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'It is their nature to do menial labour': the racialization of 'Latino/a workers' by agricultural employers

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Abstract

Latino/as[1] constitute the largest ethno-racial minority group in the United States, and a significant and growing proportion of the US labour force. Nevertheless, they remain at the bottom of the US economy, concentrated and overrepresented in 'bad jobs'. Using a case study from agricultural work, this paper examines how racialization is implicated in such positioning of Latino/as within the labour market. Based on data from in-depth interviews, I explore *how* agricultural employers articulate racial meanings about and in relation to Latino/a workers. While employers espouse colour-blindness, they routinely invoke racial meanings in their assessment of workers and everyday practices. They use race as proxy for worker quality, making racialized distinctions between recent immigrants and second+-generation Latino/as. A dual frame of reference serves as an ideological tool to de-problematize exploitative work conditions in the United States. I explore the theoretical and political implications of these findings.

Keywords: Latino/as; racialization; colour-blindness; race as culture; dual frame of reference; multiple racisms.

Introduction

Latino/as constitute the largest, fastest growing ethno-racial minority group in the United States. Historically, the incorporation of Latino/as into the US has been tied to employers' need for labour. Jobs have been and continue to be an important 'pull factor' for Latino/a immigration. Latino/as were 13 per cent of the total US labour force in 2005, and will constitute about a quarter of the total US labour force by 2050 (Toossi 2006). Despite their growing presence in the labour force, Latino/as remain on the bottom rungs of the US economy.

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Further, they tend to be concentrated and overrepresented in 'bad jobs' associated with low wages, instability, lack of benefits and poor prospects for advancement (Canales 2007).

The growing presence of Latino/as in such jobs cannot be fully explained by 'supply-side' or human capital factors such as workers' education and training alone (Canales 2007). Recent analyses have called attention to the role of 'demand-side' factors, such as employer recruitment, as impetus for immigration and for the growing presence of Latino/a workers in various industries. In fact, employer recruitment and State-led economic development initiatives are major driving forces for Latino/a immigration into various regions of the United States. Although not the only factor driving continued Latino/a immigration, recruitment by employers is largely responsible for channelling Latino/a workers into low-wage jobs in various industries, including farm work, forestry, domestic work, meatpacking and construction (e.g. Heffernan 2000; Johnson-Webb 2002; Kandel and Parrado 2005; Krissman 2005).

Employer recruitment practices are directly related to employers' sense of the ability and suitability of various groups of workers for particular work. Existing research from various work contexts suggests that, for employers, race often serves as proxy for worker skills and marker for the desirability of workers. Racial meanings inform and affect employers' perceptions and evaluations of workers, their judgement regarding which workers are fit for different jobs, their assessments of who are good and bad workers, the production of notions of skill, the connection of skills to specific jobs and the production of meanings about jobs themselves (Kennelly 1999; Moss and Tilly 2001; Shih 2002; Waldinger and Lichter 2003). Given the racialized history and contemporary structure of the United States, racialization[2] affects the way workplaces operate day-to-day. Race has informed and shaped employers' practices historically, including recruitment and hiring, thereby structuring access to the US labour system and becoming an axis along which that system is routinely organized. As Waldinger and Lichter state: 'In a racialized society like the United States, entire ethnic groups are ranked according to sets of socially meaningful but arbitrary traits; these rankings determine fitness for broad categories of jobs' (2003, p. 8).

Understanding how Latino/as get inserted and shuffled within the US occupational structure necessitates analysing the everyday production of racial meanings, *how* such meanings emerge, are deployed and become embedded in everyday institutional discourse and practice.[3] Historically, racialized (and gendered) discourses about Latinos/as in the United States have entailed their representation as particular kinds of worker. Such representations have furnished the ideological underpinning for guest worker and labour recruitment programmes, and for

policies that have opened or closed US 'doors' to Latino/as. This paper explores how employers articulate racial meanings about Latino/a workers[4] and how such meanings help inform and justify practices and arrangements in workplaces.

