Hiring Immigrant Women: Silicon Valley's Simple Formula

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I have a very simple formula for hiring. You hire right, and managing takes care of itself. Just three things I look for in hiring [entry-level, high-tech manufacturing operatives]: small, foreign, and female. You find those three things and you' re pretty much automatically guaranteed the right kind of work force. These little foreign gals are grateful to be hired-very, very grateful-no matter what.

—White male production manager and hiring supervisor in a Silicon Valley printed circuit board assembly shop

Trainers and employment agencies around town have this story we tell that explains why we prefer to invest our resources in groups with a good track record. If you tell people that there's a job call Monday morning downtown at nine, this is *what happens: the Chinese and the Koreans show up the night before and camp outside the door, so they'll be the first in line. The Iranians used to show up at seven, but now they own everything so they don't need the jobs. Between eight and nine, the Whites show up. The Mexicans come in the afternoon, after their siesta, and the Blacks roll by-maybe-sometime the next day.*

—White male industrial training program and employment agency director in Silicon Valley

Silicon Valley, as California's Santa Clara County is commonly referred to, is famed for its microelectronics industry and for the technological revolution it helped to generate. The region is renowned for its computer wizards and for the high-tech fortunes made and lost by venture capitalists and entrepreneurs. But behind Silicon Valley's celebrity is a less-known feature both of the specific region and of the world's fastest-growing industry in general. The microelectronics industry is predicated on a division of labor that is more sharply stratified by class, gender, race, and nationality than almost any other contemporary industry. The high-profile, high-paid engineers, executives, and investors are overwhelmingly White, male U.S. citizens. On the opposite end of the occupational spectrum, the majority of low-paid manufacturing workers are Third World women.

Hiring Dynamics: The Continuing Significance of Race

Silicon Valley high-tech manufacturing companies' propensity to recruit and hire primarily Asian and Latina women for operative jobs has been documented by several researchers (Green 1980; Katz and Kemnitzer 1984; Siegel and Borock 1982; Snow 1986). Employers and labor market analysts frequently argue that individuals who are women and/or people of color and/or immigrants take low-paying jobs either because they are content with them, or because they are unqualified for and sometimes even undeserving of better-paying jobs. I refer to these ideologies—and the hiring strategies that accompany them—as racial, immigrant, and gender "logic." Whether employers are conscious of it or not, each of these logics serves as a form of "capital logic," that is, as strategies that increase profit maximization. Specifically, hiring patterns that are informed by racism, national chauvinism, and sexism increase class stratification and labor control, and decrease potential unity among workers.

Another aspect of racism and the division of labor is explored by Ralph Fevre in his case study of wool textile firms in West Yorkshire, Britain (Fevre 1984). He found that Indians and Pakistanis were recruited and hired in this low-paid manufacturing sector mainly because their labor had already been categorized by a racially discriminatory society as being worth less than White workers'-before they were ever hired. Employers set low wages not only because of cost and profit dictates but also because they "regarded low wages as the basic, immutable condition of wool textile production" (Fevre 1984:11), and as all that Asian workers deserved. Employer respondents in Fevre's study believed that Indian and Pakistani male workers were "intellectually limited," and that they possessed racially specific characteristics suiting them to the monotonous work. As one of these British employers put it: "Asians are plodders so you put them in combing where you need plodders" (Fevre 1984:111). These same groups of workers were denied the opportunity to demonstrate other work abilities because employers refused to hire them for "non-plodding" jobs.

Findings

Findings indicate that race, national origin, and gender have major significance in determining the class structure and division of labor of Silicon Valley's high-tech industry. High-tech industry managers still use race and nationality, in addition to gender, as primary categories in designating the division of labor. At each of the subcontracting firms I observed, between 80 and 100 percent of workers are Third World immigrants. These firms tend to specialize primarily in unskilled and

semiskilled assembly work, which is subcontracted out from other firms. Subcontractors usually pay lower wages and offer fewer benefits than the larger, more vertically integrated, better-known semiconductor firms, such as Silicon Valley's "Big Three": Intel, National Semiconductor, and Advanced Micro Devices. Subcontractors provide an easily expandable and expendable labor force for the very volatile industry. These assembly shops, where immigrant women were the most highly concentrated, have the lowest job security in the business.

