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Fieldwork in the Poultry Capital of the World: An Interview with Carrie Freshour about her work on Race, Place, and Labor in the US South

Hanne Cottyn and Sithandiwe Yeni

Keywords: poultry, fieldwork, labor, abolition, structural racism, carceral geographies

Abstract: Hanne Cottyn and Stha Yeni of the CFI spoke with Carrie Freshour about cheap meat, workers' care and resistance, and fieldwork in Georgia, USA, which has been named the "poultry capital of the world." The article is a lightly edited transcript of their conversation from 5 August 2021.

Aerial view of poultry processing plant in North Georgia. Photo credit: Kwamé Kang, 21 July 2021.

Q: What brought you to the "poultry capital of the world"? Why did you become interested in studying the global meat industry, and in Georgia in particular?

A: I was raised in North Georgia, in a rural place called Adairsville, where poultry farming was really big. Many people, including my parents' friends, were contracted poultry growers, so they had chicken houses, which dotted the landscape where I grew up.

I graduated in 2009, which followed on the global food crisis. It made me ask questions about food justice, access, and race, and their implications for people not only in the global South, but also in the US. North Georgia just seemed like the ideal place for this work, and a way to go back home, essentially.

For my research, I trace the longer history of the industry. This relates to the abolition of slavery, how plantation elites reorganized themselves through land monopolization and

racial violence. This is what W.E.B. Du Bois (1935) calls the counter-revolution of property. This is also about how elites reinstated the racist exploitation of workers as a pillar of plantation agriculture to the region. All of these historical questions –questions of place and questions of futures- brought me back to Georgia.

Q: Can you tell us a bit more about how other commodity frontiers have shaped the U.S. South into the heart of the global poultry industry?

A: A lot of folks might start with the history of the innovators of the industry like Jesse Jewell [a pioneer in the poultry industry in Gainsville, Georgia], DW Brooks [who led Gold Kist Inc., in Athens, Georgia], and Don Tyson [the son of John Tyson, who established Tyson Feed and Hatchery, Inc. in Arkansas in 1947, now Tyson Foods]. They vertically integrated the industry around the 1950s. They are often celebrated for being able to combine their ownership of feedlots or their ability to acquire fertilizers, and their ability to transport chicks and eggs to farmers across the different parts of the South. That's one way to think about the role of these different commodity frontiers within this region. But taking a longer historical approach, questions come up around the role of agricultural production within the Black Belt South[1] (in the emergence of the global poultry industry), and the relationship of the transatlantic slave trade to the production and expansion of cotton across the region. In my field site and in Georgia, cotton was literally transformed into the poultry industry.

My analysis draws on Clyde Woods' (2017) work, in thinking about the plantation bloc in this region, understanding how power is distributed, and making and remaking of what we call the South, and particularly the Black Belt South.

In Georgia, I focus on D.W. Brooks, who went on to advise many US presidents, and was the director of the UN World Food program for a number of years. He was foundational in growing out and establishing the Cotton Producers Association of Georgia. The association was initially formed as a client cooperative for farmers, and then directly transitioned into poultry. By understanding that connection, I think we can connect to other people's work on the longer history of cotton in the region. It makes visible that these aren't just new industries that were supported through innovation and transformation of entire ecologies, but that they are traceable to this longer history of the attempted commodification of people through the transatlantic slave trade.

Q: What role does fieldwork play in unpacking these labor dynamics and their historical and global connections?

A: Between 2014 and 2015, I did ethnographic fieldwork at one of the state's largest poultry processing plants as a regular line worker for six months. Alongside this work, I also recorded oral histories with women workers and their families. I initially thought that telling them about my six months at the plant would help me to show that I have some understanding of the work, and maybe they'll respect that a little bit. But most of them kind of laughed. They were like "Oh your little time at the poultry, you couldn't last, could you?"

In addition to ethnographic work, I conducted archival research, and began what has become an ongoing collaboration with organizers, community leaders, and the children of poultry plant workers, which led to this documentary short that we are working on now.

I started fieldwork really focusing on this question of labor, and labor at the point of production, but also thinking with feminist Marxists about social reproduction. I think that in some ways I had some blinders on. I was not thinking nearly enough about the role of policing and criminalization, about expanding carceral geographies, which Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) makes us all pay attention to, and how these forms of policing are of course place-based and tied to social relations around housing, development and jobs within this field site. The fieldwork pushed me to think more about connectivity

[1] A region in the American South characterized by thick, dark, fertile soil that became the centre of slavery in the USA.

to other sites that attempt to produce and discipline a certain people and place that I was blind to in my obsession with labor and work.

Q: Who are the workers in the plant, what is the gender set-up and the age set-up, and where did they come from?

