Working in Tobacco
Migrant labourers in neoliberal regimes in Mexico and the USA

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Table of Contents

Illustrations ........................................................................................................................ 5
Abstract .............................................................................................................................. 6
Declaration ......................................................................................................................... 7
Copyright Statement ........................................................................................................ 8
Acknowledgment ............................................................................................................... 9

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: TOBACCO AND LABOUR ........................................ 10

Neoliberalism ................................................................................................................... 16
Mexico-US migration literature ......................................................................................... 21
  Overview ....................................................................................................................... 22
  Implications ................................................................................................................... 24

Ethnographic research .................................................................................................... 27
  Kentucky ....................................................................................................................... 30
  Nayarit ........................................................................................................................ 32

Organisation of the thesis ............................................................................................... 35

CHAPTER 2: GROWING TOBACCO ........................................................................... 38

Politico-economic background ....................................................................................... 41
Good agricultural practices ............................................................................................. 45
Kentucky tobacco ........................................................................................................... 50
  Tobacco as an enchanted object ................................................................................. 52
  Tobacco’s moral ethos ................................................................................................. 58
  Hoping for a contract .................................................................................................. 62

Nayarit tobacco .............................................................................................................. 64
  The Nayarit Context .................................................................................................. 66
  Land reform in Nayarit ............................................................................................... 69
  Tobacco is part of a mafia ......................................................................................... 72
  Tobacco’s moral ethos ................................................................................................. 76
  Tobacco contracts ....................................................................................................... 78

Conclusions: similarities and differences ...................................................................... 83
CHAPTER 3: WORKING TOBACCO HANDS............................................................. 84

Kentucky: antagonistic relations................................................................................. 86
  Contract system ........................................................................................................ 87
  Oral contracts versus written contracts ................................................................. 89
  The caravan ............................................................................................................. 91
  38 cents ................................................................................................................. 95
  Corporeal antagonism ............................................................................................ 97
  Green Tobacco Sickness ....................................................................................... 100
  Time to be paid ................................................................................................... 101
  Work as sacrifice ................................................................................................. 102
  Divisions among workers .................................................................................... 105

Nayarit: naturalised inequalities ................................................................................ 107
  Employer-worker relations .................................................................................. 109
  As if they are on holiday ...................................................................................... 112
  Low-wage labour ............................................................................................... 115

Conclusions: work as a structural situation ............................................................ 117

CHAPTER 4: LABOUR COMMODIFICATION AND RESISTANCE .................... 119

Kentucky .................................................................................................................... 123
  The government brought them .......................................................................... 125
  Como un paquete .................................................................................................. 129
  Peor que en una prisión ....................................................................................... 136
  La jaula de oro ..................................................................................................... 138

Nayarit ....................................................................................................................... 144
  It is the same ....................................................................................................... 145
  Differences between working conditions in Kentucky and in Nayarit .............. 146
  Work conditions for indigenous labourers in Nayarit ........................................ 149

Conclusions: labour commodification .................................................................... 152

CHAPTER 5: MEXICAN IDENTITY, RACE AND ETHNICITY ...................... 154

“Poor Mexico. So distant from God, so close to the United States” ..................... 156
  The category of “Mexican identity” in Kentucky ............................................... 164
  Racism at the border .......................................................................................... 165
Illustrations

All photographs are by María de Lourdes Salazar Martínez

Figure 1. Tobacco barn ................................................................. 52
Figure 2. The caravan ................................................................. 92
Figure 3. Climbing a barn ............................................................. 99
Figure 4. Ramada ........................................................................ 111
Figure 5. Tobacco strings ............................................................ 116
Figure 6. Room ........................................................................... 141
Figure 7. Juan and Apolinar ......................................................... 150
Figure 8. Florece care centre ....................................................... 187
Abstract

Over the past two decades, an interest in how tobacco capitalism works in everyday life has reintroduced a fertile discussion about one of the capitalism’s core features: the production of surplus value. Through a case-study of Kentucky and Nayarit, this thesis will discuss how the industry of tobacco, instead of depending on historic-geographical unevenness in the spread of capitalist relations across the world, works with unevenness as part of its own structure. In other words, for the securing of surplus value the tobacco industry relies not on non-capitalist relations of production, but rather on an increasing horizontal and vertical integration of tobacco capitalism. This is evidence of the industry’s power to effect a new configuration of relations of production different from the configuration of the industry in previous years: tobacco was a product of state intervention.

Nayarit in Mexico and Kentucky in the USA appear to be similar in many aspects, despite their different locations in global capitalism and on the ladder of development. In both places, capitalist relations of production frame life, and a dependence on cheap labour for the working of the tobacco industry is manifested. In both places, neoliberal reforms led to the privatisation of the tobacco industry, whereas before tobacco production was subsidised by the state. Nayarit and Kentuckian tobacco growers and workers have to deal with increasing economic pressures and find themselves looking to diversify income streams. In both contexts, similar racial hierarchies structure similarly gendered divisions of labour in the tobacco industry, both within the workforce and in terms of productive versus reproductive labour.

The differences between Kentucky and Nayarit have created a situation in which the same group of Nayarit migrant labourers live with unevenness as part of their life projects, though they are working within the same tobacco industry. The thesis presents rich ethnographic detail about heterogeneous contexts that exist within and are shaped by the same tobacco capitalism, and the way through which unevenness generates migrant labour that creates a durable geographical connection between distinct instantiations of the same tobacco industry.
Declaration

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Chapter 1: Introduction: Tobacco and Labour

This thesis examines how the global tobacco industry works with unevenness within the heterogeneous map of capitalist modes of production. In contradiction to the idea that tobacco capitalism exploits regions dominated by non-capitalist relations of production, in a neo-colonial mode, in order to keep the cost of labour down, I argue that tobacco capitalism exploits different forms and conjunctures of capitalist labour relations, which have developed historically in different areas. Throughout the thesis, I examine the unevenness and the workings of tobacco capitalism in detail by focusing on the differences and similarities between Kentucky in the United States and Nayarit in Mexico, two regions long pervaded by capitalist relations of production in the tobacco industry. At the end of the nineteenth century, Nayarit had already been incorporated in a system of tobacco capitalism. I also explore how the increasingly horizontal and vertical integration of tobacco capitalism shapes the experiences of the same group of Mexican people who move between and work in both regions.

These are real people who live their everyday lives as well as they can within the social and historical constraints of contemporary societies, which they actively produce, negotiate and contest. The lives of these workers are divided between two tobacco towns, one in Nayarit and one in Kentucky, regulated by the very same global tobacco industry. I argue that the way the tobacco industry operates, underwritten by varied interconnected work arrangements (intertwined with “productive” waged work and unwaged “reproductive” labour), contradicts the idea that industrial agriculture, particularly tobacco capitalism, is sustained by rural subsistence economies. In other words, I show that the tobacco industry uses low-wage workforces that come from capitalised economies and not necessarily from subsistence economies. It has been argued that cheap labour is produced in such subsistence economies, for they can reproduce themselves “through the unpaid labour they apply to the agricultural means of production” (Meillassoux 1981:138). Kearney (2004:145) explains how the articulation between infra-subsistence
peasant households and communities with distant labour markets are economically advantageous for the receiving economies. According to Kearney (2004:145), “In such systems the labour power [...] is partially reproduced by the production of food and other resources outside capitalist relations of production, thus articulating capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production.” Nayarit farmworkers do not come from systems characterised in the literature as Mexican peasant economies, as they cannot make a living in their places of origin. The differences between Kentucky and Nayarit create a durable connection between the different work regimes developed in each place. For example, Nayarit farmworkers need to migrate if they want to build a house, because their wages are otherwise not high enough to do so. The Nayarit farmworkers’ seasonal migration to the United States and particularly to Kentucky has therefore become a constitutive element of their lives. Unlike the Nayarit workers, the situation for indigenous workers at the bottom of the ladder is slightly different, because they still rely on food sources outside capitalist relations of production, which is also evidence of the tobacco industry’s capacity to subsume different work regimes.

In the same vein, it has been argued (Basok 2002; Cohen 1999; Kearney 2004; Meillassoux 1981) that unfree or semi-free labour, still bound to the soil, sustains capitalist industry. Cohen (1999:2) argues that “capitalism has always revived and even thrived, by deploying substantial numbers of unfree or semi-free labourers,” thus contesting Marx’s view that the capitalist mode of production relies exclusively on free wage labourers. Other lines of scholarship are pushing for a wider consideration of unwaged and waged labour, rather than free or unfree labour. Kingsolver (2007:89) suggests that the transfer of low-wage or non-wage workforces from rural economies was central to the production of tobacco: for example, in the mostly mountainous Appalachian region (see Billings et al. 1986), and in the current Latin America diaspora that has supplied the tobacco industry in Kentucky with low-wage labour. Kingsolver’s (2007:89-90) main contribution to this discussion is her understanding of the category of “strategic alterity” as fundamentally necessary to capitalist logic and practice, particularly in the ways the occupation of low-wage and non-wage labour categories are naturalised and marked as “other.” As Benson (2008) similarly explains, migrant farmworkers are
often viewed as “other,” and belonging to the “outside.” He connects structural violence to the concept of faciality (drawing on Deleuze and Guattari) to explain how migrants are othered. For Benson (2008:596), faciality refers to “how people see others,” which “can help legitimize patterns of social subordination, economic exploitation, and spatial segregation.” I engage with the analysis offered by this literature on inclusion/exclusion; however, I avoid reinforcing representations of rural economies as outside capitalism. Nayarit workers and growers are part of the same capitalist tobacco economy.

I draw on the work of Holmes (2007) and Benson (2008) as I found some similarities between their work and my research. Their main contribution is to the ethnographic understanding of structural violence, structural vulnerability and structural hierarchies. They show eloquently how the hierarchical and appalling conditions in some of the agriculture camps in the USA are frequently hidden, ignored and legitimated in terms of individual responsibility. Holmes (2013:169) has noticed that “many people justify the living conditions of migrant workers based on what they assume is normal for them.” However, a “pecking order” produces the suffering and illness of undocumented, indigenous Mexican berry pickers, which Holmes (2013:31) denounces throughout his work. Inadvertently underlying Benson’s and Holmes’ analyses there remains a dual economy model, whereby the global South is depicted as based to a large extent on a rural subsistence economy, a kind of safety net that allows migrant worker wages to be kept low and new generations of workers to be produced at low cost, whereas the North is represented as an industrialised agricultural context.¹ Against the idea that the global South is pervaded by non-capitalist relations of production, I develop a key argument of this thesis: that the global South too is part of the heterogeneous map of capitalist relations of production. This critique can also be directed at the work of Rouse, and in particular the concept of bifocality, which carries a similar implication. The chronic, contradictory transnationalism that Rouse (1992:46) refers to juxtaposes a farming way of life and a proletarian way of seeing the world. Rural

¹ The global South concept here refers to the classic division between the peasant South versus the industrial North and the Lefebvorean dialectic of centre and periphery (see Wallerstein 1995).
Mexico is depicted as a set of social relations outside capitalism. However, to a great extent, the Mexican countryside has been industrialised, and it relies heavily on labour from other places with industrialised agriculture. In sum, these authors (Rouse 1992; Kingsolver 2007; Benson 2008; Holmes 2013) have not criticised the theory of the “articulation” of modes of production, which argues that the production and reproduction of workers at low cost was left to the economies outside capitalist relations of production. In Kentucky, the production and reproduction of workers at low cost is left to another tobacco economy also pervaded by capitalism: that of Nayarit.

The tobacco economy in Nayarit is linked to the Kentucky tobacco economy, but in very uneven conditions. The tobacco economy in Nayarit operates at such a low profit level that people are forced to migrate in order to pursue their life projects and to escape “poverty” (with aspirations fed by the global consumer economy). Kentuckian tobacco growers employ Nayarit immigrants to do the lowest paying jobs. These are workers maintained in another capitalised economy and not in a subsistence economy. This thesis shows how the global division of labour operates so that people from different economies can sell their labour abroad. Nayarit and Kentucky share similar social and economic structures: for example, both tobacco economies need low-wage labour, but their particular histories and processes make the experience of working and living in both places seem completely different for the workers who move between and work in both locations.

In particular, I focus on the experiences, subjectivities and working and living conditions of a group of Nayarit “free workers” who were born and grew up in Amapa, a Mexican tobacco town, and who are wage-earners in tobacco plantations in both Nayarit and Kentucky. This case-study of a group of men, whom I call the “crew of seven,” allows me to analyse the global vertical and horizontal integration of the tobacco industry, which exploits (or extracts surplus value from) a set of economic and social structures that are heterogeneous and yet interconnected.²

² One day in September 2008 in Kentucky, Paloma, a settled migrant from Nayarit (whose life story I will return to in Chapters 4 and 6) introduced me to a crew of seven Nayarita men who were working in tobacco. Unlike Paloma’s father Vicente, these workers were
The yearly routine of the crew of seven involves working in tobacco in Nayarit from February to May, then heading north to work on the corn plantations in Iowa during the summer months, and then working in tobacco in Kentucky from August to December. Based on a year of fieldwork in both Kentucky and Nayarit, I found that the production of tobacco leaves relies on a transnational circuit of workers that operates in a more regulated manner than it did in the 1990s. The workers follow the yearly cycle of tobacco in two different countries in order to pursue their life projects. That being said, the different opportunities and constraints that they have in each context obscure the fact that their condition as workers in both countries is structurally similar. In other words, the same group of workers experience work, time and space differently while occupying similar positions and positionalities in the production of tobacco leaves. This idea resonates with Anthias’s (2008:17) notion of “translocational positionality.” This notion “relates to the importance of context, meaning and time in the construction of positionalities. Positionalities themselves are socially produced through the interplay of processes and outcomes of social relations” (Anthias 2008:17). Anthias (2008) moves away from the concept of “intersectionality,” which refers to the interconnection between social divisions, such as those of gender, ethnicity and class. She proposes translocational positionality as an alternative to the concepts of identity and belonging, which do not pay attention to social locations and processes.

Drawing on Anthias (2008), I will focus on processes as opposed to analyses of categories of identity. In Kentucky, the same people (the crew of seven) are racialised illegal workers who work for white Kentuckian farmers, whereas in Nayarit they are local mestizo farmworkers and Nayarit tobacco growers. By assessing the processes and conditions of possibility, I aim to avoid reinforcing the idea of fixed categories.

undocumented, and thus had different opportunities. They were visiting Paloma’s neighbour, a man from the same community. I asked them whether I could visit them at their workplace and in their caravan, and they agreed. I also asked them whether they could pick me up, as I did not have a vehicle and they had a minivan. Since this first encounter I have been following them in their migrations to the USA.
It was through this group of workers that I got to know the tobacco farmers in Kentucky and the crew’s white Kentuckian co-workers. The *patrones*, or bosses, are white Kentuckian farmers who employ Mexican migrants (“illegals”, as well as those with a guest worker H-2A visa), whereas in Mexico the tobacco farmers or *tabacaleros* are mestizo locals who employ mestizo and indigenous workers, the latter under the most appalling conditions.³ The crew of seven’s experience of being placed within a set of social categories of exclusion/inclusion, thus turning them into desirable/undesirable populations, leaves them and other Mexican tobacco farmworkers at a disadvantage and exposes them to vulnerability in Kentucky; they are less vulnerable in Nayarit. Generally, this difference helps them to gain some control over their lives. In Kentucky, the actual demand for low-wage labour, amid claims of labour shortages, cannot be taken for granted. This demand is linked to the history of US-Mexican relations and the history of the USA as a country built by immigrants. In Mexico, the crew of seven do not act as low-wage labour, due to the presence of indigenous workers, whose availability is linked to the history of Mexico as a mestizo nation based on colonisation/decolonisation.⁴ The tobacco industry has always required a cheap form of labour to reinvent itself. Flexibility has been shown to be a core characteristic of this kind of labour. It is interesting to ask how the crew of seven manage to move between systems and to adapt to the new demands of the global economy without trauma. They find ways to make sense of their oppression and exploitation in very different and often contradictory ways, for example, by holding on to moral and religious values, such as suffering, love, loyalty and solidarity. Moreover, having a family as a goal gives sense to a life on the move.

Some of the relevant questions central to my research are as follows: What can a comparison between the two tobacco economies tell us about the everyday lives, life projects and struggles of different groups of people? How are social

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³ The H-2A visa is granted only for farm work of seasonal or temporary nature for a maximum of ten months. It was authorised by the Immigrant Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986.
⁴ I refer to “indigenous workers” as peasants from the Huichol, Cora, Mexicanero and Tepehuano ethnic groups, who have been kept at the fringes of modern Mexico and subjected to poverty through state programmes. The term mestizo, denoting a mixture of Indian and Spanish ancestry, conveys the historical differentiation between indigenous people and those who think that they belong to the modern and “civilised” Mexico.
structures experienced, reproduced and contested? How do social markers such as race, ethnicity, gender, nationality and age work in both places?

**Neoliberalism**

The Nayarit tobacco growers are aware of recent transformations in the tobacco industry and the growers express them in particular ways, translating them into local terms: they present Philip Morris as if the company were a *patrona* for whom they work. Another tobacco grower explained to me that he was producing tobacco for Queen Elizabeth through British American Tobacco. The growers assume that they are part of global processes that changed and destroyed former agreements; it was the state that set the rules for producing tobacco during the years prior to privatisation. I also remember a Kentuckian grower who was annoyed by the fact that he had not received his cheque after selling his first load of tobacco to Philip Morris. He explained to me that the company in Switzerland delayed the cheques and he also emphasised that the office in Kentucky could not contact the office in Switzerland because the time zone was six hours ahead. The Nayarit grower and the Kentuckian grower were aware of the forces of neoliberalism and they transferred them to their local contexts. Nayarit and Kentucky are subjected to the same rules and, notwithstanding their differences, greater vertical and horizontal integration is produced. In other words, unevenness is integrated into the structure of neoliberalism. The changes to how the tobacco companies organised the new contracts between the companies and the growers were striking, and they indicate that the tobacco grower is conceived of as essentially no different from enterprises.

It seems that neither the Nayarit nor the Kentuckian growers know much about the real Philip Morris: are they a *patrona*, or an office headquarters in Switzerland? Grasping the local experience of the changing industry seems central to understanding the role of neoliberalism. In Kentucky and Nayarit, neoliberal transformations take place in very different ways.

The notion of neoliberalism understood as a way of life is helpful for considering why the workers among whom I undertook fieldwork have a different perception of work in comparison with previous generations (Dardot and Laval
However, I found that the way people experience (neoliberal) transformations is full of contradictions. There is a set of social categories through which it is possible to analyse recent economic and political changes as cultural and embodied experiences, for example, as a racialised Mexican illegal. However, such categories do not mean the same for everyone.

Brenner and Theodore point out that there was considerable agreement regarding the basic elements of neoliberalism as an ideology. In contrast, “Neoliberal restructuring projects have been produced within national, regional, and local contexts defined by the legacies of inherited institutional frameworks, policy regimes, regulatory practices, and political struggles” (Brenner and Theodore 2002:349). Restructuring projects corresponded to market forces operating according to immutable laws no matter where they were “unleashed” (Brenner and Theodore 2002:349): the assumption underlying the projects was that “open, competitive, and unregulated markets, liberated from all forms of state interference, represent the optimal mechanism for economic development” (Brenner and Theodore 2002:350). This discussion of neoliberalism, and the forms of power and strategy that it entails, informed my research to a large extent, as it has been one of the most important paradigms in Mexican rural studies since the 1990s.

Neoliberalism entails privatisation and produces the conditions for greater exploitation and oppression of workers. However, people have multiple possibilities to strategise within neoliberalism. According to Harvey (2005:3), neoliberalisation:

entailed much “creative destruction,” not only of prior institutional frameworks and powers (even challenging traditional forms of state sovereignty) but also of divisions of labour, social relations, welfare provisions, technological mixes, ways of life and thought, reproductive activities, attachments to the land and habits of the heart.

Workers are no longer considered subjects of state assistance and intervention, and this is common to both Kentucky and Nayarit. “Welfare was a decommodifying intervention on the part of the state, both to offset class inequalities and to fill gaps where commodity relations worked inappropriately, such as health and education.”
(Smith 2007:226). Notwithstanding the rolling back of the state, welfare retains a central and indispensable role (Molyneux 2007:1).

The neoliberal paradigm resonates with Balibar’s remarks that capitalism is forced to transform itself, its own modes of exploiting the labour force and its modes of socialising individuals, which are not the same everywhere (cited in Smith 2013). Uneven development is endemic to capitalism as a historical-geographical system. In particular, patterns of “unevenness” are changing following the restructuring of the tobacco industry. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on the daily lives and practices of workers and farmers to gain a sense of how structural transition operates at a local level. In the USA, “tobacco culture” can be seen as part of this local experience, a product of state intervention and subject to ongoing reinterpretation under privatisation. However, the global South, the geographical area and analytical category to which Nayarit belongs, has undergone a similar process of privatisation, which contradicts the dualistic analysis critiqued above.

For most of the twentieth century, the production of tobacco in Mexico was influenced by a post-revolutionary project and industrialisation. The tobacco industry shifted from being a national company during the 1970s to becoming a self-regulated industry during the 1990s, controlled by two of the most powerful global tobacco companies: Philip Morris and British American Tobacco. What followed was an attempted top-down strategy to disband the group of tobacco growers who mobilised on different occasions to demand protection against the negotiation schemas of the tobacco companies and against the privatisation of the tobacco industry in 1990. Mackinlay (2011) argues that the state’s agenda of favouring corporate interests was paramount during the period prior to the 1990s.

According to Molyneux (2007:1), “In developing countries with disarticulated economies, weak states and dispersed forms of demand making, social policy evolved in a more fragmented form and social welfare was secured or supplemented by other means.” Interestingly, people have adapted to the shift from state support to a more privatised industry. But the way Nayarit tobacco farmworkers have experienced that shift over time has shown that the restructuring of the Mexican tobacco industry has changed people’s expectations, hopes, labour conditions and economic situation. A narrative informed by older
practices and memory sees the past as a better world, and that there is nothing positive to look forward to in the future. For previous generations, the tobacco industry offered more security and opportunities. For the more recent generation, growing tobacco is not an option. It was evident that the government redirected resources towards the companies, and the social responsibility onto the tobacco growers and the farmworkers.

In the USA, a similar process of privatisation occurred. Tobacco production moved from being an industry widely supported by federal government programmes to one that was left open to the market. The notion of tobacco culture (Daniel 1985) conceals the large-scale exploitation of workers and romanticises a notion of belonging.

Tobacco growing in the USA was generally a family-owned business that entailed a close relation between the tobacco producer’s family and the land, a morally valuable enterprise and a historical attitude (Griffith 2009:433). The tobacco producer used to work with his family and this included child labour. Tobacco, like cotton and rice, generated a culture favoured by forces set in motion by the Civil War (1861-1865), such as “the transition from slave labour to sharecropping” (Daniel 1985). Tobacco culture, “the daily and seasonal routines of farm families, the annual cycle of breaking the land, planting, cultivating, harvesting, and marketing” (Daniel 1985:xi), changed during the 1930s, when instability in the tobacco markets and tobacco-farm work led to political pressure for the state to subsidise tobacco production. “The daily cycle of work that coiled into a yearly routine remained static and unmechanized during the 1930s, but government programs as well as automobiles and radios altered rural life” (Daniel 1985:184). Tensions then arose between the old culture of the nineteenth century and the new one of the early twentieth century. “The tension created by the collision of the old culture and the new manifested itself in many ways, yet the life of a tobacco farmer continued in a familiar daily and yearly routine that demanded hard work and afforded few pleasures. Most farmers had dreams of a better life that included literacy for their children, health care, and respectability, but these could only be realized if the tobacco crop sold well at auction” (Daniel 1985:184).
The next important change happened in the 1970s when the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, in collaboration with North Carolina State University, successfully put harvesting machines into production and implemented bulk curing, which significantly cut labour requirements in tobacco culture (Daniel 1985:264-265). “The savings in field labor proved immense. Instead of the 370 manhours per acre that an all-hand-labor operation required, machinery for plowing and topping and the harvester could perform the task in a mere 58 hours” (Daniel 1985:265). However, the production of tobacco still relies on workers and not only on machines, as do other crops, such as soya beans.

Early in the twenty-first century, tobacco lost its positive image and legitimacy from a health point of view, but it is still legal, and the idea of a culture, a set of values maintained and protected by family units and communities still permeates tobacco producers’ lives and work. However, nowadays this culture does not have the political and economic support that it did from 1933 to 2004 in the USA and from 1970 to 1991 in Mexico, when governments protected the production of tobacco with subsidies and price protection.

Kingsolver’s (2010) work has contributed to the understanding of the tobacco industry as a global industry, yet one bound to everyday practices. She addresses how tobacco farmers’ lives are connected to broader processes and how they are unaware of the global forces that constrain their life projects. Kingsolver (2010:36-37) suggests that:

While small farms are thought of as self-contained units and farmers are thought of as working for themselves, Kentucky tobacco farms have always been related to global economic cycles. Farmers have taken on most of the risk but little of the profit in the global tobacco industry. Their fate has been tied to the fate of this global crop and to world events like the Irish potato famine and the collapse of the Mexican peso after neoliberal reforms, since those have been factors in the migration decisions of some of the workers who have ended up on Nicholas County tobacco farms.

Mexico in the 1990s was a terrain for neoliberal reforms. The privatisation of the land came into effect in 1992, with the reforms of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, as part of a series of neoliberal projects. Foreign investment was promoted, the land was expected to be purchased by private corporations and the
transition from tobacco to alternative crops, such as rice, soya beans and corn, was encouraged. However, neither the expected land purchasing nor foreign investment happened, and remittances, not the cultivation of alternative crops, have kept the local economy afloat. As Otero (2011:385) points out, “labour sovereignty, defined as the ability of a nation to generate employment with liveable wages for the vast majority of the population,” has been a casualty of Mexico’s economic integration with its northern neighbours within the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), signed in 1993.

The issue of processes of neoliberal privatisation has been raised previously in regard to its similar paths and different outcomes in both Kentucky and Nayarit. I found that neoliberal changes as a political and economic project intended to generate similar conditions for the relations of production everywhere, but a focus on the local lives in each place allows us to see the differences that constitute the productive heterogeneity of tobacco capitalism. In cultural and social terms, neoliberalism also entails “creativity” and “diversity,” which is what helps keep the industry afloat.

**Mexico-US migration literature**

This section examines what the Mexico-US migration literature has to say about migration between two economies based on capitalist relations of production. Although a large body of literature exists on Mexico-US migration, less attention has been paid to the study of the circular migration of seasonal agricultural labourers or mestizo migrant workers who do not come from rural subsistence economies. The idea that the economies of Mexico and the United States are vastly different, which has motivated Mexicans to look for better conditions in the USA, has guided the discussion on Mexico-US migration. However, I found that the same group of workers move in both directions within the tobacco industry, migrating from Mexico to the USA, returning to work in Mexico again, migrating again, returning again, and so on, all within a single global industry characterised in both places by fully capitalist relations of production.
Nayarit tobacco producers and workers follow the yearly cycle of tobacco in Nayarit and in Kentucky, following a crop they have known since their childhood. Although they move across national borders, their work trajectories and positionalities continue to be linked to the global tobacco industry in both places. I argue that both structural similarities and structural differences between the USA and Mexico have played an important part in the circular migration of mestizo agricultural workers. Although both regions have capitalist relations of production, regional heterogeneity in these relations within the tobacco industry has facilitated continued access to cheap, flexible labour - which is nevertheless skilled in the production of tobacco - and profitably supplies international tobacco companies with their raw material: the “golden” leaves.

In the following discussion, I unpack some of the component elements of Mexico-US migration studies. The first section offers a brief overview of the key Mexico-US migration frameworks, followed by a general analysis of the implications of circular migration: for example, how this kind of migration undermines the South-North and push-pull models, and the migration-development nexus. The policy-making approach is also challenged by the complexities of the tobacco workers' circular migration: for example, they cross legally, then become undocumented within the USA with no intention of remaining, and they return at the end of the tobacco harvest season.

Overview

Classic migration literature based on Marxist theories relied on pull-push models to explain why people cross borders. According to Bustamante (1975), the demand for cheap labour, lower rates of unemployment in the USA, and changes in immigration policies motivated undocumented Mexican migration. On the push side, “falling agricultural wages, rising food prices, a shift to capital-intensive production methods, and decreased opportunity for urban employment” and the railroads constituted favourable conditions for migration (Massey et al. 1987:40). This approach has been complemented by studies that emphasise the individual’s decision to migrate. According to neoclassical economic theory, individual
calculations on whether to migrate respond to wage-differentials between labour-receiving and labour-exporting countries (Portes 2008:21). In other words, migrants try to maximise their economic well-being (Escobar et al. 1998:195). Another group of migration studies focuses on networks and social capital as factors that sustain migration (see, for example, Durand 1988). Social networks are a central category in Portes’ analysis (2008:22); these networks “link not only migrants with their kin and communities in sending countries; they also link employers in receiving areas to migrants.”

Finally, community studies analyse the constitution of transnational circuits: “social and geographic spaces that arise through the constant circulation of people, money, goods, and information” (Rouse 1989, cited in Massey, Goldring, and Durand 1994). For example, Rouse (1992:27) draws attention to the way migrants from El Aguililla in the west-central region of Mexico, who move to Redwood City in northern California, maintain links with Mexico despite physical separation. Although transnational migration studies claim to focus on the circulation of people and recognise that people maintain multiple locations, positions and belongings (see, for example, Anthias 2008), how workers can circulate within the same industry on an annual basis has been overlooked. These studies focus on issues relating to identity, subjectivity and social relations within migrants’ networks, but they underestimate the importance of continuities and changes in migrants’ structural positioning in the labour market shaped by their periodic circulation within the same capitalist industry. These studies of transnational communities have focused either on long-term settlers who maintain strong social ties with their communities of origin through objects, information and frequent travel, or on people who returned when they felt they had saved enough money and were successful. However, these studies have not paid adequate attention to the increasing flows of workers in both directions on a regular basis within the same industry.
Implications

While most of my findings fit into the literature about Mexico-US migration, the migratory circuit within which some Mexican tobacco workers belong has not been analysed by the migration literature. My contribution fits within what Escobar identifies as low wage and flexible labour migration; as Cornelius (2006:12) describes, immigrants have come to fill particular niches in the US economy, “jobs that are low-skill, low-wage, manual, and often, dirty, repetitive, and dangerous.” However, my findings provide a new perspective on migration through the analysis of the circular migration of tobacco workers. The migration of tobacco workers in both directions challenges the conventional narrative in the literature, evident in the delta river metaphor by Escobar et al. (1998:170):

When the Bracero Program was in operation, the flow of Mexicans north was largely confined to the channel created by legal recruitment. Blocking that channel by abolishing the Bracero Program in 1964 thus stopped the migration flow temporarily. The migration soon resumed, however, with a myriad of small streams the vehicle for Mexicans migrating north.

In the case of the Mexican tobacco workers, the river metaphor and the Escobar et al. (1998:164) model: “demand-pull factors in the US, supply-push factors in Mexico, and network factors that bridge the border,” obscure the fact that migration exists in both directions, as do the pull-push factors: for example, there are also pull factors in the Mexican tobacco economy which encourage labourers to return. There is work available on the tobacco fields in Nayarit, and access to state social security is the main reason for staying in tobacco production there. In sum, the circular migration of some of the Nayarit tobacco workers is based on the regional heterogeneity within the same tobacco industry.

World-systems and other neo-Marxist theories perceive “labour migration as a natural response to the penetration of weaker societies by the economic and political institutions of the developed world” (Portes 2008:21), and have drawn some very important conclusions on the flows of people and commodities from this assumption. Portes (2008:22; 1978b), found that capitalist penetration in the form
of new wants and consumption expectations is part of the processes of Mexico-US migration. According to Escobar et al. (1998), many recent empirical studies have expanded to consider how migrants use their earnings to “obtain the funds needed to buy the consumer goods that neighbours were able to purchase with savings and remittances” (Stark 1991, cited in Escobar et al. 1998:195). A further way to understand the penetration of developing countries is through the impact of neoliberalisation on their agricultural economies. Escobar et al. (1998:198) describe how between 1988 and 1994, agriculture in Mexico began to be restructured, beginning with a withdrawal of government subsidies after 1988, and as a result there was a “massive movement off the land in Mexico” (Escobar et al. 1998:200-201). It was anticipated that the neoliberal reforms through NAFTA would displace Mexican farmers, and a transition to labour-intensive fruits and vegetables became the main alternative for rural Mexico (Escobar et al. 1998:203). However, focusing on the global tobacco industry, and the flow of tobacco workers between both countries, in both directions, shows that some rural workers have not been displaced from tobacco production. Furthermore, my research demonstrates that the uneven geographical development of neoliberalism worldwide has facilitated the emigration of workers and access to cheap labour.

Portes (2008:19) focuses on the link between development and migration by discussing two opposed approaches: one that perceives the “outflow of people not only as a symptom of underdevelopment but also as a cause of its perpetuation”, and another “that regard[s] migration both as a short-term safety valve and as a potential long-term instrument for sustained growth”. Cornelius (2006:9) describes the developmental approach to immigration control as the best alternative to reduce illegal migration significantly in the long run.

My approach differs from Escobar (2009) and Portes (2008) in that it captures some of the complexities of circular migration. Although Portes (2008:24) has noted that “cyclical labour migration can have positive developmental effects, especially at the community level,” my ethnographic research focuses more on the point of view of the tobacco industry and the tobacco workers themselves. In a framework that aims to understand the actual and potential interactions between migration and development, many Mexican tobacco workers, for example the crew
of seven, are not a loss for the Mexican economy, as has been argued for undocumented migrants. According to Escobar (2009:80), there is a link between the loss to the labour force and emigration, and the gain through remittances. However, my analysis suggests that one of the winners is the tobacco industry, because it can count on cheap and flexible labour in both countries, with the movement of labour between regions facilitated by the workers’ experience and skills working in the same industry in both places.

Literature understanding the state as an apparatus of regulation is another way to approach international migration (see, for example, Bustamante 1997). In particular, the concentrated border enforcement strategy has raised the financial costs and physical risks of illegal entry to the point where undocumented migrants are staying longer on each trip or are settling permanently in the United States (Cornelius 2005:782). Unlike Cornelius and Salehyan (2007), who analyse the situation of people who have crossed “illegally,” my focus is on tobacco workers, some of whom migrate as H-2A visa guest workers and become undocumented workers within the USA. When these workers return to Mexico by bus, the US border control is less strict as they are already on their way back to Mexico. This means that they have found ways to circumvent the Mexico-US border control using legal means.

Policy recommendations have become a major area of debate. Cornelius (2006), describing the border enforcement-only approach to immigration control, argues that the US government’s commitment to reducing the flow of unauthorised immigration from Mexico is wrong: “if current border enforcement efforts do little to counteract labor-market forces, then the ability of the state to enforce its immigration laws is undermined” (Cornelius and Salehyan 2007:140). Cornelius and Salehyan (2007:149) conclude that “political restrictions on immigration are far outweighed by economic and family-related incentives to migrate.” An alternative would be to facilitate “legal entry opportunities for low-skilled foreign workers through a guestworker program and/or providing a larger number of permanent, employment-based visas for such workers” (Cornelius and Salehyan 2007:150). Escobar et al. (1998:172) note that “there is no magic bullet solution such as a guest worker program to deal with unwanted Mexico-U.S. migration.” Escobar et al. have
recommended bilateral migration management as a strategy to deal with migration; economic growth and job creation in Mexico should reduce migration from Mexico to the USA (Escobar et al. 1998:236). Similarly, Bustamante (1997:1117) calls for both countries to act together, “to eliminate undocumented migration through a bilaterally negotiated process that would have to be concomitant to a formal agreement on labor migration” (Bustamante 1997:1113).

My thesis reveals the complexities of contemporary Mexican migration. For example, I found that H-2A visa workers program fits partially with the interests of the tobacco farmers, who employ both H-2A and undocumented workers. From the point of view of the tobacco workers, the H-2A visa allows them to enter legally, but forces them to become “illegals” if they want to escape the constraints of the H-2A visa and work more flexibly - e.g. with an employer other than the one assigned by the visa. My research thus suggests that migration should also be addressed from the point of view of global commodity chains, and how the companies controlling them benefit from the uneven geographical development of neoliberalism. This focus allows an examination of the links between the national work regimes regulated by different nation-states. In particular, from the point of view of the tobacco industry, the South-North migration model and the sending-receiving community frame do not explain the migration patterns of the tobacco workers, who on a seasonal basis move between two places connected by a common production regime. Moreover, the idea that pull factors only exist in the North is also contested, because tobacco workers are employed by the local production in Mexico as well. Although the wage gap and networks play a central role in shaping decisions to migrate, there is no intention of permanent settlement; migrants prefer to be on the move within the heterogeneous map of capitalist modes of production.

**Ethnographic research**

Fieldwork for this thesis was conducted between July 2012 and July 2013 in two sites: i) the tobacco farms surrounding the towns of Bethlehem, Pleasureville and Eminence, in Kentucky, USA, and ii) the town of Amapa, in Nayarit, Mexico. I did
participant observation and “participant listening” (Forsey 2010) in both tobacco regions. This allowed me to assemble my ethnographic material: life stories, discourses, descriptions, perceptions, expectations, narrations and some pictures of different actors in the various nodes of the production of tobacco.

My interest in exploring social inequalities and power relations within the tobacco industry began as an undergraduate, while I was researching the migration of a group of people from the Mexicanero and Tepehuano ethnic groups from the Mexican mountains to the coast of Nayarit. In an unexpected encounter with one of the employers in March 2006, I found that the tobacco farmers had themselves become migrants and farmworkers in the tobacco region in Kentucky. This encounter motivated me to start, borrowing Marcus’s (1995:106) phrase, “following the people” across time and space. This encounter also made me question my own assumptions about structures of power. I found that indigenous workers were not the only people the tobacco industry was exploiting; the tobacco growers themselves had been exploited in Kentucky. Although my concern with the positionality of indigenous workers guided most of my research at that time, I became particularly interested in the positionality of their employers in Kentucky. In September 2008, I conducted a three-month period of fieldwork in Kentucky for my Master’s degree in anthropology. In 2012, as part of my PhD, I was back in Kentucky to continue my research about the global tobacco industry. I was inspired by the way Mexican migrants find ways to regain control over their lives within structures of power.

This project is also highly motivated by ethical and political concerns over the process of research. In particular, many contrasting and mutually exclusive situations allowed me to gain insight into a multiple and internally heterogeneous network of actors (for example, Nayarit seasonal migrant workers, indigenous workers, and Kentucky tobacco producers) whose life projects have been affected by the privatisation of the tobacco industry. During the encounters between these different actors, people could see the inequalities shaping their own social contexts reflected in the lives of people they considered “others”, which made them more

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5 Exploitation is understood here in very general terms as the extraction of surplus value from labour.
aware of the inequalities shaping their own social contexts and accepting of the fact that people they considered “others” were not so different from themselves. In my case, my awareness of being an “outsider” in Kentucky and in Nayarit gave me access to different positionalities. “What on earth am I doing here?” I occasionally asked myself while in Kentucky. I remember I would get a feeling of strangeness first thing in the morning, as if I were a different person living with a family on a horse farm in Kentucky; as the day went on this feeling would fade. The family members were simultaneously strangers and friends, to borrow Powdermaker’s (1966) phrase. As time went on and different places became more familiar, I felt myself becoming part of the relationships I was trying to understand.

Another reason to partake in the exciting challenge of doing ethnography is the idea that dialogue between the ethnographer and different actors remains open. I agree with Jackson (2013:118) that “the justification for ethnography is not epistemological but existential.”

It cannot presume to know the other, for this would be to claim the last word, to bring dialogue to an end by declaring that something is now settled and grasped. Rather, the ethnographer seeks to provide an ethical justification for engagement with the other – answering the ethical summons to enter into that other lifeworld, not to achieve perfect comprehension of it but to call into question, and place in brackets, all that he or she customarily privileges as natural, moral, legal, or human.

I have to admit that there were many situations in which I could not challenge my judgment or call my ego into question: holding myself “hostage precisely because an economy of expectations or debts has yet to be established” (Levinas 1969, cited in Benson 2008:600). Nonetheless, this is precisely what allowed me to take part in people’s lives. I was constantly changing my activities, participation and attention among different groups of people whose relations were sometimes antagonistic. The fact that I had access to different groups of people who sometimes seemed to dislike each other or who were socially divided and antagonistic brought into focus many contradictions. In particular, knowing the exploitative situation in which the majority of workers found themselves, and the participation and collaboration of
the different actors in this, including myself, I could not help but feel awkward when getting into the Kentuckian farmers’ new trucks, or participating in the Baptist Church without being a true believer as they claimed to be. I felt uncomfortable when hearing racist comments and jokes about indigenous people that Nayarit people made. In other words, I found that Mexican workers and their Kentuckian employers and local people occupy different positions in the social structure. This was also evident in the politics of space. However, my presence acted as a communication bridge. When the crew of seven asked me to call their employer, I did so. When Brian asked me to translate for their workers, I agreed. Notwithstanding cultural stereotypes and colonial optics (Fabian 1983, cited in Benson 2008), the possibility arises that people challenge their own ideas about people they consider “others”.

Kentucky

I believe that “method is about choice” (Bernard 1998:9), but a choice guided by the subject of interest. Had the crew of seven not migrated to the United States, I would not have chosen Kentucky and Nayarit as my field sites. Hannerz (1998:240) suggests that in the selection of two places “there are choices to be confronted here and constraints to be taken into account, more varied and complicated than in the selection of a single site.” As the Nayarit guest workers normally live six months, from July to December, in the USA and six months, from January to June, in their hometown, I made living arrangements with a family in each place. I emailed the Kentuckian and Nayarit families I had met during my previous fieldwork. In 2012, Katherine, the employer of the crew of seven, helped me find a place to live in with a Mexican family, and in the second half of my fieldwork, the Nayarit family with whom I had lived in 2008 offered me accommodation in Nayarit. My choice of multi-sited ethnography was purposeful, given my interest in exploring the privatisation of the tobacco industry, which led to a durable connection between distinct areas of the same industry.

In 2012, I found myself back in the region of “bourbon, horses and history”, in Kentucky. Katherine, along with her daughter and grandson, picked me up from
Blue Grass Airport in Lexington. We went for lunch at the chain restaurant her
daughter was working at, and it was then when my research questions about the
positionality of the Kentucky growers were reformulated. After lunch, she took me
to Margarita and Vicente’s house, with whom I lived for six months. They are a
family of four: a mother and father and their two little girls at a horse farm located
on land surrounding the tobacco plantations. It was through their lives that I came
to see how a family of undocumented immigrants from Chiapas, located in the
south of Mexico, struggle for a “better life.”

The horse farm was a strategic place which allowed me to follow the
activities of a group of Nayarit workers during the summer, autumn and winter as
they worked at Brian’s tobacco farm that I first heard about in 2008. The first week
of August 2012, I visited the crew of seven at their caravan. However, I could not
visit them regularly until I bought a scooter, which became a mark of identity. The
tobacco growers and the Mexican workers were able to identify my presence by the
bright-orange fluorescent flag at the back of my scooter that Katherine’s father
recommended me to buy. It was a way I could easily be spotted by the locals from
their pickup trucks.

I spent most of the time in the tobacco fields, the barns, and the crew's
caravan. I conducted several informal interviews with the crew of seven in order to
collect information about the requirements that guest workers have to meet to be
recruited, such as fees, age, work experience and skills. I gathered information
about the contracts, wages, benefits, obligations and regulations. In particular, I
was looking for Nayarit workers’ opinions and experiences regarding tobacco
production. During this process, I was able to collect their life stories.

Another of my objectives was to visit different tobacco farms to compare
the working conditions. This allowed me to expand my social network. Through
snowball sampling, I established amiable relations with a group of H-2A visa guest
workers, who were mostly men aged between 30 and 50, and a group of
undocumented Mexican workers (settlers). There were so many life stories waiting
to be heard. I gathered information about working conditions and experiences in
the H-2A visa guest worker programme, including, for example, what workers liked,
what they did not like, what they thought must change and what issues concerned them.

Additionally, I had several conversations with Nayarit women who had been living in Kentucky for many years. My participation as a volunteer in an immigrants’ programme for English as a second language gave me better access to these families. For example, during winter, when it became too cold to ride my scooter, the Nayarit women who participated in the programme used to pick me up and take me home. I also conducted several informal interviews with the Kentuckian tobacco producers and their families, to whom I stressed my interest in today’s tobacco culture, the moral values surrounding tobacco and their experiences after the privatisation of the industry in 2004. I collected tobacco producer’s points of view about the most recent transformations of their towns, infrastructures, working conditions and fringe benefits. I was invited to Katherine’s house for Thanksgiving and New Year’s Eve, which allowed me to gain insight into the lives of local farmers. Local farmers and I appeared to share a common interest in pondering what the future holds for tobacco producers. Moreover, I found that growers have “good feelings”; they are not simply vectors of power. On Sunday, I attended a local Baptist church, which allowed me to interact with local people. Some of them used to invite me for supper and would offer to take me grocery shopping once a week.

I twice visited the Philip Morris buying station to compare it with my previous experience in 2008. I found that things had changed, as more workers had been replaced by forklift trucks. Finally, I moved out from the working places into the places Nayarit workers went in their “free” time, or when they were not working, such as: Walmart, Latino groceries, Chinese restaurants and the Flea Market.

Nayarit

The second stage of my fieldwork was planned to coincide with the arrival of the crew of seven and the Nayarit tobacco-harvesting season, which runs from January to May every year. The purpose of this stage was to gather data with indigenous
agricultural workers, mestizo agricultural workers and Nayarit tobacco growers. In May one two-week field trip was made to Kentucky during the tobacco transplanting season, and in June a one-week field trip was made to the mountains of Nayarit.

I spent time in the tobacco fields and conducted several informal interviews with indigenous workers and their employers. My first attempt to conduct interviews with the families of indigenous workers proved extremely disappointing, because they move between plantations every few weeks. However, identifying families by working through employers who generally knew who was working where proved helpful. I regularly visited Juan’s tobacco fields, where one of the members of the crew, José, and a family of indigenous workers were working. I gathered indigenous migrant workers’ opinions and experiences in the production of tobacco, including, for example, the things they liked, the facts they did not like, the conditions they thought needed to change and their other concerns. I also conducted informal interviews with Nayarit tobacco producers to gather their points of view about the most recent transformations of their towns, infrastructures, working conditions and fringe benefits. Emilio, Juan and Roberto were key actors from whom I collected information about the privatisation of the tobacco industry.