Both employers and workers interviewed in this study agree that the lower the skill and pay level of the job, the greater the proportion of Third World immigrant women tends to be. Assembly work, which is classified as the lowest skilled and is the lowest-paid production job, has the highest concentration of these workers. Entry-level electronics production workers, in job categories such as semiconductor processing and assembly, earn an average of from $4.50 to $5.50 an hour; experienced workers in these jobs earn from $5.50 to $8.50. At each of the small (less than 250 employees) subcontracting assembly plants directly observed, immigrant women account for at least 75 percent and up to 100 percent of the assembly labor force. At only one of these plants do White males account for more than 2 percent of the production workers. By contrast, 90 percent of managers and owners at these businesses are White males.

Gender Logic

The employers interviewed indicated that they prefer to hire immigrant women, as compared to immigrant men, for assembly work because of beliefs shared by workers and employers alike that women can afford to work for less. None of the employers had any concrete knowledge about their workers' families or arrangements. Yet almost all of the employers stated that they assumed that their women workers were attached to male workers who were earning more than the women were. In fact, 80 percent of the women workers I interviewed were the main income earners in their families. Approximately 75 percent of the managers and employers interviewed stated that immigrant women are better suited to high-tech assembly work than immigrant men. Their jobs are characterized by assembly line-style repetition of a small set of tasks. According to workers, the work is extremely tiring because it requires constant concentration and intensive eye-hand coordination to manipulate the tiny, intricate circuitry. Employers and managers consistently claimed that Third World immigrant women are particularly suited to the work because of their supposedly superior hand-eye coordination and their patience. One male manager claimed that the "relatively small size" of many Asian

and Mexican women "makes it easier for them to sit quietly for long periods of time, doing small detail work that would drive a large person like [him] crazy." The workers this man supervised, however, thought he preferred to hire physically small women because he could then feel superior and intimidating, "more like a big man," as a Filipina worker put it.

"Immigrant Logic" in Hiring

> *If I had to pay higher wages, I wouldn't stay in business here. It's not that I couldn't "afford" it per se, but the profit margin would be smaller, obviously. In Singapore, labor costs one-fifth of what it does here.*
>
> **—White male employer, subcontracting assembly plant**

According to employers, low-level production jobs in Silicon Valley probably would not exist unless there were workers available to work cheaply at insecure nonunionized jobs. Without such a reserve army of labor to call on, manufacturers might very well have developed the industry differently, with an even greater emphasis on automation and overseas location. An engineer in charge of production technology at a semiconductor manufacturing firm observed: "We already have the technology to fully automate everything we do here—it's just more expensive. We could definitely automate every step of the process if it ever becomes cheaper to do that than use human labor. Because of the large supply of unskilled immigrants in the area, labor is still cheaper for doing certain jobs than machines are." He later commented that two major factors could tip the balance in this equation: a curtailed immigration flow and unionization.

Employers interviewed in Silicon Valley electronics plants explain their penchant for hiring large numbers of immigrants in terms typical of employers everywhere who hire immigrants: they are more willing than nonimmigrants to work for low pay in "bad" jobs (i.e., jobs that are unsafe, monotonous, uncomfortable, and unsteady). Immigrants are seen-and see themselves--as being more desperate for work at any wage, because of lack of language, employable skills, or education.

Fifty percent of the employers interviewed offered some form of unsolicited moral legitimation for why they pay such low wages. The following remark from an assembly shop owner typifies this: "I don't want you to think I'm some kind of heartless ogre—my people really do seem to manage quite well on what they earn." The remaining 50 percent offered no personal legitimation: they simply indicated that their wage structures are the result of market supply and demand. This

comment from an employer at a subcontracting assembly plant is unusually straightforward:

> Beats me how [entry level operatives] survive: they can't possibly do much more than eke by on these wages. But if they don't know the language, and some of them are illiterate even in their own language, and let's suppose, hypothetically of course, that they're not exactly here [in the U.S.] legally-just how many options have they got? We [employers] take advantage of this, but I'm not here to apologize for capitalism.

Employers (as well as the nonimmigrant White and African American workers with whom I talked) argue that immigrants from industrializing countries are better able to survive on very low wages than nonimmigrants. They surmise this is for two reasons. First, people from poor countries are viewed as skilled at and "used to" living on scant resources. Several employers and managers believed that "poverty management skills," as one assistant personnel manager termed it, are one of the "cultural values" that render certain minority groups more likely to succeed. A White male owner of a disk drive manufacturing facility reported:

> These people from Third World countries really are incredible: they're so resourceful! I have this one woman who works for me-she's Filipino, or from somewhere around there-and she supports three kids and her parents on $5.65 an hour. Not only that, but she always makes the best of the situation, and she's always bringing in cakes and things for everyone. We only have one kid, and my wife says she can't make ends meet. And believe me, I make more than $5.65 an hour!

