Roundtable ABSTRACT

Roundtable 02: Bodies and environments as infrastructure: injury, extraction, and resistance in transnational food systems

Organizer: Gerardo Rodriguez Solis, Seth M. Holmes

Abstract: Transnational industrial food systems rely heavily on a workforce made of migrants who face low pay, substandard working conditions, and increased health risks. These food systems simultaneously rely on ecosystems, landscapes, and waterways that face overuse, overheating, and toxification. Putting together critical studies of bodies and exposures with recent turns toward infrastructural analyses, we will examine the simultaneous exploitation and injury of migrant farm worker bodies and the extraction and toxification of environments in transnational food systems. This roundtable considers both worker bodies and environments as critical pieces of food system infrastructures, often taken for granted by societies until they no longer function. We turn our ethnographic and theoretical attention to the experiences and resistances of the bodily and environmental components of infrastructures through which many European and North American societies are fed.

Building from ethnographic studies of diverse food chains – e.g., intra-EU mobile workers in agriculture, migrant supply chain and farmworkers in the US, and health professionals in agro-industrial regions of Mexico, we theorize transnational infrastructures that produce injury and extraction and that workers resist and remake. In this roundtable, we will analyze various examples of bodily injury and environmental degradation in transnational food systems. We conclude with a focus on how workers address resulting challenges, particularly their strategies to navigate precarious jobs, work against socio-economic marginalization, and access and re-imagine healthcare between transnational food systems.

SESSION SCHEDULE

18.09.2025 | Slot 1| 2-0-4

Kamil Matuszczyk: 'What could happen to me? A brick won't fall on my head.' Reflections from field research on the safety and health of Ukrainian seasonal workers in agriculture in Poland

Paul Sperneac-Wolfer: Knowing heat. Conflicts around greenhouse heat stress management in Austrian agro-industrial food production.

Jakub Stachowski: Navigating Precarious Lives: Migrant Workers in the Norwegian Salmon Industry

Mael Vizcarra, Alesandra Tatić: Where's the Proof? : The Production of Evidence in Food System Worker Labor Struggles

SESSION PAPERS

'What could happen to me? A brick won't fall on my head.' Reflections from field research on the safety and health of Ukrainian seasonal workers in agriculture in Poland

Kamil Matuszczyk

European studies on seasonal migration have so far paid little attention to issues such as health, the body, accidents at work or health and safety at work. Despite legislation regulating the working and housing conditions of migrant workers in the agricultural sector in the European Union, the implementation of these provisions remains insufficient and inadequate. In Poland, which remains a leader in attracting seasonal workers, there is also a lack of in-depth knowledge about the health status of migrant workers. Using the example of the circular migration of Ukrainians to rural areas in Poland, I aim to identify the strategies these workers use to protect their health, body and safety while picking fruit and vegetables. To this end, I draw on the results of a multi-site field research (i.e. participant observation on five family-run farm-sites, in-depth interviews with workers and employers) conducted in 2019-2025 in the 'Europe's orchard basin' (Grójec County, 50 km from Warsaw). The results of my research revealed, among other things, the widespread phenomenon of maximising temporary income at the expense of self-exploitation and deterioration of health (back pain, sunburn, dehydration). The Ukrainian workers interviewed prefer to treat themselves, mainly because they are not insured in Poland, they are not familiar with (or do not trust) the public health system in Poland, and they prefer to treat more serious illnesses or injuries in Ukraine.

Knowing heat. Conflicts around greenhouse heat stress management in Austrian agro-industrial food production.

Paul Sperneac-Wolfer

This contribution examines greenhouse heat as a harmful and under-considered modality of high-tech food production designs. It draws on long-term ethnographic engagement with Roma-Romanian migrant workers in a vegetable greenhouse cluster in eastern Austria, which produces more than 50% of Austria's vegetables. High-tech

greenhouses are considered 'protected environments', but their particular microclimate causes physical stress, with sometimes harmful consequences for workers' bodies. In the context of eastern Austria, these dynamics are expected to worsen as meteorological forecasts predict intensifying heat waves in the coming years and decades. Against the backdrop of growing tensions between agro-industrial production, climate warming and workers' well-being, I draw on the notion of infrastructure as a way of jointly considering the techno-materiality of AgTech workplaces and the relational position of greenhouse workers in the Austrian fresh food supply chain. Second, I provide ethnographic examples of workers' exposure to and strategies for coping with greenhouse heat stress, and how these juxtapose with medical, technical and institutional forms of acting upon heat stress. Drawing on debates in the anthropology of infrastructure, these cases reveal the critical importance of "how to understand when infrastructure becomes violent, for whom, under what conditions, and why" (Rodgers & O'Neill 2013: 402). In doing so, it offers a grounded, relational understanding of climate warming as lived through the bodies of those feeding European societies.

Navigating Precarious Lives: Migrant Workers in the Norwegian Salmon Industry

Jakub Stachowski

In recent decades, the Norwegian salmon industry has evolved from a local enterprise to a global powerhouse, relying heavily on labor migration from Eastern and Central Europe. Based on interviews and participant observation among Polish migrants in a coastal Norwegian community, I discuss how local social integration processes are intertwined with changing working conditions in the industry. I illustrate the evolution of employment relations from inclusive and paternalistic to more instrumental, with later arrivals increasingly treated as disposable labour. Employment strategies such as long probationary periods and partial contracts create precariousness and uncertainty about long-term employment prospects, leading to workplace segmentation and competition among migrants. Migrants face physical, social, economic, and symbolic challenges that often deprive them of essential prerequisites for integration, such as language practice and social relations with non-migrants. However, migrants are not only passive recipients; they show considerable agency in actively addressing the above challenges, develop strategies to navigate precarious work conditions and combat socioeconomic marginalization. In many cases, they are able to establish meaningful lives in the locality. This presented case illustrates how the demographic stability and economic vitality of rural communities depend on migrants but is complicated by the contrasting rationalities of local communities and salmon producers. The study emphasizes the need to consider both structural conditions and individual intentions in understanding migrant integration, highlighting the complex interplay between local labor markets and community dynamics.

Where’s the Proof?: The Production of Evidence in Food System Worker Labor Struggles

Mael Vizcarra, Alesandra Tatić

In this paper, we explore the ways legislative-bureaucratic infrastructures come to shape what counts as evidence in legal proceedings supporting food system workers’ labor

rights. Specifically, we examine the creation and usage of various media—including images—as evidence, as well as their reception within legal-bureaucratic infrastructures. Our analysis is based on ethnographic media (video observations and audio interviews) of individual cases of agricultural workers filing motions against their employers for labor violations in Austria and in the U.S. Here, we investigate how various media—photography, documents, testimonies, among others—are transformed (or not) by workers and lawyers into admissible legal evidence in courts of law. We question the role of editing, framing, context, and even file formats, in turning raw media into legible legal proof. Our analysis highlights the fragile and unstable nature of these media as "evidence," even in the case of images or photographs, evidence par excellence, broadly understood to be conclusive evidence or proof. Ultimately, our analysis reveals not only the limits and possibilities of using images and other media in individual labor struggles, but the ways legislative-bureaucratic infrastructures enable and inhibit agricultural workers' ability to organize effectively and seek justice.