A: To give you a bit of context, there are two sides in the process. Evisceration is the first point of production, where the birds are slaughtered, feathered and viscera are removed. It prepares chicken for deboning, which is a phase of further processing, where it's cold, refrigerated. Across the two sides there are three shifts and 1600 workers in all levels of different positions. When I was there, there were four lines; 24 workers on the line. It's mostly women on the line, I would say 90%. Men who did work in the plant were mostly chicken catchers, live-hang, maintenance, and supervisors. There is a clear and historically gendered division of labor. In terms of age, most of the workers were in their 30s and above, and a lot of senior workers in their 60s and over. In this plant in particular, there's the saying that if you're Black in Athens, you know somebody who's worked at the poultry plant. Some workers told me that they had a poultry family because many generations have worked in the plants. I think this is changing now, but there is this deep and long relationship to the poultry for what people call Black Athens.

Q: When doing fieldwork, you start with some ideas and expectations, but you might find things that totally surprise you. Are there any unexpected findings that have emerged from doing fieldwork?

A: Yes, lots of things! I think that's the exciting and challenging part about doing research with people. Gilmore pushed me in so many ways. She reminds us that, "you find the answers to the questions you ask." I think I entered the field asking a set of questions that weren't the questions that needed to be asked. Many of the immigrant rights organizers, student organizers, labor organizers out of Atlanta I talked to before beginning fieldwork in northeast Georgia talked about the role of undocumented immigrants, largely Latinx [gender-neutral reference to people of Latin American cultural or ethnic identity in the USA] workers, in these plants. That was the racial transformation I thought I would focus on. That's also the story commonly presented in the media, even media that advocates worker rights and pushes the narrative of the exploitation of workers in this industry. But when I got to the region and was employed at the plant, the majority of the women I worked alongside were Black women, and this continues to today. There's a small pocket of women who worked for generations, since the 70s, and then there are some workers who worked anywhere from six to twelve years, and then there are many, many workers who worked less than two years and sort of rotated, very temporary. The role of Black women to this industry is largely erased from public conversation, and people's public perceptions of these places.

Q: How does fieldwork give insight into practices of resistance to contest the industry's disciplining of labor?

A: The plant ethnography really allowed me to see small forms of resistance. I don't mean small as in insignificant, but on a smaller scale than for instance from unionization. This plant in particular had a union but it was very weak because of Georgia's Right-to-Work Law[2] under which not everyone has to pay dues and or be a part of the union for the plant to be unionized. But there are other ways to think about how Black women on the line really took care of one another, and also resisted the kinds of bodily degradation that the plant requires. I think of Robin D.G. Kelley's (1996) work on "infrapolitics" or what James Scott refers to as "everyday resistance.[3]" Robin Kelley talks about foot dragging and just slowing down the pace of work. This is a way to resist the discipline of labor, but also the conditions of work. I tried to think about what I saw happening on the line and how Du Bois thought about abolition. He argues the abolition of slavery

[2] https://aflcio.org/issues/right-work

[3] Scott, J.C. (1986). Everyday forms of peasant resistance. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 13(2), 5–35; Scott, J. C. (1989). Everyday Forms of Resistance. *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*, 4(1), 33.

Poultry houses out in Jackson county, GA. Photo credit: Carrie Freshour, 12 August 2021.

was also the abolition of the conditions of work. I understand these practices as connected to larger ideas and ideologies about work, especially against the backdrop of the plantation.

Another form of resistance is absenteeism as ways in which people are able to move in and out of the plants. To me, that speaks to James "Jimmy" Boggs' statement[4], who says very simply "a job ain't the answer" when he's talking about automation and the future of work. People aren't necessarily staying long enough to improve the conditions of work in a traditional sense through union organizing. Instead, people make life work in other ways, outside of this plant job, like different side hustles but also with unemployment or disability, and/or social security insurance. A normative, white supremacist way to look at this is to conclude that (racialized) people are lazy or people are trying to evade hard work. In reality, these strategies express a broader critique of the shitty jobs that are offered to working class Black folks in rural places, and working class people in the US South more generally.

If "a job ain't the answer," what does this actually mean for labor organizing and social movement organizing? What might the answer be? What does freedom look like in a racial capitalist global economy? I am thinking of movements for land and movements to cooperatively own one's labor that are also emerging in this region.

Lastly, there is the question of what really is the fight here. It is true that companies like Purdue Chicken, or Pilgrim's Pride, or Tyson Foods are not going away. They might automate the work and then there will be generations of unemployment, as we saw in the auto industry. People moving in and out of the plant or foot dragging and slowing down production in small ways tells us that

[4] Jimmy Boggs was a Detroit auto worker from Marion Junction, AL and lifetime partner/collaborator with Grace Lee Boggs. He writes about the role of automation for the autoindustry and beyond in *The American Revolution: Pages From A Negro Worker's Notebook* (1963). New York: Monthly Review Press, 15, 3.

the conditions of work are not viable and that there have to be alternatives. This is not just about living wages, but about a way of living, potentially a guaranteed basic income alongside forms of organizing that are continuing to happen inside the plants.