The racialization of Latino/as in the United States: theoretical considerations

Recent sociological scholarship has moved away from a focus on race as a static category of membership or identity, towards a focus on racialization, or race as fluid, dynamic, historically specific and geographically contingent relation and process. Theorizing and documenting empirically *how* racialization occurs is a central task in contemporary sociological scholarship (see Darder and Torres 2004; Murji and Solomos 2005; Bonilla-Silva 2006). While the racialization of Latino/as (mostly Mexicans and Puerto Ricans) at their time of incorporation into the United States has been examined extensively (Almaguer 1994; Guerin-Gonzalez 1994; Menchaca 2001; Whalen 2001) *contemporary* processes of Latino/a racialization have seldom been explored (notable exceptions include Naples (2000) and De Genova and Ramos-Zayas (2003)).

Since the mid-1960s, most immigration to the United States has come from Latin America. US Latino/a populations have grown and become increasingly diverse in national origin, ethnicity, race and class. Also, Latino/as have dispersed geographically, with the most dramatic population growth occurring in 'new destinations'. Multiple questions regarding these demographic changes necessitate theoretically anchored analysis and empirical investigation. How have these changes altered the racial stories told about Latino/as? How have they reconfigured racial representations and racialized social relations and conditions? Given continuous replenishment of Latin American immigrant populations, how are various cohorts racialized? How do the racial stories told about second-generation Latino/as compare with those about the newly arrived? Is there a racial ordering of generations of Latino/a immigrants?

Different racializations and multiple racisms

Historically, analyses of racial matters in the United States have emphasized a white-black binary, with Latino/as (among other racialized populations) becoming 'invisible minorities' whose experiences are understood only in relation to that binary. Recent scholarship has begun to examine the racialized experiences of 'invisible' groups, revealing different processes of racialization, demonstrating

the limitations of unidimensional conceptions of racism and documenting multiple and different racisms.

Jung (2002), for example, shows how analyses that homogenize 'the Asian worker experience' obscure the distinct ways in which Filipino and Japanese agricultural workers were racialized in pre-Second World War Hawaii. He demonstrates that the racisms these two groups faced varied in intensity and form. Racist discourses against Filipinos emphasized their purported racial inferiority, while racism against the Japanese entailed fear that they were *not* racially inferior and questioned their loyalty to 'America'. Kim (1999)'s work also reveals the multidimensionality of racialization and racisms. She introduces the concept *racial triangulation* to explain the valorization of Asian groups *vis-à-vis* one another and relative to whites and blacks. She proposes that such valorization occurs along an axis of superiority/inferiority and also along cultural lines, Similarly, De Genova and Ramos-Zayas (2003) document how Mexicans and Puerto Ricans are differently racialized – and participate in the construction of their own racialized differences – all within a larger structure of racial inequality and oppression.

This essay contributes to this burgeoning literature by examining the ways in which Latino/as are racialized in a specific context of contemporary US class relations. Using a case study from agricultural work, I examine how Latino/as are racialized by employers. I analyse agricultural employers' discourse as it reflects larger ideological forces that sustain and reproduce structural racism (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 2006) by normalizing and de-problematizing racially unequal arrangements and making them invisible. My interpretation of the discourse of employers scrutinizes the social significance and social consequences of their racialized accounts. I identify racial stories, describe discursive patterns and place employers' accounts of race systemically, within the larger realm of power relations.

The case study

This research draws from in-depth interviews with white[5] and Latino/a (Mexican and Mexican American) employers[6] in the tree-fruit and vegetable industries in Washington. These industries present an interesting case for analysing the production of racial meanings about Latino/as in US workplaces. Despite increasing mechanization, they remain among the most labour-intensive industries in the United States. Also, since the *Bracero Program*, they have relied heavily on Latino/a (primarily Mexican) labour for filling low-end jobs (Gamboa 1990).[7] Finally, the personnel practices that agricultural employers in Washington rely on (which enable and foster continuous recruitment of new Latino/a immigrant workers) are increasingly used *across* the

United States, within other agricultural industries (e.g. meatpacking), and outside the agricultural sector (Krissman 2000; Johnson-Webb 2002; Kandel and Parrado 2005).