A second explanation several employers offered in explaining immigrant workers' willingness and ability to live on low wages is that such workers' family members are probably still living in their countries of origin, to which the immigrants themselves are planning to return. What might seem like meager savings in the United States, these employers pointed out, stretch much farther in poorer countries.

Employers stressed that they are doing immigrant workers a favor by supplying them with any job at all, as the following quotes from two board shop owners reveal:

> I don't really prefer to hire immigrants, but they're usually the only ones willing to do the job. Most Americans would find it kind of boring work, but the

> Mexicans and the rest of them are grateful for whatever they can get. It beats welfare—both from their point of view, and from ours.
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> Actually, it's a good deal all around. A lot of these people were starving before they came to the States, so to them this job is a real step up. They haven't got many skills and they don't speak much English, so they can't expect to be paid much. They're grateful for whatever they get, and I feel we're providing a service by employing them.

In general, employers feel that immigrants are not taking jobs away from U.S. citizens, because relatively few citizens apply for such low-paid and "boring" jobs. That U.S. citizens do not, by and large, take these jobs does indeed suggest that they do not want them, as long as they can get better-paying ones. Yet White North American workers of both sexes, and often men of color, are discouraged by management from applying for entry-level manufacturing jobs, and are more likely to be denied such jobs when they do apply. This was openly confirmed by the majority of hiring personnel interviewed, who claim that most men and White women are not well suited for these jobs.

When I applied for assembly jobs at various plants, I was repeatedly told by personnel directors that the work wouldn't suit me and that I'd be much happier at a professional job or in a training program, because I was "an American." Naomi Katz (like me, a college-educated, White, North American woman) told me she had the same experience when she looked for assembly work during her study of Silicon Valley workers (Katz and Kemnitzer 1984). While investigating maquiladora work in southern California, Maria Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, who speaks both Spanish and English fluently, found that when she made phone inquiries for production jobs in Spanish, she was told there were openings, but when she inquired in English, she was told there were not (Fernandez-Kelly 1985).

Adapting Fernandez-Kelly's technique, I had a team of nationally diverse male and female students call plants and inquire about entry- level production job openings. Female students with Asian, Pacific Islander, or Latino "accents" were told there might be jobs available for them three times more often than male students with Anglo accents. One of the reasons for this bias, a personnel director told me, is that managers think the only educated Americans who would take such jobs must be either journalists or union organizers who were trying to get a story or stir up trouble.

One of the central reasons that employers "prefer" to hire immigrants rather than available nonimmigrants for low-skill, low-paid, and precarious jobs is that their worth is less valued in society in general. This is clearly expressed by one of the factory owners I interviewed: "This industry is very volatile: the market demand is constantly fluctuating. One month I may have to let a third of my production people go, and the next month I may need to double my work force. Let's face it, when you have to expand and contract all the time, you need people who are more expendable. When I lay off immigrant housewives, people don't get as upset as if you were laying off regular [sic] workers."

Employers also prefer Third World immigrants because they are often newly proletarianized, with little organizing experience in an industrialized setting. And as people who are insecure in their residential status, whether documented or not, immigrants are seen as unlikely to "make waves" against any part of the American system for fear of jeopardizing their welcome. Many of the production processes in semiconductor manufacturing involve the use of highly toxic chemicals, and the rate of reported occupational illnesses in the industry in California is three times the average for all industries (Olson 1984:71). Labor organizers interviewed believe that one of the reasons management prefers to hire immigrants is that they are less familiar with occupational health and safety laws than other workers, and less likely to seek their enforcement.