I participated as volunteer in the Florece programme in Amapa, which consisted of a day care establishment and an independent school. This is a programme, co-funded by the tobacco industry and the Ministry for Social Development (SEDESOL), which aims to eradicate child labour in the tobacco fields. Each year the Florece schools compile a record of the children who attend their centres, recording their names, date of birth and locality of origin, as well as the names of their employers and the location of the plantation. It enabled me to interact with indigenous children, their teachers, and staff, who were all local people, as well as the medical doctor of the centre, who was a key informant. Each morning shortly after dawn a driver and I would collect the children who were enrolled at the centre in one of the Florece pickup trucks. During the mornings I helped in the kitchen and I helped look after the children. In the Florece centre I was also able to meet employers affiliated with British American Tobacco.
Furthermore, I had several conversations with Nayarit women who migrate to the USA. I visited the families of the crew of seven, and I spent time with my host Nayarit family and my neighbours. In Amapa I lived with a local family I had met in 2008. Vicente and Esperanza, who became good friends of mine, offered me free accommodation during my fieldwork in their home town. Their son Pablo, his wife Martha and their daughter were living in the same house.

Women were key actors in collecting information about the arrangements of the departure of the guest workers, and I gathered their experiences as women who are left alone while their husbands, fathers and brothers are in the USA. Many of these conversations were recorded in my field diary. These contributed to my understanding of how women challenge the traditional division of labour between the husband as breadwinner and wife as housewife.

Large proportions of my time in the field were dedicated to understanding how mestizo people understand their world. This required me to spend many days with locals, in the convenience stores, the river during the Holy week, the clinic, the banks, the tobacco fields and the fronts of their houses where they typically sit at sunset to talk informally about life on the move and on the coast. Visiting the area in a light aircraft and attending football matches were also strategies to gather different views of ongoing changes in tobacco production.

During my fieldwork I came to understand that it was not only the crew of seven and their families who were asking for respect, but so too was everyone involved in tobacco production: the farmworkers, their employers and also the tobacco companies' workers. Everyone felt they were doing a good job, and that they were being fair with the people who were in a lower position, but no one felt that the industry had rewarded their efforts and the work involved in sustaining the production of tobacco. The different positionalities, including my own, and my engagement with a claim of respect allowed me to understand how important putting oneself in another person’s shoes was as part of my methodology.
**Organisation of the thesis**

In this introductory chapter, I have established a key argument of this thesis: that Kentucky and Nayarit are both pervaded by capitalist relations of production, thus contesting the idea that Nayarit or the global South is characterised predominantly by non-capitalist relations of production. To begin moving beyond the dual-economy model, I outline my approach below, guided by a comparative perspective between Kentucky and Nayarit.

The second chapter, *Growing Tobacco*, gives an overview of the world as seen by tobacco farmers. I focus mainly on the tobacco growing experiences of three Kentuckian farmers, Brian, Jim and Bob, along with their families. By also focusing on the lives of three Nayarit growers, Roberto, Juan and Emilio, I aim to explore how differently, or “hard”, in their own words, the situation of tobacco growers is experienced in each location. How is work perceived in varied regions of tobacco production? How is labour regulated in places connected by the same global industry? How do the employers of Nayarit workers normalise their position and their workers’ conditions? What are the different systems of values and morality that intersect at the encounter between white Kentuckian farmers and mestizo workers? What are the different systems of values and morality that intersect at the encounter between mestizo farmers and their local and indigenous workers? These questions, among others, inform my analysis of the differences and similarities between Kentucky and Nayarit. By focusing on different groups of tobacco growers, I examine how Nayarit and Kentucky have some aspects in common. For example, both places have undergone a process of privatisation and are fully integrated into the global tobacco industry. However, there are also some differences, which are linked to the fact that Nayarit farmers cannot make a living out of the production of tobacco in their town, so migration to the USA has become part of their lives, whereas the Kentuckian farmers must also find a second job but can do so outside agriculture and without leaving their country.

The third chapter, *Working Tobacco Hands*, examines the world as seen by tobacco farmworkers; particularly it analyses their antagonistic class relations. In Kentucky, antagonistic class relations between the crew and their employers are
more visible than in Nayarit between mestizo employers and their workers, because in the latter these are mediated by the presence of indigenous workers, family ties and friendship relations. Hence the experience of work being a different embodied experience in Kentucky and Nayarit, which reflected a structural condition. Different ways of being wage-earners are not only embodied in different categories of workers, but are also interiorised by the very same workers. The land reform and the social policies in Mexico combined with cultural factors are directly related to the protection of low wages, but not dignified lives. I argue that their condition of being a low-paid and sometimes unpaid workforce is informed by cultural meaning and ideas of what is considered adequate, and is framed by an ideology of exchange. While realising their condition of exploitation, the workers still manage to pursue their life projects.

The fourth chapter, *Labour Commodification and Resistance*, examines the refusal of workers to commodify all aspects of their lives. It centres on the daily struggle of being commodified and being a person. How do tobacco farmworkers cope with the limited possibilities to negotiate their living and working conditions? I use a comparative approach between Kentucky and Nayarit to examine how the same group of workers experiences the duality of commodity/person in both places. In doing so, the differences and similarities between Kentucky and Nayarit will be discussed.

The fifth chapter, *Mexican Identity, Race and Ethnicity*, analyses how race and ethnicity operate in everyday life in Kentucky and in Nayarit. Race forms a common pan-American framework for thinking about hierarchical difference, thus showing similarities between Kentucky and Nayarit. However, the category of “indigenous” in Nayarit, which does not have an equivalent in Kentucky, is the most exploited category, while the category of “(illegal) Mexican” in Kentucky is found at the bottom of the ladder there. I focus on the experiences of the crew of seven men in order to address why the same workers have felt themselves to be targets of racism at the US-Mexican border, and yet denied suffering racism in Kentucky; and why in Nayarit, where they occupy a different social position and positionality, they denied the existence of practices of racial discrimination against indigenous workers.
The sixth chapter, *Gendered Independence*, evokes the experience of being male or female in Nayarit and Kentucky. In both places, common structures of patriarchy linked to work and capitalism are pervasive, but not without differences in the way these structures are experienced by the same people. Gender relations were often expressed in both Kentucky and Nayarit by the emic notion of independence, linked to work: for example, “when women work, they feel independent”. This chapter discusses how men have a certain form of independence in Nayarit and a different form in Kentucky. It shows how women in Nayarit can enjoy a certain kind of independence while their husbands are in the USA. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s work on capitalism and schizophrenia, I argue that the workers, who have turned into flexible workers, are brought into stability and discipline by their families, who stay at home, in a process that is crucial to tobacco capitalism.
Chapter 2: Growing tobacco

No two farmers are the same and tobacco farms vary greatly in terms of scale and activity.6

Certainly, Kentuckian and Mexican tobacco growers are not the same. However, the tobacco growers (on both small and large scale farms) in each place are in a similar position of having to deal with the changing character of the tobacco industry. Tobacco growers in each place have to cope with instability, unpredictability and risk, which are constitutive characteristics of global capitalism. But there are also important differences in the way growers deal with their situations of uncertainty, and the way in which they operate with the tobacco companies: for example, Kentuckian tobacco growers have Mexican workers for producing quality tobacco, and they have second jobs to pay for health insurance, whereas Nayarit growers have indigenous workers to take on the activities that they themselves are not willing to do, such as stringing tobacco, and they produce tobacco to have health insurance. Moreover, Nayarit farmers and farmworkers migrate to the United States to pay for a house in Mexico. In this chapter, I foreground the tobacco growers’ voices, and their experiences and strategies for holding out in the tobacco industry. I explore how they have come to interpret the production of tobacco leaf after the restructuring of the tobacco industry. In Kentucky, tobacco growers perceive it to be a “gamble”; they do not know if they will stay in the business from one season to the next. Similarly, in Nayarit the production of tobacco is perceived to be volatile. These perceptions are linked mainly to the changing weather conditions and the quality of the land. However, weather conditions are not the only concern of Nayarit growers; they are also worried about the tobacco leaf buyers’ lack of objectivity in regard to the quality of tobacco. It is commonly believed that the tobacco companies in Nayarit “are a mafia,” a Nayarit grower told me. Other ideas are held by growers in both Nayarit and Kentucky, for example, the idea that the production of tobacco is about to completely die out.

After the restructuring of the tobacco industry, the production of tobacco now appears to be very well planned and controlled “to achieve the texture, colour and overall quality of a specific tobacco type.”\(^7\) The companies need to be able to ensure a fairly homogenous product from all their operations, no matter what the exact production arrangements are.\(^8\) However, the new quality control measures have generated discontent among the tobacco farmers in Nayarit and in Kentucky. The growers have found that the new guidelines and regulations for producing tobacco of a certain quality do not fit their practices. They are conscious of the differences from previous years when the production of tobacco was less regulated, the growers participated more and regional and local knowledges played an important role (see Madera 2009). Moreover, the tobacco growers were then in a less dependent position relative to the companies, because the state acted as a mediator between the companies and the tobacco growers. State intervention postponed the vertical and horizontal integration of the tobacco industry. In this chapter I will explore how tobacco growers in each place experienced the changes in the role of state intervention.

Although the participation and knowledge of the growers seems to have been more important in the production of tobacco in the past than it is currently, the growers are still able to contribute to the process with different strategies and ideas. Such contributions are inextricably entwined with the values, emotions, fears and desires of the farmers, which the companies, such as Philip Morris and British American Tobacco, seemingly tend to ignore.\(^9\) The notion that the production of tobacco


\(^8\) One can see the same processes of cigarette manufacturing throughout the world, as it is put in a virtual factory tour at British American Tobacco Switzerland: http://www.bat.com/oneneweb/forms.nsf/uk.VirtualFactory/$FILE/enter.htm (accessed 21 January 2016).

\(^9\) I will focus on two of the top six corporations that control the cigarette industry worldwide. Philip Morris and British American Tobacco are the companies related to the people among whom I worked during fieldwork in 2012 and 2013. Philip Morris’s brands include Marlboro, the world’s number one cigarette brand since 1972, L&M, Fortune, Bond Street, Parliament, Sampoerna, Philip Morris and Chesterfield as well as various local brands. British American Tobacco’s global brands are Dunhill, Kent, Lucky Strike and Pall Mall.
tobacco is woven with growers’ values is obvious, but how these values, emotions, fears and desires are linked with the positionality of the tobacco growers is not obvious. I draw on the notion that economy is always moral, which implies an awareness of the commonplace contradictions in everyday life (see Sykes 2009). This argument is not new. Nevertheless, “what is moral about moral economy” (Sykes 2009) will be discussed here through grounded reflection. In particular, my interest is to reflect on what seems to be a set of moral demands or the moral ethos of the tobacco growers and their ideas of belonging to a “person of a kind” (Goffman 1969) who demands acknowledgement as such, as persons (and as the tobacco growers). This reflection allows me to explore the idea that Mexican and Kentuckian tobacco growers are very similar in many aspects; “it is the same here as in Kentucky,” a Mexican tobacco grower told me. I was unable to take this for granted, because the rural United States is commonly depicted as developed whereas rural Mexico is commonly presented as underdeveloped. In Kentucky, the production of tobacco relies more on tractors than people, whereas in Nayarit it is the opposite. However, I found that some of the demands of the tobacco growers in Kentucky are similar to the demands of the tobacco growers in Nayarit. That being said, the way growers in each place exert moral demands upon others, particularly their workers, is different. For example, Nayarit growers tell their workers not to bring their children to work in the tobacco fields, not out of concern, but because the companies say so. In Kentucky, there is no child labour, but growers demand loyal workers.

In the first section of this chapter, “Politico-economic background”, I will discuss the role of the state interventionism in reframing the relationships between the tobacco growers and the companies. In the second section, “Good agricultural practices”, I will discuss the social programme of the companies from the growers’ vantage point. In the third section, “Kentucky tobacco”, I will examine how Kentuckian growers have been dealing with the deregulation of the global tobacco industry. I will focus mainly on the experiences of three farmers and their families in growing tobacco: Brian, Jim and Bob. Brian and his wife Katherine have been employing the group of Mexican workers that I have been following in their migration since 2008. Finally, in the fourth section, “Nayarit tobacco”, my aim is to
find out how Mexican growers live the process of growing the same crop: tobacco. I focus on the idea that the production of tobacco is the same everywhere, or, as a tobacco grower put it: *es la misma*. The growers in both places are in a relationship of dependency with the companies, as without a tobacco leaf buyer the growers lose everything. However, the contracts with the companies vary. For example, Nayarit tobacco production is financed by the companies, whereas in Kentucky the production of tobacco and machinery are paid for with bank loans.

**Politico-economic background**

I initially came to the conclusion after fieldwork that the power of the tobacco companies resulted from and reinforces a concentration process, and an exploitation and objectification of labour wilder and more anarchical than in the Fordist-Keynesian era. This black-and-white vision in which the companies are against the growers and workers whom they oppress would have been simple to understand. However, in bringing to the fore the perspectives and practices of the growers, with the companies’ goal of offering a homogenous range of tobacco products as the backdrop, I came to see that the relationship between the tobacco companies and the growers is subtle and contradictory. After the tobacco companies introduced new guidelines and increased regulations for the production of tobacco, the growers reacted angrily. The tobacco growers do not want to be told what to do. They know how to grow tobacco; it is a legacy from their parents and grandparents.

Next I will examine some of the key moments in the transformation of the tobacco industry in Nayarit and in Kentucky. These tobacco regions are located in two countries permeated by different realities, but subjected to similar neoliberal reforms. According to Harvey (2005:11) “the neoliberal project is to disembed capital from state constraints.” Nevertheless, the state still plays an active role in the fabrication of “subjectivities, social relations and collective representations suited to making the fiction of markets real and consequential” (Wacquant 2012:68). I will next give an account of the neoliberal transformations of the
tobacco industry in Nayarit and in Kentucky, focusing on the capacity of the companies to adapt to new demands.

Between 1972 and 1990, Tabacos Mexicanos (Tabamex), a semi-state company, regulated the tobacco wholesale market in Mexico. 52% of the shares were owned by the federal government, 24% by the Confederación Nacional Campesina, or the National Peasant Confederation, which acts as the representative confederation of the peasants, and the final 24% by the tobacco companies that operated in Mexico in the 1970s, which were mainly transnationally owned companies (Mackinlay 1999:152). La Moderna, and Cigarrera la Tabacalera Mexicana (Cigatam) had almost total control over national tobacco production. Tabamex, following public policies of state intervention based on Keynesian economic models, was used to restrict the influence of transnational corporations. In practice, it was used more to prevent outbreaks of social unrest that could endanger the apparent “peace” imposed by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party or PRI) than to promote the interests and welfare of the tobacco growers (Mackinlay 2011:216). In consideration of the outcomes of state interventionism, it has been argued (Mackinlay 2011:258) that Tabamex’s prevailing interest was in political rather than economic issues.

Transactions between companies and tobacco growers were made under government supervision to avoid arbitrariness (Mackinlay 2011:247). Growers were approached as a key part of the formerly national industry of tobacco. One of the first clashes between the growers and the companies that Tabamex had to mediate took place in 1974. The tobacco companies had refused to pay full price for their tobacco, due to its yellowish colour, and demanded a 40% discount. Tabamex and the growers agreed to each subsidise half of this discount. This idea of protectionism still permeates the memories of growers: these were the years of the Golden Coast, abundance and the celebrations that the tabaqueros used to have after getting the raya (getting paid). However, this came to an end with the sale of

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10 The PRI was founded in 1929, and ruled uninterruptedly the country for 71 years from 1929 to 2000.
11 The region of large-scale tobacco production by which at least two generations enjoyed the abundance and fertility of the land was commonly referred to as the Costa de Oro or Golden Coast.
Tabamex in 1989, commonly seen as the beginning of a new phase in the economic and social life of Nayarit (Castellón 1992:43). But it was not only the sale of an important company that affected the growers, but also ruptures with the idea of social justice.

By mid-1997 two transnationals, Cigatam, a subsidiary of Philip Morris, and La Moderna, a subsidiary of British American Tobacco, had gained control over much of the national market. With them emerged a new set of institutional arrangements. For example, individual negotiations without state intervention developed between tobacco producers and transnational companies. Moreover, a significant decrease in both the amount of contracted land for tobacco and the numbers of growers kept widespread discontent alive among the families of the tobacco growers, the population of the tobacco towns and the leaders of the tobacco growers. Apparently, the tobacco companies were purchasing less tobacco, and imported tobacco was replacing local tobacco. Finally, a process of concentration of land began to develop.

The trajectory of the tobacco industry in the United States is similar to that in Mexico. Actual arrangements in the tobacco industry in the United States were preceded by the New Deal programmes aimed to protect the tobacco industry, under the banner of wealth redistribution, which followed policies of state intervention similar to those in Mexico.

The main programme consisted of a tobacco quota and tobacco price support, which regulated and protected US tobacco production from 1933 to 2004, when the US government approved the Fair and Equitable Tobacco Reform Act (or “tobacco buyout”). With the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, commodity programmes for tobacco, cotton and rice were promoted. In particular, the New Deal acreage-control policies froze the geographical areas where tobacco could be grown (Daniel 1984:23), thus keeping tobacco prices artificially high. Only those who had the quota could grow specific amounts of tobacco. In other words, the quota was attached to the land. This system enabled a common form of “southern tenure,” a system of owners, tenants, and sharecroppers along the Burley Belt (Daniel 1984:431). Tobacco growers engaged in various arrangements, for example, one farmer could own the quota while another grower raised the tobacco for a
share of the crop, depending on who supplied the labour, barns and other inputs. The conditions of this system were favourable to the landowners, who were in receipt of government guaranteed tobacco prices and loans. At the end of the twentieth century arguments were made against the system, whereby poundage quotas could either be leased or sold, and it came to an end along with the restructuring of a way of life. When the guaranteed tobacco prices and loans programmes were cancelled, direct contracting with growers allowed companies to take direct control over production. The few growers who decided to hold out were negatively impacted by these changes in the tobacco industry.

According to Daniel (1984:111), farmers, warehousemen, manufacturers and the federal government cooperated with each other to stabilise the production of tobacco. The banks were involved in the arrangements and, along with the United States Department of Agriculture Farm Service Agency (USDA FSA), gave farm loans. However, the USDA FSA cancelled their loan programmes after the 2004 Tobacco Reform Act was approved. The Act promoted agriculture transition with financial support until 2014. In particular, the Tobacco Transition Payment Program (TTPP), consisting of annual transitional payments known as the “tobacco buyout”, aimed to launch the transition of producers to the “free market”, but in reality it accelerated their exit from the tobacco business.

The tobacco buyout “eliminated tobacco quotas and tobacco price supports and allowed producers to plant any amount or type of tobacco regardless of geographic location” (Foreman and McBride 2011). While producers were given “the freedom to plant as much tobacco as they wished, they were also exposed to increased market and price risks, ultimately impacting their ability to adapt to current market conditions” (Foreman and McBride 2011). After the buyout, half of the tobacco farms disappeared, and the concentration of land among fewer farms has been increasing. In other words, the tobacco growers who stayed in business farm more hectares of tobacco than they did previously, an average of 34 hectares compared to 13 hectares in 2004. Production efficiency increased, but the prices of tobacco remained below the average prior to the buyout. Thus, the elimination of the quota programmes generated more competition, market risks and structural changes at the farm, regional and market wide levels. Moreover, it proved to be
disadvantageous to the growers’ lives, which deteriorated rapidly in the neoliberal context.

In Kentucky, a new set of institutional arrangements developed after the elimination of the auction houses that guaranteed tobacco prices. The prices and grading of tobacco generate fears among growers. However, growers were encouraged by the 2012 tobacco price. According to Snell (2012), it was “the most interesting season for burley tobacco during the post-buyout era.” This generated positive expectations among farmers although, despite the good news, growers remain anxious.

In sum, Tabamex regulated and protected the national production of tobacco in Mexico between 1972 and 1990. Moreover, it mediated relations between the tobacco companies and the tobacco growers, thus avoiding arbitrariness and delaying the vertical integration of the tobacco industry. After the privatisation of the industry in the 1990s, the way growers were approached changed dramatically: they started being approached mainly as enterprises. Similarly, the US government protected the national production of tobacco between 1933 and 2004, when tobacco industry was privatised. In Mexico and in Kentucky alike, neoliberal reforms affected the former arrangements between the state and the tobacco companies, resulting in the growers becoming increasingly dependent on global corporations.

**Good agricultural practices**

I have suggested that the growers did not support the tobacco companies’ new regulations. The growers feel that the quality control and ethical regulations were introduced solely to address market concerns, without regard for the real effects on farmers’ lives. Overall, the tobacco companies strive for a particular quality of tobacco, which burdens growers with more labour and restricts their room for manoeuvre.\(^{12}\) For example, Philip Morris recommends crop rotation and appropriate use of agrochemicals. However, Kentuckian farmers argue that they do

\(^{12}\) I am inspired by Lara’s (1998) discussion of quality in her analysis of women’s participation in the production of tomato in Sinaloa in Mexico and the harvesting of flowers in the State of Mexico.
not have enough extra land to practise crop rotation and the result is the overuse of the land they have. In Nayarit, crop rotation is very limited and inappropriate use of agrochemicals has become a common strategy to stay afloat in the business (as discussed in more detail below). On the other hand, ethical concerns framed by what the tobacco companies call social responsibility in tobacco production have produced criticism among the farmers, who find these to be a façade rather than a real change in any positive direction. For example, British American Tobacco Mexico claims to have given voice to their growers. In one of its articles entitled “Cosechando con mi amigo el productor de Tabaco”, they acknowledge one of the best tobacco growers of the region of Santiago Ixcuintla in Nayarit. But when I spoke with that grower, Pedro, he complained that his suggestion to improve the situation of the growers had been deleted from the publication. Moreover, Nayarit growers and Kentuckian growers alike felt that they were being blamed for situations for which they were not totally responsible, such as child labour.

The companies’ newfound environmental concern is a key aspect framing their new way of producing tobacco. They say they aim to:

- combine viable tobacco production with positive environmental management including: soil and water conservation; appropriate use of agrochemicals; environmental, occupational health and safety standards in tobacco leaf processing; and promoting afforestation programmes to enable farmers who require wood for tobacco curing to obtain it from sustainable sources.\(^\text{13}\)

In Nayarit, growers have to practise the correct disposal of empty pesticide containers, but they cannot always make a trip to the receiving stations of the companies. Moreover, improving growers’ local environments and livelihoods are some of the new goals of the companies: “our aim is to ensure that farmers’ standards of living are maintained or increased through the introduction of good

agricultural practices.” However, from the point of view of the growers, the companies have contributed nothing “good” to the tobacco towns. The tobacco industry can also be understood as a “field of forces” and a field of struggles, the latter “tending to transform or conserve this field of forces” (Bourdieu 1993:30). From the perspectives of the growers, the interests of the companies are far removed from their own interests. The growers’ interests are not reflected in the new agricultural practices, which include measures to help protect the environment, ensure sustainable crops, provide a safe working environment for farm workers and prevent child labour. These practices are not part of the growers’ priorities when it comes to the quality of the tobacco leaf. In sum, they want to be paid for what they have worked, but without increasing their responsibilities.

The tobacco companies foster specific knowledge, skills and responsibilities in their producers. The growers think they do so by controlling the tobacco prices, particularly through a classification of different qualities based on moisture content, colour and weight. This entails that tobacco growers must adhere to a particular idea of quality indicated in the buying agreement they sign with the company. Interestingly, the idea of quality is translated into the daily experiences of the tobacco growers, into a changing grammar of tobacco. Furthermore, quality is a responsibility passed on to the tobacco farm workers. The companies aim to control the production of tobacco step by step, from the selection of the seeds to the final product. From seed to packed tobacco, Philip Morris executives track and manage adherence to their guidelines through their “Tobacco Identity Preservation Program (TIPP), a system of quality sampling and testing that takes place during every step in every tobacco leaf’s journey to PMI.”

To ensure traceability and provide us with a global view of the quality of every tobacco crop we combine TIPP data with comprehensive reporting on

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the development of each crop: from seedbed to field, through curing, grading and processing to the destination warehouse and into the manufacturing process.
We also expect our leaf suppliers to follow all seed importation regulations and phytosanitary (seed health) requirements, keep detailed records and results from variety evaluations, and engage in any national programs for variety development or evaluation.\textsuperscript{16}

The companies want producers to adjust their practices and mentality (towards ensuring the fair treatment of workers, practising environmental protection, etc.), but in everyday practice neither of these goals of adjustment is achieved. Growers have their own opinions about how production should be done and what moral values are worth defending.

The farmers argue that despite the hard work they invest in tobacco, along with their “commitment” and “loyalty”, it is not always appreciated. They argue that the tobacco companies impose the tobacco quality standards and prices. The quality standards are translated into different tobacco grades, which did not exist prior to the 1990s. It is also about strict management of the crop, where planting, harvesting, and stripping must be done at the right time and the responsibility lies with the growers. The growers argue that quality standards translated into different grades enables the companies to pay them less for their tobacco, which belittles their efforts. It is frustrating when the production “is not good”, the colour is not good, the weather is not good, and so on, as if tobacco were an “enchanted” object. “It is like a gamble,” I was told by a Kentuckian tobacco grower. The main hope of the Mexican growers is that the companies switch to using one or two tobacco prices, or perhaps three (good, regular and bad), instead of the 16-price structure it changed to after privatisation. In Kentucky, the growers hope that the companies begin giving them long-term contracts instead of one-year contracts. Nevertheless, the relations between growers and the companies continue (in contradictory ways). The growers are happy again when the “colour of tobacco is perfect, chocolate, the smell is sweet, the texture is good, the weight is good.”

\textsuperscript{16} Information is available from:
There is another important aspect which generates different opinions among the growers. The companies are forced to inform the consumer about the risks of smoking. BAT claims to be a socially responsible company, for example, by providing information about the different risk profiles of its products: “to help consumers make informed choices.”17 Kentuckian growers do not think tobacco companies strive to improve public health, but simply to burden them with more tasks and restrictions for less pay for their tobacco bales. Sometimes, the growers strongly believe, it seems as if the production of tobacco becomes a battlefield, in which the companies fight against the growers. The companies’ stance on consumers making informed choices has returned to the growers in particular and disadvantageous ways. For example, Brian, who is against smoking like other growers, could not renew his lease on a spot of land which he used to grow tobacco, because its owner changed his mind after being persuaded that producing tobacco promotes smoking.

Brian does not think that producing tobacco means promoting smoking or that it makes him an accomplice of the tobacco companies in this respect. Tobacco growers present themselves as independent growers and human beings. Their moral ethos has nothing to do with the ethics of smoking or not. Brian repeated the same argument he had had in 2008 when I asked him again in 2012 what he thought of the widespread belief that smoking is related to lung cancer. He said smoking is an individual choice, as is wearing a seat belt. He assuredly told me that the government does not have the authority to tell anyone to wear a seat belt or to quit smoking, though he hates smoking and instead prefers snus (tobacco for chewing). However, he thinks it is different for his granddaughter (nine years old in 2012), who cannot yet decide whether she should or should not wear a seat belt. Another grower, Jane, has a similar opinion: smoking is an individual choice. Jane is a pharmacy assistant and one of the few women, and one of the youngest, tobacco growers. She told me that although she grows tobacco she does not support smoking; she herself does not smoke and she does not tell other people to smoke.

The companies are looking for farmers with particular moral values: values that promote the quality, productivity and sustainability of tobacco farming. In practice, tobacco growers follow various strategies to stay in business, make a profit and direct their labour. They are more concerned with the quality of their tobacco than the working and living conditions of their workers. This means that workers have to work long hours to achieve the quality standards. However, growers re-humanise workers when they need loyal and hard-working people to do the menial jobs, thus aligning their ideas with the companies that say that action plans are put in place if minimum requirements such as no child labour, no exploitation of labour and respect for freedom of association are not met. “If suppliers continue to fail to meet the minimum requirements, they risk losing their position as a supplier to BAT.” 18 The tobacco companies are making some effort to be more ethical but it does not work well in practice because growing tobacco is structurally violent and dehumanising. Who are the tobacco growers in each place? What are their expectations? Why do they feel that the companies they work for seem to be against their interest?

Kentucky tobacco

The “buyout” has engendered tumultuous change in the lives of the Kentuckian people I spoke to. By 2012, almost a decade had passed since the privatisation of the tobacco industry, and the growers had not seen any improvement in their lives. The annual transitional payments helped some growers hold out, but with overwhelming uncertainty about their future. Another battle the growers feel they are fighting is against the government. They believe that not only the tobacco companies but also the government is against them, and is destroying everything that their grandparents, parents and they themselves had worked for; they think the government is destroying their way of life: a life of work and effort.

A key transformation entailed by the restructuring of the tobacco industry is the consolidation of family farms dependent on neighbouring families into the

current large-scale farms. Ann, Bob’s mother, recalled that her parents had been tenant farmers. They worked the land for many years and gave part of what they produced to the landowner. Many years passed before they were able to buy their own land. Bob’s grandmother is in her 80s and she is now the owner of the land she and her husband had farmed for many years during the second half of the twentieth century. She used to lease it to other tobacco growers and farmers, including Brian and her grandson Bob, until she became concerned about the ethics of smoking and decided to remove the lease on her land.

The landscape is also an expression of the way that life and work are changing. The fields that employed many generations of tobacco growers currently host goats, abandoned machinery, hay and horses. Local young people are no longer seen working the land. The old tobacco farms have been turned into horse farms, which is a new way of doing “good business,” my neighbour told me. The tobacco bulk barns, which were a distinct local marker and an important technological advance in the region in the 1970s, are turning into memories and photographs to be collected (Figure 1). Some of the remaining buildings are still in good condition, but others will not stand for much longer, as parts of their wooden roofs and ivy-covered walls have already fallen down and are disintegrating into the soil.

The hilly tobacco roads, which connect each corner of the region, are still in good condition. Pickup trucks and tractors will use these roads for decades to come. Along these roads are long fences enclosing land and cattle. The houses sit behind the fields, but many are out of sight and scattered. The locals love their privacy. Caravans are also a part of the landscape, and are more visible. Convenience stores with gas stations also contribute to the distinctive character of the tobacco towns; these stores are important gathering places, but the petrol prices and the companies running them are constantly changing. Local churches, mainly Evangelical Protestant churches, which are central to these towns are also changing, employing new pastors and losing old members.
In what follows, I will reflect on the anthropomorphism of tobacco and machines, and the dehumanisation of labour, through the experiences of Brian, Jim, Bob and their families. All three of them produce Burley tobacco for Philip Morris International (PMI).

**Tobacco as an enchanted object**

Tobacco leaves hanging in the barns make for a fascinating setting. When sunlight shines on a tobacco leaf, it is possible to appreciate its golden colour, the perfect colour the grower works so hard to achieve. However, it seems that the tobacco leaves have a will of their own. In this section, I will follow the mechanisms by which a tobacco leaf appears to become an enchanted object. In its document about “Growing Tobacco,” Philip Morris depicts the process of growing tobacco as follows:
The growing process for tobacco has not changed much in the last 200 years. Technology has been added, of course, to make production more efficient, but the different stages of the process remain more or less the same: crop planning, crop cultivation, harvesting, curing, and grading and assessing.

In the first stage of the growing process, tobacco seeds are sown in specially constructed seedbeds. At the same time, farmers carefully prepare the soil in their fields. After two months in the beds, the seeds have grown into plants approximately 15-20 centimetres high and are ready to be transplanted to the field. The plants grow in the field for a further two to three months. Throughout the growing process, the plants are cultivated to maximize yield and quality, the soil is tended regularly, and care is taken to protect the plants from pests and disease.

Harvesting is the next stage of the process. Harvesting is either done leaf by leaf in the case of Virginia and oriental tobaccos, or by the whole plant, in the case of burley. Harvesting has to take place when the leaves are mature (or ripe) and in prime condition for the next stage, the curing process.

Curing plays a major role in contributing to the final leaf quality. Different ways of curing are used for different types of tobacco: air-curing for burley, flue-curing for Virginia, and sun-curing for oriental.

Once the leaves are cured, they are sorted according to their quality and stalk position. The leaves are then packed into bales ready to be shipped. Tobacco bales are moved to a buying station where they are assessed and subsequently purchased by leaf buyers.

The tobacco is then processed, which for the burley and Virginia tobaccos includes separation of the leaf from the stem. The tobacco is dried, packed into cases, and shipped to our manufacturing centres around the world.19

These stages seem fixed in the minds of the growers in Kentucky and Nayarit. Every time I asked them about the process of growing tobacco, it was described to me more or less in the same fashion as the company puts it. However, living among the growers and their families showed me that growing tobacco entails ordinary and mundane activities to produce the best tobacco quality. I could see that despite the fact that tobacco companies try to homogenise the tobacco quality worldwide by administering specific practices, the way these processes take form in concrete experiences entails a reality that is more human: “it is too much work”, “it is heavy work”, “the weather was bad”, “it was the hottest year since I was child”, “the colour was not good”, “the weight was not good”, “the pay was poor”, etc. These are some of the expressions that I heard during fieldwork and they contain much

19 Information is available from: 
more about the growers' values and expectations than the description of the process above. For example, the first thing that Katherine (Brian’s wife) told me when I saw her on my arrival at the airport was that they had not experienced temperatures like the ones they had had in 2012. Temperatures had reached more than 100 degrees Fahrenheit, or 37.8 degrees Celsius. For Katherine, 2012 was the hottest summer she had ever experienced. This was a concern shared by other farmers as well. “If it is too dry the tobacco will cure too quickly and lack moisture producing a yellow tobacco unfavourable to big companies buyers,” a tobacco grower said to a local newspaper (Bowman 2012).

The way Kentucky farmers talk about planting tobacco has elements of an enchanted process. Schneider (1993:x) argues that enchantment “is part of our normal condition, and far from having fled with the rise of science, it continues to exist [...] wherever our capacity to explain the world's behaviour is slim, that is, where neither science nor practical knowledge seem of much utility.” Framing a discussion through this concept encourages a focus on the process by which the production of tobacco is depicted by the growers. For example, it is taken for granted by the farmers that “the weather has helped tobacco case up properly and if the weather cooperates with curing we should be okay,” as one tobacco grower said to a local newspaper (Bowman 2012).  It is commonly assumed that tobacco quality depends on weather conditions. For example, if the weather is too cold or if it freezes before the tobacco is cured, the quality will be affected. To avoid any damage to the tobacco, Mexican farmworkers and their employers have to work harder. On one occasion, an early frost was forecasted, so to avoid any impact on the tobacco quality, a crew of Mexican workers bulked all the tobacco they could in 13 hours. Some of them became ill with Green Tobacco Sickness, or GTS. It is my contention that the notion of quality has served to legitimise and cover a process of

20 “Casing is a term used to describe the glossy quality tobacco leaves will take on once it has absorbed enough moisture. In colonial times, tobacco would be left on the ground and covered with hay to increase its moisture. Early farmers would ‘sweet’ the tobacco before the practice was prohibited for sanitation reasons due to contamination from farm animals” (Bowman 2012:A4).

21 Green Tobacco Sickness is a type of poisoning that can result from absorption of nicotine through the skin when harvesting wet tobacco.
de-humanisation by which workers are being turned into non-human objects while

the tobacco and tractors are anthropomorphised.

The tobacco is seen as having a will of its own. “You won’t know till you put it on the scale,” a tobacco grower said in an interview, referring to the tobacco quality (which depends on weight, colour and texture of the leaf), which was remarkably high during the drought of 2012. Gell (1992:48), drawing on Simmel, argues that “valued objects present themselves to us surrounded by a kind of halo-effect of resistance, and that it is this resistance to us which is the source of their value.” This might well be applied to the desire for a good quality tobacco. One tobacco grower said in an interview that “if a cold wind comes in or we get an early frost it could be bad.” Gell (1992:48) suggests, referring to the peculiar power of works of art, that it “does not reside in the objects as such, and it is the objects as such which are bought and sold.” The resistance, according to Gell (1992:49), “is to being possessed in an intellectual rather than a material sense.” The power of tobacco resides in its golden colour, along with its weight and texture, which becomes an object of desire.

I remember Jim’s face of satisfaction when all his tobacco was graded as T1, the highest grade. “I got number 1. It was perfect tobacco.” Jim was happy after receiving the pay cheque and all his anger at how the companies were promoting new regulations dissolved. The colour of his tobacco was of high quality: the graders said it was “chocolate” and “golden yellow,” it smelled “sweet” and the texture was checked too. I have a vivid memory of seeing the buyer take a leaf of Jim’s tobacco and gently rub it into the palm of his hand, and hearing the noise of the scattered pieces of the leaf that ended up spread out on the floor. Other men arrived, saw the tobacco and smelt it. By inspecting his tobacco in minute detail, these men openly acknowledged Jim as belonging to a region that produces good quality tobacco, as a good piece of art at auction would be acknowledged. The buyer pulled out a sample of one of the big tobacco bales to look at it. Jim was anxious while the buyer was examining his tobacco, because he could reject any tobacco that did not conform to the requirements of the contract. I observed that the buyer’s subjective judgment about colour was as central to this transaction as were the scale and the moisture tester, which was broken that day. 2012 was
considered a good year for tobacco, one of the best quality crops in recent years, the experts said, and it was reflected in the pay cheques, and on the faces of the growers.

We went to Jim’s barn, where Mexican workers were stripping his tobacco. We switched pickup trucks. I was surprised by his new, shiny, white, big and clean pickup truck, which was parked in the barn below the sticks of tobacco that were curing, the same tobacco that seems to have a will of its own. He used his new pickup truck to pull the wagons piled with tobacco bales. We arrived at the receiving station at lunchtime. I had time to talk to some of the Mexican workers who are in charge of driving the forklift trucks, and tagging the tobacco following the buyers’ assessment (by sticking on flags of different colours used to indicate the quality of tobacco). After lunch, the tobacco selling process was resumed: Jim’s tobacco bales were loaded onto a line to be checked for moisture (23.9% moisture is the limit), but due to a faulty machine all the tobacco was received; the tobacco bales were weighed one by one (the maximum allowed for big square bales is 800 pounds or 362.87 kilograms); the buyer graded the tobacco based on the schedule of grades and gave it a per pound price; a worker tagged the bale with all the above information; and finally a forklift picked up the bale and loaded it onto a semi-truck. Sonia, one of the women who stick on the flags without knowing the meaning of the colours, wondered whether tobacco growers were well paid for their tobacco. I said that they were. Jim’s net proceeds from the sale of his 22.6 hectares of tobacco was about $80,000 (approximately 52,576 GBP).

The quality was perfect on this occasion, but Jim would have blamed his “careless” workers if the quality had been poor. Some of the tobacco growers, in particular Jim and Bob, blamed their workers for their lack of care. Jim told me that if he had treated the tobacco as “the Mexican workers do,” he would have been scolded by his father. “They are rough with the leaves,” and “they break the leaves while housing,” Jim told me. Moreover, “the Mexicans” put four leaves in the “trash” instead of two, which for him is a waste of money. At the same time, Margarita, who went to strip tobacco every morning during December 2012 and January 2013, and who had stripped tobacco on other occasions, described her work stripping tobacco as well as the way the gringos treat the leaves; they were
slow because they stripped as if they were caressing (acariciando) the leaves, “we (referring to Hispanic workers) do not,” “we work fast.” From Margarita’s point of view, treating the leaves with great care did not make sense: it was just a leaf covered with dirt. For Jim, a tobacco leaf must achieve the characteristics of quality tobacco. “You can’t have green and you can’t have yellow tobacco” (Bowman 2012).

“Because it goes overseas,” it must be clean, Bob told me. Jim heard that a beer can was found in one of his good friend’s bales of tobacco, and on a different occasion a pair of earphones was found. Growers want workers who do a good job, but not workers who damage their tobacco, listen to loud music or drink too much (discussed in Chapter 3). What about the working conditions of the workers? It is important to “keep tobacco clean,” but not to keep the working place clean, and if it is dirty the responsibility is on the workers themselves. The tobacco companies want growers to follow the Good Agricultural Practices guidelines (outlined previously). But the growers do not follow these guidelines.

Approaching the stripping rooms, I was always surrounded by familiar sounds and a bit of home. I visited different stripping rooms in Kentucky. One morning in January as I went with Jim to see the stripping process, the grass was frozen and the place was cold. Once I had passed the threshold the sound of the radio filled the space. Norteña music came through the walls and advertisements in Spanish were common: “Usted tiene derecho de vivir libre de discriminación.” There were five workers in the room. El Taco (the nickname of one of the workers) was cutting the flyings, the leaves at the bottom of the stalk. Eusebio, the man next to him, was removing the cutters, the leaves next to the flyings. Martin, the third man to the right, was removing the tips, the leaves at the top of the plant. Each leaf according to its position has specific qualities, size, colour and maturity. Jim argued that this cutting process is important because each leaf has a different price. When workers do not select well, he “loses money.” He seems to forget that workers are entitled to work in a place where risks to their health are properly controlled.

Growers want careful workers, but make no effort to cultivate work relations that might encourage a careful attitude. I found it perplexing that workers spend so many months at a time, for so many years, working for the same patrón
(boss) who knows hardly anything about them. Jim does not remember the names of his workers or know them well. Why would this be otherwise? El Taco thinks that after finishing stripping the tobacco his “crazy” boss “les va a dar una patada y ni las gracias” (will give them a kick and not even a thank you). Jim wants hard-working employees who do the job on time and keep the tobacco clean, but if they do not finish on time he will not pay them until the work is done. Jim told me that before Christmas the previous year, his tobacco bales were rejected for exceeding the moisture content limits, for which he blamed his workers. When the workers asked him for their wages, Jim shifted the responsibility to his friend (by whom they had also been employed) for delaying the pay cheque. When the workers asked Jim’s friend to be paid, he shifted the responsibility back to Jim. The workers were not paid until after the New Year. Jim would not have done this had the rejection of his tobacco not risked his farm, a “morally valuable enterprise” (Griffith 2009).

**Tobacco’s moral ethos**

Kentuckian tobacco growers have traditionally been family-owned businesses involving close relationships between tobacco producing families and the land. Yet, these intimate relationships have been increasingly threatened by larger farms after the buyout. The production of tobacco can be seen as the annual routine of ploughing, cultivating, harvesting and marketing that organises farmers’ lives. According to Daniel (1984), tobacco production bound the life cycle of women and men to a yearly cycle of agriculture work.

They cut firewood for the curing barns in winter, set out plant beds in January, broke the land and transplanted the seedlings in May, ploughed, chopped, suckered, wormed, and topped throughout the early summer, and then harvested for six successive weeks in late summer. In autumn the whole family graded and tied the leaves into “hands” and finally hauled it to market for auction. It required 257 man-hours per acre to cultivate the crop (Daniel 1984:432).

In a way similar to Daniel (1984), Bob explained the tobacco cycle to me in the kitchen of the local Baptist church. He gave me a very formal description of it, giving a general outline of the main activities. However, growing tobacco is not only about
these routines and cycles, nor is it only about the technical details of using particular seeds (NC129, or KT 210, which Brian uses, “is less resistant to black shank (a tobacco disease),” Bob said), fertilisers, insecticides (Orthene and Admire, “the former to control flea beetles and the latter for insects”) and machinery. It is also about a moral ethos surrounding a desired object which is intertwined with the lives, expectations and values of the growers. This ethos is informed by the fact that tobacco growing is seen as hard work, and as a very difficult business to stay in.

It seems that a bond between local people has allowed some of the growers to stay in business. The production of tobacco entails risks and social bonds are necessary to deal with these. Jim was always attentive to his mobile phone, recognisable by its orange cover. His taking calls from other growers and his son, Arno, showed me that he was helping other growers with their production. At one point, Danny called him, excited that his tobacco was about to be stripped. Jim and Danny have worked together for many years, and their relationship is embedded with traces of old solidarities: Danny lent Jim’s daughter, Jane, a barn, and Jim lent Danny his workers and a stripping room. Moreover, these bonds have created a moral ethos that has given growers the strength to contend with the tobacco industry’s changing character. These are some of the bonds they think are on the verge of disappearing due to the “socialist” measures of Obama. On the same mobile phone with which Jim keeps in daily communication with his network of friends and family, he showed me a cartoon of President Obama saying that this time he did not inherit the mess that Bush left, but his own mess.

**Hard work**

Part of the moral ethos of tobacco-growing is the idea of hard work. Tobacco growers identify themselves as hard-working people. Many of them get up at 4:00 AM to have a coffee, read the newspaper and enjoy the peacefulness of the countryside. The first thing that Jim and Bob do in the morning is farm work: they check on their cattle, as sometimes the bulls damage the fences at night. For Brian, it is then time to go to work at a correctional facility’s 3,000 acre farm (1,214 hectares), which is his full-time job, and where he has his own cattle. Nearly all
farms support some beef production in this area, as livestock enterprises are central contributors to agricultural income. The soil types make a significant portion of this region best suited for pasture (27.2% of land in farms).²²

It is undeniable that Katherine and Brian are hard-working people like Jim and Bob. However, it is not because of their hard work, as they like to think, that they have a farm. There is a history of concealment of the way workers are placed as the “others” to carry out the greater part of tobacco production as a low-paid workforce. There is a history of exploitation. The story told with pride is that Katherine and Brian belong to families who have cultivated tobacco for generations. They belong to a tobacco town of which they feel proud, I was told.

The production of tobacco gives growers a sense of “freedom,” Bob said. He likes the “country”, the animals, the “peacefulness”, to be outside, tobacco and the money. Bob is Brian’s father-in-law’s cousin’s son, and he employed (shared) the same group of workers that Brian employed in 2012: the same workers whom Brian and Bob care about less than their tractors, tobacco and farm.

One day in November, Jim arrived to pick me up at ten in the morning. I spent a day with him as he was taking his tobacco to the Philip Morris International receiving station. I got into Jim’s pickup truck. A cloud of cigarette smoke filled the space. It was dusty and untidy, and an open packet of jerked meat sat on the seat. Empty Marlboro packets were strewn under the seats. He was smoking one cigarette after another. Jim is a very talkative man, with the recognisable raspy voice of a heavy smoker; laughing with his characteristic touch of childishness, he told me part of his life story. This story cannot be detached from his main activity as a Kentuckian farmer embedded with his moral values caught up in the former values of the tobacco companies, family pride, masculinity and loyalty. Even though the tobacco growers do not want the companies to tell them what to do, because this seems to restrict their independence and room for manoeuvre, they continue to work hard to produce quality tobacco. “My dad gave me two rows of the field when I was six years old. I’ve been raising it ever since, about 50 years,” Jim told

me. Then again, in his view, everything he had, his family, farm and houses, was
due to his own hard work. But he does not seem to be aware of the fact that had
not poorly-paid labour helped grow the tobacco, it would not have been possible to
own the land, to have a farm, to build a barn and to occupy the position they have.

