper-masc, like masc for masc moment.” Mocha Witch, a Black queer stripper from New York, talked about his experience working at a queer club in Los Angeles that has curated its space to cater to a wide-ranging queer audience. In his discussion, Mocha Witch noted that the queer club in LA was noticeably different from straight clubs because rather than centering the sex appeal and the stripping aspect—although still very much present—it focused more on the spectacle and the tricks of the strippers. Although there are clear differences between the audiences that attend straight clubs versus queer clubs, there remains the fact that the public sphere is continuously informing the expectations of the private sphere of the clubs.

Given that the public sphere—the clientele—plays such a big part in determining how the private sphere of the club is constructed, it consequently affects *which* strippers get hired and *how* the strippers approach and interact with clients. When interviewing Ocean, a Black non-binary femme stripper, they expressed the difficulties that Black

femmes go through to get hired at most clubs that still uphold white-supremacist beauty ideologies. As expressed by them:

“Yeah, um, especially working at a white club. Oh, my goodness. It’s, it’s a lot. It’s tough, because we do feel like there is a black quota. But I will say, because there is a black quota, I honestly think everyone is beautiful. I am one of those cliché motherfuckers. But because there is a black quota, and they are very particular about the black women that they hire, all the black girls working at the club are bad as fuck. Like, they all look good, because I think we are held to such an extreme and high standard. That, yeah, that’s one of the reasons like a lot of girls don’t get in.”

Overall, the interviewees agreed that Black strippers (both AFAB and AMAB) continuously face greater challenges when seeking work at clubs. Moreover, all strippers, but particularly AFAB strippers, emphasized the importance of beauty standards at the club. From makeup, to shaving, to hairstyles, all strippers talked about the beauty expectations they felt they had to fulfill to work at the club or stripping related events. In most, if not all, cases, these expectations were shaped by patriarchal beauty standards rooted in the public sphere rather than requirements in their club contracts. For instance, when discussing shaving and waxing, Delilah shared:

“There’s not really any fine print that’s like, you have to be hairless, but you know, that’s what appeals to people. And you also probably realize like, someone’s

gonna say something to me if I come in here with a full bush, like, there’s just, there’s all of those aspects that people don’t really think about. And body hair is, pretty affirming to me. There was a period of time where I would cry every time I had to shave my legs.”

These complex feelings towards ‘giving in’ to patriarchal and other normative beauty standards were often tied to the discussion of profit making with most dancers, both AMAB and AFAB, noting that adhering to these was a sort of security measure to make money. In this way, these feelings were also tied to the reading, understanding, and experiencing of the patriarchal public sphere.

All the strippers I interviewed—AFAB and AMAB—expressed moments of deep introspection through which they continuously negotiated their bodies and their physical appearance. For instance, Colette, a stripper and artist from Chicago, expressed how their look at the club had changed throughout the years as they “gained a better understanding of what men want.” Nonetheless, they also emphasized that:

“Yeah, it was a return to all these things [patriarchal beauty standards, gender norms, etc.] that I had worked really hard to set down. Um, and it was a conscientious one where I knew it was less of these internalized compulsory behaviors and rather like a, a distinct choice to make myself look that way in order for this outcome.”

Similarly, Wolfie and Mami Ceiba talked about having to lean into certain ‘gay’ and/or ‘queer’ stereotypes that

might not be representative of themselves in order to make money. The conscientious decisions of strippers to embody the ideal ‘woman’ or the ideal ‘gay/queer’ shows a clear understanding of the social dynamics, specifically the traditional gender roles, of the patriarchal public sphere. In this sense, strippers demonstrate a deep embodied understanding of Butler’s thesis in *Gender Trouble* about the performativity of gender by which, rather than automatically taking up the assumed “repeated acts” expected of any given gender, they make deliberate decisions in order to make a profit (1990:45). However, because AMAB strippers expressed similar experiences to those of AFAB strippers, they highlight deeper contradictions within the public sphere. While gender roles appear to have expanded to ‘accommodate’ queerness, these roles still rely on rigid, often racialized and capitalist, norms. In this way, the performance of queerness, like that of femininity, becomes congealed into recognizable forms of desirability that still serve patriarchal, racialized, and capitalist logics. Ultimately, strippers of all genders seemed to continuously reject gendered norms and expectations while still engaging with them tactically, exposing the constructed nature of gender and commodifying it in return. Thus, as strippers embody the desires of the public sphere, they become embodied translators of the public sphere within the private sphere. This embodied translation, further discussed in the next section, goes beyond gender, for it also encapsulates an understanding of race, class, and age dynamics. For instance, Ruby, a Black stripper from New York,

talked about all the physical maintenance she goes through in order to make money given that she does not fall into the traditional white beauty standards. For her:

“I’m not white, you know what I mean? Like it’s not giving Pamela Anderson, it’s not giving Angelina Jolie, so from a strategic point of view I knew I’m not gonna hit. I’m not gonna light up those fantasies. So, then I need to figure out what else I’m doing. I think whereas white dancers don’t necessarily even need to put makeup on, they don’t necessarily need to get their nails, they don’t necessarily need to like monitor their body hair the way I do, and they don’t need to be like as done up; I think part of my presentation which then carries over to how I look day-to-day is just like so highly super femme because outside of race like the biggest fantasy that people want is like this hyper feminine goddess sensual being.”

Through her high maintenance beauty routine, Ruby captures the more complex aspects of patriarchal beauty standards when race comes into the conversation. Because Black desirability is seen as inherently different from White desirability, Ruby, and other Black dancers, are pushed to go through more meticulous beauty routines in the hopes that they can provide alternative fantasies for clients who already hold certain prejudices, ideals, and beauty expectations.

Thus, for strippers, the public and the private sphere are continuously bleeding into one another for, in their embodied translation, they must make

decisions about their bodies that may have consequences on either their income or their being outside of work. As a result of this continuous bleeding of the private and public, they are constantly negotiating not only *what* they are willing to do but also *who* they are willing to become.

The body of strippers within the club, then, from a Marxian perspective, becomes a means of production: one that must be optimized, adorned, and disciplined in order to generate profit under capitalism. In this sense, strippers fully exemplify Karl Marx's assertion that "the worker sells not what labor produces, but [their] ability to labor, [their] bodily and mental capacities" (1867:4). The stripping industry—as well as other jobs within the sex industry—lays bare the reality of capitalist exploitation by positioning the body as both the means of production and the commodity itself. Most of the strippers I interviewed, particularly the AFAB ones, noted how their decision to go into the industry had been conscientious of this dynamic. Many described a deliberate decision to monetize their present bodies, acknowledging how appearance, sexuality, and desirability could be leveraged under capitalism. Their decisions were consistently entangled with complex histories—layered with financial necessity, trauma, and a desire for autonomy—and were frequently intertwined with experiences of sexual harassment in everyday life. For instance, when interviewing Ocean, they expressed how getting harassed by men on their day to day convinced them to start stripping: "I'm already getting harassed like just existing. So, I might as well make some

money off of this and be able to take care of myself, you know?" Moreover, nearly all AFAB strippers interviewed expressed having a more complicated relationship with their bodies after starting to work in the industry. In particular, interviewees noted that, outside of work, they no longer invested as much time and effort into their appearance, often making a conscious effort to escape attention. When discussing this matter, Colette said that: "Not only am I just too tired to make myself look a certain way for other people when I'm not at work, but I'm also like, I actively just don't want attention or to be sexualized." Others, such as Delilah, described the emotional and physical toll of constantly commodifying their desirability in order to make a living:

"Being this really like, desired is very exhausting. There's a bodily reaction to these people staring at you and wanting to um... like it's a very consumerist standpoint of taking you in a visual way, there's a level of entitlement, but let me not... I digress..."

From this perspective, the bleed between the public and the private sphere becomes increasingly apparent, revealing how gender, race, and capitalism are interwoven—structuring not only consumer desire, but also the labor required to fulfill it.

Space becomes a key component in the commodification of bodies within the stripping industry. As mentioned previously, other authors have discussed how clubs build an alluring atmosphere in which beauty is 'created' by utilizing "special effects [such] as staging arrangements, lighting systems, fans set in the stage floors, smoke, and strobe lights" as

well as nonstop music that is “selected to be sexy or fun” (Frank 2002:243, 163). The efforts carried out by strip clubs to curate specific atmospheres vary and often depend on the type of establishment and the audience it caters to. This curation is often tied to “the cultural organization and ‘class’ of its patrons, owners, managers, and employees” (Liepe-Levinson 2002:51). Thus, even though there are similarities in the ways in which strip clubs construct a space and an atmosphere that sells the fantasy of sex, how each club does so is informed by the audience it caters to and, as such, the public sphere that informs it.

The strip club, then, becomes a space that must serve a dual purpose: to create an inviting atmosphere conducive to sexual fantasy, while simultaneously avoiding the imposition of any singular approach to sex. As such, while the lights, stages, and music ‘construct’ an alluring space that appears ideologically charged, the club is an ideologically flexible space that exists neither in the public nor the private sphere but is ultimately shaped by both. This liminality allows for customers to build their own fantasy world, which is brought to life by the strippers working there. A key part of the club’s appeal, then, lies in the understanding that clients can walk in and be approached by beautiful femmes who seem to cater precisely to what they are looking for. Instagram page @hustlerdiaries shared a publication by @paige.byas in which she states

“You have to learn how to read customers, you have to identify what kind of person they are and what they’re looking for when they come into the club. It’s your

job to figure out what that customer wants and then deliver, that’s how you get your money.”

This statement resonated with what most of my AFAB⁶ interviewees said, encapsulating the importance for strippers to learn how to ‘read’ their clients’ needs. Additionally, they expressed that there is no manual on how to read clients and that, for the majority of them, it was a skill that they developed with time. Previous research has shown that strippers, particularly AFAB ones,

“...physically manifest such expectations by responding to, rather than initiating, interactions with others; by yielding the greater portion of time and physical space to dominants (mostly males); by using smaller gestures in general; and by presenting a circumspect or constrained (lady-like) comportment which often includes a submissive, averted gaze when dealing with the opposite sex.” (Liepe-Levinson 2002:108)

Most interviewees generally aligned with this portrayal, especially the part about letting the client lead the interaction. Still, some emphasized that asking directly what a client is seeking on a particular night is equally important.

As many interviewees expressed, reading a client isn’t always easy or obvious, and their strategies to do so typically fall into three main approaches. The first of these, and normally the easiest one, consists of interacting with clients that readily show interest in them. As Phoenix shared:

“My thing is like if I have to work too hard it’s probably not for me, because like a man doesn’t

need convincing for what he wants. And so, it's like I could work harder to convince, but the way I choose to work is like I'm not. And sometimes it works in my favor because then they're like oh she's not begging for it."

Other strippers shared how, through time, they've learned which niche group of men to seek out. This approach not only allows for them to make 'easier' money, but also oftentimes allows them to be more genuine⁷ around their clients and develop stronger connections with them. The second approach, the most common one, consists of deciphering the needs of clients, often involving reading needs that the clients themselves might not even be aware of. Interviewees expressed that doing this often requires longer conversations and closer attention to the client's body language. Moreover, as expressed by Delilah: "What a lot of people don't think about is that they have to be realistic with themselves and what they want to get out of it. And, when you are not, you are probably not going to be satisfied." The emphasis on clients' honesty regarding desire is a reminder of the active role of clients in sex work and the importance of communication in customer satisfaction. Lastly, strippers discussed that the real hustle happens when interacting with clients that, originally, show no particular interest in them and, as such, forces them to find new ways to sell themselves.

While these interactions can be fruitful and affirming to strippers and their sales abilities, interviewees mentioned how they can also end up being extremely awkward, unsatisfactory, and at times physically and/or emotionally unsafe.

The relationship of the strippers to each approach varies with some of them preferring quick and easy interactions while others having a preference for interactions that are longer and possibly more meaningful. The preference of one approach over another is directly connected to a stripper's personality, their emotional state and sex drive that day, financial necessities, and many other different factors. Some prefer quick and transactional encounters, while others—such as Mala, a stripper and artist from Chicago—find greater satisfaction in longer, more emotionally resonant interactions. These preferences, however, are not made in a vacuum. They are often shaped by racial and gender dynamics within the club. As expressed by Ocean,

"When I first started, there would be like white girl nights at the club, because it is a predominantly white girl club. And it'd be those nights where, unfortunately, you know, you're not gonna make any money because you've picked up and paid attention and see that the customers are not tipping or dancing with any of the black dancers and the only girls that are making money are the white women. And it sucks because sometimes when you see that it's a

white girls night, you just kind of have to take the L and most of the time we'll all sit back in a dressing room and like, counsel each other and be like, ain't that about a bitch."

All the strippers I interviewed—both AFAB and AMAB—agreed that customers' motivations varied greatly. From partying to more intimate and vulnerable connections, strippers have to continuously find new ways to read clients in order to engage with them and make money, often having to do so multiple times in one night. The liminal nature of the club—being both void and full of ideology—makes it so that the possibilities of clients' fantasies were infinite. And while it is true that the club increasingly attracts cis-hetero men that often seek to fulfill sexist and gendered fantasies, all interviewees emphasized that the club was also a space for both men and queer people to escape from the social expectations of the public sphere. All AFAB strippers noted that, since starting to work at the club, they had developed a deeper sense of empathy—for better or worse—towards men. As Delilah stated,

"I think that's one of the biggest things I learned while being in the industry is like, a lot of men don't have a safe emotional space to be heard on various levels of vulnerability. It's just like, they don't have that in a way where they feel like they are not going to be judged for not being man enough"

Thus, in a world where patriarchal systems impose gendered expectations on both men and women, the club can become a space within the private sphere in which desire, intimacy, and fantasy can exist in different forms from those in the public sphere. For queer clients, the club can also serve as a place of self-discovery away from the judgmental eye of the public sphere. As Ocean expressed,

"[The club] is also like super sexually healing. A dancer that I worked with told me that she was giving a dance to this woman one time, this 40-year-old woman, and she had always known that she was gay, but she never felt like she could fully accept it or whatever. And then she got a private dance from this one dancer, and she just started crying during the dance and was like, I've been a lesbian my whole life and I never felt ok with it. And so like, I think it can also just be a place of healing for people to self-discovery for the dancers and the customers."

This sentiment was shared by AMAB strippers that, having worked in predominantly queer spaces, emphasized how these clubs and strip pop-ups can serve as spaces for creating connections, "environments where we can make friends, where we can find lovers, and where we can build community" (Mocha Witch).

At the heart of all these experiences are the strippers themselves: bodies navigating racial, gendered, and emotional terrains in real time. Through their labor, they give form to the fantasy of the private sphere while constantly mediating the expectations of the public. It is precisely within these complex negotiations—per-

sonal, relational, and embodied—that we can begin to see the stripper’s role as translator between the two spheres.

“Embodying the Fantasy”: Money and Embodied Translation

As we delve deeper into the liminal space of the club, the line separating the public from the private sphere becomes increasingly blurred. As clients enter the club in search of fantasies fulfilled, strippers must continuously improvise new methods to satisfy them. In the past, self-proclaimed feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon—the principal figures of the Women Against Pornography (WAP) movement—have argued that pornography, and by extension other forms of sex work such as stripping, encourage male violence against women through the continuous explicit depiction of women as sexual objects for male use⁸ (MacKinnon-Dworkin Antipornography Civil Rights Ordinance 1984). This argument, however, has been widely critiqued for reinforcing a rigid gender binary in which the men are cast as desiring subjects and women as passive, subordinate objects of desire. In the context of stripping, Liepe-Levinson (2002) writes that “despite the intricacies of [Dworkin’s and MacKinnon’s] rhetoric, most formulations rest on two-dimensional conceptions of gender and desire which the strip show—being a performance specifically about desire—foregrounds” (p.11). Thus, even though strippers must translate the gendered norms of the public sphere through embodiment, their doing so is inherently performative. At the center of this performance lies the exchange of money and, with it, an ex-

change of power. This section explores the role of money in shaping strippers’ gendered performance within the club, highlighting the complex power dynamics that come into play and the crucial role of embodied translation between the public and the private spheres in the pursuit of profit and customer satisfaction.

To understand the role of money, then, it is important to discuss the product being sold. In strip clubs, the fantasy of control is central to the experience and, therefore, becomes part of the commodity itself. Clients, by virtue of their purchasing power, are granted the illusion of choice—they decide how the interaction unfolds, which dancer to engage, and what kind of experience they want. Yet, as many of my interviewees emphasized, this dynamic is far more complex for, although strippers are the ones in control—having autonomy over which customers to approach and, at times, the prices of their services—they must still perform outwards submissiveness in order to preserve the fantasy. As Wolfie stated,

“I do really feel like it is this like hyper sexualized desire, but also just control where customers often just want to pay you to do something that they want. You’re just an object like you are a person and you’re hot and you’re attractive. But more often than not, you are just fulfilling a service. Or being a body so that they can get off in whatever way they want to, whether that’s because they can’t find someone in their life that willingly wants to do that, or they don’t have time or whatever it is.”

Interviewees described identifying dis-

tinct categories into which they could classify clients' fantasies. The most notable among these were: *the siren*, *the therapist*, and *the girlfriend experience*. The first—*the siren*—was described as the most common and revolves primarily around sensuality. In this performance, strippers draw on their sensual prowess, using movement, voice, and bodily engagement to interact with clients in a sexually alluring manner. The second—*the therapist*—centers on emotional labor. Here, strippers take on nurturing roles: boosting clients' confidence, easing anxieties, and serving as attentive, nonjudgmental listeners. Lastly, *the girlfriend experience* draws from both, the siren and the therapist, as strippers seek to mimic the sensual, affectionate, and emotionally supportive dynamics expected of women in cis-hetero relationships.

These performances are further complicated when strippers are pushed to simulate gendered roles they would normally reject outside of the club; roles which are inherently influenced by the ideologies of the public sphere. Interviewees who identified as non-binary expressed feelings of discomfort at performing gendered dynamics within the club discussing how it shaped differently their queer experience. For Delilah, *"Being perceived as a woman all the time and being around women all the time is like healing, but also really hard to digest sometimes. I don't mind being referred to as a woman in that space because I feel like it avoids conversations that could potentially put me at risk, so I just kind of deal with that. But it is hard to feel queer enough a lot*

of times outside of there and remind myself that, I'm just as valid as I was before I started doing this job and also as valid as other people who are more visibly queer."

Similarly, Black strippers described confronting specific racialized dynamics as part of navigating success within the club. As Ruby put it:

"I've also needed to get really comfortable with just flat-out being fetishized because that's also something that I can provide that is different right, so I don't even blink when people are like 'I just love that your skin is so much darker than everyone else's', it's like laughable."

Across the interviews, strippers of various genders and racial backgrounds spoke to the emotional dissonance of enacting roles that often clashed with their identities outside the club. For many, the act of performance became not only a negotiation of fantasy and labor, but also a daily reckoning with how race, gender, and queerness are fetishized and commodified within systems of desire. It is through navigating these intricate dynamics that strippers become embodied translators—leveraging their understanding of the construction of desire, along with the gendered power relations in the public sphere, to embody and sell their services.

Crucially, this embodied translation would not occur without the exchange of money. The monetary exchange also complicates the apparent power dynamics within the club. As discussed earlier, the idea of control is central to the appeal of strip clubs. While customers *do* hold power—choosing their experiences—they relinquish that power the moment they pay

for any service. In doing so, control shifts to the strippers, whose labor consists of tailoring performances through embodied translation. In this sense, clients may believe they are paying for beauty, intimacy, or authenticity, but what they are actually purchasing are curated performances calibrated to fulfill their desires. This transactional reversal has been noted by sex work advocates, such as Annie Sprinkle, Marilyn Dragu, Nina Hartley, and Debbie Sundahl, who have argued that “‘the sexual consumers’ very act of buying erotic entertainments or hiring others to arouse them—to ‘do’ them—is also an immediate act of giving over social and personal power” (Liepe-Levinson 2002:85). It must also be emphasized that in these transactions, the tailored performances—these acts of embodied translation—are ultimately reflections of patriarchal fantasies rooted in the public sphere. Each performance is not a spontaneous expression of the stripper’s desire, but rather a mirror held up to the client’s projections, channeled through the physical and emotional labor of the performer. In this sense, the stripper’s body becomes a site upon which the client’s external, culturally shaped desires are enacted.

As a result, these fantasies can often be problematic, and when layered with the complexities of money and power, interactions within the club can become tense. As expressed by Mala, “[Clients] feel like at a club they’re the ones in charge. They cannot talk like this to any other woman in their life, but they come to the club and because they’re paying you for your time, they literally think that they can just do whatever because

they think less of you, and they think that you’re going to have to take it.”

These tensions can range from sexist and racist remarks to outright assault, requiring strippers to intuitively navigate delicate situations where they must continually weigh their physical and emotional well-being against the need to make a profit—a topic that will be further discussed in the following section.

The role of money within the club becomes especially significant when examining the roles strippers are expected to perform. As discussed earlier, many of these roles involve enacting a highly specific form of femininity—one that often merges the nurturing caregiver with the sensual seductress. The convergence between these two is something that many of my interviewees noted while also emphasizing that this fantasy is often a reflection of the male impotence caused by patriarchal expectation within the public sphere. In Ruby’s words,

“A therapist isn’t enough. The therapist is gonna tell them to do stuff to change [the emptiness they feel] which they don’t want to do. And a therapist isn’t someone that they can touch and have intimacy with. They’re looking for the assurance that frankly we all get from being held and feeling wanted and feeling desired. They just want to know that they can be their authentic self and share all of those things, and someone would still desire them and think of them as a man.”

As a result of this, while many of the interviewees did express an increased sense of empathy towards men, they simultaneously emphasized that the emotional and

physical labor expected by male clients should only be extended in exchange for compensation. Several strippers underscored the absurdity of being expected to fulfill multiple roles—caretaker, therapist, lover—often with a heightened sexual availability, all while adhering to rigid beauty standards that demand hairlessness, flawless nails, and sculpted physiques. To provide this level of labor and presentation without monetary exchange, they argued, would be both unsustainable and exploitative. As Kitty aptly put it: “It’s only worth it if the money flows.” Thus, money is not merely a transactional tool; it is the engine that gives form to the impossible fantasy of ideal womanhood while simultaneously sustaining the capitalist-patriarchal order. It upholds a narcissistic male fantasy: a woman who exists to reflect emotional needs while remaining endlessly sexually accessible.

On a different note, some strippers shared that performing these roles could sometimes serve as an affirmation of their identities outside the club. In the act of embodying ‘the other’ in performance, they were able to assert their own identities through negation—actively rejecting roles, behaviors, and expectations that felt misaligned with their sense of self. This process resonates with Judith Butler’s analysis in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), where they argue that identity formation hinges on acts of differentiation and repudiation. As Butler writes, “The forming of a subject requires a differentiation from the abjected and the repudiated; this repudiation institutes the subject in a particular domain of intelligibility and establishes the outside as the necessary ground for the subject’s

coherence” (p. 3). In Delilah’s words: *“These aspects of hyper feminine bodies, or female perceived bodies, you know, actually are the things that affirm my non-binary gender, because by existing this way, I’m already kind of removing what you’re trying to perceive of me. And I accept it so fully, that I can exist outside of this binary because I realize that all of these are constructs and boxes, and everything has been socially constructed. And it’s honestly, something I’ve really clung to over the years.”*

As such, while interviewees described having to perform specific gender roles within the club, many also noted that this performance actively discouraged them from reproducing those roles outside of work, ultimately reshaping their personal, embodied understandings of gender.

Similarly, interviewees expressed having had transformative experiences in their sexualities. Many emphasized that their ability to be intimate had been significantly affected by their work, with some stating that their desire for and participation in sexual activities had gradually dwindled as well as their approach towards sex had shifted. Additionally, AFAB strippers commented that their attraction to women had grown since working at the club, while their attraction to men had significantly diminished. However, some of them—such as Ruby—stated that their time working as a stripper had allowed them to learn new aspects about their sexuality. As Ruby shared,

“I’ve never felt like my sexuality was more fluid than it is now because I connect to people when I’m

dancing by sort of finding something that I find attractive about them. The way that I do my dances creates a spell on them but also on me too, and then I do feel connected to them. And I think it has just affirmed that I could experience attraction and have really pleasurable eroticism with anyone. In some sense I feel more free to choose a partner that I actually like and it's not just like beholden to whomever I've had the best sex with before cause I'm like I can create the best sex with anybody and that's not that it doesn't take intention but I do think it's possible as far as gender."

Thus, while the harms of stripping cannot be overlooked, the continuous narrative of stripper victimization oversimplifies the complex physical and emotional labor performed by these workers and diminishes the autonomy they inherently possess.

The reflection of public sphere ideologies within strip club fantasies also underscores the normative power of privacy. As pleasure becomes relegated to the private sphere, desire is increasingly confined to—and reproduced through—cis-hetero-patriarchal norms, ultimately reducing it to a commodified product that can be bought and sold. And while the sexism embedded in the structure and practices of many strip clubs is undeniable, it is equally important to recognize that it does not have to be this way. As discussed throughout this section, strippers are paid to perform, to embody something—but that “something” need not always reflect the dominant ideologies of the public sphere. As explored throughout the previous section

and this one, the ideological openness or even emptiness of the strip club allows for more than just cis-hetero-patriarchal values to take root. The presence of money does not exclusively purchase fantasies rooted in domination and gendered power; it can also fund experiences grounded in pleasure, curiosity, and emotional exploration. As Colette observed, “Coming to a strip club doesn’t mean that you need to pay for those things. It just means that you’re here to do that.” In this sense, while money can certainly be a conduit for narcissistic male fantasies, it can equally enable alternative fantasies—ones that privilege intimacy, mutual recognition, and self-exploration, both sexual and non-sexual. Ultimately, it is strippers, through their ongoing negotiation of how, when, and to what extent they are willing to embody these public sphere-rooted desires, who must navigate the cultural expectations placed upon them in order to make a profit. It is this complex act of boundary-making that becomes the focus of the following section.

***“You Can Spend the Money, You Can Never Forget What You Did for It”:
Boundaries and Hustling***

In the video shared by @hustlerdiaries on Instagram, mentioned in the first section, @paige.byas underscores the importance of creating boundaries in stripping, remarking: “You can spend the money, you can never forget what you did for it”—the title of this final section. In the comments, many echoed this sentiment, with one user noting, “Not all money is good money. But good boundaries attract the right money.” Throughout my interviews, variations of this phrase

came up again and again, suggesting how central money is in shaping boundaries—often positioning boundary-setting in direct opposition to maximizing profit. Though I had not initially framed a question specifically around boundaries, the theme emerged as central to understanding how strippers navigate the complex dynamics of the club and how those negotiations shape their lives beyond its walls. As expressed by all my interviewees, boundaries were first and foremost a survival tactic, but at times, they also became a means of fostering sisterhood and camaraderie within the club. As such, this section focuses on the importance of setting and enforcing boundaries as an integral part of the performance of embodied translation, directly shaping dancers' autonomy in determining how, when, and to what extent they are willing to embody desires rooted in the public sphere.

Many of the strippers I interviewed shared that their first time in a strip club was the night they auditioned to work. As a result, entering the industry was a profound shock—one they had to navigate alone, with no guidance or support, and one that fundamentally reshaped how they viewed their bodies. Because of the isolating⁹ nature of the job, strippers are often forced to confront their personal boundaries without any clear understanding of what is expected of them, or what they have the right to refuse. Many began stripping in their mid to late twenties and expressed gratitude for not having started earlier, believing they wouldn't have had the emotional maturity to navigate the job's physical and emotional demands. Those who did start younger reflected on how their immaturity left

them more vulnerable to exploitation and placed them in situations where they struggled to advocate for themselves.

Overall, strippers agreed that they entered the industry without the proper tools to navigate it. As Delilah shared:

"When I was less experienced, I'll say there's definitely things I put up with that I have to live with myself now. And it wasn't always like me doing things, it was more so not knowing how to stick up for myself, or not realizing how important it was. And maybe feeling like, at that moment, the money was more important. And that was like, one of the fastest lessons I learned: the money is never more important than how you're going to feel 10 minutes from now, an hour from now, 10 years from now... like those things really stick with you. There's those nights where you never feel clean enough, and that's not because you're not asserting your boundaries, that's just because people are nasty."

This lack of access to resources—and the consequences that follow—reflect broader societal patterns of exclusion rooted in whorephobia. As Gayle Rubin (1984) argues, people whose sexual behaviors or identities fall outside what society deems acceptable—such as strippers—are systematically pushed to the margins. In her well-known "sex hierarchy," Rubin maps how only certain expressions of sexuality are afforded legitimacy, while others are stigmatized, criminalized, or outright erased. This regulation of sexual legitimacy ties directly into Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's distinction

between the public and private spheres: the public sphere, as shaped by dominant ideologies, plays a central role in deciding which forms of intimacy and sexuality are seen as respectable and which are excluded from cultural recognition. As Rubin notes, these hierarchies “rationalize the well-being of the sexually privileged and the adversity of the sexual rabble” (p. 152). Strippers’ work inherently disrupts these privileged expressions through the commercial performance of promiscuity, non-monogamy, and, at times, queer desire. For those who live and work outside this normative framework—those whose labor refuses conventional ideas of sexuality and propriety—there are no public resources, no institutional guides, and no safety nets. Strippers, like many other sex workers, are left to figure it out for themselves—especially given their status as independent contractors¹⁰, which offers little to no structural support or protection. As a result, strippers—and, more broadly, sex workers—enter the industry blindly and have very limited resources on how to navigate it. As written by @thestrappedproject on Instagram:

“There were no training programs or curated career paths. We had Craigslist ads, Backpage listings, and word of mouth. We shared our safety tips in dressing rooms. We watched each other. We taught ourselves how to dress, move, negotiate, and stay safe. What people now call ‘technique’ or ‘energy work’, we lived out of necessity.”

To be a stripper—and more broadly, a sex worker—is often, as a friend of Colette put it, to “gracefully deal with sexual assault.” In this context, the process

of boundary-setting in the club is rarely proactive. Instead, it typically arises from discomfort, harm, or trauma—emerging from the aftermath of experiences that taught them what they would not tolerate or endure again. My interviewees confirmed this, sharing how their experiences at work shaped their boundaries. Across the board, there was a consensus on two main factors that determined how they set those boundaries: their emotional and physical state on any given day, and the demeanor and behavior of the customer. In relation to the latter, many strippers noted that familiarity played a key role—knowing a customer and having interacted with them before often made them feel safer, which in turn allowed for a different set of boundaries to be enacted. Moreover, strippers emphasized that ‘reading’ customers played a key role in their approach. As expressed by Phoenix,

“Sometimes it’s in your control, sometimes it’s not in your control. Things that I do to minimize SA and boundary crossing is trying to vet the person that I go spend time with, but that doesn’t always work out. There’s a lot that you can tell about a person before getting into a private space with them, even if it’s for a couple of minutes, just by their actions. And then I think, is it worth it to try and risk it? Can I manage this? Am I gonna have to look out for this? Is this somebody I want to completely avoid?”

Thus, boundaries shift from client to client, day to day, and dancer to dancer. And while many strippers establish clear boundaries for themselves, these are often tested or crossed. How

a dancer responds is shaped not only by how frequently those lines have been violated, but also—and perhaps more crucially—by the amount of money they anticipate receiving in return.

Given that strippers' primary goal is often to maximize income, enforcing boundaries becomes a complicated and strategic undertaking. Contrary to the popularized phrase "boundaries are sexy," in the context of the strip club, setting limits can risk breaking the fantasy and turning customers away—resulting in lost income. While some interviewees shared that they occasionally disclosed personal 'rules' to clients, many also admitted that, more often than not, they chose not to. Instead, they relied on subtle tactics—like gently pushing clients' hands away—to discourage unwanted behavior without breaking the illusion of control and desirability. On Instagram, @gemmarosepole shared a series of posts aimed at helping new dancers navigate this delicate balance. In it, she advises strippers to "lap dance defensively," writing:

"Never turn your back to anyone you don't trust. Trust isn't automatically given to customers, it's earned. For too handsy customers: Is he submissive? If so, pin his hands and make it 'kinky'. Is he dominant? Blame everything on the club and say you want them to touch you, but the club will kick him out if he continues (whether the club actually cares or not). Use ambiguity to your advantage. Make the customer THINK he's always right"

This strategic ambiguity resonated with many of my interviewees, including Delilah, who explained, "I've kind of fig-

ured out that sometimes, if I can manipulate the situation or just reframe it in certain ways, it will end up getting me more money or, you know, more time than I will charge." The ways in which strippers navigate difficult situations reveal not only emotional intelligence and keen perceptiveness, but also a practiced skill in conflict resolution that is strategically employed in the pursuit of financial gain.

Nonetheless, strippers are not always able to manipulate situations in their favor. More often than not, they find themselves dealing with customers who repeatedly cross boundaries. Interviewees shared that in these moments—particularly when they had to tell clients 'no' multiple times—tensions would often escalate, sometimes leading to arguments or, in more extreme cases, to clients being removed from the club. However, many dancers also noted that they typically avoided making scenes, largely out of fear that drawing attention would result in punishment from managers. Moreover, when managers or security did get involved, it almost always meant they wouldn't get paid by the customer. In light of this, when difficult situations arose, whether involving customers violating boundaries or dancers compromising their own, many interviewees emphasized the importance of self-compassion. They spoke about allowing themselves to feel whatever came up without judgment, and when needed, taking time off to rest, recover, and emotionally reset.