Racial Logic

As the quote about job trainers' racial hiring preferences at the beginning of this paper suggests, Silicon Valley employers and their colleagues distinguish not only between immigrants and nonimmigrants but also between different immigrant groups. A clear racial, ethnic, and national pecking order of management's hiring preferences emerges from interview findings. Most employers have a difficult time clearly distinguishing the myriad diverse races, ethnicities, and nationalities represented in their labor force. Yet this did not prevent many of them from making stereotypic assumptions about very broadly and usually incorrectly categorized groups. The two such broadly defined "groups" most prevalent in the immigrant workforce, and thus most often compared by employers, are Asians and Pacific Islanders, to whom employers variously refer as "Asians" or "Orientals"; and Latinos, to whom employers variously refer as "Hispanics," "Latins," "South Americans," or, generically, "Mexicans." Asian immigrant women are clearly management's preferred production workers. Eighty-five percent of the employers

and 90 percent of the managers interviewed stated that they believe Asian women make the best assembly-line workers in high-tech manufacturing.

Because employers tend to ascribe specific work characteristics to entire groups, they assign each group to jobs that emphasize these characteristics, thereby fulfilling their own prophecies. I observed hiring practices that appeared to be based on employers' racial and gender pecking orders. The training and employment agency director quoted at the beginning of this article assumes that different work characteristics exist according to race, and that members of some racial groups always show up late, and some always early, to job calls-not only to job calls, he implies, but also to work. Yet at none of the five large job calls I attended at high-tech manufacturing plants was this the case: Blacks, Whites, Latinos, and Asians all showed up early.

Most managers interviewed consider African Americans to be the least desirable workers, not because they are believed to be too good for the jobs, as Whites are generally considered, but because they are not considered dependable enough for employment in general. Managers were mixed in their evaluation of Black immigrants: one production manager commented that Black Caribbean immigrants are "not usually as cocky" as African Americans. Management attitudes toward entry-level African American applicants are more negative than toward any other group. For working-class African Americans in Silicon Valley, this suggests, Wilson's prognosis of the declining significance of race in the labor market is not applicable. However, Silicon Valley hiring personnel repeatedly commented that there is a shortage of African American applicants at the professional level. I was told by several that they would like to find and hire well-credentialed African American engineers or programmers. This suggests that White racism against Blacks may indeed be partially mitigated by Blacks' class and educational status, as Wilson proposes (Wilson 1978), but I was unable to find African American high-tech professionals who could confirm or deny this.

Three of the firms I talked with were considering opening plants in U.S. localities with large Mexican populations (Brownsville, Texas; Albuquerque, New Mexico; and Watsonville, California). When I suggested locations characterized by large reserve labor pools of Black workers, such as nearby Oakland and East Palo Alto, spokespersons at all three firms indicated that these areas did not have suitable labor climates. Black workers are hired by high-tech production facilities in North Carolina's Research Triangle, however. An organizer whose union was conducting an organizing campaign in the high-tech manufacturing industry at the time

suggested that Silicon Valley firms would not consider locating in Oakland because of union strength in that largely Black area. A leader in a different union that was targeting a large local semiconductor manufacturing company believed the industry's avoidance of the region was directly rooted in racism.

Four employers who had no direct experience—either negative or positive—with hiring Blacks and Latinos in skilled positions told me that they would prefer not to do so unless no one else was available. Their preferences, according to the respondents, were not based on comparative productivity reports from colleagues but on what they had personally concluded about these groups outside of the workplace. "Blacks are troublemakers," explained one administrator. "I found that out when I was at [the University of California at Berkeley]. They don't like Whites and they don't like authority—and I'm both." Only two of the employers interviewed reported that they had no racial preferences in hiring for entry-level jobs. Only one of the two claimed to have absolutely no racial preference for hiring at any level, but even he amended his claim by adding, "as long as the secretaries are pretty, and personally, I don't find most Black women that attractive."

I was told several times by employers and managers that they prefer not to put Blacks and Hispanics in jobs that require much training, because, as one White manager worded it, "that would be throwing good money after bad—they tend to quit faster, so why invest in them?" Yet at none of the companies I observed was management able to provide me with a racial breakdown of turnover rates. A Black Jamaican woman who worked in the plant of the manager just quoted confided: "More Blacks would be likely to stick around if they gave us a chance at the better jobs, but they never do. So of course you're going to leave if you find a better offer, or if you just get tired knowing you'll stay at the bottom, no matter what you do."

Guadalupe Friaz's in-depth study of a large Silicon Valley electronics firm provides another example of how what appears to be a race distinction between workers may actually be a result of managers' racism. Friaz found that Asians had the lowest turnover rate of any group at the firm, and that Blacks and Latinos had the highest. She suggests that one possible explanation for this difference is the bias of racist supervisors, who treat workers differently and recommend promotions according to race (Friaz 1985).

