The Life of a Strawberry: Visualizing Human and Non-Human Connections in the Contemporary Food System

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In this project, I was asked to analyze the research of Professor Marcos López and draw on agricultural literature. The research considers the complex ties between human and non-human factors in the strawberry farming industry in southern regions of California as well as Baja California in Mexico. While a demographic map or a network analysis conducted through Node XL were considered at first, Professor López decided on a visual representation of data to show influence through a system—one that could be used as a learning tool to illustrate the factors at play.

Historically, both Mexico and the U.S. housed strawberry firms and fields that served local communities. In addition, the U.S. imported both fresh and frozen strawberries from Mexico. However, these imports decreased from 1970 to 1993, and as technology and the use of chemicals increased at U.S. owned fields in Watsonville/Salinas and Baja California, the remaining Mexican market shrunk. Thus mestizo and indigenous workers moved increasingly into the U.S., where they are now subject to the whims of growing season, immigration policy, output-dependent pay rates (piece-rate system), and the integration of their local networks within the firms’ employment structure. In addition, as U.S. firms grow, they demand more resources from local environments (such as water supplies) and pollute communities with the fumigants and pesticides historically used. It is important to note the multi-directional influence on migrants—they need employment from U.S. firms, but struggle to advocate for their rights. U.S. firms too are in great need of their labor, but immigration policy makes it difficult to acquire enough.

Further questions may be explored to project the state of U.S. strawberry farming in the face of changing immigration policy, government chemical regulation, and depleting ecological resources.

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