Jim has three children, all of whom “went to college,” which was paid for by
tobacco. “It was not hard to raise them,” they did not do drugs or anything like that,
he told me. His children are hard-working people. His daughter, Jane, grows
tobacco too and was able to buy an old Chevrolet pickup truck with her earnings
when she was sixteen. I remember her 82-year-old grandmother and mother at the
stripping barn helping her to strip her and her brother’s tobacco. This image of a
hard-working farming family goes along with the accepted values of producing
tobacco. This is the image Katherine and Brian also have of themselves, that of a
hard-working family. However, there are other structural factors (such as the
divisions of social class) involved in their positioning, and people seldom talk about
this. The conditions that were favourable to the production of a farmer identity
have changed along with the privatisation of the industry.

Jim said to me that the farmers who had quit “don’t really care anymore, I
don’t think. They won’t go back. People sell their equipment, they’re done.” These
growers use their barns for hay storage. However, a common action before selling
the assets of a farm is to find a second job which will allow one to continue
participating in the production of tobacco and thus its moral ethos.

Second job

In 2012, Brian and Katherine planted 17.4 hectares (43 acres) of burley tobacco, but
“It has been too much hard work and last year tobacco prices were not good,”
Katherine told me. In 2010, “Philip Morris did not want to pay well for our tobacco
because the colour was not good.” In 2011, the “tobacco did not weigh,” and it was
difficult to find workers to strip the tobacco; they contracted two men and three
women to strip their tobacco, but the work was “too heavy for women and it took
more time to finish the job.” In 2012, Katherine was tired of the farm and they
decided it was time to quit. Although they no longer made a living from the
production of tobacco, they remained in the tobacco business. Katherine and Brian worked second jobs to pay their social security. With the tobacco sale they were able to pay land taxes and other household expenses. Brian worked as a farm manager at the Roederer Correctional Complex and Katherine worked as an office manager at the Henry County Care Team. Social security concerns Katherine and Brian greatly and a second job in addition to the farm has been the best way to deal with this.

**Hoping for a contract**

In Kentucky, the tobacco growers sell their tobacco to either Philip Morris USA (PMUSA) or Philip Morris International (PMI). Tobacco buyers can choose not to renew contracts and most contracts last for one year. These contracts are called contract leaf purchasing. For some producers it is very difficult to work under these conditions because there is no security. They cannot invest in machinery (e.g. big tobacco balers) nor expand a farm because there are no guarantees that they will stay in business. As Jim explained:

> There are no young people getting into it. You can’t afford the barn, and get the stuff to do it … new barn, stripping early, concrete, balers and they could say “oh well you’re done.” Yeah, it’s not like corn or soya beans, where if they don’t take it, take it to sale, or take it to feed cattle or hogs. If you don’t have a place to go, you’re done.

I recognise, nevertheless, that Bob, Jim and Brian worked hard to get a contract with Philip Morris International. Jim got a contract for one year and for 140,000 pounds of tobacco. This means that he had to sell this quantity of his tobacco to the company and follow all their requirements to produce quality tobacco. He would have liked to have got a contract for five years, like his daughter, Jane, and son, Arno. I asked him why he thought some growers got a five-year contract and others only one or three years: was there any reason in particular?

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23 US Social Security is the equivalent of UK National Insurance, whose contributors can eventually qualify for certain benefits including the State Pension.

24 In 2008 Philip Morris split into PMUSA and PMI, which presumably would leave the latter’s tobacco production for sale abroad outside the Food and Drug Administration’s regulation (Ferrell 2013:32).
Always has gone up and down. They can buy cheaper overseas. They keep score cards on each grower Maleic hydrazide levels or MH\textsuperscript{25}; moisture; non-tobacco-related material (NTRM); grades filling contract; chemical residue and other things. I raised my contract to 140,000 from 130,000 years ago. Contract says no “old tobacco” so I raised the same amount. I didn’t want to grow and throw away, contract says sell only own tobacco no old so I did as contract said and usually had 134,000 to 137,000 every year. When we signed they said I missed getting 5 year contract by one point. Oh well! I rather they tell me they don’t want it. I have zero faith in tobacco company anymore. They could outlaw tobacco and I would never say a word. PM called it partner. I sure as hell don’t need a partner like them. \textit{sic}

Jim was disappointed that the company to which he had been selling his tobacco for many years was unable to protect its suppliers. The company is evidently increasing its regulations, which is shifting the priorities of the growers from a lesser to a greater interest on mechanical measures of quality: thus displacing the role of enchantment. Bob got a contract for 8 acres for one year, and he was not at all happy, because he was expecting to get a five-year contract for 12 acres. With this it would have been easy to invest in, for example, another tobacco baler. He assured me that raising wages was not up for discussion. Bob also was disappointed that some other growers got five-year contracts when “they do not deserve it.” He had worked hard and produced more than was agreed in his previous contract.

Bob was told that growers who complied with the contract, in terms of weight and quality, could decide how many pounds they will sell the following season. They also receive incentives for fulfilling their contracts. Many of the things said about the contracts in conversations between growers carry some of their own interpretations, expectations, disappointments and beliefs. Jim was 4,000 pounds below his contracted tobacco harvest. It was not a big problem, but in previous years it would have cost him his contract, he told me. He did not think Philip Morris wanted to lose growers. He shared this theory with other growers, saying that

\textsuperscript{25} “MH is the only true systemic product available for sucker control in tobacco. Since it is absorbed through the leaves and moves to actively growing sucker buds, it does not have to directly contact leaf axils to be effective. However, good soil moisture at the time of application is required to allow adequate absorption by leaves” (https://tobacco.ces.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/2015-2016-Burley-Production-Guide.pdf?fwd=no (accessed 20 November 2015)).
Philip Morris was not in a position to risk his contracted tobacco because every year more and more farmers were quitting, because, like Brian and Katherine, they found the work much too difficult or because, as I was told by Jim, “old people are getting tired of all the bullshit they are put through.” Notwithstanding this, Katherine and Brian stayed in business with a few hectares. Among Brian and Katherine’s worries were that it was getting harder to take out a bank loan, interest rates were higher and the banks did not want to lend money. Unlike Nayarit tobacco growers, Kentuckian growers take out bank loans to fund tobacco production. After the USDA FSA cancelled their loan programmes in 2004, the banks became the only source for loans.

**Nayarit tobacco**

It has been a period of “reconversión,” authorities and politicians emphasise during interviews and public speeches. This has been promoted as positive change. However, the negative impacts of actual change have been less addressed publicly. What does restructuring, or reconversión, mean? In very general terms, it refers to the shift in priorities and institutional change the tobacco industry has undergone which sought to break down more traditional ways of negotiation concerning state intervention. Furthermore, it refers to a new set of practices and subjectivities among the tabaqueros, or tobacco producers. The tabaqueros have had hard times since the privatisation of Tabamex. They yearn for the golden age of tobacco production in Mexico, and they keep this memory alive through accounts of prosperity and wealth: for example, through the stereotypical image of a tobacco grower in his new pickup truck after selling his tobacco. It was also common to hear that men wanted to marry a tobacco grower’s daughter to gain financial security. However, these ideas have gradually been fading away as more than half of the tobacco producers have quit in the last ten years; tobacco does not represent a safe business anymore. A way of life has changed alongside this process of reconversión, and people’s opportunities have changed with it. The conditions of tobacco growers

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26 In 2015, Jim lost his contract with Philip Morris.
have declined, incurring human costs as well. Emilio, a tobacco grower, told me that the only one who knows what the future holds for these families is God:

When work stops, there is nothing, absolutely nothing, to do. The advantage is that many (farmworkers) are contracted in the United States. For the ones who stay here, there is no place to go to. They (the companies) are trying to obtain two harvests, but no. Only God knows!

This section analyses the process of reconversión as structural change, and it considers the way such change is perceived and experienced by the tobacco growers. In what follows I will focus on the experiences of three Mexican tobacco growers: Roberto, Juan and Emilio. I aim to explore how the situation of the tobacco growers is experienced - “hard,” in their own words - and how it is different from the situation in Kentucky. In Nayarit, tobacco requires more labour, as there is less machinery than in Kentucky. In Nayarit, for example, there are no mechanical transplanters, so transplanting is done by hand and with more workers: sixteen instead of three. There are very few tractors, and there are no barns to cure the tobacco, which was an important technological advancement in Kentucky. Consequently, Burley tobacco is cured outdoors. Tobacco-leaf strings (each string has approximately 800 leaves) are hung up and tied to outdoor structures. There are no balers, which are used in Kentucky to produce their big square bales with a maximum weight of 800 pounds. In Nayarit, they tie tobacco using a process called enchapilar (this is a traditional way to pack tobacco strings into bales, using the foot and a wooden box). Yet, growing tobacco is not only about a traditional way of producing tobacco, using specific techniques, seeds, fertilisers, insecticides and machinery; it is also about people’s life projects within structures of power.

The first part of this section contextualises the process of reconversión by explaining the history and privatisation of ejidos in tobacco production. In Nayarit, tobacco production benefited from the political project of the ejidos, or social land, which is different from the USA, where private property has predominated. In other words, the triad of the state, tobacco companies, and tobacco growers and workers developed in a context where land became a key mechanism for achieving political support and legitimation, as it was in Postrevolutionary Mexico. In particular,
extensive clientelism as way of negotiation gained force during the second half of the twentieth century. This is a process the local government of Nayarit and the tobacco industries each engaged with in their own ways.

The Nayarit Context

A sweet, burnt smell in the air, produced by the old sugar factory, with ashes floating by and settling on car windscreens is the way one is welcomed to Tepic, the state capital of Nayarit and the tobacco capital of Mexico. Nayarit is located in west-central Mexico, on the Pacific Coast. It borders the state of Sinaloa to the northwest, Durango and Zacatecas to the north and northeast and Jalisco to the south. The territory is comprised of 20 municipalities and its capital Tepic, which is bounded by the highlands of El Nayar and the Pacific littoral. Nayarit has an area of 27,335 square kilometres, which represents 1.4% of the country surface area (INAFED 2010). Nayarit is not only known for tobacco production but also the production of a variety of beans (65,782 hectares), sorghum (58,456 hectares), mango (38,234 hectares) and sugar cane (23,138 hectares). Likewise, stockbreeding is an important activity for the regional economy: it maintains 304,324 head of cattle (INEGI 2012).

Nayarit currently produces 86% of the national tobacco production, and the state evokes memories of one of the politically and numerically strongest groups of peasants. Nayarit has been linked to the modern tobacco industry since the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1927, with the formation of Tabaco en Rama (Tersa), the industrial development of the tobacco industry took place in Nayarit (Madera 2000:28). From 1930 to 1970 the number of hectares reserved for tobacco sharply increased from 21,396 to 43,085. In regard to production, it greatly increased during the same period by 553% from 10,492 tons to 68,569 tons (Madera 2000:28). According to Mackinlay (1999:148), by the 1970s Nayarit controlled 80% of Mexican tobacco production. During the 1979-1980 season tobacco reached its peak in terms of area under cultivation, with 38,357 hectares, which contrasts starkly with its decline a decade later: during the 1989-1990 season, only 19,865 hectares were dedicated to tobacco. In the 1990s the hectares
of tobacco fluctuated from year to year. The two seasons between 2007 to 2009 have been the lowest in terms of hectares dedicated to tobacco. However, the number of tons of tobacco produced per hectare was not affected. These changes are also evident from the fact that, today, in Nayarit approximately 3,000 tobacco producers are contracted by the tobacco companies every year, compared with 15,000 back in the first half of the 1990s, and 9,000 at the turn of the twenty-first century.

The information in Table 1 shows four decades of tobacco production in Nayarit, including the influence of Tabamex in the 1970s and the years of the rolling back of state intervention in the 1990s. The number of tobacco producers dropped sharply at the turn of the twenty-first century, entailing the cancellations of the contracts of many families that depended on tobacco production. The sharp cuts also manifested in reduced numbers of hectares given over to tobacco, which to this day have remained below the 10,526 hectares the companies purchased in the 2003-2004 season. But of most concern is the lack of alternatives left for these families after this structural shift in the industry. For instance, migration has become part of the life projects of Nayarit tobacco producers and farm workers in ways that are not necessarily advantageous to them.

**TABLE 1. TOBACCO PRODUCTION IN NAYARIT FROM 1970 TO 2012**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GROWING SEASON</th>
<th>AREA (has)</th>
<th>PRODUCTION (tons)</th>
<th>PRODUCTION VALUE (£)</th>
<th>TOBACCO PRODUCERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1971-1972</td>
<td>28,627</td>
<td>50,751</td>
<td></td>
<td>10,583</td>
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<tr>
<td>1972-1973</td>
<td>30,347</td>
<td>49,545</td>
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<td>10,915</td>
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<td>1973-1974</td>
<td>31,985</td>
<td>60,080</td>
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<td>12,041</td>
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<td>1974-1975</td>
<td>30,015</td>
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<td>Departures</td>
<td>Arrivals</td>
<td>Balance</td>
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<td>1979-80</td>
<td>38,357</td>
<td>59,571</td>
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Source: ARIC 2013.

Land reform in Nayarit

Nayarit is characterised by a marked division between indigenous and mestizo populations that has framed the labour market. According to the official statistics of 2010, Nayarit is a state of 1,084,979 inhabitants of which 52,833 aged 3 years or over (5% of the state population) speak an indigenous language. The Huichol language is the most common, spoken by 23,834 persons, followed closely by the Cora language, spoken by 19,429 persons. The Tepehuano language is spoken by 1,904 individuals and the Náhuatl language by 1,856 speakers. This division has a spatial dimension, with uneven geographical distributions. Mestizo people own the most fertile land of the Río Grande de Santiago’s valley, whereas indigenous communities own mountain lands that were used, to borrow Aguirre Beltrán’s phrase, like “regions of refuge” during the agrarian revolts. The expropriation of communal villages made cheap temporary labour more readily available than ever before; in particular, indigenous communities have supplied the coast of Nayarit with cheap and temporary labour.

Nayarit was a state of resistance movements: the Lozada uprising from 1854 to 1873 was an important factor in the indigenous peoples’ regaining of their former autonomy. The labour movement in years that followed, particularly from 1912 to 1916, was central for enabling Nayarit to gain its statehood. From 1915 to 1934 the agrarian reform took over the territory (see Meyer 1989).

In 1917, a very small number of families owned 98% of the total land in the form of latifundia: the Aguirre, Delius, Romano, Menchaca, Corcuera, Fernández del
Valle, and Maisterrena families owned 1,300,000 hectares. Despite the national transformation of land politics, particularly from 1917 to 1932, only 1.66% of Nayarit’s total land was distributed in the form of an ejido, a kind of collective land tenure. Although Nayarit was connected to Sinaloa through the construction of a railway in 1929, this transformation did not have a great impact on the regional economy. According to Stavenhagen (1970:236), the ejido can be read as the most important achievement of Mexican agrarian reform, “particularly because it is a social institution which in large measure satisfied the people’s and the government’s desires for social justice and because potentially it represents the foundation for a more just and efficient form of economic production: a cooperative or collective one” (Stavenhagen 1970:236). Communal land was also a way to gain access to the land by providing original titles. The agrarian legislation prescribed the restitution to the peasant villages of their communal lands, if they could prove through original titles (generally of colonial origin) that they had been...

27 In 1900, Mexico was a country of 13,607,259 inhabitants, of which 71.4% lived and worked predominantly in rural areas controlled by haciendas. During the Porfirian period, railroads linked the post-civil-war US and Mexico, as part of a broader communications revolution, which had a profound impact on the demand and supply of labour (Katz 1974:3). In 1900, the size of the contribution of agriculture and forestry was estimated to be 30% of the gross national product. However, the working and living conditions in the haciendas were unbearable; for example, a sharp decline in real wages paid to hacienda labourers and the expropriation of the lands of communal villages produced greater inequalities (Katz 1974:1). Katz (1974:4) provides descriptions of the different statuses of the workers labouring on Mexican haciendas: 1) permanent resident peons, mainly agricultural workers, but some cowboys, shepherds and artisans; 2) temporary workers who worked the hacendado’s fields for a limited time in the year; 3) tenants; and 4) sharecroppers. But none of these categories of workers owned the land. In 1910, “1 per cent of the population owned 97 per cent of the total land, while 96 per cent of the population owned only 1 per cent of the land” (Stavenhagen 1970:227). In the United States, the Southwest initiated development in agriculture after the Civil War, thus becoming an alternative to working in agriculture or the mines in Mexico and allowing the population of the north of Mexico to look for work across the border in the USA, since work in subsistence agriculture only required three months of the year (Katz 1974:34). However, during the economic crisis of 1907-1908 the Southwest turned into a desert for a huge group of Mexican labourers, who had to flee back to the haciendas in the north of Mexico. The gruelling working conditions and land concentration in Mexico generated greater discontent among rural workers, who turned into key agents of economic and political change. One of these profound transformations was the impact of the land reform of 1917, which intended to dismantle the concentration of land that favoured only a small portion of the population. It generated a new social configuration, in which diverse sectors of society were recognised, such as the rural workers.
illegally deprived of them (Stavenhagen 1970:235). In 1970, Nayarit gained popularity for being the “ejido state”; ejido and communal land represented 78.7% of the total land, in contrast to 20.7% of private property.

Amapa, where I conducted my fieldwork, is one example of ejido formation. This ejido is located in the municipality of Santiago Ixcuintla, the second largest municipality of Nayarit in terms of population size and economic contribution. Amapa ejido is next to the Río Grande de Santiago, which flows westward through this region. The land is among the most fertile within the region, particularly apt for tobacco and other cash crops. According to official records, Amapa, formerly of hacienda San Lorenzo, was inhabited by 253 inhabitants in 1900. In 1935, the land was granted to the workers of hacienda San Lorenzo. However, there were few farm workers who wanted to settle and work the land. Therefore, new settlers arrived from the neighbouring towns. The low population density was an issue for the hacienda. Meyer (1989:237-238) has observed that the lack of local workers was the motivation for a labour agreement between the Agrícola Tampiqueña company and Noatoro Kobayashi, a Japanese entrepreneur, to transport Japanese settlers to the region of hacienda San Lorenzo. However, this project did not succeed, as the Mexican Revolution broke out, and Chinese migrant workers were slaughtered. The few Japanese who were already in the region were forced to flee back to Japan.

In 1935, 1,404 hectares were awarded to 190 beneficiaries, or ejidatarios, and their families, who in total were 433 persons. During the following 30 years, exponential growth occurred. The population growth stopped abruptly in the 1990s, and between 2000 and 2010 the population declined from 2,273 to 2,226 inhabitants.

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28 An ejidatario is a political and cultural figure with rights and obligations relating to the membership of an ejido. In an ejido, there is a proper centre, a church, a house of the Ejidal Assembly, a health centre and a school: the cornerstones of the national identity. Pre-Hispanic, colonial and republic forms coexist in the same space. The ejido is divided into “land for housing,” where the houses of the ejidatarios and other members of the ejido are located. The “communal land” is used in common by all members of the ejido; and “parcelled land” is the land subdivided into parcels and assigned to individual ejido members for their exclusive use. The form of the ejido persists, but as a very different economic and political project.
In 2012, Amapa was composed of 338 **ejidatarios**, 370 **avecindados** and 14 **posesionarios**. The ejido was comprised of 1,404.2 hectares, of which 1,349 are devoted to agricultural production, 49 are for human settlement and 5 are for urban growth. On average, each ejidatario has rights to less than 2 hectares of land. In Amapa, 37% of the population are economically active, of which 74% are men and 25% are women; and 63% of the population are young dependents (those aged below 15) and elderly dependents (those aged over 65). Some of these people are the guest workers I followed to Kentucky, for whom no land was available in Nayarit. According to the law, **ejido** plots cannot be sold, rented, mortgaged or transferred in any form, except in specific cases included in the law. However, although renting land was not legal, it was a common practice. This changed in 1992 with the new Agrarian Law known as **Programa de Certificación de Derechos Ejidales y Titulación de Solares Urbanos** (or PROCEDE), in which the exclusive bond between the ejidatario and the land was broken. The law heralded the transition from “social property” to individual property.

**Tobacco is part of a mafia**

In Nayarit, the quality of tobacco is linked to the quality of the land and local weather conditions. However, although Nayarit growers share with their Kentuckian counterparts a common concern with the weather, the main concern of the Nayarit tobacco farmers is the corrupt practices, which the leaf buyers arguably have continued to benefit from since the old days of state corporatism. They believe that the quality of their tobacco is manipulated by the leaf buyers at the

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29 Although **avecindados** are ejido-members who own a house and have been living for one or more years in the ejido and whose status has been recognized by the ejido Assembly or by an Agrarian Court, they have no right to an individual plot, no right to access common land, and no right to vote in the ejido Assembly (Valsecchi 2010:6). Therefore, they commonly work other people’s land for a paid wage, or rent a plot from an **ejidatario**. Some **avecindados** have no relation with agriculture work. Unlike **avecindados**, **posesionarios** are non-ejidatarios in possession of a plot, which they came to possess through occupations of empty land, illegal transactions and invasions before the 1992 Agrarian Law.
tobacco company receiving station in order to pay them less. They believe this is so because the companies have plenty of room to name their price and even refuse to buy all or part of a grower’s tobacco crop by simply grading it outside of the schedule of grades, as Emilio explained to me. He challenges the companies to take some of the responsibility for the production of quality by providing growers with advice about how to produce calidad or quality.

In June 2012, Emilio decided to change to dark tobacco. This decision was motivated by the fact that he had harvested rice and it was late in the season for planting burley. He harvested rice following a policy of “reconversión del tabaco y alternativas de trabajo.” Only two local farmers had agreed to participate in this project promoted by the federal government. They were granted water and credit and the sale was good. However, the programme did not offer similar conditions in 2013. The growers would have to pay for water. Therefore, Emilio bet on tobacco again. One of the advantages Emilio found for growing tobacco is that the growers have a tobacco leaf buyer already, whereas in the case of other crops they do not. He harvested tomatillo and got 69 Mexican cents per kilo (0.03 GBP), which is next to nothing. However, this also means more dependence on the tobacco companies. Emilio asked the engineer of the company to wait for him until he had finished harvesting the rice and then to give him a contract for two hectares. The engineer of Philip Morris Mexico agreed, but “a new engineer came along” and he changed the deal. Emilio ended up growing only one hectare of dark tobacco, the K-326 flue-cured, because it was too late to do otherwise, as he began the process in December. He was told that this variety of tobacco needed less work, and this fitted in with Emilio’s ideas and hopes, as well as those of other growers. That year was the first that he tried growing a new tobacco variety. But there was something to consider: the quality of the land. “Oh well, I’ll just plant dark (tobacco).” Emilio explained that people around him, including his father, had little confidence in the quality of his land to produce dark tobacco. He asked the engineer for step by step guidance on how to produce “quality” and followed the engineer’s instructions accordingly.

He needed the tobacco to be a specific colour. Notwithstanding the differing opinions over the quality of his land, he followed his hunch. He wanted to prove
that his land was capable of producing a dark tobacco of good quality and colour. Indeed, it had a “pretty colour,” which translates into quality. “Tobacco has its detail.” Emilio’s view is that Philip Morris has the responsibility of ensuring the quality but it is up to the farmers to plant the tobacco. The engineers simply wish to avoid any responsibility related to the quality of the land.

In Emilio’s description, what appears to be at stake is the question of the responsibility for producing a specific quality of tobacco. Emilio is challenging the company to share responsibility for the tobacco quality, instead of just creating and introducing price schedules. “Ellos no se la quieren rifar,” means that the company is not willing to play the game fairly, but instead changes the rules according to its own agenda. However, British American Tobacco (2015) argues that they have technicians who are “local experts”:

They work in the field with farmers, agreeing contracts, supplying seed and offering advice on propagation, the safe use of agrochemicals and integrated pest management. They provide farmers with access to farming methods and technologies that might otherwise be beyond their reach, for example, new seed varieties or fuel efficient curing barns. Engaging with our contracted farmers in this way helps make their farms viable and efficient. In doing so, we protect the security and quality of our tobacco leaf supply. But our support goes beyond just growing tobacco. Leaf technicians also advise on techniques that help protect the environment; everything from reducing water demand through efficient irrigation, to managing biodiversity and preserving natural forests. And agronomy support also covers areas of agricultural practice other than just tobacco farming. Our technicians provide farmers with advice about how to improve the quality and yield of food crops, making them more self-sufficient. While the support we provide our contracted farmers undoubtedly brings advantages to our business in terms of access to high quality tobacco leaf, it also plays a significant role in improving local environments and livelihoods and in helping mitigate and reduce the impacts tobacco growing may have.  

However, Emilio is convinced that the tobacco industry is a “mafia;” so convinced that he feels reluctant to be involved in its production. No one gets more than 50 thousand pesos, even if the production is worth 60, 70 or 80 thousand. They would

rather the farmer be paid less and therefore kept in check; for this reason he sees the business as “mafioso.”

Emilio explained to me that the company decides how much the grower will earn. To do this, the company can refer to a list of prices. He explained to me the structure of the tobacco prices. There are 16 prices, based on categories of four letters (B, C, T and X), according to the quality of tobacco, and within each letter category there are numbered groups, for example, B1, B2, B3 and B4. This is the same for the other three letters. There is also a price for tobacco without any classification, which the growers call “rubbish.” Everything revolves around the companies’ interests, it is commonly assumed. Emilio’s view is shared by Roberto.

Roberto sent some tobacco bales to the receiving station in Tepic, but some of his tobacco bales were rejected, allegedly due to low quality. Roberto thinks that this would not have happened if he had had a good relation with the engineers of the company. Roberto, like many other growers, explained to me that it is the whim of the buyer at the receiving station which predominates whether the tobacco is accepted. There is a very common expression to explain when one dislikes someone: *me cae gordo* (he doesn’t go down well with me). Roberto explained to me that every year, many farmers do not have much success simply because the engineer takes a disliking to them.

In sum, the biggest concern of the Nayarit tobacco growers regarding the *calidad* or quality of the tobacco leaf is its link to the power of the tobacco leaf buyer. The buyers at the companies' receiving station can reject any damaged tobacco or any tobacco that does not fit the requirements of the agreement. Unlike Kentuckian growers, who believe the (relative) price of tobacco reflects its quality, Nayarit growers do not think the price of tobacco reflects its quality. Moreover, Kentuckian growers believe that “careless” workers can damage the quality of their tobacco, whereas Nayarit growers do not share a similar idea about their workers. Indigenous workers in particular are seen as having nimble fingers.
Tobacco’s moral ethos

The tobacco producers in Mexico are small farmers who own an average of 2 hectares of land. They employ family members at the beginning of the crop cycle and low-wage workers for the strenuous activities. The production is less industrialised than in Kentucky and more “traditional.” Tobacco producers in Kentucky own an average of 34 hectares and they rely on migrant workers and farm machinery. By contrast, Nayarit tobacco producers rely on people from the Mexican highlands, mostly indigenous migrant workers from the Huichol, Tephuano, Mexicanero and Cora ethnic groups, who work in the most appalling conditions and are often characterised as “uncivilised” by mestizo people.

Roberto is one of these Nayarit tobacco growers. He grows tobacco and beans. With his broken and overweight body it requires an enormous effort. He likes to sit outside his small house to rest, because it is too hot and cramped inside his place, which consists of three small earthen-floor rooms. He has a rocking chair beneath a tree that offers him good shade. He used to go to the USA, until he could not go anymore. Roberto studied up to the 3rd grade of primary school. He could not continue studying because he had to work and help his parents in the fields. Emilio, like Roberto and many other tobacco growers, did not finish primary school either, and works hard to hold out in the tobacco business. Nayarit growers rely mainly on hard work and cheap labour to deal with the risks entailed by growing tobacco.

Hard work

Tobacco growers try to maintain the old values from before privatisation, such as a culture of work which means being in the fields from dawn to dusk. Kentuckian growers are similar in this respect; hard work is felt to be a central part of their way of life. One day in February, Emilio, a solitary farmer wearing an unmistakable cap with the emblematic colours of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party or PRI), stood on the edge of the tobacco canal to
check his water pump.\textsuperscript{31} I approached him to ask about the process of growing tobacco. I noticed his red cap had been faded by intensive use in the sun. He also wore an old red long-sleeved T-shirt, spotted with the yellow chemical that is used to kill the suckers, and jeans and \textit{huaraches} (traditional Mexican sandals made with hand-woven braided leather straps). Emilio, a 38-year-old tobacco grower, who is single, “has been in tobacco since he was a kid.” Emilio also knows the North. He went to the USA seven times. The last time was in 2003 and he over Stayed his visa. He has been a guest worker in North Carolina and Kentuck. However, he dislikes the North and he plans never to go back there again. He explained how working the land is of course physically exhausting, unlike working in the local pharmacy for example. On the land, one works from dusk till dawn. The work eases when your workers, “\textit{tu gente}”, are there but the owner always ends up working more. He values the labour “\textit{en el campo}” because he applies the teachings of his parents along with his own experience. He feels emotionally connected with the farm work.

This is what Emilio told me. Working in tobacco is primarily a physically demanding and exhausting activity. It is hard work. The value of his work, Emilio emphasises, lies in the fact that it was learnt in his childhood. However, he does not seem conscious of the fact that a process of dehumanisation of labourers has to happen in order for him to continue growing tobacco. Nevertheless, there are some hints in Emilio’s words, “\textit{ya cuando traes tu gente ya por lo menos descansas un poquito más}.” The grower is able to rest a little, because there are workers who will do the job, indigenous workers.

\textbf{Reselling spare agricultural chemicals}

The existence of “illegal” sales of agrochemicals on the informal market gives tobacco growers some margin of production and more pesos for them. Unlike Nayarit growers, Kentucky growers have second jobs to stay in tobacco production. It is not that in Kentucky illegal practices are uncommon. On the contrary, Kentucky growers sell, for example, extra tobacco to other companies, which is something

\textsuperscript{31} Distributing caps and t-shirts is an old very common practice of the parties, aiming to gain votes.
prohibited in their contracts with PM. In Roberto’s words, if a grower receives two tonnes of fertiliser, one is to be sold. “They (the companies) provide you with the chemicals, but many people just go on to sell them.” Some growers, he explains, are not bothered about how much fertilizer they are given to use. They will often use some of it and then sell the rest.

Or there are other strategies. Emilio talked to me about the illegal use of herbicides, which are potentially deadly substances. The companies say, “quiero que apliques esto.” Emilio is given a certain product by the company to deal with the particular disease his crop has. But he knows the diseases well and recognises that the product is not strong enough to tackle it, so he goes searching for a stronger one, such as Lannate 90 – a powerful substance that kills any pest that comes into contact with it. The companies do not like that the growers use alternative products to the ones that they provide because, like Lannate 90, they are extremely toxic and can leave a residue.

According to Emilio, the engineers of the company tell them how to grow tobacco; in particular, the company provides them with seeds, and products to be applied to the tobacco plants. The engineers strongly advise growers to use the company’s products. However, the growers use other pesticides which are cheaper, but more toxic, than the products the company sells them. Emilio believes that the tobacco company has contracts with other companies to sell their particular products, but due to the expense, growers turn to alternative markets where products are cheaper, but toxic.

**Tobacco contracts**

In Mexico, tobacco is financed by three tobacco companies that control the national market, namely Tabacos Desvenadados (TADESA), a subsidiary of Philip Morris International, British American Tobacco Mexico (BATM), and Tabacos del Pacifico Norte (TPN), an affiliate of Universal Leaf Tobacco Co. The latter buys, sells and processes flue-cured and burley tobacco, but does not manufacture cigarettes as do the other companies. Credit from the companies allows growers like Emilio to keep growing tobacco, which would be difficult otherwise. This is different from the
contracts between the Kentuckian growers and the companies, which lead to less dependent relationships between them than the relations between Nayarit growers and the tobacco companies, because the companies are only the buyers and not also the money lenders as it is in Nayarit. A written contract mediates the relationships between the companies and the growers: the latter must sign it along with the transnational company (la empresa) and La Asociación Rural de Interés Colectivo de Productores de Tabaco Constituyente General Esteban Baca Calderón, (Rural Association of Collective Interests Esteban Baca Calderón) known as “la ARIC.”

For Roberto, Juan and Emilio it would be extremely difficult to find a different source of credit; banks do not lend money for tobacco growing as they do in the USA. Without company loans, which are interest free, they would not be able to produce tobacco. Some growers also grow beans and jicama (Mexican yam), using the same land where tobacco is produced, but this is just to complement their total earnings from tobacco. The companies transfer amounts of money periodically to the growers' bank accounts. They also provide growers with inputs such as seeds, water pumps and so on. Growers are obliged to produce tobacco in the area defined beforehand, to use the tools the company provide them with and to avoid employing child labour. The companies in return are “obliged” to buy the growers' tobacco. The money earned from the production of tobacco covers the growers' loans; as money is received by the companies, the debt is adjusted until fully covered. Once these transactions are paid off, the remainder is what is left for the grower. The tobacco prices are determined by the tobacco company prior to the beginning of the growing season. The contracts also included various incentive programmes, such as fifty Mexican cents (0.02 GBP) more per kilogram if a grower produces 2,100 kilograms of dried tobacco per hectare. However, a grower’s biggest fear is that the company will reject all or part of his tobacco by simply grading it outside of the grades included in the contract. A fee is paid to the ARIC, which is the mediator between the company and the grower, of six Mexican cents

32 The ARIC was established in the 1990s for the purpose of representing tobacco producers in the annual negotiations with the tobacco companies, with the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social (Mexican Social Security System or IMSS) and capital goods companies.
per kilogram of tobacco to cover the purchase of assets from the government, and four Mexican cents per kilogram to cover administrative costs. \footnote{The ARIC now holds the assets of Tabamex, following its privatisation, for which the growers are still paying for up to now. These assets are mainly old buildings. The ownership of Tabamex's old headquarters now belongs to Santiago Ixcuintla. The mouldy walls of the abandoned building, which represents better times, have been disputed by some of the previous workers of the company and the tobacco farmers. Each group has claimed it as their property.}

Juan is an _ejidatario_ who planted 12 hectares of tobacco and 20 hectares of beans. Juan told me, “the price of the latter was good, but not the production.”

Juan supplies raw materials to Tabacos Desvenados (TADESA) to manufacture tobacco products for the national market. “The payment is good but quality (of the seeds) is poor,” he said, while BATM, which he thought was a Mexican company, in his view gives “good credit and helps the growers.”

Regarding the equipment, the company gave Emilio everything he needed, so he did not have to spend money on this. The company gave him 14,000 Mexican pesos (600 GBP), and of this he only spent 11,000 pesos (471 GBP). He was able to save money by using the same equipment (e.g. a water pump) from the previous year. It also helped, he said, that he wrote down everything he was planning to do and what he had done. Planning and recording this information helped him save money. Emilio’s net proceeds from the sale of his 1 hectare of tobacco was about 60,000 Mexican pesos (2,485 GBP). Emilio asked “¿dónde queda mi trabajo?” with which he shared his frustration that his work was not paid for as it should have been. “Vamos a suponer, si a mí quedan 40mil por hectárea y yo trabajé 5 meses, todos esos días yo gano 20 tantos mil pesos, entonces ¿cuánto me está quedando?”

Nevertheless, it was a good year for Emilio. However there is no security at all in this work, and he could have worked for nothing if, for example, a severe flood had occurred, which is possible in this region. If the Nayarit growers lose their crop, they lose a year’s income, even though the crop is covered by agricultural insurance. In reality, the insurance protects the companies’ risk. Unlike Nayarit growers, Kentucky growers have agricultural insurance to pay for bank loans in case of a
damaged crop. In what follows I will focus on social security and its meaning for Nayarit growers.

**Social security**
A third of the growers’ profits go to the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social (Mexican Institute of Social Security, IMSS). This fee is transferred from the company to the IMSS, and when the tobacco is received by the company it covers the payment. This is one of the former agreements from when Tabamex protected the industry which still frames the relations between the companies and the state and which also contradicts the idea that the tobacco industry is a totally privatised system. It seems that for the majority of tobacco farmers, access to the social security system is the main reason for staying in the tobacco industry. This is also an important concern for Kentuckian growers, but they access it by getting second jobs (as shown above in the case of Katherine and Brian). For example, this is Roberto’s main reason for staying in the tobacco business. The profit from selling tobacco is apparently just a bonus for his work. In June 2013, Roberto was very sick. He was hospitalised because he had dengue fever, which can be fatal. I saw him soon after he was discharged and I was struck by his weak body, his white, dehydrated lips and the changes in his skin colour. “Thank God,” a common expression of Rebeca’s, Roberto’s wife, he had health insurance.

In Mexico, an important improvement in labour rights was social security for “trabajadores del campo” (agricultural workers). In the 1940s, the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social was founded. However it only really became implemented in the 1970s, when clinics and infrastructure were expanded. In the case of the tobacco farmers, they obtained access to social security in 1974, in relation to the social justice claims of those days and the logic of liberalism. It included, among other things, medical assistance, the protection of basic subsistence and a pension. In contrast to the tobacco farmers, tobacco workers only had access to medical assistance; they relied on the employing tobacco farmer for registration with the IMSS. A tobacco farmer could only register up to five workers. Arguably due to excessive bureaucratic procedures, tobacco farmers ended up in “corrupt practices,” registering only family members and not their
workers (both local and indigenous seasonal farmworkers). These practices of corruption constituted a central part of the argument in favour of the reform of the Social Security Law.

In 1997, a new Social Security Law adversely impacted tobacco farmers. The changes included an increase in contributions at a time when tobacco prices were worsening, and an increase in the retirement age (65 years of age and after 24 years of contribution). It became harder to get into the social security system as more health restrictions were imposed. For example, people with diabetes, alcoholism, dementia and VIH, among other illnesses, were excluded if it was their first application for social security or if they wanted to re-enter the system. Also, 1,250 weeks of contributions were needed instead of the 500 weeks required before 1997, and this was difficult to achieve through growing tobacco. In 2001, public discontent regarding changes in the law led the ARIC to occupy the IMSS offices in Nayarit, demanding medicines and an increase in tobacco prices. The result was a reduction of the growers’ contribution to the IMSS and the elimination of some benefits for seasonal tobacco farmworkers.

**Grupos solidarios**

Growers deal directly with the companies, and individual contracts are signed between a grower and a company. Nevertheless, solidarity lending is a key mechanism for sharing responsibilities, via *grupos solidarios* (solidarity groups), which create mechanisms to share debt among a group of people in the name of solidarity. Moreover, these arrangements create a denser social network among growers based on trust, which is different from Kentucky, where growers rely on friends and family networks to help each other with the production, but not to share debts. This has been a very interesting way to manage the company credits that allow the growers to produce tobacco. With regards to the solidarity groups in Nayarit Emilio explained that, previously, “*La empresa lo hizo a su conveniencia.*” These days, growers are free to choose with whom they want to work. He will not choose to work with someone who he feels he would have to bail out, so he prefers to align with his family. But of course some families have more hectares than others. Some growers might even choose to work alone even if their family has very
few hectares because the chance of having to support someone with a bad production is greater. The tobacco growers organise themselves into groups which, from the viewpoint of the growers, generates and reproduces different kinds of relationships. Family ties are used in these negotiations with the company. They are negotiated and contested. Emilio, for example, prefers working by himself to working with family members for this kind of enterprise.

**Conclusions: similarities and differences**

In this chapter, I have shown the power of the companies to integrate heterogeneity of arrangements and contexts of tobacco production. The companies push their own agendas in relation to the quality of tobacco, thus permeating the practices of the tobacco growers in both places, which has generated different reactions to what seems to be an imposition of just market interests.

In Kentucky, tobacco growers have a second job, whereas Nayarit growers stock up spare agricultural chemicals to resell them. Nayarit growers stay in business to gain access to the social security system. In Kentucky, it would be unthinkable for the tobacco companies to pay social security payments to the state and reclaim this cost from the growers’ tobacco sales. There are also differences in the negotiations and tensions between the growers and the tobacco companies. Kentuckian tobacco growers are relatively less dependent on company credit, whereas Nayarit tobacco growers rely exclusively on company credit, for which they are organised in *grupos solidarios* or solidarity lending groups. The companies make large profits from, I would argue, the politics of solidarity and friendship among people who work growing tobacco through *grupos solidarios* in Nayarit. Such collective debt is beneficial to the companies, and collaborative working in Kentucky is another way to secure tobacco production. However, growers in each place are in the same vulnerable position of having only one tobacco buyer. Notwithstanding the similarities between both regions engaged in the same industry, Nayarit growers have to migrate to the North to have a house in Mexico and to pay its bills, which turns them into the providers of low-cost labour for Kentucky’s tobacco region.
Chapter 3: Working tobacco hands

The comparative approach of this chapter is different from that of the previous chapter, which explores the differences and similarities between Kentucky and Nayarit through the lives of Kentuckian and Nayarit tobacco growers. Instead of looking at the experiences of different sets of people, this chapter explores the positionality of one group of Nayarit farmworkers, the “crew of seven” as I call them. The fact that this crew works on tobacco plantations in Kentucky and in Nayarit in similar structural conditions, as wage earners (Fernando being the exception), allows for a comparison between the two places from a different angle.

In Nayarit, Francisco (born 1957) produces beans and works as a day labourer in tobacco. Daniel (born 1987) works as a day labourer in tobacco along with his father Francisco and brother. Rafael (born 1959) works as a day labourer in tobacco. Julio (1981) works for his father-in-law who is a tobacco producer. José (born 1977), from being a tobacco producer, became a day labourer in tobacco. César (born 1989) works in a bakery. Fernando (born 1974) grows his own tobacco.

In this chapter, I explore how the crew of seven perceive their working conditions, their relationship with their employers and their own position and positionality in Kentucky and in Nayarit. A dual-economy model, within which Kentucky might be depicted as a developed economy (or the centre) and Mexico as an underdeveloped economy (or the periphery), conceals the fact that both are centres of tobacco capitalism. Moreover, it turns out that it is literally the same group of wage labourers (working class) producing the tobacco in both Kentucky and Nayarit. It is not Nayarit labourers leaving a non-capitalist subsistence economy and filling the low-wage labour gaps in the capitalist production of tobacco in Kentucky, as could be assumed by the dual-economy model, but the same labourers working in the same capitalist tobacco industry in their region of origin.

The crew of seven are able to move between the two contexts with some ease.

34 The members of the crew of seven are Francisco, Rafael, Daniel, José, Fernando, Julio and César. I established friendly relations with them in 2008, during my fieldwork for my Master’s thesis, and these continued when I worked again in 2012. They are Mexican tobacco farmworkers in both the tobacco fields in Kentucky in the United States from August to December and in Nayarit in Mexico from February to May.
because their familiarity with the same cash crop in Kentucky and Nayarit allows it. Their skills in and background knowledge of both tobacco production and tobacco quality have facilitated their work and integration in this other economy. Although other Mexican workers in Kentucky are able to do the same work and to learn the physical activities with relative ease, their knowledge of quality (for example, colour, texture and moisture content) is not as easy to acquire, for it takes time and experience: they were born and bred in a tobacco town. The crew members know, for example, the colour that indicates when the tobacco in Kentucky is ready to be cut and cured without needing to wait for the employer, in their case Brian, to tell them so. Additionally, these knowledges give them a relative independence from Brian, who does not have time to be there most of the time. In addition, hard-working people (a constitutive characteristic of tobacco towns) are highly valued in Kentucky and in Nayarit (discussed in Chapter 5 and in Chapter 2). Notwithstanding similarities in the basic hierarchy of the work organisation of the tobacco industry, working in each area is a different experience for the same people. These are two different geographical locations which do not share a similar history of domination and development. For example, in Nayarit there is no exact equivalent of the category of “illegal immigrant labour,” and in Kentucky there is no exact equivalent of the category of “indigenous seasonal labour.” The crew becomes cheap labour in Kentucky, whereas in Nayarit they are medium-paid labourers or growers themselves. The latter is possible due to the role played by indigenous workers, a role similar to that of the crew while in Kentucky, a parallel that the crew is unable to see. Having a different positionality in each context, their perceptions of work vary greatly from place to place, and are informed by social categories, such as race, ethnicity, gender and citizenship, and by their life projects towards an ideal of being free men in comfortable retirements. In Kentucky, their “work” is conceived of as a “sacrifice,” a “necessity” and an opportunity, whereas in Nayarit it is perceived as absent work. In the strict sense of the word, work in tobacco is conceived as a custom (learnt during their childhood) and routine, within a given time frame linked to family routines, and a time of waiting.

The relations of the crew with their employers in each location also vary. The crew of seven Nayarit workers have been working for the same Kentucky
farmer, Brian, for about ten years. The crew also work for other farmers, some of whom are Brian’s friends. “He is rich” and “we are poor”, are the expressions commonly used by the crew of seven when referring to the unequal relationship they have with their employer in Kentucky. Holmes (2007:59) argues that “one does not perceive only others, but also oneself, as belonging in particular social locations.” The same men work in Nayarit as local farmworkers harvesting tobacco for employers from the local community. “He is lazy”, and “he does not work like Brian”, are some of the ways that José, one of the members of the crew, used to refer to Juan, his employer in Nayarit. Juan is not perceived as rich in the same way that Brian is by the crew of seven. However, from the perspective of the indigenous workers Juan is rich.

How do the migrant workers in this crew value themselves and give sense to their life projects through different ideas of “work”? How is work framed culturally? How does work fulfil their expectations? These are some of the questions that I aim to address in this chapter.

The structure of the chapter proceeds as follows: in the next section I will focus on the value attached to work in Kentucky by the crew of seven. Then I will compare their experience of work in Kentucky as sacrifice, necessity and opportunity, with work in Nayarit as noticeably absent work.

Kentucky: antagonistic relations

In this section, I explore the ways in which Nayarit workers give meaning to their position as cheap labour in Kentucky. I will discuss this category of work from the perspective of the workers and the way they understand themselves and their Kentucky employers. This also means looking at the moral values attached to work in the context of Kentucky tobacco farming. They have particular ideas about which working and living conditions fit their expectations, goals and possibilities. These ideas mediate their relationships between themselves and their gringo employers.

The relationship between Brian and the crew is shaped by a social condition of self-recognition as the “poor,” and is characterised by interlocking forms of subordination. Their engagement is already couched within “a particular set of
relations embedded in economic transactions and dependencies” (Benson 2008:600). In this relationship they can see their differences in wealth. “Brian lives cómodamente” (comfortably), the crew assured me; they recognise themselves through the other, the patrón (the boss). Their relationship responds to various interests, sometimes opposed, as in the question of wages.

The structural condition between the crew of seven and their Mexican employers at home is obscured as will be shown in the cases of Julio and José in the next section about Nayarit. Their relationships with employers at home are mediated by the very same transaction in which the worker sells his/her labour-power. However, the way this is informed by what I call mestizo solidarity and its contradictions, and the politics of kinship and friendship, turn domination into a less overt characteristic of the employer-employee relationship. The intermediation of a shared culture between the crew of seven and their Mexican employers makes the differences between Brian and the crew of seven more conspicuous. Moreover, the crew’s position as (illegal) Mexican immigrants highlights their antagonistic class relation (in comparison with the relationship between Brian and his white American workers). Another example is the situation of Fernando (a member of the crew), who is a tobacco producer himself in Nayarit. Fernando is a tobacco grower like Brian, but in a very different situation, to the extent that Fernando becomes one of Brian’s temporary workers for part of the year: the reverse in almost unimaginable.