Interviewees also underscored the importance of community, both within and outside of the club. Inside the club, strippers frequently expressed the care and solidarity they received from

fellow dancers. As shared by Colette, *“I remember the day that a dude smacked me so hard, I was crying in the locker room and this girl that I barely knew was so nice to me. She was literally wiping my butt cheek with alcohol just being so sweet and understanding and being like ‘oh my god, I’m sorry you’re going through this’.”*

Moreover, building friendships at the club—as many interviewees emphasized—offered a sense of encouragement to show up for work, knowing there would be someone they could rely on. For some, these friendships also became strategic; having a trusted companion nearby not only boosted their confidence, but could also serve as a selling point with customers. For most, though, engaging with other strippers became a crucial way to learn different methods of hustling. As Ocean shared:

“I danced with this one girl one time and the guy paid \$60 for our dance. And then she was like, if you want us to take our tops off, you’re gonna have to tip us 20. We take our tops off. And then he was like, ‘Oh what are the rules? Can I touch?’ She was like, you can touch if you tip us \$40 more. And I was like, damn, the way we just took this \$60 dance and made it \$120. I was like, thank you. That’s a hustle... and he did it, he paid. She articulated herself so well and just asked for what she wanted, and he gave us both the money. I was like, okay, damn, well, let me go ahead and try and do that.”

Ultimately, having a sense of communi-

ty was crucial for all of my interviewees. For many, the friendships they built at the club became an essential part of their aftercare routines—spaces where they could process the physical and emotional toll of the job. These connections also served as opportunities for reflection, where dancers could share what they felt went well, what didn’t, and how they might approach things differently next time. Delilah recalled how, with a friend who used to work alongside them:

“We used to carpool, because I didn’t have a car at the time. And so, when I was working nights, we’d always work together. And when she would drive me home, we would always review our nights together. A lot of times we would have similar customers. But you know, there were some nights we didn’t see each other at all. And we would always talk about, if something bothered us or what was the best thing was the best feeling I had tonight. And that was just super healing. I think there’s something just really comforting and beautiful about someone who understands this industry, no matter how they identify.”

Similarly, Wolfie shared how they relied on both industry and non-industry friendships as part of their support system:

“I have a really good sense of community, people that are in the stripping and sex working community and also out of it. I think it’s really important to maintain friendships in both aspects, because obviously people in the community can understand a lot of the nuances of situations. But also, being in

the community, sometimes we let things slide because we've been in it longer. And then sometimes I'll talk to people outside of the community and tell them and they'll be like, that is fucked up and not okay. And like, you're right. It actually is. And like, I thought it wasn't, or like, didn't think it was that big of a deal, but I'm just, like, so used to things. So, it's nice to have people on both ends of that to support me."

The importance of aftercare was emphasized by all of the strippers I interviewed. While some developed their own unique rituals—such as burning incense or palo santo—most shared a set of common practices they followed upon arriving home: removing all clothing worn at the club—some even refusing to bring anything from work inside their living space, taking hot showers, avoiding counting money in their bedrooms, and journaling as a form of emotional release. Beyond these nightly routines, many highlighted the significance of physical care practices like massages, acupuncture, lymphatic drainage, and visits to bath houses as essential components of their broader self-care. These practices helped them manage the physical strain of the job and maintain emotional balance outside of work.

Overall, while it might be hard for non-sex workers to grasp how the physical and emotional tolls of stripping could be 'worth it,' every one of my interviewees expressed some form of gratitude for what the work had taught them—about themselves, their boundaries, their resilience, or their capacity to connect with others. Their reflections complicate any simplistic readings of sex work as only

harmful or degrading, instead illuminating the complex, often contradictory, emotional landscape of the job. Moreover, these narratives complicate the divide between public and private life: strippers don't just perform fantasies for public consumption—they absorb and transform those performances, carrying their insights and boundaries into their personal, everyday lives. In doing so, they invert the expected direction of influence, translating what is learned in the club into practices of empowerment, self-knowledge, and boundary-setting beyond it. As shared by Ocean,

"I feel like I learned how to stand up and speak up for myself within the club. So, translating that with my life outside of the club has helped a lot. My work persona has helped me learn so much more about my worth and stand on it a little more, and that's amazing to take outside of the club. Knowing that regardless of it being sexual or not, like, my boundaries are put in place for a reason. My body is mine and I don't have to do anything that I don't want to. And again, it doesn't even have to just be like, based on sexual things, just knowing that, like, I have limits. And that's okay and it's okay to say no."

Similarly, for Mami Ceiba:

"I feel like when I'm in that working mentality it's a mentality that you know you're worth so much. You're working for money. So, in my day-to-day life, especially when I'm kind of down, I just try to put myself in that same mentality. Even if I'm going to school I'm thinking

‘yeah I’m gonna make a trillion dollars today’. And it just makes me, I don’t know, it makes me carry my chest up. I just feel like it’s giving me a really good ego boost.”

These accounts reveal that strippers do more than perform the fantasies expected of them—they actively reshape, resist, and reframe these expectations. The lessons learned at the club become bridges to new ways of being outside of their work, where dancers not only fulfill public desires but also transform their work into powerful practices of self-definition, autonomy, and empowerment. In this way, strippers engage in embodied translation both inside and outside the club—first by translating public desires through performance, and then by reversing the flow of meaning as they carry those lessons into their personal lives. This reversal further blurs the line between the public and private spheres. In reflecting on and embodying these lessons, any reductive view of sex work as merely performative or passive is problematized. Instead, the embodied translation carried out by the strippers highlights the resilience and strength required to continuously reframe and redefine the roles they are given, turning their work into a site of personal growth, self-awareness, and resistance. As Kitty aptly puts it, “I’ve never felt closer to being me.”

CONCLUSION

Embodied translation leads us to the central idea of body intellectuals: through the physical and emotional labor of navigating societal expectations and continuously negotiating boundaries, strippers acquire knowledge with and through

their bodies. These bodies are not merely sexual commodities, but sites of embodied knowledge that exist in ongoing conversation—bridging the public and the private sphere. Their knowledge of societal and cultural norms, as discussed in the first two sections, shapes how they perform and construct the fantasy of the private sphere within the liminal space of the club. Inversely, as discussed in the last section, their lived experiences at the club ultimately inform and transform the way they view the public sphere and, as such, the ways in which they navigate life outside of work. In this sense, strippers’ bodies serve as living archives of emotional, social, business, and trade knowledge. Through their engagement with clients, strippers accumulate a wide range of information—from stock tips to political insights—that they can carry into their daily lives. Additionally, their interactions with other dancers create a network of shared knowledge, where information circulates, and strategies for coping and care are exchanged and cultivated. Overall, what became most evident throughout my research was the value and necessity of sex worker networks—communities born from urgency, sustained through mutual care, and rooted in shared experience.

It is in the idea of strippers as body intellectuals that I locate a site of queer revolutionary potential. As Cathy J. Cohen writes in *Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics*, “if there is any truly radical potential to be found in the idea of queerness and the practice of queer politics, it would seem to be located in its ability to create a space in opposition to dominant norms, a space where transfor-

mational political work can begin” (1997: 438). Viewed through this lens, the body intellectuality of strippers resists dominant norms on multiple fronts—challenging academia, rejecting cis-heteropatriarchal expectations, and positioning itself broadly as anti-system. Of course, it would be both irresponsible and inaccurate to suggest that all strippers would personally identify with these frameworks. However, my argument does not rest on individual self-identification—although many strippers would identify with these, even if not by name. Rather, it is grounded in the inherent qualities of the labor itself, as seen throughout this research, which consistently push against dominant norms and structures.

Regarding the first claim against dominant norms—anti-academia—I argue that the ways in which knowledge is produced, circulated, and embodied among strippers fundamentally challenge the idea that formal institutions such as academia are the sole or superior sites of intellectual production. Strippers, coming from diverse backgrounds and lived experiences, engage in modes of learning and knowing that are deeply experiential, collaborative, and embodied—positioning their labor as an alternative form of scholarship.

The second claim—the rejection of cis-heteropatriarchal expectations—is embedded in the very fabric of stripping. While the performance of femininity or a particular type of queerness within the club often appears to reproduce these norms, it simultaneously resists them by virtue of being explicitly performative. The staged, transactional nature of the labor exposes the constructedness of

gender and sexuality, revealing them as roles that can be inhabited, exaggerated, or subverted. Furthermore, although individual strippers may personally subscribe to traditional gender roles or sexual norms, their work requires them to engage with these norms in complex and often contradictory ways. In the club, they may present themselves as non-monogamous, queer, or as fluid embodiments of femininity and/or queerness, depending on what the moment calls for. This occupational flexibility creates space for reimagining gender and sexuality beyond fixed, normative expectations—challenging the rigid binaries that cis-heteropatriarchy depends on. This dynamic is especially pronounced in gay and queer clubs, where the work inherently resists these structures, even as other gender norms may persist.

Lastly, stripping’s positioning as broadly anti-system lies in how it disrupts traditional capitalist labor models. Unlike conventional nine-to-five jobs bound by rigid schedules and bureaucratic hiring practices, stripping allows for greater autonomy over strippers’ time, labor, and body. While practices vary across clubs—and some clubs do not allow such flexibilities—many dancers have significant control over when and how they work, challenging the expectation of productivity dictated by capitalist time structures. Moreover, strip clubs often serve as sites of employment for individuals who have been systematically excluded from the formal labor market—such as people with felonies, undocumented workers, or those navigating intersecting forms of marginalization related to race, gender, and sexuality. In this way, stripping opens

up alternative economic possibilities, operating outside of and in resistance to dominant labor systems that prioritize conformity, legality, and assimilation.

The revolutionary potential of stripping further lies in its deep ties to sensuality. In *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*, Audre Lorde writes about the transformative force of the erotic in shaping our capacity for joy and meaning. She argues:

“This is one reason why the erotic is so feared, and so often relegated to the bedroom alone, when it is recognized at all. For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of. Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives. And this is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe.” (1984:3)

In this, stripping—as seen in the testimonies throughout this research—exemplifies the power that understanding one’s sensuality has in shaping one’s view of the world and how one moves through it. Because of the nature of their labor, strippers are constantly reflecting on how sexuality and performance inform their sense of self, connection, and purpose. This intimate knowledge—what

Lorde would call “erotic power”—not only gives meaning to their work, but also directly pushes back against normative structures that attempt to erase the erotic from the public sphere by relegating it to the private. To succeed in their jobs, strippers must repeatedly draw on their erotic power to replicate feelings of intimacy and arousal within the club. In doing so, they actively push against the boundaries between public and private, reclaiming sensuality as a legitimate and powerful form of knowledge.

Ultimately, while strip clubs still have a long way to go before they can truly be recognized as sites of revolutionary potential, they already possess key aspects—such as their liminal nature and their ideological fluidity—that position them as launching points from which to envision queer futures. As José Esteban Muñoz writes in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, “queerness is not yet here” (2009:1). And yet, in the present manifestations of opposition that strip clubs embody, we are given glimpses of that not-yet-here. In these glimpses seen from the present, we are able to envision a future in which strip clubs become spaces of meaningful sexual exploration untethered from dominant ideological structures. And, at the center of these futures are strippers—body intellectuals—who guide us as we navigate new spaces in which stripping goes beyond our current understandings of gender and sexuality.

ENDNOTES

¹The private is not just about the personal or the intimate but is shaped by intimacy, affective labor, and social expectations that exist within private life (such as family, love, or sexual relationships). In their view, the private sphere is often entangled with broader societal structures, such as gender, sexuality, race, and class, and is shaped by the social and emotional demands placed on individuals within their intimate relationships. The private sphere is not isolated but exists in tension with the public, where societal expectations about intimacy, affect, and love have implications for broader political and cultural norms.

²The public sphere is shaped by political structures, economic systems, and ideologies that regulate and mediate the emotional and affective lives of individuals. The public is seen as a space where emotional engagement is often shaped by larger systems such as government, media, and capitalism. The authors emphasize that the public sphere doesn't simply concern rational discourse but also public feelings—how collective emotions, such as nationalism, anxiety, or desire, circulate in public life.

³Straight clubs is used to refer to those clubs that cater to primarily straight male audiences and, as a result, hire majority femme presenting people—with very few cases of trans women hires.

⁴These three differences are usually interconnected in some form. The types of services might vary on how much nudity is allowed and the type of clientele that an establishment seeks to attract might affect how much nudity is allowed. The ways in which these three aspects inter-

act also affect the ways in which a stripper makes money. In gentlemen's clubs, strippers usually make most of their money from selling VIP rooms, while in booty clubs strippers tend to make most of their money from their dances on stage.

⁵Queer strip clubs refers to those clubs that cater to a queer public. Queer clubs may vary with some of them catering more to gay men, while others catering to broader queer audiences.

⁶While AMAB strippers also agreed with the concept of 'reading' clients, the lack of spaces in which to work at—and the different expectations within these few spaces—made it so that these approaches could not be directly translatable into queer stripping spaces. As such, the discussion of 'reading' clients mainly focuses on the experiences of AFAB strippers.

⁷Most of the strippers I interviewed discussed how it was harder for them to create a club persona rather than being their authentic self. This, however, also comes with risks as masking can serve as a shield of protection within the club.

⁸See also Dworkin's *Pornography: Man Possessing Women* (1981).

⁹Stripping is generally a 'lonely' job, especially for new strippers. When they arrive at clubs they tend to not have friends and, "due to the club's exploitative systems, tensions between co-workers will be heightened [as] strippers are forced to compete against each other for the bare minimum." (@gemmarosepole on Instagram).

¹⁰Although varying from strip club to strip club, strippers are hired as independent contractors. This means that they are not paid hourly, they do not have benefits, and have little to no protection at

work. As expressed by @gemmarosepole on Instagram: “Often, clubs will have rules you must follow, but sometimes it’s the wild wild west and anything goes.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Catalina García Restrepo (they/them) holds a B.A. in Sociology and Gender & Sexuality Studies from the University of Chicago and is currently pursuing a Masters in Social Work degree. Their research interests include gender performance, sex work and the body, and the impact of socio-cultural norms in relationships.

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Seeds of Dissent: Organizational Capacity, Media Embeddedness, and the Divergent Trajectories of the Indian Farmers' Movement

Arjun Garg

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the divergent trajectories of the Indian farmers' movement across four states—Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh—following the introduction of three farm bills in 2020 that challenged agrarian society. Although triggered by this common national grievance, the movement unfolded in strikingly different ways across states, both in its initial eruption in 2020 and in its resurgence during a second wave of protests in 2024. By moving beyond the states and waves that received the most scholarly and media attention, this study provides a more comprehensive and geographically nuanced picture of the movement's evolution. Using a comparative historical approach and strategic case selection, this study argues that variation in movement trajectory is best explained through two key mechanisms: organizational capacity and media field embeddedness. Organizational capacity, rooted in the historical strength and structure of farmer unions, shaped the initial emergence of protests. Media field embeddedness, the extent to which a state's movement actors were connected to broader activist and media networks, determined the persistence of mobilization under conditions of repression and fragmentation. By distinguishing between movement emergence and movement persistence, this thesis advances a sequential framework for understanding protest lifecycles. In doing so, it not only contributes to scholarship on the Indian farmers' movement but also advances broader debates in social movement theory, showing how the hidden “seeds” of latent infrastructures and communication networks shape whether movements survive, adapt, or dissolve in contested political environments.

INTRODUCTION

In September of 2020, India's government passed three agriculture bills known as the Farm Bills that sparked one of the largest and well-organized movements in global history (Pahwa 2020). This mobilization transcended regional, caste, and class divisions by drawing farmers, laborers, and activists into protest actions for over a year, through

two waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, until the Farm Bills were eventually repealed in November 2021 (Reuters 2021). Despite this initial victory, farmers mobilized again in 2024, demanding legal protections for critical agricultural institutions, such as Minimum Support Price (MSP). As of March 2025, this second wave of protests is still on-

going, but it has already surpassed the duration of the first, highlighting the resilience and deep-rooted grievances of these agrarian struggles (TNN 2025). This historical episode offers a powerful lens for understanding agrarian politics and the social conditions under which collective action emerges and persists.

The immediate trigger for this mass mobilization was the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government's introduction of three controversial agricultural market reform bills. In the 1960s, through what was known as the "Green Revolution," agrarian India was reorganized around regulated marketplaces called "mandis" where farmers could reliably sell their crops (Narula 2022). In these markets, the government committed to buying certain crops at a guaranteed minimum price, or MSP, which provided a critical safety net for farmers. The Farm Bills deregulate these markets by allowing crop sale outside of mandis, threatening the MSP system. Farmers feared that dismantling this system would expose them to exploitation by large agribusiness corporations, eroding their economic autonomy and threatening rural livelihoods. It would also trickle down and threaten several other institutions, such as the Public Distribution System, India's largest anti-poverty program, which relies on MSP-based procurement (Rajalakshmi 2021). With India already battling a historic farmer suicide crisis due to climate change and debt cycles (Krishnan 2022), the bills presented not only an economic threat, but a symbolic attack on the protective institutions that they had come to rely upon. By making it harder for farmers to get out of debt, the bills signaled to farmers

that the government will not help them through this crisis, thus forcing farmers to take matters into their own hands.

Despite being driven by the same national issue, the farmer protests unfolded in different ways across states, outlined in Figure 1 and detailed in the findings section of this paper. Punjab immediately emerged as a powerful epicenter of the movement, mobilizing rapidly and sustaining protest energy consistently. In contrast, Madhya Pradesh (MP) saw limited protest activity from start to finish. Maharashtra initially had impressive mobilization, but struggled to maintain momentum in the second wave. Uttar Pradesh (UP)'s trajectory was characterized by delayed but eventually robust participation in both waves. The goal of this paper is to explain these divergent pathways that have clearly manifested through the two waves of protest in 2020 and 2024. How did the different social and political contexts of different Indian states influence their movement trajectory in the farmer movement from 2020 onwards?

While there has been research done about the farmer protests writ large, the academic literature and media both largely ignore differences in the movement between states. Previous studies have explored the historical impact of India's Green Revolution on the movement (Singh et al. 2021; Kaur and Saratchand 2023), the stratification of class and caste interests involved in the movement (Lerche 2021; Pattenden and Bansal 2021), and the strengths and weaknesses of the movement (Singh et al. 2023; Narula 2022). However, they are primarily focused on Punjab, Haryana, and Western Uttar Pradesh, which

	Punjab	MP	UP	Maharashtra
Movement Emergence	High	Low	Low → High	High
Movement Persistence	High	Low	Medium	Low

Fig 1: Table of Movement Trajectories

were the guinea pigs of the Green Revolution and therefore have the longest history with regards to mandis. Despite this, farmers in other states such as Madhya Pradesh have since also grown a meaningful dependence on MSP. Looking at the nuances of the movement in these other states reveals important differences in the way the movement played out which provide a ripe case for comparative analysis.

Through a comparative analysis of four Indian states, I argue that variation in movement trajectory is the result of two factors: organizational capacity and media field embeddedness. In particular, organizational capacity explains movement emergence and media field embeddedness explains movement persistence. States with strong, historically-rooted farmer unions were able to mobilize more quickly and on a larger scale when the farm bills were introduced. They were able to lean on pre-existing protest networks and experience to build a coherent movement. While organizational capacity determines the foundation of the movement, explaining its persistence requires moving beyond internal resources and understanding movements as relational actors embedded in a broader protest field. Persistence through the second wave depended on a state's embeddedness in the

broader protest media network, which allowed states to resist state repression, coordinate across divides, and maintain symbolic legitimacy. While this paper's argument is grounded in the specific dynamics of the Indian farmers' movement, it points to broader lessons about how deep organizational infrastructures and relational media positioning interact to shape the life cycle of protest movements.

EXPLAINING MOVEMENT TRAJECTORIES

This section evaluates leading explanations from the social movements literature to understand what drives variation in movement emergence and persistence. Conventional accounts based on material grievance, state repression, or framing strategies fall short in explaining the variation in these farmer protests. Instead, I argue that two related factors, organizational capacity and media field embeddedness, offer a more compelling explanation. These variables help explain why some states mobilized earlier and more powerfully, as well as why some states sustained momentum across multiple protest waves while others fell off.

One explanation for movement participation focuses on material grievance. Taking an expected-value approach, scholars argue that people participate in social movements based on the perceived costs and benefits of doing so (Klandermans 1984). As a result, movement trajectory is shaped by the potential material gains directly at stake, as well as the “biographical availability” of the protestors (McAdam 1988). That is, the material costs of participating, such as lost farming yields, which is mediated by things like wealth. Thus, we should expect states with wealthier farmers who can more easily afford to be out protesting away from their farms to protest more. We should also expect states with more farmers who are impacted by the farm bills to protest more. However, this was not the case in this movement. Madhya Pradesh (MP) saw low movement emergence despite having a large number of farmers impacted by the farm bills (Government of India 2023).¹ On the other hand, Maharashtra had fewer farmers impacted by the farm bills as well as having poorer farmers, but still saw high movement emergence (Government of India 2021).²

A more compelling explanation for variation in movement trajectory is organizational capacity. This refers to the ability of organizations to effectively utilize their resources towards their goals (Barman and MacIndoe 2012). Staggenborg (2020) finds that organizational capacity influences the development of social movements. They don’t simply *happen* when the need arises but are influenced by organizational structures and internal dynamics. Organizational capacity can both influence and be influenced by pro-

tests. The success of some movements comes outside of material benefits and in their ability to build solidarity between groups and mobilize people for the future (MacKay 2002). However, not all forms of solidarity are the same. Wright et al. (2022) introduce “drive-by solidarity,” a form of context-dependent solidarity that is thin and based on temporary shared interests. This perspective shifts attention away from grievance alone and toward the slow, often invisible work of building movement infrastructure long before any protest begins. I find that the organizational capacity of different states at the time of the farm bills being introduced contributed significantly to movement emergence.

While organizational capacity helps explain movement emergence, it does not fully account for differences in movement persistence. Maharashtra had strong organizational capacity and movement emergence, but it saw low movement persistence in the second wave. Another line of explanation focuses on the role of state repression in determining movement trajectory. Past research has shown that political repression can significantly influence movements, but it is inconsistent on whether it encourages or deters protests (Opp and Roehl 1990; Rozenas and Zhukov 2019). It seems to be extremely context-dependent, based on things like protest perceptions (Edwards and Arnon 2021) and the history of suppression (Bell and Murdie 2018). These differences are clear in the Indian farmer protests, since all cases saw government suppression to some degree, but it had different consequences in each state. In Uttar Pradesh (UP), for example, the suppression served as a rallying point that enraged farmers

and strengthened the movement. On the other hand, in MP, suppression prevented the movement from ever even getting off the ground. Suppression can't alone explain variation in movement trajectory, but it is an important place to look.

Something that could mediate government suppression and explain its differing consequences is framing ability. Snow and Benford (1988) describe how successful movements engage in diagnostic and motivational framing to define the problem, propose solutions, and inspire collective action. More recent literature analyzes how the emergence of social media has altered the dynamics of framing by allowing movements to circumvent mainstream media, but also posing challenges for cohesion and control (Tufekci 2017). Framing helps determine whether protestors are viewed as legitimate actors or as threats, and whether state repression is interpreted as justifiable or excessive. In the case of the farmer protests, framing clearly mattered. For example, Punjab was able to insulate protests against government propaganda through their own internal news media sources. However, framing ability alone can't explain the full picture. Maharashtra had strong ideological clarity and messaging through AIKS, but they saw low movement persistence.

A new variable, media field embeddedness, explains why some states were able to sustain mobilization through a second wave while others were not. Fligstein and McAdam (2012) introduce to social movement theory the idea of "strategic action fields," which can be thought of as the building blocks for collective action in society. Organizations and states don't

exist in a vacuum. Their strength comes not just from their internal resources, but also their position in the broader field of relationships (Diani 2003). Then, "media field embeddedness" specifically refers to a movement's relative position within the wider network of activist media and protest organizations. Unlike organizational capacity, which captures a group's ability to mobilize participants, or framing, which captures how effectively it constructs meaning, media field embeddedness captures whether those mobilizations and messages are connected to and amplified by others. Movements that are more embedded occupy central positions in these networks: they are more visible, more widely referenced, and more tightly linked to other protest actors. For example, Maharashtran protestors had strong internal clarity amongst themselves, but not with the rest of the movement. I find that states more embedded as the symbolic core of the protest media field were better able to deal with government suppression and saw higher movement persistence compared to more isolated states whose movements faded over time.

RESEARCH METHOD

This paper takes a comparative historical sociological approach to explain the divergent movement trajectories for the Indian farmers' movement across four states. These states are treated as historically embedded cases through which I compare the mechanisms that influenced movement trajectory. The comparative approach follows a most-similar systems logic in which cases share key structural conditions but vary in outcomes, allow-

ing me to isolate the core mechanisms driving the variation. This approach was selected due to the small number of cases, which would make a purely quantitative approach limited. Moreover, because relevant evidence is dispersed across regional and multilingual sources, the process of reconstructing these narratives is itself central to the analysis. The goal is to develop causal accounts that illuminate how different structural conditions and logistical strategies combined to produce variation in the outcomes of this particular historical event. This approach follows a tradition in historical sociology that emphasizes causal mechanisms and sequencing (Griffin 1992; Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003). In line with this tradition, I paid close attention to the timing, sequencing, and internal dynamics of mobilization in each state to develop an explanatory narrative that traces how specific configurations of organizational capacity and media field embeddedness shape the emergence and persistence of the movement.

To explain variation in protest outcomes, I define movement trajectory as composed as two related dimensions: movement emergence and movement persistence. Movement emergence refers to the speed and scale with which initial protest activity emerged in response to the 2020 farm bills. Movement persistence refers to the ability of the movement to maintain momentum through the second wave in 2024, particularly in the face of repression and internal fragmentation. By separating these phases, I can determine factors that spur short-term mobilization versus ones that can sustain a movement. It also allows me to better

identify the sequencing and interaction of causal mechanisms instead of treating the movement as a one-off event.

To investigate these patterns, I selected four Indian states, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh (UP), Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Maharashtra, as cases that exhibit distinct combinations of emergence and persistence. The cases are not intended to be representative but instead to demonstrate meaningful variation in movement trajectory. Punjab saw both early and sustained mobilization, Maharashtra had strong initial energy but dropped off in the second wave, MP remained largely weak throughout, and UP entered both waves late but powerfully. Importantly, what remains relatively constant across these states are farmers impacted by MSP and geographic distance from New Delhi. All four states were in the top half nationally in the number of farmers who benefited from the MSP procurement scheme in 2019, prior to the start of the protests (Government of India 2023). This ensures that each case had a substantial population directly affected by the farm bills and allows me to reject the hypothesis that variation in movement trajectory is simply the result of different levels of material grievance because of the farm bills. Distance from the focal point of the protest marches, Delhi, also was relatively similar between the cases. Punjab, UP, and MP were at most one state away from the capital, while Maharashtra, though farther, still saw high movement emergence through long distance vehicle marches. This allows me to reject the alternative hypothesis that variation in movement trajectory is simply the result of accessibility towards the protest sites near Delhi.

	Punjab	MP	UP	Maharashtra
Movement Emergence	High	Low	Low → High	High
Organizational Capacity	High	Low	Low → High	High
Movement Persistence	High	Low	Medium	Low
Media Field Embeddedness	High	Low	Medium	Low

Fig 2: Table of Core Mechanisms of Movement Trajectories

To explain variation in movement trajectory, I instead focused on the two core mechanisms of organizational capacity and media field embeddedness. Organizational capacity was operationalized by tracing the historical development and relevance of farmer unions in each state. I assessed the number and size of active unions, their leadership structure, and their involvement in past mobilizations. Pre-existing alliances, diverse leadership, and proven protest experience are signs of high organizational capacity, and states lacking such features are inferred to have lower organizational capacity. Media field embeddedness is operationalized by examining a state's position in the cross-state flow of protest information. I looked for evidence of media production, participation in national protest discourse, and coordination outside of the state. While media presence internally within the state may contribute

to media field embeddedness by providing more access points to the broader movement, it is not necessarily indicative of media field embeddedness if this media presence remains isolated. These inferences were drawn through process tracing and narrative reconstruction.

To trace these mechanisms across the four cases, I looked at a range of primary and secondary sources. These included newspaper articles, government documents, local protest media, union publications, and academic studies of the movement. I also looked at recorded interviews and speeches made by protest organizers. I looked for relevant moments through the history of the state or during the movement itself that were key indicators regarding the status of organizational capacity and media field embeddedness of each state. These sources allowed me to reconstruct a narrative of events in each state, identify important turning points,

and interpret how actors responded to challenges. I paid particular attention to how organizations coordinated and how public narratives changed over time. This material helps me produce historically grounded explanations that illuminate not just what happened, but how and why it happened differently across cases.

While this approach allows for in-depth, contextually grounded analysis, it is not without limitations. The small number of cases limits the generalizability of the findings beyond the selected states, and the reliance on secondary and media sources introduces potential biases in coverage and interpretation. Additionally, the process of narrative reconstruction necessarily involves interpretive judgment, which may shape how causal mechanisms are identified and sequenced. However, despite these limitations, this approach provides a rigorous framework for uncovering how and why movement trajectories diverged across cases.

FINDINGS

This section presents the comparative findings of the four selected cases—Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh—to explain variation in movement trajectories during the Indian farmers' protest. Each section analyzes how a state's unique historical, organizational, and relative media field configurations shaped its participation across two key phases in 2020 and 2024. The cases are organized as coherent stories to illuminate the causal processes that connect organizational capacity and media field embeddedness to outcomes of movement emergence and movement

persistence, as outlined in Figure 2.

Punjab

Punjab was the first and most forceful rallyer. Its rapid mobilization was driven by decades of farmer union building and cross-caste alliance work that laid the groundwork for mass resistance. The legacy of the Green Revolution combined with experienced leadership and wide-ranging alliances made the protest appear less like a political rupture and more like a continuation of a long agrarian struggle in the state. Punjab also powerfully sustained its movement through the second wave in 2024 despite internal divisions in protest leadership. Its media capacity via in-house newspapers and symbolically central position in the larger movement proved essential to framing state repression as excessive and keeping morale high. Punjab's story is one of early ignition and sustained fire, made possible by high organizational capacity and deep media field embeddedness.

Punjab's long history of farmer mobilization and union building provided important protest infrastructure for the farmers' movement. The Green Revolution's social and ecological disruption spurred left-wing movements such as the Naxalite militancy in the 1960s (Singh et al. 2021). In 1972, the farm union "Punjab Khetibari Union" was formed, eventually expanding into the nationwide "Bharatiya Kisan Union" (BKU) in 1980. Following a national period of diminished strength in the 1990s, it was Punjab again that revitalized them with the creation of the "BKU (Ekta Ugrahan)," which adopted a leftist ideology and focused on issues for small and marginal farmers in Punjab

(Shyam et al. 2024). Many of the leaders of the 2020 farmer movement in Punjab have been involved since the 1960s and carry with them the trauma and lessons of this long struggle (Singh et al. 2021). With this protest infrastructure in place, Punjab had high organizational capacity.

This organizing experience positioned Punjab well to jump right into action in 2020. Within a week of the farm bills being announced in June 2020, Punjabi organizers went village to village, distributing Punjabi-translated documents and educating villagers on the harmful effects of the farm bills. This quickly led to local protests, including boycotts and blockades, that continued throughout the summer and escalated in September when the farm bills were actually passed (Singh et al. 2021). In November, a nationwide coalition called “Samyukt Kisan Morcha” (SKM) was formed to lead the movement against the bills, and they called for “Dilli Chalo,” a march towards the capital, New Delhi (Singh and Singh 2024). This march saw significant participation from Punjabi farmers, who became the lifeblood of the movement. The speed and efficiency with which these foundational movement developments unfolded are the result of pre-existing movement networks and logistical practice. Organizers knew precisely where and how to coordinate farmer discontent.

Leading up to 2020, Punjab also saw changes in farmer-laborer dynamics that primed them to begin to challenge historical antagonisms between these groups. Farmers from dominant caste groups historically exploit local Dalits and seasonal migrant workers, and there are frequent farmer-laborer

conflicts over land and harvesting wages (Lerche 2021). However, in line with the new BKU (Ekta Ugrahan)’s leftist agenda, the farmer union worked with the “Punjab Khet Mazdoor Union,” a labor union, to pressure the government into providing compensation for farmer and worker suicides. They continued to provide support for worker issues, such as crop-loss compensation, developing an understanding of broad-based democratic struggle and coalition forming (Kaur and Saratchand 2023). The BKU (Ekta Ugrahan) also has both worker and women wings that advocate for their respective groups (Singh et al. 2021). Deep-seated and ongoing issues still exist, but these coalition-building efforts helped soften the caste and class antagonisms that had historically fractured rural protest in Punjab. By aligning their struggles under a shared framework of agrarian justice, farmer unions created the conditions for a broader mobilizing bloc that extended beyond landowning farmers.

This groundwork became evident during the protests, which saw wide participation from Dalit laborers and women, groups previously sidelined in agrarian movements, due to the state’s high organizational capacity. While many individual Dalits remained hesitant to join the movement due to the entrenched caste hierarchies, organizations such as Zameen Prapti Sangharsh Committee (ZPSC), a land acquisition movement for Dalits, stood in solidarity with the broader farmers’ movement (Majumder 2021). On February 18, 2021, Punjabi farmer unions organized the first *Mazdoor-Kisan* (Worker-Farmer) rally with the explicit goal to mobilize workers.³

This not only bolstered the protestors' numbers but also gave the movement a strong sense of legitimacy by demonstrating how they were willing to put their differences aside due to the importance of their shared goal. Women's participation was also significant, a reflection of their increased structural power within groups like the BKU (Ekta Ugrahan) (Kaur and Saratchand 2023). The diversity of protest participation in Punjab across caste, class, and gender lines was not a coincidence, but the result of historically-built organizational capacity that allowed for the base of the movement to be expanded.

