New Harvests: The Experiences of Immigrant Farmers in Maine

In 2002, the city of Lewiston, Maine skyrocketed to national prominence due to the publication of an open letter by Laurier Raymond Jr., then the mayor of Maine’s second largest city, to the elders of the Somali community. Prompted by the arrival of over a thousand Somalian migrants to Lewiston in the span of little more than one year, Laurier urged these newcomers to dissuade relatives and friends from moving to the city, asserting that the municipality’s financial and emotional resources had been wholly depleted. Laurier’s controversial message piqued the interest of the Maine public, initiating a protracted and impassioned debate on the place of these immigrants in one of the whitest and fastest-aging states in the country.

More than a decade later, Maine remains the final destination for many different people settling in the US. While some critics argue that newly formed migrant communities threaten to destabilize and irreparably damage the state’s equilibrium, others believe that the immigrants’ diversity benefits Maine’s local cultures. I sought to embed my research of immigration to Maine in this greater context, focusing on the experiences of a unique group of people who decide to pursue farming once they settle down in Maine.

I worked with a Portland-based non-profit organization, which helps immigrants establish their own farming businesses by setting them up on tracts of leased land, providing relevant agricultural and commercial training, and connecting them with different service providers. The farmers in this program work small plots of land, typically under an acre, using environmentally sustainable methods. They then sell their produce in farmers’ markets and other farm-to-table exchanges. The organization paired me with five different farmers who expressed interest in my project. These farmers were refugees, asylum seekers, and economic migrants who came to Portland from El Salvador, South Sudan, Burundi, and the Congo. Although they were highly diverse in terms of their backgrounds, my informants were united in their commitment to farming and desire to manage their own farming businesses.

In order to get to know my informants and gain a better understanding of farming in Maine, I spent much of my time working in the fields alongside these farmers, mainly weeding, controlling pests, watering, and harvesting. Through this participant observation, I learned how much physical effort is required to successfully operate a farm, even very small ones, using environmentally sustainable methods. In addition to my observations, I conducted semi-structured interviews with three of my informants and one employee at the Portland non-profit.

From analysis of my data, I realized that for these immigrant farmers, farming is not merely an economic enterprise, but instead serves a variety of cultural functions. These include instating familiar and beloved activities from their past into their new lives in America, working a job they find fulfilling and meaningful, gaining access to new social networks beyond their own ethnic communities, learning the English language and other practical skills in a hands-on setting, and passing on their heritage to their children. Similarly, working closely with the land helped to firmly ground these immigrants in their new locale, and they were overwhelmingly resolved to make Maine their permanent home. In these ways, farming fundamentally structures the daily lives and experiences of these new Mainers. Synthesizing my own data with relevant scholarship on contemporary immigration to the US and American agriculture, I ultimately concluded that farming effectively helps immigrants adapt to life in America, while simultaneously engaging them in a familiar, productive, and potentially lucrative enterprise, and that this non-profit program may serve as a model in other parts of the country with growing refugee and immigrant communities.