**Contract system**

In this section, I will describe the contract system in Kentucky. In-depth data were gathered in Kentucky during the tobacco harvesting season of 2012 with the crew of seven, and Brian and Bob as their patrones. I recorded in my field diary work-related information and history including wages and accommodation arrangements. Participant observation helped me to understand the contractual relationships between the crew and their employers, why they return, and what work means to them.

Undocumented workers like the crew of seven do not have a legally enforceable contract, which is a key feature of the undocumented workers-growers
contract system. In other words, they are not subject to a contract system that is enforced by the US federal labour laws, and they do not have the same rights as documented workers. At the same time, they are not obliged to work by a written contract, and do not have to give notice if they choose to leave early. However, in most cases the workers do not leave until they have finished harvesting and stripping the tobacco. The crew do not finish their contracts because of the existence of a legal agreement, but motivated by reasons that are linked with economic and cultural obligations: for example, they “gave their word” to Brian.

In 2012, the crew of seven were contracted by Brian, who required labour for harvesting and stripping his tobacco. In July, one member of the crew called Brian from Iowa to inform him that they would arrive for the tobacco harvest. Their relation was based on an oral contract. The contract lasted approximately five months, from August to December. In 2012, the Kentucky minimum wage rate was 7.25 US dollars. However, payment was by piece-rate: i) 38 cents per stick for harvesting and hanging tobacco, and ii) 22 cents per pound of tobacco they bailed. In addition, Brian offered money to help the crew with the expenses of returning to Mexico.

There was accommodation for the members of the crew (a point I return to below). They lived in a caravan where they had a kitchenette, running water and a shower. The housing conditions did not match the standards of the H-2A Visa Program. However, the crew took the caravan as if it was a bonus for which they did not pay rent or bills.

In terms of labour laws, the working conditions of the crew broke regulations on maximum working hours per day, and health and safety regulations. Although the crew never worked for 13 hours per day, as was the case in Iowa, they were available to work more than eight hours per day. They were exposed to Green Tobacco Sickness (GTS) and they were not provided with the information about the risk of GTS. They were not insured for the period they worked. Pain in an arm or leg was common, and their only access to health care was over-the-counter pain medication, such as aspirin bought in Walmart, which they used to help mitigate discomfort.
The crew’s familiarity with the crop gave Brian security. The crew knew what to do and when. Sometimes Brian arrived at the farm after work to tell them what tasks they had to finish and what was next. Moreover, the agreement with Brian gave them the flexibility to work for other tobacco growers if it did not interfere with his tobacco work, which would not have been allowed within the H-2A guest worker program. The next section discusses the differences between oral contracts and written contracts in order to understand why the crew preferred oral to written contracts.

**Oral contracts versus written contracts**

Oral contracts are frequently described in negative terms, because they leave workers at the whim of their employer. In other words, the orality of these contracts expresses the lack of power of the Mexican workers and the absence of recourse to formal mechanisms of labour regulation. Moreover, the oral contracts are an expression of the structural conditions of employment which force them to accept the conditions of work offered. They are also seen as allowing for greater abuse of workers. However, I found that the crew preferred oral contracts to written contracts framed within the H-2A visa guest worker programme, because oral contracts offer workers the flexibility that they are looking for. My focus in this section is on the negotiation of their oral contracts, in the words of the workers themselves. This will give oral and written contracts a grounded perspective.

As the crew of seven are “illegal” Mexican workers in Kentucky, their contracts are oral. It could not be otherwise, as not only do they overstay their visa (valid until Christmas every year), but also the H-2A visa guest worker programme on which they arrive in Iowa does not allow workers to be employed by someone else after finishing their contract (to be discussed in the next chapter). The work in Iowa lasts for around five weeks during summer, which makes the visa process and all the experiences the workers go through to get to Iowa hardly worth the effort, hence their decision to stay longer to work. Knowing that one of the options available for them is to work on an oral contract, they choose this over returning to
Mexico after only five weeks of work. As with any contract, oral contracts entail rights and obligations for both the employer and the worker.

On a different level, there is a feeling that oral contracts can be altered for the benefit of the workers, because they can look for work with other tobacco growers and they can even visit family members living in the same area. Nonetheless, it is clear that the growers demand loyalty from their workers. That being said, the crew have a relative flexibility that is not possible on a written contract like the one the crew on the neighbouring farm work on, or the one the crew of seven themselves work on in Iowa. The orality of the contract allows room for manoeuvre, whereas a written contract leaves no space to think about potential changes to the working conditions. On a written contract, the workers are paid per hour, they have a place to stay and their travel expenses are reimbursed. Contracts also vary in terms of conditions regarding the mobility of the workers, which generally seem highly restricted for workers on written contracts. They seem to become an asset of the farm.

The crew sees the oral contract as something temporary towards a more “secure” written contract. They see in their written contract to work in Iowa for the summer months, before arriving in Kentucky, the possibility of crossing the border in safer ways, avoiding smugglers. However, written contracts for non-US citizens have been shown to favour employers and secure the workforce, which for them is arguably in short supply. Thus, the aim of protecting basic rights at work is left to the whims of the employers. The crew of seven think that formally contracted workers have less room for manoeuvre than themselves and less possibility to go out in Kentucky, as workers with written contracts must stay on the farm and are not allowed to work for other employers. Thus oral and written contracts have been shown to favour the farmers, yet in different ways. Interestingly, the relationship between Brian and the crew is framed by and at the same time frames their oral contract, whereas in a written contract the employer-employee relationship is less subjected to an ideology of exchange and reciprocity. In short, the relationship between Brian and the crew is mainly a contract based on trust. The crew trusts Brian and Brian trusts them, a relation that entails both antagonism and interchange.
Brian is seen as el patrón (the boss), a person with authority over his crew. This power is still effective 3,300 kilometres to the south, at home in Nayarit. Notwithstanding the fact that the relationship between the crew of seven and Brian is mediated by money in the form of wages, the workers found it difficult to differentiate their legal rights and obligations from their moral values and expectations. For example, the caravan, which entails many contradictions, is seen as a favour by the crew of seven.

The caravan

On my first visit to the old caravan in 2008, I was struck by the poor living conditions of the place and I could not imagine how seven men could share the same space with only one toilet and two bedrooms (Figure 2). My fieldnotes are often punctuated with descriptions of the caravan as being “old”, “dirty” and “small”, which are the same adjectives the crew used to refer to it. In 2012, the caravan seemed to be dirtier and older than it had been in 2008. From what I know, the caravan remained in the same place from 2001 to 2013, until the land on which it was parked was sold. For outsiders like me, it was not easy to find the caravan. It was parked on one of the multiple country roads that connect and divide the rural landscape into private farms. The caravan was located between the towns of Bethlehem and Pleasureville, a town named after a famous old brothel. The caravan was referred to as “la tráila” by the crew of seven, and the “Mexican trailer” by Brian.
Although the crew kept insisting on the refurbishment of the caravan, they assumed that Katherine and Brian would not do anything about it. Katherine explained to me that the caravan had a plumbing problem she and Brian had to pay for, and that this had added to the utility bills. By returning every year to conditions that they did not like and saw as undignified, I believe that the crew ceded power to Brian and ended up recognising themselves as the “poor,” and that their living in those conditions became accepted by Brian and the local people. Brian and Katherine did not think that the workers were able to live in a clean space. Katherine asked me, “how do you find the caravan?” But without giving me time to reply, she answered her own question: “I try to clean the place every year, but it is so old that it has been impossible to clean it.” It was not only about cleanliness, but also the things in the caravan that are broken. The crew complained about a crack in the floor through which crickets entered. In December 2012, José, who was the last worker left occupying the caravan, showed me a broken window which made it difficult to keep the place warm.

When Katherine’s grandmother died in 2013, Katherine’s father, Dean, along with his sister, decided to sell the land where the caravan was. It had been
Katherine’s grandmother’s land. Therefore Brian and Katherine had to find a different plot of land to lease for the crew's caravan. Brian found that the only place available for the crew to stay in was Nick’s house; Nick was one of his white workers. However, the house had had a fire shortly before the crew arrived. The crew rejected Brian’s offer of living there, so he had to find them another place. They did so because it was a “rubbish house.” The electrical sockets had burned out and the smell of cats and the thought of fleas were overwhelming. The crew wanted to move into the trailer that was next to Dean’s place (Brian’s father-in-law). There was much negotiating between Brian and the workers. Daniel complained of the poor conditions in the house they were offered and knew that there was room for negotiating as Brian needed the workers.

This event shows what places were thought to be suitable for workers like the crew of seven: old caravans and rubbish houses. However, these ideas were reconsidered when Brian rented another caravan that Dean owned and which he had recently refurbished. Katherine was surprised that her father agreed to lease his recently refurbished caravan to Brian for the crew to live in. They had got used to the idea that they lived in the old caravan. Unlike Katherine, the crew appreciated the fact that they could stay in a refurbished caravan. The land around this caravan had many trees that offered plenty of shade. To keep the interior of the caravan clean, Brian bought trays on which the workers could leave their boots and clothes in the caravan after working, I was told by Daniel. The caravan had air-conditioning and two new bathrooms, three rooms and a living room.

Apparently, Brian was thinking of building a new place to offer the crew if they returned the next summer, or to offer to new workers if the crew were not willing to return. Daniel told me, “Si este año llegan a ir, o que vengan otros ya voy a hacer una casa para no andar batallando yo, dijo [Brian].” Daniel thinks that there is plenty of space in Brian’s new land where a new place for them could be built. “Y en el rancho que compró, está grande ahí el terreno. Y luego la casa es grande y todo.”

In the summer of 2014, the crew visited Brian’s new house for the first time. Daniel said that Brian had a comfortable house. It is in the style of a log house (real wood), with three storeys, including the attic, two clean indoor bathrooms, a
kitchen, insulation and heating. Furthermore it is quiet and has a beautiful, big
garden. Brian also owns part of a stream and some woodland. I know this because I
helped Katherine clean the house before she and Brian moved in in January 2013.

It is thanks to the migrants’ work that tobacco growers like Brian are “rich,” I
was told by the workers. The relationships between farmers and workers, I suggest,
develop on a daily basis, which is central to the identity of the workers as “the
poor.” The workers can see the inequalities between them and Brian in Brian’s new
house, trucks and clothes: Julio observed that Brian wears expensive brands of
clothes for farmers, such as Wranglers, whereas Katherine always wears the same
clothes. They have to work in difficult conditions and live in old caravans because
they are poor, but they do not want to be poor: this was a common idea held by the
crew. From the perspective of the workers, these relationships can be seen as
antagonistic, shaped by a set of conflicting interests in relation to key elements
outlined in their oral contract: housing, wages and activities. Employers rent cheap
places in bad condition for their workers, as shown in the example above, and
refuse to listen to workers' demands to increase their wages. They argue that if
they increased the wages or spent more on rent, they would lose money. However,
ideas about the places where workers might stay are revised on a daily basis. In
2013, Brian rented a refurbished caravan. Brian is the boss and as such he holds the
whip hand. Nonetheless, on this occasion his intention of lodging his crew in Nick’s
house did not hold, because the crew’s pressure for a different place convinced
Brian to change his original offer, which had been based on his ideas about the
crew’s social position. Nick’s house represented an unacceptable position (lower on
the social ladder), which the crew would reject regardless of their condition of
“illegality.” Previously, the crew had agreed to stay in the old caravan, which shows
how their bargaining power is partially curtailed by their condition of “illegality,”
but this time they knew that Brian would have risked part of his tobacco by not
renting Dean’s refurbished caravan on time. The crew would not have started
cutting tobacco if they had not been given a suitable place to live.
38 cents

The crew agreed with Brian that their pay is 38 cents per stick. Their main task is to cut and house (hang) Brian’s 43 acres (17 hectares) of tobacco. Although the crew keeps insisting on a pay rise, Brian and Katherine refuse. So they do their work for 38 cents per stick, respecting their agreement. But sometimes they, as a group, try to do things at their own pace. However, the tobacco has its own pace and Brian demands that they do certain things faster to maintain the tobacco quality, which as shown in the previous chapter is very important to the growers. The tobacco leaves cannot be left for long in the fields, due to the risk of being damaged by the sun. The crew needs to be fast to prevent the tobacco leaves from yellowing, thus damaging the quality of the tobacco; and they have to finish the work before it begins raining. To achieve good quality the crew needs to be well organised and to maintain the pace of work. They are allowed to take a break when it rains, but not when there is work to do and the weather allows it. If they take a break when there is work to do, Brian will go to the caravan to make them work. On several occasions, Brian reminded them that the agreement was that he would pay for the caravan as long as they were working. If they did not want to work, they had to leave the caravan as soon as possible. Unlike Brian, the crew believes that the tobacco can wait a little longer. Legally, Brian has no means of forcing the crew members to comply with their agreement, but morally they have given their word to cut Brian’s tobacco. They give their word that they will not quit in the middle of harvesting, as has happened with other workers. Brian does not want to take the risk of having to find a new crew when his tobacco needs to be harvested before it gets damaged. Although Brian is aware of the availability of other workers, he thinks that they will not work as fast as his crew. Moreover, other workers may have the skill but they lack knowledge about tobacco quality and the activities required to produce it. Such knowledge and experience facilitates the work of the crew. For example, they know from the colour when the tobacco is to be harvested or cured. The crew’s experience in tobacco in Nayarit makes them valuable as workers in Kentucky. In that sense, the crew is not as easily replaceable as Katherine has suggested on several occasions. The crew will finish the job if they
have said that they will. Brian looks for them every year, because they are known for working quickly and doing a good job. However, their good word is not always reciprocated, the crew suggested. The crew did not want to work for Bob, who is close to Brian’s family, because he changed his offer. To begin with he said that he would pay 36 cents per stick, but in the end he paid only 34 cents per stick. The crew told me that Bob was a “gordo sin palabra” (fat man that does not keep his word): “si es lo suficientemente hombre que cumpla su palabra” (if he is man enough he will keep his word). Although they did not want to, they did work for Bob, because Brian threatened that he would kick them out of the caravan if they did not comply, which illustrates the relative power of the crew and Brian. He used the caravan to put pressure on the crew to work even when they thought the payment was unfair. The following year the crew knew how to avoid working on Bob’s farm. They did not arrive on time to harvest Bob’s tobacco and he had to find another crew. However, the crew respected their agreement with Brian. They were on time to harvest Brian’s tobacco, but this time he only had 15 acres (or 6 hectares). By examining the disagreement between the crew and Brian, my intent is to highlight that the crew was upset about Bob’s going back on his word, but they never showed disagreement with being paid at a piece rate instead of a daily rate, which has important implications for their working conditions. This issue has been raised by scholars in regard to intensive agriculture: “in the light of our field data we can affirm that the increase in income is due to the generalization of incentives for productivity, wages set by piecework or task assignment (‘a destajo’), among other wage modalities that tend to increase labour productivity, but without the legally established measures for job protection” (C. de Grammont and Lara 2010:239-240). Workers’ health and safety risks are higher within the task-assignment wage modality. The activities the crew undertake outlined in the following description illustrate some of the risks and antagonistic relations which tobacco entails.
Corporeal antagonism

Antagonistic class relations manifest in different ways and some of these are expressed through the bodies of the workers. My aim is to provide a sense of the antagonistic relation between the growers and the crew in a very corporeal way. In the field, at eight in the morning, with the temperature at 35 degrees Celsius, each of the farmworkers is cutting tobacco. They do not start working earlier in the morning because the tobacco is too wet and the nicotine penetrates the pores easily. There are other employers who make their workers start work earlier; this is one way that workers distinguish good employers from bad employers. Cutting tobacco is an exhausting activity. The workers use a spear and a tobacco knife to sever the stalk at the ground. Brian provides them with the tools. Each farmworker chooses a furrow of tobacco in the field. The pace of work is maintained. Workers bend over to cut the stalk at the ground with the tobacco knife, lift the plant of tobacco and spear it, and if it is not speared then they repeat the movement, over and over. The movements that they have to do with their bodies, over and over, are gruelling. The farmworkers stop to catch their breath from time to time, to wipe the sweat from their forehead and to see how much tobacco is left, but then they resume working. They cannot stop for longer because that means losing money, for both Brian and the workers. They have a notebook, which Brian gives them, to write down the number of sticks that they have finished. The older workers (in their 50s) usually make less sticks than the workers a generation younger (in their 30s and 40s), and a similar amount to the youngest workers, those in their 20s. They feel the heat, the humidity and the drops of sweat. They breathe dust and feel pain in their arms and all over their bodies. Sometimes, when it is too hot, beyond their resiliency, they have to stop and lie on the grass to drink water and to recover. However, Brian does not think they are working as hard as he is used to working, from dawn to dusk and “24/7.” He only takes one week of vacation with his family during the summer to go to Tennessee. Brian is unable to put himself in their shoes. Cutting tobacco is not an activity that Brian would take on himself, but he will drive the tractor to plough his fields and plant the tobacco early in May. This is something that the crew is aware of, that Brian is not someone who would take a tobacco
knife and spear tobacco like them or with them. However, the crew prefers Brian not to be around because they are able to do their work without being observed by him, which would make them feel uncomfortable. The crew does not like to be observed by their employers because this is read as an indication of mistrust. But Brian's notebook system shows that he trusts them. He trusts that they are men of their word and will not let him down.

After cutting, the crew has to place the tobacco sticks on wagons and haul them to the barns to be hung and air cured. In the tobacco field, two workers stay on the wagon while it is moving to receive the tobacco sticks that the workers pick up from the field and hand up to them. They try to do this activity at sunset so that the next day the tobacco does not absorb the heat of a hot day, but the coolness of the dawn. The workers complained that they had been working for free. Brian had not paid them for piling the tobacco sticks on wagons and hauling them to the barns, which had been agreed in advance. This activity has become part of the job of hanging tobacco, but the workers think hanging tobacco is a hard enough job as it is, and so have asked, unsuccessfully, for this to be paid separately: for example, 20 cents for hanging tobacco and 18 cents for harvesting per stick. In the barn they hang the tobacco sticks, with a few men staying on the wagon to hand the tobacco sticks to the workers on the different tiers of the tobacco barn. Brian rented Dean's barns, which are part of his family heritage. This means that some of them are around 100 years old. The workers spoke about how the old barns shake when they hang Brian’s tobacco, and how they are afraid of falling. When the tobacco sticks are big and heavy it requires even more effort and the risk of falling increases. While they work, the barn is also very hot and their T-shirts get soaked in sweat. After hanging the tobacco, the workers are exhausted. Even when barns are new the crew are afraid of falling. Daniel told me, clearly concerned about their safety, about a new barn they had worked in, hanging the tobacco of another of their employers, a friend of Brian’s. They had thought it would be in good condition, “a estar cuchito,” but they all agreed the barn was very shaky. It had three wooden rails that were all well apart from each other, fit for only two people to be on, but three of them were needed to hang the tobacco.
The barn is a “matón” (literally, killer, but also thug) and the workers have to climb it to hang the tobacco sticks. In the barn, some stay on the wagon to pass up the tobacco sticks from the wagon to the worker or hanger on the first rail. The hanger passes the stick on to the man on the second rail. And he passes it on to the man on
the third rail at the top, at elevations of between 3 and 9 meters (Figure 3). For obvious reasons, hardly anybody wants to work on the rail at the top, because it is very hot and high, and they must climb up to reach it. A grower would not build a “killer barn” if he knew what climbing it meant. Brian is not the kind of person who would climb up a barn; he is the boss and he has people to do it for him. Moreover, for this activity, he “shares” his crew with other tobacco growers. Sharing implies passing on some of the responsibilities of employing Mexican immigrants, but it is also a way of concealing poor working conditions. In sum, the barns in their physicality reflect antagonistic class relations between employers and workers. Responsibility for the potential risks is transferred to the workers too. For example, as will be discussed below, Green Tobacco Sickness is dealt with as if it were an individual responsibility (see Holmes 2013), which is yet another aspect of antagonistic class relations.

**Green Tobacco Sickness**

Exposure to the sun and Green Tobacco Sickness (or GTS) are not included in the agreement. These take a toll on the workers’ physical and mental health. The crew wear long sleeves, leather palm gloves, a scarf under their cap, jeans or trousers of cotton and polyester, and boots. But this clothing does not always protect them from GTS. “Nos da comezón o se nos sube a la cabeza” (it causes itchiness or dizziness), Julio told me. On their first day of work Raúl, the 17-year-old member of the crew, became ill with Green Tobacco Sickness.\(^3\) He was vomiting and had cramps all over his body. He stayed in the caravan because he could not keep up with the tasks the next day. But eventually he got used to GTS. The workers say that the youngest workers are less resistant to GTS.

Another of the younger workers, César, started feeling dizzy, and the others told him that it was because he was fat. He asked me if I knew where to find

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\(^3\) One month after the crew of seven arrived in Kentucky, a new member, Raúl, joined them. Raúl was born in California, and when his parents decided to return to their home town in Mexico, they brought him back with them. He was 12 years old. Raúl was brought to Kentucky by Josh, a blind man who has a visa and accompanies people without visas across the border for money.
medical attention and I told him to apply to the Mercy Clinic, as I heard that the family with whom I was living were registered there, but it was easier for him to treat himself. César thought that maybe it was caused by cholesterol, so he started drinking a blend of apple, oats and water first thing in the morning. He was also thought to be more susceptible to GTS, and after a long day of hanging wet tobacco he usually vomited during the afternoon or night. If he felt discomfort the next day he would not go to work. The crew were evidently being left without health insurance; they had to pay for medicines and any treatment they might need. Susceptibility to GTS or other health conditions was seen as a reflection of a weak body by Brian and the other tobacco growers, who perceived their own bodies to be strong enough for the work. Nevertheless illness allows workers to take a rest and recover. GTS is part of a process of adjustment, which the employers were unable to understand and did not believe in. In particular, growers did not believe that GTS affected some more than others. The growers claimed to be resistant to it, but they do not seem to be aware of the fact that they are not exposed to wet tobacco leaves to the same extent that their workers are. They do not have the same physical contact with the tobacco that their workers do. It is evident that the worker’s health and safety is not just an individual responsibility, but reflects structural inequalities and antagonistic class relations.

**Time to be paid**

The relationships between employers and workers are also shaped by misunderstandings due to differences in language, and are informed by practices and values fed by a consumerist economy. The following story took place when it was time to be paid: It is a Sunday morning and the crew of seven call me to ask for help. The crew has not yet been paid and Friday was payday. The men tell me that they went shopping in Carrollton the previous day, where there is a well-known outlet mall with cheap denim jeans. After having gone shopping they are running out of money and they want their pay cheque. They ask me to call their employer Brian to ask him for the cheque. Having met Brian and his wife Katherine in 2008 and having kept in touch with them afterwards, I feel confident to do so. The crew
of seven are in the caravan and from there I call Katherine and explain to her that the crew has asked me for help as they are waiting for their pay cheque. *El patrón* (the boss) Brian arrives in the caravan and stays near the threshold. As he does not speak Spanish and the crew does not speak English (Julio was not there), I translate the conversation for both. He puts a document (the form to file his Annual Federal Tax Return for Agricultural Employees) on the table, which one of the crew will have to fill in. He also brings a copy of a similar document that a worker had filled in the previous year. The worker who signed it was not the same worker that Brian is thinking of now; the first was Daniel's uncle, who shares his name exactly. The uncle worked and lived with the crew in 2008, but now he lives with his family in a house near the farm and he only works with the crew occasionally. When the crew notice the confusion they mock Brian, who leaves the caravan to get the pay cheque from his pickup truck. This act of mocking Brian implies an image of him as the *gringo tonto* (dumb American). While Brian is outside, the crew and I discuss who is going to sign the document. Finally, Daniel signs it and gives a false social security number because he does not have one. When Brian returns, he gives them the pay cheque and takes the document with him.\(^{36}\) The crew then get ready to visit the Flea Market, to go for their weekly groceries at Walmart and at the Latino stores, and to have lunch at the Asian Buffet. It was the crew’s right to be paid, but Brian used it as a tool to get his document signed.

This example shows that the timing of wage payments are an arena in which opposed class interests can be expressed, sometimes via mockery. However, both parties find the ways to negotiate their differences, to their mutual benefit.

**Work as sacrifice**

In the following discussion, I will address how the crew believe that they are making a sacrifice and want this to be acknowledged, and how the farmers think differently. The workers feel that their desire for better living conditions while in

\(^{36}\) Brian and the crew both mock the politics of immigration and the USA's governmental controls. Brian tells them to write down a different address from the one they have in the USA to avoid being persecuted by the Internal Revenue Service. He thinks that the US government will not look for them in Mexico.
Kentucky and to be paid what they think is “fair” for the work they perform is not fulfilled within their actual working conditions. They want their employers to acknowledge that they have made a long journey that involved crossing the border and staying as undocumented workers. In other words, they want to be acknowledged not only for their work (understood as the physical activities linked to the harvesting of tobacco) but also for their effort to get to Kentucky and for overstaying their visas, thus becoming “illegal” immigrants, to work in the production of tobacco. They think that Brian needs them, but the availability of a pool of immigrants has secured Brian’s demand for cheap labour and has increased competition among workers. However, the idea of being specifically desired as a crew, “they are fast” was a common expression, which can be read as a form of respect, gives the crew some sense of their own exploitation. Julio told me that Brian does not want to give the job he and his brother have worked since 2009 to a different crew. Age and experience in tobacco play an import role in performing the work of stripping tobacco, and this gives a relative advantage to Julio and his brothers who are in their 30s: they are known for working quickly and they were born and bred in a tobacco town.

They find that they are exposing themselves to the sun, high temperatures and the nicotine, which is absorbed into their pores when the tobacco is wet. These are some of the many aspects of their daily lives that remain silenced by the employers and local people, who are unable to see these conditions as part of structural inequalities. These difficulties are not recognised as part of their “work,” and the workers suggested to me that if the employers acknowledged them it would generate the empathy necessary to improve their living and working conditions. They want to be recognised as workers who make sacrifices, for example, leaving their families for about half of the year, to be in Kentucky on time to cut tobacco and to maintain the economy. It is very difficult for them when there is a problem at home, such as, for example, when César’s child was bitten by a dog and he had to be hospitalised. However, the flexibilisation of labour is usually seen by the government and local agents as a win-win situation for both the employers and the employees. Work as a sacrifice is seen by the workers not as an individual responsibility, but as an effect of the lack of opportunities at home - “due to
necessity,” I was commonly told. The root of this sacrifice can be traced to the inability of the Mexican government to generate stability and work opportunities. I was repeatedly told that had they been able to get better jobs in Mexico, they would not have migrated to the USA. Work in the tobacco fields in Kentucky is both a necessity and an opportunity, the workers told me. The different meanings of work reflect a structural situation which generates a specific context of antagonistic class relations between Brian and the crew. Brian perceives the crew’s work as being “normal,” and also thinks that he is doing them a favour, as opposed to the crew’s idea of their work as being as sacrifice reflecting their antagonism in their class relations.

On a Saturday afternoon that they do not want to work because they are exhausted and they think they need a rest, Brian arrives at the caravan and asks them if they are on vacation and whether they want to earn money or not. He tells them that they are not paying rent and that the ones who do not want to work can leave. No one makes any comment or objection to what he says; Brian is the boss and his tone of voice and confidence in giving orders confirm this fact. They respect Brian as the boss, they give him their “word” (dar su palabra) and they trust him, but he has not appreciated them for their work, which is not only about increasing their wages. They are not on vacation, they are here to work. As they say, using a common phrase, “Pues sí a eso venimos” (of course we came to work). The workers are asking for respect and recognition for their efforts; and the workers, in exchange, will keep their word. Their word is inextricably linked with their ideas of sacrifice and values of reciprocity.

Sacrifice lies in the awareness of being excluded as the Mexican workers, who belong in the tobacco field, the broken caravans and the dangerous barns, while Brian is doing another kind of work. He is working on the prison’s land, where he has his own cattle and horses. Brian does not cut tobacco, nor does he do any of the other activities that the crew does. He is not exposed to the same conditions, and this division clearly reinforces their antagonistic class relations. Their work is not valued in itself, but rather in relation to how they are perceived as Mexican workers, which contributes to class antagonism in Kentucky. The crew are, sometimes, seen as lazy and careless Mexican illegals. I remember a rainy day, with
very slippery soil, when Julio had been driving Brian’s tractor, and Brian got upset that Julio, the foreman of the crew of seven, had not taken due care of the tractor. In Brian’s eyes, Julio did not know what the price of that tractor was. This image informs Brian’s set of categories, whereas the same image of themselves as Mexican illegals has an opposite meaning for the crew of seven, linked to their perception of themselves as self-sacrificing and hard-working people. “Are you on vacation?” Brian exclaimed. The crew’s work has different meanings for the crew than for Brian. It was taken as an insult: being asked whether one is on vacation after all the sacrifice undergone to work in Kentucky. For Brian the insult consisted in implying his workers were lazy and irresponsible for not fulfilling their agreed role as workers, whereas for the crew it was an insult because it denied their sacrifice.

**Divisions among workers**

Antagonistic class relations are also reflected in divisions among the workers. In particular, the set of categories Brian uses to identify Mexican migrants affects how the workers relate to each other. They try to distance themselves from particular stereotypes and this means employing strategies of interaction such as the silent treatment. On one occasion when I arrived at the field, José was drunk. The other workers were cutting tobacco while José was on his mobile phone and Julio was fixing the van because the battery had died. José had been listening to loud music but had left the radio on for too long, draining the battery. José and Julio’s van stayed in the field until the next morning. One Sunday at the Flea Market, one of the workers complained that he could not sleep the night before because José and Julio had stayed up late playing cards. In the caravan, nearby friends would sometimes visit the workers in the evenings and at weekends, and some of the workers would sometimes get drunk. José frequently played cards with Julio, and they were often joined by Fernando’s brother, who lived with his family near the caravan, and another friend. They made one-dollar bets on poker and liked to drink beer while the other five members watched TV, rested or called their families. In effect, there was a difference between José’s behaviour and that of the others, and
four of the crew tried to distance themselves from the immigrant stereotype (lazy, drunk, likes loud music, irresponsible) that José embodied: a stereotype that reinforces the violence against immigrant workers, who lack labour rights and good working conditions. Experiences such as these with José drove the other four workers to take the decision to stop talking to him. However, it is not surprising that alcohol is common among these workers, given that beer is one of the things that helps mitigate the discomfort of the nicotine in their bodies. I was told repeatedly that beer helps them sleep, and that without it they would stay awake due to the nicotine. Brian brought them beer regularly, as a gesture of goodwill. But he also scolded them, as if they were children, when they got drunk and listened to loud music.

In the encounters between Brian and the crew, power was exercised and conceded; and it included processes of recognition of the boss. The crew of seven recognised in Brian’s face that he was the boss, and in doing so, they recognised themselves as not only the poor, but the subordinated. Brian became the face to be mocked. The crew of seven feared their employer. At the same time, they trusted him, because they knew that he would not call the police, and they poked fun at him and did things behind his back (such as pouring too much water into the tobacco). We all “accumulate, exercise and concede power” (Torres 1997:168), but everyone does so from different positions and boundaries. The workers recognised themselves as vulnerable, as the majority neither spoke English fluently nor had a social security number, except those who had overstayed their visas for a longer period of time in the past. Julio and César were afraid of being tracked somehow if their social security numbers appeared in documents, as they were no longer allowed to stay in the USA. It seems that Brian was unable to understand the situation. As noted above, Brian wanted one of his workers to sign a document with a social security number for a tax declaration.

They recognise Brian and they want to be recognised. The workers want to be recognised as “hard-working” people, because this is thought to be one of the main reasons why an employer will continue to employ the same workers. Becoming hard-working implies an extra effort. It entails not only working hard and enduring the working and living conditions, but also becoming a “worker” who will
fulfil the requirements of tobacco production: quick, strong, cheap and available “24/7.” In this case it is not only the commodity of labour which satisfies the necessities and demands of the employers, but the labourers must also fit into a certain category of worker: one who stays sober, loyal and hard-working. In this sense, it is not only for their skills that they are morally valued. Workers struggle to fit into this category of the good worker and in their efforts they attempt to establish distance between themselves and the stereotypes that inform Brian’s categories about his workers. However, they still drink and listen to loud music, which is criticised by their employers. An immigrant worker that likes drinking “too much” is evaluated as someone to disdain and to discount. Brian, for example, would drink a beer with his workers, but not more than one. Moreover, Brian would never go to work drunk.

**Nayarit: naturalised inequalities**

In this section, I will explore how the structural relation between tobacco growers and farmworkers in Nayarit, although similar to that in Kentucky, is characterised by a different understanding of the category of work. The same hierarchical organisation of company/grower/worker exists in the tobacco industry in each place: the same Nayarit workers sell their labour to both Kentuckian growers and Nayarit growers, which entails similar structural relations. However, the meanings attached to the crew’s work and their experiences of work are different in each place. The absence of jobs in Mexico and the presence of jobs in Kentucky frame the activities of the crew in terms of necessity and opportunity in Kentucky, but as absent work in Nayarit. Particularly, their work in tobacco becomes part of a routine that exists in relation to activities within their family lives (work-family dynamic). It is also my aim to examine how their understandings of work are affected by the presence of indigenous workers.

I found that the antagonistic class relation between employers and their mestizo workers (middle-wage workers or “normal” workers) is cushioned by the presence of indigenous workers; a presence that assimilates the interests of growers with the interests of their workers, with regard to both work and more
generally about perceptions of life. Similarly, the presence of Mexicans in Kentucky cushions antagonistic relations between growers and white workers. Tobacco is seen as an activity that is passed down the generations and which the younger generations of men are still involved with. This is similar to what the Kentucky growers think: that they inherited the culture of tobacco from their parents and grandparents, but unlike the young generation in Nayarit, tobacco is becoming a lost culture in the new generations in the Kentucky tobacco towns. Moreover, growers and workers see themselves as sharing a similar life story: employers and workers (including the crew members) started working in agriculture from a young age, typically after dropping out of school. This is a bond that I did not find between Brian and his white workers. They do not see themselves as sharing a similar life story: Brian is the boss and his white employee is the worker, although in a different situation from the Mexican workers.

“It is because I am a *burrito* (the diminutive of donkey),” Julio told me. The crew think that the only jobs they can do are in agriculture because they did not study; they consider themselves *burritos*. They blame themselves for being lazy at school. They take on all the responsibility for something that was not just an individual responsibility, but a structural position of the individual. In this way, the crew compare themselves with Nayarit tobacco growers, whom they see as *burrito* too, whereas Brian’s white workers see Brian as a member of a family of hardworking tobacco growers. In contrast to the crew’s experience in Kentucky, the rich/poor dichotomy cannot explain their relationship with their employers; instead kinship relations and communal ways of interacting are more relevant for that purpose. The crew of seven work for local people, thus giving sense to kinship relations. They work in order to help their employers, who may be their father-in-law, brother, cousins or friends, and to maintain networks of solidarity. In this case, the crew of seven share nationality, language, values and an ideology of work with their employers. Moreover, they share what I call mestizo solidarity, rooted in processes of post-colonial nation-building. Working for a *gringo* rather than for someone from the same town changes the meaning of work, although their relation is mediated by the same contractual principle of employer-employee. Nayarit mestizo workers do not see their Nayarit employers as “rich,” they consider them
to be in a very similar condition to themselves. They are all “civilised” people living together, defined as such in opposition to indigenous people (see Chapter 5). They can be the tobacco farmers themselves, like Fernando. They are all rancheros (people from small towns known as ranchos).

**Employer-worker relations**

Brian and the crew agree on an oral contract based on trust and loyalty. The Mexican employers and their workers also agree on oral contracts, but unlike in Kentucky they have a more egalitarian relation (based on the idea of a common past and rooted in ethnic antagonism between mestizos and indigenous people) and, in comparison with the agreements made between Brian and the crew, their contracts do not necessarily reflect class antagonism in such an overt way. The members of the crew have their own houses in Nayarit. They are paid per day and do not ask for pay rises or better places to live in as they do in Kentucky. Mestizo workers are paid per day in Nayarit like the white workers are paid in Kentucky, which shows that mestizo workers are in a similar position to the white workers in Kentucky, but without being able to see these similarities the crew agreed to be paid per task in Kentucky. There are also other kinds of differences; for example, although the workers follow their employers’ orders because they are paid to do so, the employers are not called *patrones* (as they are in Kentucky). Instead, they are called by their nicknames. Julio told me that their employers wonder why they are not called *patrones* like the growers are in the USA: “*Ellos dicen, por qué cuando van al norte luego dicen que el patrón, del patrón esto y por qué aquí no. Si ellos te dicen hay que hacer esto, lo haces, te está pagando. Y aunque no lo llames patrón, no deja de ser el patrón.*” In Wittgenstein’s words “the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” (Wittgenstein 1953:11e). The category of *patrón* indicates hierarchy, which is not found between Nayarit employers and their mestizo workers, but instead between Nayarit employers and their indigenous workers. Nonetheless this is for different reasons: in the USA the category of illegal immigrant refers back to its constitution as a nation of immigration; there is no equivalent category in popular usage in Mexico. In Mexico, the category of
indigenous people goes back to its colonial past, but the category of Native Americans in the USA, which is the equivalent of indigenous people in Mexico, do not work as seasonal migrant labour in Kentucky like indigenous people do in Nayarit.

In this sense, tobacco workers in Nayarit feel that they are appreciated by their Nayarit employers. The employers know that their mestizo workers are norteños, which generally means people from the north, but in this particular case refers to people who migrate to the North. This in turn means they are recognised as hard-working people; awareness of their migration and the toll tobacco takes on their bodies gives legitimacy to the thousands of women and men who migrate.

In what follows I will focus on the relationship between José and Juan, his Mexican employer. José does not think of his Nayarit employer as the hard-worker that he sees in Brian and in himself. The local tobacco farmers migrate less than their mestizo workers, though they may also become migrants. Nevertheless José does not use the category of rich to refer to Juan; he uses the category of civilised to refer to both of them together in opposition to indigenous people (as we will see later and as will be further discussed in the Chapter 5).

In the past, José was a tobacco grower, but due to the restructuring of the tobacco industry and the Land Reform of 1994, it became too difficult for him to stay in business. José was born in 1977, so he is still considered strong and suitable for farm labour. However, in a few years other workers, younger than him, will be preferred by the Kentucky employers, which is what happened to a group of workers in their 50s that I met in 2008. They did not return to Kentucky because it was getting harder to find a job due to their age.

José worked with other two mestizo workers, Amalfitano and Rubén. Their job consisted of building *ramadas* (shelters roofed with branches in the tobacco fields, where indigenous workers sleep and work) (Figure 4), spraying fertiliser and inhibitors to prevent the suckers, and checking the water pumps. They also hung up the tobacco strings (consisting of 800 tobacco leaves) in outdoor structures, counted them, and made the tobacco bales. The working hours varied according to the activity in question and the pay was around 200 pesos per day (around 8 GBP). They agreed these conditions with Juan in an oral contract. José gave his word to
Juan, but there is more room for manoeuvre and improvisation than the oral contract in Kentucky allows. Workers can refuse their employers’ requests for their labour whenever the need to arises. If something comes up at the last minute, for example, related to family matters, the workers let their employers know and do not go to work. There are workers willing to replace them for one day. This is a situation similar to the relation between Brian and Nick, his white employee: for example, Nick can stay home on leave.

Figure 4. Ramada

Working in tobacco from February to June provides José with a temporary solution to the ongoing problems of the decline in agricultural employment and the stigmatisation of being unemployed that goes with it. This kind of work provides no security at all, and it is just enough to keep him at subsistence level. However, it fills the time perfectly while José is waiting to return to the USA. Julio works in the production of tobacco in Nayarit for the same reason: it is something to do while waiting to migrate. This is a description of Julio’s workday in his own words.
We get up at 4:30 in the morning, ready for work at 5:30. We take lunch with us. Laura cooks for me when she has the chance. I have a snack to last me until 10:30 /11:00 AM. The lorry arrives at the tyre shop to pick us up. We rest for 15 to 20 minutes while we have our lunch, at 07:30. We work from four to five hours. When I am at home I make sure to get some sleep. I help my father-in-law in the afternoon. Some time ago [during these afternoons] I built a room. My brother-in-law helped me with the walls. He mixed the cement and lay the bricks and once finished we put the roof on.

Julio works for his father-in-law, who owns 10 hectares of tobacco. Two hectares are contracted in Julio’s name, although he does not possess the land. This is the only way that Julio, his wife and their children can gain access to the social security system. In 2013, he earned around 1,200 pesos a week (about 46 GBP). For Julio, working in tobacco in Nayarit and in Kentucky shows that he has ambition, that he wants to progress. In Julio’s opinion the men who do not migrate to the USA are lazy; they are not forward-looking men, he told me. As I mentioned earlier, he does not want to work when he gets older. This is a way to give sense to working in tobacco at home while waiting for the time of year for him to migrate and work in the North.

As if they are on holiday

I will now address how a different perception of work frames their situation as workers in Nayarit, where I was told that it is less boring to work in tobacco than outside agriculture. I have already shown how the understanding of work, as an activity that is paid, differs, from Julio’s perspective, between Nayarit and Kentucky. I will focus on José’s experience, as he was the one who used the notion of “holiday” to refer to his situation in Nayarit.

José was the last to remain in Kentucky. As mentioned above, five of the group of farmworkers he worked with had returned by the end of September after having finished hanging Brian’s tobacco. Julio the foreman, who brought two of his brothers to join him for the stripping of the tobacco, and Raúl, a young man who turned 18 while working in Kentucky, returned to Nayarit in December to spend Christmas with their families. They left after finishing stripping Brian’s tobacco. José stayed on alone in the caravan because there was still work available from the
other tobacco growers. It was January when I last visited him, just before my trip to Nayarit. José sold his labour for the same industry in both places, but in different conditions. He belongs to Nayarit: he speaks the language and he knows the regional culture.

In Nayarit, I greeted José at the corner of the market in the county town. The person I greeted seemed very different from who he had been in Kentucky. In rural Kentucky, José was in complete isolation in a cold winter. In Nayarit, he had a completely different demeanour, with the self-confidence and security shown by someone who is familiar with a place and has regained his freedom. It was a sunny day, as it is almost every day, and hot from dawn to dusk. The first thing he said, smiling, was, “I’m on holiday.” In reality, after having worked hard for almost six months in Kentucky and not yet having found a job in Nayarit, he had no option but to take a break. In formal terms he was unemployed. It is not until February that tobacco requires labour.

Working in tobacco is seen as the main activity that allows workers to earn money to pay for food and bills at home. Although, the pay in Nayarit is not enough to build a house, which is thought of as requiring work in the USA. Local people often say that in the North life is only about work, seen as a burden and a commodity, and that the cost is dear, and generates “suffering” (for example, their small children can easily forget that they are their fathers). They feel like slaves. The difference is that instead of shackles, caravans and passports are efficiently used.

In Kentucky, there is no “free time,” whereas in Nayarit work does not feel like a burden and the category of free time takes form in different ways; it is time spent with family and friends. They do not feel like slaves, but free men. Work and free time are clearly separated. The division is culturally embedded (work is related to a wage, but also to networks of solidarity). The work available partially fits the requirements of the workers; but only partially, because they want to be able to afford a house. Within Nayarit tobacco growers’ attempts to reduce labour costs, their mestizo workers are not affected in the same way as their indigenous workers are. For example, the latter are paid at a piece rate, whereas the mestizo workers are paid per day.
Working in tobacco can also be a way to occupy their time as they wait for their departure to the USA. Waiting is a social construction of time and space caught up in political, economic and cultural transformations. In other words, they work in Nayarit to wait until it is time to go to the North. Finally, for some local workers working in tobacco can be less boring in comparison to other jobs outside agriculture. It is the physicality of the job which makes it interesting for mestizo workers. They like to move constantly, although it is hard work; the pain and physical dimensions make tobacco the preferred work, and gives men their manhood.

Jorge, the former foreman of the crew of seven, worked six months inspecting the tobacco canals on his motorcycle. It was getting boring for him. Soon after he finished this job he started working in tobacco. He preferred this to his previous job, because he “is used to working in agriculture.” That being said, it was hard work. Carrying heavy bunches of tobacco leaves over his shoulders to the other end of the tobacco row was strenuous work in itself. But then he had to string the tobacco, which involved sitting in the field for long periods in one position. His waist would hurt and his legs would go numb. This is usually work that indigenous workers take on, but Jorge took it on because it was the only job available at that time, when the season was about to end. Jorge did 19 tobacco strings one day and 21 the next day. He started working at 7:00 AM, went back home at 12:00 PM and returned to work at 2:00 PM. Nevertheless, for him it was más divertido (more enjoyable) to work in tobacco than to inspect the tobacco canals.37

Working in tobacco becomes part of the workers’ routine within a context of absent work. In particular, this work is not seen as a sacrifice or a necessity like it is felt when they are in the USA. It is part of their heritage and one of the few work opportunities available in Nayarit. In Nayarit “work in tobacco” does not entail the same toil and pain that it produces in Kentucky. Their income in Nayarit may be tight but it is enough to support a family. However, they want a house and furniture, for which money is needed. The remittances can be used to invest in convenience stores, which are usually controlled by women. Women can also

37 For the first time, Jorge planted tobacco in 2014: “Yo soy mi propio patron en Amapa, echo tabaco ya” (I am my own boss in Amapa, planting tobacco), Jorge told me.
become money-lenders, generating interest on which they can live. They are also employed as babysitters, waitresses, secretaries, nurses or as pharmacist assistants.

**Low-wage labour**

Paradoxically, the same workers who demand to be recognised for their sacrifice and suffering in the USA are unable to recognise the efforts that indigenous workers make to travel to and stay in the tobacco fields in Nayarit. There is a slight awareness that indigenous workers are exposed to abuse and violence, but this does not generate more than a few comments. The workers I worked with do not see that the very same idea of sacrifice they have can be seen among indigenous workers too. Working in the production of tobacco is an industry of inclusions and exclusions which involves an ideology of work that is not framed by citizenship or labour rights. For example, the working hours and wages are not regulated and are subject to abuse. Working is not the same for everyone. Indigenous workers are caught up in the informality that has characterised farm labour governed by transnational companies such as Philip Morris and British American Tobacco. It is undeniable that the tobacco the companies buy and promote is maintained by a regime of child labour, and workers without labour rights or dignified conditions. However, this industry requires the participation of each and every one of the workers (mestizo and indigenous workers). This makes them either accomplices or, perhaps more eloquently, active participants in their own exploitation.