Despite its early strength, Punjabi protest structures faced significant internal fragmentation that threatened the movement in the years following the repeal of the farm bills in 2021. In 2022, a faction of SKM leaders broke off to contest Punjab Assembly elections under the name "Samyukta Samaj Morcha" (SSM), violating the larger movement's commitment to political neutrality. When this failed, SSM members attempted to rejoin SKM, and internal disputes over whether to accept them back led to a split and the formation of "SKM (Non-Political)" led by Jagjit Singh Dallewal (Parsai 2024). Tensions deepened further in 2023 when BKU (Ekta Ugrahan), due to a large number of Punjabi farmers being Sikh, supported a campaign by a Khalistani⁴ group demanding the release of Sikh prisoners. This decision was seen as non-secular and radical by some members, who formed another splinter group called "BKU (Ekta Azad)" (Nibber 2023). While the core ideological goals remained the same across these factions, these divisions posed a serious

challenge to the coherence, legitimacy, and unity of the movement in Punjab.

In spite of these organizational splits, Punjab's movement saw strong persistence due to their deep embeddedness in the broader protest media field. Even as formal unity between unions was unraveling, Punjabi protest networks remained symbolically and logistically central to the national movement. In February, SKM (Non-Political) kicked off the 2024 wave of protests by organizing and leading a Dilli Chalo 2.0, with heavy Punjabi participation. The movement's ability to act in unison despite fragmentation was rooted in the development of robust internal media infrastructure that allowed them to independently stay connected to the broader media field. For example, *Trolley Times*, a newspaper created by Punjabi farmers during the first wave, served as an informational anchor offering unified messaging in both Hindi and Punjabi to ensure broad accessibility (Ramani 2020). Social media platforms like Twitter were similarly useful in coordinating action and countering disinformation (Happy and Mogha 2024). More than being logistical tools, this media infrastructure allowed factions to appear symbolically aligned in Punjab and maintain high media field embeddedness. In November, Jagjit Singh Dallewal began a fast that he threatened to maintain until death if the government did not meet the movement's demands, which became a key rallying point in this second protest wave. By late 2024, even the SKM, which had initially kept a distance from Dilli Chalo 2.0, lent its support, reaffirming Punjab's centrality in the protest field. In this way, Punjab's central media

field embeddedness served as a glue for sustaining ideological cohesion and protest legitimacy across a fragmented base.

The movement in Punjab also faced significant government suppression in the form of propaganda campaigns and direct police violence. Punjabi protestors were labeled as violent Khalistani-extremists, international spies, terrorists, etc by BJP-run media sources. This is a classic BJP suppression tactic that has been successfully deployed to shut down protests in the past (Apoorvanand 2021). This time, however, it didn't work, owing to Punjab's deep embeddedness in the broader media ecology. Sikh diaspora abroad organized their own solidarity protests and used their media outlets to counteract the BJP's narrative (Bhardwaj and Kumar 2020). This also prompted international celebrities like Rihana to make statements in support of the farmers' movement, further legitimizing the protestors (Mishra et al. 2021).

Despite this, the BJP ramped up its propaganda campaign during the second wave in an attempt to take advantage of the movement's internal divisions. They labeled protestors as foreign-funded and violent, such as by refusing to meet with farmers who allegedly had "bombs, weapons and swords" despite no evidence that this was the case (Babushahi Bureau 2024). This was done to justify an aggressive police response that used tear gas and rubber bullets at the Haryana border to prevent the Punjabi protestors from marching to Delhi. However, it backfired. Rather than discrediting the movement, it galvanized further participation. Footage of the police violence was quickly circulated through the pro-

test media network, reframing the state's response as excessive. When a 23-year-old farmer was shot and killed at the border, unions across India responded with outrage towards the BJP (Ghazali 2024). In this way, grassroots media sources offered narratives that contradicted official accounts. The protestors' ability to counter disinformation, amplified by their embeddedness in both national and international media circuits, transformed an intended moment of demoralization into a rallying point. Rather than fragmenting the movement, state repression only deepened its resolve and reaffirmed Punjab's symbolic centrality in the struggle.

Madhya Pradesh

In stark contrast to Punjab, Madhya Pradesh (MP)'s protest presence remained marginal throughout. Despite having a large base of farmers that benefit from the MSP system, the state lacked the organizational infrastructure needed to translate discontent into coordinated action. Without strong unions or movement leadership, protest efforts remained fragmented and were easy targets for the police. In the second wave, this vacuum was filled by the Congress Party, whose intervention was largely symbolic and politically motivated rather than being an example of grassroots mobilization. This absence of movement infrastructure also meant that MP remained outside the strategic core of the protest field, leaving it both physically and symbolically isolated from the broader farmers' movement.

MP lacks a deep tradition of farmer unionism. As a state that wasn't a large part of the initial Green Revolution in the same way Punjab was, its integra-

tion into the MSP system came relatively late, with the most significant growth in agricultural output only happening in the last 15 years. Its agricultural sector saw a shocking 92% increase in the five years from 2010-2015, becoming the second largest wheat-producing state after Punjab (Ninan 2017). As a result, while the number of farmers who are dependent on MSP rose sharply, there was little time for the intentional practice of building durable farmer unions. The most significant mobilization happened in 2017 with loan waiver protests that turned violent in reaction to police violence. This movement wasn't led by any farmer union, however, since there wasn't one positioned to do so, but rather was a leaderless operation that relied on social media communication (PTI 2017). An important difference between the use of social media in MP and in Punjab is that in MP it was used logistically out of necessity, whereas in Punjab it was used explicitly for publicity. Instead of writing newsletters, MP protesters were using social media as a means to communicate and make decisions because they had no other way to do so.

This absence of formal organizational capacity left MP farmers particularly vulnerable to preemptive repression. Without unions to coordinate logistics or provide institutional support, protest efforts remained scattered and fragile. Local demonstrations were confined to a few districts and failed to scale into mass mobilization towards Delhi (Pattenden and Bansal 2021). Farmers who attempted to join the national protests did so in small, self-organized groups that were easily intercepted by the police. An example of this was the arrest of social ac-

tivist Medha Patkar and her group, who were stopped in Uttar Pradesh before they could reach Delhi (Dwivedi 2020). Many farmers expressed a desire to participate but simply lacked the resources to do so. Without a union, there was a massively increased logistical and financial burden on individual farmers, who were too poor to deal with this police intervention on their own (Choudhary 2020). As a result, the movement was unable to gain any type of momentum.

This pattern largely repeated during the second wave in 2024. While protest activity was marginally more visible than in 2020, it remained limited in scale and character, due to the fact that organizational challenges remained. In the absence of robust unions, the Congress political party stepped in to provide logistical support. Congress organized rallies and promised a legal guarantee for MSP if they were to be elected (Noronha 2024). Clearly, these protests were driven by the political motivations of Congress rather than true grassroots mobilization. Given the increasing farmer discontent towards the BJP, Congress's main political rivals, the goal of these agitations was to build a base of support amongst farmers and win their vote in time for the next elections. Thus, these protests don't represent a true extension of the democratic farmers' movement, but rather a co-option by the state. Alongside Congress, the "Kisan Mazdoor Mahasangh," a smaller union in the state, led some local demonstrations, but like earlier efforts, these remained fragmented and failed to converge into a broader campaign. Farmers again attempted to travel to Delhi in small, dispersed groups, and

once again, the police quickly intercepted and detained them before they could reach protest sites (Panik 2024). Unlike in states where strong media ties helped reframe repression as excessive and mobilized broader solidarity, MP's isolation from the national protest discourse meant that these police crackdowns went largely unnoticed. Since the movement in the state never really got off the ground, it remained at the very fringes of the national media field and saw no persistence.

Uttar Pradesh

Uttar Pradesh (UP) offers a case of conditional participation in which mobilization was delayed and contingent on symbolic interventions and broader leadership signaling. Despite having been historically involved in the Green Revolution like Punjab with strong agrarian political importance, the movement in UP began relatively weak and fragmented. This stemmed from internal organizational fractures in the state's largest farmer union, the "Bharatiya Kisan Union" (BKU).⁵ However, through a series of symbolically powerful public moments and strategic alliance-building, UP rose to the forefront of the movement. Across both protest waves, UP's movement trajectory demonstrates how historical protest networks and organizational capacity can override short-term organizational challenges to build strong mobilization. It also shows how reconnection to the protest media field can allow a state to strengthen its participation and maintain relevance even while remaining just outside its symbolic core.

UP has long been a key site of agrarian mobilization, but the strength of its

protest infrastructure had eroded leading up to the introduction of the farm bills in 2020. The state's farmer politics can be traced back to former Prime Minister of India and Chief Minister of UP Charan Singh, who forged powerful alliances amongst farmer bodies that resulted in strong electoral gains and agrarian political influence from the 1940-70s (Deo and Choudhary 2024). At this time, the farmers' movement was primarily dominated by the Hindu farming Jat caste. Charan Singh's legacy was institutionalized by Mahendra Singh Tikait in the 1980s, who quickly rose to prominence as the new leader of the peasant movement and as the head of the BKU. He tried to shed the movement's Jat identity and expand its base by appointing Muslims and members of different castes as union officers, building a powerful alliance that advocated for Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh farmers alike (Deo and Choudhary 2024). However, this coalition began to unravel in the 1990s with the rise of Hindutva, the BJP's Hindu nationalist agenda which exacerbated tensions between Hindu and Muslim farmers who were now politically divided over religious lines. These tensions rose to an extreme with the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots, a violent killing and displacement of Muslims that burned a deep scar of resentment in the hearts of Muslim farmers (Kumar 2022). Also around this time, in 2012, Mahendra Singh Tikait died, making his son Rakesh Tikait the next successor to the peasant legacy, who showed the BJP support to appeal to the Hindu factions of the fractured union. His failure to rebuild broad-based support led to internal dissent, especially amongst older members of the union

(Deo and Choudhary 2024). By 2020, the BKU was no longer the unifying force it once was, leaving UP's organizational landscape fragmented and uncertain as the national protest movement began.

This fragmented organizational landscape translated into initially weak movement emergence in the early phases of the 2020 wave. The only prominent organization to vocally oppose the bills in September 2020 was "Rashtriya Lok Dal" (RLD), a local political party that organized some local demonstrations (Parashar 2020). Additionally, UP farmers participated in protests led by Punjabi activists throughout the summer, but this participation was mostly supplemental and lacked coordination from within the state (Singh et al. 2021). Crucially, the BKU did not support the movement at this time. Rakesh Tikait publicly expressed support for the farm bills and parroted the BJP narrative that they would only impact farmers in Punjab and Haryana, with UP farmers having no need to protest (Ghosh 2021). This position discouraged mobilization, and thus, without major institutional support or a shared narrative, protests in UP lacked cohesion and scale.

This dynamic shifted dramatically when a series of key events transformed the protest landscape. First, Tikait and the BKU hesitantly switched sides and supported the protest in an attempt to renew the relevance of their union. Due to his national clout, Tikait quickly became a figurehead of the movement, going on national television to debate BJP supporters (ABP News 2021). The movement was building, but it wasn't yet as strong as it could be. During a Republic Day protest in January 2021, some people

scaled the Red Fort, a powerful symbol of Indian nationalism and independence, and flew the Sikh religious flag (Mitra and Regan 2021). The BJP quickly took advantage of this, pointing to it as evidence of protestors being extremist and anti-national in an attempt to delegitimize the movement. The state launched a massive crackdown, targeting protest leaders like Tikait with threats of arrest (Deo and Choudhary 2024). Tikait, despite being initially ambivalent about the movement, found himself ensnared. At a protest site, surrounded by police and facing imminent arrest, Tikait delivered a tearful, impassioned speech on live television, asking others to stand up to the BJP's brutal regime and proclaiming his unwavering support for the protest. The moment went viral. Imagery of a crying farmer leader reinvigorated UP farmers, for whom the Tikait family name carried significant symbolic weight. Within hours, thousands of farmers mobilized in support from across the state, arriving with tractors, rations, and a renewed sense of purpose (Raju 2021). On the same day, behind the scenes, his brother, Naresh Tikait, reached out to Muslim farmers in Muzaffarnagar, the site at the very core of their religious tensions, with the promise of reconciliation. This was an unexpected and powerful gesture that helped restore the fractured cross-religious solidarity of the BKU (Deo and Choudhary 2024). What had begun as a scattered and stagnant movement had suddenly gained emotional urgency and logistical strength. UP's organizational capacity had been renewed and, with this new Hindu-Muslim farmer alliance and fire in the hearts of protestors, the movement in UP became

incredibly powerful. It was because of the state's rich protest history that this was possible, pointing to this longer-term organizational capacity as the driving force behind UP's movement emergence.

Despite UP's revitalized role in the first wave, the second wave of protests in 2024 also began with hesitation and ended with greater mobilization, in a similar pattern to the first wave. Rakesh Tikait and the BKU again initially distanced themselves from the Dilli Chalo 2.0 campaign, aligning with the original SKM instead of the breakaway SKM (Non-Political) that was leading the new mobilization in Punjab. Naresh Tikait criticized the march as rash, referring to the protestors as "stubborn" and arguing that capital marches should not be done for every demand (Pillai 2024).

Rakesh Tikait also worked with the SKM to organize other forms of protest like boycotts, but through October, he maintained that "Protest is by Punjab farmers only till now" (ANI 2024). This ambiguity from UP's most recognizable leaders not only delayed participation but also threatened to fragment the symbolic unity of the movement. Unlike Punjab, which occupied the symbolic center of the protest field and bore the burden of representing the movement as a whole, UP's peripheral status allowed it to hedge. Its support was important, but not foundational, enabling a strategic ambiguity that would have been untenable for a core state. This distance reveals the consequences of lower media field embeddedness. Without active participation and narrative alignment, UP began to slip from the collective protest imaginary. The absence of decisive messaging or sym-

bolic leadership weakened the state's ties to the broader protest media field and, in turn, put its movement persistence at risk.

However, UP's resurgence in the second wave was ultimately made possible again through a resurgence of media field embeddedness through a reintegration with the rest of the movement. While not as central as Punjab, UP was not fully isolated from the broader protest network. Despite his ambivalence, Tikait maintained his ideological support for the farmers, claiming that he supported the movement but would not participate in the march. However, he warned the government that if they created problems for the farmers, UP farmers would join and cause an even bigger agitation than in 2020 (Srinivasan 2024). In this way, even though UP did eventually join the protests, its persistence was conditional and not as powerful as in Punjab. Its partial embeddedness as a result of Tikait's recognizable face and importance in the Indian media meant that when the government did use violence against the Punjabi protestors, UP was positioned to respond. During his fast, Punjabi leader Dallewal reached out and called for the help of states like UP (M. Khanna 2025). In response, in December 2024, Tikait announced a meeting with Dallewal to help bridge the earlier factional divide (Kunal 2024). On his way to this meeting, however, Tikait was detained by police—an act that underscored both the threat he posed to the government and the visibility of his role within the movement (PTI 2024). He followed this with a Republic Day tractor rally declaration and a series of Kisan Mahapanchayats⁶ to remobilize his base in UP (DN Bureau 2025). These

actions were communicative symbols that reasserted UP's broader alignment with the movement. Because UP remained partially embedded in the media ecology, it was able to leverage shared narratives, symbolic leadership, and coordinated messaging to re-enter the protest field and make its movement persist.

Maharashtra

Maharashtra presents a case of high capacity without connectivity—an isolated engine. The state entered the 2020 protests similarly to Punjab, with powerful energy led by the historically powerful “All India Kisan Sabha” (AIKS) and its broad-based alliances with Adivasi, women, and marginal farmers. Through the organization's ideological clarity and organizational capacity, Maharashtra emerged as an important contributor in the first wave. However, this initial strength did not turn into long term persistence. During the second wave in 2024, AIKS withdrew from the larger movement due to their fringe position in the media field. This left Maharashtra looking more like MP than Punjab, with growing mistrust and communication breakdowns that smothered momentum. This state's story is one of initial fire and strong internal resources that were squandered by relational and communicative isolation.

Maharashtra's capacity for large-scale mobilization in 2020 was the result of decades of ideological discipline and logistical preparation. AIKS is the agrarian wing of the “Communist Party of India (Marxist)” (CPI(M)), which has maintained a persistent organizational presence in the state. This legacy traces back to the 1940s, when organizers affil-

iated with the CPI(M) led peasant uprisings against the colonial state and local landlords, including a historic Adivasi revolt (Dhawale n.d.). After independence, the peasant movement re-emerged with the “Shetkari Sanghatana” in the 1970s, a union that mobilized for loan waivers and agricultural subsidies and drew significant attention to sources of rural distress (Dhanagare 1990). Although that movement tended to represent wealthier landowners, CPI(M) continued to build parallel networks oriented toward the rural poor (Pendse 1991; Dhawale n.d.). In the years leading up to the farm bills, AIKS had organized several high-profile mobilizations that signaled its ability to translate grievance into coordinated protest. In 2017, they pressured the BJP into promising a loan waiver through strikes and road blockades (Dhawale and Narkar 2024). When the BJP went back on its promise, AIKS led a historic 200 km march to Mumbai, the state capital, with comprehensive demands that benefited Adivasi and poor farmers. The march saw significant participation from Adivasi and women farmers, demonstrating the unity of the powerful agrarian bloc in Maharashtra. After another year of protests, AIKS led a second march to the capital that was stopped after a successful meeting with the state government (Dhawale and Narkar 2024). These marches offered more than just visibility; they honed logistical capabilities and built a powerful protest culture amongst the rural peasant class.

The strength of this protest culture was demonstrated during the 2020 protests, where Maharashtra, despite being geographically furthest from Delhi of the states I considered, saw an ambitious and

logistically complex mobilization. As early as September, AIKS coordinated a statewide “Rasta Roko” (road blockade) that saw over 35,000 peasants disrupt national and state highways across districts, with reports of police repression in several locations. This was followed by mass participation in a December “Bharat Bandh” (all India shut down), where protestors from Maharashtra joined, again facing arrests (Dhawale and Narkar 2024). The highlight took place later that month with a 1440-kilometer vehicle caravan to Delhi, making Maharashtra the only non-frontline state to make such a journey (Parth 2020). Traveling through MP and UP, the march not only brought physical reinforcements, but also embodied the emotional commitment of Maharashtra to the cause. Participation in these actions demonstrated an exceptional level of determination by protestors. Poor farmers and Adivasi traveled in old trucks and tractors with “torn blankets, worn-out sweaters, and an unshaken resolve.” In a local march, a 72-year-old Adivasi woman walked 200 km on foot to participate (Dhawale and Narkar 2024). This was not merely the result of spontaneous outrage, but a strong foundation of protest memory and logistical practice. This reflects how high organizational capacity, when activated by moral urgency, can override material constraints.

Yet by the time the second wave of protests emerged in 2024, Maharashtra had all but disappeared from the national movement. When the SKM was splintering, AIKS remained aligned with the original SKM coalition and refused to support the Delhi protest. In an interview, Ashok Dhawale, a prominent leader of

both AIKS and SKM, maintained that SKM represents the true interests of 99% of farmers while SKM (Non-Political) is simply a small splinter group who he accused of intentionally undercutting SKM protests (The Citizen 2024). When Dallewal’s fast began, and other groups like the BKU and SKM began to re-integrate themselves into the protest, AIKS continued to keep its distance. Then, in January 2025, AIKS and two allied organizations formally split from SKM to create a new platform, the “Kisan Sangharsh Morcha” (KSM), announcing that they would no longer support national-level agitation and would instead concentrate on state-specific issues like sugarcane pricing and land redistribution (Khan 2025). This functionally spelled the end for the larger farmers’ movement in Maharashtra. These events were caused and amplified by Maharashtra’s peripheral position in the national protest media field.

Despite Maharashtra’s strong participation in the initial wave, the state was never considered a leader like Punjab or UP. Instead, its involvement was seen as supplemental to the main protest, which caused it to be logistically isolated. Maharashtra protest leaders emphasized a lack of logistical communication from Punjabi farmers as a reason for why they kept their distance from the protests in 2024. In particular, they cited being caught off-guard by the Republic Day protest and the storming of the Red Fort (Biswas 2024). SKM leaders insisted that they were not responsible for the incident, making what actually happened unclear (Hindustan Times 2021). Regardless, Maharashtra’s low media field embeddedness made it harder for them to trust

the movement, resulting in poor communication and the alienation of key leaders. This alienation was also a significant reason for AIKS splitting off from SKM, as the BKU faction led by Tikait was holding underground meetings with government officials that AIKS was not part of (Khan 2025). Without strong channels of logistical communication or symbolic alignment, Maharashtra's protest organizations found themselves disconnected from the evolving movement. AIKS bi-monthly magazine saw no mention of Dillo Chalo 2.0, instead focusing on SKM protests (AIKS n.d.). Lacking a reliable communication network, organizational support, and being on the very fringes of the media field, Maharashtrians were unable to sustain their protest movement.

CONCLUSION

The divergent trajectories of the Indian farmer protests across Punjab, MP, UP, and Maharashtra can be explained through two mechanisms. Movement emergence was primarily determined by the depth of organizational capacity: states with historically entrenched farmer unions and networks, like Punjab and Maharashtra, were able to rapidly mobilize mass resistance. Movement persistence, on the other hand, depended on media field embeddedness, the extent to which a state's protest organizations were integrated into broader activist communication networks that could withstand state repression and counteract propaganda. Taken together, these offer a dynamic explanation for how agrarian movements survive and evolve under repressive pressure and logistical con-

cerns, providing broader insights into the life cycles of continuous movements.

This study extends and refines theories of social movements by emphasizing the historical importance of organizational capacity in movements. The farmer protests reveal that capacity is an accumulated asset. Punjab's rapid emergence was not just a function of material resources, but the result of decades of union building, caste alliance work, and logistical practice that laid the foundation for the protest. In contrast, MP lacked this historical depth, leaving farmers without a way to effectively translate their grievances into coordinated action. This also suggests a reconsideration of how we determine the "success" and "failure" of movements. A "failed" movement may not produce material change but it provides logistical practice and develops social movement organizations to prime them for the future. A "successful" movement may gain material concessions, but could fragment organizations in a way that hurts future prospects.

While organizational capacity underpins a movement's development, its persistence is best understood by examining how it is embedded within a broader protest field rather than internal resources alone. Media field embeddedness captures this by highlighting how a movement's survival depends not only on its own internal strength, but also its position within the wider activist media. Movements that are well-embedded can reframe repression as illegitimate, draw new allies into their cause, and keep protest energy circulating even when internal divisions emerge. Punjab persisted because it was a central protest hub in

a network that could amplify its claims. On the other hand, Maharashtra was on the outskirts of the protest field, which made them vulnerable to fragmentation. Even though they had high organizational capacity, they were unable to apply that effectively towards the movement.

Therefore, organizational capacity and media field embeddedness work in sequence instead of individually. Initial mobilization relies on the slow, historical accumulation of organizational infrastructures that allow movements to rapidly respond to political shocks. As movements grow and face state repression, their success becomes contingent on their ability to embed themselves within broader activist fields that can sustain momentum and circulate their counternarratives. The farmer protests thus illustrate that the life cycle of movements depends not only on strength at one moment in time, but on the capacity to transform from an isolated initial movement to a durable field actor.

It is important to understand the scope of these findings. In particular, the argument developed here likely generalizes to long movements that unfold across multiple stages and waves, where emergence and persistence are meaningfully distinguishable. For shorter movements without long-term logistical concerns, persistence likely matters less. If we only look at the first wave, Maharashtra's movement is a success story. However, it points to considering media field embeddedness as an "invisible" concern that didn't reveal itself until later in the second wave. Still, these movements may be characteristically different, governed more by things like charismatic leadership or brutal state repression than long-term

protest dynamics. Thus, while the Indian farmers' movement reveals important insights about the layered construction of durable protest, these insights apply best to movements situated in broader media networks and with long-term potential.

Understanding variation between different stages of a movement is crucial for understanding how movements survive, adapt, or collapse over time. Movements are not static, but evolving fields of contestation that are constantly changing as alliances fracture, narratives evolve, and strategies change. By paying close attention to intra-movement differences across states, organizations, and waves, this study shows that movement building and persistence is a complicated achievement. Focusing only on single moments of victory or defeat risks flattening the complex pathways through which those moments are created. Movement trajectories depend not only on their strength at the start, but on their ability to transform and re-embed themselves in a rapidly changing environment. When does a movement truly end—when its material resources dissolve, its relational ties erode, or when its ability to imagine collective action disappears completely? This is something for future studies to explore.

ENDNOTES

¹Based on 2019 data from a 2023 report to the Lok Sabha that cites the Indian Department of Food and Public Distribution. This is measured based on how many farmers the government is buying from at MSP.

²“Wealth” here is operationalized using average holding size in 2015-16 from a 2021 report to the Rajya Sabha that cites the Agricultural census, which takes place every 5 years. This was not conducted in 2020 due to COVID, so this is the most recent data before the protest.

³It is notable that it is *Mazdoor-Kisan* instead of *Kisan-Mazdoor*—placing workers first to emphasize their desire for solidarity.

⁴A controversial Sikh-serperatist movement that has had violent clashes with the government (Mogul 2023).

⁵This is different from the BKU (Ekta Ugrahan) which is based in Punjab and split off from this BKU (Shyam et al 2024).

⁶A local farmer meeting of about 10-12 villages led by village Khap panchayats. These meetings have important historical importance as a way to coordinate and mobilize farmers in UP (Upadhyay 2021).

⁷Adivasi are India’s tribal and indigenous population.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Arjun Garg (he/him) holds a B.A. in Sociology and a B.S. in Mathematics from the University of Chicago. His research interests include social movements, collective action, and South Asian political history. He is currently working in data engineering and is developing research interests in compu-

tational approaches to social questions.

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Cultivating a Legacy: Exploring Inheritance and Succession Planning Strategies on Intergenerational Family Farms in Rural Georgia

Juliet Cairney

ABSTRACT

While the majority of farms in the United States are family-owned and operated, the total number of farms and the share of family-owned farms continue to decline nationwide. This trend affects the economic and social makeup of rural communities and shifts the agricultural landscape in the United States fundamentally. Succession, or the process of selecting and educating younger family members in preparation to inherit the farm, is a key factor in the continuance of intergenerational family farms. This project studies the succession process on family farms in rural Georgia, which have remained owned and operated by the same family for at least two generations. Using qualitative data collected from eleven semi-structured interviews with intergenerational family farmers, this study explores family farmers' process of taking on responsibility on family farms and how they structure their approach to planning to pass the farm on to the next generation. The study first finds that at each step of the succession process, familial support is crucial to supporting farming as a career. The study further finds that family farmers' own complicated emotional relationship to farming, as well as family farmers' dual roles as parents and farmers, introduce contradictory strategies in each farmer's approach to the succession process. These contradictory strategies, in addition to considerations about gender norms, aptitude for farming, and maturity of potential heirs, can destabilize farmers' confidence regarding the prospect of passing down the family farm at any stage of that process.

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, it is well-documented that the number of farms is declining. In the mid-1930s, approximately 6,000,000 Americans self-reported as full-time farmers; in 2000, that number had fallen to 750,000 (Wuthnow 2015:2). This trend remains significant in more recent years as well: since 1980, the number of farms in the US has decreased by over half a million, and between 2017

and 2022, the number of farms fell by 100,000 (Baethge 2024; EWG 2024). Small or medium farms (those with total sales value less than \$100,000, or with sales between \$100,000 and \$500,000) and family farms saw the sharpest decreases in number between 2017 and 2022, compared to other size and ownership categories. During the same five-year period, average farm size increased

by 5%, and the number of farms with farm sales greater than \$5,000,000 nearly doubled (EWG 2024; Zimmerman 2024). Furthermore, although non-family farms and family-owned farms that rely extensively on labor provided by hired workers, contract workers, and other operators and their families make up a combined total of less than 15% of all farms in the United States, these farms account for over 65% of the country's agricultural production (ERS 2024; MacDonald 2014). Evidently, United States agriculture is trending away from these small family farms toward larger consolidated family and nonfamily farms.

At the same time, however, the majority of farms in the United States today are classified as small or medium-sized family-owned farms, meaning they are owned by the producer or by individuals related to the producer and rely primarily on the labor provided by individuals related to the producer (USDA 2021; MacDonald 2014). Since family farmers make up the vast majority of farmers in the United States, changes to this section of the agriculture industry can have far-reaching ripple effects concerning food security, rural-urban demographics, rural land use patterns, and agriculture as a social institution in America. Not only do family farms make up a substantial section of the economic base in rural communities, but the cultural dynamics of these communities can also be altered as farming families leave to seek employment elsewhere or as external entities buy and develop that farmland (Wadley 1982:478). Furthermore, many current family farmers own, lease, and operate land that has been passed down through

multiple generations; the continuance of these farms carries significant emotional importance to farmers and farm families.

Central to the family farm is the question of succession—the passing-down of a family farm from one generation to the next. The process of succession is neither simple nor quick; rather, it is a lifelong process of learning to farm, choosing to farm, and gradually taking on personal responsibility, financial responsibility, and eventual ownership of the family's farm. The purpose of this project, therefore, is to understand family farmers' process of taking on responsibility on their family farms and how these same farmers structure their approach to planning to pass the farm on to the next generation. Through analysis of qualitative interviews, I investigate how family farmers navigate the process of inheriting the farms they live and work on and how these farmers approach the process of planning to pass their farm on to the next generation.

In response to the investigation regarding the process of inheriting a family farm, I find that familial support is crucial to the decision to farm on a relatively small scale. Beginning early in their lives, farmers developed an affinity for the farmland and farming lifestyle as well as a certainty that their role as family farmers is valuable and meaningful. They also acknowledged the difficulties of farming and their uncertainty that this career and lifestyle would remain viable and meaningful in the future. As they began to prepare to pass the farm on to the younger generation, farmers must balance the goal of passing on the family farm with ensuring a secure future for their children and loved ones.

These internally conflicting goals caused farmers to employ contradictory strategies; these strategies, along with considerations about gender norms, aptitude for farming, and the maturity of potential heirs, complicate the succession process and destabilize farmers' confidence regarding the prospect of passing down the family farm. At any stage of the process, this destabilization can cause the succession process to encounter minor or major interruptions or, in some cases, to ultimately fail.

In the sections that follow, I show that family farm decline and the changes in farmer demographics in the United States, and specifically Georgia, where this study was conducted, demonstrate that the study of farmers' approaches to family farm succession is especially relevant. I examine previous research on causes of structural farm change, motivations for farmers to continue farming, the importance of succession for farm resilience, and financial and career decision-making. Then, I explain my decision to investigate farmers' subjective understanding of the farm succession process by collecting and analyzing semi-structured interviews. Finally, I present the data gathered from these interviews, discuss the farmers' complex relationship to farming and how the contradictions within their perspective on farming are reflected in their approaches to succession planning, and argue that these contradictions are not completely resolved by the outcome of any individual family's succession process.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Agricultural data collected over the last several decades show that not only is the number of all farms declining, but the number and proportion of family farms are also decreasing. This trend is observable in both the United States at large and specifically in the state of Georgia, where the data collection for this project took place. The United States Department of Agriculture's Census of Agriculture, conducted every five years, collects comprehensive data on U.S. farms and ranches as well as the people who operate them. This census reports that from 1997 to 2022, the total number of farms in the United States decreased by just over 14%, while the number of farms classified as family or individual farms decreased by 16% (USDA NASS 2024). During this same time period, the total number of farms in the state of Georgia decreased by 20 percent, while the number of farms specifically classified as family farms decreased by 25% (USDA NASS 2024). In 1997, farms classified as "family or individual" made up 86.8% of the farms in the U.S., and 88% of the farms in the state of Georgia; in 2022, these numbers had fallen to 84.7% and 83.6% respectively (USDA NASS 2024).

As the number of farms in the United States steadily decreased, the number of physically large and economically super-productive farms increased. From 1997 to 2022, average farm size increased by 32 acres, and the number of "very large" farms—farms of 2,000 acres or more—increased from 74,426 to 83,308, which is an increase of nearly 9,000 very large farms in just 25 years

(USDA NASS 2024). The number of farms in the highest category in terms of value of sales—\$500,000 or more—also increased from 1997 to 2022 by over 100,000 farms (USDA NASS 2024).

Furthermore, the ability to make a living as a farmer in the United States appears to be decreasing. According to a study conducted by the University of Missouri in 2023, the number of farms in the United States on which the principal operators depended on off-farm occupation as their main source of income increased from 37% in 1974 to 56% in 2017 (Krohn and Spell). The simultaneous growth in the number of very profitable farms and the percentage of farmers whose main source of income is from off-farm occupation indicates growing stratification in agriculture in the United States.

It is also critical to note that the average age of a US farmer is nearly 60 years, with the number of active farmers below 40 years declining overall (Lally and Mars 2024:560). While the number of producers ages 65 and over increased by 12% from 2017 to 2022, the number of farmers between the ages of 35-64 decreased by 9% (Lally and Mars 2024:560; NSAC 2024). These figures are only countered by a modest increase in the number of new farmers and farmers aged 25 and under. Ultimately, the increasing average age of farmers indicates that succession planning efforts are of particular importance, since farm succession is the means by which intergenerational family farmers introduce younger farmers to the agricultural workforce.

The shifts in United States agriculture—the declining number of small fam-

ily farms, the growing prevalence of very large, non-family farms, the reduction in farmers' abilities to make a living from their farms, and the increasing average age of farmers—raise questions about the means by which existing family farms remain viable. Succession is a key part of the continuance of a farm; if the process of the farm changing hands from one generation to the next is successful, that farm remains a viable family farm. If succession is not achieved, then the loss of that farm contributes to the declining number of family farms, and the sale of the land may contribute to the growth of larger farms.