The sample included forty employers[8] from twenty-six farm operations and firms (packers/shippers, equipment and input suppliers, warehouses) representing the various sizes[9] and types of agricultural operations in Washington (see Table 1).

Since the perceived race of the interviewer might affect interviewees' willingness to speak frankly about their racial views (Reese *et al*. 1986), white employers were matched with a white interviewer and Latino/a employers were matched with a Latina interviewer.[10] Access to agricultural employers was obtained through contacts from Washington State University (WSU)'s Cooperative Extension, the Washington State Department of Agriculture and WSU faculty and their contacts in growers' groups. Most employers were introduced to the study by these individuals, who explained that they would be asked questions about their workforce, day-to-day practices and views on the dynamics and challenges facing the industry. Contacts reached employers at grower group meetings or via phone or email and furnished the lead investigator (the author) with names and contact information for willing study participants. An interviewer followed up with employers via phone or email. The sample was expanded in a snowball fashion.

Interviews lasted between one and two hours, and were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. To preserve confidentiality, employers were given pseudonyms. Coding of the interview data initially involved identifying situations when employers spoke directly and explicitly about race/ethnicity. A subsequent stage of analysis involved identifying implicit references to race and subtle racialized meanings. Analysis aimed at identifying the breadth of employers' responses. I identified cross-cutting and recurrent themes and divergent themes, and drew comparisons between the responses of white and Latino/a employers.

The ethno-racial division of agricultural work

To contextualize employers' discourse on race/ethnicity, it is useful to have a sense of the demographic make-up of the workplaces they

Table 1. *Sample description*

	Males	Females	Total
White	26	2	28
Mexican	10	1	11
Mexican American	1	0	1
Total	37	3	40

operate. Early in each interview, employers were asked to describe the ethno-racial and gender composition of workplaces and particular jobs (what percentage of the workforce was comprised of which groups). They were asked to explain how they thought such a composition came to be, and what factors they thought might account for it. Without exception, employers' described workplaces that were highly segregated and hierarchically organized by race/ethnicity and gender.

White employers (typically involved in mid-to-large operations) described workplaces where most low-wage jobs (field jobs, like pickers, irrigators, tree trainers, and warehouse jobs, like packers, sorters and label machine operators), direct supervisory and lower management positions (foremen, crew bosses and line supervisors) were occupied by *Hispanics* (employers' term). The overwhelming majority of office, managerial, professional and ownership positions were occupied by w*hites*/*Anglos*/ *Caucasians* (employers' terms), with women occupying mostly the office jobs, and men dominating the others. Employers in orchard operations described their workforce as mostly Hispanic and male, except during peak harvest, when many Hispanic women also work. In warehouses, employers described a workforce primarily Hispanic and female, except for some supervisory positions and for jobs as mechanics, forklift drivers, and palletizers, which tend to be occupied by (Hispanic and white) men. All Latino/a employers who *owned* and managed small agricultural operations (ten out of twelve) described a workforce comprised mostly of *mexicanos* or *hispanos* (their terms), and claimed never to have had white workers.[11]

'I don't care if you're black, white, pink, or whatever': colour-blindness in agricultural workplaces

Despite their own accounts of a markedly racialized division of labour and of racialized hierarchies in their workplaces, all (both white *and* Latino/a) employers minimized the importance of race/ethnicity. In effect, employers' discourse suggests that an ideology of colour-blindness[12] is pervasive and dominant in agricultural workplaces, and that the minimization of racism is one of its central frames (Bonilla-Silva 2006). However, there were some differences in the ways in which Latino/a and white employers adhered to a colour-blind framework.

The majority of white agricultural employers explicitly claimed to 'not see race.' For example, Alex, a white manager at a large operation stated:

> Well, I don't really know, I don't really notice trends like that because, I try to keep an open mind. I mean .... I'm not a real [laughs] racial type .... I don't look at, whether they're black, white,

> pink or, whatever. . ..I look at what they have to offer, and if they have something to offer, we try to, bring 'em on. But, I would say we're pretty fair with the way we do, we have some people. . . Hispanic. . .that are lead people, our seconds, basically.

