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**Social Equity in Agriculture: 2006 Eco-Farm Conference**  
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The “Social Equity in Agriculture” seminar was the most worthwhile, and the most controversial of the seminars I attended at Eco-Farm.

Highly professional and practiced presenters from the California Institute for Rural Studies displayed a powerpoint revealing their research, *Best Labor Practices on 12 California Farms*. The powerpoint highlighted the insights and issues on the twelve CA farms most-touted for best labor practices. The powerpoint was brilliant; the researchers had interviewed farm-owners and farmworkers in compiling data, and all of this had been digested into a distinct business-like dialect to communicate effectively to large-scale agribusiness owners and professional farm-owners the critical methods of just labor practices.

Following the success of this conventional front-of-the-room presentation, the well-known CSA farm-owner of Full Belly farm in Capay Valley, CA, (she recently appeared in the film *The Future of Food*) explained her positions on labor practices on her farm (one of the 12 researched). Full Belly is a 250-acre farm with a summer crew of 40-45 workers; there are 25 workers who are year-round employees. Payroll is 46% of farm expenses. The farm-owners eat and work with farmworkers. A kids farming camp in the summer interlocks learning and community with the kids and the farmworkers; farmworkers are interacting with people who eat the food they grow, and who really care about social equity. Visitors to the farm “really expect that we [in organic and sustainable agriculture] are the leaders on this issue.” Full-Belly has morning crew meetings and stretching sessions led by seasonal interns.

The farm-owners at Full Belly recently met with every worker on their farm in 20-minute interviews to check-in with them personally about community issues – there had been some “concerns like housing, like where they were all living sometimes.” What a hard issue, yet still a concern on a “best labor practices” farm. This may have more to do with personal stories, or the lack of social equity for Mexican laborers outside of a “best labor practices” farm.

Full Belly is working hard to keep workers enticed to work for their farm. After all, the obvious labor market is in construction, where pay is higher in Sacramento.

Two Mexican laborers had been in the back of the room, and had been shuffled like ants from the front to the back and so forth from the outset. There had not been chairs on the presenters’ stage for them, only for Full Belly’s farm-owner and the CA Institute for Rural Studies researchers. Granted the room was crowded, but --? At the front of the room they didn’t know what to do, and were asked to introduce themselves, (they had had a translator found for them who translated the whole time) and tell their job histories and experiences with “best labor practices.” Then, they were asked questions by the audience. These Mexican farmworkers were introduced as examples, almost like specimens at the front of the room [of our white-supremacist curiosities “Is it working?” “Are the best labor practices the best?”]. The audience genuinely

wanted to connect, and many in the audience phrased questions in Spanish. Questions like, ¿Are there obstacles to owning your own farm – or are you making a choice to keep working on an owned farm? Why are you dependent on this farm? ¿Is finding work hard after working at a best practices farm? ¿How can we burr the divide between farm-owner and farmworker?

I am a beginner at all this thinking and talking about race. I am studying to form words about how to communicate my reflections on the way the presentation was built, or not built, around, or involving, these Mexican farmworkers. The “Social Equity in Agriculture” episode fumbled to communicate inside the age-old structures of race/class/culture/language, and it was disappointing that we blindly put foot in mouth, blasphemy, tapping at the walls of social equity like a moth rattling in a jar, like the words rattling in our heads. How do we talk about race/class/differences and equalities in human society?

I am not convinced the presenters had thought about safe space or non-violent communication forums, or that they had even informed the Mexicans what the talk was about before they showed up that day. The Mexicanos told me they wished they had been prepared on what the talk was going to be about; they had felt surprised [and clueless]. I understand this as: they had felt unsafe. Equity was talked about, but all the words got in the way of constructing equity in that room, between the people at that Eco-Farm workshop. How might we format next year’s workshop to promote deconstructing these communication barriers in Spanish/English/non-violent communication? How might we design a workshop that builds non-violent communication skills into a discussion of social equity? What are the ways we might educate ourselves in our exploration of labor in sustainable agriculture? To paraphrase a student’s concern at the Education Pre-Conference, “Whose knowledge is valued?”