By interviewing current family farmers who hope to pass on their family farms, I investigate the actions of family farmers within this context of change in the United States, including how farmers' awareness of agricultural changes influences their approaches to the challenge of preparing the next generation in their family to inherit their farm. Understanding how current farmers approach farm succession allows us to comprehend the factors that make planning for the future of their family farm difficult, which in turn contributes greatly to an understanding of the variables that can make family farms resilient in the face of agricultural change.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In order to examine family farmers' process of inheriting their family farms and the strategies they employ as they structure their approach to succession, this project poses three research questions:

1. What role does support from older farming family members play in helping prospective heirs learn

how to manage a family farm, establishing an heir's emotional connection to farming and farmland, and allowing the heir access to enough financial support to make an early career in farming viable?

2. What strategies do current family farmers use to identify potential heirs and educate, prepare, financially support, and encourage their prospective heirs to inherit the farm, and how do farmers' characterization of and reaction to economic factors such as input costs, availability and affordability of land, and stability or volatility of crop prices influence their approach to succession planning for the future of the farm?
3. What character traits or aspects of identity do farmers consider relevant or necessary in a potential heir, and how does the search for these traits contribute to or complicate the succession process?

These questions represent the questions that farmers implicitly engage with throughout the succession process. The topic of each of these questions—familial support, strategies used by current family farmers, and character traits considered necessary in a potential heir—provides an opportunity for the succession process to succeed, to encounter major obstacles, or to fail. As heirs themselves, farmers first encounter familial support as an immersive introduction to family farming; later, as adult farmers, they begin to build a plan to identify an heir and pass on their farm. As they proceed in the succession process with whatever amount of success they experience, they inevitably must consider the character traits that

they deem necessary for a potential heir, must measure their identified heir against these criteria, and, if the situation calls for it, must decide whether or not to compromise on these ideal qualities in order to proceed with passing down the farm. At each step of the process, farmers' methods of engaging with these questions can complicate, enable, or impede the succession process; by investigating these three questions, I will explore and explain the strategies that aid the process as well as those that create obstacles or complications to family farm succession.

As I analyze farmers' experiences and strategies during the inheritance and succession processes, I focus on the key contradictions inherent to the process—specifically, farmers' conflicting positive and negative associations with farming, as well as the tensions between their dual roles as parents and as family farming mentors. Family farmers find significant meaning, purpose, and enjoyment in farming as a career, and report a deep attachment to the lifestyle and to the land itself. At the same time, however, farmers recognize the difficulties and abiding frustrations inherent to farming, and they are unsure that family farming will remain viable, meaningful, and enjoyable in the future. Farmers' love for farming, frustrations with farming, and anxieties about the security of farming conflict all inform the succession process. Furthermore, family farmers often simultaneously occupy both the role of the parent and the role of the farming mentor in their relationships with their potential heirs; these dual roles can bring conflicting aims to the succession process. As parents, these farmers aim

to ensure stability and security in their children's future, while as farmers, their goal is to ensure the continued family ownership and operation of their farm. These conflicting goals form the basis of my analysis of farm inheritance and succession, since these internally conflicting aims develop into contradictory motivations and strategies which can complicate or impede the succession process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This project aims to investigate how family farmers inherited their family farms and how they prepare to pass them on to their children or other younger family members. In order to later discuss how farmers engage with input from the broader agricultural landscape as well as input from within their family units and communities, I examine previous research on structural farm change, motivations for farmers to continue farming, the importance of succession for farm resilience, and the processes of financial and career decision-making.

Structural Change in the Number and Size of Farms

Widespread change in farm size since the beginning of the twentieth century results in part from economic and political changes. In a 2019 article, Wenbiao Cai used quantitative analysis to show that the change in farm size demographics between 1900 and 2002—namely that the number, size, and productivity of large farms increased, while the number of small farms and especially small family farms declined—is due not solely to competition with larger farms, but also to farm legislation

and farm subsidy policies enacted over the twentieth century that specifically, but indirectly, favor large farms (pp. 388, 408). The shifts in agriculture, Cai argues, are the result of these agricultural policies, and are unlikely to be results of other variables such as unequal changes in skill levels among farmers or changes in the composition of crops (2019, 408).

Sociological analyses, however, tend to challenge the idea that institutional farm change is driven solely by economic conditions, even those driven by policies that favor large farms. Linda Lobao and Katherine Meyer argue that the “the mass decline of the farm population” and “the structural transformation of agriculture, whereby most remaining farms...are incapable of fully employing and sustaining families” are not solely examples of policy change or economic transition, but also are a result of aggregate actions taken by individual households and communities (2001:111). To understand the nature of farm change, then, researchers should investigate the “sustained social practices of farmers,” as well as farmers’ interactions with external influences such as gender-based expectations, household dynamics, state and national programs, political organizations, and rural communities (Lobao and Meyer 2001:111). While the agricultural transition affects and is affected by the economic status of different types of farms, family farms are such socially embedded institutions that studying the transition as a purely economic phenomenon leads to incomplete analyses (Lobao and Meyer 2001:111). The decisions of individual farmers in their communities create the transition

on smaller scales, which contributes to the overarching trend of farm population decline and the structural transformation of agriculture.

Furthermore, studies highlight an ongoing tension in agriculture between tradition and modernization. Modern technological advancements, such as increasingly powerful equipment, genetically modified seeds, and chemical pesticides and fertilizers, are essential to allowing the family farmer to maintain the high crop yield necessary to stay in business; this is both the process and the result of an ongoing cycle of advancement and expanded production that Lobao and Meyer described (2001:110). However, family farmers can neither maintain increased input costs caused by the high purchase and maintenance prices of these technological developments, nor purchase the extra land necessary to make a living off a family farm (Wuthnow 2015:160). Therefore, smaller farmers struggle economically and eventually, in many cases, go out of business. This “displacement of farmers from farming” is the result of a system which prioritizes technological advancement and economies of scale (Lobao and Meyer 2001:110). A similar tension between smaller and larger farms is evident in Cai’s article on farm size and economic policy: the increasing economic viability of large farms creates a need, real or perceived, to expand the size of the farm in order to remain competitive (2019:408). Expanding land and increasing dependency on technological advancements have also lengthened farmers’ work hours, increased their physical distance from their families, necessitated

hired help, and reduced the farmers’ sense of independence (Wuthnow 2015:160-1). Family sociology, economics, and policy researcher Charles B. Hennon and sociologist Bruno Hildenbrand discussed the ongoing struggle to resist trends of industrialization and consolidation in agriculture to maintain the “traditional” values and patterns of life that a farming family considers meaningful; in most cases, farmers must sacrifice some aspect of independence in order to maintain other aspects of their traditional identity (2005:514-5).

Evidently, farm size, economic policy, modernization, and social change within rural families and communities all contribute to the broad structural changes to agriculture observed in the United States. As individual actors, farmers make choices about their farm’s future that are informed by their knowledge of broader social and economic transitions. This project investigates the extent to which farmers utilize their awareness, knowledge, and perception of these structural changes and the factors which contribute to them in order to strategize navigation of the succession process during a time when family farms are experiencing insecurity and instability within the broader agricultural landscape.

Family Ties as Motivations for Farming

The family unit, as the central social location where family farming occurs, occupies an important role in and exerts key influence over individuals’ actions and decisions. The family farm functions as both a home and a business,

and integrates paid capital-generating labor with the social unit of the family; thus, sociological analysis of the family farm must include analysis of the workings of the family itself (Bokemeier 1997:10). Research into these workings reveals that the family can serve as a mechanism that supports and enables family farming, or as an obstacle to the operation and continuance of family farms. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow discussed the deep connection that farmers perceive between intergenerational family ties and the profession of farming; his interview respondents consistently reveal that they feel a deep connection to their profession because of something “in [their] blood”—describing their reason for farming as an affinity they inherited (12).

Heritage, tradition, and familial legacy were all seen as key reasons to continue farming and to support children in learning to farm (Wuthnow 2015:14). Young family farmers learn from their parents and grandparents how to farm; furthermore, families can provide financial assistance to their next generation of farmers, allowing them to avoid the prohibitively massive land and equipment costs associated with starting a farm (Wuthnow 2015:25-6). At the same time, however, familial expectations and dynamics can act as obstacles to a person becoming a farmer. It is common for daughters to be overlooked as potential heirs, regardless of whether they show aptitude for or interest in farming; furthermore, familial disagreements or tense interpersonal relationships can complicate succession (Wuthnow 2015:17; pp. 25-28).

Recognition of the perceived benefits of family farming for children motivates parents to continue to farm, counteracting elements of the experience that dissuade farmers from continuing. Joanna Dreby and Mairead Carr, in their 2019 study, found that despite experiencing economic difficulty, which discourages families from continuing to farm, parents “rationalize farming as a lifestyle choice undertaken for the benefit of their children” (p. 904). The commonly held idea among the farmers interviewed by Dreby and Carr is that the agrarian lifestyle on a family farm is beneficial to children’s development, helping them to develop into well-rounded, hard-working people, regardless of whether the children choose to farm in the future or not (2019:912–4). In *Pricing the Priceless Child*, Viviana Zelizer described how, in the twentieth-century push to outlaw child labor, agricultural labor—specifically labor on family farms, not corporate industrialized farms—was considered “good labor” that provided the child the chance to develop useful skills in a wholesome environment (1985:77-79). For this reason, child labor on family farms was exempted from the category of harmful, exploitative child labor in public discourse (Zelizer 1985:79). The idea that family farming is good for children and that children have a natural place on family farms due to its benefit towards their development is central to the analysis of the farming family, because the perceived synergy between childhood and family farms motivates farmers to continue their selected career. Yet this idea conflicts with studies contending that rural depopulation leads to

limited funding, poorer public facilities, relatively low salaries, and limited special programs for schools and other public services in rural areas; these conditions may convince farming families that their children would benefit from seeking education and employment away from rural areas rather than growing up on a family farm (Husa 2023:307-8). However, studies of rural depopulation do not indicate whether pursuing education in urban areas prevents children of family farmers from returning to operate and inherit the family farm later in life.

Familial influence, connection to familial heritage, the desire to continue the family's legacy, and the perceived benefits of family farming for farmers' children all motivate farmers to continue to farm. These motivations inform and affect farmers' development of approaches to farm succession. This project explores how these motivations to farm translate into strategies used by farmers to plan and prepare to pass the farm on to the next generation, and seeks to understand how familial connections support or create obstacles within the succession process.

The Importance of Succession Planning for Family Farm Resilience

Succession is a key part of the stability of family farms in the United States. Sean Lally and Matthew M. Mars discuss how the persistence of multigenerational family farms remains “threatened by uncertain succession outcomes” (2024:560-1). In a 2012 study of family farms in rural spaces located relatively close to urban areas, sociologists Inwood and Sharp determined that farming

families who could not identify an heir either “disinvest[ed]” or “enter[ed] a static management mode” where the family “placed less emphasis” on increasing farm productivity and began to sell off land and assets—effectively disinvesting in the future of the farm (p. 115). By contrast, families who could clearly identify an heir began “a variety of horizontal and vertical growth strategies,” from acquiring more land and growing higher-value crops to increasing productivity and investing in equipment (Inwood and Sharp 2012:115). Notably, these changes occurred before the official transfer of farm ownership; the heir, though identified, had not yet assumed full responsibility. Succession planning is thus not only important for identifying a person to inherit the farm, but also key to maintaining the farm's viability as a business that could not only survive but also grow.

In addition to well-executed succession planning, organization and leadership play an important role in family farm stability and continuance. In their case study of six family farms, Lally and Mars discovered that a balanced leadership dynamic within the family was very important in influencing the organizational innovation and the resiliency of intergenerational family farms (2024:560). They revealed the importance of ingenuity, shared problem solving, the honoring of legacy, and careful innovation in boosting the longer-term resiliency of the family farms (Lally and Mars 2024:560). Since part of resiliency is defined as successful intergenerational succession planning, it seems both that proactive succession planning supports farm operation, and that the succession process is itself

supported by a well-functioning farm.

Identifying an heir fortifies a farm family and provides encouragement to increase the resilience and plan for the future viability of the farm; failing to identify an heir has the opposite effect. Balancing responsibility and decision-making between generations, a key part of the transfer of farm ownership, also boosts farm resilience. By investigating individual experiences with inheriting farms and planning for farm succession, this project is able to show that, while identifying an heir and maintaining a balanced leadership style can increase the likelihood that the family will successfully pass on a farm that will remain in operation, neither identifying an heir nor adjusting one's leadership style completely dispels farmers' deep-seated worry about the future of farming. This worry continues to complicate farm succession. This study will further enable researchers to understand family farm resilience, stability, and continuance.

Financial Decision-Making and Career Choices

A family farm is a business; it is undeniable that farming must be economically feasible and must allow the farmer to earn a living in order for that farm to continue. However, research shows that decisions regarding finances are made not solely based on financial considerations but are informed and influenced by personal and social considerations. Although money is a fully transferable medium that potentially allows for purely rational trading in the economic market, individuals consistently display a tendency to “embed money in partic-

ular times, places, and social relations” (Zelizer 1994:18). People “ earmark” money with the context and character of social interactions, assigning specific associations or meanings to the blank canvas of financial transactions (Zelizer 1994:19). It is clear, Zelizer argues, that there is an “independent effect” of social and cultural factors in defining economic situations and making economic decisions; this effect is distinct from the influence of economic rationality (1985:11).

In addition to the tendency to define or categorize money and monetary transitions based on the social context of those transactions, individuals make economic decisions about how to source, spend, and save their money based on the social influences that are, functionally, most important to them. In his case for including “market processes” such as individual economic decision-making as subjects of sociological inquiry, Mark Granovetter argued that individuals' choices when navigating economic decisions are “embedded in networks of interpersonal relations” (Granovetter 1985:504). These decisions are neither the unguided actions of a singular uninfluenced agentic individual nor purely the result of societal pressure on that individual (Granovetter 1985:504). This analysis, Granovetter asserts, “avoids the extremes of under- and oversocialized views of human action” and depicts the individual as an agent whose actions are influenced by immediate or relevant social and interpersonal communications (1985:504). Making choices about money, scholars agree, is a process that draws influence from the social context that is most immediate to that person—

their personal social networks as well as the associations they assign, implicitly or explicitly, to certain groupings of monies or to certain financial transactions.

Research indicates that individuals' choices about career paths, another determining factor of the long-term survival of a family farm, operate in a similar way. In a study of students' career choices and trajectories, sociologists Phil Hodkinson and Andrew Sparkes observed that the students' career decisions "were pragmatic, rather than systematic"—individual young people made career choices "based on partial information located in the familiar and the known" (1997:33). Students' career decision-making was "context-related" and "could not be separated from the family background, culture and life histories of the pupil" (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997:33). The choices were also "opportunistic" in that students made choices in reaction to "opportunities as they were perceived and encountered"—decisions were, therefore, only "partially rational" since these decisions were "also influenced by feelings and emotions" (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997:33). Hodkinson and Sparkes expand upon these findings to propose a model of career decision-making which involves three "completely integrated dimensions"—pragmatic and rational decision-making, interactions with others within a set of shared social "regularities" or norms, and serendipity, or the "partly unpredictable pattern of turning-points and routines that make up the life course" (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997:29, 36). Evidently, then, when individuals make individual economic decisions such as saving and spending as well

as long-term personal and economic decisions such as career choice, they act as individuals with agency while simultaneously reacting to and accepting influence, direct or indirect, from important social bonds and relationships and the opportunities provided by their social context.

In the case of family farm succession, individuals—current farmers as well as potential heirs—make significant decisions about their own career plans and about the economic future of the farm based on memories, emotional attachments, and meanings assigned to assets with financial value such as land and equipment. At the same time, individuals accept influence from the social networks—the family and the rural community, among others—within which they are embedded. The succession process of a family farm blends the considerations of the individual and the interactions of the family with the financial considerations of the farming enterprise and the career considerations of the individual heir; this project seeks to determine how farming families' social and interpersonal considerations influence their approaches to making decisions with significant economic and career implications during the succession process.

Conclusion

This project analyzes how family farmers navigate the process of passing down the farms they live and work on to the next generation. Currently, researchers understand that the decline in the number of farms and the growth in the size of the average farm reflect tensions in the agricultural landscape, which can introduce complications to family farm

operation and succession. Furthermore, familial influences inform a person's choice to farm and affect a person's ability to farm. Studies of farm succession assert that consistent optimism about the succession process is key to family farm resilience and viability, indicating that the succession process is vital to the farm at all stages, even when the current farmer has not yet begun transferring responsibility to the younger generation. Moreover, sociological researchers have presented models of economic decision-making, both for short-term decisions, including purchases, and long-term decisions such as selecting a career. This model emphasizes both individual agency and influence from important social relationships and relevant social norms. My own research analyzes how family farmers engage with the tensions in the agricultural landscape and the influence of the family unit to form strategies with which to make decisions during the succession process and respond to complications or obstacles. This in-depth analysis of how farmers work to enable transitions in farm ownership contributes to a better understanding of a key piece of family farm continuance in the United States.

METHODS

To investigate the factors that affect the extended farm succession process, this project compared different farmers' succession plans as well as the attitudes and strategies with which the farmers approached succession planning. I planned to investigate how the following factors influence farm succession: farmers' strategies for inheriting and planning to pass on a farm, familial encouragement and

support or lack thereof, wariness about the economic viability of the farm and of farming in general, and farmers' own complicated emotional relationship to farming. Of chief interest to this project was the nature of these influences and the extent to which they influence the process.

Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted with family farmers in Georgia, each lasting between sixty and ninety minutes. All of the farmers included in this study primarily raise row crops, although many also raise livestock and poultry; the exact crops grown and the proportion of resources dedicated to animal agriculture on a farm often vary year to year. All interviewees inherited the farms they operate. Since I intended to explore how each farmer's experience of inheriting the farm influences their planning for succession, I did not include interviews with farmers who operate first-generation, newly established farms. Furthermore, I included conventional, organic, and mixed-methods farmers² operating family farms of various sizes. My sample included seven fully conventional farmers, two organic farmers, and two mixed-methods farmers. I have not endeavored to gather equal numbers of each type of farmer—conventional, organic, and mixed-methods—because the primary goal of this study was not to compare farming methods but to understand the process of family farming succession in the state of Georgia, an area that includes farms of all three types. If significant differences in the succession processes appeared between farms utilizing different methods, then a study of farm succession based on cultivation methods would be highlighted as an

area where further research is necessary.

I identified interview participants first by reaching out to the farmers whose contact information I already had through personal connections or could find posted publicly on social media or on each farm's webpage. Following these initial interviews, I identified further participants principally through snowball sampling. At the end of each interview, I included a question asking the participant if they would be willing to share my name, contact information, and research topic with any acquaintances, friends, and/or family members who may also be interested in participating in an interview. I also prepared a snowball recruitment script approved by the IRB to follow up with interview participants after the interview has concluded. Interviews took place either in person or over Zoom, and were recorded with written and/or verbal consent. Conducting remote interviews over Zoom, a video conferencing platform, allowed me to observe the body language and facial expressions of the participants in a way that mimicked a face-to-face conversation.

Through these semi-structured interviews, I aimed to understand how social factors, including familial relationships, a person's characterization of their own identity, embeddedness in a farming community, and the person's and family's perception of the economic viability of farming as a career, influence the lengthy and often complex succession process. I began each interview by gathering basic demographic information and asking broadly about the person's farm, gathering information about how their farming operation is structured and how they talk

about or characterize different aspects of their farm. I followed up with questions about their employment status (whether they are a full-time farmer or are employed in multiple jobs). I then asked a series of open-ended questions, followed by "probes," or follow-up prompts, to understand how the farmer inherited their farm—how they learned to farm, what drove their decision to commit to farming as a career, how the process of taking on responsibility and ownership unfolded in their lives, and what they particularly like and dislike about their career—before transitioning into asking questions regarding if, and how, they were preparing to pass the farm on to the next generation in their family. When it came up organically in the interview, we also discussed their family, their relationships with family members, and their view of their role in taking care of and interacting with the land they farm. I attempted to gather information not only about their experience as a successor and their experience planning for educating and training the next generation, but also about how their experience selecting farming as a career and inheriting their farm informed their succession planning approach. The semi-structured nature of the interview also allowed me to listen to the information that the farmer mentioned or elaborated on without prompting; this allowed me insight into what the farmer considered important and helped me understand their perspective on the topic.

Since this was a study of the farm succession process, I began the analysis by separating these farmers into four categories based on their characterization of their succession prospects,

in order to identify the different potential outcomes of succession planning. Ultimately, this study would identify any differences in succession planning strategies or conditions that could lead to each of these outcomes. Identifying any relevant differences in succession outcomes would allow me to begin to build an understanding of how the succession process operated and how farmers strategized to overcome obstacles.

The farmers I interviewed reported varying degrees of optimism regarding the likelihood of successfully passing down their farm to the next generation within their family. Four out of the eleven farmers interviewed were optimistic, but their prospective heirs were very young, so these farmers remained in the early stages of succession planning. Another four out of eleven farmers were optimistic with a plan in progress; these farmers had identified potential heirs who were older teens or adults and had expressed and maintained interest and engagement in the farm. Two farmers were categorized as conditionally optimistic or pessimistic. These farmers did not actively have a plan in place or are pessimistic about their ability to successfully pass on their farm to the next generation for specific reasons. Finally, one farmer appeared to have no clear succession plan. This farmer reported an optimistic outlook on the process, but unlike other optimistic farmers, he reported no clear plan or intentional methods by which he guided or continued to guide his potential heir into farming as a career. This category was defined by the farmer's reactive, rather than proactive, approach to farm succession.

In order to determine relevant in-

dependent variables that appeared to influence farm succession, I first identified thematic elements within the farmers' responses to interview questions. I used highlighting and commenting features to highlight and label text with the idea expressed in a certain sentence, paragraph, or small segment of the interview. I then grouped these ideas into themes, or broader main ideas that helped me understand what elements of personal identity are relevant to farm succession, the extent to which familial relationships directly affected succession and the extent to which this influence was mediated through access to resources and financial support, and how a characterization of and reaction to economic factors such as input costs, availability and affordability of land, and crop prices influenced their decision to take on farming and continued to influence their approach to succession planning for the future of the farm.

This study involved a sample size of eleven family farmers. Despite the small sample size, the forthcoming detailed analysis of the in-depth qualitative data collected was able to identify meaningful conclusions. In-depth and semi-structured qualitative interviews allowed the researcher insight into the perspectives held by the population being researched and the ideas, opinions, and truths that the people being interviewed glean from their experiences. While interviewees may not have an objective understanding of their context, and while a small sample size may limit generalizability, the purpose of this project was to understand commonalities and divergences in individuals and farming families. An objective understanding of succession was not the goal

of this qualitative social science research project; instead, I expected to develop an understanding of experiences as expressed by the group of individuals whom I interview. Furthermore, although interviewees offered a subjective understanding of their own circumstances, their responses would be analyzed and presented as objectively as possible by a researcher who was not a family farmer and did not share all of the same ideas and potential biases of this sample. This would aid in allowing readers to perceive any biases or subjectivities that the interviewees themselves may not have consciously noticed.

FINDINGS

Each of the eleven intergenerational family farmers I interviewed was at various stages of passing down their family farms to the next generation, with varying levels of optimism about the succession process. In this section, I describe and analyze how these family farmers inherited the farms that they lived and worked on and how they approached the process of preparing to pass the farm on to the next generation. There is not one easily identifiable factor that ensured or ruled out a favorable outcome in the family farm succession process, nor is there a clear point at which the farmers transitioned from expressing worry to consistently expressing confidence in the secure future of their farms. Instead, I illustrate that farm succession was a complicated process with many considerations for farmers and farming families, which is further complicated by contradictory strategies that developed from the tension between farmers' attachment to farming and their anxieties

about the future of farming as a whole.

Inheriting a Family Farm

Inheriting a family farm: family and legacy. When asked what made them choose to farm as a career, respondents claimed that their entry into farming was inextricably connected to their families. "I guess it's born and bred into you," said farmer Tom Fisher when asked how he started farming. "My daddy—that's all he's ever done. And other than [vocational school] and [a temporary job at a lighting company], that's all I've ever done." Similarly, farmer Chris Lawson stated, "I've always worked on a farm. My, my parents, my daddy, and my granddaddy, well, my whole family was big farmers."

Furthermore, respondents described wanting to be involved with their family farm as early as they could remember. Fisher stated that, during his early childhood, "the last thing I'd tell my momma before I left to go to school is, 'you find out where Daddy and [hired hand] and them's gonna be this afternoon when I get home from school so I can go and help them.'" Similarly, farmer Sam Walker recounted that "at a very young age, probably seven or eight years old," he would tag along with his father and his uncle—"being more of an aggravation than help, you know, wanting to do this, wanting to do that." He sheepishly yet proudly recounted his early zeal for farming:

You're going to think this is crazy, but if I was in the yard playing and I heard a vehicle coming up the road, I could tell before I ever even saw it, just by the way the vehicle sounded, that it was my dad or my uncle, just from the way that

the truck sounded on the road. And if it was, I was bolting straight to the road, like getting in the road, so they gotta stop, going "let me in, I want to go," that kind of stuff. It's, it's crazy. A lot of people don't understand that. [...] And then finally, you know, they started giving me a little responsibility—maybe, you know, pulling weeds out in the fields or, or something like that, helping.

Lawson echoed a similar sentiment, stating that he “went everywhere [his] daddy went,” even getting up willingly “in the middle of the night” if his father needed help on the farm. All eleven farmers in this sample recounted a similar sentiment of self-motivation, although they recalled beginning their involvement in farming at different ages, from early childhood to adolescence. Most of the farmers took on tangible responsibility, such as operating equipment, starting in their early teenage years.

Inheriting a family farm: economic support. Support from older farming family members also proves invaluable for helping farmers manage the start-up costs associated with beginning a career in farming. All of the farmers interviewed in this study reported that start-up and input costs—specifically land, equipment, and seed—were prohibitively high. Established family farms allowed access to both land, since new farmers could inherit long-term leases as well as family-owned land, and equipment. As Chris Lawson stated, “it’s a whole lot easier when your daddy and your granddaddy or somebody’s got equipment left... if you start at the finish line like some of these boys do, it’s a whole lot easier

than when you’re starting at the start line with nothing.” Since equipment costs have risen so sharply in the recent past, children of more established farmers benefited by inheriting equipment that was purchased more cheaply by their parents, and which the parents were well-practiced in repairing. More experienced farmers were also better able to get loans in order to pay for new equipment or equipment upgrades, as mixed-methods farmer Jeffrey Bennet explained. If a new farmer were to try to buy the land and equipment necessary to farm, “a bank wouldn’t give you the money for it.”

Seeds, another major input cost, have risen sharply in price in recent years as well, as genetically-modified varieties have increased in popularity. Genetically modified crops, as Bennet explained, were necessary because their pest-resistant qualities reduce the need for herbicide and increase yield—but they were expensive, leading to family farmers struggling to achieve the highest possible yield every year to cover the higher cost of seed. Families helped alleviate the economic burden of high input costs by going “on halves”—an arrangement which entails the new farmer taking half of the financial burden of the farm from his or her parents, performing half of the labor, and collecting half of the profit. Some farmers took on half of the responsibility right away; others took on a smaller share at first, and gradually increased their stake in the farm over time, as they learned how to manage the family farm. By reducing start-up costs and allowing new farmers to gradually increase their share of input costs, support from older family farmers was key to ensuring that

family farmers' early careers were viable.

Notably, as family farmers gain responsibility and eventually take over their farms, they work closely with their family members throughout their entire lives. Tom Fisher, a fifty-nine-year-old multigenerational family farmer, farmed with both his father and his adult son, and he joked that although his father has “turned all the decision making and stuff over to me,” giving Fisher the final say in most of the financial and practical decisions, his father was “always going to be the boss.” Many family farmers echoed this sentiment; the work of operating their farms was inextricable from interaction, cooperation, and contention with their families. This close connection also brought family members together; Michael Harrison reported that he and his brother, who co-owns his farm, “talk every day” to determine “which direction we want to go the next day,” and that they were “closer” because of it. Despite occasional disagreement and contention, he reported that he feels he can “count on” more “personal” and “reliable” help from his brother than he could from an unrelated business partner—for example, he and his brother were ready to help each other with childcare at a moment's notice. For these farmers, the practical aspects of farming were closely entangled with family life and relationships.

Inheriting a family farm: personality and character. In addition to describing the connection to and support from their families, farmers also described themselves as possessing certain personality traits which they considered essential to inheriting and maintaining a family farm. “It has a lot to do with...

mental toughness and...what you find important in your heart and in your mind,” said Daniel Harris, reflecting on his specific aptitude for farming. He expressed his belief that it took significant fortitude and perseverance to continue working even when exhausted, when working incredibly late hours with little notice, or when losses, such as the loss of a crop that he'd put several months of care into or the loss of a calf whom he felt he could have done more to save, felt like personal failures. He acknowledged that perhaps not every person finds those kinds of challenges bearable. Similarly, younger farmer Sam Walker stated the importance of resilience in a farmer as he recounted how, as a child, he would weigh and shell peas—work that he recounted was rough on one's hands, and done in the summer heat—without complaining, while his siblings and cousins complained and found ways to avoid this and other less pleasant chores. He described himself as not one to “look for excuses,” and acknowledged that it might sound “a little bit cocky,” but that he was “tough” and willing not just to work hard at unpleasant chores, but to volunteer to help when he hadn't been told to do so because he wanted the opportunity to learn. Being a farmer also involved discipline in being willing to sacrifice leisure or social time when necessary. Michael Harrison described that, since farming didn't have a set ending time for a shift of work, he wasn't able to go play softball with his friends as a child and teenager. “I'd be on a team,” he said, and “out of 20 games, I'd make two of them or three of them, because I just couldn't never... get away.” He said that at the time, it had

made him frustrated, but that he understood that farming “is probably going to mean a lot more to you one day than playing a couple games of softball.”

As an example of the dedication and willingness to sacrifice that he believed good farmers possess, Jeffrey Bennet described his total commitment to the farm during harvest season, which spans most of October and November. He related that, early in his marriage, his wife would feel “resentful” because he was hardly involved at all in parenting during those months. Once, he told me, he was unable to accompany his wife and children to his brother-in-law’s wedding, because going out of town for three days during harvest would mean losing a significant amount of the crop. He described these situations with regret, wishing that he had been able to find help to fill in for him or to relieve some of the burden and acknowledging the strain that farming put on his relationships during busy seasons, but simultaneously, he said that his brother-in-law “didn’t understand it” because “he’s not part of this [farming].” Although he recognized the difficult sacrifices that he and others made, he also maintained that these sacrifices were necessary and should, ultimately, be understandable.

Inheriting a family farm: love for farming and sense of purpose. Furthermore, the farmers I interviewed described a deep, sustained love for farming as one of their principal reasons for pursuing family farming as a career. As Michael Harrison stated, “it’s almost selfish, really, [how much] you love it. You love it that much, and you want to do it [...] you want it to succeed.” This love, Jeffrey Bennet stated, develops from having

farming “in your blood.” When pressed, he revealed that the phrase appears to both refer to the familial connection to farming—being “brought up around it” and being able to “see the lifestyle”—but also to the personal connection that the farmer experienced—the fact that “you love what you’re doing.” All of the family farmers I interviewed expressed a similar feeling that farming was especially meaningful to them in a way that was central to their decision to be farmers, but that was difficult to describe in words. These farmers associated their particular feeling of being drawn to farming with being raised on a farm and experiencing that lifestyle from a very young age. While I do not assert that growing up on a farm caused an interest in farming, these family farmers’ lifelong proximity to farming does seem to be an important factor in allowing them to notice and develop their interest in farming as a career.

It is this love for the land and this connection to the farming lifestyle that kept farmers running their farms rather than pursuing other careers. Many farmers recounted growing up hunting, fishing, and playing pickup sports with siblings, cousins, and friends on and near their family’s land. Being surrounded by family land allowed Sam Walker to be “always outside doing something,” which he loved because he wasn’t “cooped up” inside. Similarly, when he was a child, Jimmy Nelson wanted to spend his free time doing “anything outdoors”; farming was especially meaningful to him then and now, not only because he got to work outdoors, which he enjoyed, but also because the work involved “taking pride in what [he was] doing” and ap-

preciating that his uncle “gave [him] the chance to do it.” Having a visibly measurable impact on his family’s farmland made him feel important. Comparably, Jeffrey Bennet stated that, despite having to work in heat and rain when necessary, he’d “just rather be outside. I hate sitting behind a desk. You never see the sun.” On his farm, he was able to work outdoors, methodically, finding his own rhythm; he relished both the independence of “being [his] own boss” and the freedom of being able to make his own decisions about his family’s land. Some reported that they consider it important and particularly enjoyable to have lots of their own land, since this enabled them to avoid the cramped feeling associated with living in proximity to others—as Cassie Sanders told me, she “can walk for a mile and not see a person,” and she loved “peace and quiet,” “being able to see the stars,” and “not worrying about your dog running into the neighbor’s yard.” Living surrounded by farmland rather than in a neighborhood allowed that space to feel more like her and her family’s home. Chris Lawson spoke of a similar connection to his family’s land—he described plots of land on or near his family farm where different generations of his family have farmed for over a hundred years. The road he lived on, he told me, was named after his great-great-uncle. “I’m the only person in my family that’s still farming,” he stated frankly, “so it just kinda makes me proud to know that I’ve carried on, I guess, our family legacy and name, I guess you would say.”

Farmers are also connected to the land directly on an emotional level. For example, during a discussion of what he

liked about farming, Tom Fisher struggled for words, then paused for a long moment before looking out at his field and stating:

There’s certain things you smell during the year that...like in the springtime, you smell fresh plowed dirt. There’s something that, you know—and then there’s certain chemicals that, you arrive by a field and it—one thing, really, is cotton. When they defoliate cotton, when they take the leaves off of cotton before they pick it, that’s got this real distinct smell. You can be riding down the road in the dark, and you smell that smell and, well, somebody sprayed that cotton field, you know, with cotton and fresh plowed up peanuts, you know, fresh cut corn. And you know, by smelling that smell, you know what time of the year it is.