José, Amalfitano and Rubén were not the only farmworkers that Juan employed. He also employed a family of indigenous farmworkers: Ofelia and Apolinar, and their children, along with Apolinar’s mother and brother. They were in charge of stringing the tobacco leaves to create *sartas*, or strings (Figure 5). A person might do between 8 and 20 strings per day. Indigenous farmworkers are seen as having the nimble fingers required for this activity. Their working hours are much less regular, as they are available 24/7 since they live in the tobacco fields. They also work at night by moonlight. Unlike local seasonal mestizo farmworkers, indigenous farmworkers are paid on a piece-rate basis, earning 10 to 12 pesos (around 40 and 48 pence GBP respectively) per sarta. This is similar to the situation
of the crew while in Kentucky. They are paid 38 cents per stick (around 25 pence GBP), whereas white workers are paid per day (as discussed in Chapter 4). However, the crew only sees the USA-Mexico wage gap and they have an expression for this: “Con una hora que trabajes aquí (in Kentucky), ya estás ganando lo que trabajas allá (in Nayarit) en todo el día.”

The positionality of indigenous workers is different. These workers take on the tasks that are thought of as suitable for them and unsuitable for workers like the crew of seven. In other words, they fill in the position of low-wage labour that the crew does in the USA. The Nayarit workers I worked with recognise indigenous people as hard-working people, as they recognise themselves to be. However, indigenous workers are thought to have a different culture of work and a different weltanschauung (see below); it is seen as something intrinsic to their bodies. Hence the name of the second part of this chapter - naturalised inequalities.
One afternoon during spring, outside a convenience store, José, his employer Juan and I find ourselves talking about various issues while relaxing after a hot day. Juan and José use the example of an indigenous girl to explain that the indigenous farmworkers have a different way of thinking and living. José and Juan told me that Juan ordered his indigenous worker to take his daughter to the hospital; the girl had become very ill. However, the girl was only taken to the hospital when it was already too late. Juan thinks that his worker had waited so long because “they’d” rather be cured by a shaman than go to a hospital. The girl did not die, but she cannot walk as she could before. José shows us how the girl now walks, dragging his foot. “Before the illness she could run throughout the tobacco fields,” José says, and adds that “she cannot run anymore.” Juan and José communicate with each other against the backdrop of exclusion/inclusion practices based on race and ethnicity. Their communication shows us a less hierarchical employer-employee relationship than between Juan and his indigenous farmworkers. José and Juan share similar moral values whereby indigenous farmworkers are placed as “outsiders,” and are excluded from participating in the community. As members of the same ejido, the Bedouin saying may apply to Juan and José: “Me and my brothers against my cousins, me and my cousins against the world.” In this case, Juan, José and other local farmworkers are located in opposition to “outsiders,” such as indigenous seasonal farmworkers, on the basis of hidden yet historically given and very powerful racial and ethnic hierarchies (discussed in Chapter 5).

Conclusions: work as a structural situation

In this chapter, I have drawn attention to the different meanings that the category of work has for the crew in relation to their experiences in two different work regimes, in Kentucky and in Nayarit. The different meanings reflect the differences between Kentucky and Nayarit, each location has followed a different path in the history of capitalism. The absence of work in Nayarit turns work into an opportunity and necessity in Kentucky. In Nayarit, I have highlighted particularly the idea of work in tobacco as a routine and part of their family-time frame. Different
meanings of work reflect this structural situation: in Nayarit, the availability of work is limited, whereas in Kentucky the availability of work allows the satisfaction of some of the crew’s aspirations (informed by a consumerist economy): such as a house.

The very same structural situation (absent/present work) frames the relation between the crew and Brian, their Kentuckian employer. The category of illegality has restricted their bargaining power in relation to Brian. However, the crew has an advantage in relation to other Mexican workers in the region: they know how to work tobacco, because they have been learning both the skills and the knowledge since their childhood. And while other Mexican workers in the area can learn the skills to work tobacco with relative ease, acquiring knowledge about the quality of tobacco is much more difficult.

The antagonistic class relations between Brian and the crew have different expressions, some of which are not evident: the wages, the fields, the caravan, and the barns can reflect this antagonism in very subtle ways. The situation between the crew and their Nayarit employers is different because their position and social positionality is different, for example, in terms of working and housing conditions. Indigenous seasonal workers occupy a similar position to the one the crew has in Kentucky. For these workers, work in tobacco entails the same toil and pain that it produces in Kentucky for the crew.
Chapter 4: Labour commodification and resistance

This chapter examines the tension between being a commodity and being a person in Kentucky and Nayarit. I found that the same tension is central to both economies, both permeated by capitalist relations of production, and in particular to tobacco capitalism. In other words, the same set of people (the crew) sell their labour to the tobacco industry in both places, and this entails particular forms of coping and managing the alienation the exchange produces. Interestingly, the crew are aware of their commodification in Kentucky, where they want to be recognised as people, a condition which is threatened in the USA by a powerful apparatus of surveillance. However their alienation in Nayarit is mitigated by the presence of indigenous workers. Specifically, we will examine how the crew of seven resist being treated as commodified objects in two places.

I will argue that, although not without its critics, the category of resistance is useful for analysing the power relations within the global tobacco industry. I focus on the desires, creativity and practices that the crew of seven’s working and housing conditions entail. They are also linked with a historical struggle for labour rights (for example, demands for social security for farmworkers) and processes of resistance that were generated by the very same capitalist logic in which they are caught. That is to say, the kind of resistance and power that the tobacco industry entails is historical and contextual. I want to shed light on what the workers can do within particular frameworks and within structures of power in the wake of neoliberal retrenchment.

The situation of the crew of seven’s vulnerability and oppression in Kentucky, as well as those of other groups of workers, raised the question of power and resistance during my fieldwork. Drawing on Gledhill (2012:3), “the study of resistance should be embedded in more complex accounts of the practices of power.” The grounded analysis of the experience of Nayarit workers in two different work places, in particular, their experience of being a commodified object and being a person, will give resistance its meaning and content. This will allow me
to examine different practices of power that crosscut the global industry of tobacco: sometimes against the workers themselves and sometimes on their side.

In Kentucky, the crew of seven want to be acknowledged as who they are and for their sacrifices. They struggle to maintain some control over their lives within their condition of vulnerability (for example, by drinking, listening to loud music, cracking jokes and pouring too much water into the tobacco to make it weigh more), whereas in Nayarit the same activities (for example, drinking, listening to loud music and cracking jokes) are normalised, and the possibility to negotiate some of their working conditions, such as the working hours, makes the experience of objectification less visible. However, the same historical forces that tip the balance in favour of the mestizo workers in Nayarit have undermined the dignity of indigenous workers, which they fight against in various ways. For example, indigenous workers drink and use their languages as strategies to cope with their working and living conditions. Meanwhile, mestizo workers criticise the way indigenous workers drink, thus maintaining distance from them. This also applies to Nayarit workers in Kentucky, where the employers criticise the way Mexican workers drink, but the crew members are unable to perceive any parallels with the situation at home.

The study of the relation between resistance and power in the workers’ own terms is translated into the idea of being free. The desire to be “free,” in the words of the people I spoke to, is linked to restrictions on their movements. This is linked with the workers’ perception of a “good life,” spaces in which they can feel in control (individually or collectively) of their lives. They are able to carve out some of these spaces at home, through family and marital arrangements (relations which are not entirely reducible to the commodity market) (discussed in Chapter 6). I will discuss the notion of freedom used by Nayarit workers by looking at the practices they use to cope with the restrictions and workings of the Mexican-US border. They also express their ideas of freedom through their practices and interactions of everyday life. For example, they present themselves as people who like dancing and drinking, spending time with their family and friends, and watching TV. All of these are practices and ideas that constitute their notion of a “good life.” I argue that some of these situations help people escape from the commodification of life, but
at the cost of becoming objectified in more oppressive ways. In other words, the experience of a “free” life in Nayarit is linked to their experience of oppression in the USA as well as the visible oppression of indigenous workers in Nayarit, which fosters different ideals of freedom for which they have to work. The crew gain social acknowledgement in Mexico for working in the North in exchange for giving up family space and labour rights. They participate actively in their own commodification, as this case-study will show. At a local level, however, they find ways to have an enjoyable life and mock the surveillance apparatus that the US and Mexican governments have erected.

I found that workers do not use terms like “resistance” or “struggle.” My initial reading was that the crew of seven were not interested in opposing their position of vulnerability. However, in their focus on ordinary things and their efforts to lead a “good life,” I found that they use particular ways of resisting specific forms of power that do not necessarily put at risk their opportunities to work in Kentucky. This is neither a case of organised ways of resisting nor “everyday forms of resistance” (Scott 1985). The crew of seven cannot afford to risk their work opportunities on either tobacco plantation, so they have found safe ways to demonstrate their disagreement and general disenchantment. Tobacco farmworkers do not see going on strike as an option to show their opposition to being treated as commodified objects, but instead have other practices, which do not risk the hierarchical structure of tobacco capitalism.

The crew of seven both resist and support the existing system of power. Scholarship on agency can be useful in understanding how tobacco workers struggle to gain control over their lives so that they can support a family. Workers want to give their children what they did not have in their own childhoods; they want to have a house, to gain respect and to hold on to the ideals of a “better life.” Agency is also present when workers, broadly speaking, do not want to change their conditions. Agency understood as a capacity for action does not exist “apart from cultural construction (nor is it a quality one has only when one is whole, or when one is an individual)” (Ortner 1995:186).

I also found Mahmood’s (2001:215) analysis of agency useful, in which agency is not defined as a synonym of resistance. “In this sense, agentive capacity is
entailed not only in those acts that result in (progressive) change but also those that aim toward continuity, stasis, and stability” (Mahmood 2001:212). Thus she problematizes the universality of the desire to be free:

...the desire for freedom and liberation is a historically situated desire whose motivational force cannot be assumed a priori, but needs to be reconsidered in light of other desires, aspirations, and capacities that inhere in a culturally and historically located subject (Mahmood 2001:223).

This chapter begins by examining the system of recruitment and the H-2A visa programme. The latter is seen as a point of entry for the crew of seven into different occupations, such as the production of tobacco leaf. My primary concern is how workers resist objectification on their own terms, focusing on what they actually do and what they can to stop being treated as a commodified object within the H-2A Visa Program in the United States. Julio once told me, “Nos sentimos como un paquete.”

“Nos sentimos peor que en una prision” is one of the expressions commonly used by the crew of seven when referring to their experiences in Iowa, whereas in Kentucky, Julio and other Nayarit people who worked in the region would say, “Nos sentimos en la jaula de oro.” In Mexico, the same workers feel free: “Nos sentimos libres.” What can they do at home that they cannot do in the USA? What does freedom mean from the perspective of the workers? Spending time with family, going out, going to the beach, managing less hours of work and having money for a “ceviche” or “pescado zarandeado” (traditional, delicious Nayarit food) are pleasures that they do not have while in Kentucky. Moreover, they have less control over their lives than they do in Nayarit, where they do not feel under surveillance by la migra. However, at the same time they are able to do things in Kentucky that they are unable to do in Nayarit. Another of my aims here is to find out what people’s feelings and practices can tell us about resistance, power and agency. In particular, I examine how the workers are developing strategies to both cope with processes that treat them as commodified objects, and make being acknowledged as a person a legal claim.
Kentucky

In this section, I will examine how migrants are made visible and desirable commodities to be controlled by agencies and employers (see Lindquist 2010), who tend to forget that they are individuals who have feelings, opinions and rights. According to Lindquist (2010:116-117), there is comparatively less information about the process of labour recruitment than there is about why “unskilled” migrants, both female and male, leave home and how they are treated upon arrival: “it is critical to consider the infrastructure, or ‘migrant institutions,’ which allow people to move” (Lindquist 2010:117). In addition to this, I found that there is less information about how workers themselves live the process of recruitment. This section will show that labour recruitment, while surrounded with formalities, is also embedded in workers’ fears and expectations. Moreover, it is part of workers’ life projects.

Another of my objectives is to focus on debt, using Lindquist’s discussion as a framework. Lindquist’s (2010:118) concern is how the bodies of migrants are quickly transformed into valuable commodities to be controlled and protected, in particular, through the gendered regimes of debt as they affect the recruitment and transplantation of men and women from Indonesia to countries such as Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. Lindquist (2010:130) suggests that “as capital incrementally flows down, the female migrant is thus transformed into a commodity that must be protected by the recruitment agency and the sponsor.” The men who move from Nayarit to the United States do not have to be protected by a recruitment agency in the same ways as the women Lindquist spoke to need to be protected (for example, to avoid pregnancy), but they are disciplined and controlled by other means, for example, through their criminal records. Drawing on Lindquist (2010:132), I also found that “gender actually shapes transnational migration regimes.”

As noted above I will examine how recruitment, or as the workers call it, mandar pedir (being sent for), is embedded in workers’ emotions, bodies and practices of everyday life. Before this, I will address the recruitment process mainly from the vantage point of an H-2A agent, an Agriculture and Natural Resources
agent, and the employers, thus accounting for the process of labour recruitment at the intersection of formal and informal processes.

The crew of seven and other Nayarit men and women use the H-2A Visa Program as a point of entry into the United States. I was told repeatedly that this allows them to cross the Mexican-US border safely, particularly in comparison with the methods employed by migrant smugglers and drug traffickers. The H-2A Visa Program is often described officially in terms of numbers and as a relief for the shortages in the labour market in the rural sector of the USA; usually none of the worker’s rights and opinions are taken into account. This permeates agents’ views about the programme and their ideas about who the workers are. The H-2A programme is seen as a win-win programme. Martin and Teitelbaum (2001: 118-119) note that:

US and Mexican advocates promote temporary worker programs as a “win-win” game. According to their arguments, US employers would benefit from a guest worker program because they would obtain legal access to workers who would accept low wages and be unlikely to unionize. At the same time, the temporary Mexican workers would win jobs at wages far higher than those available at home.

Such advocates seem blind, however, to the human costs: “short-term labour contracts resurrect older forms of indenture, with limited rights and mobility” (Glick-Schiller 2009:30). The US guest worker programme does not necessarily guarantee better working and living conditions, although tobacco workers do obtain an H-2A visa that allows them to cross the Mexican-US border “legally.”

Rather than this official vision, I will focus on the experience of the crew of seven who are employed as H-2A guest workers in Iowa. After completing their employment in Iowa, these workers, despite it being against their contract (which indicates that upon completion they must return to their country of origin), then travel to Kentucky to work in tobacco. In Kentucky, they are “illegally” contracted because the H-2A programme does not allow workers to be contracted by a different employer from the one who requested them in the first place. If that were allowed, they would be able to find an employer who offers better working conditions without the risk of being sacked and refused future entrance to the USA.
This is not about individual responsibility, as it is commonly portrayed as in the media. Being an immigrant worker is not a choice, but a result of the workings of a politics of immigration that have contributed to the formation of the global labour reserve.

**The government brought them**

The aim of this section is to address how the agents and employers, whose actions and perspectives shape the experience of workers who are sent back and forth to the USA, understand this process. I found that some of these actors, when expressing their opinions, are likely to forget that they are dealing with individuals similar to themselves, who have opinions and rights, and are not commodities.

Moreover there exists a tension between employers, agents and government agencies. To analyse this situation I will take as an example the Agriculture Workforce Management Association (AWMA), which is one of the agencies in Kentucky that recruits workers as part of the H-2A Visa Program. This association claims to be “a voice on labour issues”, and claims to “act as a liaison between farmers and government agencies”. I think this association has the advantage of sharing a building with the Burley Tobacco Growers Co-op, which administered part of the price support programme until 2004. This co-op still claims to be the voice for burley tobacco farmers and their families. I also heard about it during informal conversations with farmers because the agency supplies Mexican workers to one of the largest farms that I visited during fieldwork. Officially the H-2A programme is presented by the AWMA as follows:

> It is a federal program that permits employers to apply for nonimmigrant alien workers (guest workers) to perform any type of farm work of seasonal

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38 The Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association acted as a tobacco buyer before 2004, when the companies offered no more than one cent more than the support price. This was a “fixed price determined on the basis of the quality and demand for the grade” guaranteed by a federal programme: the Burley Tobacco Program. The farmer was paid for his tobacco from the sales warehouse, which was reimbursed by the co-op, using money lent from the Commodity Credit Corporation, “a federal corporate agency that finances and otherwise manages a number of commodity programs” (Eastwood and Van Willigen 1998:38).
or temporary nature for a maximum of ten months. The H2A program is authorized by the Immigrant Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986. The purpose of the H2A program is to assure employers a legal and adequate labor force while also protecting the jobs and wages of U.S. workers.

Who may apply? Any agriculture employer or group of employers who need workers to perform seasonal labour. An employer may apply for H2A workers and complete all the necessary government procedures on their own or the employer may have a H-2A Agent [sic] to do this for them for a fee. Most farmers will contract with an H-2 Agent due to the burdensome government requirements (AWMA 2015).

Employers and agents agree that it is difficult to meet the “burdensome” government requirements. David, one of the Henry County extension agents, wanted to know during an interview whether the workers felt good about the programme, because employers did not. In his opinion, the H-2A Visa Program has too many conditions. He referred specifically to the housing conditions, whereby the employer must provide accommodation for those workers who cannot return to their own residence the same day (and these must be inspected and approved by the State Workforce Agency):

There must be at least 100 square feet (9.29 square meters) for each occupant. Of this at least 50 square feet (4.65 square meters) must be in sleeping area. An area for storing clothing and personal articles must be provided to each occupant. There must be one bed for each worker. There should be one toilet, and showerhead for each ten occupants. One hand-washing sink for each six occupants. Windows and doors should be equal to

39 The Henry County Cooperative Extension is an important link between the counties of the Commonwealth of Kentucky and the state’s land grant universities to the benefit of local people. The land grant universities are linked with the passage of the Morrill Land-Grant Act of July 1862. “For Kentucky and the other states of the South, despoiled and devastated by the Civil War, the Morrill Act provided their only chance at the time of establishing publicly funded nonsectarian colleges.” The Act authorised the federal government to provide each state with 30,000 acres of federal land for each of its senators and representatives - to be used for the endowment, support, and maintenance of at least one public college for the purpose of instruction in agricultural science and engineering. “Although the law did provide for separate but equal facilities, only Mississippi and Kentucky established institutions for blacks under the first Morrill Act” (Williams and Williamson 1985). The county of Kentucky gained independence from the Commonwealth of Virginia under the name of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, enhancing a government based on the common consent of the people. Throughout the USA there are four states that use the term Commonwealth in their official state names: Kentucky, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and Virginia.
approximately 10% of floor space on a room-by-room basis. Each room must have at least one opening window that is capable of being used for ventilation and emergency exit in case of fire. Housing for migrant workers must be a minimum of 500 feet (152 meters) from livestock. They must have hot and cold running water, a smoke detector in each sleeping room, fire extinguisher and a first-aid kit.

David stressed that the growers themselves live near their cattle, and he questioned how they could offer housing standards to the workers that not even their own houses meet. However, despite the requirements of the programme, he thinks it is likely that farmers will opt for workers with H-2A visas instead of acquiring expensive machinery, such as machines for bulking tobacco or taking down tobacco in the barns. He argued that due to market pressure, farmers must try to save money where they can, and contracting workers from abroad permits this.

When David asked me what I had heard about workers’ experiences in the programme, he emphasised that some workers might be fine with their employer. He mentioned that some growers take their workers to church to make them feel comfortable and treat them well, “because they want them to return.” He noticed that some of the employers even want to learn Spanish, to be able to talk to their workers in their own language. However, despite the thoughtful actions of some growers, the employers on the bigger farms tended to think of the workers as commodities. David also stated another idea, which I heard often, that the presence of H-2A workers is a bad influence on the local young people, who become lazy, and that it also encourages farmers to not want their own children to work in tobacco. Overall, he framed “the idea of employing H-2A workers” as something coming from the government, rather than the employers themselves.

The people in charge of the Agriculture Workforce Management Association, Rick and Donna, despite having no direct contact with the workers, follow the discourse of a win-win game, arguing that workers with H-2A visas make good money as contracted workers. This is linked to the idea that their wages are far higher than those available in their home countries. Rick stressed that they earn good money, because they send some home and spend their money in Mexico, where US money goes further.
For employers with large farms that grow tobacco and other crops the H-2A Visa Program is burdensome, but convenient. I remember George saying that every night he had to do paperwork related to the workers. And his “right hand,” as the blonde Mexican foreman of his farm is known, had the idea that each worker was very expensive to bring in, including himself and his wife, thus justifying their condition of exploitation, as if George therefore had the right to make them work 12 hours or more a day during the peak season. For Jim, another grower, the programme was not a good experience. The H-2A workers he contracted wanted to order him around and did not do a good job, in his opinion. Therefore, he went back to contracting undocumented workers. For Brian, the programme is not an option. Why would he bother contracting workers through the programme when he has “loyal” workers whom he contracts illegally that save him money and time? The crew of seven delivered themselves to Brian’s door. However, the members of the crew do not want to be seen as illegal workers, and they do not want to be illegally contracted either. They asked Brian to be contracted as H-2A visa guest workers (a point I will return to below), because they are afraid of la migra, the consequences of being caught by the police and the risk of deportation. Moreover, the crew want to be seen as “normal” and “legal” labour, as they are in Nayarit, despite the fact that it implies greater commodification of them as labour and more regulation. However, Brian prefers them to remain illegal as it gives him more flexibility: for example, he is not required to invest in a clean and convenient space for the workers to live in. This allowed him to house the workers in the derelict caravan for so many years.

40 The estimated cost per worker is between 1,040 and 2,290 dollars (or 716 GBP and 1,578 GBP). Information is available from: http://www.awmalabor.com/2015_Cost_Per_Worker_08122014.pdf (accessed 12 February 2016).
Como un paquete

Lindquist (2010:131) found that migrant women are not passive victims in these processes of labour recruitment. Over time, migrant workers develop strategies within the current migration regime (Lindquist 2010:131). Similarly, I found that the crew of seven have been overstaying their visas for more than ten years. I found that they are not passive victims of the neoliberal reforms. The same reforms that control the circulation of the work force, for example, through commercial treaties such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, follow a different rationality: workers are essentially no different from commodities.

“I feel like a parcel:” this image was clearly embedded in Julio’s mind, as he would repeat it every time I asked him how he felt about being an H-2A visa worker. As contracted workers, they are supposed to return to Mexico soon after finishing their contract, and to come back to Iowa when they are again needed for detasseling corn.41 This is how the crew of seven found themselves as workers within the H-2A Visa programme. The AWMA will send out “a crossing packet each time a worker or a group of workers cross [the border]. The packet has instructions on what they [the employers] need to do when their H-2A workers arrive” (AWMA 2015). The workers are treated like a package, and they are aware of it. The employer must sign documents when the workers arrive, as if they are parcels that have been delivered, and he has to give his signature again when they leave the farm to confirm that the workers have complied with the contract. If an H-2A worker fails to report to work or leaves without notice, or if a worker is terminated before the completion of the services for which he or she was hired, or if a worker finishes the labour or services for which he or she was hired more than 30 days early, the employer must, within 2 working days, provide the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) with a report of termination, giving

41 Detasseling corn is an activity which consists of removing the top part (the tassel) of corn plants in order to promote cross-pollination in the production of hybrid corn. This work is mainly done by Mexican workers.
the date of the termination and the reason for it. This is a system in which Brian does not want to partake, despite the workers’ suggestion otherwise. They want to be “legal” labour. They want to be contracted by Brian within the H-2A visa programme. For their part, the workers believe that if they worked under the H-2A programme, their contractual conditions of work would remain unchanged, but their entrance and stay in the USA would be less risky. After the restructuring of the tobacco industry, competitiveness has increased, and illegal labour is one way for small farmers like Brian to ensure making a profit. Unlike Brian, George has capitalised his farm, and H-2A workers have become essential to it. It is still a burden to bring workers in within the H-2A visa programme, but it is less risky.

Daniel shared with me the workers’ desire to be employed within the H-2A visa programme in Kentucky. They would do so in the name of an institution that generally seems to be on the side of the employers, as several scholars have argued (see Binford 2009) and as I have also found. In doing so, they would actively participate in their own objectification. Nevertheless, they want Brian to mandar a pedir for them, in order to avoid being caught working illegally, which would jeopardise their possibility to return in future seasons. They do not want to be mojados (undocumented immigrants). They told Brian to find an agency that would hire them legally and they would help pay for their own visas but it seems Brian did not want to. He came back saying that the conditions of the caravan did not match the criteria. They insisted with Brian, being clear about what they thought and stating that this result suited him, as the visa process would cost him money. They requested that he begins the process in April or May and they would help with the visa. Another farmer, George, knows the procedure and could advise Brian. It would be good for him as well because there would be other farmers who could pay for their labour on other farms. This would alleviate financial pressure for Brian.

In Daniel’s testimony there is neither opposition to becoming part of the legal system nor an explicit desire to break the law as many think, as if becoming undocumented was an individual choice. Nayarit people themselves think that “it is

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better to work with a visa because the workers have security, health insurance and rights.” They do not pay rent or bills. Moreover, there is a telephone number to report abuses by the employer. However, “workers do not denounce them due to ignorance,” I was told by Diana, the wife of one of the workers. The crew of seven find being contracted beneficial because they do not want to be mojados. Moreover, with a visa, they would be able to go back home. Thus far, the crew of seven have not been sanctioned for overstaying their visas, but they fear they soon will be as more and more checking is taking place at the port of exit by inspecting officers. This desire seems to contradict their preference for their situation in Kentucky compared to the situation of the H-2A guest workers on the neighbouring farm. On the one hand, the crew value the flexibility that being “illegal” offers in Kentucky. On the other hand, they do not want to be “illegal” due to increasing border controls and surveillance. It is important to stress that being commodified entails a different situation than being objectified; they are interconnected but separated by the workings of different institutions: the US Department of Labor and the US Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Workers must follow a formal procedure to become H-2A visa workers. Although I will describe some of these steps as they were described to me by the workers themselves, it is central to keep in mind that these are embedded with fear, nightmares, and rituals.

The crew of seven goes through the same process every year and it involves many filters: la patrona (a female boss), the US Consulate and the port of entry. They contact Miguel, who owns a small labour recruitment agency in Santiago Ixcuintla, the municipal seat ten minutes from their home town. They go individually to see Miguel, not as a group. They are required to bring their passports and a copy of the receipt for the visa fee payment that is sent to the Consulate General of the United States in Monterrey in the north of Mexico.

Contact with the employer is through Miguel, but only after the workers first contact the employer themselves. The crew call their previous employer, la patrona, to ask her whether she will be contracting the same workers. Miguel then

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43 Lindquist (2010:18) argues that these agencies mediate flows of capital, facilitate bureaucratic process and move the migrants themselves.
sends her a fax with the names of the workers. The employer must fill in an application 75 to 90 days before the workers are required.

As noted earlier, in the meantime, daily life is full of uncertainties, fear and rituals. The workers have dreams and nightmares about it. Francisco described to me a dream he had the night before as it felt very real; it was about going to see Miguel and handing over his passport, but it was just a dream onto which he had pinned his hopes. No day passes without the workers wondering whether or not their name is going to be on the list of contracted workers. This fear became a reality in the case of César in 2013, one of the members of the crew, whose situation proves that nothing guarantees their place in the cuadrilla or the group of workers the next year. As Daniel described it: “ya no lo pidió la patrona allá (Daniel is referring to César), nomás de hecho había pedido a mi papá, a mi tío Fernando, y a mi tío Rafa de aquí y los demás a nadie, ... hasta que la hallé (referring to the employer).” After Daniel spoke to the employer, his name was put on the list, but not César’s.

Between two and three weeks after they send in their passports they are informed about their interview appointment date. They have to leave a day before their interview appointment; they arrive at night and sleep outside the US Consulate in Monterrey.

The whole town knows when workers are due to leave because an announcement is made through the town’s PA system indicating that they need to get ready to leave soon, sometimes in a week’s time. When their visas are confirmed, around one week before departing, they get prepared. Some go to church, to healers, to the cemetery to say goodbye to a parent, or visit close family members to say goodbye. For example, Julio’s experience is that before departing, he cannot sleep. He stares at the rooms he built himself, and he gathers images that he will take with him to the North. Overall, there is a shared feeling and common thought whirling in his mind: the possibility of no return. This powerful idea is very present among migrants and their friends and family, who are left wondering whether or not they will see them again.

Along with these striking images, workers leave the country deeply in debt. This adds to their fears. It is common for the crew to borrow money before they
leave to finance their transport and subsistence, and to leave money for their wives. They must pay for their transport from their hometown to Monterrey and from Monterrey to Iowa. This is money that their employer must then reimburse them within the first week of work. The following is an estimate of the reimbursement paid to a worker, provided by the AWMA (2015) (in US dollars):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consulate Interview Fee (IMRV)</td>
<td>$190.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Country Transportation Estimate</td>
<td>$120.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridge Fee</td>
<td>$6.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation from Border to Jobsite (USA)</td>
<td>$134.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subsistence Pay for Travel $11.58 per Day</td>
<td>$46.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated Reimbursement to Worker for Travel &amp; Related Cost</td>
<td>$496.32 (approximately 329 GBP)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Money lending has become an important informal institution based on a strong sense of trust. The debt is repaid as soon as the workers get their first pay cheque in the USA. Workers typically borrow money at a 6%, 10% or 15% interest rate per month. Borrowers are asked for their title deeds, or other properties’ titles that guarantee the loan will be paid off. The major risk for local lenders like Laura, Julio’s wife, is when workers decide to settle in the USA and do not pay off the loan.

There are also people making money out of migration in more dishonest ways. The workers are exposed to fraud and they know it. Chamba Mexico was a network of fraudsters that were using the façade of a recruitment agency to deceive people who wanted to work in the USA. I was at Jorge’s house, the former foreman of the crew of seven and son of the oldest man of the crew, Francisco, when we heard a report on the news about Chamba Mexico declaring it to be one of Mexico’s largest fraudulent organisations, not only in Nayarit but also in other states. Doña Luisa, Jorge’s mother-in-law, had lent money to a person who paid for Chamba Mexico’s services, thinking that they would find him a job sooner than other recruitment agencies. They did so in his case, because the broker was from
the same community. But soon after, people started thinking that the amounts of money being paid were unreasonable, and then it became clear that it was a fraud.

Along with frauds and the risks associated with them, there are the filters. The Consulate General of the USA is what I call the second filter. In dealing with the Consulate, workers are asked for information such as, for example, how many times they have been to the USA, when and for how long they had stayed, and for what purposes. They cannot admit to having overstayed their visas and having worked illegally, because if they do they are sanctioned and prohibited from entering the USA for one or more years. However, once it has been proved that one has overstayed his visa, it is better to tell the “truth,” as they understand it, about why they stayed longer than permitted; otherwise, the sanction can be tougher. None of the members of the crew has ever been rejected, but Julio’s wife has. Laura was contracted in the peach picking industry in 2009. She wanted to help her husband in the construction of their house. But during the interview at the Consulate in Monterrey her entrance was refused. She said that “me castigaron” (she was punished) because in 2001 she had overstayed her visa to give birth to her son in Kentucky. Soon afterwards, she returned to Mexico because she did not like the American way of life. After being refused in 2009, she was told to wait for three months before applying for a new visa. However, she did not apply again. Since then she has stayed in Nayarit. The pace of life changed her plans. She became pregnant again and now has a little girl who she looks after when her husband is in the North. This incident left them indebted to local money-lenders; they had to borrow money to pay for the visa fees and the journey. Thus, migration policies spilled over into their everyday lives back at home as a gendered punishment (see Lindquist 2010). It was common to hear people saying “me castigaron” and talking about how this has changed their lives.

In Monterrey, workers board the buses that will take them together with other workers to the farm in Iowa. The buses from Monterrey to Iowa are already paid for by a company in charge of that. The return ticket is also paid for by the employer, who must reimburse return travel costs upon completion of the contract. The following is an estimate of the reimbursement paid to a worker (return ticket), provided by the AWMA (2015) (in US dollars):
In Country Transportation Estimate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transportation from Jobsite to the Border</td>
<td>$120.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subsistence Pay for Travel $11.58 per Day</td>
<td>$134.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated Reimbursement to Worker for Return Travel</td>
<td>$288.74 (approximately 191 GBP)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On their way to Iowa, some men get off the bus in Texas. Their main purpose for getting a visa was simply to cross the border, whereas the crew continue on their journey to Iowa.

The third filter is the port of entry. When I crossed the Mexican-US border by bus I observed that the main concern was to comply with the requirements and to answer the questions correctly at the port of entry. It is here that the authorised period of stay is decided. In the same port-of-entry where the crew cross every year, there are exchanges of life stories, solidarity, stress, worries and disappointment when the officers authorise a shorter stay than hoped for. It is usually fear which best describes the general sentiment at the port of entry; this is usually contradicted by the experience of the crew of seven, who until now have not been rejected at this point. However, the crew witnessed the detention of a fellow worker. They believe that the US Consulate in Monterrey had complied with agents at the port of entry to authorise the worker’s H-2A guest worker visa, in order to detain the person at the port of entry. Presumably, there was an arrest warrant issued against him. As Daniel described it:

If you enter with a cap they will give you a nasty look, you have to take it off. They take your picture and your fingerprints once again. Then you leave and join the queue to pay the 6 dollars for the bridge crossing. People have been handcuffed at that point. Imagine someone has an arrest warrant, and even when your visa is approved at the consulate, the agents wait until you are at the border to lock you up. Sometimes I think there is a complot between the consulate and the border control.
Through events like this the force and constriction of the border is materialised, which is not only external but also internal to the vigilance of the workers themselves: an obedient consciousness that turns into a disobedient subject when they overstay their visa.

Leaving Nayarit to be an illegal is a different experience from leaving on a H-2A programme. I found that crossing the Mexican-US border illegally was common before 2001, and was what many if not all of the members of the crew used to do. After 9/11, and also in connection to the violence of the Mexican drug war, attempts to cross the border illegally have decreased due to increases in surveillance.

In this section I have shown the work involved in crossing the border as an H-2A visa guest worker, which is preferable to becoming an illegal immigrant. However, perhaps the real desire to be “normal” and “legal” is what is sought by the crew as they travel to the USA.

**Peor que en una prisión**

In Iowa, Nayarit workers are afraid to stand up for themselves because they want to be contracted again for subsequent seasons. However, this does not stop them from talking amongst themselves and being aware of the bad treatment, isolation and confinement that they put up with and which they describe as “worse than a prison.” They were not afraid to share their experiences with me either.

The crew started working in Iowa in 2000. They are contracted by Tom and Tere, who require labour for corn detasseling and other agricultural activities, such as picking beans, cucumbers and watermelons. The contract lasts approximately two months, from July to August. In 2012, the salary was $11.50 (7.93 GBP) per hour. Every day they had to get up at 3:00 AM to be transferred to the fields and start working at 6:00 AM.

The work is very tough basically because the hours are very long. You barely sleep, getting up at 3:00-4:00 AM to have breakfast and then get on the bus that takes you to the fields. You check in with your name and pass etc. and you have to sign in when you start and when you leave. You work until
sundown, working between 12-13 hours every day. And since they pay in cash, you pocket your 1,000 dollars each week.

When in Iowa, the crew feel as if they are in prison not because their employer is a bad woman, but because the conditions are very poor compared to their conditions in Kentucky. As Julio put it: “Te sientes como prisionero, estar listo pa’ lo que ellos se les ponga a mandate. Si a ellos se les ocurre trabajar en domingo todo el día, todo el día trabaja uno y si no pues no trabaja uno.”

In Kentucky the restrictions on their movements become looser: for example, they have their own vans and they can visit relatives when they have free time. Despite their confinement in Iowa, Julio happened to meet a woman in a local bar close to his workplace with whom he had an affair. Furthermore, in the workplace, they can drink. “The bar was 10 minutes’ walk away and had a canteen, pool table, music and sport on the television. The bar also had air-conditioning so it was a nice break from the heat outdoors. There were not only Mexicans there but Americans as well.” These are Julio’s words; according to him drinking in a bar is allowed. Drinking in a bar is a way in which the workers try to assert their personhood and autonomy in Iowa.

In 2012, they worked alongside 500 workers from different regions of Mexico. Establishing conviviality among so many men was difficult. Francisco remembered that the first time he and his son Jorge arrived in Iowa, people from Tlaxcala did not like them, but now they felt more integrated. This shows that internal and intraregional rivalries have transferred to a situation where the workers are under pressure and exploitation. The workers all slept in the same two-storey building. The crew complained about their food and drinking water. The drinking water tasted foul and so even coffee was difficult to drink. Moreover, they had to pay for their food, which, at 100 dollars per week, was expensive. “3 meals came to 12 dollars a day. The farm workers cook themselves (on a rota) and one female cook provides the flavour.”

They also found it difficult that there were only two telephones for all the workers, and calling Mexico was very expensive. Men who complained about this would be refunded by the employer, but they would not be contracted again the
next season. In Iowa, without access to a car or mobile phones, they felt confined. There was no chance to buy either, as they rarely got to leave the farm during the term of the contract. They did not bring their own mobiles due to the risk of theft and because calling rates to Mexican are very high while abroad. A big farm like the one in Iowa, as with any capitalist enterprise, will squeeze as much profit from their workers as they can. They did not get enough sleep, as they had to get up at 3 AM. Structural violence and vulnerability are inevitable conditions of such a complex labour hierarchy. Whereas in a farm like Brian and Katherine’s, which is more like a family business, market interests and family values are entwined. Furthermore, the relationship between Brian and the crew gives greater room for negotiation about work conditions. However, the possibility that Brian could quit farming tobacco at any time creates instability for the crew. Another alternative would be for Brian to capitalise his farm, which would be highly risky because he is not a full-time farmer; if he did, it would be better for him to contract H-2A workers than illegal workers, for both the security and the possibility to squeeze workers in more efficient ways.

**La jaula de oro**

Despite the workers feeling more relaxed in Kentucky, it was common for Mexican tobacco workers there to say that they feel they are in a “jaula de oro” in the USA (gilded cage), whereas in their home towns they feel free. This image applies to the USA in general, but particularly to the Kentucky context in comparison with their experience in Iowa, as it is a place of transition and confinement, for they are not allowed to leave the farm at any time. The bar in Iowa was even bought by the owners of the farm.

“Although the cage may be made of gold, it is still a prison. At some moment, you feel you want to be there. Despite how much money you might earn, if you don’t have your family here, you are not at ease.” This is what Julio told me. For him there is nothing like being with his family in Mexico. Overstaying their visas generates fear and uncertainty. However, the crew are likely to prefer this option to being in the shoes of their neighbours, the H-2A visa guest workers group. When the crew told me that they wanted to be contracted, they were thinking of the H-2A
visa as a way to enter and stay legally in the USA. They were not thinking about the implications in terms of the restrictions that are linked to the H-2A Visa Program. In the crew of H-2A workers there was a man named Alberto from Nayarit. Alberto was not undocumented, he was a H-2A visa worker. Hence he was not afraid of “la migra” like the crew were, but he had to face other restrictions.

Alberto recommended that I use the front entrance to the farm and not a path to the side because the employer might otherwise think that the workers were bringing in women. I spoke with the employer, George, and he allowed me to visit them regularly. Eventually, using the path to the side was banned, in order to regulate the visits of friends and family, which are restricted. They were living in three trailers behind the house where George’s parents live. The crew that I followed never worked for 13 hours in a day, as was the case with this crew.

The day they worked 13 hours, they were exhausted, but they kept working until they finished. Some regretted “selling themselves,” I was told by the workers. Others got Green Tobacco Sickness, and some of the youngsters were vomiting. The tobacco grower brought them fried chicken from Dairy Queen to compensate their efforts, but they wanted to sleep, not eat. However, some could not sleep because of the nicotine absorbed through their skin. Thinking of the tobacco quality, the employer wanted to finish before it started raining. The next day, they rested because it was raining. The fact that the employer bought them chicken made them think that he was a good employer. However, the workers were not sure whether the employer would contract them the following season. He will contract the ones who work hard and are loyal, not the insubordinate workers.

A central difference between undocumented workers and H-2A guest workers is the power that the foreman has over them. An H-2A worker was dismissed because he did not keep up with the pace of work and he did not follow the foreman’s instructions. Two other workers, who were relatives, resigned in solidarity. They wanted to set their own pace of work. At the beginning they

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44 According to the US Department of Labor, GTS is a “potentially deadly condition.” They have also declared that “New workers may have a lower tolerance to nicotine exposure than previously exposed workers.” Information is available from https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/green_tob_sickness/index.html (accessed 12 February 2016).
worked fast, but as they started feeling indispensable to the farm they changed, the foreman told me. “They thought they were making the farmer rich.” The dismissed workers were replaced by undocumented workers, settlers in that county. The dismissed workers will never be contracted again at that farm, and they will have further difficulties if they want to enter the USA again. The act of complaining and opposing the working conditions is punished. The three men stayed in Kentucky as undocumented workers. In this case, the shift in legal status from H-2A guest workers to undocumented workers meant more independence, but at the price of more risk. As an undocumented, there is always the possibility of being caught and deported.

Unlike George’s crew, once in Kentucky the crew of seven feel better; they have a car and mobile phones, although their mobility remains highly restricted due to their status of “illegality.” When they arrive in Kentucky, the first and most important thing they have to do is buy a mobile phone so they can be in touch with their families. Mobile phones have become an important means for maintaining daily communication with their families, and through these conversations they are updated on events at home, they love and they fight. Moreover, the crew of seven have a place to stay where they can have some autonomy. The caravan is one of the central spaces in which the crew’s everyday practices include subtle elements that help them overcome the difficulties of feeling dislocated and being at risk. Notwithstanding the crew’s feelings of isolation, the fact of being illegal gave them some independence vis-à-vis H-2A guest workers. They are free to invite friends and women to the caravan and, because the farms are scattered and isolated, they are not subject to the gaze of their white employer or neighbours. On the neighbouring farm with the group of H-2A guest workers, friends, women and alcohol were prohibited.
The crew had a daily routine, which helped them tolerate the feeling of being separated from their families and cope with the pressure at work. The caravan was a small space for a group of seven men, and they distributed their personal possessions wherever they found a suitable place. Each member of the crew had shampoo and soap, a toothbrush and toothpaste, and detergent, and they kept their clothes in their suitcases (Figure 6). Workwear, sandals and boots were kept both outside and inside the caravan. The way they divided the sleeping space was important because this revealed internal conflicts and family ties. Julio and José slept in the living room, as they did not get along with the rest of the group. Francisco, Daniel, and Rafa slept in one bedroom (Francisco is Daniel’s father and Rafa’s brother-in-law) and Fernando and César slept in the other room (Fernando is Francisco’s brother and César is Rafa’s neighbour). When Raúl arrived, Julio and José made space for him in the living room. The caravan had a very old kitchenette, which they usually used at night. They formed teams of two for cooking their meals.

Figure 6. Room
At night, they cooked the next day’s lunch and dinner. They ate at the dining table, but they also used it for playing poker. They ate lunch and dinner on a rota system because the dining table was only big enough for a maximum of four people. In these ways, the caravan was appropriated by the workers. Sometimes it worked as a refuge, but I will not deny that it was also a kind of cage that reflected the control exerted over the workers. They were not free to move as they wished; they were targeted as Mexican “illegals” and were hidden. The caravan was taken as if it was a bonus, a part of the deal that Brian agreed to because he is not a bad person after all.

There are other aspects of their everyday life that help them cope with their condition of subordination, such as watching TV together. It is an afternoon and we are ready to watch a horror film. The movie is Pumpkinhead (1988). The film is on VHS, the only format available for them to watch because they do not have cable television. Brian does not want to pay for it. The movie starts and they begin to interact with the scenes. The movie is in English, but as they do not understand English, they change the characters’ dialogues into Spanish, saying what they think it is being said or what they want to hear. Likewise, they also warn the main characters when they are in danger or when they are about to die in the film. They are immersed in the movie. At the end of the movie, the crew look pleased after having shared a film together. These are some of the aspects of life in Kentucky in which they can recognise themselves. At home it is very common to watch films with their families. It was important to get a satellite dish; they wanted to watch television in Spanish and the weather forecast. One month after arriving and settling into the caravan, they finally installed a satellite dish for their television, for which they paid monthly. They had been asking Brian for it from the day they arrived, but he did not want to provide one. Jaime, the owner of the Latin Market, a Mexican restaurant in town, helped them get a contract, as they had to give a local address, bank account and social security number. Once they had it, they mostly watched programmes in Spanish, which helped keep their links with Mexico. This was one of the factors that make their stay in the USA less difficult.

They also find ways to soften the routine by joking, swearing and listening to music in Spanish, mainly norteñas (a popular genre of Mexican music). For example,
they used to listen to music while stripping tobacco. This activity is considered to be a burdensome task compared to cutting tobacco. The dust makes it difficult to breathe and the work is tedious, as Julio and José remarked. Stripping tobacco is similar to a production line, and they do not like to work in assembly factories. They find these jobs boring. The first man strips the flyings, the leaves at the bottom of the stalk. He hands the stalk to the man next to him to remove the cutters, the leaves next to the flyings, and the third man to the right removes the tips, the leaves at the top of the plant. Each leaf, depending on its position on the stalk (bottom, middle or top), has specific qualities, size, colour, and maturity. There is coordination in the stripping room. It can be exhausting working all day in the stripping room, but the nicotine which penetrates their bodies and the music in Spanish keep them awake. Generally, Brian arrives at the farm after work, to check the work that has been done, and so the workers have to wait for him in order to tell him what tasks they have finished and what is next. Sometimes they want to leave early, but nevertheless have to wait for him to avoid being scolded. One day while they were waiting for him, with their bodies covered in dust and their noses blocked, they used humour to deal with their fatigue. José says that Brian stares at him: maybe he is puto (a disrespectful way of saying he is gay) and he likes him. José’s spontaneity makes us laugh.

As the end of the season approaches it is difficult to keep up the motivation. But the idea of returning home for Christmas keeps the peace. The pace of work sets the pace of life and the work turns into a mark of identity. They do not work in factories; they find any activity that is similar to assembly-line production very boring. They belong to the fields, and they hold on to their identity as rancheros (farmers). This means working hard from dawn to dusk. However, some of their tasks discourage them. Julio told me that they were very upset about spending an entire day booking tobacco, which means climbing the tiers of the barn and handing the sticks of tobacco down and placing them on a wagon, without being paid. They had to do it because the more tobacco they got down, the more they could bail on the following days. Julio and his crew earned 22 cents per pound of tobacco they bailed and not per hour, as local farmworkers were paid, because the latter “won’t work slower to make more money,” as Brian’s son explained to me. They finished
bailing up the 80,000 pounds of tobacco that Brian had agreed to deliver to Philip Morris International; the bales were ready to be processed into cigarettes. Julio and his crew worked fast, wanting to finish quickly so they could be home for Christmas. This was their main motivation to work harder. They knew that once they had accomplished their agreement with Brian they would be able to leave and return home. They did indeed finish on time.