Certainly not all employers and managers I interviewed and observed displayed blatant racism. Even those who admitted to personal racial preferences in hiring typically indicated that they knew it was illegal to institutionalize such preferences, as this executive's words illustrated: "It would be fine with me if I

could simply advertise that I only wanted to hire certain groups. But nobody's that stupid—you'd get your butt sued off. But it's not against the law to choose where you post jobs—and where you don't. . . . I resent anybody telling me who I should hire, regardless of who does the best work, but I'm a stickler about doing everything by the law."

Interviews with White employers and administrators suggested that they are most comfortable when their workplace colleagues and office staff are also White, and their production work force is not. This makes it easier for management to construct an "us" and a "them" to help solidify the division of labor. It protects the white-collar Whites from having to confront their own racism, enabling them to view work relationships as occupationally, rather than racially, based. This is certainly not a unique situation. As a union organizer phrased it, "Historically, it has always been easier for bosses to exploit people they don't identify with."

Are Asians "Better" Workers?

In general, although employers and managers express resentment of upper- and middle-class Asians and Asian Americans whom they view as competitors, they continue to prefer Asian workers. One manager, who refers to his Mexican workers as "bean eaters," said, "I've just never liked Mexicans. They r\lb me wrong." He explained that he finds Mexicans both lazy and insubordinate on the job. When asked for specifics, he replied: "Well, it's not anything they do or don't do. It's not like there have been any incidents. I just pick up on their attitude. Once a grape picker, always a grape picker."

Many of the White managers interviewed resent Mexicans and Chicanos because they think Mexican immigrants are "ripping off" the United States. Several of the production and other midlevel managers grew up in California agricultural regions where battles between White farm owners and the predominantly Mexican United Farm Workers have been bitter. They interpret the union's organizing as a racial problem, not as class struggle. Most seem to have no idea that similar battles had been waged between Whites and Asians in earlier genera- tions (Filipino farm workers, for example, were also active in forming the United Farm Workers), and that White hostility to Asian workers was once just as vehement.

Another example of self-fulfilling racist prophecies is shown in the story of two neighbors who, unbeknownst to each other, called about the same job openings as packers (typically a job filled by men) at a high-tech manufacturing assembly plant. One, a Chinese immigrant who speaks English with a very discernible

Chinese accent, was told to show up on the following morning at 8 A.M. sharp. The other, a U.S. citizen whose voice patterns as an African American are also very discernible, was told to "come by sometime tomorrow morning." When the Black man arrived at 9 A.M., he was told the job had already been filled, on a first-come, first-served basis. The Chinese man, who got one of the positions, later reported that at the end of the first day of work, employees were told that there were still two openings available, in case they knew anyone who might be interested. He told the White employer that his neighbor, who was "like a brother" to him, might want the job and was told, "Chinese are good workers; bring him by." The neighbor, the same Black man who had tried earlier to apply, accompanied the Chinese man to work the next day, where he was again told there were no openings. The employer later told the Chinese employee, "I thought you said you were bringing your brother." The next week, two other Asian immigrants were hired. On a separate occasion, the White personnel director at this firm told me that the reason so few Blacks worked at her firm was because so few applied. "Personally, I think because [Blacks] have lived here longer [than Asian immigrants] they know how to scam better." She added, "They don't need to get regular jobs in order to survive."

Conclusion

In conclusion, the racial division of labor in the Silicon Valley high-tech manufacturing workforce originates in the racially structured labor market of the larger economy, and in the "racial logic" that employers use in hiring. This "racial logic" is based on stereotypes-both observed and imagined-that employers have about different racial groups. One of the effects· of this racial logic, vis-a-vis workers, is to reproduce the racially structured labor market and class structure that discriminates against minorities and immigrants. Another effect is that within the workplace, racial categories and racism become tools for management to divide and control workers. These are dynamics that individuals and organizations interested in social change must become more familiar with-not just in Silicon Valley but elsewhere. As for the situation in highly "innovative" Silicon Valley itself, to date, neither labor, women's, nor ethnic organizations have made major inroads in challenging the hiring hierarchy (Hossfeld 1991). But challenge it we must. Equality of opportunity, both at work and away from it, cannot be achieved unless we learn to recognize and reject practices that are based on "simple formulas" about gender, race, and nationality.