Near the end of the interview, he pulled out his phone to display a photo of the sunset over one of his cotton fields, taken from the cab of his tractor. “This is why I spend my life farming,” he explained. “Because you get to look at stuff like that.”

For many farmers, this love extends into a feeling that they have found their purpose in farming—that they have been called by God to be stewards of the land. “I love my land better than anybody,” Chris Lawson stated during a discussion about voluntarily adopting low-till practices despite a lack of government incentives. “I’m the best steward of my land ever. People don’t understand that [...] I’m gonna do everything to my land because I love my land. That’s why I farm. I’m not gonna do nothing to hurt me or my land.” Four other farmers—a total

of five out of eleven—offered an almost identical statement. These farmers, as well as three additional farmers, also reported feeling either “called” to a farming career or “allowed” to farm as a career by God. Michael Harrison told me, “I feel like God’s called me to do it. And that’s one of the biggest things, is he’s nurtured me my whole life to be good at it [...] God’s been good to me.” Similarly, Harris reflected, “I believe it’s the good Lord that allowed [me] to do it, and to be profitable.” Lisa Gibson told me definitively that “The Lord called us to the farm and has definitely blessed it” and stated that farming has shown her “what taking care of and being good stewards of God’s creation is like.” Farmers stated these strong senses of purpose solemnly but readily, indicating that farming was more than a job to them—the work that they did resonated deeply with their sense of what their purpose was in the world. They believed that family farming was not just a career choice that they’d made but something that reflected their God-given identity and individual purpose.

Inheriting a family farm: frustration and anxiety. A sense of ambivalence towards farming emerged when farmers considered that farming, despite often being perceived as a meaningful, almost sacred calling, was difficult, thankless work with little promise of economic gain. “Getting out would be a lot easier,” Michael Harrison said when asked why one might stop farming. “I mean, it’s a lot easier [...] with the volatile prices, I mean, it’s just hard to pencil out a living [...] and it really is frustrating.” Similarly, Harris said he “[doesn’t] fault anyone for getting out of it” since “you work hard,

and you don’t have anything to show for it [for several years], and it gets really disheartening.” Harrison disparaged the insufficiency of government subsidies offered to farmers whose crops fail due to unexpected natural disaster, calling the funding “basically enough money to hang yourself, not enough money to pay all your bills back and, you know, make a living.” Cassie Sanders discussed the “soul-crushing” effect of “losing everything” in a crop failure, which “happens again and again and again.” As she described the experience of taking on the responsibility of the family farm with her husband, she spoke of the future with dedication, but also anxiety, stating:

And if we lost the farm, you’d forever be saying, why didn’t we try? [...] A little girl told me yesterday, well, you know, sometimes if you’re in a nightmare, just open your eyes and pick another dream. And I’m like, wow, if it’s only that easy, I don’t know if I—what other dream would I pick?

Similarly, Daniel Harris attested that in his experience, the people who stop farming and sell their land and equipment “didn’t want to sell out. They had to.” Generally, farmers seemed to agree that family farmers farm because they feel an aptitude for the work, and they feel that the work is satisfying, important, and meaningful; they acknowledged that the primary barriers are economic obstacles, rather than any kind of change in the person’s career goals or affinity for farming.

It is also worth noting, however, that farmers often immediately follow negative statements with positive statements. Harrison, for example, followed

his statement about farming's disheartening failures by adding, "then when you have a really good year, everything, you look back and you say, man, it was all worth it. You know, that's when it's really good." Similarly, family farmer Lisa Gibson described the "mental and emotional load" of the constant problem-solving that farming entails, but followed this up immediately by stating that "It's good because...[my kids] get to see how we handle problems" and learn problem-solving skills and resilience in the process. Most farmers echoed similar sentiments—for each negative aspect of farming that was described, there was a lesson that family farming taught, an aspect of personal resilience that it fostered, a familial relationship that it strengthened, or an element of meaning, personal satisfaction, or happiness that couldn't be replicated elsewhere.

Inheriting a family farm: conclusion. For the farmers included in this study, many aspects of farming—the entry into farming, the reasons to farm, the connections which made their early career financially viable, the means by which they learned to farm, the reasons why they love to farm and why they continue to farm—reflected the importance of the family-oriented nature of the family farm as well as the importance of each individual farmer's sense of identity and purpose within that family system. Farmers felt connected to the land and to the farming lifestyle because of the lifestyle itself, the rewarding and meaningful feeling of making an impact and seeing results, and because of an emotional connection not only to the land as a physical manifestation of their family's legacy, but also to the land itself. Farmers expressed

mixed feelings when they discussed how difficult farming was, with the inevitable cyclical nature of "good years" and "bad years", but despite this ambivalence, farmers expressed that they viewed themselves as meant to be family farmers, and they loved it. Essentially, I find that farmers were certain that their profession—their role as family farmers—had been valuable and meaningful for them, but that they experienced profound worry when they speculated about the probability that this career and lifestyle would remain viable and meaningful in the future.

Family Farm Succession

Farmers began the succession process with many considerations in mind: the joy of farming, the sense of familial connection and legacy, the self-identification with the profession, the sense of being called as a steward, the ambivalence, the frustration, and the worry. Passing on a family farm started with identifying one or more potential heirs. Most farmers first looked to identify one of their children as a potential heir; all of the farmers I interviewed had at least one child. At this early stage in the succession process, when the farmers were identifying children whom they thought might inherit the farm, two major factors were immediately, though not always explicitly, considered: gender and kinship.

Family farm succession: gender. Of the eleven farmers included in the study, only two farmers expressed no hesitation in considering their daughters as female heirs. Lisa Gibson has 3 daughters, and spoke of them taking on the farm just as easily as other farmers mused about their sons inheriting their operations. Without

including any qualifier about her children being female, she described their general involvement in farm chores before discussing that she thought her middle daughter had a special aptitude for farming. “My middle kid, I think she’ll probably be the one to take it and run with it,” she stated. Similarly, farmers Deborah and Anthony Smith, who have two daughters, noticed that one daughter expressed much more of an affinity and aptitude for farming than the other; they selected her as the heir, and that daughter and her husband are now partial owners of the farm. Notably, both of these farmers were among those who had multiple daughters but no sons. It is also worth noting that both farmers who placed full confidence in their daughters as heirs were themselves women who had inherited intergenerational family farms.

Three farmers were undecided regarding whether they considered their daughters potential heirs. Jimmy Nelson stated that he considered teaching his daughter to farm and involved her in some chores, but reported that she never showed a specific enjoyment of farming, while his son did. He stated that she had other interests, such as travel sports, which took up most of her time. Similarly, Michael Harrison reported that, of his 3 children, “all of them rode tractors with me,” but that his son, who he identified as the probable heir of the farm, “probably did it more than anything because he wanted to be with his daddy or, you know, he didn’t want to be here with 3 girls.” Finally, when asked if any of his three children are interested in farming, Sam Walker replied that his children are “all girls.” He then reconsidered, howev-

er, and stated that his second daughter, who is 12 years old, “may be interested. We’ll see. She does show some interest.” He stated that because his daughter was “very nurturing” and he “think[s] she would be a good farmer, you know, as long as she could learn how to like the mechanical side of it.” He stated confidently that she would be very good at growing plants and caring for animals. Ascribing other affinities or interests to daughters, or selectively recognizing a greater affinity for farming in sons, appeared to be a comfortable middle ground for farmers with children of both genders when they began to narrow the selection to one potential heir. Although these farmers did not rule out daughters directly, they more readily accepted their sons as potential heirs and expressed reservations when they did consider their daughters.

6 out of the 11 farmers in this study made no mention of daughters as potential heirs. 2 of these farmers had only sons, so they never faced this question, but the remaining 4 explicitly stated that they ruled out their daughters based on their gender. When asked if his daughter is involved with the farm, farmer Chris Lawson stated, “well, she’s a girl, so...she don’t have to.” He offered no other explanation. Tom Fisher and Jason Scott similarly ruled out their daughters as potential heirs on the basis of gender, but they followed this statement by describing that their daughters had other interests that they preferred to farming, while their sons took an interest in farming early on. Finally, Daniel Harris did not consider his daughter and only child a potential heir, which, he explained, was why he decided to expand the pool of potential heirs to include his

much younger male cousin. He is currently in the process of training his cousin to one day inherit his farm. Scott has similarly expanded his search and was also considering his nephew as a potential heir, in addition to his very young son.

Selecting a potential heir was generally the first step in the succession process, and it set the tone for the early stages of the process. Right away, the farmer must decide how to engage with gender norms in farming; farmers could choose to exclude their daughters immediately, or they could less directly select away from seeing their daughters as potential heirs by instead focusing on the daughters' other interests, or—in rarer cases—they could place full confidence in the daughter as an heir. In cases when daughters, either because of the daughter's lack of aptitude and ability or because of the farmer's decision to prioritize male relatives, do not appear to be the farmer's best chance at passing down the farm, the farmer must make a decision regarding how far to extend the pool of potential heirs to other male relatives (such as nephews and cousins) in order to select someone to inherit the family farm.

Family farm succession: aptitude assessment. While identifying and considering potential heirs, the farmers began to determine and assess the aptitude that these children showed toward being family farmers. This includes first noticing the interest in farming that the child shows. Farmers with prospective heirs in the early stages describe their potential heirs' interest in glowing terms. Michael Harrison, for instance, claimed that his 11-year-old son was “eat up with it.” “He wants to do it. He wants to drive some-

thing every day when he gets out here. I don't think any of the other ones will. But my son loves it,” Harrison added. Similarly, Jimmy Nelson and Jason Scott, each stated that their sons, both 7 years old, “love” farming; Both Nelson and Scott saw a future in farming for their sons. In comparison, farmers with prospective heirs in their late teenage years or early adulthood tended to provide more nuanced and cautious assessments of their child's interest, regardless of how far the succession process had progressed. For example, Daniel Harris described how he was training his younger cousin, a man in his early twenties whom Harris hoped would eventually take over responsibility for his farm. The two were “farming together” and each took responsibility for “about the same amount of acres” as the cousin began to buy his own equipment. But despite the high level of responsibility, Harris expressed reservations about his cousin's potential. “I know he enjoys it,” he acknowledged. “Right now, I'm gauging his maturity.” Chris Lawson echoed the hesitation over his potential heir's maturity and also offered a more personal reason for hesitation. His 18-year-old son worked on the farm, steadily gaining responsibility and training with the goal of taking full responsibility of the farm one day, but Lawson thought that his son “need[ed] to develop relationships with other farmers” and with “the bank” so that he could ask for advice, borrow equipment, and access loans when necessary in order to be successful as a farmer. He further worried that his son “loves it, but don't [sic] have the love for it that I do.” Farmers with very young potential heirs, early in

the succession process, appeared able to project more confidence because they have not yet had to engage with the practical issues of succession or with their potential heir's perceived shortcomings.

While assessing a potential heir's ability to inherit and manage the family farm, there are certain attributes that farmers interpret as signaling an aptitude for farming. As discussed earlier in this section, farmers identified certain character traits in themselves that they believe are especially important for success in family farming; these traits include mental toughness, resilience, perseverance, dedication bordering on stubbornness, and a willingness to work hard and sacrifice. Farmers named these same traits when describing what character traits they thought indicated that their selected potential heirs would be good farmers, and therefore a good choice to inherit the family farm. However, farmers expressed frustration at the perceived loss of work ethic in their children and the younger generation, as compared to the parents' generation of farmers. Sometimes these frustrations were expressed lightheartedly: like many other farmers with young children, Jimmy Nelson joked that his son "would be following [him] around" on the farm "if he had got up this morning" instead of sleeping in. Other times, farmers expressed these frustrations as criticisms of their children or potential heirs; when describing his oldest son, who he'd originally hoped would take on the farm, Jeffrey Bennet stated disappointedly that his son "just didn't... see the value in buckling down and working. He just... wanted a paycheck." He expressed significant frustration that not

only did his children not value the hard work that farming entailed, but they also did not understand how rewarding it feels to be a family farmer. Similarly, Daniel Harris and Sam Walker specifically stated their frustration with the younger generation's disappointing lack of "work ethic." Often, this frustration over a lack of appreciation for hard work is connected to a frustration with the dwindling attention span that they perceived in their children, which they frequently blamed on the children's increased screen time. Nelson stated that when he was his son's age, he "would just soon sit on a tractor all day" but his son "gets bored with it and wants to, you know, after a few... hours, so he's ready to go do something different... Kids got so many distractions nowadays, so it's so much screen time versus what we had growing up."

Interestingly, however, farmers expressed frustrations not only with what they perceived as negative influences and undesirable character traits, but also with positive influences such as sports and extracurriculars. As Daniel Harris stated, "the biggest thing is nowadays we're competing against...you got football practice all summer long. You got [football practice] all season. So these kids that would be willing to work are playing sports more than likely." The loss of work ethic that farmers describe is, evidently, compounded by the fact that children who do maintain a work ethic are engaged in other activities that are demanding of energy and time.

Farmers' frustrations with their potential heirs represent practical concerns about obstacles to the succession process: work ethic, focus, and time commit-

ment are important when learning how to manage the responsibility of a family farm. However, taken as a whole, these frustrations also reflect farmers' anxiety about the lack of security inherent to the succession process. As discussed in the previous section, farmers carried an awareness of the external challenges and the precarious nature of family farming, and they worried about the future of family farming as a whole. By expressing frustrations about their potential heirs' perceived shortcomings, farmers may attempt to assign their worries to elements of the process that they can control. However, even increasing their children's responsibilities, monitoring their aptitude for farming, and managing their time commitments cannot ultimately assuage the farmers' nervousness about the insecurity of family farming as a profession. Farmers set a lofty and unreachable goal for their children: that they demonstrate enough aptitude, work ethic, and commitment to farming to create a sense of security that is ultimately lacking.

Family farm succession: mentoring and training. Even as they expressed these concerns and frustrations, farmers educated, encouraged, and supported their prospective heirs, albeit cautiously. Farmers began their children's involvement on the farm early. Cassie Sanders described that her son has been "strapped to us" for "his whole life"; she recounted that her son "was back in the truck with [her] doing deliveries at two weeks old." She homeschooled her son until he was in fourth grade, and she felt that by being immersed in farming for his whole life, he was able to learn more about farming and be "challenged more," as well as ben-

efit from being able to see farm life with "no filters." As the children grew older, farmers began to increase their involvement on the farm, increasing the time that their children spent riding on the tractors with them and giving them simple chores that increased in complexity and responsibility with age. For example, Jason Scott's 7-year-old son accompanied him while he started the irrigation system and helped to dig in the soil when it was time to "check for worms" or test the soil quality. Older children, such as Lisa Gibson's 9- and 14-year-old daughters, chose to "feed the animals and [...] plant pumpkins," and took on responsibilities on the farm—responsibilities that "will grow with age." Her 14-year-old was also learning to drive a tractor. Similarly, Sam Walker reported that his 12-year-old manages a small garden to practice growing crops. Farmers with older teenage and adult children or prospective heirs focused on delegating tasks to their children that not only taught responsibility but also familiarized them with different areas of the farming operation and helped them learn to manage the farm as a whole. For instance, Chris Lawson's 18-year-old son delivered shipments of grain to local customers and processing plants, and Lawson was working up to the point where he could trust his son to "get the planter" and plant entire fields of peanuts on his own. Daniel Harris had assigned his younger adult cousin, who is in his twenties, full responsibility for farming and managing nearly half of his farm's acreage. As their prospective heirs grew in age, their responsibility increased, and farmers aimed to teach their heirs both the individual skills

necessary for each task that farmers did and how to manage the farm as a whole.

Involving young potential heirs and increasing the responsibility and involvement of older potential heirs is complicated by the fact that farmers also felt a need to shelter and protect their children. Sometimes this conflicting interest is introduced by the farmers themselves; Michael Harrison described how, as a parent, he was much more sensitive to safety concerns than his parents were with him:

The things that I did back in the day, I don't know if I'd let my sixteen, fourteen, fifteen, year old do it anymore. I'd get on a tractor and go over [in the field] when I was 11 years old and start cutting hay with a rotary mower. And I said, I didn't have a phone, didn't have a radio, didn't have a way to call back or nothing [sic] like that. My mom and dad would let me go do it because—you know, I don't know if we were more responsible then or, you know, I don't understand. But I would never let [my son] go do that. I'd have to go over there with him and put my eyes on him for 4 or 5 rounds before I'd ever...then I'd make sure he had a phone with him before I left.

He stated that his hesitation stemmed both from concern for his child's safety and concern that his child would lose focus, let the tractor drift off of the "1 to 2inch straight line," and trample valuable crops. Other farmers expressed a similar dual concern: operating equipment is dangerous, they asserted, and takes a level of focus that they hesitated to trust their children to consistently maintain.

In other instances, the farmers did not express hesitation about their prospective heirs' safety, but other family members did. This hindered the farmers' ability to involve their children in the day-to-day operation of the farm. Tom Fisher, who farmed with his adult son, expressed his frustration that, despite his grandson's interest in farming, his daughter-in-law won't let his grandson "know he has legs;" he stated that her overprotectiveness hindered the child's involvement on the farm despite the child's apparent interest.

In these instances, farmers described a disparity between their memories of their own process of learning to farm when they were children and the considerations that inform their strategies for passing on their farm to their own children. As they guided their children through the succession process, farmers had to balance both the goals of a farmer and the responsibilities of a parent. These farmers wanted their children to take on responsibility, but they also identified significant parental considerations which caused them to hesitate to actually dole out that responsibility. This could complicate and slow down the learning process for their potential heirs, which could cause the children to take on responsibility more slowly than the farmers might consider ideal. On the whole, however, farmers viewed these safety considerations as necessary, if sometimes frustrating. Contradictions between safety concerns and farm involvement exemplified the tension between the farmers' role as parents and the farmers' role as farmers—a tension that manifested in contradictory goals and strategies in the succession process.

Farmers continued to balance the

dual roles of parent and farmer as they closely monitored their child's developing ability to farm while simultaneously remaining cautious about assuming that their child wants to farm as a career. To monitor both the child's ability and desire to farm, farmers engaged their potential heirs in a series of requirements or "tests" which they use to make judgments about the child's potential future as a farmer. The most common of these are educational requirements. Only 2 out of 11 farmers said that they did not or will not require their potential heirs to attend formal higher education or obtain vocational degrees; the other 9 farmers said that these degrees were invaluable not only because they could offer their children a backup career, but also because it allowed their prospective heirs to discover an aptitude, affinity, or enjoyment of a different career path than farming. Farmers thought it was important that their children tried other things, so that if their children did decide to farm as a career, the farmers would know that it was out of a love for farming, not simply because they were never exposed to anything else. Some farmers also expressed that they required their children to have another job first or live away from home before deciding to farm as a career. Cassie Sanders, for example, stated that, although her eighteen-year-old son said that he wanted to farm, and she wanted him to farm, she required him to attend college and live in the dormitories first, because he "need[ed] to have a little bit of...experience away from home." Similarly, Sam Walker described how his father denied him the opportunity to work on the family farm right away:

The week that I was graduating

college, I told Daddy, "All right, I'm ready to come back home, I want to farm." And he told me, he said, "You might come back home, and you might farm, but you're not going to farm here." And that was my dad's words to me. I was like, okay, well I didn't have any money, I didn't have any land or any equipment. So I had to find another job.

He stated that although his father's response initially surprised him, this approach allowed him to experience another job which he enjoyed, working in the timber industry for 7 years before he felt that something was "calling [him] back" to farming. When he approached his father again with a plan to rent land and farm jointly, his father agreed. Walker planned to mimic his father's approach, though to a less intense degree, if he ended up passing his farm on to one of his children; he considered it essential that by trying a different career and taking initiative toward his own goals, he proved both to himself and his father that farming as a career was right for him.

Importantly, these tests aim to determine not only testing the child's ability to be a farmer but also their passion. As discussed earlier in this analysis, farmers strongly felt that they were called to be farmers, and that farming as a career was their purpose. Testing their children was not solely intended to ensure that their children have a secure backup plan; farmers were also attempting to discern whether their potential heirs experience that same sense of calling, meaning, and purpose. These farmers aimed to ensure that their children have the financial and occupational security awarded by having

multiple options, so that if they choose farming, it will not just be out of necessity but out of confidence that farming as a career is the right choice for them.

Farmers worked hard to ensure that, should their children choose farming as a career, they would be able to. Jason Scott, echoing nearly all of the farmers in the sample, described how he and his uncle worked to ensure that the farm would be in good condition for the express purpose of passing on a viable, stable farm to his son and nephew “once the boys are old enough.” They aimed to pass on a farm that is as secure as possible. However, farmers repeatedly stated that they only wanted their children to own and operate the family farm if that is what the child truly wants to do as a career. Despite farmers’ deep desire to pass on the farm and to see their family farm continue after their retirement, farmers insisted that they did not want to pressure their children into taking on the farm if it wasn’t something that the child clearly wanted to do. If there were any uncertainties about the child’s desire to inherit the farm, they would prefer their children to work elsewhere rather than inheriting the farm. Jimmy Nelson expressed these conflicting goals, stating:

I don't wanna force him, by no means, and make him do something that he don't want to do, but I also want him to learn responsibility on top of that. So if we're gonna do it, let's, let's do it the right way and let's not do it just because that's what we wanna do right now. And then if you're gonna do it, we're gonna go with it and do it and then you're gonna stick with

it, but...I don't wanna force him, but I, I mean, I, I, if he wants the opportunity, I want him to always know it's there, but also don't wanna just hand it to him [...] I want him to have to earn it like I did.

In this quote, Nelson also introduced his belief that children who inherit farms have to sincerely want to farm—both because, as Michael Harrison stated, farmers will be miserable and potentially unsuccessful at managing a farm if they don’t love farming and aren’t sure that this is their purpose, and also because farmers seemed to believe that the children have to prove themselves. Among other farmers, Chris Lawson echoed a similar sentiment, stating that he wanted his son to prove his dedication to farming because “I had to do the same thing. I paid my dues.”

Importantly, therefore, the testing of the potential heir hinted at a less obvious, almost unattainable standard: that the child should match their parent’s aptitude, willingness, and dedication for farming. In every critique of the child’s aptitude, ability, and character, and every concern about their aptitude or willingness, the farmer expressed either overtly or implicitly a comparison to themselves. “I want him to have to earn it like I did,” Jimmy Nelson stated. “He don’t have the love for it that I have,” Chris Lawson critiqued. Nearly every farmer recounted the level of focus, dedication, and desire to farm that they remember having as a child and teenager, and worried that their own potential heirs do not quite match these traits. This high standard did not rule out the child inheriting the family farm; instead, these comparisons and standards reveal that in ideal circum-

stances, farmers would see evidence not only that their potential heir is a good farmer, but that their heir matches their own aptitude and love for farming perfectly. In this ideal situation, the farmer could feel more confident that managing the farm would work out for the children at least as well as it has worked out for themselves. The paradox in this comparison highlights the consistent internal conflict in the farmers' approach to the succession process—that these farmers love farming, but worry that it is a challenging and precarious profession, and so hesitate to commit their children to it without the indication of security that farmers imagine their children's heightened ability or dedication would provide.

Family farm succession: worries about the future. Most of the farmers in this study currently expect that they will be able to pass on their family farms to a younger family member, and are in the process of preparing for this eventuality. But, as mentioned in the previous section, two farmers interviewed either have failed or expect to fail to pass on their farms, and several other farmers express concern about the future of their farms' succession prospects. When faced with worries about succession or the prospect of failing to pass on their farms, farmers exhibit three main emotional reactions.

The first is a sense of deep sadness, which Daniel Harris revealed when he described his process of mentoring and sharing responsibility with his younger cousin in the hopes that his cousin would one day inherit his farm. "There's coming a day when the farm legacy is coming to an end," he said heavily. "I just don't want it to be on me." This sadness is coupled

with a desire to keep farming for as long as possible. For example, Tom Fisher and Jeffrey Bennet described that their elderly fathers—88 and 85 respectively—continued to farm every day despite their age and declining health because, as Bennet said, "everybody needs to have a purpose." By continuing to work on the farm and have a say in decision-making, even if their share of day-to-day responsibility has greatly decreased, they are able to continue feeling the sense of purpose that they have always associated with farming.

The second emotion expressed at the prospect of failing to pass on the farm is acceptance. Jeffrey Bennet, the only farmer in this sample who has, at the time of the interview, failed to pass the farm on to any of his adult children, speaks about the succession prospects with acceptance and talks proudly about his children and the careers that they chose to pursue instead. Similarly, Deborah Smith discusses that although she and her children would like her grandchildren to one day inherit the farm, she realizes that it is possible that they will not, and states calmly that "you don't want to obligate your children to your dreams or your desires. You can't live through them vicariously." Overall, even if their children do not farm as a career, farmers speak with pride about the positive character traits that their children have developed from growing up on a farm, and often name the ways that they believe these traits have made their non-farming children more effective in other careers or in their family lives.

A third emotional reaction is avoidance. Sam Walker, for example, doesn't elaborate on what he plans to do with the farm in the event that he is unable to

identify an heir; he simply states that he doesn't know and indicates that he would like to move on to the next question. Similarly, Jeffrey Bennett dodges the question of what he will do with the land when he is finished farming, stating that it still belongs to his elderly father, so he will make that decision, if he has to, when his father passes on; he comments that although he expects to outlive his father, "none of us know what's going to happen."

Notably, even farmers who appear to be progressing in their goal to pass on their farm to the next generation express wariness or worry about the future of their farms' succession prospects. Cassie Sanders expresses this when she discusses her concerns about her eighteen-year-old son's future if he inherits the family farm:

My son thinks he wants to farm, and I'm not going to discourage him. But I think about the young people that want to get into this and do this. There's so much stacked against them now that I wonder, who is going to feed us? Who is going to do this? You can't afford to do it. What is it going to look like? What does the future of farming look like? And, you know, there's less and less of us doing this work. [...] He wants—he thinks he wants to do it. But he's eighteen. He's in school right now. And I hope he does. I hope he goes on and takes over. But what is it going to look like for him? I don't know.

Sanders describes a latent worry that many farmers hint at. They're aware that passing down the farm is not solely a decision that they can make, or that their potential heirs can make. Their chil-

dren's chances of continuing the family farm are dependent not only on how effectively the family navigates the internal succession process, but also on the broader conditions for farmers and the viability of family farming as a career. Farmers carry an awareness of that anxiety-inducing reality and understand that factors they cannot control coexist with, and may eventually undermine, the elements of the succession process that they can plan and strategize to navigate. As they progress towards passing on their farm, then, farmers must reconcile their profound attachment to farming with the knowledge that the future of farming is uncertain. Farming is something that farmers love, but it is something that they are wary about encouraging their family to rely on. Despite all of the meaning and purpose that farming has brought them, these farmers cannot guarantee that farming will be a viable career for their children, and their awareness of this uncertainty is at the center of many complications to the succession process.

Family farm succession: conclusion. Overall, it is evident that family farm succession is an extremely complicated problem with many considerations for farmers. Current family farmers enter the succession process with deep love for farming and certainty that farming is meaningful and purposeful for themselves and their families. Since the farm is a physical manifestation of their family's legacy, farmers feel incredibly connected to their family's farmland and the family farming lifestyle, and they are heavily invested in the farm's continuance. However, farmers also enter the succession process with an awareness of

the struggles, hardships, and sacrifices that farming requires and the uncertainties about the future of family farming as farms grow fewer, larger, and increasingly consolidated. Farmers express that they view themselves as having found their purpose in being family farmers, but this does not dispel the ambivalence or anxiety with which they view their life and chosen career. These conflicting feelings manifest as farmers plan for the succession process. While farmers want their children to take over the farm, they must figure out how to balance this aim with their knowledge of how difficult and uncertain this career path is. Farmers must manage both the goal of succession and the high standard that they hold their children to; they experience disappointment when they feel that their children do not fully match their zeal for farming but must manage their expectations, frustrations, and anxieties in order to achieve the goal of passing on the farm. They must also, however, balance their desire to pass on the farm with their parental desire to see their children follow their own passions and live the most fulfilling lives possible, and with their desire to ensure security in their children's futures.

Family farming is a source of pride, identity, purpose, freedom, and joy; it is something that farmers' children are exposed to and immersed in early on, but it is also a difficult life that farmers do not want to pressure their children into choosing. Inheriting the family farm is a responsibility which farmers want to ensure that their children are suited and prepared for, as well as a special role that they feel their kids need to earn. Family farm succession, therefore, is a com-

plicated process that is difficult to ever definitively conclude. Farmers' uncertainties about the future of family farming and their dual roles as parents and farmers foster contradictory strategies which develop a tenuous succession path that can be destabilized at any point in the process, from very early in the child's life to very late in the parent's career.

CONCLUSION

Family farmers are the backbone of American agriculture. Because family farmers make up a longstanding but declining majority of farmers in the United States, changes to this section of the agriculture industry can affect food security, stability of rural communities and economies, and the functioning of agriculture as a social institution in the United States.

As this study reveals, family farmers' relationship to farming is complicated and often contradictory. Farmers develop a love for farming, a sense of purpose, and a close emotional relationship to the farm lifestyle; at the same time, they carry an awareness of the hardships and shortcomings of a farming career and an ambivalent opinion of its future. These conflicting ideas manifest as contradictory strategies in their succession process. The farmer's own internally conflicting goals, as well as considerations about gender norms, aptitude for farming, and maturity of potential heirs, destabilize farmers' confidence regarding the prospect of passing down the family farm. At any stage of the process, this destabilization can cause the succession process to go "right" or go "wrong"—to continue smoothly, to encounter major interruptions or, in some cases, eventu-

ally to fail. Farmers' methods of engaging with elements of the inheritance and succession processes can complicate, enable, or impede the succession process.

Farmers' worries about the future of family farming extensively affect the process of passing on family farms. Uncertainty in the future viability and stability of family farming makes it difficult for farmers to achieve successful intergenerational transfer of their farm while simultaneously feeling confident regarding their children's career security. In some cases, farmers successfully pass on the farm, but this does not assuage their concerns about the future; in other cases, farmers' children pursue careers outside the farm, and although farmers experience profound sadness at the loss of the family farm, they also have pride in their children and a sense of security in their future. Family farm succession, therefore, is a process that does not easily or simply resolve; as with farming itself, there is an element of sacrifice and continued instability regardless of the family farm's fate.

This study analyzes the succession processes, strategies, and complicating factors for eleven intergenerational family farms in the state of Georgia. Further research could more explicitly determine the impacts of changing parenting norms on farm succession, identify any added anxieties caused by changing environmental conditions such as droughts, heat, and soil quality, or describe the effects of farm change on rural land use patterns. Additionally, further research exploring farm succession could expand to include other geographic areas where farming may occupy a different social and cultural position, or where family farm decline

may be occurring on a different scale. Hopefully, this study can contribute to a developing understanding of family farming in the changing agricultural landscape of the twenty-first century.

ENDNOTES

¹Compared to farms classified as partnerships, corporations, or "other", a category which includes estates or trusts, prison farms, grazing associations, and American Indian Reservations.

²Categories defined by USDA standards

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Juliet Cairney (she/her) holds a B.A. in Sociology and Environmental and Urban Studies from the University of Chicago and is currently serving as a Rural Agriculture Volunteer in Senegal with the Peace Corps, where she is focusing on building small-scale projects that support sustainable local food production and food security. Her research interests include agriculture, food systems, sustainability, qualitative methods, environmental policy, and the inheritance, stability, and succession of family farms in a shifting social landscape.

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BELONGING THROUGH DISTANCE: Public Solidarity and Private Boundaries in the Venezuelan Diaspora

Magdalena Paul

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

To Venezuela: not the symbol, or the cautionary tale, but the place I called home for 18 years. A country I've, ironically, long held at a cautious distance—uncertain whether to defend it, explain it, or leave it behind. Evidently, this project doesn't solve that tension, but it gave me a way to sit with it. If nothing else, I hope it adds something, however small, to the long, unfinished work of making sense of who we are to one another, and to the country we no longer live in but can't quite let go of.

To my friends and family, thank you for the patience and the well-timed distractions. You knew when to ask, and most importantly, when not to.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This manuscript reflects fieldwork, analysis, and writing completed in May of 2025. Because several immigration policy developments affecting Venezuelan migrants changed materially after the thesis was first completed, I have made updates to time-sensitive legal and political references where necessary. The underlying empirical analysis and argument still remain anchored to the period in which the research was conducted.

ABSTRACT

How do migrants stand together in public, yet drift apart in their private lives? Among Venezuelans in New York, this tension runs beneath the surface of everyday encounters. Migrants routinely show up for one another—circulating resources, offering guidance, and supporting national causes—but these gestures rarely translate into closeness. Friendships unfold elsewhere, along more selective paths, shaped by class, migration wave, and reputational caution. Through interviews with Venezuelans from different migration waves and routes, this study traces how solidarity and distance unfold within the same people, as migrants move between moments of connection and moments of distance in the course of daily life. Rather than leaving old divisions behind, migrants reconfigure them through the lens of exile, redrawing boundaries in the language of trajectory, trust, and worthiness. I introduce the concept of “belonging through distance” to explain how solidarity endures—not despite fragmentation—but because of it. In this delicate balancing act, public acts of care are sustained by

private restraint: migrants honor moral obligations to the collective while safeguarding themselves from the vulnerabilities of intimacy. This dynamic reveals a diaspora held together less by emotional closeness than by moral performance and a calibrated distance. By distinguishing solidarity from belonging, and by tracing how exhaustion, survival priorities, and reputational risk make distance feel natural, the analysis reframes what it means to stay connected in exile. In the Venezuelan case, community persists through separation, and care—paradoxically—survives because migrants have learned to protect even as they connect.