The crew’s experiences in Iowa were often described to me through the image of a prison. They move from home, where they feel “free,” to a place that seems to them “like a prison.” Nevertheless, even in Iowa they find ways to regain control over their lives, such as through going to a local air-conditioned bar where they can socialise with both migrant settlers and local people. This makes the place feel more familiar, more like their situation in Nayarit where they frequently visit restaurant-bars with their families. The image used to express sentiments about Iowa differed from that used to express sentiments in Kentucky. They move from “the prison” to the “gilded cage,” where they regain space to move around, but have nothing compared to the space they have at home. In Kentucky, they have the caravan, in which they organise space in more familiar ways. The prison and the cage are the tropes of their positions at work available under the relations of production in the USA: the first as H-2A visa guest workers and the second as “illegal” workers. These categories are in opposition to their positions at work in Nayarit, where they are “normal” workers. Their position in Nayarit is far from that in which they find themselves in the USA, yet their USA positions are negotiable in different ways: through the bar in Iowa and the caravan in Kentucky.

Nayarit

According to Gledhill (2012:2), “Understanding why people in apparently similar ‘situations of domination’ react differently is a central issue in rethinking resistance.” In my case study, addressing Gledhill’s question means asking why the same workers in apparently similar situations of domination react differently. In the USA, the crew are in a similar structural social position to indigenous workers in Nayarit. However, it does not mean that they are able to understand each other.
In this section, I will examine the meaning of freedom from the Nayarit workers’ perspective to understand this idea as it is practised every day. In particular, I will examine what workers mean when they say “I feel free in my home town.” Notwithstanding that they are still working while they are in Nayarit, they share a feeling of being in their own place, being “normal” labour and not feeling out of place as “commodities.” This “normality” entails the feeling of freedom that they are dispossessed of in the USA through both their positioning and the way they are positioned as “illegal” immigrants. It is also the presence of indigenous workers that gives Nayarit workers a strong sense of normality.

It is the same

Kentucky and Nayarit share structural similarities regarding class antagonism between employers and labourers. Here I refer to the structural similarities between the situation of Brian, who is the boss in Kentucky with a crew of seven Mexican men and three white workers labouring for him, and the situation of Juan, a grower in Nayarit with local workers (José being a member of the crew) and a family of indigenous seasonal labourers who work for him. This identical configuration of relations between a boss and labourers illustrates how the tobacco industry depends on similar structures in both places.

During an interview, Emilio, a tobacco grower, pointed out basic similarities in the way many employers put their labourers to work, thus avoiding tasks they do not want to do. He also stressed that in times of hard work he would ask his (mestizo) workers to “give him a hand,” which is a way of asking for help that invokes community values.

I helped out people from here who know how to string tobacco. That is a day contract, for a day you are paid 180 or 200 pesos, and on Saturdays you work half days. The working day is usually 8 hours. You start at 7:00 AM and have a break at 12:00 PM, then start again at 2:00 PM and end the day at 5:00 PM. Sometimes if the afternoon is really hot, we start at 3:00 PM and leave at 6:00 PM. If your work is used, I pay you more.
Emilio explained to me that local workers do not take on certain activities that indigenous workers are employed for, in a similar way to how in the USA, Mexican workers take on activities that neither their employers nor their white workers want to do. Emilio came to the conclusion that “It is the same:” the relations of work in Nayarit and in the USA are the same. The American employers are in their tractors while Mexican workers are cutting tobacco. In Nayarit, something similar happens. The employers are in their pick-up trucks while their workers do the harvesting.

Emilio also agreed that it is the same in Nayarit as it is in Kentucky, that the employers have their “families of indigenous workers” (they commonly arrive in families) in the same way that the Kentuckian employers have their contracted workers. Emilio is able to see a parallel that mestizo workers often deny, because this would mean comparing themselves to a group of people whom they think of as inferior.

Nearly all the tabaqueros have their own workers, and when they know I am going to start to string tobacco they call them. And they pay them per string. In true American fashion, people already have their bosses. That is starting to happen here. I have my Cora family, and I wait for them every year. They even give me their phone number, and they call me or I call them. The boss is expected to give them somewhere to stay at his house.

Emilio believed that the way indigenous workers are abandoned in the fields is unfair. Emilio would often say that in Nayarit, “It is the same.” He refers to the antagonistic relationship between the employer and the workers (in particular, indigenous workers). However, not everything is the same, as is discussed in more detail below.

**Differences between working conditions in Kentucky and in Nayarit**

I found that the structural differences between Kentucky and Nayarit (for example, the work opportunities in Kentucky versus the lack of opportunities in Nayarit) are evident in the condition of José’s positionality, who works for Brian in the USA and
Juan in Mexico, two tobacco growers that produce tobacco for the same company, Philip Morris.

In Nayarit, José, a member of the crew, introduced me to his employer Juan. José told me that unlike Brian, Juan does not work. The relationship between Juan and José, although in essence contradictory and antagonistic, is mediated by “mestizo solidarity,” which softens his relation with Juan and encourages him to characterise Juan as “lazy” in comparison with his gringo employer. From José’s point of view, his relations with his two employers are qualitatively different. For example, José is able to spend an afternoon gossiping with Juan, whereas Brian does not even speak his language. In the Nayarit context, José is not faced as a commodity which employers “have purchased and which is assumed to be continuously at [their] disposal, available for monitoring and managing” (Taussig 1983 cited in Benson). He is Juan’s neighbour, a man who has a family and is part of the same Juan’s community.

Feelings of freedom

I also found that the members of the crew use the idea of freedom to refer to activities such as spending their weekends with their families at the beach, going to the river, going to a family restaurant to eat seafood, going to a dance and doing other activities that they are not able to do while in the USA. I would argue that in these experiences there is an overwhelming feeling that life at home is mediated less by economic values than by moral values. It is about their participation in family and community activities. I remember Jorge going to church with his wife in the evening during the Holy Week.

This is also about the freedom of movement; they are free from the steady apparatus of surveillance mounted around the modern construction of a particular subject: the “illegal” immigrant. The invention of this subject has had wide and multiple consequences and is the root of suffering of millions. Julio explained to me that he feels free when he drives in Nayarit. He described to me the persecution he is subjected to while in Kentucky, where it is common for the police to follow them as suspected “illegal immigrants.” He pays special attention to drink-driving, which
is done with more impunity in Nayarit than in Kentucky (which tells us about surveillance and policing), and there are implications for his work too. If the workers were caught drink-driving in the USA they would get a criminal record and this would increase their chances of being sanctioned and forbidden to return. If they were caught in Nayarit it is unlikely that this would affect their return to the USA.

In Kentucky, it’s hard to drive. You’ll get into problems with the police. You can’t drink and drive, if you can’t even drive safely sober. In Nayarit, you can drive real drunk, all over in your car, and if you get caught drinking and driving they lock you up but it’s not as bad as in Kentucky. In Kentucky you can be driving along the motorway and before you know it you got the police behind you. In Nayarit that doesn’t happen. That’s why I think one has more freedom in Nayarit. If they catch you drinking and driving in Kentucky, you get punished, and then there is no way you can cross the border again.

However, the possibility of these types of “freedoms” - freedom of movement, freedom at work and the freedom that follows from being in their own place, is not possible without going back and forth “like-a-package” to the USA. In other words, the lack of jobs in Nayarit does not allow them to follow their aspirations for “freedom” and a “good life.”

**Easier work routines than in Kentucky**

The experience of regaining “freedom” at home is also connected with there being fewer restrictions at work compared to the restrictions in the USA, and access to multiple resources to cushion their condition of wage-earner and reduce feelings of alienation; they have brothers and other relatives who are able to cover for them.

Jorge, the former foreman of the crew of seven, explained to me that there were days when he did not return to work until four in the afternoon, instead of two, because it was too hot. He works from seven to midday and from two to five in the production of tobacco (depending on the weather). The amount of time he spends at work is eight hours, and this is split by a break of two hours, when he eats, watches TV and takes a nap at home. In Nayarit, workers such as the crew members do not spend as many hours working as they do in the USA, or as
indigenous workers do in Nayarit, and they are not exposed to the same working conditions and risks that they face in Kentucky. In Nayarit, they have their own houses, clean and familiar spaces surrounded by trees, which do not produce feelings of imprisonment. Regarding GTS, mestizo workers are not exposed to it in the same way as they are in Kentucky; they are less in contact with tobacco than they are in Kentucky. A third aspect regards their access to health care; notwithstanding the poor quality of public health services in general in the country, access to it became relatively easy after the reform of the Social Security Law in 1997.

Their sense of freedom depends partly on the presence of indigenous labourers, who do the work that mestizo workers find boring, such as stringing tobacco. For example, 86% of the tobacco growers contract day labourer agricultural migrant workers from Huichol and Cora ethnic groups.\(^{45}\) The conditions that producing tobacco entail for indigenous workers are different. For example, I never heard an indigenous worker saying that he or she could change their work timetable because it was too hot.

**Work conditions for indigenous labourers in Nayarit**

The class antagonism found between Brian and the crew can also be observed between indigenous workers and their *patrones*. Certainly, mestizo workers and their employers are exposed to toxic agrochemicals, because they are the ones who spray them, but they do not sleep in the fields or bathe in the tobacco canals like the indigenous workers do. They do not work long hours, nor feel the cold and humidity of the hard soil under their covers. Neither do they receive the same treatment at the local clinic, where paternalistic treatment is particularly overwhelming when indigenous people are the patients.

In Nayarit, while workers like the crew of seven feel free, other workers feel badly treated. I will focus on an indigenous couple, Ofelia and Apolinar, who eloquently described to me how they thought that what they considered bad and

unfair treatment from their previous employer had been avenged. They referred to God as their protector.

Juan recommended that I should speak with Ofelia and Apolinar because they were “talkative,” unlike other indigenous workers “who are not,” José stressed. When I accompanied Juan and José to the tobacco fields I was able to observe Juan’s interaction with his employees and José’s interaction with his co-workers. I was already there talking to Ofelia and Apolinar when Juan arrived at the *ramada* (shelter) where Ofelia, Apolinar, their children and Apolinar’s brother and mother worked and slept. Juan moved two buckets so he could sit down and pay them. Apolinar talked to Juan and Ofelia listened closely to the conversation between them (Figure 7). Meanwhile, their children were sitting in the dust, surrounded by tobacco.

![Figure 7. Juan and Apolinar](image)

Juan pays them per task and he brings them food when the field is too far from a convenience store. In this way, workers become indebted. The prices of oil, rice and
sugar are higher in the ejidos than in the municipal seat ten minutes from the ejido. This was also the case with the tienda de raya, a system where the payment of wages was in kind, to the employer’s advantage, which was commonly used during the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century. Practically speaking, that institution continues, masquerading in the guise of the good will of the employers. While Juan and Apolinar were talking, three workers, including José, were preparing the inhibidor that prevents suckers from sprouting again. They mixed the powder with water, then filled the backpack sprayers and started spreading the mix. They ate papaya and they shared a piece with me as an antidote to poisoning, but the children and four adults would be working and sleeping in the fields. The youngest was a one-year-old girl; she was sleeping in a hammock while her parents and older sister were working. Their bodies, closer to the dirt, are viewed as more resistant to agrochemicals. However, workers like José are unable to see that it is not that mestizo bodies are different from the bodies of indigenous workers, but rather that their positionality and the categories they fall into (such as “indigenous” worker) are the result of structural and historical inequalities. Antagonistic class relations frame the relationships between employers and workers.

Is the workers’ use of God a way to uncover exploitation? Ofelia and Apolinar once worked for an employer who had treated them badly. He reprimanded them because they had asked him if they could borrow dishes and cooking utensils from him. The employer told them that they should have brought their own dishes, but worst of all, he did not pay them. “My God made him pay,” Apolinar exclaimed with satisfaction. The employer died in a car accident. He had crashed into the tobacco canal that is used to water the tobacco and other crops and where indigenous people bathe. For Ofelia and Apolinar, it was not they who killed their employer, it was their God: the God that the Franciscans had taught them to worship during colonisation, but who they worship alongside other gods, for example, the sun and the earth. This story encapsulates sentiments of class antagonism similar to the sentiments the crew had towards Brian.

There are, of course, different ways in which alienation is managed. Indigenous workers use the idea of God as a source of justice, whereas mestizo
workers use indigenous workers to feel that they have a place of their own, as workers who do eight hours work a day and no more. How the relationship between mestizo and indigenous workers is framed by race and ethnicity structures will be the focus of the next chapter, which explores processes of national identity.

Conclusions: labour commodification

The crew’s story and their positionality within the global tobacco industry give valuable insights into the commodity-person tension. I have stressed that Kentucky and Nayarit share structural similarities. But there are also important differences between both places. I found that these similarities and differences are manifested in the different ways the tension between being a commodity and being a person is managed. The crew’s positionality in Kentucky as “cheap labour” and as “illegal” immigrants necessitates that they generate diverse practices to cope with their situation. The crew members want to be “normal” in Kentucky and they do what they can to achieve this situation, for example, by listening to loud music, drinking, and cracking jokes, which constituted “everyday” resistance. The desire to be “normal” is context, time and meaning related: the tension between being a person and being a commodity is linked with a historical struggle for labour rights (for example, access to health care, unionization and a safe working environment), citizenship rights and processes of resistance.

The story told in this chapter provides material to reflect on the different ways to manage the commodity-person tension. The crew has found different strategies to cope with their situation in Iowa, a place that seems to them like a prison, in Kentucky, a place where they regain space to move around, and their home town in Nayarit where they feel free. In Nayarit, the crew try to avoid doing the activities that they find boring. There are other workers who take on these “boring” activities. Although they are in a similar situation of selling their labour to the global tobacco industry, the availability of indigenous workers, and the politics of kinship and friendship turn domination into a less overt characteristic of their positionality. These are precisely the similarities that enable the crew to not recognise the position of the indigenous workers in Nayarit, despite the fact that, in
Kentucky, they start to recognise that they are like coritas. They are accustomed to a capitalist system in which someone has to occupy the lowest position on the social ladder.

The case of the indigenous workers and in particular the story of Ofelia and Apolinar allow us to reflect on the similarities in the basic hierarchy of work organisation of the tobacco production in Kentucky and in Nayarit. The positionality of Ofelia and Apolinar in Nayarit is similar to the crew’s positionality in the USA. Indigenous workers find ways to gain control over their lives amid the most appalling conditions that this chain of exploitation generates: for example, the housing and working conditions break health and safety regulations, as do the working hours per day. Ofelia and Apolinar believe that there are other routes for justice; against “bad” employers and harsh treatment, God is the source of justice. However, the crew rarely recognise that the presence of indigenous workers decreases the burden of activities, because indigenous workers will do the work that none of the crew is willing to do. I would suggest that this has been possible in a context in which the Mexican government has failed to protect the human and labour rights of agricultural workers and in particular the rights of indigenous seasonal workers in the tobacco production. In the following chapter, I will discuss how living and working conditions are linked to broader structural factors such as race and ethnicity.
Chapter 5: Mexican identity, race and ethnicity

In this chapter I examine the differences and similarities between Kentucky and Nayarit in terms of their structures of race and ethnicity, using the same comparative strategy as in Chapter 2. I will also discuss, using the comparative strategy deployed in Chapters 3 and 4, how the experiences of the crew capture the nuances of race and ethnicity as they operate in everyday life in the tobacco industry in Kentucky and Nayarit. In both places, the basic structures of racial and ethnic categories and relations have emerged in a common history of a European conquest of indigenous populations and transatlantic slavery. For this reason, race and ethnicity play a central role in shaping relations of production and the experience of the workers in both regions. However, racial and ethnic divisions in each location have had rather different historical trajectories and thus have influenced the workers’ experience differently. Certainly, while these heterogeneous racial and ethnic differences are exploited for the same end (profit), the tobacco companies do not handle them in the same way: for example, in Nayarit, there are child support programmes, funded by the companies, which target indigenous families, who are seen as more likely to put their children to work in the tobacco fields; in Kentucky there is nothing similar in terms of support from the tobacco companies.

My point of departure is the construction of Mexican identity as a project of inclusion/exclusion and supposed racial/cultural homogeneity. In particular, I will emphasise the construction of the Mexican-US border as a key element of Mexican identity. The increasing enforcement of the Mexican-US border and race boundaries shows how Mexican migrants and their families are being relegated to live within the shadow of an exploitative system, in which the complicity and cooperation of US and the Mexican governments has been central.

I will focus on the experiences of the crew of seven men in order to address why the same workers feel that they are targets of racism at the Mexican-US border, and yet deny suffering racism in Kentucky, while in Nayarit, where they
occupy a different social position and positionality, they deny the existence of practices of racial discrimination against indigenous workers. Based on observations of face-to-face relations between Kentuckian farmers and Mexican workers in Kentucky, and between nonindigenous and indigenous workers in Nayarit, I came to understand race and ethnicity as a common feature of both Kentucky and Nayarit. In both places it takes form in experiences, practices and strategies that mediate social relations and key elements of the political economy of tobacco.

This chapter is organised in the following way. The first section will analyse how whiteness in the USA, often defined in racial terms as the core of the Americanness, shaped the immigration policies that regulate the presence of the country's non-white population. However, I do not propose that this process exists without contradictions. The growth in great numbers of Hispanic and Asian populations (many of them non-white) by the end of the Bracero Program (1964) and throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and the occasional amnesties which have legalised the presence of circa 6 million undocumented Latin American immigrants (for example, the 1986 Immigration and Reform Control Act, and the 1994 Immigration and Nationality Act), suggest complex processes within which whiteness has shaped immigration policies. In connection with this, I will examine how the mestizo ideology became the core of Mexicanness, suggesting a complex interplay of exclusion/inclusion of indigenous populations: for example, indigenous representation has gained great significance in national politics since the 1940s. I understand these constructions of national identity as two parallel processes, but intertwined as two unequal forces. In other words, the imperial ambitions of the USA to a large extent influenced events in Mexico in the aftermath of its independence in 1821. I will then go on to discuss the construction of Mexican identity in connection with the production of illegality in Kentucky. Focusing on daily life, I will show how differently race and ethnicity operate in Kentucky in comparison with Nayarit, and how experiences of otherness are different in the two contexts of tobacco production. In Kentucky, there is a connection between discourses of being Mexican, and being “illegal,” and the criminalisation and legalistic treatment of Mexicans (“Mexicans do not pay taxes”). According to De Genova, the racialisation of Mexican migrants cannot be understood without
understanding the production of nation-state space (2005:6). There is always the possibility of deportation, the possibility of being removed from the space of the U.S. nation-state (2005:8). In De Genova’s words (2005:8), “‘illegality’ provides an apparatus for producing and sustaining the vulnerability and tractability of Mexican migrants as labor.” Whereas in Kentucky the connection between being Mexican and “illegal” is more powerful than in Nayarit, in Nayarit there is a connection between being indigenous and uncivilised, invoking a particular set of moral and cultural values (“indigenous women in denim look modern”), which I will discuss in the third part of the chapter.

“Poor Mexico. So distant from God, so close to the United States”

In this section, I will expand De Genova’s (2005:225) suggestion that the excessively exploitative arrangements for Mexican migrants are the continuation of the spatial construction of the US nation-state, nowadays with the complicity of the Mexican government. This supports the idea that Mexico has been governed by “traidores de la patria” (traitors of the fatherland) like Santa Ana, as was expressed by one of De Genova’s informants.46 It is my contention that these exploitative arrangements followed in the aftermath of parallel processes of expropriation, exclusion and otherness not only in the USA, but also in Mexico during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I understand that De Genova uses the category of Mexican workers/illegality as the critical standpoint of the US nation-state, but without going beyond the US border this only gives a partial understanding of the power of using racial and ethnic labelling, such as “Mexican” and “American”, when identifying populations.

According to De Genova (2005:213), the categories of Mexican and Latino in the USA are inextricably intertwined with the development of “American” national identity and the spatial construction of the US nation-state. This spatial construction would not have been possible had not a new border been delineated. The Mexican-US border, which stretches from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific

46 Antonio López de Santa Ana was the defeated and captured Mexican general who granted Texas independence in 1936 in exchange for his life (De Genova 2005:226).
Ocean for 3,000 kilometres through urban areas, the Sonoran and Chihuahua deserts, and the Rio Grande, was delineated through the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848. This treaty concluded the US invasion and forced Mexico to approve the US annexation of modern California, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, and Texas, as well as portions of Colorado, Wyoming and Utah (Durand, Malon and Massey 2002:31).

Included in the treaty was the obligation to naturalise Mexican citizens in the newly annexed territory as citizens of the United States within the Naturalization Act of 1790, which stipulated “that a person who was to become a naturalized citizen of the United States must be ‘white’” (De Genova 2005:216). This was part of the treaty, even though the person would not be classified as white in everyday practice in the United States. An early test of the treaty involved the case of Ricardo Rodríguez, whose naturalisation application was legally challenged by T.J. McMinn and Andrew Jack Evans on the grounds that he was neither white nor black (De Genova 2005:220-221). McMinn and Evans filed a petition to prohibit Mexican immigrants of Indian descent from applying for US citizenship (San Antonio Daily Express 1896, cited in Menchaca 122:2011). In 1933, the issue of Mexicans’ putative whiteness by treaty was revised and called into question (Haney Lopez 1996, cited in De Genova 2005:221).

In the 1930s, 415,000 Mexican migrants, along with many of their US citizen children, who were legal residents as US citizens, were expelled from the USA, and a voluntary repatriation of 85,000 more took place (De Genova 2005:224). However, after turning a blind eye to the Mexican workers abandoned in the desert by the USA during the Great Depression, the USA found itself with a labour shortage caused by its participation in the Second World War. A mass importation of Mexican labour, known as the Bracero Program (1942-1964), was agreed to address this. Mexican workers were allowed to enter the USA as a temporary workforce to cover the labour shortage in some areas of the southwest of the USA. Mexicans workers thus were recognised as an important part of the workforce in

47 “McMinn was a high-ranking officer in the state executive committee of the People’s Party, and Evans also had a long history of holding high-ranking positions within the Republican Party” (Menchaca 2011:125).
the USA, whose position in the labour market was included and influenced by the narratives and strategies of labour control. However, they were excluded from the hegemonic “national” identity of “American”-ness (De Genova 2005:215), which was imagined as a coherent set of features: the white man. According to De Genova (2005:223), “it is revealing that the U.S. Border Patrol, from 1924 – when it was first created – until 1940, operated under the auspices of the Department of Labor.” So Mexicans in the USA were included as labour, but not as potential candidates for citizenship.

Through the Bracero Program around 4.6 million Mexicans were allowed to do farm work in the USA (Martin 2002:1128), and three effects stood out: (1) legal Braceros were followed by undocumented Mexican workers, (2) the abundance of Braceros allowed the southwestern states to become the garden states of the USA, and (3) the availability of Braceros in the fields and the development of a non-agricultural economy encouraged Mexican-American citizens in the southwest to change from a predominantly rural to a mostly urban population (Martin 2002:1128-1129). Additionally, they increasingly identified as white to further distinguish themselves from brown Mexican immigrants. Dowling (2014:16) found in her research that “Latinos along the US-Mexico border are more likely to identify as white than in other parts of the state.” In 1964, the Bracero Program ended, and numerical quotas were introduced to restrict “legal” migration from the Western Hemisphere. As Zolberg puts it (1990, cited in De Genova 2005:230), the quota system “sought to deter immigration of blacks from the West Indies and ‘browns’ from south of the border more generally.”

48 In 1921, an overall numerical quota on immigration to the USA was imposed—“about 350,000, reduced to 165,000 in 1924” (Martin 2011, cited in PRC 2015:19). “The 1924 law set annual quotas for each European country based on the foreign-born population from that nation living in the USA in 1890. The 1921 and 1924 laws exempted from the new quota highly skilled immigrants, domestic servants, specialized workers such as actors and wives or unmarried minor children of U.S. citizens, and the 1924 law also created preferences for quota visas for certain family members and agricultural workers” (Martin 2011, cited in PRC 2015:19). The quota system was dismantled in 1965 through a new law, which emphasised family reunification.
more rigid, categorical “illegality” for Mexican/migrant workers in particular was expanded.

De Genova (2005:229) points out that no other migration has been as severely restricted and regulated as migration from Mexico has. For example, in 1986 the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act, or IRCA, began the era of “the border spectacle” (De Genova 2005:242) as 2.3 million Mexicans were legalised: 1.3 million were legally authorised workers and 1 million were special agricultural workers (Durand, Malon and Massey 2002:103). This was made possible through the Special Agricultural Workers Program, or SAW, which legalised undocumented workers. The other major element of the reform was:

...an H-2A certification program, under which farmers had to provide housing and demonstrate to the satisfaction of [the Department of Labor] that they tried and failed to find US workers, and a noncertification Replenishment Agricultural Worker (RAW) program that would allow foreign farm workers to circulate within agricultural regions in the US. (Martin 2002:1131)

In 1990, the IRCA was revised due to the increasing number of immigrants who wanted to enter the USA, legally and illegally. The US borders were reinforced and sanctions were imposed on employers who hired unauthorised workers. This reinforcement was evident in the increase of border patrol agents, vehicles (horses, bicycles, cars, all-terrain vehicles, military helicopters, and small high-speed boats), sophisticated surveillance devices (including ground sensors, night scopes and video cameras), scanning devices and metal walls, fences and barriers, which also evoke powerful images of danger and fear (see Inda 2006). These measures inevitably resulted in the formation of Mexico as the USA’s revolving door. On the one hand, the “immigrants” are persecuted and deported, on the other, they are welcomed as “guest workers.”

For Mexico, national formation took a different path. A key event that preceded the expansion and consolidation of the US nation-state was the independence in 1821 of New Spain from its three-hundred-year oppressor, the Spanish Crown. Independence was motivated by the prospect of a set of liberal and anticlerical reforms that Spain was about to impose on its American colonies. Thus,
independence prevented Mexico from adjusting to liberal ideals and served to maintain the status quo of power held through a system of caste privileges. In 1821, the construction of a Mexican national identity was promoted by the *criollo* (Creole) elite. Four elements constituted its core: the foundation of Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Aztec Empire, denigration of the Spanish conquest, resentment towards the *peninsulares* or *gachupines* (as people from Spain were known), and devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe (Aguilar 2010).

In the 1840s, the US invasion left the country reduced to half of the territory it held prior to the secession of Texas in 1845. This was the result of the imperial ambitions of the United States, based on a vision of white supremacism contained in the discourses of Manifest Destiny, which nonetheless celebrated progress (De Genova 2005:217). In contrast with the power of the racial ideology of purity and (masculine) whiteness in the USA, and its imperial and liberal ambitions, the construction of a Mexican identity took a different path. The notion of *mestizo* served as a link between two worlds in conflict: the white elite (of Spanish descent) and the indigenous population. The myth of *mestizaje* allowed for “the construction of the idea of commonality of descent as a feature of Mexican identity” (De la Peña 2006:280). However, *mestizaje* was defined not only in biological terms, but also in cultural terms (De la Peña 2006:280).

In 1867, a liberal republic was established, and within it, the indigenous population was seen as an obstacle to civilization (Aguilar 2010). Despite being the majority, the indigenous population became the “abject pueblo” of a country ruled by the mestizo elite, which saw itself as civilised and developed. Indigenous populations were excluded from Mexican citizenship, which contained the ideal of a literate society (Lomnitz 1999:292). According to De la Peña (2006:281), the exclusion of the indigenous population “was also a consequence of the vision of Mexican citizenship as a function of cultural homogeneity, which ignored the demands of Indian peoples for cultural and political recognition, thus thwarting their participation in the public sphere.” Nonetheless, the indigenous population’s exclusion from Mexican citizenship is complex and contradictory, for their culture was appropriated as the mythical indigenous embodied by the images of *Quetzalcoatl* and the *Virgen morena* (Virgin of Guadalupe) (Aguilar 1993).
The Mexican revolution of 1910 promoted the ideals of social justice and democracy held by the mestizo elite. They became members of the emergent rural and urban middle classes, and were seen as the people leading the process of nation-building, “since the Indians had suffered four centuries of exclusion and extreme poverty, while the Creoles had become parasitic and anti-patriotic,” as argued by Andrés Molina Enríquez, a lawyer and sociologist influenced by social Darwinism (De la Peña 2006:230). The ideal of social justice was legitimated through the 1917 Constitution and by land reform. Article 27 of the constitution protected access to land for peasant families. However, as Lomnitz (1999:288) pointed out, the agrarian reform failed to build a Lockean citizenry in the countryside because neither ejidatarios nor comuneros (for indigenous communities) became the legal owners of the land. Moreover, “they depend on local government support for many aspects of production, and so are feeble participants in the construction of a bourgeois public sphere” (Lomnitz 1999:288). This was according to the project of state corporatism that characterised Mexico’s political system. The agrarian reform did not work because instead of generating a more equitable distribution of resources, it furthered the consolidation of a political class and its corporatist interests.

In post-revolutionary Mexico, a strategy called indigenismo aimed “to recover and reinterpret Mexico’s indigenous past in order to construct a modern, ‘revolutionary’ national identity” (Smith 1995, cited in De la Peña 2006:281). In the 1940s, the Instituto Nacional Indigenista or INI (the Indigenist Institute) was created. The INI managed the country’s indigenous populations until 2003, when it was transformed into the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas or CDI (National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples) (Saldívar 2011:69). As noted above, De la Peña (2006:281) argues that the failure of this strategy to fully recover and reinterpret Mexico’s indigenous past has in part been due to the vision of Mexican citizenship as a function of cultural homogeneity, thus ignoring people’s diverse demands. Unlike De la Peña, Saldívar (2011:70) argues that indigenismo was not about creating equality or hegemony, but about reproducing “the state’s” right to rule. Saldívar argues that “the INI was the place where anthropologists put ideas of acculturation and cultural relativism into
practice, helping the federal government in its efforts to integrate indigenous peoples into the mixed-race (mestizo) nation.” Despite the good intentions of some *indigenistas* to achieve equality and bring justice to the communities, there were some institutional and personal limitations that led to its failure. A good example of this was the 1965 Plan Huicot (the name was made up of the first letters of the Huichol, Cora and Tepehuano ethnonyms), a government development project in my region of interest, which considered indigenous people as people living on the margins of civilization (Huicot 1966:7).

In 1989, the International Labour Organisation published Convention 169, which was devised to recognise and protect the rights of indigenous peoples, and Mexico ratified the convention in 1991 (De la Peña 2006:287). Yet the Zapatista movement of the 1990s uncovered deep fractures within “Mexican” society, and the continuing disregard of the indigenous population’s demands. At the same time, the reform of Article 27 of the constitution allowed for the privatisation and selling of *ejidos*. Moreover, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was signed, which aimed to ease the flow of capital and commodities but neglected to take into account the high risks that Mexican migrants would experience crossing the border, and the foreseeable decline in living and working conditions for the indigenous population. All these events were accompanied by the fashionable discourse of multiculturalism (De la Peña 2006:281) that some (Hale 2002; Hernandez et al. 2004, cited in De la Peña 2006:281) link to the (neoliberal) defence of cultural diversity, which emphasises the need for governments to “transfer functions” to ethnic organisations and accept certain minority rights. In this vein, Speed (2005:44) suggests that, rather than directing our efforts towards obligating the state to implement multicultural recognition policies, we should continue to look for alternatives, such as the autonomous project of the Zapatista movement.

In this section, I have explained how the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries constituted the period of the formation and consolidation of the liberal ideology and capitalist relations of modern Mexico and the United States. The principle is the same in both countries: the spatial construction of nation-states and homogeneous societies. However, despite sharing the same liberal principle of citizenship, each process had its own particularities and lasting effects. The
discourse of purity and whiteness had lasting and contradictory effects. For example, it informs the current policies of identity, immigration and naturalisation in the USA and the mestizo ideology in Mexico, rendering whiteness as a site of privilege in both places. Particular processes of exclusion and inclusion are involved, through which people occupy certain positions in situations of advantage and disadvantage. These are positions where exploitation is naturalised, wages are kept low and certain rights and obligations are defined. Had racial/ethnic divisions not structured the relations of production in Mexico and Kentucky, it would not be possible to fill the gaps of labour (especially cheap labour) in both tobacco regions. I think that the remark of Porfirio Díaz, reminds us of the traces of this history: “Poor Mexico. So distant from God, so close to the United States.”

The following section looks at how, in Kentucky, Mexicans are considered to be ideal workers in tobacco, willing to take low-paid and unregulated jobs. Within the USA, Mexican workers have been subjected to control through policies of identity, immigration and naturalisation. However, despite the rigidity of these policies, people have expanded their own categories and identities through daily practices. More concretely, Nayarit migrants in Kentucky have re-deployed the ideology of mestizaje to a context where a past of slavery haunts daily encounters between tobacco growers and farmworkers, and encounters between local white and black people.

In thinking about the connections between ethnicity and relations of production, I found several studies useful. One is that of Bourgois (1988), in which he argues that class and ethnicity shape the same “material reality,” the same structure of power relations and conflict, which also produces them. Specifically, Bourgois (1988:342) suggests that “the interaction of the ideological dimension of domination and the structure of occupational subordination and systematic economic marginalisation escalates the Guaymi experience of oppression into something more than the sum of its ideological and economic parts.”

In the same vein, Duke, (2011:2) whose research is based on fieldwork carried out among Jamaican, Puerto Rican and Mexican workers employed to cultivate and process

49 The Guaymi people are a group of indigenous people who entered the labour force of a United Fruit Company banana plantation in Panama in the 1950s.
shade tobacco in the Connecticut River Valley, analyses the ethnically reified division of labour constituted by historical migration patterns, English language ability and racially-informed perceptions of what constitutes a “good worker.” Duke (2011:3) posits that in order for oppressive mechanisms to be maintained over time, they must become internalised through the lived experience of social beings. These works offer a conceptual framework for describing both the material realities and internalisation processes in Kentucky and Nayarit that are evident in, for example, the opposed positionings (practices, opinions and relations) of mestizos and indigenous people.

The category of “Mexican identity” in Kentucky

The category of the Mexican in Kentucky has been maintained through interactions, stereotypes, discourses, narratives, segregations and divisions of labour. Moreover, it is a practice contextualised within the relations between white Kentuckian farmers, local white people and their “Mexican” workers against the background of the hegemonic polarity of racialised whiteness and blackness in Kentucky. Dowling (2014:7) argues that “context and audience shape racial and ethnic labelling” for both groups in their interactions with each other and with other racial groups.

From early on in my fieldwork, I observed how Brian only talks to the crew when he needs them to work: he does not talk to them when he does not need them. The crew does not hear from him, even though he lives nearby, until Brian needs them again and he arrives at the caravan to tell them what needs to be done. Brian and the crew live in the same area and work for the same tobacco industry, but the way that the crew and Brian and his family each move around and use space is framed by a local US racial-ethnic hierarchy and classificatory system.

Henry County is the county in which Brian and the crew live. In the 2010 census (see http://factfinder.census.gov), 14,452 Henry County residents identified themselves as being white, 419 as black or African American, 38 as American Indian and Alaska Native, 31 as Asian and 447 as Hispanic or Latino. However, it is difficult to calculate the number of immigrants living in this region because they move
across counties and state boundaries on a regular basis (as noted above in Chapter 4).

Although the formation of a Mexican identity in the tobacco towns of Kentucky is an ongoing process, local people have come to take for granted that Mexican men work in tobacco or construction and Mexican women are housekeepers or work in fast food chains such as Subway, or in Mexican stores. Mexican people are a juxtaposition to the antagonistic relation between black people and white people (see Miranda and Rich 2005). Local people assume that people who look like Mexican workers do particular jobs that require specific skills. The reality is that these are low-paid jobs. When I helped Brian’s wife clean the new house that they just had bought after selling their old farm, the man delivering a new refrigerator asked her whether I wanted to work as cleaner in his house. I explained that I was not a house cleaner, but nevertheless I look like a Latina (see Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). In my case, my brown skin, small height, gender and being Spanish-speaking generated different expectations from local people. For some, notwithstanding my visa, I looked like a domestic worker. For others (in particular, for Katherine and her family), having a visa, not working in paid employment and being fluent in English entailed a process of whiteness, which “is not necessarily attached to the ‘white’ body but to a site of privilege” (Moreno 2010:398). Unlike me, the crew of seven men would be perceived as Mexican workers within local understandings and positioned in places of disadvantage.

My aim is to explore how Nayarit tobacco workers fit in everyday interactions in the Kentucky tobacco region. In particular, I will focus on the racialised category of “Mexican” as it has been understood and maintained in practice. I will use ideas and expressions used by local white farmers to refer to Mexican workers in general, and in particular to the crew of seven.

Racism at the border

The crew found that racism and illegal working is a matter of the border, which I will discuss in this section using Douglas’s (2003:44) concept of matter out of place, which suggests a set of ordered relations and a contravention of the order. In
Kentucky, a place where the crew do not think of themselves precisely as contravening the order, they do not feel as racialised as they do at the border. This experience was manifestly evident when some of the crew returned to Mexico. They felt threatened at the Mexican-US border when an agent asked for their documents. The workers told me the following story about an encounter they had with a “racist” agent when five members of the crew crossed the Mexican-US border to return to Nayarit:

We were separated from the rest... just on the way out, where the bridge is, they let some buses pass, and stop and check others. I think it depends on who is on duty, because this one was really racist, even having a go at people with papers. What could we say to him? If we said anything to him he could order us off the bus.

César, Daniel, Francisco, Fernando, and Rafa described this “racist” agent of the Border Patrol (part of the US Customs and Border Protection, a component of the Department of Homeland Security). They were on the bus returning home when the agent stopped the bus and checked the passengers’ passports, which was unusual, as Fernando told me. They were annoyed with this “random” checking because they felt it was against them as Mexicans. They believe the agents chose who they wanted to quemar (burn). The agent noticed that they overstayed their visas by fifteen days. He then threw their I-9 forms in the bin, but they feared he would take out the forms afterwards when they had departed. They feared this could prevent their return to the United States the following year. This fear followed them in nightmares during the following months at home. Fernando stressed that the agent looked like a “Mexican”, that maybe he was a US citizen of Hispanic origin. It was common to hear that the agents who look Mexican American but are pocho (light-skinned) are the most racist. This can be linked to the fact that “the strategic use of whiteness in Mexican American communities converges with contemporary colour-blind discourse to produce racial ideologies that evade asserting racial difference” (Dowling 2014:12), whereby lighter-skinned Mexican Americans endeavour to reinforce their belonging to the USA, in opposition to the integration of darker-skinned Mexican immigrants.
Once the Nayarit workers cross the border and arrive back in Nayarit, they feel free, and they take over the streets, the beach and the tobacco fields. Thus, they reaffirm their belonging and identity to the tobacco town. However, these processes are permeated by issues of race and ethnicity as well, although in a very different way from how they are in Kentucky (a theme that will be returned to in the section “the category of indigenous identity in Nayarit”).

**Racism, in Kentucky, “no”**

Based on the assertions of a farmer, the presence of Mexican workers in Kentucky seems new: “They arrived recently,” in the 1990s, to fill labour gaps. Their seeming newness and the accuracy with which they are represented and thus positioned as Hispanic workers contribute towards their exclusion as a group of people who do not belong in Kentucky, but also their inclusion as the “best help ever,” as Katherine told me. The Mexican identity, mainly as a male worker, is the image of the Other, but an Other who has helped the production of tobacco to succeed amid difficulties deriving from the steadily increasing demands of the tobacco companies. Katherine once told me, “Daniel and the guys are the best help we have ever had, says Brian. He says they are great guys!” There are also contradictions, confusion and ambiguities in these representations. Tobacco growers and their families are unable to see that by doing the “right thing,” for example, by acknowledging that they are “great guys” because they are available to work long hours, and through using categories such as the “Mexican workers,” they are reinforcing ideas of inclusion and exclusion, and belonging and otherness. In the reproduction of processes of exclusion and inclusion and the reinforcement of stereotypes it is not only the Kentucky growers, but also the farm workers who participate actively in the construction and reproduction of certain stereotypes.50 Drawing on Bourgois

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50 This is a process of which I am also a part, inadvertently, and I am sometimes aware of this. I have participated in the reproduction of certain stereotypes. For example, my own use of categories such as mestizo, brown skin, Hispanic (categories which I understand to be pejorative in Oaxaca (my hometown)), reveals the contradictions of my own position as a woman who had access to education, a site of privilege in a state of 3,801,962 inhabitants of which 1,165,186 are considered indigenous people. Information is available from:
(1988:342), the dominant ideology is internalised by the workers themselves. The crew, for example, engage in gambling and drinking (see Duke 2011:2). Moreover, they have denied being targets of racism in Kentucky, as have other groups of workers from Mexico that I spoke to in Kentucky. Daniel told me that they had not felt any racial discrimination in Kentucky. Beyond work, they only go out to eat. Brian had mentioned the presence of the police in order to deter the crew from going out, but Daniel confirmed they in fact converse with the police. He also recognises that the police are aware of Brian’s workers. Daniel was the first of the crew to make a connection between racist discrimination and the police, mainly concerning agents at the border, and he also understood that being a “good worker” in Kentucky, or a disciplined worker who avoids “the street” (see Rouse 1992:33), protects them from discrimination. Daniel stressed that they only go out for work and food and then return to the caravan, which he thinks is the reason they have not felt discriminated against by the police or local people in Kentucky. In these terms, racialisation is linked to a particular order, the border and the police in Kentucky. However, it is not linked to the crew’s way of seeing and being seen in daily life, although racialisation is very much present everywhere.

It is men whom the police follow and punish in particular ways as if they were criminals, for being undocumented and for being Latino men (see Wacquant 2009). Police also persecute illegal women, but they are not punished in the same way as men: there are other strategies to restrict their mobility such as fear instilled that their children can be taken away. When I went to Walmart with the crew of seven, Julio was constantly looking in the rear and the side mirrors to make sure we were not being followed by a patrol car. He then decided to take one of the two main roads to get to Walmart; one is safer than the other, of which many stories are told about the detention of men, stories that confirm the possibility of being caught at any time. Julio himself was detained and jailed when he and his partner overstayed their visas for the first time in 2002. That was a traumatic experience for Julio. The patrol took him to jail, and left his partner behind with their baby in her arms; the image of Laura, with their baby, crying and standing alone in the middle

of nowhere still haunts his memory. Patrol cars usually park in hidden places beside
the road, hunting for “illegal” people, as I was told by Julio and other Mexican
people living and working in that region. Julio and his co-workers were afraid of
being stopped because they are not white; they are seen as “Mexicans,” as “others”
vis-à-vis the locals or white people (I will return to this idea elsewhere in Chapter 6).

As a Mexican man and an “illegal,” the only places Julio feels safe are the
tobacco fields and the caravan, where la migra never look for “illegal” workers.

Walmart and the flea market have never been raided by immigration officers, even
though everybody is aware that these are places visited by undocumented workers
for their consumption and leisure. In Walmart and the flea market, undocumented
workers feel safe, although they do not on their journeys to and from those places.
They also feel safe in the tobacco fields and barns, their workplaces, the caravan
and the Asian buffet, where they are accepted as customers.

I also found that there are places where Mexican people have been
discouraged from going to through implicit ways. The crew do not see that by being
discouraged from visiting some places or by avoiding such places because of fear,
they reinforce stereotypes. The Scribber’s Elm station restaurant is a good example
of this. This restaurant is used by local families and tobacco growers. This is a place
for local people who feel proud to be part of a tobacco town. There is where Brian’s
grandson had his birthday party in 2012. It is also one of the few places where
indoor smoking is still permitted. This is not a place for Mexican people who work in
the fields harvesting and housing the tobacco because they do not share a common
identity with the tobacco town; they do not belong to the tobacco town. The
Mexican workers have their own places where their Mexican identity is
encouraged, such as a Mexican store called the Latin Market where workers can eat
Mexican food and speak Spanish together. These places are never visited by Brian,
Katherine and their family. When they want to eat Mexican food, they go to the
“Mexican” restaurants for local customers, where the majority speak English, and
the staff members, cooks and cashiers are of Latino origin (often second
generation). Other examples include “Dollar General” and “Family Dollar,” which
are useful for illustrating the difference between racial-ethnic segregation and class
segregation. These stores were opened to help the economy of the local working
class. They are places that one would imagine guest workers might also use, but they are discouraged from doing so. Walmart, with its big section of varied Latino products, is the main supermarket which attracts guest workers. One can see that it is often crowded with tobacco farm workers “because the parking lot is full of their vans,” a Mexican settler told me in trying to distance herself from them. Katherine and the other local women avoid going to Walmart on Sundays; they prefer to do their shopping on weekdays. She also goes to Dollar General and Family Dollar to buy cleaning products.

The category of Mexican is experienced within particular orders such as the Mexican-US border (particularly when the workers return to Mexico) and the streets in Kentucky, which are part of the police’s domain, but is not felt when they go to the supermarkets. In Walmart, the crew feel at home. It is a place where they find other migrants from the same community. The crew does not know that Katherine feels uncomfortable at busy times, or that other locals do shopping in a different supermarket (Kroger) and will visit during the week if they need something from Walmart. The Mexican settlers who want to distance themselves from the immigrants/ illegals are doing what the locals do – going to other supermarkets and only shopping at Walmart when it is quiet. Previously the staff in Walmart might not have spoken to the migrants, but now that many of the staff members are Latino/second generation this is changing. The increasing numbers of Latino staff in Walmart shows how the presence of immigrant Mexicans and local whites may coexist. For Mexican immigrants the place might feel more familiar, whereas local whites might feel at home there too on weekdays and at quiet times. The local racial order is protected by regular encounters and everyday discourse.

“The Mexicans are a good crew”

Stereotypes are also very powerful ways to define the other. “The Mexicans”, “the Mexicans’ trailer”, “the Mexicans are loyal and hard-working”, and so on, are expressions commonly used by locals to refer to the crew of seven. But what do these mean in practice? At first glance one might think that some of these ideas
express a positive image of this crew, as they are acknowledged as doing a good job. However, these also serve to hide their exploitation, but in particular ways.

Notwithstanding Brian’s belief that the crew are the best help he has ever had, there are other stereotypes employed to make them work. Laziness is a very powerful stereotype about Mexicans and Latinos in general in the USA. The crew do not want to be seen as lazy: this would conflict with the work ethic that they respect and perceive in themselves and that they feel they share, for example, with Brian too. Moreover, this idea of themselves as hard-working is deployed against black people and even local whites to claim a position as the “welcome and desirable” workers.