Several white employers declined to answer direct questions about race. One such employer remarked that such questions were not necessary. Further, the explicit mention of race/ethnicity seemed inflammatory to several white (but to none of the Latino/a) employers. Mike, a white assistant manager at a large operation, expressed frustration at being asked to talk about the ethno-racial composition of jobs in his workplace:

> I, it just [laughs] I could, I could go into a whole soapbox in my opinion . . . . Race, race is an issue in this country mainly because those populations want to keep it an issue in this country. When you really get to the hiring and, and firing and who's on your team type situation. . .it's based, as far as I'm concerned, on performance. I don't care if you're from Mars; if you can do the job and you can communicate with me . . . and do it effectively, hey, you're hired. You know, I could care less . . . . But there – excuse my, my opinion here . . . there are people out there that want to make it an issue constantly. And . . . it just, it just, it irritates me [laughs]. I mean, it just flat-out irritates me, that it even has to be a question. And, I take it to the point of, for instance, on my own census deal that comes out every you know, four years or ten years . . . . You know, it just, completely whizzes me off, that they sit there . . . 'what race are you?' I scratch it out and put 'American'. You know? [Raises voice] To hell with you! I mean, you know? We're all under the same flag and, by God, we fought in the same wars! We're all Americans here! Yes, it's neat that you have an ethnic background. I mean, I like to say that, you know, my family's origins are from Scotland, and I like, bagpipe music, and stuff like that. Um, but I don't make an, you know, I [laughs] I don't run around going, 'God, we're getting whizzed on all the time.' You know, Scotchmen are always getting whizzed on. Oh, and we've gotta be sensitive, you know, because, you know, don't call us 'kilt walla, wearers.' I mean . . . . Come on, you know? I got, I got better things to do with my time than that. (Interviewer: Do you feel like race is an issue in terms of, the work that you're doing or . . .) Is it an issue? Not as far as I'm concerned [laughs]. And not as far as, as [name of business] is concerned . . . . We're an equal-opportunity employer, and [pause]. You know, I think that . . . I guess what I'm trying to say is that . . . one, I'm, I'm a little irritated in even kinda going there with the question, and, two, you know, if the folks were there and they were go, you know,

> have the degree background and yadda-yadda and they were here in the work pool in [town], then they'd be working here. You know, by virtue of the fact that they're not here doesn't mean that, anything other than that they're not available .... And that's all I was, I guess, in a circuitous way trying to get – you know, it's just, 'geez, Louise'. Absolutely, you know? If somebody wants to make race an issue, then I don't have time to talk to 'em.

Mike's and Alex's statements display a *rhetorical incoherence* which, as Bonilla-Silva (2006) argues, reflects the tension associated with talking about race in a world that insists that race does not matter. For these employers, race is evidently an uncomfortable subject. What is significant about these statements is that, in both style and substance, they mirror the views of most white Americans (Gallup 1997; Krysan 2002). Mike frames race in terms of ethnicity (culture), and ethnicity as ultimately optional and voluntary. A growing literature documents that, in contrast with people of colour,[13] whites often do not think of themselves as members of a racial or ethnic group, seeing ethnicity as situational, as something they may or may not choose to embrace (Waters 1990; Feagin, Vera and Batur 2001). Viewed in this way, race is no longer an organizing principle of social life. In effect, constructing race solely as a cultural marker is tantamount to stripping it of its structural implications.

White employers also engaged in what Bonilla-Silva (2006) has termed the *naturalization of racism*, providing seemingly non-racial or race-neutral explanations for the ethno-racial division of labour and hierarchies in their workplaces, most often attributing them to 'supply and demand.' As one employer noted:

> [T]he workers are one hundred per cent Hispanic .... [O]n all the ranches that I run ... we have no Caucasian people at all .... And the reason being is that we don't get anybody applying for it. It's mostly been just Hispanic people were applying. (Interviewer: How do you think it became that way?) Supply and demand, you know. Basic economics.