INTRODUCTION

Diaspora is so often told as a story of solidarity. At its most basic, the term refers to a population dispersed from a shared homeland yet still bound across borders by identification, attachment, and an ongoing orientation to home (Safran 1991; Anderson 2006; Brubaker 2005). Across borders and distances, migrants are imagined as a community bound not just by origin, but by memory, moral duty, and a shared sense of home. From celebrations of the homeland to protests in the streets, they appear to sustain a togetherness that transcends geography (Appadurai 1996; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Yet even as scholars have traced the fractures of class, race, legal status, and politics that run through diasporic life (Al-Ali, Black, and Koser 2001; Mahler 1995; Glick Schiller 2003), they have largely kept unity and division at opposite ends of the spectrum—treating both as separate states, rather than conditions that unfold together, in tandem.

My research with Venezuelan migrants in New York suggests something else entirely. What holds this diaspora together is not emotional intimacy, nor deep cultural kinship, but a felt obligation to show up for the collective or the nation. Migrants do so in visible and practical ways: they organize fundraisers,

send remittances, mentor new arrivals, and throw their weight behind the national cause. On the surface, these gestures could signal cohesion, but beneath them lies a discrete, more selective reality: these same migrants often avoid community spaces, speak cautiously—or even critically—about their fellow Venezuelans, and filter their social worlds selectively. They rally for the nation, but they do not do so through unguarded closeness.

But to understand this dynamic, we must first understand the layered nature of Venezuelan migration itself. Consequently, the Venezuelan exodus has not been a single, unified flight, but a series of layered departures shaped by class, timing, and political rupture (Freier and Parent 2019; Garcia 2023; IOM 2021). What began as the exit of professionals and elites in the early 2000s—fleeing Chávez’s political project and the stigmatization of wealth—gradually expanded into a broader exodus, as economic collapse, state violence, and mass scarcity forced many more Venezuelans, often with fewer resources and less certainty, to leave as well (Páez 2011). These shifting conditions gave each wave its own social meaning: early migrants often left by choice, with plans, visas, and networks, while later ones moved through

necessity, uncertainty, and, increasingly, on foot¹. These differences—between relocation and fleeing—did not simply disappear once abroad. In fact, they became new markers of status and social legibility within the diaspora. In New York, the symbolic distance between someone who arrived through the asylum system and someone who arrived for graduate school is more than logistical, as it quietly informs how Venezuelans see one another, what they assume, and how far they're willing to let someone in. To understand this diaspora, then, requires more than counting its size. It demands an attention to the fractures within it—that is, fractures produced not just by geography, but by the intricate history of how, when, and under what circumstances people left.

This is the paradox that sits at the center of my argument: migrants continue to give, support, and identify with a shared collective, even as they hold one another at a distance. The question is not whether the diaspora is unified or divided, but how these two dynamics are made to live alongside each other—essentially, how solidarity is enacted without dissolving the very boundaries that have long defined who belongs, and with whom. This leads me to the central question of this thesis: **How do Venezuelan migrants sustain collective support for one another and for their homeland—while maintaining personal distance and curating their social ties with care? And what broader pressures and patterns make this form of solidarity even possible?** This is ultimately a tension that unsettles many of the assumptions still shaping the literature, where public giving is too often read as proof of closeness,

and solidarity treated as interchangeable with community. What this thesis seeks to explain is not how solidarity survives division, but how the two are entangled—how migrants continue to act on behalf of one another while preserving the very distances that hold them apart. This condition, which I call *belonging through distance*, might seem contradictory, but it is a patterned way of navigating the social, political, and practical forces that make closeness uneven and difficult, while still sustaining solidarity, participation, and attachment to the community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

How Solidarity Has Been Understood: The Literature's Assumptions

A broad body of scholarship concerned with how migrants remain tied to homelands across borders has often treated visible, public acts of solidarity as evidence of enduring connection. Within these accounts, gestures like protests and other forms of transnational engagement are understood to reaffirm not just belonging, but also emotional closeness to the community (Anderson 2006; Appadurai 1996). For both Anderson and Appadurai, attachment to the national collective survives the distance by becoming public and symbolic: through imagined community in the former, and through diasporic public spheres in the latter. Research on transnational migration gives this claim depth by showing how migrants stay embedded in cross-border fields of family life, politics, and exchange through communication and ongoing participation that stretch beyond any single national territory (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Jointly, these literatures help

materialize a durable interpretive habit: outward acts of connection are regularly treated as evidence that communal identification remains intact, and often that some deeper emotional bond does too.

Even as scholars have turned their attention to the fractures within diasporas—fault lines of class, gender, politics, or migration story—this deeper assumption that visible solidarity reflects deeper communal connection proves remarkably hard to shake (Brubaker 2005; Vertovec 1999). There is recognition, of course, that diaspora is performative, that it operates as a stance or frame of identification (Brubaker 2005). Yet the focus remains heavily weighted toward acts like remittances or protest participation—actions still treated as synonyms for community cohesion, as if public solidarity naturally mirrors private belonging (Shain 2007; Vertovec 1999). Some work has begun to examine how these expressions of solidarity unfold unevenly across status lines. For instance, Parreñas (2001) notes how transnational mothers experience care hierarchically, with class shaping both who can provide support and how it is interpreted. Similarly, Levitt (2001) observes that remitting practices are filtered through classed expectations of obligation and respectability. But even in these accounts, the act of giving still tends to signal connection—a durable tie, however strained. This logic carries directly into the scholarship on transnational care, where flows of support are often framed as both practical necessity and emotional expression (Baldassar 2007; Parreñas 2001). Care, even across great distances, is depicted as a vehicle to sustain familial and national bonds,

with physical absence made secondary to the moral and emotional weight of obligation (Baldassar 2007). Thus, even where fragmentation and strain are acknowledged, the dominant view continues to tie material support to emotional closeness, as though the act of giving is inseparable from a feeling of belonging (Baldassar 2007; Baldassar and Merla 2014; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011).

And this is precisely where I see an opening. Much of this scholarship leaves under-examined the possibility that solidarity might survive—perhaps even thrive—without intimacy. Few accounts fully engage the tension between civic performance and emotional distance, or consider how migrants might fulfill community obligations while keeping their social worlds carefully bounded (Mavroudi 2008). Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004), writing in the context of transnational migration, offer a helpful distinction between “ways of being” and “ways of belonging.” The former refers to everyday practices—sending remittances, maintaining contact with family—that link migrants to their countries of origin, while the latter captures symbolic acts that signal explicit identification with a national or collective identity. Their framework expands what counts as transnational engagement, showing that migrants do not need to perform belonging to remain connected. But their focus remains on what migrants *express*, not in how they *feel* or relate to others. That is, they make space for action without identification, but not for obligation enacted through emotional distance. My concern is not whether migrants perform belonging, but how they navigate its emotional and social

boundaries: how they support the nation or the community while keeping others at a measured distance. Where their distinction helps rethink visible affiliation, mine centers the internal (and often unspoken) logic that structures selective care, social withdrawal, and reputational caution. I take seriously the possibility that solidarity might not just exist *despite* distance, but be structured through it—in some cases, distance itself is what makes solidarity possible by allowing migrants to give without exposing themselves to the risks of intimacy or entanglement.

Therefore, while the literature has begun to decouple action from identity, it has yet to reckon with solidarity shaped through emotional separation. My contribution lies in tracing this dynamic as a patterned mode of engagement more than as an exception. I shift the lens from whether migrants express belonging to how they manage its terms: offering help, support, or care out of caution, obligation, and a desire to preserve distance—and not out of closeness. In doing so, I offer a framework that reframes this tension: one in which distance is not a breakdown of community, but a deliberate way of navigating it. Because by assuming that visible acts of solidarity naturally reflect belonging, the literature risks overlooking the quieter negotiations migrants make every day—acts of contribution shaped more by duty, expectation, or a sense of moral script than by deep affection. What does it look like when migrants show up for the community, but keep its members at a distance? When duty compels them to act, even as trust and intimacy are carefully withheld?

Choosing Our Circle: How Migrants Curate Intimacy in the Diaspora

If the public life of the diaspora is shaped by gestures of solidarity—protests, remittances, fundraisers, or quiet acts of help—its private life is built from something far less visible: decisions about intimacy, trust, and proximity. I use “public” here not only to refer to what is outward or collective, but to describe acts that fulfill civic and moral obligations—those moments when migrants show up, whether for Venezuela as a nation or for a fellow Venezuelan in need. These gestures often cross lines of class, background, or migration path, but if public duty asks migrants to participate, the private sphere is where they negotiate how much to let others in (Al-Ali and Koser 2002). Essentially, it is where social ties are curated with care. This distinction is not simply about what is visible and what remains private, but also about how far care is allowed to go, such as the lines they draw between offering care and allowing that care to deepen into closeness. Indeed, Venezuelan migrants do help one another. Sometimes the help is symbolic, directed toward the homeland; and sometimes it is personal, between Venezuelans—like a mentor guiding a newcomer, a job lead passed along, or a neighbor quietly checking in. But what remains consistent is the distance that often trails these gestures. Often, support is extended, but intimacy is withheld with precision. That is, one might offer guidance across lines of class or trajectory, but stop short of friendship. In this social world, help crosses boundaries that trust does not. What I trace in this section is this choreography of proximity and parallel restraint.

Essentially, not the absence of solidarity, but its selectivity. Yet, these boundaries are not incidental, as they are shaped by deeper logics of self-protection, symbolic distinction, and reputational care. In this sense, the private is not where solidarity disappears, but where it is reconfigured—it is where migrants maintain the emotional boundaries that the public script of community asks them to breach.

Social ties in the diaspora do not fall into place by accident. They are selected, shaped, and at times, avoided—seemingly trivial decisions made in public spaces around the city, on Facebook groups, and after brief encounters that do not lead to more. Scholars of homophily, or the tendency for people to form ties with others who resemble them, have long shown that we are drawn to those who resemble us: in class, in education, in values, in life story (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). But, more than it being about comfort, resemblance here becomes a kind of compass. In the uncertainty of migration, when everything else feels unsettled, people often move towards those who seem easier to understand and to imagine building a connection with. It offers cues for trust, for cultural fluency, for who might understand what does not need to be explained. These familiarities do more than guide social life; they give it structure, especially in conditions where few other structures remain (Centola et al. 2007).

Still, the story here is not one of automatic pull. Migrants do not simply fall into networks by default; they navigate multiple layers of belonging, balancing what is expected of them publicly with what feels safe or desirable privately. In

much of the literature, these realms are often blurred: the network of public solidarity—rooted in national duty, symbolic obligation, and communal scripts—is too often assumed to mirror the network of private intimacy, where ties are guided by trust, affinity, and shared life experience.

But these are not the same network. Small (2017) challenges the idea that the strongest ties are necessarily the most intimate, showing instead that people often rely on weak ties or casual acquaintances for meaningful forms of support—particularly in contexts shaped by constraint or necessity. His work helps unsettle the assumption that emotional closeness and instrumental support always align. But these types of frameworks remain largely structural; they tell us who people turn to, not necessarily how they interpret or manage those ties—nor why some relationships remain emotionally bounded even when help is given. In my context, what matters is not just who helps whom, but how boundaries of respectability and status are maintained *within* that help. Similarly, Verbrugge (1977) reminds us that proximity is no guarantee of connection. Sharing the same space—whether at a community event, in the workplace, or in a place of worship—does not dissolve the undercurrents of social distinction. Her insight is critical for understanding why community spaces do not automatically produce closeness. But her account does not fully explain the active work migrants do to assess social compatibility—how they read class, trajectory, or background into each encounter, and how that reading determines who will be invited in, and who will remain at a distance.

What my findings show is that these

social readings are deeply informed by the hierarchies migrants bring with them. Whether someone arrived by crossing through the Darién jungle or on a flight with a student visa, with documents or without, becomes more than a backstory—it becomes a filter for how others understand their respectability, trustworthiness, and social worth. Scholars of symbolic boundaries have richly traced how classed distinctions are reproduced through everyday acts of distinction (Lamont 1992; Lamont and Molnár 2002), and Spencer and Pahl (2006) remind us that friendship choices are rarely socially neutral. But few have extended these insights into the realm of migrant sociality—that is, into the micro-decisions through which individuals curate closeness, manage reputation, and weigh the risks of intimacy within their own national community. My work builds on this literature by tracing how symbolic boundaries are reactivated in post-migration relationships, and how pre-migration scripts of class, trajectory, and status shape who migrants hold at a distance—even as they continue to act in solidarity. This is the work of the private domain: not the absence of solidarity, but its calibration.

My research builds on these frameworks to show that migrant networks do not simply materialize from shared national identity, instead being actively assembled, filtered, and maintained. Rather than defaulting into cohesion, Venezuelan migrants construct their social worlds with intention, often in ways that reflect the classed distinctions and social scripts they carried with them. Homophily, long understood as a mechanism of comfort and familiarity, becomes a tool for pre-

serving social fit; symbolic boundaries, as theorized by Lamont and others, reappear in the form of reputational caution and social reading. In this process, nationality becomes a necessary but insufficient condition for closeness. That is, shared origin may open a door, but what truly determines whether someone walks through it often depends on class background, educational level, or the nature of their migration path. These differences do not just shape institutional outcomes, they inform the small, intimate decisions of everyday life: who to befriend, and who to avoid. In reality, I found that such choices are rarely random. Migrants often assess one another through subtle but recognizable cues—speech, dress, migration story—and use these to decide not only who is trustworthy, but also who might reflect well or poorly on them in a new social context. And while this process doesn't eliminate solidarity, it does place boundaries around it. Essentially, the same migrants who show up for national causes or community events often draw far sharper lines in their personal lives. What my research brings into view is not just a pattern of selectivity, but a silent social code—one that governs care, controls risk, and ultimately redraws the moral map of diasporic life.

This tension—between public alignment and private distinction—frames the core of my inquiry: how migrants navigate community when solidarity and selectivity must coexist. Throughout this thesis, I draw a distinction between *solidarity* and *belonging*—two terms that often travel together in the literature, but which operate quite differently in the social world I observed. In this thesis, *solidarity* will re-

fer to the public-facing actions migrants take to support a collective project: such as organizing fundraisers, offering guidance, attending protests, or circulating resources. Traditionally, these gestures are often interpreted as evidence of deeper unity—assumed to signal shared feeling, emotional closeness, or communal identification (Baldassar 2007; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Yet, what I found is that such actions—or, solidarity—do not require intimacy at all. In other words, these public acts can and often do unfold in the absence of personal closeness, and may be driven more by obligation, duty, or shared memory than by trust or affinity. *Belonging*, by contrast, is not what gets performed—rather, it is what gets carried, cultivated, or preserved. Essentially, it speaks to a sense of attachment to Venezuela itself, to a collective ideal, or to a moral community that does not depend on interpersonal connection.

Therefore, while the literature tends to read *solidarity* as a proxy for *belonging*—as if public giving naturally reflects private identification—my data suggests a more layered reality. In this context, *solidarity* often emerges *despite* social distance, and *belonging* is maintained *through* it—sustained by repeated, symbolic acts (rather than by emotional intimacy) that allow migrants to feel tethered to something larger, even as they hold one another at a distance. This distinction matters. Ultimately, it makes visible a kind of diaspora in which people do not feel held together by shared social life, but remain tethered to one another—and to the nation—through duty, memory, and the structures that allow them to give without being fully known. In short, while *sol-*

idity can exist despite distance, what the findings begin to show is something even more striking: that *belonging*, in whatever form it appears, is not what dissolves distance, but what takes shape through it.

METHODS

This project did not begin with the question it ultimately came to answer. At first, I was drawn to something simpler: an observation about the current circumstance Venezuela is going through and the possible tensions it produces. Namely, it was the fact that Venezuela is living through one of the largest exoduses in the world, with approximately a quarter of its population having left the country (UNHCR n.d.).² Beyond the scale of it, what was striking to me was that the sheer massiveness of the issue means there is a very stark difference between who is leaving, when, and how. Unlike other diasporas often imagined as cohesive, the Venezuelan case is marked by fragmentation from the start. I was interested in the tension between these very different groups—elites (like students with visas to study at prestigious American universities or professionals with green cards) and working-class migrants (who are commonly referred to as “*caminantes*” for the way they cross the Darién jungle and make the journey to the United States by foot)—and what happened when they landed in the same city, carrying wildly different scripts for how to survive.

My initial framework reflected this class and migratory tension. I focused on what I initially began to think of as *planned* versus *unplanned* migrants, drawn from the ways participants them-

selves talked about who had a “structured” migration (typically more elite migrants) and who arrived with nothing but improvisation (typically working-class migrants). I wanted to know: in exile, do these groups come together—or do they replicate the divides of home? And more importantly, how does class travel when the landscape shifts?

As I began interviewing, a deeper paradox began to surface. Migrants indeed spoke often of solidarity—of being there for one another, of sharing a homeland, of feeling some vague collective bond. Yet when they talked about their own lives, their friendships, and their choices, a different logic appeared entirely. This time, they were cautious, they filtered, and they had strong opinions about other Venezuelans—especially those who behaved differently from them. Most surprisingly, they didn’t see this distance as a problem to be solved. If anything, it was simply “the way things worked.” In practice, people could show up for Venezuela, support fundraisers, and help others find housing, but still be deeply selective about who they let into their actual lives. Naturally, the project shifted. What began as a study of who socialized with whom became a study of *how solidarity and distance coexist—and why*. I came to observe the moral calculation through which migrants offer help, fulfill obligations, and perform alignment, all while carefully maintaining reputational boundaries and emotional space. Thus, a qualitative, interview-based method became not just appropriate but necessary. The social dynamics I was trying to understand, including how migrants offer help, draw boundaries, and man-

age closeness, are so often unspoken and uniquely shaped by daily life that they resist quantification. The kind of data I needed would best emerge through conversation: stories, hesitations, and the slips between what people said and how they said it. Interviews allowed for contradiction to appear as structure, not simply confusion—that is, for participants to reflect aloud on the lines they draw, the judgments they make, and the logics that guide when and how they choose to give. What this method made visible was not simply social connection or disconnection, but the very reasoning behind it: the reputational calculus, emotional exhaustion, and classed instincts that shape solidarity from behind the scenes.

Interviews

The primary method of data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with 9 Venezuelan migrants currently living in New York. Before the interviews, participants completed a short survey designed to introduce some of the most central themes of the study. The first part gathered demographic information—when they migrated, how they perceived their class status in Venezuela, and how they evaluated their economic stability in New York. These questions essentially served as context, allowing me to understand participants’ backgrounds before speaking with them. The second part of the survey turned more directly to the relational dynamics at the center of the project. It asked participants about their socialization process—whether they had connected across class lines, whether they interacted with Venezuelans of different political alle-

giances, and whether they felt their social circles had expanded or contracted since migration. These responses provided preliminary data, but more importantly, they set the stage for conversations about the divisions that persist within the Venezuelan migrant community, and ultimately, divisions that are often difficult to articulate. Having these reflections already in mind made it easier for participants to engage in honest discussions about exclusivity, distrust, and the tensions that shape migrant interactions.

Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted in Spanish, although Spanglish naturally surfaced in some conversations, particularly among participants who had migrated young, had lived in the United States for extended periods, or had undergone planned migration. The choice to conduct interviews in Spanish was intentional, not just for comfort but for equity—ensuring that all participants, regardless of class background or migration status, could express themselves fully and precisely. Ultimately, language itself became part of the data, as it was often wealthier migrants who were fluent in English or slipped into Spanglish in our conversations. These linguistic shifts mirrored the broader differences this project traces—differences in how people presented themselves and how they navigated belonging.

The interviews themselves were structured to trace the evolution of participants' social networks over time. The first half focused on pre-migration friendships—essentially, what kinds of circles they moved in back home, how class shaped their relationships, and which social logics they carried with them into

exile. Certainly, this section was not just about documenting the past but more so about understanding the social habits, class logics, and expectations migrants drew from as they began rebuilding social life abroad. Then, the second half turned to post-migration relationships: who they first connected with in New York, how their networks shifted over time, and whether they sought other Venezuelans or preferred to integrate into broader American or Latino spaces. In this way, the interviews traced not just a social trajectory but also a set of decisions (some deliberate and some circumstantial) about proximity, trust, and the very calibrations of care.

A full overview of participants—including their migration pathways, class positions, patterns of participation, and forms of belonging—can be found in Appendix A.

Sampling Strategy

Since this project is fundamentally about how solidarity and distance coexist within a fragmented diaspora, my sampling strategy was designed to trace that very fragmentation. Therefore, I did not necessarily seek a representative sample of Venezuelan migrants in New York, nor did I aim to confirm a specific typology. Instead, I intentionally sampled for contrast—across class, migration history, and levels of social engagement—with the goal of capturing the internal divisions that migrants themselves describe, and of understanding how these divisions shape the ways they relate to one another. From the beginning, I was struck by how visibly stratified the diaspora already felt. Essentially, some migrants arrived with legal status, professional credentials,

and pre-existing networks, while others came through more precarious channels, with few resources and fewer guarantees. Or, some had been in New York for nearly a decade and were already narrating their migration in retrospect, while others had arrived in the past year and were still improvising daily. Similarly, not all migrants moved through the diaspora in the same way. Indeed, some were deeply embedded in Venezuelan spaces—organizing events, circulating resources, or running businesses that catered to the community—while others deliberately opted out, distancing themselves from those very spaces.

Ultimately, I was not just interested in who people connected with, but in how they interpreted the broader social field of their world: what it meant, for example, to say, “I don’t go to those events,” or “I only help in X cases.” I recruited participants who could speak to these distinctions from multiple angles: those who felt embedded in the Venezuelan community, those who avoided it entirely, and those who hovered somewhere in between. It became clear very early on that the Venezuelan diaspora is more sorted than it is simply dispersed. Most importantly, this sorting shapes not only social relationships but also how migrants imagine the boundaries of obligation and affiliation. Therefore, the sampling strategy was essential to the broader goals of the project; if I wanted to understand how solidarity is offered selectively, or how emotional distance becomes a mode of survival rather than a personal failure, I needed to speak with people who lived that tension differently. Thus, by building a sample that spanned across class,

migration wave, and social orientation, I was able to listen for contrast, not just in what participants said, but also in how they narrated their place within a fractured collective. Sampling for diversity, in this context, wasn’t just a matter of fairness; it also became the very method for revealing the structure of distance.

Recruitment Strategy

Recruitment for this study was initially directed at the broader Venezuelan migrant community in New York, under the assumption that participants would naturally fall into different social and migration-based categories. My first approach relied on public spaces and online platforms—flyers posted in university spaces, libraries, and other communal areas, alongside outreach in digital spaces where Venezuelan migrants gathered.

Facebook, in particular, stood out as an unexpectedly dense network of Venezuelan migrant interactions. Dozens of community-based Facebook groups exist for Venezuelans in New York, ranging from the straightforward (“Latinos en NYC”) to the more specific (“Venezolanos en New York y Jersey City”). Some of these groups are open, while others require moderator approval. I joined 16 of these groups and began posting my flyers consistently. The smallest had 1.4k members, while the largest had 98.4k, and they were extremely active—all of them with over ten posts per day. While some groups centered on cultural events and community-building, most functioned as practical survival networks, where Venezuelans posted job listings, offered babysitting services, advertised small businesses, and, in some cases, promoted

adult content.³ Despite their high engagement, these groups were ultimately not effective recruitment spaces. My flyers were quickly drowned out by the sheer volume of posts, and while many participants later in their interviews acknowledged being members of these groups, very few actively engaged beyond using them as a resource when needed. In the end, only one participant was recruited through Facebook—an indication that while these platforms reflect Venezuelan social life in exile, they do not necessarily function as spaces where migrants forge deep personal connections.

Shifting strategies. By the beginning of the Spring 2025 semester, I was forced to pivot my recruitment strategy in response to a dramatic shift in the political landscape. On February 2nd, after weeks of speculation, the Trump administration officially announced the termination of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Venezuelans.⁴ The policy was immediate—Venezuelans who had TPS from 2023 would lose protection in April, while those who had TPS from 2021 would face termination in September. Practically overnight, more than 330,000 Venezuelans found themselves at risk of becoming undocumented, very evidently fueling widespread fear and uncertainty in the community.

It was immediately clear that my initial recruitment approach—posting faceless flyers in online spaces—would no longer work. Recruitment for a study targeting migrants could not take place in a community under active threat of deportation. Even before the announcement, trust in research—especially from an unknown figure—was limited. Now, with

their legal status suddenly in jeopardy, migrants were understandably hesitant to engage with anything that felt remotely expositional. Recognizing this shift, I restructured my recruitment approach to establish trust before asking for participation. Rather than continuing broad, impersonal outreach, I embedded myself within existing community networks, speaking directly with key community figures and organizations that migrants already trusted. I was careful, however, not to add to the burden of organizations already overwhelmed with crisis response efforts. Many of these groups had entirely shifted their focus in the wake of the TPS announcement—holding legal clinics, Know-Your-Rights workshops, and emergency meetings—and asking them to actively recruit for my study would have been inappropriate and exploitative.

Instead, I sought out alternative community spaces where Venezuelan migrants were already engaged. One of the most successful recruitment channels was an Instagram account with over 92,000 followers, which operates as a de facto Yellow Pages for Venezuelans in New York. The account regularly posts about community gatherings, restaurant openings, and key updates for Venezuelan migrants. Unlike Facebook, where posts are easily buried, this account was more curated, with posts scheduled for current events each day of the week. The page administrators agreed to distribute my flyer once a week through Instagram stories, a method that significantly increased visibility. The majority of my participants were recruited through this avenue.

With TPS set to end in April, I moved quickly to begin interviews, pri-

oritizing more “unplanned” or working-class migrants, who were the most vulnerable under the new policy. During this phase, I conducted six interviews—five working-class migrants and one migrant with a higher socioeconomic status who migrated through more stable routes. Once I had completed this first wave, I shifted to more targeted recruitment to balance my sample.

Targeted recruitment. Early interviews made it clear that migrants with higher socioeconomic status or those typically with more “planned” migrations were far less likely to be part of the same community support networks that made earlier recruitment possible. More specifically, this group of migrants rarely engaged with mutual aid groups, nonprofits, or community shelters—the very spaces where many of my initial participants had been found. That is not to say that these migrants were necessarily harder to find, just that they were less visible in the kinds of community infrastructure that more precarious migrants relied on. This required yet another pivot. Rather than continuing to recruit through resource-driven networks, I turned instead to Venezuelan-owned businesses, cafes, and restaurants in areas where more economically stable migrants were likely to spend time. Unlike my previous recruitment attempts, which were centered on migrant support spaces, this approach was more discreet, fitting the more selective and often reputation-conscious spaces that many middle and upper-class migrants seemed to move through.

Even this distinction between those who are visibly engaged and those who are not wasn’t always about class alone.

Some migrants, regardless of background, chose to avoid Venezuelan networks altogether, either consciously or not. For instance, they did not attend community events, follow diaspora news, or interact much with fellow migrants—not necessarily out of apathy, but often for personal, political, or social reasons. Within this group, some wanted to distance themselves from the class and political tensions that pervade Venezuelan spaces, while others sought to more fully integrate into American life, deliberately minimizing their Venezuelan identity in the process. Therefore, capturing these more socially withdrawn perspectives required a different strategy, of course. This meant that to reach participants who had intentionally opted out of Venezuelan networks, I relied on participant-driven referrals. That is, interviewees would connect me with friends or acquaintances who, while disconnected from visible migrant infrastructure, still had rich insight into the very dynamics of distance that sit at the core of this project. These participants were especially important, not because they represented an outlier, but because they helped illuminate what fragmentation feels like from the margins and how distance is not always circumstantial but sometimes simply chosen.

Data Transcription and Analysis

All interviews were transcribed using Trint, a transcription software selected for its high accuracy in both Spanish and Spanglish, reflecting the bilingual nature of many participants’ speech. Conversations often moved seamlessly between languages, especially among migrants who had been in the

United States longer or who occupied more professional spheres. Aside from it being a technical concern, accurately preserving these shifts was also more of a substantive one, as language itself often revealed how participants positioned themselves in relation to both the United States and other Venezuelans socially, emotionally, and culturally.

Transcription, however, was only the first layer. Each interview was relistened to and reviewed on the same day it was conducted, which allowed me to document tone, pacing, moments of hesitation, and other subtle cues that don't always survive the transcribed page. While relistening, I began building mental maps of each participant's migration story and also their social orientation: how they moved through Venezuelan spaces, what boundaries they drew, and how they made sense of those choices. Essentially, these early profiles became the foundation for a comparative reading of the interviews. Rather than sort participants into fixed categories, I paid close attention to how they narrated their social world and positioned themselves within it. To help guide this process, I tracked each participant across three primary interpretive axes:

- *Orientation to Venezuelan spaces*: whether participants embedded themselves in Venezuelan community life, engaged selectively, or actively distanced themselves. This included, for example, whether they attended events in the community, relied on Venezuelan networks for work or support, or avoided those spaces altogether for reputational, emotional, or practical reasons.
- *Style of social reasoning*: how partic-

ipants explained the decisions they made about helping others, keeping distance, or choosing whom to trust. Here, I focused on whether they justified those choices through ideas about duty, class compatibility, political disappointment, emotional exhaustion, or the need to protect themselves from overexposure or conflict.

- *Expression of belonging*: how participants spoke about Venezuela itself and about their connection to other Venezuelans. For some, belonging appeared very concretely as a sense of obligation to stay informed, to help, or to “show up” for the homeland. For others, it was more selective and took place through a symbolic attachment, occasional participation, nostalgia, or a continued identification with Venezuela despite keeping a distance from Venezuelan social life in practice.

Taken together, these dimensions allowed me to trace how migrants constructed their belonging through distance: how they offered help without intimacy, filtered connection through classed instincts, and maintained reputational boundaries even while participating in collective causes.⁵

Coding and Analytical Framework

Data analysis followed a multi-stage coding process that blended both inductive and abductive reasoning. Rather than beginning with a fixed schema, I allowed themes to emerge from the interviews themselves—essentially, through the stories participants told, the logics they reached for, and the subtle judgments embedded in how they described others. In this way, rather than just or-

ganizing data, coding became a way of listening more closely for the distinctions migrants drew and the moral language they used to make those choices feel not only reasonable but necessary.

As patterns began to surface, the coding structure consolidated around five key domains—each one capturing a different facet of how migrants negotiated care, distance, and affiliation:

- *Obligation Without Closeness*: This focused on the disjuncture between help and intimacy. Here, I coded for moments when migrants offered support (financial, informational, emotional) but kept others firmly at arm’s length. Sub-codes tracked *public performances of solidarity* (such as showing up to rallies or fundraisers), *private acts of giving*, and *narratives of duty versus desire*, where participants made clear that what compelled them to help was not affinity, but a script of morality, memory, or role.
- *Social Curation*: This dimension captured how participants selected, filtered, and, in some cases, actively avoided connection. For instance, some described explicit *criteria for closeness*—whether around class, cultural fluency, or trust—while others referenced broader social categories, like *types of migrants*, that guided who felt like “their kind of person.” I also coded for how *carried hierarchies* from Venezuela shaped these readings, how *friendship repertoires* evolved over time, and where relationships were forged—or not.
- *Weariness Toward Homeland*: Here, I traced a different kind of distance: not from its people, but from Venezuela itself. Many participants expressed emotional fatigue, not just with politics but with the emotional burden of caring too much, or for too long. Some described *strategic neutrality*, others *retreat and exhaustion*, and many moved between both. These codes helped illuminate how detachment can be an act of self-preservation, even among those who still feel tethered to a national cause.
- *Boundaries of Trust*: This code focused on the mechanics of social distance—how migrants protect themselves in a space where reputation feels fragile. I coded for *judgments against certain types of migrants*, for *lateral surveillance/gossip*, and for how people managed *reputational risk* in both community and private life. Some avoided Venezuelan spaces altogether, while others drew smaller, safer circles around themselves. What surfaced here was surprisingly, at first, not apathy, but discretion (or, distance as a way to manage exposure).
- *Reflections on the Paradox*: This dimension captured participants’ own awareness of the contradictions they were navigating. Some *named the paradox* outright—for instance, by expressing frustration that Venezuelans help but don’t befriend one another. Others offered more implicit *negotiations of belonging*, or used the interview space to position themselves in relation to the very fragmentation they described. These codes held a different weight: they made visible not just behavior, but interpretation, or how people made peace

with the distance they maintained.

It was through these codes that I was able to trace not only what migrants did but how they justified it—essentially, how, when solidarity appeared, it was often structured by caution, and how care could be enacted without collapsing the very boundaries it moved across. Rather than assume unity or division, the coding process made room for something more complex: a fragmented diaspora, held together by calibration and not quite by intimacy.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Given the heightened vulnerability of Venezuelan migrants in New York, participant safety and comfort were the most critical ethical considerations in this study. Interviews were initially planned to be conducted in person, but after the TPS termination announcement, I pivoted to virtual interviews via Zoom. The threat of deportation had created an atmosphere of fear, and expecting participants to meet in public, especially in visibly Venezuelan spaces, would have placed an undue burden on them.

Similarly, my recruitment strategy had to shift in response to the political climate. Many Venezuelan migrants, especially those in more precarious situations, had already begun distancing themselves from community events that felt too exposed. Then, throughout January and February 2025, nearly all Venezuelan community events pivoted towards crisis response (like legal aid workshops). Given this, it was both impractical and ethically wrong for me to

attempt recruitment in these spaces. I could not, in good conscience, approach migrants at a legal clinic where they were preparing for potential ICE raids and ask them to participate in my study. Instead, I shifted recruitment to public spaces that were not explicitly tied to legal aid, such as Venezuelan restaurants and cafes, where engagement felt less formal, less transactional, and ultimately safer.