For the crew of seven, local white workers only work occasionally in tobacco because they are “lazy” people. Nick (one of the crew’s local white co-workers), for example, is not willing to work more than eight hours a day, unlike the crew, who regularly work longer hours. For local Kentuckians of the older generation, among young white people a work ethic is conspicuous by its absence. Some of the Kentuckian employers I talked to think that black workers are lazy, a view which is also held by Mexican workers. Fernando, a member of the crew, told me that they had to move out of the first house they rented the first time they arrived in Kentucky, because they felt in danger due to a black guy living on the corner who was drug dealer. The problem was that one day this man arrived at their house with his gun because he had heard a friend of the crew, who was drunk, shooting into the air. This experience reinforced the image that the crew holds about black people, that they are “aggressive” and “lazy:” being a drug-dealer is not perceived to be hard work. These moments clearly illustrate that the crew want to distance themselves from black American people; they do not want to look like them. I remember a conversation with Julio when he told me that he had thought about becoming a drug-dealer as a way to avoid hard work. This possibility arose when the drug business was popular in Nayarit, before the state declared its war on drugs in 2006. The crew call black people “lazy” because they do not want to take on the same jobs that Mexicans do, the jobs that white people think Mexicans should be
doing, such as tobacco harvesting. Kingsolver (2007:88) noted that: “Two hundred years before, a non-wage agricultural labor force had been enslaved African workers, but that labor history had all but been erased.” However, I found that this historical background still informs practices and the relationship between the crew and his employer. They are “Mexicans,” but not black American workers, whom Brian finds lazy and irresponsible: an image that the crew work to distance themselves from.

The crew of seven perceive themselves to be good workers, whereas Dean, Brian’s father-in-law, thinks that they are good workers because their job is easy to do. However, he remembered a time when his son brought some friends from the University to help with the harvest: they found it hard work, and they did not return the next day. Dean told me this story while the workers were hanging tobacco in one of his barns. They were covered in dust, and pouring with sweat, but nevertheless Dean considers the crew’s job “easy.” Dean will never admit that the crew is hard-working in comparison to himself. Dean is in his seventies and he never stops working on his farm where, after quitting tobacco when the buyout occurred, he now keeps cattle. He is a hard-working man, but has never himself done what the crew does. Instead, he sits in his jeep looking after his cattle or stands in the barn while the crew hang the tobacco sticks. Barns are considered part of a heritage of “hard-working” white people, thus veiling the centrality of black people in the past and Mexican workers’ contribution to the production of tobacco in the present. Countless sticks of tobacco have been hung in barns over the years. The barn is one of the places where racialised Mexican illegals spend their days working. For locals, as much as it is a capitalist interest, it is also part of the tobacco culture (intertwined with slavery), based on moral values, whereas for the crew it is a location of hard work. The workers have to climb the rails in the barns, but they do so with fear, while local whites watch and laugh at them from below if they show weakness.

The unfortunate statement of the former Mexican president Vicente Fox in 2005 voiced a general sentiment among Mexican farmworkers regarding black people: Mexican immigrants to the USA take jobs “that not even blacks want to do.”
The crew see Brian as a hard-working man in part because he works in the field, unlike their employers in Nayarit. Their positive views are reciprocated by Brian, who is satisfied with the crew’s work and wants them to return every year. Who would not find it convenient to have a group of workers that travel to one's farm at their own risk and accept most of one's working conditions? The workers themselves acknowledge this, saying *nos ponemos de pancita*, a common saying which means that they do not put up resistance or demand more. There is a general idea that Mexicans are highly desirable to growers and represent something positive, thus disguising the human cost. Duke similarly observed in his field site that "In order to improve their chances of being invited to return for the following season, labourers took great pains to be perceived by the grower as stoic, uncomplaining, and hardworking, even when carrying out hazardous tasks" (2011:6). One day in August, I visited the crew in their caravan and saw Rafa lying on the grass outside, and I presumed it was because his leg was hurting badly. José also had pain, in his right arm, and he complained about it for the whole season. The youngest, the 17-year-old, Raúl, got Green Tobacco Sickness on his first day of work; he was vomiting and had cramps all over his body. The idea that they should keep working no matter the pain is embedded in their perception of themselves as hard-working Mexican men. They use this idea to distinguish themselves from local white workers. Brian uses these ideas when he wants them to work, but when he does not need them, the workers are just a group of “Mexicans” in a caravan.

One of my neighbours told me that he had a loyal and trustworthy Mexican worker. He said that he would be willing to lend his worker money on his way to Mexico without any doubt that his worker would repay him. However, for Tom, a tobacco farmer who had previously employed the crew of seven, although “the Mexicans” are a “good crew,” because they work fast, they are not trustworthy. He thinks that Mexican workers cannot be paid by the hour because they will waste time in order to work more hours and earn more, and therefore they are paid on a piece rate basis. Like most growers, he believes that Mexican workers would not work as quickly on an hourly rate as they do on a piece rate basis. He also refers to the idea that someone needs to keep an eye on the tools, the waggons and the steamer machine, to avoid careless mistakes. Having an eye kept on them is not
something thought to be necessary for local white workers. Unlike the crew of seven, white workers are thought to be trustworthy; they are paid by the hour. For the crew, being paid on piece rate is a good deal because they can leave as soon as they have finished their task of stripping tobacco. They do not see this as discrimination against them. Julio told me that he has not felt racism against him. Moreover, he supports the idea of being paid by task, because it motivates them to work harder and faster. He believes hourly pay would be more tiring and being paid by weight allows for higher daily earnings.

Again, ideas about loyalty, trustworthiness and untrustworthiness serve to subvert the racialisation and exploitation of Mexican workers. The workers respect these values in as much as they allow them to keep a place in the production of tobacco. Untrustworthiness, which is a very pervasive stereotype about Mexicans, produces in the workers the opposite practices. “Nos ponemos de pancita,” in Daniel’s words, because they want to distance from such negative stereotypes and keep their work in the tobacco farms. At the same time this image is extremely useful to Brian and the other tobacco growers.

The white working class

Gledhill’s observation (2012:9) that “people in apparently similar socioeconomic situations could be found in opposing camps” can be applied to relations between the crew and the local white working class. The crew worked with two local men whom they referred to as “bolillos” (bread rolls) due to their skin colour: Nick, a very talkative man, and Roy, who was very quiet. The crew said that Nick and Roy “work for short periods and stop when they are tired,” “they are lazy,” and Nick “is just a joker,” whereas the crew members work no matter how much pain it causes them, assuming the image of the “suffering body” (Fassin 2001:4).

Nick used to joke about his nationality, assuring us that he is from Guatemala and that his father took him to the USA and left him with his uncle, and never returned to pick him up. Everyone laughs every time he makes these kinds of jokes and absurd claims. His Spanish only extends to a few phrases, such as “rapidito-rapidito,” “Guatemala,” “jotos,” and “andale-andale” (reminiscent of
Speedy Gonzalez); otherwise he speaks English. Nick and Roy only occasionally work with the crew. When there is no work in tobacco, they work in a factory. Although Nick knows how little the crew members earn, he thinks that Mexican workers “earn good money to send to Mexico,” as “they don’t pay taxes,” and “they have money to come here.” From his vantage point these are things that show that the position of Mexican workers is better than his own; he considers himself to be a poor man who has been working in tobacco since he was 12 years old. Nick told me that the workers had called him “crazy,” to which he replied that he was not crazy but “happy.” With his claim “I am Guatemalan,” Nick is vindicating his position as a white man working among non-white illegal Mexicans. In other jokes, Nick characterises Mexican workers as lazy and weak homosexuals. Nick plays with these ideas in a way that might conceal that these are powerful forms of reinforcing stereotypes about Mexican workers and claiming his belonging as a white man. Nick denied that racism is part of the configuration of work in the tobacco fields. De Genova (2005:174-185) traced the complexities of the racialised condition of Latino workers in a factory in Chicago, Illinois. By analysing “Gonzalo’s ironic tactics of defamiliarization and his own surrealistic claims to whiteness, on the one hand, and his portrayals of himself as a ‘nigger,’ on the other,” De Genova (2005:186) found that Gonzalo’s jokes “gestured toward what was ultimately his own captivity as a Mexican at an intermediate racialized location somewhere between white and Black.” I found that the irony of Nick’s assertions works his positionality and relation with his non-white co-workers. Through Nick’s jokes, he, the crew and I partook in the reproduction of the local racial and ethnic configuration in complex and contradictory ways.

The relationship between Nick and Brian seemed to be different. For example, Nick did not joke around with him and there was nothing like radical doubts about the final vocabulary (Rorty 1989, cited in De Genova 2005:174). Their families have known each other for generations. Brian and Nick’s random encounters outside the workplace were framed not only by Brian’s concerns regarding his farm, but also by family matters. For example, Nick expressed concern about Brian’s son, whose episodes of depression had been known about for a long time. Moreover, when Nick’s wife died Brian offered his condolences to him. I
remember that Brian needed a room for stripping his tobacco after selling his farm in December 2012, and Nick asked Bob to lend his room to Brian. Bob was not fully convinced of the idea, but nevertheless, he lent it. Brian had also asked Nick to let the crew stay in his house, but this idea arose only because it had suffered fire damage. Evidently Nick would not have been living there with them, primarily because they occupy different positionalities. If Nick looked for the crew outside the workplace it would only be to offer work on other farms and only when he knew that the crew might be interested. For the most part, Nick and the crew do not have conversations outside absurd affirmations and “language-games” (Wittgenstain 1953). In this broader setting and through irony, Nick and the crew were constantly reaffirming themselves as white and Mexicans respectively.

In the preceding sections, I have attempted to understand the place that the Mexican workers and the category of Mexican identity have in the local racial and ethnic configuration of Kentucky, which is mainly contradictory. The category of Mexican should be understood as an ongoing process with political and economic implications for the tobacco industry and for the local economies of the tobacco towns of Kentucky. There is no capitalist enterprise that, other things being equal, would not take advantage of the differences in labour costs and flexibility that derive from racial and ethnic hierarchies. Despite the compliance of the tobacco companies with the ILO’s Agricultural Labour Practices Code, by which workers shall not work excessive or illegal work hours (PMI 2015), there is no mention on their websites of the presence of undocumented workers in the tobacco fields in the USA, whose condition of “illegality” has increased their situation of vulnerability. It seems that the employers and the local authorities have turned a blind eye to the condition of “illegality,” attached to stereotypes of the Mexican worker, which leaves them without protection against abusive employers. In other words, the stereotypical image of Mexicans as “illegal” is very contextual. Mexican is a category applied in particular situations. When the police park their patrol cars in hidden places beside the road they are not hunting deer, but “illegal” immigrants, who they target while they are out in the streets, but not when they are working in the fields. I use the image of “hunting” because as in hunting the trees serve as camouflage, and they wait for hours in the same spot, as hunters do when waiting
for prey. There are never any police raids on the tobacco fields, although they are common in the nearby factories. Brian acts as if he does not know that his workers are undocumented, yet he knows that they are, and he benefits from their status of illegality when it comes to paying wages, taxes and applying pressure on them to work.

The category of indigenous identity in Nayarit

Picking up on one of the main themes of this chapter, that in both Kentucky and Nayarit race/ethnicity play a role in structuring relations of production, this section explores how Nayarit tobacco workers interpret their racial-ethnic identity and how this works in daily life in Nayarit. More concretely, in this section I am concerned with the ways in which race and ethnicity shape face-to-face relations between Nayarit people who migrate to the United States and indigenous people while they are in the Nayarit tobacco region. These are families who travel through the mountains of Nayarit and other nearby states to arrive in the Coast of Nayarit to harvest and string tobacco. Each member of the family works in tobacco, as is the custom in their communities of origin, where all members of the domestic group participate in the domestic economy from a young age. It has been calculated that 68% of the workers bring their families with them including their children (50% of them age below). In observing daily interactions between nonindigenous employers and workers, and indigenous workers, it seemed to me that attitudes towards indigenous populations are mediated by ideas and prejudice in relation to people with dark brown skin (prietos), who are seen as non-Spanish speaking, illiterate and living in poverty in their traditional garments. Indigenous populations are considered to be different, and “uncivilised.” In particular, local mestizo people perceive the families from the Huichol, Cora, Tepehuano and Mexicanero ethnic groups to be different from themselves. Nonetheless, mestizo people would not admit that a system of racial and ethnic hierarchies frame their practices and beliefs.

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In this section I will explore how mestizo people uphold both negative and positive images of the category of indigenous identity. I will explore dominant stereotypes about indigenous people and the way they contest these images: in particular, the dominant image of indigenous workers as “prietos” (brown skinned). I will also discuss how a programme called Florece (Blossom), which aims to eradicate child labour, both changes and maintains hegemonic ideas of an indigenous identity. The programme was developed and has been managed by British American Tobacco of Mexico, in coordination with government ministries and the NGO, Jalisco Desarrollo y Fomento (JADEFO). It resonates with Hale’s (2002:496) suggestion that, “In direct contrast to its classical antecedent, neoliberal doctrine is predicated not on destroying the indigenous community in order to remake the Indian as citizen, but rather, re-activating the community as effective agent in the reconstitution of the Indian citizen-subject.”

The ancient Indian

The way that hegemonic ideas about the category of “indigenous” identity are used in everyday interactions and in connection with transnational migration will be discussed in this section. Indigenous workers do not have to cross a national border to arrive in their tobacco region, which is how the materialisation of the category of Mexican “illegals” takes place. There is no equivalent of this category in Nayarit. In Nayarit, the category of indigenous identity is a tool of inclusion and exclusion. For Nayarit people, what is common to all mestizos, and even more evident among returnees who have experienced being the Other due to their immigration status, is pride in their Mexican identity, and they distinguish themselves from the indigenous population, whom they consider to be inferior and uncivilised people. Nayarit people, wearing denim and clothes bought in the USA and having access to social and economic capital, see themselves as having become more modern and civilized. This positive image runs parallel to the negative image of indigenous people who work in tobacco. Such workers rarely migrate to the USA, because it is expensive to do so. Unlike indigenous workers, mestizos have money and thus
goods which make them feel modern and progressive, and superior to the "Indians.”

I also found that Nayarit people in Kentucky feel proud of an Indian history; they feel proud of the ancient Indian. They wear T-shirts with caricatures of the Cora hat, and Cora people dressed in traditional garments. Nayarit people have appropriated the image of the Cora group as a mark of identity, which is promoted by the local government of Nayarit. As Moreno (2010:393) similarly found, “Those who locate themselves as Mexicans have learned to see and praise indígena peoples as an essential and vital part of the national culture and landscape, giving ‘sense’ and depth to Mexican history, but they do not seem to have any desire to ‘look’ like them.” I often heard this expressed during my fieldwork, for example César claimed that they are the Cora people of the USA: “Nosotros somos los coritas de Estados Unidos.” This is how the workers reaffirm their identity as nonindigenous, because they do not think that they look like indigenous people. Accepting that everyday racism exists in Nayarit is especially painful, because they may also recognise that they are racialised in Kentucky. César’s belief is shared by Emilio, a tobacco grower, who told me that he thinks that indigenous people are discriminated against in Nayarit in the same way that Mexican workers are in the USA.

I found that the same Nayarit workers who are targets of racism in Kentucky through the category of “Mexican” (they feel proud to be Mexicans, but they do not want to be “illegals,” “Blacks” or “indigenous”), engage in practices of racial discrimination against indigenous populations in Nayarit. They make jokes not only about people from the Cora ethnic group, but also from the Mexicanero, Huichol and Tepehuano ethnic groups. Another way to discriminate against indigenous people is by using the diminutive to refer to them (huicholito and corita or indito).

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53 Cora people are an indigenous ethnic group of El Nayar, a region defined as a homogeneous cultural and political area divided by the limits of Nayarit, Durango, Jalisco and Zacatecas.
Racism, in Nayarit, “no”

Although the dichotomy between indigenous and nonindigenous people has varied expressions, they are all concealed by the dominant discourse. What does it mean to have brown skin in Mexico and not talk about it? What does it mean to be white in Mexico? Moreno (2010:394) builds upon the premise that everyday racism exists in Mexico and in the Latin American context, but argues that the recognition of it cannot be taken for granted. According to Moreno (2010:388) people not only deny racism, “but do not recognize themselves as racialized, there is no public discourse about it and each painful racist encounter is strikingly shifting and slippery.” It is precisely this difficulty in discerning what racism is which “allows people to experience it as commonplace throughout society and in their own lives, lowering the perceived gravity of its effects” (2010:394). This is what Moreno called distributed intensity, which also entails that people “express and feel racism in moments of greater intensity where specific social configurations allow the racist moment to emerge and be expressed” (2010:389).

It is through daily and painful encounters between nonindigenous and indigenous people in the convenience stores in the town, in the street and during the saint's day celebrations when practices of inclusion/exclusion unfold.

Indigenous workers are thought of as belonging to the tobacco fields and the mountains. Seeing them having a stroll in the plaza, outside the time their presence is tolerated on Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning, might be taken as challenging the order. As with Mexican workers at the border, indigenous workers outside the tobacco fields remind me of Douglas’s (2003:44) concept of “matter out of place,” which suggests a contravention of the order. Nonindigenous people feel the necessity to differentiate themselves from the ways indigenous people raise their children, love, work and do things in general, as I will show later in the section about jokes. Furthermore the fact that indigenous people are acknowledged by the government through aid programmes generates envy from mestizo workers.

Francisco, Rafael, Daniel, José, Hugo, Julio and César, the members of the crew that I followed in Kentucky, are used to seeing indigenous people sleeping in the fields, as if indigenous people were less valuable. However, they deny being
racist, even though their words are pervaded by the local racial and ethnic hierarchies. Although Julio told me that he is not racist, in his comments indigenous people are clearly regarded as inferior. He clearly states “estamos más arriba que los coritas” considering his people as more “civilizado”. He says he even gets on better with “ellos” than with his own.

In Nayarit, the crew of seven occupy a space of privilege vis-à-vis indigenous workers, who live the process of indigeneity as the site of the “abject pueblo:” a process that under the multicultural model “would vindicate the permanence of the state recognition of cultural differences in Mexico” (Martínez et al. 2014:46). Julio and the crew do not want to look like indigenous people because they link this category with negative and pre-modern assumptions (which go back to the low status of indigenous people during colonial times), similarly to why they do not want to be “illegals” in the USA (see De Genova 2005:178). They want to be “normal” mestizo workers in both the tobacco regions. However, when it comes to “good” workers, the category of “indigenous” identity is positively valued, because they will do the work that none of the crew is willing to do in Nayarit.

**Nimble fingers**

Indigenous workers are seen as having nimble fingers. The crew clearly regard this as a valuable skill. However, this “positive” characteristic masks the fact that indigenous workers have to work harder to prove themselves, and, ultimately, a sense of inferiority is mobilised.

Indigenous identity is linked with physical characteristics, such as skin colour, clothes and ways of thinking: “they have another way of thinking”, “they are narrow-minded, because they would rather be cured by a shaman than to go to a hospital”, and “they are not like us”. This is what I was told by a Nayarit tobacco farmer who employed José of the crew of seven. The same farmer employed the family of indigenous people I described speaking to in Chapter 4.

In the tobacco fields local workers encounter indigenous workers, and they treat them as if they are part of the fields, resistant to the appalling conditions and the agrochemicals. José and two local workers sprayed the *inhibidor* knowing that a
family, among whom the youngest was a one-year-old girl, worked and slept in the same field. They sleep under the *ramada* or shelter that the growers provide for them “so their skin doesn't get darker than it already is,” one grower told me with a hint of humour, using *prieto*, which is a pejorative category.

Other encounters occurred in town. I was in one of the convenience stores when a group of indigenous workers passed by. A woman told her husband to give them a lift to the fields, because it was a long walk under the heat of the sun, and the workers were their employees. Her husband replied that he would not take them, because they were used to walking. Thus he naturalised their condition of structural inequality. Nonindigenous people are used to giving orders to indigenous people. For example, a young indigenous woman was trying to watch a dance during the saint’s day celebration and a nonindigenous woman told her to move: she did not ask, but gave an order. Nonindigenous people address indigenous people as if the latter do not share the same code of communication or simply do not understand what is being said to them. Nonindigenous women are often paternalistic and patronise indigenous women.

I was told by Fernando (a tobacco producer) that one of his workers gave birth in the tobacco fields and he took her to the clinic. Indigenous women are thought to be stronger than nonindigenous women because they give birth and within two weeks “they are carrying tobacco.” Indigenous women are perceived as lacking feminine attributes, and the idea that they do not have affective ties with their children is common. It is assumed that working in tobacco is a suitable activity for indigenous women and even their young children, although not for local mestizo women and their young children. “Child labour” has been defined as an indigenous problem, even though mestizo children also work in the fields (between the ages of 14 and 18), which would be framed as child labour by international standards. These are processes linked to naturalised notions of indigenous women, children and men as culturally inferior. This resonates with Moreno’s suggestion (2012:3) that notions of “race,” nation and femininity become configured and are constantly (re)done/(re)created in the participants’ bodies.
Jokes

A common way of recreating and concealing notions of race was through humour. Golash-Boza and Sue (2013:4) help us understand the workings of racial humour. Interpreted as non-racist, racial humour works to maintain Mexican colour-blind ideology and reinforce the country’s racialised social structure. Golash-Boza and Sue (2013:8) identify three mechanisms that serve to reproduce racialised systems of domination: “going along” with jokes, framing racial humour as benign and using laughter to “soften” racism. They suggest that every time racial humour goes “unchallenged it gains legitimacy, reinforcing the view that it is harmless” (Golash-Boza and Sue 2013:9). They argue (2013:15) “that humour can allow people to perpetuate racist ideas without coming into conflict with either their self-identities as non-racists or the national colour-blind ideology.”

Vicente and Esperanza, whom I lived with in Nayarit during fieldwork, often repeated an anecdote that at first glance seems funny. They have a close friend called Luis, one of the few men who do not migrate to the USA, but who nevertheless lives on remittances because he builds houses for the *norteños*, as people who migrate to the USA are called. Luis told them that he remembered Esperanza from his youth because she was pretty, and he never understood why she married Vicente, who is so ugly. Vicente did not like his comment, though everybody laughed when Luis openly expressed this opinion one afternoon after he got drunk at Vicente’s house. Vicente then said that he understood Luis’s comment because his wife Esperanza is unforgettable. “She looks like a woman of *raza fina* (good breeding),” Vicente told me. She is white and this is perceived as good and pretty. Vicente did not like that Luis said he was ugly, but he took it in good humour. Vicente is unable to see that the same humour which discriminates against him is also present in his own jokes about indigenous people; he does not see the violence in his words. Making jokes was a common way to refer to indigenous workers as the “other,” and to reinforce images of indigenous identity that seem so distant from their own identity. Through jokes, Vicente could distinguish himself from the ways indigenous people talk, live, love, and maintain relationships among themselves and with local families. Vicente would tell jokes about Cora women.
One is about a Cora woman who asks her husband whether he had stopped loving her, because he did not beat her. The joke draws on the stereotype that, among indigenous people, women accept being beaten by men. This is assumed to be normal for indigenous people, but seems abnormal and a source of humour to mestizo women. Another joke tells of a Cora couple who were not talking to each other, when a cat arrived and scratched at the man’s “balls” (*huevos, tambache*). “Shoo!” the woman shouted at the cat. Her husband was surprised that she intervened on his behalf, because she was supposed to be angry with him. She replied that she was indeed angry with him, but not with his balls, which she wanted to defend. This jokes draws on stereotypical images of indigenous people as simple and literal-minded, because the woman treats the man as separate from his genitalia. These jokes made everyone laugh, not only because of the context and content, but also because of the way Vicente imitated indigenous people’s way of speaking: *por qué lo lloras*, and *pegates*. Is Vicente racist? Yes, he is racist, but at the same time he is not. He has been discriminated against because of his colour, and he discriminates against Coras because of their race (understood as a biocultural identification). These jokes are ways through which individuals define themselves as mestizos, as being nonindigenous people.

**The Florece programme**

In 1965, Plan Huicot, a government development project in the local region, referred to indigenous people as human beings, but culturally underdeveloped: “*En el indígena se tiene a una persona dotada de todas las facultades propias del ser humano, pero por lo general pobremente desarrolladas dentro de patrones culturales que, aunque con valores auténticos, en su conjunto son reducidos y atrasados*” (Huicot 1966:174). In 2013, almost forty years later, a new discourse was established in concordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Indigenous peoples can “obtain the recognition of their internal normative systems, to the extent that these are not contrary to constitutional guarantees and human rights” (Federal Government of Mexico, cited in Speed 2005:37). However, it is
through this discourse of human rights that indigenous communities struggle for their autonomy (Speed 2005:38).

“As the state is minimized, many of its functions are ‘privatized’: passed from the state to industry and business (corporate social responsibility), communities and individuals, and, especially, civil society organizations such as NGOs” (Speed 2005:31). Speed’s suggestion resonates with the creation of the Florece programme, which aims to eradicate child labour in the tobacco fields. It is directed at jornaleros agrícolas migrantes (day labourer agricultural migrant workers); therefore it does not explicitly focus on “indigenous people.” However, a day labourer agricultural migrant worker is an occupational category which, certainly in Nayarit, is mostly applicable to indigenous people in the municipality of Santiago Ixcuintla, one of the main tobacco producing municipalities in Mexico. Tobacco companies such as British American Tobacco Mexico (BATM) and Philip Morris, which align themselves with the discourse of human rights, show how, following the retreat of the state, business assumes new functions, such as directly engaging with the communities where tobacco is being produced. Indigenous children start cutting tobacco from the age of seven, just as their parents and grandparents did. A study conducted by JADEFO and the Autonomous University of Nayarit suggested that child labour is used mainly to harvest and string tobacco.54 Child labour linked to the production of tobacco has been heavily criticised by academics, NGOs and government ministries. Patricia Díaz Romo, a Mexican anti-tobacco activist and researcher, denounced this practice with a video entitled “Huicholes y Plaguicidas,” which has circulated in academic circles, generating great controversy (http://www.huicholesyplaguicidas.org/video.html). This video, along with other publications, aims to denounce the gruelling situation of the indigenous population (see, for example, Pacheco 1999; Díaz and Álvarez 2002; Heredia, Garrafa and Villasenor 2002). However such efforts do not constitute a major challenge to the structural inequalities in the tobacco fields. The coordinator of the programme and the director of JADEFO, the NGO that manages the programme, emphasised the importance of giving children back their

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childhood. Informed by the results of research undertaken by anthropologists and sociologists at the Autonomous University of Nayarit, the programme was implemented in 2001. This study found that that 65% of the day labourers live in the tobacco fields during the tobacco harvest season (approximately 4 months), experiencing a low quality of life; and 84% of the day labourers admit their children are not being paid directly for their work. This vision, despite its good intentions (for example, giving children back their childhood), leaves untouched the structural violence experienced by indigenous people.

The Florece programme started with two day-care centres, which had increased to four by 2002 (Figure 8). British American Tobacco Mexico funded Florece in coordination with others in the tobacco industry, including Philip Morris and Tabacos del Pacifico Norte, and with the participation of government ministers and the communities where seasonal indigenous workers are employed. In each of the centres, children have access to education, health, food and recreational facilities in accordance with the rights of children. In particular, increasing children’s weight by 0.8 kilogrammes per child was one of the centre’s goals.

In the care centre I worked in as a volunteer in 2013, a total of 235 children visited the centre between February and May, the months in which the centre has been open every year since its establishment in 2002. There were children who only attended once during the tobacco season, and others who attended regularly but did not go every day. Every day, between 90 and 120 children were picked up from the fields at six in the morning and were returned at three in the afternoon. Three drivers were in charge of collecting the children, with the help of an intern. The children were aged between one and fourteen years old, with 54% of them being one to five years old, and 36% of them being between six and nine years old. The remaining 10% of children were aged between ten and fourteen. These percentages reflect the fact that attendance decreases according to the children’s age, as they start working from the age of six.
By studying the daily practices of, using the coordinator’s words, “returning their childhood to children,” the Florece day-care centre can be understood as a place where relations between different actors are shaped by ideas of race and ethnicity.
which, rather than challenging the organisation and control of work in the production of tobacco leaf, actually reproduce and reinforce differences. Most of the children speak their mother tongue, but none of the members of the staff speaks any of the Huichol, Cora, Tepehuano or Mexicanero languages; they only speak Spanish. The centre is a space of contact with children from other ethnic groups and local mestizo people. They have access to computers and are given new uniforms. But back in the tobacco fields, the reality of the children’s lives is different. They sleep in the fields, where the dewy mornings are severely cold, and where they are vulnerable to health issues, diseases and poisonous animals such as scorpions. For example, dental hygiene is difficult for indigenous people living in the fields because there is no potable water and everything is covered in dust. Also, the practices of hygiene and health promoted by the programme do not correspond to the reality of indigenous people’s conditions in the tobacco fields nor their understandings of health and illness. For instance, it was common to hear that a mother had asked the intern not to bathe her children, because she believed this could increase their risk of getting sick due to the cold mornings.

Most of the activities within the centre were directed towards the well-being of the children. But the members of the staff, who were local women and men, continuously made comments linked with notions about the condition of being indigenous. They use humour to refer to this condition; one staff member remembered a boy who stopped attending the programme: “He was cute, he almost did not look indigenous.” Other comments were equally painful: “Indigenous children do not know how to use glue, they eat it;” “Indigenous children do not know how to brush their teeth, they eat the toothpaste;” or “They do not know what spoons are for, they use their hands to put food on the spoon and then eat it;”, which would be followed by laughs and comments such as, “They are going to poke their eyes and belly button.” They suggested someone must teach them how to use a cutlery set. They remembered that one of the mothers told them that her son did not know how to use a spoon, so it was better to let him eat with his hands. Other comments were related to the meals the children were used to: “They are used to eating tortilla, frijol and chilli,” they did not eat chickpeas or lentils.
For the interns, indigenous children are different: “They have lice and are dirty,” the interns tell their families and friends. The children of these workers rarely visited the centre, as the interns did want their children to pick up lice and their children did not like visiting either.

In 2013, the Florece day-care centres were visited by public servants of the local government, managers of British American Tobacco of Mexico (BATM) and BATM employees, among whom were some engineers. “Florece tuvo la visita de importantes funcionarios de gobierno que están comprometidos con el bienestar y el desarrollo de estos niños. Así mismo tuvo la visita de todos los directivos de la compañía y de 100 empleados que vivieron la experiencia de convivir con estos niños.”

Jesús was a worker from the BATM Monterrey factory who participated in the visits. He explained to me the process by which some Monterrey workers got to spend a few days with the children in the centres. A contest was held in which the workers had to answer questions about key aspects of the creation of the programme. The workers who answered correctly were given permission to visit the centres in Nayarit. However, they had had to wait for two years due to security threats in the region from the activities of the drug cartels in 2011. In 2013, they were finally allowed to visit the centres.

The employees of the centre were stressed about the probable visit of the governor of Nayarit and the board of directors of BATM. The workers painted the walls and cleaned the windows, while the teachers practised choreographies with the children to be presented to the special guests, who were “the people who have invested their money in this programme,” as the workers of the centre and the director of the NGO told me. On the day when the BATM board of directors arrived, I found it striking that the indigenous children performed an indigenous dance in traditional clothes. For their presentation, their little faces were scrubbed clean to erase the traces of tobacco and dirt, and the dust in their ears and noses was wiped away; they were also made to wear clean uniforms, which were used only for the

visit of these “important” people. One of the employees of the centre, who is a member of the local community, stressed that it seemed like a lie, meaning that normal life and practice in the centre was very different from how it was when they received the guests. I think it was a lie in a different sense too: despite the good intentions of the programme, conceptions about indigenous people as disadvantaged people in need still inform face-to-face relationships in a way that shows that the socio-cultural dimensions of indigenismo remain in the present day (see Saldívar 2011:68). In other words, the children are perceived as needing education, food and healthcare without questioning the factors that dispossessed the indigenous communities of valuable resources, including, for example, the land on which tobacco is produced for British American Tobacco and Philip Morris, which once (in colonial times) belonged to indigenous people.

From the parents’ perspective, the programme entails that they leave their children in a place they do not always trust; yet they feel obliged to do so as it has become a way to get government aid. Participating parents are eligible for economic support for their return to their communities of origin. This is usually given to them at the end of the season, but again, only for the parents of children who attended the programme. This money comes from governmental programmes such as Programa Atención a Jornaleros Agrícolas (agricultural day labourer programme or PAJA) that works in coordination with the tobacco industry. The purpose of PAJA is to eradicate poverty among agricultural day labourers. Some of the indigenous parents I talked to clearly stated that they had sent their children to the centre to get the financial support that PAJA offered for the families who notified them of their condition as migrants, which is 800 pesos (around 31 pounds). In general, the programme does provide a lot of help for them.

From the local mestizo people’s perspective, including that of the crew of seven, the programme is further proof that indigenous people get more support than they do while in the USA. For example, Julio of the crew of seven said they would ideally like to be able to get US driving licences and multi-entry visas to make their time in Kentucky easier. The crew feel that neither the US nor Mexican governments offer them any help. It is thus ironic that, even though one of the members of the crew repeats that “we are the Cora people of the United States,”
none of the members of the crew recognises the appalling working and living conditions of indigenous workers.

From the producers and nonindigenous workers’ vantage point, child labour has become an obstacle and an additional pressure for the production of tobacco. This has become a problem for the tobacco companies, which, in coordination with government programmes, now aim to discourage child labour and improve the working and living conditions of indigenous migrant workers. At the same time, mestizo tobacco growers think that child labour is indigenous people’s responsibility. The growers think that they comply with labour regulations by telling indigenous parents about the rules, but they do not feel it is their responsibility to check that the rules are being followed.

**Conclusions: race and ethnicity**

In this chapter, I have shown how a common racial pan-American frame informs working relations and everyday practices in the tobacco regions of Nayarit and Kentucky. Even though the racial and ethnic categories derive from the colonial era, when labels for thinking about hierarchical difference were used to feed the old imperial ambitions, they are still informing face-to-face relations, albeit in contradictory and complex ways. This has shown to favour global tobacco capitalism, fed by unevenness within heterogeneous map of capitalist relations of production.

Evidently, understandings of race as a bio-cultural identification permeates the way people talk about it: for example, through irony. As Emilio often repeated, it is the same in Mexico as it is in the USA, in particular in the tobacco regions, but the way that people deal with racial and ethnic stereotypes varies in each place. There are, of course, different ways of contesting the varied racial and ethnic hierarchies that frame everyday practices in both places. Although framed in terms of race and ethnicity, a desire for the “normal” persists. The crew do not want to be Mexican “illegal” workers in the USA. They do not want to be persecuted by the police for looking different, nor do they want to look like indigenous workers in Nayarit. Moreover, the differences between the racial/ethnic frames in Mexico and
in Kentucky have protected the commercial interests of the tobacco industry (profit).

The desire for the “normal” in relation to the sexual division of labour will be the focus of the next chapter, which shows the different ways the crew and a Nayarit family divided between Kentucky and Nayarit deal with different patriarchal structures in the North and in the South.
Chapter 6: Gendered independence

Women start feeling independent when they work and earn money, Vicente tells me.

Vicente’s words, cited above, express a common belief held by Nayarit men and women. Vicente himself questioned whether or not this was a positive thing. According to him, women should not “work” or earn money, because this would mean a threat to his role as a breadwinner. Moreover, the participation of women in the workforce threatens the preservation of structures of patriarchy and the gendered division of labour historically associated with capitalism: commodity production is associated with men; social reproduction is associated with women; and when women engage in paid productive work, it tends to be seen as marginal and thus is often low-wage and/or part-time. These beliefs are common in both Nayarit and Kentucky. Nonetheless, the experiences of independence of both women and men reveal contradictions in each place, as I will show using Vicente’s life story and the crew of seven’s experiences.

In keeping with the key theme of the thesis, that in both Nayarit and Kentucky capitalist relations of production are pervasive, this chapter will analyse how common structures of patriarchy and the gendered division of labour that is constitutive of capitalism are intertwined with the reproduction of low-wage and part-time labour in both places. In addition, in both places there have been changes to these structures as women have entered the labour market in greater numbers, giving women some conditional independence from the men in their families. As a framework, I use the debate on “neoliberal” changes in Latin America in relation to earning opportunities for women (see Safa 1993; Chant 2006; Molyneux 2007). According to Safa (1993:24), women are recruited in large numbers into low-waged service characterised by “poor working conditions, lack of affordable, adequate child care, limited job alternatives, partners who offer no or limited assistance, and an increasingly high cost of living.”

Continuing the comparative approach previously used in Chapters 3 and 4 allows me to extend my critique of dualist approaches to a key aspect of the
production of tobacco: the gendered division of labour. I will begin my argument by describing how men who migrate (Vicente and the crew) experience the gendered division of labour in Nayarit and in Kentucky. To put it briefly, although the basic sexual division of labour in both Kentucky and Nayarit is fundamentally the same (with some differences: for example, the female labour force participation rate is higher in the USA than in Mexico), some of the men who migrate experience that division in different ways, because they are located within it differently in Kentucky (where they are temporarily like single men) and in Nayarit (where they are integrated as male relatives and husbands).

I will explore how the notion of “independence” is interpreted by Nayarit women and men, as this is the way that they expressed their discontent or approval regarding recent changes in gender relations. Why is women’s financial independence so questioned and challenged? Why has a woman’s independence become associated with financial independence? In what other aspects of life are women and men’s independence linked? How do men and women gain “independence” when they live together or get married? What kind of room for manoeuvre is there for women and men? These are some of the questions that I aim to address in this chapter.

I will develop my argument through an account that centres on the life story and migration experience of one man, Vicente, whose story is in no way a singular case, but rather is similar to the experiences of many other men from his community. He is one of the group of men who first arrived in Kentucky to work in tobacco in the 1980s. Vicente has maintained relationships with women in Kentucky, has worked in tobacco and has migrated under different legal statuses. I complement this with the life story of Esperanza, Vicente’s wife. Esperanza, like many other women from the same community, stayed at home with her young children while her husband was in the USA, and suffered her husband’s physical and psychological abuse upon his return. Esperanza is in her 50s and her children are now adults. Since 2007 she has had a green card through her husband that allows her to see her daughter and grandchildren in Kentucky and to work in Virginia with her husband and youngest son. Esperanza, who moves between Nayarit, Kentucky and Virginia, shows that women have found ways to rely less on their husbands.
Moreover, when women do not migrate but stay at home and assume tasks commonly considered of the masculine domain - and even when they remain in their feminine domain - they show that they have become more independent.

In his study of Mexican masculinities, Gutmann viewed his friends, a couple named Timoteo and Catalina, not so much as representative of Mexican men and women in general, “but rather as typical of the enigmas inherent and common in most gender identities that are constructed and transformed” (1996:4-5). Similarly, although Esperanza and Vicente cannot really be seen as representative of Mexican men and women from the hinterland of Nayarit, their experiences bring out some common themes in changing gender relations. According to Gutmann (1996:243) “there is ambiguity, confusion, and contradiction in male identities throughout the putative heartland of machismo.” I thought Vicente was a typical Mexican macho, but he is and he is not. I agree with Gutmann’s (1996:245) suggestion that male identities “cannot be understood outside the changing power context in which they have emerged,” and that “what they do creatively within these social and cultural constraints and how originally they perform their roles, however, is not preordained” (Gutmann 1996:245). “There is room to manoeuver,” Gutmann concludes, and his conclusion is the starting point for my analysis of the relationship between Esperanza and Vicente.

In the next section I will reflect on the way that the Nayarit men I have been following on their migrant experience since 2008 have been developing their personal projects of masculinity by using the distance/difference between Nayarit and Kentucky. In these two locations, women and men have different opportunities and constraints, but the same pervasive logic of tobacco capitalism is present in both. Afterwards, I explore how the experience of developing a project of femininity is managed by Nayarit women: both for the women who stay and for the women who have challenged their financial dependence through migration and temporary migration. Throughout, I refer both to the experiences of the crew of seven and those of Vicente and Esperanza.
Experiences of independence in Kentucky

Nayarit men act are more like single men in Kentucky, where they maintain relationships with white women (sometimes having children with them), whereas they are generally husbands and fathers in Nayarit. These men do not have their wives and families with them in Kentucky, and the sexual division of labour is slightly different there, where women work more outside the home – the female labour force participation is 45% in Mexico and 56% in the USA. Of importance here are ideas about what makes “a good woman” and “a proper man.” A key idea is that men are able to construct a different sense of themselves as men in Kentucky from what they are able to do in Nayarit: in Kentucky, they are hard-working, they sacrifice themselves and they have more sexual agency, but they are also constrained by domestic chores and illegality. To illustrate this point further, I will focus on the story of Esperanza and Vicente, whom I met in November 2008 in Kentucky, when they were visiting their daughter Paloma and looking for work in tobacco. I had been staying at Paloma’s house, conducting fieldwork for my Master’s Thesis. Esperanza, Vicente and their youngest son Pablo arrived from Virginia after finishing their work at a vegetable farm. There were ten people staying in the three-bedroom house: Paloma, her husband and four children, Paloma’s parents and brother, and me. I shared a bedroom with Paloma’s six-year-old son and eleven-year-old daughter. There were two episodes in particular that caught my attention and on which subsequent analysis will be built.

First, Paloma and her best friend warned me that “Nayarit men are calientes (randy) and they will try to seduce you.” A Nayarit woman of my age would have already been married and had children. Moreover, a single Nayarit woman does not


\[57\] In 2000, as a US citizen, he found a relatively stable job in Virginia at a vegetable farm. He and his eldest son worked together seasonally for six years in the same place. In 2007, his wife and youngest son joined them in their annual migration to the United States. Vicente’s oldest son found a full-time job in Nayarit and did not return to the United States between 2011 and 2015, when he quit his job. Vicente rents his land out for tobacco and beans, and he plants beans. He is looking forward to retiring in 2018.
befriend married men who work in agriculture, engage in drinking and view pornography. The second was a conversation I had with Vicente:

One day in February 2013, I am having an informal conversation with Vicente. We are talking over the dining table in his house in Nayarit. He tells me, “I have a child in Kentucky and I do not know whether I have another one.” He continues, “The woman got pregnant knowing that I was married.” I ask whether his wife is aware of this, and he confirms that she is. I continue listening to Vicente as he recounts another story, the life of his father who abandoned him.

Vicente was born in 1955 in Nayarit. Born into a poor family, he was raised by his sister while his mother washed other people’s clothes to earn some money. Vicente had to work from a young age. Vicente has vivid memories of having no money for clothes or shoes. His father abandoned him, and his mother had six children with different men, and struggled to feed them. None of the children attended school. Vicente found a job in tobacco in Mexico at the age of seventeen, and with his wages he could afford clothes and things that he wanted. At that time migration to the USA was not part of Vicente’s life, nor was it part of the lives of the other local men. At the age of 23, in 1978, Vicente married Esperanza and she gave birth to a girl soon afterwards. Soon after Vicente got married, he started building a house for his wife and children. To raise enough money for the house, he started migrating to the United States in 1979, when his daughter was about to turn one year old. His children and his wife become Vicente’s main motivation to migrate for work to the USA. During the seven years between 1979 and 1986, Vicente crossed the border without documentation and without his wife, until he was able to begin the process towards US citizenship. After the Immigration Reform and Control Act was passed in 1986, he was able to apply first for his US residency, and five years after that, his citizenship. In the 1990s, he and other men from his community arrived in Kentucky and found it a good place to work in tobacco. He then became a broker for Kentucky tobacco employers. His job was to find and help undocumented men from the same community to cross the border. He gave priority to family members and friends: for example, Vicente brought his son-in-law and his eldest son to the USA.
I found that the same project of being an independent man has different opportunities and constraints in Kentucky than in Nayarit. Men do things in Kentucky that they are not able to do or do not need to do at home, from maintaining relationships with other women without the risk of breaking up their families at home, to washing the dishes. However, the experience of independence is constrained by *la migra* and *los paisanos* (compatriots), who keep an eye on Nayarit men. In the next section, I seek to make these opportunities and constraints more explicit.

"Women are for cleaning"; “men are for working”

In 2008, during my first week sharing the same space with Esperanza and Vicente’s family, I found that the daily activities of this family, along with other Nayarit families to whom I was introduced, were arranged following the traditional household division of labour, where women are in charge of the household chores. But ambiguities and contradictions are part of what I thought of as the “traditional household divisions of labour.” Paloma, who worked in tobacco with her father, Vicente, and her partner, challenged the idea that women do not participate in the labour force. Drawing on work by Hirsh (1999:1332), it is possible to understand that “a generational paradigm shift in marital ideals has occurred,” because women have gained more economic opportunities, more privacy, and some legal protection from domestic violence in the USA. Vicente is very proud of his daughter, but if she were his wife he would have a different opinion, because it threatens his position as a breadwinner. Esperanza’s eldest son also suggested that his mother does not suffer at work, because normally she sits in the shade to sort out and pack the vegetables. At the time, Paloma had a one-year-old daughter for whom she received food stamps, and three children who received free access to education and other forms of support, such as free clothes and toys at Christmas. However, the incentives were not enough to allow Paloma not to work. The welfare state evidently “worked with deeply gendered conceptions of social needs, ones that were familial, patriarchal and paternalistic” (Molyneux 2007:4). Molyneux's focus was on the social policies of Latin America, but I noticed that social policy in the United States
also used gendered roles and responsibilities as its model. Nevertheless, these roles are questioned in daily practice.

Before the tobacco was cured in preparation for stripping and baling, Vicente visited his friends, with whom he played dominoes and poker, made bets and got drunk. Vicente usually arrived at Paloma’s house at night, to watch television and to play with her children (his grandchildren). Esperanza and her daughter would stay at home, or would sometimes visit Paloma’s friends or shop for groceries at Walmart. Even though it seems that traditional domestic divisions between men and women are being reproduced in Kentucky, they are not static.

When Vicente, his daughter, his youngest son and his son-in-law started stripping tobacco, I found that Paloma would work in tobacco and continue doing household activities too, which resulted in Paloma being burdened with extra work. Additionally, her mom, Esperanza, had to babysit Paloma’s one-year-old daughter as well as Paloma’s comadre’s children. Vicente stopped hanging out with his friends, because he had no time or energy to visit them after work, unless the tobacco was too dry and they could not work. Their identities as women and men were interrupted only by the pressure of tobacco-work. Although I never saw Vicente take charge of any of the household activities or prepare his own lunch, he did spend time with his grandchildren and wife, which he did not do in Nayarit. And even though Paloma’s husband would say, “Women are there for cleaning and cooking,” he had to broaden his perception of her limited independence. Nonetheless, Paloma still had to clean the house. The money Paloma received from working in tobacco was for herself and for clothes, when there was enough left over.

A few miles away, in the caravan, the crew of seven were using household appliances and to save money they were cooking, washing dishes and doing laundry by themselves. This in contrast to Vicente’s experience, who was with his wife, and to the crew’s own experience at home in Nayarit, where their wives cook, wash dishes and do their laundry.

In this section, I have shown that two ways in which men construct a sense of independence, for example, by parting from their mates and doing household chores, are always linked to women’s own life projects. For Vicente and other
Nayarit men, women are defined as best suited to the home (even when some women challenge that role by taking on paid work). For the crew, who are not with their wives, cooking and doing laundry do not represent a challenge to their sense of autonomy. Another way, as I will elaborate further below, is for the men to form extramarital sexual relationships (which are in some ways easier to form in Kentucky than at home, but are tempered by the possibility that the white women might be using the men to help pay the bills). Hence the sense of independence, or at least sexual agency, that they are able to construct is limited.