Latino/a employers did not make explicit claims about not noticing race, but also used race-neutral explanations for the ethno-racial composition of jobs. Two recurrent explanations provided by Latino/a employers emphasized the high concentration of Latino/as in their worksites' vicinity, and maintained that Latino/as are 'who looks for this kind of work'. Vicente, a Mexican male, owner-operator of a small

orchard said: 'That's who is around here, Mexicans. No American has ever helped me, they've never stopped by to ask for work' (author's translation).

Employers explicitly invoked market dynamics and demographic processes – specifically, the growth and concentration of Latino/as in the region – as if they were un-racialized phenomena. Such framing of market dynamics as 'natural' filters out the active role that employers have played and continue to play in attracting Latino/a workers to the region, and how employers' day-to-day practices are implicated in producing and reproducing a predominantly Latino/a labour force in the bottom jobs. For example, employers indicated they rely on Latino/a workers' networks for filling low-end jobs, and, if/when they need to advertise for jobs, their hiring agents target Latino/a areas and neighbourhoods, newspapers in Spanish and Latino/a radio stations. When hiring managers, employers in mid-size and large operations rely on their own personal networks of family and friends. Tony, manager at a large operation and owner of a small orchard, explained: 'This industry, in the white-collar positions, the management positions in this industry, last names stay the same, first names change.' The last names to which Tony is referring are those of the white families (some of which are 'corporate families') that own and manage the vast majority and the largest operations in the state. Tony's description points to the industry as a closed system where control and ownership rest persistently with whites. This same manager later described how his business goes about finding managers:

> [T]here's not a lot of white people [in the industry], so to speak, so you need to pay attention to names, and so . . . if you're looking [to fill] a position, you find out who wants it, you need to find out who's available, and then you call that individual, and say, "Are you interested? Would you come in for an interview? Gimme a resume." A lot of it is just word of mouth.

Statements by white *and* Latino/a employers suggest widespread adherence across employers' race/ethnicity to the belief that 'race is not an issue'. However, only white employers claimed they 'do not see race'. Some white employers expressed frustration and anger at the mention of race and ethnicity. Latino/a employers did not display such emotions, but, like white employers, adhered to a colour-blind framework by offering race-neutral explanations for the division of labour and the hierarchies in workplaces.

Culture as explanation for subordination in the labour market

Ten out of twenty-eight white employers (but none of the Latino/a employers) alluded to culture – typically, a monolithic 'Hispanic culture' – as explanation for the overwhelming presence of Latino/as in low-end jobs. For example, a white male, owner-operator of a mid-size orchard offered the following explanation: 'From a labour-standpoint you [white] folks don't work at the same pace as those .... Hispanic folks. It's not that [whites] are physically not able, it's just not culturally within them, I guess.' Russ, a white owner-operator of a mid-size orchard said:

> [T]here are cultural differences ... the Hispanic people, they tend to be a hard-working group of people. Their nature is to ... do menial-type labour. They're ... not ashamed to be labourers. There's no shame in that for them. Typically, [for] Caucasians, typical white society, that's a negative. If you're a ditch digger or a fruit picker, that's a low-end job and that's just ... something that, the young folks aren't seeking to be, I guess.

Cultural explanations were also used by several white employers to explain the near absence of Latino/as in managerial, professional and ownership positions. Larry, manager at a large operation noted:

> These people, Hispanics particularly, are very reluctant to ... be bosses of ... their peers ... they're very reluctant to do this. So, you'll find that exceptional guy that can get past that cultural thing, and, really be able to interact with the people, and be cordial and yet get the job done.

Similarly, several white employers used culture to explain gender hierarchies in their workplaces. When asked why there are few Latinas in supervisory or management positions, Jim, part-owner of a mid-size orchard, said:

> The Hispanics – a woman probably wouldn't get along real good with being the boss over the Hispanics, because of their culture. They don't listen to women as they do in the United States .... [A] woman in charge wouldn't ... get the respect there .... Hispanics just don't respect women the same way as the Americans do.

Scott, manager at a large operation argued similarly:

> The Hispanic men do not like taking direction from females, a number of the Hispanic females are not comfortable with – they make decisions all the time, but telling somebody to do something is

> difficult for them, not part of what they do. Now, my suspicion is that they do that at home all the time, but not in public, it's not something that they are as comfortable doing and yet they're very good at what they do and can be very effective.