Beyond logistical and recruitment-based ethical concerns, bias in participant responses was another key issue. Elite migrants, for example, had a tendency to downplay exclusivity, sometimes describing their networks as “diverse” even when their actual friendships remained within their own socioeconomic class. At the other extreme, some participants exaggerated solidarity, presenting the Venezuelan community as more unified than their lived experiences suggested. Political divisions—especially around Chavismo (the ideology of the dictatorship) and anti-Chavismo, class resentment, and the role of recent migrants—were also areas of potential bias. Many participants were hesitant to explicitly articulate their discomfort with class-mixing or political differences, despite implying them in other parts of the interview. To address these issues, I relied on two strategies:

- *The pre-interview survey*: By allowing participants to answer sensitive questions privately, the survey preemptively surfaced social divisions that participants might have been hesitant to admit in conversation. It helped set the stage for difficult discussions, giving me insight into unspoken tensions

- before the interview even began.
- *Anonymity and researcher transparency*: At the start of each interview, I explicitly emphasized participant confidentiality and disclosed that I was also Venezuelan. This was particularly important in encouraging participants to speak openly, as many migrants were wary of outsiders conducting research on their experiences, especially in a time of political uncertainty.

While evidently no study is entirely free of bias—especially one that deals with self-perception, exclusion, and social belonging, such as this one—these strategies helped mitigate some of the most pressing concerns. Ultimately, my approach to ethical considerations was as much about ensuring that the data captured the complexity of their experiences as honestly as possible as it was about protecting participants.

Additionally, my own positionality as a Venezuelan shaped these interviews in ways that were often convoluted. On one hand, it opened a kind of immediate legibility. People often spoke to me as if I already knew the world they were describing, as if certain things did not need to be explained. They would say “you know how it is,” or mention a type of migrant, a school, a neighborhood, or a way of being in Venezuela and move on. What struck me, over time, was how much was packed into those passing remarks. They revealed just how natural these distinctions had become within the diaspora: how easily people invoked them and how little effort it sometimes took to summon an entire social map. In many interviews, fragmentation appeared

as something already known, already sedimented, and even ordinary. Ultimately, my approach to ethical considerations was as much about ensuring that the data captured the complexity of their experiences as honestly as possible as it was about protecting participants. At the same time, the sense of sharedness was never simple. It did not move evenly across every interview, and most importantly, it did not mean the same thing with every participant. Sometimes I was simply another Venezuelan in the room—someone expected to understand the broad crisis and the emotional weather of it all. But there were other moments when I could feel myself being placed much more specifically. For instance, one participant in the interview opened up the interview by asking me what school I had attended in Caracas, and from there, spoke to me through presumed overlap, returning to places and forms of adaptation she assumed I would recognize without explanation. That kind of moment clarified something central to the project: shared nationality does not wash away social difference. If anything, it can become the medium through which those differences are read, tested, and confirmed. Certainly, Venezuelanness opened the conversation, but class, schooling, and migration pathways still often shaped the terms on which recognition happened.

That mattered all the more because I could not pretend to meet every participant from the same place. I came to this project as a planned migrant, a dual citizen, and someone whose entry into the United States was routed through stability and higher education, not through the forms of precarity, legal vulnerabili-

ty, and improvisational survival that had marked many of the lives I was listening to. While there were moments of real familiarity, familiarity could not be confused with sameness. I shared a national frame of reference with participants, and in some cases, I shared much more than that, but I did not share every risk, route, or kind of uncertainty. That asymmetry made reflexivity particularly important for me. In practice, this meant that I often had to resist the comfort of understanding too quickly. There were many moments where I knew exactly what a participant meant, precisely because I had grown up close enough to recognize the shorthand immediately. However, the data could not rest on my recognition alone, and I had to slow people down, ask them explicitly, and pull into language what otherwise might have remained implied. In that sense, being Venezuelan did not simply make the interviews easier. Instead, it sharpened my view of how much this social world depends on what often remains unspoken, on who is assumed to understand, and also on how uneven that assumption really is.

FINDINGS

What allows a diaspora to offer such steady and visible support, even as its members hold one another at arm's length? Among Venezuelans in New York, solidarity is definitely not in short supply: migrants consistently share information, circulate resources, send remittances, and rally around national causes. On the surface, these gestures might suggest a sense of cohesion, a community bound by shared origin and moral duty. But beneath that current of care lies an-

other, much more nebulous one: one shaped by restraint, and not quite so by intimacy. That is, closeness is rationed, friendships are curated with care, and emotional vulnerability is more often held back out of caution than out of indifference. The result, rather than an absence of community, is a different configuration of it: one held together by selective acts of alignment and moral participation, rather than by emotional closeness.

When I first asked how Venezuelan migrants sustain collective support for one another and for their homeland while maintaining personal distance, I understood it as a contradiction—something that needed to be reconciled or explained away. Solidarity and distance, it seemed, were pulling in opposite directions. Yet, as the interviews unfolded, a more layered structure began to emerge. What initially looked like a paradox began to feel more like a design: perhaps migrants were not sustaining support *despite* personal distance, but rather *through* it. Perhaps it was this selective way of moving through the diaspora—or, this habit of drawing lines between public obligation and private life—that made support sustainable in the first place.

That shift in understanding reshaped the frame through which I began to read these social worlds. The boundaries migrants draw—between giving and befriending, or presence and exposure—are not evidence of fractured belonging, but of its calibration. It became clear as I collected more data and talked to a wider range of Venezuelans that these lines protect emotional bandwidth, preserve reputational stability, and create a structure in which care can be offered without risking

too much. Thus, more than a contradiction to be resolved, what I call *belonging through distance* is a distinct form of diasporic alignment in which solidarity is made possible by the very boundaries migrants draw—curiously, boundaries that allow migrants to fulfill moral obligations, navigate social difference and stigma selectively, and remain connected to a national community while limiting the personal risks that intimacy can carry. What follows in this section is not so much a story of solidarity that overcomes fragmentation as it is one in which fragmentation itself makes solidarity possible.

Fragmented Solidarities: How Class and National Orientation Shape Personal Ties and Community Engagement

More than in grand gestures, the sharp edges of the pattern traced above—where migrants remain tied to Venezuelan life while drawing careful distinctions around compatibility and obligation—reveal themselves in the unapparent, almost invisible ways that solidarity is drawn to a limit. Take, for example, Verónica⁶—a middle-class migrant whose journey to New York was less an act of desperation and more a serendipitous twist of fate. She arrived on vacation with her cousin (a luxury many of the other participants could not afford), stayed, married, and built a life marked by stability rather than survival. She recognizes the shared condition of exile, but she draws her circles carefully, sketching her social map in pencil, not ink. And when asked about her relationships with other Venezuelans, her answer was indeed quite pointed:

“I’m not going to make friends with the ones from the Darién [those who make the journey by foot, crossing the Darién jungle], but if any of them need help, I’ll guide them or say: look, my advice is that you do this—that, I will do.”

Here, her words cut cleanly between obligation and intimacy. “*Los del Darién*”⁷ does not simply refer to geography—it signals a social shorthand, like a very subtle nod to class, migration route, and perceived respectability. For Verónica, it is evident that solidarity functions like a well-drafted contract of some sort: guidance is given where morally due, but friendship remains firmly off the table. Indeed, she acknowledges a duty—“damn, because I’m also an immigrant,” she said when asked why she feels such solidarity towards people she refused to befriend—yet she guards her inner circle with super quiet vigilance. And Verónica is no outlier: her posture captures a wider pattern among middle and upper-class migrants, who draw very careful lines around their personal worlds, keeping them closed to all but a trusted (and, often, *similar*) few. For instance, Ignacio’s trajectory points in a similar direction. He arrived in the United States through one of the most orderly and privileged routes in the sample: first for college, then into a polished professional life as a financial analyst at a major investment bank. He still shows up for Venezuelan political causes and national moments, but he does so from within social worlds that remain filtered and that rarely stretch far beyond familiar class lines. In his case too, collective commitment does not dissolve selectivity. It unfolds through spaces that

still feel socially recognizable, such as environments where belonging can be performed without surrendering classed boundaries that organize everyday life.

Yet this ethos of selectivity extends beyond the private domain, as it spills into public spaces too: shelters, aid groups, cultural events—all of which are spaces that might seem like the great equalizers of diaspora life at first glance. But for migrants like Verónica, these spaces are often navigated like minefields that offer reputational risks as much as communal rewards. Veronica's own account of volunteering in a shelter makes clear that her participation in these spaces is shaped by the same classed selectivity that structures her friendships. She recalled volunteering in a shelter "full of Venezuelans," but emphasized that she had never known people "like that"—not even in Venezuela—and was blunt that outside the role of volunteer, she would have never socialized with them simply "because we're both Venezuelan." Thus, rather than function as a site where national commonality dissolved social differences, it made those differences newly visible. Even as she offered help, she remained acutely aware of the kind of social world she was stepping into, treating contact as situational and bounded, and not as the basis for broader identification and belonging. Essentially, her class position shapes not only whom she lets into her personal world, but also which community spaces feel jarring, and which can only be entered through the bounded role of helper rather than participant. While she may show up to volunteer, that does not mean she experiences those spaces as places of belonging. In her case, class structures the terms

of engagement itself: it determines where she can enter comfortably and where she proceeds with caution. For middle-class migrants, personal networks and community spaces are sites of negotiation, curated to protect status and manage association. In this way, friendships are filtered through an unspoken calculus of compatibility, while community participation remains extremely cautious, at times even reluctant. But if class provides the script for migrants like Verónica, necessity writes a very different one for others.

Magaly, a working-class young woman who left Venezuela without a clear plan, followed a far more improvised migration trajectory. She had followed the advice of a friend who had migrated, journeying from Venezuela through Central America and to Chicago, eventually landing in New York. Once she was settled in the city, her networks formed through the sheer urgency of shared need, rather than the selective weaving we saw more of in Veronica and Ignacio:

"When you arrive, you become close with those who are in the same situation as you. You look for someone to survive with."

There is no polite filtering here. In Magaly's world, friendships are forged in the heat of daily survival, more like emergency, makeshift scaffolding than carefully laid bricks. These ties run very deep, knotted by mutual reliance, but they also carry the heavy weight of a shared, collective precarity. Beyond mere chosen affinity, trust grows from the simple, unavoidable need for one another. Yet, when we turn to community spaces—the public layer of connection—Magaly's story begins to shift. Indeed, her exclu-

sion is not of her own design but a consequence of structural strain, and the demands of relentless labor keep her from the very spaces that might offer support:

"I work at night, I work during the day... sometimes I'd like to go to those [Venezuelan community] events, but you have to work."

Her absence is not really strategic; it is survival. Carmen had a similar experience. A working-class mother of two whose migration was also unplanned, she arrived with little preparation and initially relied on overcrowded housing, word-of-mouth networks, and the practical help of other migrants rather than formal aid organizations. Yet, even those support structures she had did not open into easy community belonging. Between long work hours, the financial responsibility of supporting relatives back home and the emotional strain of being separated from her husband and children, her social life narrowed into a punishing routine of work and obligation. In her case too, distance from Venezuelan community spaces was not primarily a matter of reluctance. Simply, it was what happened when survival left very little room for anything beyond the next shift or the next bill. Ironically, those who could benefit most from these communal spaces are often the least able to access them. Thus, the stratification of solidarity here reveals its second edge: while upper and middle-class migrants sidestep these arenas to safeguard status, working-class migrants are pushed out by labor, exhaustion, or obligation. It seems like both drift away, but by quite different currents: one by caution and selectivity, and the other by exhaustion and constraint.

At this point, the story risks falling into tidy binaries—personal networks for the working class, community spaces for the middle class—but such a simplification would miss the real texture of migrant life. Gabriela complicates this emerging pattern. Gabriela, a lawyer-turned-entrepreneur, embodies a kind of social double-exposure. Running an *arepa* (corn-meal “sandwiches,” and also the bread and wine of Venezuela) business in New York⁸ she straddles the intimate and the communal with a fluidity not yet seen in the cases above. uncommon. That is, her personal relationships are very expansive, her interactions animated by a depth of feeling that neither fear nor fatigue has managed to dull:

"Sometimes, when I go out to make deliveries [for my arepa business] and see that it's a Venezuelan, I end up talking with them for two hours. It's like finding a long-lost family member."

The metaphor of the “lost family member” (*familiar perdido*) is telling. Gabriela spoke of her connections as not being just transactional encounters, but more so as spontaneous moments of emotional recovery. Surprisingly perhaps, she welcomes these ties, rather than holding them at bay. But her reach extends even beyond personal warmth. In community spaces, she does not tread lightly—she steps in fully, even playfully casting herself as the community’s unofficial hotline:

"People call me for everything. They ask me about everything, everything, everything. Sometimes I say, well, I'm like 311 [the municipal services hotline] in New York."

Far from approaching community

engagement with the classed caution it carried for Veronica or the material constraints that limited it for Magaly, she embraces it as a calling. Her lower-middle-class position grants her proximity to working-class struggles, while her entrepreneurial success essentially gives her the bandwidth to engage. Just as crucial is her emotional compass: where others see risk or drain, she finds purpose and connection. Gabriela does not overturn the logic of stratified solidarity—instead, she brings it into focus. Indeed, her ability to bridge personal and communal layers is not incidental; it arises from a rare alignment of class, disposition, and deliberate choice. Curiously, she offers a glimpse of what a less fragmented diaspora might look like, but also underscores how uncommon such convergence truly is.

If these portraits reveal anything, it's that rather than being absent, solidarity among Venezuelan migrants is deeply contingent—extended not through closeness, but through distance. Verónica, who migrated with legal stability and middle-class resources, does not wrestle with questions of survival. Instead of scarcity, her selectivity is about protecting status—an inheritance she carries from Venezuela and continues to curate in exile. She contributes to collective efforts, gives guidance to newer arrivals, and even volunteers from time to time. But her generosity is always calculated, bound by the desire to remain unexposed. For her, solidarity can require helping someone, but it does not require making room for them in her personal world.

On the other hand, Magaly's trajectory could not be more different. A working-class migrant who arrived through

unplanned, irregular channels, she has had to navigate every aspect of life—employment, housing, legality—from the ground up. The absence of infrastructure in her migration experience has created a world defined not by discretion, but by urgency. Her relationships form quickly, sometimes intensely, but often within the confines of survival (especially in that first year, which she, like other working-class migrants, confided was the hardest). Yet, more than just being physical, the exhaustion she describes is deeply structural, the product of having no script to follow and no actual safety net to fall back on. In this context, community is not something she avoids—it is something she often has difficulty accessing. That is, while she expressed forming an intimate circle of friends that were like “family,” in parallel she also described being held in place, overworked and overstretched, with no time or energy left for anything beyond endurance.

And Gabriela, in contrast, appears to move freely across these social terrains. A former lawyer turned entrepreneur, she occupies a low-middle-class position that sits between stability and precarity. But her exceptionality is not simply a matter of class location. As she herself reflects, her outgoing personality draws her into social connection, and her business—built around Venezuelan clients—requires it. Solidarity, for her, is truly a form of livelihood. As she described her long conversations with clients, she builds community not despite her work, but through it. In doing so, she offers a glimpse of what diasporic connection might look like if emotional inclination, economic incentive, and social position aligned.

But the very rarity of this convergence is what renders her story so revealing: she is the exception that proves the rule.

But what these stories also make clear is that the selectivity at stake here exceeds friendship itself. The same migrants who sort carefully in their private relationships are also sorting through the diaspora as a social world: deciding which Venezuelan spaces feel usable and which forms of participation feel safe or seem to drain or compromise them. For some, this might mean avoiding aid groups and public events that feel too fraught, while for others it means remaining present in those spaces but treating them as sights of necessity and not ease. In that sense, the boundary being drawn is larger than the line between friend and stranger. It is a way of managing engagement itself—of staying tied to a collectivity while continually judging how much presence and attachment any given form of involvement can be.

What emerges from these stories is not quite a tightly knit diaspora, but neither is it disconnected. This is something more complicated: a collective that maintains distance without disengagement, that offers care without collapsing boundaries. This is not the solidarity imagined in much of the literature—rooted in closeness, mutual identification, or seamless belonging. Instead, it is a form of support made possible through fragmentation, sustained by migrants who manage obligation with care and caution. Most importantly, that this diaspora continues to act collectively, even as its members remain socially apart, is a fact that demands explanation. The next section turns to that question: what makes dis-

tance the very condition for connection?

Forces of Distance: Exhaustion, Survival, and Reputational Risk

The distance traced in the previous section didn't start in exile—it crossed with them. Venezuelan migrants did not arrive with the expectation of a tight-knit community waiting on the other side. Instead, most had already learned, long before they left, how to draw subtle lines between themselves and others—lines shaped by class, by politics, and by the kind of structures that long predate migration. What New York adds is the conditions that make the instinct to be cautious even harder to resist. Beyond explaining why migrants grow distant, exhaustion, survival, and reputational risk explain why it becomes harder to imagine anything else. Therefore, this section turns to those pressures as the very terrain migrants move through, where holding back feels absolutely necessary more than it is just a simple strategy.

Exhaustion: of daily survival and of the homeland. For many working-class migrants, exhaustion is not an occasional visitor but a constant, and grinding companion. Their days unfold in relentless cycles of labor, where community life feels simply impossible. Magaly, who balances multiple jobs just to stay afloat, captured this bleak reality with sharp, almost breathless urgency:

“Everyone’s in their own world, off in their own world, working in yet another world. There isn’t much time for much of anything here.”

Her words seem to spiral, mirroring the disorienting pace of her very existence. As she quite poetically voices,

everyone is trapped in their own orbit, spinning endlessly around the demands of survival. It is not that community is unwanted, but that it is unattainable—a luxury denied by the tyranny of exhaustion. Beyond her fatigue, what stands out here is how *naturalized* it has become. There is no dramatization, and also no protest in her tone. Exhaustion has simply settled into the background of daily life, so normalized it feels inevitable. And in this state, even personal relationships are reduced to very utilitarian exchanges, while anything resembling community engagement is a distant mirage. Crucially, this material exhaustion is not simply the consequence of bare-minimum survival, but of something even more relentless: the desire to move beyond mere sufficiency. Gabriela, the arepa business owner, captured this compulsion very well, reflecting on the tireless work ethic that propels many migrants, even when they are already stretched thin:

“Most people, the Venezuelan community, we’re not the type to just settle, you know? It’s not like, oh, I’ve got enough to eat and that’s it—no way! Venezuelans always want to get ahead, always want to succeed, always want to keep pushing further.”

What she illuminates here is the paradox of migrant ambition: the very drive to improve one’s condition—to “go further”—can also become another source of exhaustion in itself. In Gabriela’s telling, work is not only exhausting because necessity demands it, but also because it is sustained by a restless pressure to keep advancing and build something more secure than bare sufficiency. Versions of

this logic surfaced multiple times across interviews, especially among migrants who, aside from surviving themselves, were also supporting relatives back home. Under those conditions, already existing exhaustion combines with the effort to get ahead. Thus, for some, when the horizon is always getting pushed forward, the price to pay is the slow erosion of space for anything beyond work itself—confined to what Gabriela eloquently deemed in our conversation the *home-work-home* way of life.

But exhaustion does not merely sap physical energy. It seeps deeper, hollowing out emotional reserves as well, particularly when it comes to the homeland itself. For many migrants, Venezuela no longer feels like a beacon of belonging but more so like an open wound that refuses to close. Patricia, reflecting on the toll of political turmoil, revealed just how deeply this exhaustion had penetrated her daily life:

“I have some sort of trauma when it comes to politics because it affected me directly... Until one day I just said: I’m done watching Globovisión [Venezuelan news channel], I’m done with TV, with the news, with everything. I cut it all off. It was making me sick.”

More than disengagement, this is a deliberate severing, a choice made in the name of self-preservation. Her words speak to a profound rupture: the moment when emotional fatigue mutates into physical strain. But what makes this exhaustion especially devastating is that it is born not of apathy, but of deep, once-hopeful engagement. Precisely because she had cared so much, had invest-

ed so heavily in the possibility of change (even sharing that she had to make the wrenching decision to migrate after a near-deadly encounter at a protest back home), she found herself forced to withdraw for the sake of survival when she went abroad. Yet, this withdrawal was not confined to the privacy of her mind. Exhaustion of this magnitude inevitably seeps outward, shaping not only thoughts but also actions. During the presidential elections that unfolded in July of 2024 in Venezuela, Patricia confessed that she did not attend a single protest or community event in New York, despite the visible mobilizations of the Venezuelan diaspora around her (and despite New York being one of the central hubs of the Opposition's efforts in mobilizing said diaspora). When asked about her absence, her answer was a blunt admission that any participation felt futile, another emotional burden she could no longer carry:

"No... you know, I hadn't really thought about it, but maybe it's because I have PTSD. And of course, nothing was going to come out of it...as always."

Rather than a casual neglect, her avoidance of diaspora activism was an extension of her self-protection. Having "fought so hard and so up close," as she put it elsewhere, she saw no difference that another protest could make—not for Venezuela, and certainly not for herself. Protests and rallies, once spaces of hope and communal resistance, had collapsed into yet another arena where exhaustion overpowered engagement. Her decision to disconnect—to "see no more news, no more television, no more anything," and to physically withdraw from the commu-

nal spaces of protest—illustrates how exhaustion becomes not only a state of being but a full survival strategy. She does not stop caring about Venezuela, but she can no longer sustain the emotional burden of following, feeling, and responding to its crises as they unfold. The homeland, in her account, has shifted from a source of identity to a source of affliction.

Across interviews, this surrender surfaced time and again in participants of all backgrounds. Some migrants described deliberately tuning out the endless tide of Venezuelan news; others confessed to a creeping numbness. It was as though, rather than being a place of yearning, the homeland had become a relentless source of despair, especially when loved ones still live back home. For Venezuelan migrants, it seems like exhaustion operates on two intertwined planes: the physical grind of survival in New York and the emotional depletion of carrying a nation that seems trapped in a never-ending cycle of crisis. Together, they do more than merely tire migrants out: they discipline their attachments, teaching them to conserve energy and making community engagement feel like a cost they can no longer afford.

Survival priorities: when necessity narrows horizons. Layered on top of exhaustion is something even less forgiving: the sheer force of survival priorities. For migrants living precariously in the labor market, survival often leaves no space for community engagement at all. The calculation is brutally simple: any time spent elsewhere is time taken away from keeping afloat. Manuel, who crossed the Darién by himself and now lives in New York to support the fam-

ily he left behind, captured this reality plainly in describing his daily routine:

“Oh, the people I spend the most time with? The people from work. I work eight hours a day, five days a week, so I’m with them pretty much all the time. And then I train [with his professional soccer team]. When there are events at the foundation [the Venezuelan community organization he is most familiar with], I can sometimes go, but it’s just for a little while and that’s it. Mostly, I’m with the soccer team and all that, or I’m just at home, taking it easy.”

His social life is already written by the hours of his workday. Even when opportunities to join community events appear, they slip past like afterthoughts—*“un ratico y ya”*, or, “for a bit.” What you see here is survival itself reorganizing his world, narrowing his relationships down to the bare essentials. His time is already spoken for.

Certainly, this isn’t just about a busy schedule. It’s about how work seeps into every corner of life until the very idea of community feels distant—not rejected outright, but edged out by much more urgent priorities. Verónica, too, captured this with a sharper, almost matter-of-fact observation about her broader community:

“Yes, exactly. Venezuelans right now...like I was saying, ten, eleven, twelve years ago there weren’t really any Venezuelans here. Now, the ones who arrived eleven years ago are a bit more settled, they’re thinking about things like helping out. But the ones who are arriving now—and they’re the majority—they’re not thinking

about that, no... they’re thinking about how to survive here.”

She puts it plainly: survival has a way of swallowing people whole. For newer arrivals (in this case, particularly those who come through irregular routes or unplanned migrations), community isn’t on the horizon, at least not in the beginning. Indeed, their energy is wholly consumed by figuring out how to survive, and how to make it through the day, while anything else—community, solidarity, belonging—becomes a luxury they can’t afford to imagine right now.

This is what makes survival priorities so effective, but also so tricky. They narrow the way migrants see the world. People like Manuel aren’t stepping back from community because they’ve weighed the pros and cons—they’re simply overwhelmed by everything survival demands of them. That is, there’s ultimately no room left to wonder what else might be possible.

Survival is front and center, shaping how migrants move through their days and what they feel they can afford to care about. When you’re stretched thin by work, chasing stability, and doing everything to avoid slipping further behind, anything that doesn’t directly keep you afloat starts to feel like a risk. And so community life—the search for connection, recognition, even comfort—just gets set aside, pushed to the margins of a life already too full.

Reputational risk: when class shapes caution. If exhaustion and survival tend to pull working-class migrants away from community spaces, middle- and upper-class migrants are more so guided by a subtler, but no less decisive, force: the

pull of reputational risk. Reputation here should not be understood in the theatrical sense, as though migrants were anxiously guarding themselves against gossip or disgrace. The risk is one of being pulled too close to a version of Venezuelan-ness one does not inhabit and does not want mistaken for one's own. Thus, the issue here isn't whether they have time to participate, but whether participation risks collapsing distinctions they would rather preserve. Community spaces, for all their promise, carry the hazard of unwanted proximity: being seen alongside, and therefore symbolically folded into, the very groups from which they are trying to distinguish themselves.

Verónica, with her usual bluntness, drew this line without hesitation. Reflecting on who she does—and, just as importantly, does not—choose to associate with, she laid it out plainly:

“Yes, yes. I mean, there are the Venezuelans, the new ones who arrived, and they all stick together, that’s how it is. I mean, they don’t mix with those of us who’ve been here longer. And me, personally, I don’t mix with the ones who’ve been here a long time either; because honestly, I don’t have the time, I’m not interested. But even if I wanted to, I would mix with that type of Venezuelan who’s been here a while—yeah, no, it’s not going to happen that I mix with the ones who just arrived. It’s not going to happen.”

Her delivery is matter-of-fact, even final: *no va a pasar*, “it’s not going to happen.” Even if time allowed, and if everything else fell into place, her decision would hold. But what’s most telling is

the way she gets there. She reaches first for time—“I don’t have time”—a reason that feels neutral, convenient, almost polite. But before the sentence even settles, she pivots: “*no me interesa*,” I don’t care. This shift matters. Time isn’t really the issue; behind it lies a social logic. The distance she keeps is not random, because “*los nuevos*” do not register to her as just another set of Venezuelans, but as a figure carrying the stigma and classed meanings from which she is trying to distinguish herself. To move too close to them would blur a boundary she still experiences as important (and not only socially, but also symbolically). Therefore, her disinterest is not neutral. It is a way of protecting the lines through which her own migration remains understood as different.

Luis opens up another angle on this logic, widening the frame beyond Verónica’s personal choices to reveal a broader set of hierarchies within the Venezuelan community. For him, the distinction is only superficially about timing. In practice, “earlier” and “later” arrivals function as dense social categories, carrying judgments about how people came, what resources they had or what kind of need they embodied, and what sort of Venezuelan they are taken to be:

“...They [the more middle class migrants, or those who arrived first] think they’re better. Because they came here on a tourist visa... they think they’re better than the people who came these years seeking humanitarian aid. But then they [the middle class migrants] overstayed their visa...also illegal. So it’s like this paradox that, honestly, I don’t understand...”

What he captures here is the persistent work of internal status-making. Chronology becomes moralized: legality—or at least, the appearance of it—becomes a kind of currency. Those who arrived on tourist visas, even if they overstayed or worked illegally, cling to a sense of superiority over those who came openly seeking humanitarian aid. The paradox, as Luis points out, is obvious. Both groups share the same vulnerabilities, yet one performs a kind of moral high ground to separate themselves from the stigma of need. And that performance matters, as it creates a buffer, a way to symbolically distance oneself from precarity—even when, beneath the surface, the conditions are much the same. It builds subtle hierarchies within the community, deciding not just who is “legal” or “illegal,” but who can claim respectability and who is left to carry the weight of judgment. Luis sees this for what it is, and his frustration is clear. But even as he critiques it, he acknowledges how stubbornly these distinctions hold.

What we see in both accounts is deliberate space-making. The Venezuelan case is one of migrants actively managing distance from one another rather than being simply pushed apart by circumstances. And it’s not just closeness they’re avoiding—in this case, what they are protecting is a way of moving through the world that still feels familiar and intact. Some associations ask too much of that arrangement when they collapse distances migrants have learned to keep and make it harder for them to hold on to the boundaries through which they remain recognizable to themselves. In this space, solidarity isn’t rationed by time or ener-

gy, but rather by how much social disturbance a given proximity seems to carry. What makes reputational risk especially tricky is its quietness, unlike exhaustion or survival, which take visible tolls. It shapes where people show up, who they stand beside, and how much they offer through the work of avoiding and positioning. And because it feels so natural and so woven into daily life, it rarely announces itself as a choice. And just as importantly, reputational caution doesn’t work alone. It stacks itself on top of everything else—the exhaustion, the survival grind—and deepens their pull. Even if someone like Verónica had the time or energy to engage more in community life, the boundaries she draws around compatibility and visible association would still keep her at a distance. Reputational risk doesn’t compete with exhaustion and survival: it very much travels alongside them, reinforcing the logic of separation.

Entanglement of forces: exhaustion meets caution. Rather than a simple list of pressures pulling migrants apart, what emerges from these stories is something more tangled: a set of forces that layer onto one another until distance feels less like a conscious choice and more like a natural state. It becomes evident that no single force stands alone, and, instead, they fold together, gradually tightening the space in which community might have grown.

For working-class migrants like Magaly, exhaustion and the daily strain of survival leave little room for anything beyond the immediate. For middle and upper-class migrants like Ana Isabel and Verónica, reputational caution draws faint but firm boundaries, keeping their social world carefully curated. And running

through it all is something that cuts across class lines: the emotional weariness of Venezuela itself. The crises that never seem to end, the weight of constant disappointment—they all pull energy away from connection and towards self-preservation. But these forces reinforce one another. Exhaustion makes caution feel inevitable; the sheer demands of survival make withdrawal seem like common sense; and reputational worries help migrants explain, to themselves and to others, why they choose to hold back. Rather than mere apathy, what takes shape is a more deliberate management of distance.

Migrants, in short, ration their solidarity. They don't turn away from connection entirely, but they measure it, giving it sparingly in moments when they feel they can afford to. Solidarity, when it does appear, is careful and considered. In other words, it is not that they do not care, but that caring too much, too often, feels like something they can't sustain. In a life already stretched thin by exhaustion and self-protection, connection becomes one more thing to conserve.

Still, migrants are not confused about this distance. Most expect it, and some even prefer it. For those with more stability, the separation often feels purposeful—another way to manage reputation, protect comfort, and avoid the kinds of entanglements they've customarily learned to sidestep. For others, especially those stretched thin by work and survival, distance comes less by preference than by pressure. In the case of working-class and “unplanned” migrants, even when the pull toward community exists, it rarely outruns the urgency of everything else. And yet across these differences, what

stands out is how unsurprising this all feels to the people living it. What may read as disconnection from afar is, up close, something far more deliberate—if not always chosen, then understood. The next section turns to that understanding: beyond how migrants move through fragmentation, how they come to explain it, sustain it, and, in some cases, even believe that it's exactly how things should be.

Belonging Through Distance: How Solidarity Persists—And Belonging Emerges—Without Closeness

Across conversations emerged a certain clarity: that care could be real without being intimate. The lines people drew—between those they would help and those they would let in—were rarely arbitrary. Indeed, they reflected older logics carried from home, and newer calculations shaped by migration: who feels safe to associate with, what kinds of proximity feel manageable, and, for migrants who arrived through less stable routes, how much energy one can afford to spend on anything beyond survival. Yet, it became very clear that more than the rules of a broken community, these were the very terms of endurance. This section turns to that logic—what I call *belonging through distance*—to explain how migrants reconcile a fractured social landscape with the persistent instinct to show up for one another, and the more imperceptible ways they remain attached through that very distance. By holding boundaries in place, they make space for a form of solidarity that is cautious, uneven, and yet, still incredibly real.

What *belonging through distance* offers, more than a rejection of commu-

nity, is a structure through which migrants make participation feel livable. At its core is a distinction that surfaced again and again in interviews: the difference between what people feel obligated to do publicly, and what they allow themselves to risk privately. One can offer advice, recommend a lawyer, and contribute to a cause, yet all of this without inviting someone into the deeper folds of friendship or emotional life. But what participants described very matter-of-factly is that this distinction does not make the solidarity superficial. Simply, it is what gives it shape. In a context where reputation can feel fragile, where energy is limited, and where the social terrain is already classed and crowded with judgment, these boundaries become a way to care without unraveling. Ultimately, people did not disappear from one another's lives, because they still helped, answered, contributed, or appeared when it mattered. What they withheld was the fuller social surrender that closeness would have required. And what results from this is a form of solidarity designed to protect both giver and receiver. What does it protect from? From the reputational risks of being too closely linked, from the emotional demands that intimacy can carry, and from the instability that often follows when boundaries blur in a world already shaped by class, migration path, and judgment.

This pattern is rarely described with drama. Instead, it surfaces in the most ordinary reflections, and usually explained as common sense, or the natural state of things. Gabriela captured this through more than an observation—she gave voice to the logic through which

distance and solidarity coexist. When asked why some Venezuelans choose to keep to themselves, she didn't critique or defend them; she simply explained. Some people, she said, pull away not out of bitterness, but because they believe it's what they need—to learn English, to integrate, to move forward.

“Yes. I mean, if I tell you, there are some people—some Venezuelans—who isolate themselves, who pull away, and actually say: ‘I won't go near other Venezuelans because it's something that looks bad, or because I won't learn anything. I have to surround myself with Americans, because I need to learn English and all that, and I don't want anything to do with Venezuelans.’ But when they are ready to come back or if they need help, we [the broader Venezuelan community in NY, and her network of Venezuelan community organizations] welcome them back with open arms.”