“I met her in a bar”

Men’s desire to build a sense of independence has different opportunities and constraints in Kentucky in comparison with Nayarit. In Kentucky, Mexican men can forge a sense of autonomous masculinity by hanging out with white women in bars and forming relationships with some of them, but their room for manoeuvre in carving out such a sense of autonomy is framed by work routines, gossip networks and a lack of mobility. Similarly, González-López (2005:5) has noted that immigrants’ “erotic journeys are also shaped by social networks, women’s paid employment, demanding schedules, and a fast-paced routine, among other social factors invading the most private moments of their personal lives.” I also found that these relationships are actually multifaceted and entail different meanings for different people (the men themselves, the white women involved, Katherine, local Latina women). Certainly, the increasing participation of women in waged labour and notions of a “good woman” and a “good man” have also helped to challenge and build men’s sense of independence. Maintaining relationships with white women or local women is also a way to overcome the sense of being an outsider, particularly for those who have been overstaying their visas.

In the Kentuckian tobacco region, women - local and working class women - hang out at bars for a drink and to dance. There is always a possibility to have an affair, for it is a good place to meet people who are looking to flirt. In spite of the men’s lack of English skills, they communicate with these women with vocabulary learned during work, through songs and from television. In 2008, Julio and José
used to visit a restaurant in a nearby city, where they would go to drink beer and *ver muchachas* (to see women). Julio and José had their own van, which facilitated their movement, and they only went during the times when there was no work. In 2012, the same men still had their own van, but they were unable to leave the caravan as often as they could in 2008. There were alarming rumours of an increasing number of detentions of migrants along the roads. Julio, like other undocumented workers, fears being pulled over and being deported, because he drives without a licence. This would mean that he would be refused a job the next year. The possibility of being caught shapes Julio and his co-workers’ mobility within the region, which affects their encounters with women and the way they perceive themselves as men. Nonetheless, they found ways to overcome the constraints that being illegal imposes (as discussed in more detail in Chapter 5).

Another of their constraints is their unpredictable work routine. The crew must comply with their orders, and it sometimes happens that the employer needs them in the fields at unpredictable times. If someone is missing everybody will ask where he is. Although, for an employer, finding out that a worker is missing is often not a problem when it does not affect production:

> It is a Sunday morning, and I arrive at the crew’s caravan to call Brian. I ask for Brian’s number and I find that the only man who has Brian’s number is not in the caravan. This man is Julio, the foreman of the crew. Julio’s co-workers tell me that he is visiting his sister-in-law. I then call Julio to ask for Brian’s number and a woman answers saying that Julio is not available.

When I asked Julio who answered the phone, he told me that she was a Puerto Rican woman, his fellow acquaintance. The weekend this happened, the crew did not cut tobacco because it was raining. Therefore Julio and the crew had a “free” weekend.

The opportunity for men to share similar spaces with white women such as a bar, however limited by gossip networks, is used to maintain these relationships (which are linked with structural conditions). As there are so many people from the same home community, it is difficult to hide their behaviour because they do not travel to places that they do not know – they stay close by. Julio, Jorge (the ex-
foreman of the crew) and Vicente have all had encounters with other women. To create the time to see them they would say that they were visiting other family members settled in Kentucky. They did not want the other men to tell their wives about their encounters, because these women would make sure Julio, Jorge and Vicente's wives back in Mexico learnt about their husband’s affairs. Normally, such affairs do not result in separation, but rather in endless fights, adjustments and negotiations, as happened between Vicente and Esperanza. Esperanza is aware of the child Vicente has in the USA and she would like to meet him.

There are varied perceptions regarding the relationships between white women and Mexican men among the local people, Mexican settlers and “illegal” workers, as the following will demonstrate. The perceptions of Nayarit settlers and temporary migrants are intertwined with the image of Latino men, which does not distinguish between settlers and temporary migrants.

Vicente has stated categorically that there is no man that has not cheated on his partner, and it would be naïve to think otherwise. Julio, the foreman of the crew, shares Vicente’s belief. Julio thinks that having affairs is something natural and he assures me that faithful men do not exist. Despite a man’s faithful intentions, he thinks that if someone gives you a look and the opportunity is there, every man will ultimately take that opportunity.

It was common to hear among Nayarit men and women that women at home are “good women” whereas women who like to go out are putillas (sluts). It is commonly assumed that “good women” are less independent than the men on whom they rely financially. For example, Vicente believed that he married Esperanza because she was a “good” woman; Vicente’s mother knew that she was a good woman to marry, he told me.

Katherine, their employer, does not understand why Latino men hang out with “fat white women” when they can hang out with Latina women, whom she finds pretty. Among tobacco employers there is an idea that Latino men hit these women and are “jerks,” which is used to feed stereotypes about Latino men.

For the men, white women can be seen as women wanting to control them and also jeopardise their families in Nayarit. Temporary workers who maintain relationships with women in the USA plan to return to their families in Nayarit, not
to start a family in Kentucky. Julio told me that the woman wanted to marry him, and if he had agreed, he would have been able to get citizenship. However, he declined her offer because he thought that his migration to the USA was not about citizenship or money. Julio and José, like other workers, want to become legal, but not at the price of having another family, which might prove very expensive. The offer was very clearly put to Julio. He was proposed marriage and therefore a legal permit to work. The woman encouraged him by suggesting he waited six months for the documents so he could then return to visit his family in Nayarit without having any problems coming back to the USA.

Among Mexican migrant women who have settled in the USA, there is an idea that white women are looking for hard-working men who will pay their household bills. The hard-working Latino man might foster this idea of Latino male identity. They think it is for personal gain, not for love, that white women hang out with Mexican men. There is also the idea that Latino men like to hang out with American women to get papers and to learn English. The women they meet are women who have children and who work as housekeepers. Unlike settled Mexican women, Mexican men make comments when they see a Mexican man with a white woman that question why the other man has made it, but not them. But these ideas about love and self-interest are not shared by white women: one of them told me that she was looking for a companion in a Mexican man, a man who would not hit her like her white ex-husband used to.

When I think about Vicente’s story and about what Julio told me regarding his encounter with a woman he met in Kentucky, I believe that the opportunities for meeting a woman for a short- or long-term relationship are different in Kentucky than in Nayarit. This is linked to the availability of work opportunities for both women and men in Kentucky, although they do not share a common language or life project. As noted above, more women in the USA than in Mexico participate in the labour force, and in daily life this translates into encounters between these women and undocumented immigrants like Julio. Also, traditional values regarding marriage and fatherhood play a key role. Nayarit women are expected to stay at home, whereas the men’s responsibility is to find work in the North and to send remittances periodically to their families back home, as well as to contact their
wives and children frequently and take decisions from abroad. In Kentucky, Nayarit men maintain relationships with other women, but these are constrained by the apparatus of surveillance over and among immigrants and by the pace of the work. In Nayarit, under the eyes of family tradition and the organisation of work, the room for manoeuvre for both women and men is clearly intertwined (as discussed in more detail below).

**Hard-working Latino men**

Part of the image of being a Mexican man in the United States is being true to your word, being hard-working, having sexual agency and having an ability to endure physical pain. The same aspects are negotiated and loosened in Nayarit, particularly when one's capacity to endure physical pain and suffering has already been proved through the condition of being a migrant. In other words, if workers have migrated, they are accepted as being men. This sentiment resonates with Aguirre-Sulem’s (2015:10) category of “brave migrant:” who risks his life crossing the border, finds a job in a country with a different culture and language and manages to improve his life and his family's prospects. In Kentucky, bodily strength and being able to endure long working days are central characteristics for their projects of masculinity. While in Nayarit, their work hours allow them to have lunch at home, where their wives are in charge of cooking for and serving them, and they can take between two and three hours to rest at home, for example, in bed or in front of the TV.

As he narrates it, Vicente’s life story resembles that of one of the main characters of a Mexican telenovela (soap opera): he has been working very hard from a young age to get what he has now, a family and a house.

He used migration to the USA as a way of getting out of poverty. After getting married, he was pushed to leave his family home and on his travels he met different women with whom he had sexual relationships. Notwithstanding his “mistakes,” as he called his love affairs, he did not leave his family and he fulfilled his role as the breadwinner, which means he keeps his word. Vicente did not want his child to repeat his own experience as a fatherless child: he was bullied for it.
succeeded because he is hard-working man, and he has been working non-stop since he was seventeen. Currently in his sixties, Vicente is diabetic and has almost lost sight in one eye, but despite this, he remains a hard-working man who is still working in agriculture in the USA.

Like Vicente, Julio believes that Nayarit men work and “suffer” in the USA for the well-being of their children and wives. Nayarit men believe that they do everything for their families, in order to provide them with shelter, food, clothes and the things that they need. They would not be able to do so if they stayed in Nayarit, because there are no jobs that can offer the same wages and access to “things” from the North. They do not want to bring their families, because it would be expensive to pay the coyote, it would risk their lives and they would have to leave their life back home. With this arrangement, Julio like Vicente has a house and family life back home. He is able to visit his mother and siblings at any time and he can see his children growing up in a “better” environment, surrounded by traditional values. These women find ways to cope with gender inequalities while managing to continue with their life projects, as will be shown below.

Julio harshly criticises the families from his town who have settled in Kentucky, saying that, “They have expensive cars, but not a house with everything they own in it.” For Julio it does not look like they have a better life, and he does not want such a life for his family: to get into debt and to have children who do not respect their parents.

The crew of seven observed that the families who settled in Kentucky work intensely; they live to work and are caught up in a desire for consumption, which is satisfied by buying things on credit, producing a vicious circle. Whereas they feel free in Nayarit because they only work from 8:00 AM to 1:00 PM and then from 3:00 PM to 6:00 PM, and Saturdays they only work a half-day. Thus, they have time to spend with their family, which is invaluable, because it allows them to have a “proper” family and protect their ideas of autonomous masculinity and a “good woman.” Returners believe that such values are absent among settlers in the USA, because they do not have “free” time to spend with their families, due to having work that consumes most of their time.
Women’s experience of independence in Nayarit

Women in Nayarit, although still very dependent (on men’s wages and moods), are increasingly taking on income-earning work (beauty salons, conveniences stores and wage labour) because they are left alone for long periods and they are sent remittances that they can use to invest in business enterprises. In a Latin American context in which women have not traditionally played a major role in agriculture – excepting indigenous women, male migration creates greater female labour force participation. In addition, for the women who stay in Nayarit, the absence of the men means not having to deal with their drunk and potentially violent husbands while receiving remittances from them (although how the money is used has to be justified to the man). For the women who migrate and settle in the USA (such as Esperanza’s daughter Paloma), the struggle for respect and financial independence has assumed greater importance since the 2007 crisis. For women who have the experience of staying behind while their husbands migrate north, things are a little different, but even for them the struggle for independence is shaped by patterns of migration. This is Esperanza’s story. In 2013, I contacted Esperanza and Vicente because I was planning to stay in their hometown of Amapa. Without hesitation, Esperanza offered me a room in their house for as long as I needed. They usually stay at home from December to March, and afterwards they go to Kentucky to visit their daughter and grandchildren, and then to Virginia where they work, staying from mid-March to November, before returning to Nayarit after stopping by Kentucky to say goodbye to their daughter and grandchildren. Previously, when Esperanza and Vicente lived together in Nayarit (and Vicente migrated north on a seasonal basis), things were difficult for her:

One day in February 2013, I am having an informal conversation with Esperanza, a fifty-five-year-old woman. We are talking over the dining table in her house in Nayarit. Esperanza has just woken up and is telling me about the dream she had the night before: “It feels so real, how Vicente was cheating on me.” Esperanza then starts wondering why she tolerated her husband Vicente’s psychological and physical abuse for more than 30 years. She was scared of him, because he used to drink every weekend and he was violent. He would go out every night, dancing and drinking with friends, and
then would return home drunk. She used to get more and more terrified as the weekend approached. Every Saturday he would invite Esperanza out to lunch, but she would not want to go because it was just an excuse for him to drink. After lunch he used to take her home and afterwards he would go out for more drinks, and he would continue drinking all of Sunday and sometimes Monday, Esperanza remembers.

In this section, I will discuss some of the negotiations and practices of being female in Nayarit, which are intertwined with the practices of being male. Drawing on work by Connell (2002:4), it is possible to understand that: “People construct themselves as masculine or feminine. We claim a place in the gender order – or respond to the place we have been given – by the way we conduct ourselves in everyday life.” Moreover, womanhood and manhood cannot be analysed separately. Esperanza and Vicente’s story illustrates how “female identities often serve as the central point of conscious and unconscious reference for men in the development, maintenance, and transformation of their own sense of what ser hombre [being a man] does and does not mean, and what it can and cannot mean” (Gutmann 1996:257). However, an emphasis on women’s independence will illustrate how they are leading their own projects as women, using male identities as a point of comparison and reflexivity. I will focus on Esperanza and Vicente, as well as some of the women who have alternative projects, albeit often constrained by different opportunities and social factors such as class and their stage in their life course. I will explore how the lives of Esperanza and other women are framed by the tobacco industry, the state and cultural practices. The flexibilisation of the roles of women and men in response to the demands of the tobacco industry has entailed an increased burden of activities. Nevertheless, this contests men’s power over women: as men migrate on a regular basis to support their families during the six months that jobs are scarce in Nayarit, women gain control over spaces previously dominated by the breadwinners. For example, when he is home, Julio decides what is best for his family, even down to what clothes his wife and children should wear, however, when he is not at home, she decides these things. In the first section, I will discuss what life was like for Esperanza when Vicente was in the North and for other women whose husbands are also in the North.
A good wife (for the reproduction of low-wage labour)

Vicente cheated on his wife many times, but an event in 2007 was, for Esperanza, the last straw, after which she decided to stand up for herself and to concentrate her energy on herself rather than on looking after Vicente. Vicente had gone out with his friends, and he did not return home until five in the morning. He later confessed that he had met two women with whom he went dancing and then took to their houses. Esperanza had put up with her husband for many years and she did not think that he would change, so she still wonders why she has stayed with him for so many years. However, what other options did she have?

Esperanza met Vicente in 1976. He thought she would never hang out with a guy like him because she was rich and he was poor, but hard working. He was working in tobacco, and he sometimes had to stay overnight in the fields to keep an eye on the water pump. He invited her to dance during the town’s celebration day, when music is everywhere and couples dance. When he asked her for a kiss she did not want give him one, because it was the first time they had gone out. This is a part of their “love” story that Vicente eloquently narrated to me in the presence of Esperanza, whose silence and gestures told me more than Vicente was telling me. Esperanza, like many other women, claims that she would be better off single than married.

They started spending time together soon after their first dance, but her grandparents, with whom she lived, were not aware of this. Esperanza told me with sadness that her mother was not able to raise all ten of her children, so she gave her (Esperanza) to her grandparents to look after. Nonetheless, Esperanza had a “good life” with her grandparents. Her grandfather was a tobacco grower and every year after selling his tobacco they would travel to Mexico City and buy a new pickup truck. Those were the best years for the production of tobacco, as is commonly remembered.

The first time Vicente went to her grandparents’ house to see her, Esperanza’s grandfather chased him out with a pistol. Notwithstanding her grandfather’s opposition to their relationship, they ended up getting married because she was pregnant.
During the first years of their marriage, Vicente worked in the production of tobacco at home and worked in agriculture in the USA. When he was home from the USA, he was out of the house almost the entire time, Esperanza remembered, either working in the tobacco and bean fields where he stayed overnight during week days, or with friends at weekends. Esperanza was at home taking care of her children: “yo trabajaba mucho, porque todo el tiempo él trabajó en los riegos. Todos los días yo trabajaba demasiado y luego en la pobreza. Yo te cuento cómo era Vicente, como batallaba yo con él.” The weekends were terrifying for her and her children, because he was drunk and violent: “el fin de semana, pues eran pleitos porque él se iba a los bailes y todo eso. Y me dejaba igual sola con los chiquillos, fue bien duro conmigo, la vida.” Esperanza, like other women, preferred being alone with her children. She remembered that when her daughter was young, she became ill one night. She asked Vicente for help in taking her to the doctor, but he reacted angrily because the little girl was crying. Esperanza went on her own into the dark to ask for help from her sister-in-law who lived around the corner, while Vicente slept after having been partying. The next day, Vicente was sick and she ignored him. It was God who made him pay, she believed.

Esperanza opened a convenience store in the 1980s with the remittances Vicente sent her. She worked there for thirteen years and through it she contributed to the household. Vicente’s migration allowed Esperanza to participate in the labour force. It was a possibility for her to gain independence at home. She managed her own business and this allowed her to socialise while her husband was in the North. Accompanying her husband to the North was not an option for Esperanza at the time, although it later became one for her daughter Paloma. Esperanza’s children were in school and none of them had a green card.

For many years, Esperanza stayed at home as many women still do nowadays. Women who are pregnant, have small children or have children at school stay in the community. They are aided by support networks in the community made up of grandmothers, female neighbours, friends and cousins, which facilitate their looking after themselves and their children alone (see Chant 2006). They raise the children who as adults will become migrants. The women receive weekly or monthly remittances, and this allows them to buy food, medicine,
school supplies and clothes. They also save money for further expenses. These arrangements allow the reproduction of low-wage and unpaid labour and also have consequences for the children.

For the children, having a father in the North can be a disruptive experience. Although Vicente thinks of himself as a bad husband, and regrets the suffering and trouble he has caused his wife through his drinking and philandering, he has never regretted leaving periodically to work in the USA, whereas his children have questioned this.

The money earned in the United States allowed Vicente to raise his family, he assured me. However, the situation is different for a child. Esperanza’s youngest son Pablo asked her when he was a child why she did not buy him a father who would not have to go to the USA. Esperanza’s daughter-in-law Martha’s youngest sister once did not recognise her father when he returned from the USA, and she asked her mother to tell “that strange man to leave their house.” Traditional fatherhood in Nayarit is being questioned by the younger generations who want a different life for their children, one without violence and with more time spent together. There is a conflict, for example, between men of Vicente’s generation, who stayed in the United States for long periods of time, spending their money on beer and with friends, and almost never spending time with their families when they were back, and men of the generation of Vicente’s sons, Pablo and Hector. Children suffered the absence and violence of their fathers, as Pablo told me in a long conversation that I had with him soon after his parents left for the USA. He believes that the suffering experienced by his father does not justify the way he treated him and his mother. Knowing what it felt like to have a father in the North, Vicente’s sons try to practise different models of fatherhood which concentrate less on financial support and more on spending time with their children and wives.\(^{58}\) It is well known that when the men return, it is important that they bring *encargos,*

\(^{58}\) I recognise that there is a growing anthropological and sociological literature on the classic patterns of gender relations in Mexico beyond the scope of this chapter. This includes foundational texts such as Melhuus and Stølen (1996), Nash and Safa (1986), Pescatello (1973), Chant (1991), and González de la Rocha (1994). Questions of changing gender patterns are raised in, for example, Gutmann (1996; 2003), and Hirsh (1999).
presents for their wives, children, mothers and other family members. Clothes, shoes and electrical appliances such as televisions and tablets are valuable presents for their family members. Despite children’s enjoyment of the gifts that migrant fathers bring them on their return, they do not relish the departure of their father.

**A good woman (doing low-paid and part-time jobs)**

Women and men engage in the construction and development of their own versions of what entails a “good woman.” According to Connell (2002:4), “Being a man or a woman, then, is not fixed state. It is a becoming, a condition actively under construction.” I found that women who stay at home, besides looking after their children, also participate in sports and integrate into the community, for example, by participating in the organisation of the town’s saint’s day, and other religious and civil celebrations. They also visit their friends, *comadres* and family members.

Martha’s daily activities will change dramatically after the departure of her husband, Pablo. While he is home, Martha is with her husband most of the time. She cooks for him and she never goes out unaccompanied. He is with her all the time, except when he will sometimes go to pick up Martha’s daughter while Martha is cooking. This relationship was the object of various comments and criticisms from Pablo’s parents, Vicente and Esperanza. Vicente’s main concern was that Pablo does not work while he is in Nayarit. Pablo only works when he is in the USA, from March to November, and he sends money to his wife. With their savings they can live without working in Nayarit. He can work in tobacco like his older brother, Vicente assured me. But he believes that Pablo is not strong enough for tobacco because “he was raised by his mother.” At his age, Vicente reminds Pablo, he had a house, whereas Pablo is still living at his parents’ house with his wife and two daughters.

“Ella no es mujer” (Martha is not a real woman), because she does not push her husband to get their own house and a space that is independent of his parents, Vicente tells me. Vicente has a similar opinion of Marcela, the wife of Hector, his eldest son. “She is not a good woman and she does not love him,” Vicente assured
me, because she is not able to save money. Every time that his son returned from the USA, she wanted to go out every weekend and this cost money that they could have saved, Vicente told me. Unlike Vicente, Esperanza thinks that Martha married her youngest son not for love, but out of self-interest. She comes from a “poor” family and does not know how to save money, Esperanza told me. She believed that Martha did not fulfil her obligations as a mother, because while Martha slept and gave all her attention to her husband Pablo, her daughter would sometimes be hungry and Esperanza would have to feed her. “That broom does not move,” Esperanza said to Martha with irony when Martha passed near a broom that was in her way and should not have been there, implying that Martha is lazy, and does not clean. Esperanza also did not get along with her other daughter-in-law, Marcela, because, according to her, she manipulates Hector.

Ideas of being a “good woman,” are influenced by songs, soap operas and talk shows. I remember Vicente would stay in his room all day long watching classic Mexican films, soap operas and talk shows. Martha and Esperanza have their favourite programmes as well. These inform and reflect dominant ideas about gender and, for example, the notion of a “good woman:” a woman who will be a good wife, faithful, a good cook and a loving mother, and who will allow men their independence. A woman who wants to be a “good woman” should be intelligent and look after the interests of her family. For women one “intelligent” option is to see men with migrant experience as potential husbands, as men who will send remittances for food, clothes and the construction of a house, and who will allow them to be independent as well, not having to rely on their parents anymore. However, men’s migration has also brought about the greater participation of women in the labour force, often in worsening conditions, for example, leaving their children behind. Esperanza told me that more and more women find themselves having to work in both Nayarit and in the USA because life has become more expensive.

There are now increasing opportunities for women to participate in migration and in the workforce in their communities as babysitters or housekeepers. After the financial crisis of the 1980s, men had to migrate because it was difficult to survive on the wages they could earn at home. In the new century,
again due to economic difficulties, women are increasingly taking part in the labour force because one wage is not enough to maintain a family. One of Martha’s comadres has a convenience store, where she used to spend time after picking up her daughter at school. Other women have other small business, such as installing megaphones on their roofs to sell announcements advertising food and relaying other community information. Martha herself cuts hair, and does manicures, pedicures and other beauty treatments. The beauty courses are part of government programmes to improve women’s lives and, with the remittances Pablo sent her, Martha bought a beauty kit. She wants to earn money to help her husband with the construction of a house (although she is not taken seriously by Vicente). They have already purchased a plot of land.

In the case of Nayarit men and women, women’s independence has been framed in a way that suggests independence was not an option for women, but it is. Pablo’s departure opened the window for Martha’s participation in the labour force. Martha turned all her attention to her daughter, who became the centre of her life, she resumed contact with her sisters and parents, and she let her friends, who were mainly her neighbours, come to visit her. The day Pablo left Amapa to work with Vicente and Esperanza in Virginia, Martha opened the window curtains (which were usually left closed while Pablo was at home to maintain their privacy) of the room which functions as a living room, kitchen, dining room and her daughter’s room, all improvised in one small space. The change of light in the room was dramatic, and complemented the increased in Martha’s socialisation with her neighbours and friends. Martha and Pablo had been living in the two rooms that were used for Esperanza’s convenience store. They had their own entrance, but they did not have a separate bathroom and instead shared one with Esperanza and Vicente. Although she would draw the curtains again when her husband returned, in the meantime Martha appropriated the space, went out with her daughter, visited friends and resumed family ties and friendship networks. Moreover, she undertook more manicures, pedicures and other beauty treatments. Arguments of this type have, for example, been made through ethnographic study of transnational migration: women achieve greater independence as they assume traditionally female tasks (see Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Kyle 1995; and Ong 1999
cited in Mahler 2001:606). Martha's independence, nevertheless, is limited by the fact that she cannot live without Pablo’s remittances, which is a common situation in which women are caught.

Remittances reflect women’s growing independence, but also the continued limitations on it. Martha’s mother and her 19-year-old sister also live their lives without a man; they move between the town and the municipal capital using public transport or their own vans brought from the North, and they go to the bank to collect remittances. The business of going to collect remittances and the way women exchange stories about the details of doing it form part of their sense of operating as autonomous agents.

On the other hand, the conditional nature of this autonomy is demonstrated by the fact that it remains important for women to tell their husbands how they use the money, and to ask for their permission. Martha asks her husband whether she can buy a pair of jeans for herself, and she asks again when she needs money for medicines or a GP appointment for her daughter. She takes pictures to prove that her daughter is sick. For example, when she needed to go to the dentist she sent Pablo a picture of her daughter’s tooth. Martha told me that there are women that lie to their husbands and spend money on things other than what they said they needed the money for, but she does not want to be like them.

Women’s participation in the labour force is linked with aspects that are less explicitly accounted for in the scholarship on the sexual division of labour and migration, and which highlight the strengths of ethnographic work. These are the emotions and experiences of women linked to a husband’s departure. A husband’s departure exacerbates their sense of insecurity, because they do not know whether the man will return, or whether he will find a good job. The day before a husband’s departure, the man and woman together arrange all the things that the man needs to take and that the woman needs him to leave. The departure is always an emotional event: there are tears, promises and blessings. Men say goodbye to their wives, children, parents and siblings. They also visit the cemetery to say goodbye to deceased loved ones. The first week can be difficult, as the women have to get used to being alone again, and taking on the responsibility for the house. Women can have sleepless nights and lose their appetite, thus losing weight while their
husbands are absent, and they also adjust their mealtimes to their children’s schedules. They resume their activities in the community. I had a long conversation with Martha after Pablo’s departure: it was hard for her to get used to being alone with her daughter and all the doubts and fears she had to face.

The experience can be different for young women whose husbands leave for the first time, as was the case for Martha’s sister and a neighbour. I remember the latter’s grandmother telling Esperanza that her granddaughter was crying every day and did not want to eat because she wanted to be with her husband. The grandmother repeated to her that she should not be sad because it meant that she would have a house soon, for which her husband was working in the USA.

In sum, life changes when the men are at home. When women are alone they gain independence, and the possibility to do things that either they are not allowed to do when their husbands are at home, or simply do not want to do because they want to spend time with their partners, which women feel is a duty. These decisions change among generations: as they grow older women are less likely to ask their husbands what and how to do things, or if they can go out to visit a friend, whereas younger women are more likely to ask their husband’s permission when they want to go out to visit their families or a friend.

Women in the North

In this section I will explore Esperanza’s sense of independence; her green card provides Esperanza access to: “Más libertad” (more autonomy). She babysits her daughter’s children while Paloma is working, and she also “helps” (work with) Vicente on a farm in Virginia. I will also compare Esperanza’s experience with that of her daughter, Paloma, who had a different life project.

In 2007, Esperanza accompanied her husband and two sons to Virginia, and after seven years without seeing her daughter and grandchildren, she thus got to visit them in Kentucky. Paloma and her two eldest daughters crossed the border as undocumented in 2000, following her partner. They settled in Kentucky and since then have not returned to Nayarit. Esperanza’s reunion with her daughter would not have been possible had Esperanza not received temporary permission to enter
and stay in the United States prior to receiving the green card, which they got in 2009. Esperanza could easily stay in the USA with her daughter and grandchildren, but she stays with Vicente, who started to negotiate his expectations and change his discourse, which is nevertheless contradictory. He told me that Esperanza does not want to be happy, because despite him insisting that she should have her own projects and motivation in life, she does not. He is willing to help realise Esperanza’s wishes. However, in Esperanza’s eyes her situation changed greatly, for example, she started standing up for herself: “Y ya de que me voy para allá, igual yo ya no me dejo, ya me defiendo más con él. Ya no soy la que era 20 años atrás, él mismo dice. Yo vi bastante el cambio.” However, she does not seem conscious of the fact that her access to más libertad translates into a greater burden of work. She acknowledges the hard work that her life in Virginia brings, but considers it as better living. Vicente helps her in the kitchen and is less demanding because he recognises that she is also working.

She feels better working in the USA than 20 years ago in Amapa: “Todo el día yo trabajaba porque tenía que mandarle el lonche, tres veces y luego lave y lave lo de los niños, no lavadora, no nada.” Esperanza remembered the time when she used to work all day at home preparing Vicente’s lunch and looking after their children, washing their clothes by hand, because they did not have a washing machine. Her situation changed completely, she believes: “Bastante cambio, porque antes era puro trabajar yo.”

Esperanza’s daughter’s life trajectory is different. Paloma ran away from home when she was fifteen, Vicente remembered. She had five friends who did the same because they thought it was “bonito” (beautiful), Vicente’s favourite word, expressed with irony. She moved into her boyfriend’s parents’ house. Paloma and Arturo had a daughter, but soon afterwards Arturo headed off to work in the USA. Vicente took him to work as an H-2A guest worker in tobacco production in Kentucky, but as he was just 17 years old, they had to use a fake birth certificate to get him a work permit. Arturo overstayed his visa and found work in construction. Since then he has not returned to Amapa. Paloma left her mother-in-law’s house, because she did not treat her well, and moved back into her parents’ house. But Paloma had problems with her brother’s wife, who was living there at that time. So
Paloma moved to Puerto Vallarta with her little daughter to work in her uncle’s convenience store. She met another man from the same town and she had another daughter. Paloma thinks that her mother-in-law caused her separation from Arturo. But he contacted her after five years and paid a smuggler to help her and the two girls into the USA. Paloma’s parents wanted her to leave her daughters in Nayarit, but Paloma wanted them to be with her, and had not Arturo agreed to accept her youngest daughter, she would not have crossed the border. They now have two more children, a boy and a girl, who are US citizens.

In 2012, things changed again for Paloma. After many years, she married Arturo to become eligible for residency. But Arturo’s problems finding a job in construction after the financial crisis of 2007 increased. He treated the children badly, insulting them and often fighting with their oldest daughter. There is a probable link between domestic violence of men against women and “an intensified engendering of aggression as some men seek to ‘resolve’ women’s increasingly declaring their independence from men” (Gutmann 1996:244). Moreover, he did not want to recognise Paloma’s second daughter. In 2012, they split up for good after many attempts at reconciliation. Paloma had been working since 2009 to support her family. In 2012, she started working in a restaurant, which allows her to support her four children. Her eldest daughter is also working in a restaurant and this helps alleviate their situation. Arturo does not pay child support; he lives with his parents and sometimes sees his children. He is under a restraining order because he injured Paloma. During this time, I was undertaking fieldwork and on one occasion as I was about to return to Kentucky for two weeks, Esperanza gave me some food and 200 dollars (134 GBP), which she had saved at home from her work in Virginia, to give to Paloma. After 2007, Esperanza’s legal status meant more work for her, but also the financing of Paloma’s greater exploitation in the USA.

**Conclusions: gendered independence**

In this chapter, I examine in detail the experiences of being male and female in Nayarit and Kentucky. I suggest that Nayarit and Kentucky share a common structure of patriarchy and gendered division of labour (men are in charge of the
production of commodities, women are in charge of the social reproduction),
constitutive of tobacco capitalism, in which the participation of the state and the
creation of ideals of love are indispensable. Against this background, I draw
attention to the different opportunities and manifestations that projects of
masculinity have in Kentucky and Nayarit. Men are temporarily like single men in
Kentucky: they engage in gambling, drinking, and pornography, and maintain
relations with white women sometimes having children with them. However, they
are constrained by work routines, gossip networks, and lack of mobility.
Nonetheless, they find the ways to cope with constraints in order to persuade their
projects of masculinity.

Although the crew take charge of household activities while in the caravan,
their sense of manhood is not affected. In Nayarit, Vicente and the crew of seven
work with a traditional model of family. For example, they do not take charge of
household activities, but they earn a living and build their own houses. Women
work too with traditional models, gaining some added autonomy when their
husbands migrate and send remittances. For example, resuming contact with their
sisters, comadres and friends, and exchanging stories about their everyday activities
encourage a sense of operating as autonomous agents. In the case of women who
migrate, relative autonomy is achieved, but that autonomy is a potential burden if
they become single mothers, and that situation can affect their mothers too as in
the case of Esperanza. However, Esperanza does not seem conscious of this. She
has a washing machine in Kentucky, which in her eyes decreases the burden of
activities.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

This thesis aimed to explore the similarities and differences between two contexts of tobacco production, one in Mexico and one in the USA. A key characteristic is that both places were subjected to similar neoliberal reforms that considerably affected labour relations, living conditions and people’s expectations and experiences in recent decades.

In the introduction I suggested that a dual economy model does not facilitate our understanding of the multilayered ways in which Nayarit and Kentucky are connected, nor does it give us meaningful insights into the ways in which the global tobacco industry operates. This is because the tobacco industry does not rely on non-capitalist economies, but instead it vertically and horizontally integrates diverse economies all structured by capitalist relations of production. By tracing and critically analysing the similarities and differences between Kentucky and Nayarit, I seek to challenge the assumptions built into the North-South dichotomy (the industrial North versus the peasant South), because neither Kentucky nor Nayarit fall outside tobacco capitalism. Comparison has proven useful for understanding a network of relations and links between and within heterogeneous capitalist modes of production; and it also gives insight into the different histories and labour regimes between Kentucky and Nayarit through which cheap labour has been produced and maintained. I also found that the differences between both locales, such as in work opportunities, labour struggles and wage disparities, frame workers’ mobility and positionality in different nodes of the commodity chain; these differences create a durable connection between the different work regimes developed in each place.

Cheap labour has been a particularly crucial element of these interconnected regimes. As capitalist enterprises generally do, the tobacco industry has secured labour at low cost through the juxtaposition of social mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion. These mechanisms are key elements for the financial viability of the tobacco industry and the autonomy of the market. My ethnographic material allows us to look not only at economic, but also historical and cultural factors. “For
Marx, the ideological basis for the increased autonomy of the market under capitalism resulted from the power of capital to extract surplus value and then to fetishize the value produced under conditions of capitalist exploitation as value adhering in the commodity produced” (Hertz 1998:20). It has been argued that regions on the “periphery” (Wallerstein 1995), dominated by non-capitalist relations of production, supply “core” states with low cost labour. The literature on articulation theory has suggested that “one facet of an underdeveloped community connects with a facet of developed capitalism, e.g. peasants as workers, migrant women in off-shore industries” (Kearney 1996:355). I have challenged this framework with an analysis of the complex relations between Nayarit and Kentucky which reveals that they are both pervaded by capitalist relations of production. Their integration into the same global tobacco industry has shown how that industry has been able to mobilise and amalgamate different labour regimes and enormous numbers of people from two geographically separate tobacco regions.

The subjectivities and material realities of the tobacco farmworkers are key to the argument presented in this thesis. The literature on internalisation processes (drawing on Foucault and Gramsci) has noted how “power” works to constitute the character of the individual and collective actor. Based on such analyses, authors reject the idea of the social person as an object, passive recipient or cultural dope (Smith 2007:217). Migrant tobacco workers are not solely the subordinate and marginal beings some literature has fetishised: “Farmworkers in the United States endure conditions of structural violence, including deplorable wages and endemic poverty, forms of stigma and racism, occupational health and safety hazards, poor health and limited access to services, and the constant threat of deportation” (Benson 2008:591). Even and especially under such conditions, they manage to pursue their life projects. Informed by discussions of the internalisation of structural inequalities and the need to look at power and hierarchies as part of historical processes, I have analysed the specific forms structural inequalities, power and hierarchies take in everyday life and through the perspective of different social actors (tobacco growers, particularly as seen from the eyes of the “crew of seven,” as well as tobacco farmworkers and their families).
Comparing Kentucky and Nayarit

I was guided in my endeavour by a comparative perspective regarding Kentucky and Nayarit. The term “moral economy” has been described as “a process wherein economic actors view production as a proper and inalienable right because they produce quality products including, not insignificantly, quality human beings” (Griffith 2009:435). This argument opposes the perception that advanced capitalist economies are amoral, guided by impersonal market forces (Griffith 2009:433). Informed by this argument, I have foregrounded the voices of the Kentuckian and Nayarit growers in Chapter 1. By focusing on the way they both live the same hierarchical structure of relations – for example, they both have to deal with the tobacco companies and with gaps in the labour supply – I demonstrated that people in each region have different strategies for dealing with their situation within the global production of tobacco.

In marketing a quality product, the tobacco companies aim to standardise their products while abiding by health regulations and labour rights. To compensate for the costs incurred by this, they have passed on more responsibilities to the growers and workers without offering better working conditions: “rather they contribute to the race to the bottom in farm wages and working and living conditions” (Benson 2010:516).

Following the restructuring of the tobacco industry, tobacco growers in each place have had to cope with instability, unpredictability and risk. Kentuckian growers have second-job strategies to add to their income in their striving for a “good life.” They also rely on Mexican workers, whereas Nayarit growers rely on indigenous workers and resell the agricultural chemicals that they get as part of their contracts with the tobacco companies. Notwithstanding the similarities between both regions engaged in the same industry, Nayarit growers have to migrate to the North to be able to afford a house in Mexico and pay its bills.

The production of tobacco in Nayarit has maintained a low profile after the privatisation of the industry, which encouraged the migration of Nayarit tobacco producers and farmworkers to the USA to complement their income. Kentuckian growers not only have the right to live in their own country, but they also have a
realistic possibility of surviving financially through their work; in the case of Nayarit growers, their capacity to live in their home country has been undermined by the Mexican government in complicity with the US government, whose policies have resulted in a situation where the growers cannot make an adequate living at home.

In Chapter 3, I developed an analytical framework within which we can understand the social world of the tobacco farmworkers. The crew works on tobacco plantations in Kentucky and in Nayarit in similar structural conditions as wage earners (Fernando being the exception). It is not Nayarit labourers leaving a non-capitalist subsistence economy and filling the low-wage labour gaps in the capitalist production of tobacco in Kentucky. The crew of seven are able to move between the two contexts with some ease because their familiarity with the same cash crop in Kentucky and Nayarit allows it. Their skills in and background knowledge of both tobacco production and tobacco quality have facilitated their work and integration in each economy. Notwithstanding similarities in the basic hierarchy of the work organisation of the tobacco industry, working in each area is a different experience for the same people. These are two different geographical locations with distinct histories of domination and development. In moving between the two, their positionality shifts from being normal labour to being illegal workers.

My analysis revealed the ways in which structures of power and structural inequality are experienced by the crew of seven. Their ideas of “work,” “a good life,” “suffering,” “inequality,” “family” and so on are reflective of a structural situation, which generates practices of contention. The workers want to be “free” within the specific boundaries that their positionalities entail, and they adjust their desires accordingly. Through doing so, they manage to make a living within both regimes of work.

Their choices in relation to migration and work are very much informed by a consumerist economy: workers want a house, a TV, clothes, and in general a “good” and “fair” life for their children, wives and themselves.

In Chapter 4, I tackled the crucial question of the bargaining power of the crew. I found that the same tension between being a commodity and being a person is central to both economies. The same set of people (the crew) sell their
labour to the tobacco industry in both places, and this entails particular forms of coping with and managing the alienation the exchange produces. They struggle to maintain some control over their lives within their condition of vulnerability (for example, by drinking, listening to loud music and cracking jokes), whereas in Nayarit the same activities are normalised, and the possibility to negotiate some of their working conditions, such as the working hours, makes the process of objectification less evident. The same structural conditions undermine the dignity of indigenous workers, which these fight against in various ways. My primary concern was how workers resist objectification on their own terms. I focused on what they actually do to stop being treated as a commodified object within the H-2A Visa Program in the USA. They have less control over their lives in the USA than they do in Nayarit, where they do not feel under surveillance by la migra.

The crew of seven do not want to risk their work opportunities. However, by challenging the visa system, which allows them to stay on the move and in circulation as tobacco workers, they risk their entry.

The relationship between Kentuckian growers and their workers is personal and moral in the sense that growers encourage workers to do certain things. For example, Brian recommended that the crew members write down a different address from the one they have in the USA to avoid being persecuted by the Internal Revenue Service. Brian and the crew trusted each other, but Brian maintained a managerial attitude. Employers and labourers sharing a beer before the workers’ departure from Kentucky produced the appearance and emotions of a developing personal friendship, but the role tobacco growers play within the industry is shaped mainly by profit. One manifestation of this was that Brian never allowed his workers to enter his house. This antagonistic yet bearable class relation also helps to maintain and produce a durable connection between the different working regimes developed in each place.

A desire to be normal was overwhelmingly present in the workers’ language and dreams. They do not want to be “illegal” migrants, or “out of place,” and one manifestation of this was their request to mandar pedir (be sent for) “legally,” which Brian was not willing to do. They do not want to be seen as “objects,” as they are by the migra. The tobacco farmworkers are aware of their condition as a
“commodity” and they fight against it through different strategies: including doing things behind their employers’ backs, which they see as a way to regain their “dignity.” They strive to regain some control over their lives within the limitations of the legal system, national borders and the market.

In Chapter 5, I examined the way in which, in both places, the basic structures of racial and ethnic categories and relations have emerged from a common history of a European conquest of indigenous populations and transatlantic slavery. For this reason, race and ethnicity play a central role in shaping relations of production and the experience of the workers in both regions. In Nayarit, there are child support programmes, funded by the companies, that target indigenous families, who are seen as more likely to put their children to work in the tobacco fields; in Kentucky there is nothing similar in terms of support from the tobacco companies, although government programmes do have migrate programmes to adjust mainly the migrants’ children’s disadvantage.

The crew of seven frequently used humour and irony to remind themselves of what they were not, and what they do not want to look like: indigenous people or black people. Their jokes felt cruel and painful to me, albeit funny to others, when they concealed how exclusion worked through categories of race, ethnicity, class and gender. They were seen as inoffensive, and they indicate a need to talk openly in everyday life about different forms of exclusion through practices and different uses of language.

In Chapter 6, I explored gender relations and the different experiences of them in people’s everyday lives in Kentucky and Nayarit. People’s lives were systematised by the common structure of patriarchy and the gendered division of labour that is constitutive of capitalism, which intertwined with the reproduction of low-wage and part-time labour in both places. Workers in Nayarit managed their projects of manhood and womanhood in complex and contradictory ways. Men who migrate (Vicente and the crew) experience gendered divisions of labour in Nayarit and in Kentucky. Women from the same community stayed at home with their young children while their husbands were in the USA, and in the case of some (for example, Esperanza) suffered their husband’s physical and psychological abuse upon his return. These women (for example, Martha) assume tasks commonly
considered of the masculine domain, and even when they remain in their feminine
domain they show that they have become more independent. In the case of women
who migrate (for example, Paloma), relative autonomy is achieved, but that
autonomy is a potential burden if they become single mothers, and that situation
can affect their mothers too. However, Esperanza seems unable to recognise her
own work and effort, and she also seems to lack consciousness of the fact that her
green card has resulted in increased workloads in household chores.

In sum, the role of structural inequalities, as well as social categories, such
as class, race/ethnicity and gender, and the ideas by which those inequalities are
justified and normalised, have shown to preserve the integrity of tobacco
capitalism.

**Bringing back neoliberalism and ethnography**

Three concluding reflections form the basis of this final section: the use of the term
“neoliberalism” in my ethnography, “everywhere” neoliberalism and the relevance
of ethnography. While I do not deny that neoliberalism has meant a generalised
withdrawal of the state, it is my contention that it still has a key role in different
spheres of social life. Specifically, state subsidising programmes for tobacco had
been cancelled in both Kentucky and Nayarit, but welfare systems remain in place
as valuable resources.

Against the backdrop of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the
privatisation of the tobacco industry in the 1990s, migration from the Nayarit
tobacco region to the Kentucky tobacco region has intensified, thus replacing state
subsidies with remittances. These changes have resulted in the rolling back of the
state from the production of tobacco in particular, rather than from all areas of
“social life.” Despite the sale of Tabacos Mexicanos, and cutbacks of subsidies in the
USA, the state still plays a key role in social life in general.

The category of neoliberalism was useful in thinking through the
privatisation of the tobacco industry. Particularly, Nayarit growers and Kentuckian
growers refer to contemporary transformations as signalling a “before” and “after”
of the privatisation of the industry. Matters of concern and struggle for the
grandparents of current tobacco producers were still present in personal memories, and even more evidently in continuing struggles for social welfare and health care. This concern regarding health care has been swept under the carpet by recent changes in labour regimes, but it returns in different ways. Nayarit tobacco growers stay in the business to access social security through being a grower with a company contract, and Kentuckian growers access social security through second jobs.

Secondly, the story told in this thesis about the tobacco industry has challenged the idea that neoliberalism (as a political and economic project) homogenises relations of production. It was thought that: “Increasingly freed from the regulatory constraints and barriers that had hitherto confined its field of action, financial activity could flourish as never before, eventually everywhere” (Harvey 2005:33), but I would add that this took place in very dissimilar ways. I argue that tobacco capitalism exploits different forms and conjunctures of capitalist labour relations, which have developed historically in different areas. Tobacco growers who are still able to make a living out of the production of tobacco need to produce and sell their production to the same tobacco companies in very unequal conditions. However, they do so within tobacco capitalism, which had the power to integrate horizontally and vertically unevenness into its structure.

The workings of the tobacco industry and the reproduction of its profits are better understood in terms of unevenness within the geography of capitalism. Restructuring projects corresponded to the market forces operating according to what were thought of as immutable laws no matter where they were implemented (Brenner and Theodore 2002:349): “open, competitive, and unregulated markets, liberated from all forms of state interference, represent the optimal mechanism for economic development” (Brenner and Theodore 2002:350). However after 20 years there was an evident disjuncture between the ideology of neoliberalism and its outcomes in social relations; for example, significant disparities developed between work opportunities in Nayarit and in Kentucky. The work available partially fits the requirements of the workers in Nayarit, because they want to be able to afford a house and fill their desires fed by a consumerist economy.
To conclude this thesis, it seems clear that a critique of cultural relativism is surely important. This agenda undoubtedly haunts my work. This thesis is not only about a group of workers’ life and work trajectories within the workings of the tobacco industry, it is also about connections, networks of people and structures that go beyond two locales. It was a way to organise my ethnographic material to give a comprehensive account of events, in minute detail, of processes and structures that are part of the story of tobacco capitalism. Nonetheless, my concern was how to avoid the circularity of ethnography and “the unwarranted empiricist disjunction of ethnography from theory” (Wacquant 2002:1470). Drawing attention to the complexities and contradictions of everyday life is one way. González (2003:450) has argued that ethnography is theory: in other words, it is within the ethnography itself that the theoretical models are inserted into the data, and it is in the organisation of the ethnographic data where the theoretical models are constructed.
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