White employers' emphasis on culture as explanation for the overwhelming presence of Latino/as in low-end jobs, and for their scarce presence in positions of power is symptomatic of the re-articulation of inequality in the United States within a colour-blind framework. Rather than being anchored in open claims about biological superiority or inferiority of groups, contemporary racism entails the coding of race in the language of 'difference' and 'culture'. Cultural difference is assumed to have grounding that is essentially biological, and as such it is treated as ultimately inevitable and unchangeable. Bonilla Silva (2006) has called this the *biologization of culture*.

By alluding to natural tendencies of 'Hispanic culture' and ascribing to 'Hispanics' as a group a propensity to perform well in menial jobs and to not want to be bosses, white employers normalize and de-problematize the systematic pegging of Latino/as to low-end jobs. As Sayer and Walker (1992) argue, skills and jobs are defined and redefined according to their bearers. Back-breaking, low-wage jobs become 'Hispanic jobs', and a class of predominantly white owners and managers accrues the profits generated by such competent and cheap labour, and the public and psychological wage that DuBois (1969) identified as the principal benefit of whiteness.

The relative valorization of Latino/a workers

Agricultural employers' racialized assessments of Latino/a workers frequently involved comparisons between Latino/as and other ethno-racial groups. This is not surprising because racialization is always relational: the meanings associated with one group and the positioning of one group in a racial order are determined and defined in relation to those of other groups. Further, employers in various work contexts routinely evaluate workers of different ethno-racial groups in relation to one another (e.g. Griffith 1993; Hossfeld 1993; Moss and Tilly 2001; Shih 2002). What is remarkable is how agricultural employers place and evaluate Latino/as in relation to whites and other ethno-racial minorities, and also various Latino/a groups *vis-à-vis one another*.

When discussing why Latino/as constitute the overwhelming majority of farm workers and entry-level workers in warehouses and packing operations, both white and Latino/a employers routinely cited the strong work ethic and performance of Latino/as, comparing it with the purportedly poor work ethic and performance of whites Such

perceived differences lead to employers' preference for Latino/as for filling low-end jobs. Employers also alluded to such differences to explain why there are few, if any, whites in such jobs. The following quotes by white employers illustrate these findings:

> Most white people are not gonna work as hard as most Hispanic people .... I don't know why. I could speculate: they don't wanna work for the wage. Physical labour is becoming beneath a lot of people. (Roy, manager at mid-size operation)

> We ... have to have more productive people, and white people are not productive at all in the orchards. Cuz we have rarely hired some white people, and they'll be lucky if they last a day, just because they cannot, productively, stay up with the Hispanics. (Randy, part-owner of mid-size operation)

Most Latino employers also characterized whites as uninterested in manual labour, lazy, and unwilling to work hard, and described Mexicans as dependable and willing hard workers. Lupe, owner-operator of a small orchard spoke of whites' lack of dependability: 'White people, Americans, show up. But they don't stay very long, they leave' (author's translation).

Several white employers contrasted the work ethic of Latino/as with the alleged poor work ethic of other ethno-racial minority groups. Tony, white male, manager at a large operation and owner of a small orchard, stated: '[T]he Mexican population is, bar none, one of the hardest working people that I have ever seen in my life. And I have had experience with Native American, Orientals, Filipino, or Vietnamese, Africans – African-Americans.'