Q: What is the kind of backlash from capital to the way workers are resisting? Generally, when people resist, they're targeted and people are divided. Are workers being intimidated in any way?

A: Capital's backlash within the industry goes back to the 1950s when white women dominated the plants as the main workforce. They actually organized in Georgia in 1954. Jesse Jewell, who was a key industry leader in Gainesville, Georgia, directly pushed back. There was a case taken to the NLRB [National Labor Relations Board] because of their anti-union efforts back in the 50s. So this anti-labor and anti-union push-back from poultry capital goes back to the founding days of the industry.

There have also been intentional efforts to displace Black labor through the recruitment of undocumented and immigrant labor from the US Southwest and outside of the US, sort of as a response to Black worker lead organizing. That was an initial backlash beginning in the 1980s and peaking in the 1990s. Once these workers, largely Latinx immigrants, began organizing, there was a very clear anti-immigrant backlash, at least within my site. The backlash responded not only to local plant organizing, but more broadly against immigrant rights organizing across the country.

Capital in Georgia responded with a combination of the expected xenophobic anti-immigrant organizing and actions alongside carpet and poultry industry leaders to pass legislation against what they call "illegal" immigration. In Georgia, there were mass layoffs within my fieldsite in 2008, 2009, 2010, that continued until HB-87, a massive anti-immigrant bill, was passed in 2011. But for those small, everyday forms of resistance, it's difficult to organize a backlash at the industry level. However, there are ways that they've worked to discipline absenteeism and attempts by workers to slow down the line which are tied specifically to the sort of physical spatial layout of the plant and the production line itself. One of the most shocking things is probably the point system, which means that workers who miss a day, or late evenings or weekend work days, get a point. After a number of points, they're fired, no excuses or negotiations, even during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Another response targets workers' survival strategy of moving between different plants and between different low wage jobs. People I interviewed who worked in the 90s and 2000s were going from fast food to the poultry plant, to home healthcare, to side hustles, depending on their bodily and financial needs. The plant was seen as some quick, hard, but fast money. As little as it pays (currently US $ 12-13 per hour), it pays the highest among these kinds of jobs. The plant here instituted a policy to stop these practices. If you have worked at the plant twice before, you couldn't

Wall in Diane's home honouring family members and celebrating sons' achievements. Diane worked in the plant 5 months, and was applying again at the time of interview. Her mother and several family members also worked in various poultry plants across the region. Photo credit: Carrie

come back. Now that demand for workers has increased, because of COVID-19 and briefly expanded unemployment benefits, they have relaxed this policy.

Q: How has the current situation of global pandemic and the way the poultry industry is responding to the pandemic transformed the processes you are studying?

A: With the COVID-19 global pandemic, people began paying attention to the meat industry, in this country and globally. In March 2020, some of the first deaths were registered within the industry at the Tyson plant in Camilla, Georgia. All three women who died of COVID-19 were Black women, mothers, grandmothers, aunties, family members, community members who had collectively worked at the plant, around 70 years[5]. This caused a surge in attention and everyone suddenly cared about these places, because they were hotspots. Around the same time Donald Trump issued the Defensive Production Act and ensured that workers remain in the plants as these are essential industries that should continue operating. He received active guidance on this decision from the National American Meat Institute (NAMI). There's really great investigative journalism documenting that communication in ProPublica[6]. Scholarly attention also increased sharply, and then kind of waned. We see how the problems that occur at these plants continue despite us -scholars- telling and retelling the trauma, the exploitation, the degradation of this work and of people who work there.

Q: We've come to the end of our conversation, is there something you would like to add?

A: I guess I'd just like to reiterate the quote by Gilmore, that, "we find the answers to the questions we ask," to think about what kind of fieldwork matters. The big thing for me, and for students and other scholars working on poultry and livestock production, labor exploitation, and food sovereignty, is what are the stories that we can tell, or the discussions or questions we can raise, to actually move the needle?

I am just stuck because I think so many of us who work on the meat and poultry industries have told this story in a number of ways. Many people like Raj Patel and Jason Moore, Tony Weis, and Mindi Schneider have been really influential in thinking about the ecological devastation of these industries. And yet, what will move the needle when we know that poultry is terrible for the environment, for consumers, and for workers? How do we tell a different story? How do we build with people doing that work?

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*All photos provided by the author.

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