Her tone carried no surprise. If anything, it reflected a kind of acceptance: that this, too, is part of how people survive. In the previous section, I explored this kind of retreat as a response to the pressure of survival—a strategy for endurance or assimilation. But Gabriela's reflection points to something more: that even in withdrawal, one does not necessarily forfeit their place. And this is precisely what *belonging through distance* makes visible. Solidarity in this unique world does not demand emotional closeness, nor does it fracture when people step away. Instead, it very clearly leaves space—for exhaustion, for reinvention, or for retreat. That is, people can disappear

and reappear without having to account for the distance in between, because stepping away is already understood as part of the instability of migrant life rather than as a final break from the collective. Gabriela's point is that absence does not necessarily cancel belonging. The diaspora remains intelligible to itself precisely because it has learned to absorb retreat and return as ordinary features of collective life. In that sense, what holds the diaspora together is—rather than an uninterrupted closeness—a shared capacity to make room for distance without reading it as a disappearance in any final sense. This may be one of the very conditions through which the community endures. Gabriela was just as clear, however, that the instinct of solidarity persists throughout it. “People want to support one another, they want to grow as a community,” she later said. What she makes visible is a social world in which distance and support move alongside one another, negotiated as part of everyday migrant life.

Verónica, like Gabriela, does not speak of fragmentation with alarm. Solidarity does exist, she acknowledged, but not always as something seamless or constant. Instead, she told me that it often appears in fragments: a fundraiser here, a donation drive there. To be sure, these efforts are real and vital, but they remain uneven, shaped by the pressures of daily life and divided by class and path.

“Yes, there are foundations. They send toys in December for the kids... but I think we need to do more. Yeah, I don't think it's enough. Maybe five or ten percent of Venezuelans are doing that. [...] The ones who are arriving

now aren't thinking about that, no... they're focused on figuring out what they're going to eat, how they are going to make money.”

Her words reflect an understanding that in a world defined by unequal timelines and unequal burdens, it is unreasonable to expect collective engagement to be evenly distributed. The urgency of newer arrivals, many of whom are still learning how to survive (and who tend to come through less stable paths as previous waves did), renders participation in community life a luxury they simply cannot afford. And yet, Verónica does not interpret this as a breakdown. Quite the opposite: for her, this is the infrastructure of how solidarity now works on this side of the border. Once again, it seems like rather than distance *eroding* belonging, it simply *arranges* it. As Gabriela and Veronica show, support emerges when and where it can, shaped by class, timing, energy, and moral disposition, but never requiring perfect symmetry. Instead, what they help us see is that solidarity need not be universal to be real. Curiously, in this community, care is measured, participation is intermittent, and still, *something* holds. Like Gabriela, Verónica accepts these asymmetries simply as facts of life. But not all participants take the same stance. If Gabriela and Verónica have made peace with fragmentation, Luis voices it as a tension that is inherited, and never quite resolved.

For Luis, the boundaries that shape the diaspora are not circumstantial—they are embedded in the very culture migrants carry with them. That is, the distinctions migrants draw between one another are not new, but they are deeply familiar,

carried from home like cultural luggage: *“Sometimes I think it’s cultural. No matter where we are, we keep making divisions. Oh no, he’s a sifrino [colloquial name for Venezuela’s elite] they say...or oh no, he’s del barrio [or, “from the slums,” a local way of referring to the working class].”*

What was most striking was not precisely the content of what he said, but the context. He wasn’t describing Venezuela, he was actually talking about New York. Evident here is the fact that the language of class, still spoken in familiar shorthand, is now repurposed to map onto a terrain where the original referents no longer exist. There is no *barrio* here. And no Caracas private school accents or local gated enclaves that *sifrinos* are associated with. And yet, the categories endure, just now retraced through migration waves, way of speaking, level of education, employment, and the subtle cues that signal what “type” of migrant someone is. This endurance offers orientation in a landscape that often feels unrecognizable. More than simply being a reflex, to speak as if one were still in Venezuela is a way of restoring a social order that feels legible, even if reconstructed. These old names, applied to new hierarchies, give migrants a sense of place—but also a logic through which to sort, filter, and distance. What Luis helps us see is that these divisions are not simply carried; they are indeed redeployed. And while they offer structure, they do so at a cost: using them reinscribes the very exclusions that exile was (ideally) meant to escape. But alongside these hierarchies that exist within the community, there is a growing external

pressure that parallels it: the category of “migrant” itself has taken on a pejorative edge, especially when it evokes recent arrival, hardship, and low social standing. That is, what once marked class distinction now reappears as judgment about the migration wave, as older hierarchies become entangled with growing anxieties about what the figure of the Venezuelan migrant has come to represent publicly.

And Gabriela, who prides herself on being the social glue of migrant New York and knowing “every type” of Venezuelan in the city, has witnessed this shift firsthand. She recalled the moment when a newer wave of migrants began arriving—people with fewer resources, irregular migration paths, and often more visible precarity—and how quickly the tone in the community began to shift.

“Then, when that other group of Venezuelans started arriving, people began saying...well, that they were unprepared, rude, uneducated. That’s what the community was saying. But what happens? I think that difference, that divide, is visible. Still, for me, we are all Venezuelans—because we are Venezuelans. We’re all valuable, and we can’t go around saying that what’s happening now is because of those [newly arrived, working class] Venezuelans. What’s happening right now in terms of migration [American policies targeting Venezuelan migrants]...that wasn’t the norm. That wasn’t the rule. It’s a small percentage of people who didn’t do things the right way. And maybe, I think that maybe there’s a political agenda behind all of it.

Maybe that small group [of “criminal” Venezuelans] had a mission—to do what they did in order to make the rest of the Venezuelan community look bad. To discredit the group that was doing things right, that was working honestly and contributing—economically and socially—in a positive way to this country, you understand? And now, all Venezuelans together are the ones paying the price.“

She begins by naming what “the community” says: that the newer arrivals are unprepared, impolite, uneducated. But she quickly pivots, drawing a line between herself and that discourse. For her, all Venezuelans are valuable. The behavior of a few, she insists, is not the rule. Perhaps, she even suggests, the worst of it is being politically manipulated. Yet, beneath this defense, what her reflection reveals is a decisive shift in the social life of Venezuelan differences abroad. The distinctions she references belonged to an older repertoire of classed perception carried from Venezuela and still available in exile as a way of reading others. Earlier migration waves also carried those hierarchies with them, but in settings where any Venezuelans living in the same city were more socially similar—families, students, and professionals with planned trajectories, legal pathways, and relative stability—there was less need to assert difference so forcefully. What changed in recent years was the context in which those distinctions now operated. As larger and more heterogeneous waves of Venezuelans began arriving, and as headlines about crime and chaos—which, since January of 2025, are now more frequent,

politically amplified, and impossible to ignore—began to stain the collective image and stigmatize the image of the migrant, internal boundaries acquired more urgency. Those who had arrived earlier, who had carved out stability and earned a certain social standing abroad, now found themselves recalibrating: drawing new boundaries between themselves and “those others,” hoping not to be swept into the same frame of “criminality,” “dependency,” and “social burden.” Under those conditions, class boundaries no longer worked only as familiar ways of locating people within an internal hierarchy. They became more active instruments of differentiation, used to manage proximity to a degraded public category—especially for those migrants whose class position, planned trajectories, or relative stability gave them more to protect. This is the deeper significance of the divide Gabriela is describing. Certainly, the arrival of newer migrants did more than add another layer of difference to the diaspora: it changed the stakes of those differences by altering what *venezolanidad* (Venezuelan-ness) itself could come to signify in public. In that altered landscape where “migrant” (and, in particular, *Venezuelan* migrant) had become a marked and devalued identity, the line between *los nuevos* and *los de siempre* became one way of redistributing stigma within the diaspora itself, pushing its heaviest weight onto those already closest to precarity.

Ana Isabel’s recollections help clarify what was different about earlier Venezuelan migration. Growing up in Miami, she described a social world in which Venezuelan families abroad often already knew one another—or if not,

they could be quickly placed through surnames or shared acquaintances. Whenever she made a Venezuelan friend at school or in the neighborhood, she said, her mother could often place the family with remarkable ease because someone's grandmother knew someone else's or their fathers had moved in the same business circles. "Everyone in Caracas knows each other," she concluded. Not quite. It's only true for the social world it assumes: one in which elite and upper-middle-class Venezuelans moved through dense, overlapping circles that made familiarity feel natural, even abroad. The summer camps, friendships, and family circles that structured her upbringing were not simply "Venezuelan" in a broad sense. More than that, they were homogenous spaces in which many of the classed distinctions carried from Venezuela remained present, yet required less explicit policing because the people surrounding them were, in most cases, already understood as similar. What changed, then, was the ease of presumed resemblance. Once Venezuelan migration no longer referred primarily to people already legible within those familiar classed worlds, the old distinctions had to be activated more deliberately and defended more openly.

In this way, belonging through distance names the form attachment takes once solidarity has to move through a more heterogeneous and more publicly stigmatized landscape. As Gabriela and Luis show in different registers, distance is not always about indifference. Sometimes, it is simply about managing how one is seen, both by others and by oneself, in a social world where being associated with a certain "type" of migrant

can carry real social consequences—or, in the case of working-class migrants, where attending community events rather than their work shifts can threaten hard-earned stability. But rather than dissolve the instinct to support, these pressures reshape how it is expressed. The participants I interviewed did not withdraw entirely; instead, they offered help in forms that felt legible, safe, and reputationally contained. That is, migrants may not invite each other into the most intimate corners of their lives, but they will nonetheless circulate information, recommend resources, and contribute to collective efforts. Rather than thinking of them as contradictions, we must instead see this pattern as the structure through which solidarity endures, and belonging, in all its variations, continues to be built.

The effect is a form of collective life that cannot be measured by intimacy alone. If one looks only for emotional closeness, the Venezuelan diaspora can appear fragmented, selective, and even distant. But that reading misses the other forms through which attachment is actually maintained. People remain tied to the national community through obligation, recognition, and acts of support that stop short of full interpersonal incorporation. What remains shared is a continuing sense that one still belongs, still owes something, and still stands in relation to a broader Venezuelan "we" to which they still feel accountable.

What, then, sustains that sense of obligation even where intimacy remains partial or withheld? The interviews point repeatedly to two forces. The first is a sense of obligation to Venezuela as a national ideal: not necessarily in the form of

patriotic allegiance, but as a commitment to a place that lives in their language, memories, and imagined futures. Whether this duty is political, emotional, or symbolic, it compels migrants to act—to donate, to advise, to organize—because to give back is to stay tethered. The second is an embodied recognition of what it feels like to be new, lost, or undocumented—essentially, to have been helped once, or to wish you had been. This recognition does not require friendship; rather, it requires memory, and a form of empathy shaped by experience. Together, these two forces form the backbone of diasporic solidarity. Solidarity, then, does not emerge from affinity. It emerges from responsibility: to a homeland they still carry, and to a journey they all, in some way, share. In this context, responsibility is enough to compel action, and it also becomes the grounds on which belonging is built unevenly, selectively, and without requiring the collapse of distance.

What this reveals is that distance does not cancel the desire to belong—it simply reshapes where and how that desire is directed. For some, solidarity becomes a way of staying connected to Venezuela itself, and not only through overtly political acts such as protesting or tracking the crisis, but through a broader sense of responsibility for the country's social and material wellbeing as well. Participants like Gabriela expressed this as an obligation to help however they could: by fundraising, by donating, by trying—however modestly—to soften the weight of the crisis back home. For others, especially those worn down by political fatigue, belonging took another (sometimes less loud) form: cultural, nostalgic, and

deliberately apolitical. Participants like Patricia found comfort less in political expression than in food, music, and the rituals that preserved a sense of Venezuelanness, even when national discourse had become too heavy to carry. And for many working-class migrants with unplanned journeys—like Magaly and Manuel—belonging emerged most clearly through practical forms of mutual care: helping newcomers navigate shelters, jobs, or basic needs by drawing on the memory of having once been in the same place. What links these different expressions is that none depends on intimacy as a precondition. They depend, instead, on repetition, obligation, recognition, and the willingness to keep contributing without requiring closeness in return. In this community, belonging survives as practice. Venezuelanness can be defended politically, remembered, cooked, sung, organized, or materially supported, which is precisely why it endures even when closeness remains uneven.⁹

In the end, what this section uncovers is a diaspora in which support and distance have ceased to be opposites. They are part of the same arrangement. Veronica captured that arrangement when we were conversing about her time volunteering to help newly arrived migrants in Port Authority, and she told me, “I can help you, sure, but we will not sit down and have dinner together.” She names a social world in which assistance remains imaginable, even expected, while intimacy remains carefully rationed. The point is not simply that migrants draw lines. It is that those lines have become one of the main ways collective life is organized under the pressures of class

difference, migratory heterogeneity, exhaustion, and stigma. In that sense, the enduring force of this diaspora lies neither in broad interpersonal closeness nor in any fantasy of unity, but in its ability to keep producing bounded forms of care that allow the collective to persist without ever becoming socially undifferentiated. Thus, *belonging through distance* is a form of collective life sustained through bounded attachment, where migrants remain tied to one another, and to Venezuela, through obligations they continue to honor without ever pretending that shared nationality dissolves difference.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This thesis began with a question that seemed deceptively simple: how do Venezuelan migrants continue to support one another—and a shared national cause—while keeping each other at a distance? I had understood this as a contradiction, or something to be reconciled, because how could people keep showing up for one another despite the fact that they so bluntly and passionately reject intimacy with one another? The answer, as it turns out, lies in design. In other words, rather than being in tension with their participation, the very distance migrants maintained was what made that participation possible.

What this study reveals is that migrants navigate solidarity and separation in tandem, calibrating care in ways that preserve both their sense of self and their place within a collective project. They do not withdraw from the community out of apathy, nor do they participate and act in solidarity out of seamless belonging. I

came to call this logic *belonging through distance*, a form of diasporic life in which people do not dissolve inherited boundaries, but rather move through them, offering help without intimacy, and showing up without stepping in too far. Across interviews, what became increasingly clear was that support and solidarity do not emerge from closeness, but from responsibility. It is a moral claim that migrants continue to recognize: a duty to the nation they carry, and to the journey they share. Essentially, they may avoid emotional closeness, but still circulate information, send remittances, and organize aid. Certainly, this is not the solidarity we might think of as tightly woven communities, but it is a solidarity that makes room for absence, or one that allows people to retreat without forfeiting their place. What follows in this section, then, is a reflection on what this reveals about Venezuelan migrant life and the conceptual frameworks we use to understand diaspora, care, and fractured forms of belonging. In tracing the implications of *belonging through distance*, I now turn to the literature it complicates, the questions it opens, and the ethical terrain it asks us to reconsider.

Rereading Solidarity

If the literature on diaspora has long treated solidarity as a tether—as evidence of enduring national feeling, affective proximity, or shared struggle—then what this thesis surfaces is something a bit more brittle, and perhaps more instructive: that in the world that these migrants inhabit, solidarity is not the result of belonging. On the contrary, it is the structure that makes belonging even possible. In other words, people give

because they remember what it was like to need something, or someone, and not because they already feel held by a community. They show up because they still carry a sense of duty—which inevitably is not always loud or visible—that it is still enough to compel them to act. And through those small, deliberate acts—such as forwarding a contact, or answering a question—something begins to take shape. It’s not exactly intimacy, and it does not try to be, yet it holds. Most importantly, it creates a way of being involved without being absorbed, and thus, of staying connected while still protecting space. *Belonging through distance* names this form, one which is less about refusing community than about redefining what being part of one looks like.

This reframing unsettles one of the field’s most durable assumptions: that public engagement and private connection move in tandem. Within studies of transnational care, for instance, scholars have shown how migrants sustain ties to home through remittances, caregiving, and emotional support (Parreñas 2001; Baldassar 2007). The prevailing logic—perhaps best captured in Baldassar’s notion of “care across distance” (2007)—frames such acts as more than material transactions; instead, they are gestures of relational continuity, almost as symbolic bridges that keep emotional closeness intact despite geographic dispersal. And yet, what my findings suggest is something else entirely: that care can function not as a bridge, but as a boundary. That is, a performance of obligation that sustains connection precisely by maintaining distance—essentially, not as a by-product, but actually as a deliberate design. The

Venezuelan migrants I interviewed rarely withheld support, but they did offer it carefully—advising newcomers, contributing to community causes, sharing information, yet still drawing clear perimeters around their emotional and social availability. Verónica, for instance, volunteers occasionally, but does so from a place of very studied detachment. In her case, her solidarity is not expressive, but rather very disciplined. “I’m also an immigrant,” she offered, as if that alone justified the act—essentially, as if the role, rather than the relationship, was what gave the gesture its moral force. Her posture illustrates what Baldassar and Merla (2014) gesture toward but do not fully pursue: that care can be routinized, performed more as a civic script than as a product of affection.

This logic extends beyond the interpersonal and into the political as well. Classical theories of diasporic engagement have long imagined migrants as emissaries—carrying national commitments across borders, voting from abroad, protesting in solidarity, and lobbying as transnational citizens (Al-Ali and Koser 2002; Shain 2007). But in the Venezuelan case, the only common response is not expression—for some, it is retreat. Patricia, once deeply involved in political organizing back home, now avoids even peaceful rallies hosted in Central Park.¹⁰ Yet, she made it clear that it was not because she had disengaged, but because the costs of engagement had become too steep. For Patricia, those costs were shaped by years of living through a dictatorship that had already colonized everyday life back home, pulling people into an almost unending cycle of outrage, mobilization, and disappointment. By the time she mi-

grated, political participation no longer felt energizing or sustaining, but consuming. Put simply, rather than disinterest, her silence is an effort to protect herself from being drawn back into a crisis she had hoped migration might finally place at some distance. Thus, Appadurai's "fear of small numbers" (2006), which gives language to the threat of proximity within minoritized collectivities, is useful here. But what emerges in this case is not just political anxiety—it is a deep, emotional exhaustion. If anything, the months since this thesis was first completed have only made this retreat easier to understand. By the fall of 2025, the news cycle had become especially brutal, filled with stories of children being detained or deported and of immigration enforcement reaching into spaces that were once assumed to offer some protection. In that atmosphere, it is not hard to see why a public rally might feel, to some migrants, less like an act of solidarity than a form of exposure. For some Venezuelan migrants in New York, stepping back from public politics can reflect both the exhaustion of having already lived through the crisis so fully and the growing sense that visibility in the United States now carries risks on its own.

It is here where literature has often mistaken what is visible for what is shared—reading proximity as proof of cohesion, when it may just as easily be a performance of it (Brubaker 2005). Mavroudi (2008) names disengagement as a form of survival, essentially a strategy migrants adopt in response to the psychic toll of prolonged crisis. But what my data makes visible is how that logic saturates not only political life, but the most ordinary terrain of social exist-

ence. Our conversations showcased that migrants withdraw not only from protests, but from WhatsApp chats, from big social gatherings and shared meals, and from the soft, ongoing demands of communal life. And yet, it is undeniable that they still give and still contribute.

And nowhere is this structure more legible than in the moral grammars migrants carry with them. As Luis put it, Venezuelan class logics travel remarkably well. What once indexed difference through accents and Caracas zip codes now maps onto migration waves, visa histories, and perceived worthiness. The language of *sifrino* (wealthy) and *del barrio* (from the slums), or *los nuevos* (new arrivals) and *los de siempre* (long-time migrants), is a reorganization of old hierarchies in new terrain. The literature on symbolic boundaries has long argued that people draw moral lines to mark status and belonging (Lamont and Molnár 2002)—or that these distinctions shape how we know who counts, and why. But what my findings suggest is something more specific: that migrants don't just carry these boundaries with them, they learn how to reattach them. Indeed, they arrive already fluent in a grammar of difference, and they recalibrate that grammar to manage new forms of uncertainty abroad.

Even Gabriela, the most socially expansive participant, could see these scripts clearly. More than most, she had a kind of panoramic understanding of the Venezuelan community in New York: she could describe the "home-work-home" rhythm of working-class migrants trying to survive, but she could also see the tension older, often wealthier arrivals felt toward newer ones, and the social

differentiation that followed. Her openness, then, did not come from being unaware of these dynamics. It came from her unusual willingness to move across them—to talk to, help, and engage with Venezuelans of all kinds—something shaped both by her business, which brought her into contact with every type of Venezuelan, and by an extroverted disposition that found purpose in relational work. And if she appears exceptional, it is because she is. Most others operate with far narrower margins, negotiating their care within a logic that prioritizes safety, clarity, and social distinction.

What the Venezuelan case confesses most clearly is that the boundaries migrants draw around themselves are never quite final. However carefully they narrow their circles, at any moment there might be an event, phone call, or a new arrival that compels them to engage with the community, if only for a brief moment. That, in the end, is the insight the literature has yet to fully absorb: that solidarity does not require intimacy to be sincere. The form *belonging through distance* takes is one that exists through intermittent moments of recognition. That is, it occurs in moments when even those who have withdrawn from communal life find themselves called back into relation.

A Framework Meant to Stretch

What *belonging through distance* offers is not a theory of Venezuelan exceptionalism, but a sociological invitation: to rethink what holds people together in contexts where cohesion is neither assumed nor easy. That is, if classical diaspora literature has leaned heavily on metaphors of tethering, kinship, and

emotional continuity (Anderson 2006; Levitt 2001), then this thesis suggests a different lexicon—one that is organized around calibration rather than unity or closeness. Solidarity, it turns out, does not require cohesion but a structure sturdy enough to hold people together without demanding they collapse the space between them. And this shift, while subtle, has real stakes. In migration studies, diasporic coherence has often been located in the persistence of ties (for instance, through remittances, transnational voting, and community organizing) (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Al-Ali and Koser 2002), but what my findings suggest is that these forms of participation can be consistent, even meaningful, without signaling any real interpersonal closeness. In other words, the presence of solidarity does not tell us much about the depth of social life. *Belonging through distance* names this distinction, offering a framework for understanding how migrants remain materially, morally, and symbolically engaged by organizing care and support through distance.

It also invites a broader rethinking. What if the sociological puzzle is not how migrants come together, but how they continue to show up while staying apart? What if the future of diaspora is not built on the intimacy of shared struggle, but on the rhythm of selective participation? These questions become especially urgent in contexts marked by internal fragmentation. This is because migrants are not just mobile—they are divided: by class, migration wave, legal status, exhaustion. Scholars like Mavroudi (2008) and Appadurai (2006) have powerfully traced the emotional toll of displacement

and the role of surveillance in fracturing diasporic life, but what remains under-theorized is how migrants build social worlds *through* that fragmentation—not despite it. Essentially, by working within distance rather than by simply overcoming it. *Belonging through distance* makes visible that architecture: a configuration of collective life structured around boundaries that hold and make participation possible when intimacy does not.

At its core, the concept names a social logic built to live inside ambiguity. People participate to signal alignment and not to affirm closeness. They give without inviting obligation, offer help while guarding reputation, and contribute to the collective without asking for intimacy in return. Rather than a retreat from community, this is a redesign of its terms. It is what allows migrants to fulfill moral scripts while preserving emotional bandwidth, or to remain tethered while staying carefully apart. And in that sense, belonging through distance is not simply a reading of Venezuelan migrant life, as it can also become a framework for understanding how solidarity operates in stratified communities. For instance, it helps us see how care adapts when trust becomes a risk, and thus how fragmented collectivities manage to endure themselves. The sociological implication is a refusal to idealize closeness. We must stop mistaking intimacy for the only meaningful form of care, as sometimes the most honest version of solidarity is not found in the collapse of boundaries, but in the shared decision to keep them—and still show up anyway.

What We Can't Yet See—And Why That

Of course, this thesis captures only a slice of a much larger terrain. Its scope is shaped not just by its location—New York, a city whose density, diversity, and anonymity both sharpen and stretch the logic of selective engagement—but also by its design. The findings draw from a small, purposively selected group of Venezuelan migrants, with the goal not of representativeness, but of theorizing from contrast: across migration waves, class positions, and social orientations. What this leaves out, inevitably, are other logics of solidarity that may take shape elsewhere—for instance, among the undocumented navigating full legal invisibility, or among older or more gender-diverse migrants whose networks may follow different scripts, or even in smaller cities where the social field is tighter, the options for selective participation fewer, and the boundaries perhaps harder to hold.

But more importantly, there is also a bigger limitation built into the project's premise: its participants agreed to speak about their Venezuelanness. That is, even though I purposefully tried to include Venezuelans with various degrees of engagement with the community, this sample inevitably reflects people who, to some degree, still feel drawn to engage with the category—perhaps skeptically, selectively, or reputationally—but engaged nonetheless. Consequently, what remains outside the frame are those who have disengaged completely: migrants who neither show up publicly nor maintain private attachments; or, perhaps more curiously, those who do sustain private emotional connections to Venezuela (which this thesis suggests are largely absent) while avoiding its public perfor-

mance entirely. In this sense, the combinations of solidarity and distance explored here may be just a few among many. What's missing are the alternate configurations: *distance without duty*, perhaps, or *duty without distance*, or even complete detachment without structure. Yet, these absences point not to a flaw, so much as a new frontier—one that suggests that solidarity is not a binary, but a spectrum, and one that deserves further mapping. And more than that, they sharpen the very intervention this project seeks to make. Too often, migration literature has treated attachment to the homeland and affiliation with co-nationals as if they arrive bundled (Levitt 2001; Baldassar 2007)—as if to care about Venezuela is also to seek out Venezuelans. But what this thesis makes clear is that those two axes—*relationship to the nation* and *relationship to others from the nation*—do not always align. In fact, they often diverge. Thus, what *belonging through distance* does is name that tension: the possibility of remaining morally tethered to a national project while holding reputational or emotional distance from the people who inhabit it.

This conceptual shift opens several avenues for future research. One is comparative: how does *belonging through distance* operate in smaller, more intimate diasporas—where anonymity is harder to maintain, and the cost of disengagement may be steeper? Does the logic hold when options for avoidance narrow, or does it collapse under social pressure? Another is temporal. That is, this study captures a very specific moment—the current wave of massive migration, amid political fatigue, reputational anxiety, and the rising American (as in, in

the entire American continent) stigma of the Venezuelan label. But, how stable is this architecture over time? Does distance eventually give way to new forms of intimacy, once migrants are no longer living at the edge of survival? Or does it calcify into disconnection, even after the storm passes? And finally, there is also the question of the framework's reach beyond the Venezuelan case, of course. Namely, what happens when *belonging through distance* travels—into other fractured diasporas, post-crisis communities, or class-stratified collectivities where national obligation persists but emotional proximity has grown thin? What might this framework help us see in Haitian, Afghan, or Ukrainian migrant worlds? Or, in expatriate communities built around legacy, perhaps, and not solidarity? For instance, in immigrant spaces where the moral weight of helping remains, even when the desire to connect does not. Evidently, this thesis does not claim universality, rather, it names a social logic that may be far more common than we have allowed ourselves to see—and offers a vocabulary for understanding how solidarity survives, reshapes, and repositions itself when togetherness is no longer the goal, and when distance, rather than threatening the community, becomes the very form through which it is sustained.

What Distance Can't Protect

And yet, even a logic as adaptive as *belonging through distance* has its limits. If this thesis has shown how solidarity can survive internal fracture, it must also ask what happens when the conditions that once made that survival possible begin to collapse. What follows is not just

a question of whether *belonging through distance* appears elsewhere, but of what happens when it is placed under pressure.

Ultimately, what this thesis traces is a social world structured by restraint. Long before the headlines turned, migrants were already drawing lines—between those they might help and those they could not afford to invite in, and between what they owed Venezuela and what they no longer had the energy to feel. Contrary to spontaneous acts of warmth, participants described these as measured forms of engagement. As it was established earlier in the findings, *belonging through distance* was never a contradiction, but the very infrastructure that made participation possible in a world where proximity had become a liability. But it is impossible to ignore that this infrastructure is beginning to fray. That is, in a political climate increasingly hostile to the very idea of Venezuelan-ness, the calculations that once sustained selective solidarity no longer hold. Here and now, the figure of the Venezuelan migrant—which was once framed as a symbol of democratic hope or humanitarian urgency—is increasingly recast as a liability: no longer a symbol of escape from crisis, but a perceived crisis in itself. At the time this thesis was first written in May of 2025, deportation threats loomed, and Temporary Status Protection (TPS) guarantees hung in limbo. In the months since, DHS has effectively terminated Venezuelan TPS, and the broader enforcement climate—for all migrants—has only become more punitive. And, as a consequence, the reputability politics that once buffered some migrants—fluency, documentation, or self-sufficiency—no

longer insulate them as they once did. In this climate, the distinctions migrants once drew—between themselves and others, and also between presence and affiliation—evidently begin to lose their meaning. Yet, this is not because migrants have stopped managing how they move through the social field, but simply because the field itself has stopped registering the difference between them. In this context, the reputational boundaries that once provided cover now evidently offer little protection. Essentially, nuance collapses under the weight of suspicion, and migrants who once calibrated every gesture now find themselves folded into the very categories they had spent years learning to navigate around. In Trump’s America,¹¹ the *sifrino* and the *persona del barrio* are both, to their dismay, indistinguishably and irrevocably just Venezuelan, no matter how carefully they’ve set themselves apart. If the argument here traced the weakening of those protective distinctions as of 2025, the months since have only made that fragility more visible.

The logic of *belonging through distance* still holds, but it is being stretched to its edge. What happens when even distance isn’t enough? When no degree of calibration, no posture of restraint, and no amount of careful separation can protect you from the suspicion embedded in your passport, and, ultimately, in your increasingly unwelcome presence? What happens when the strategies migrants built to manage risk—to give without closeness, or to care without exposure—are asked to carry more weight than they were ever meant to bear?

This thesis has shown how solidarity survives fragmentation. But the deeper

question—the one we can no longer defer—is this: **How long can it survive a politics that punishes even the fragments?**

ENDNOTES

¹R4V (2024) provides the most comprehensive data on the number of Venezuelans displaced and the shifting nature of migration routes, including the rise of “*caminantes*.” See: <https://www.r4v.info/en>

²As of 2024, over 7.8 million Venezuelans had fled the country, representing more than 25% of the national population and making it the largest external displacement crisis in the Western Hemisphere, and one of the largest globally. See: R4V – Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, “Venezuelan Refugee and Migrant Crisis,” <https://www.r4v.info/es>.

³This detail is included to illustrate the unfiltered and wide-ranging nature of migrant online spaces, where practical needs, emotional support, and informal economies overlap in very complex ways.

⁴When I was conducting fieldwork and recruiting participants in early 2025, the Trump administration had just announced its decision to terminate TPS for Venezuelans. As the text describes, protections from the 2023 designation were scheduled to expire in April, and those from the 2021 designation in September. The announcement immediately created widespread fear and legal uncertainty within the community, especially among newer arrivals. In the months that followed. Although litigation in spring 2025 temporarily preserved TPS protections, later agency action and court rulings altered that. USCIS currently treats the 2023 and 2021 TPS designations as officially terminated and expired effective October and September 2025. As of March 2026, the legal aftermath remains contested, but the broader point holds:

TPS for Venezuelans moved from uncertainty into a far more punitive and unstable terrain. See: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), “Temporary Protected Status Designated Country: Venezuela,” updated March 2026, <https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/temporary-protected-status/temporary-protected-status-designated-country-venezuela>.

⁵Important to note, however, is that the goal was never to generalize, but to identify recurring logics or patterns of reasoning that revealed how migrants navigate social belonging without necessarily collapsing into community.

⁶All names used in this study are pseudonyms. I’ve also changed or omitted identifying details—like the names of businesses, organizations, and even boroughs they live in—to protect participant privacy, given the current climate surrounding Venezuelan migration. Many participants were at risk of deportation or facing the possible loss of Temporary Protected Status (TPS), making anonymity especially important.

⁷References to “los del Darién” or “those from the Darién” invoke more than just a migration route. Essentially, within the Venezuelan diaspora, the Darién jungle has come to symbolize classed, stigmatized migration—often associated with desperation, informality, and social difference.

⁸Arepas, a staple of Venezuelan cuisine, are a symbol of shared identity, resilience, and memory for many migrants (Gabriela even pointed to the sheer amount of arepa restaurants that have opened in recent years since Venezuelan migration became more prevalent). Her business thus carries cultural and emotional weight, not just economic value.

⁹More data on the differences between participants and the various ways through which they expressed belonging can be found in Appendix A and B viewable in the online version.

¹⁰In New York City, the Simón Bolívar statue in Central Park has quickly become the meeting point for the Venezuelan diaspora—especially during protests or moments tied to the national project. What was once just a random monument now doubles as a kind of anchor: a place to show up, be counted, and feel briefly less scattered.

¹¹While some participants did not explicitly reference the political context, and a few with higher socioeconomic status who did expressed relief at being shielded from deportation due to their legal documentation, the shift in tone following the first February 2025 TPS termination announcement was unmistakable. Across interviews conducted during this period, a heightened sense of fear and uncertainty surfaced—even among those not personally at risk. Several participants voiced concern for others in the community, including migrants they might not typically associate with, truly underscoring how this moment of political precarity blurred existing boundaries momentarily.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Magdalena Paul (she/her) holds a B.A. in Sociology and Latin American Studies from Columbia University. Her research examines stratification, social networks, group boundaries, and the institutional conditions that shape opportunity. She is especially interested in how communities form internal divisions, how

people navigate belonging across those divides, and how institutions can either deepen exclusion or create possibilities for solidarity and reintegration. In the coming years, she plans to continue this line of research through doctoral study in sociology, using mixed methods to examine inequality, identity, and institutional life.

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Address

1126 East 59th Street
Chicago, IL 60637
United States

Email

cjsuchicago@gmail.com