Another practice of relative valorization employers used involved assessing Latino/a workers in terms of perceived degree of assimilation and legal status. Both white and Latino/a employers distinguished between the work ethic of recently arrived and second+-generation Latino/as. White employers emphasized that the longer Latino/as live in the United States, the more Americanized they become, and the 'lazier' they get. The following quotes illustrate this recurrent theme:

> I've seen the worth – work ethic deteriorate over the ... last twenty years. People don't want to work as hard. They want more money. And they want shorter hours. They want weekends off. I'm just seeing that gradually go that way. And, it's a simple excuse for it, they're becoming more American .... The Hispanic people traditionally are very hard, hard workers .... When I was a child, my dad hired people. They worked hard ... and didn't complain, and ... just worked, from sunup to sundown ... cuz that's what they were

> used to. But now that most of . . . our workers, workforce is half-ass Americanized – a lot of 'em are fully Americanized – they are becoming more lazy as far as the work ethic . . . . Sure, we need to pay a fair price . . . fair wage for a fair job. But just their attitude is changing. (Joe, manager of mid-size orchard, owner of small orchard)

> [T]he generation that is coming into the workforce now, is . . . typically second or possibly third generation of being here in the United States . . . who's actually been brought upon amongst the culture of the United States is – today's younger Hispanic workforce has come up in, is more in tune with our culture rather than the Hispanic culture of what we've dealt with in the past . . . . I guess that leaves open to debate . . . is our culture better or is their culture better? I don't know, but . . . there is a recognizable difference in, in those who are brought up within our culture . . . versus those who weren't. (Troy, manager at mid-size orchard, owner of small orchard)

Several Latino/a employers also distinguished between the work ethic of newly arrived Latino/as and that of those who have settled in the United States. Tomás, Mexican owner-operator of a small orchard stated:

> There are [Latino/a] people who have been here for years and they don't do good work, and there are people who are recently arrived, but . . . they put a lot of effort into their work and quickly learn what you want them to, and there are people that, because they are already here, they already know, and they know English, and their work is so much worse than the work of those who just arrived. I have heard them saying, 'Fire me, if you're gonna fire me, go ahead, who cares.' And almost always it is people who have been here for a long time. The majority of them are more problematic.

Legal status was routinely identified by employers as an important predictor of worker quality and as an indicator of the desirability or undesirability of workers. Employers identified undocumented workers as ideal workers, because the economic, social, cultural and political vulnerabilities they face leave them no choice but to work hard and go 'the extra mile' without complaint. One employer stated:

> I've heard from foremen that they say that illegals, those guys sometimes work harder than the legal guys. Because the illegal guys evidently have a harder time finding work . . . they're hungrier, they work harder just to keep their job, and then hopefully stay here

> longer. Because if they lose their job, it's pretty much dire straits. As where if they're American citizens, they have opportunity for maybe a better education or if they get fired down the road to get a job somewhere else, too. . ..I guess the threat of getting fired is just not as severe on American citizens than to illegals. (Henry, manager, small operation)

In discussing workers' economic vulnerability, agricultural employers invoked what Waldinger and Lichter (2003) have called a *dual frame of reference*. They de-problematized the conditions facing Latino/a immigrant workers in the United States by comparing them to the conditions workers would presumably face in their countries of origin. In the words of one white employer:

> We have a very, very nice, life here in the United States, okay? Compared to other countries. If you get a chance to visit around and see how they live, and . . . what their culture is like, you can understand why the Hispanics wanna be here. I mean, this, to them getting a seven-dollar job in a farm is, fantastic. Even though they work hard, but they work hard at home, for pennies, and so, that's never been a problem. (Larry, manager at large operation)

Larry's admission that 'that's never been a problem' bespeaks a shared understanding among agricultural employers, and documented by scholars in other work contexts including high-tech manufacturing (Hossfeld 1993) and textiles (Chapkis and Enloe 1983). Such understanding is that immigrants from poor countries are more willingly exploitable, more willing than other workers to take on the hardest jobs and put up with unfavourable work conditions for the lowest pay. They are assumed not just to be okay with working hard for little money, but to be *content* to do so.

When asked to identify problems affecting the agricultural labour force, several white employers expressed concern about the potential disappearance of the worker vulnerabilities described above. One such employer stated:

> What we're seeing is . . . a shift in who is out there; instead of being the lean, mean, hungry guy . . . what we're finding . . . is that . . . instead of the guys who really want to, get out there and do the job for ya and please ya, we're ending up . . . with folks that . . . can take it or leave it basically. (Mike, assistant manager at large operation)

Several white employers expressed concern about labour shortages due to tougher immigration controls. Two such employers indicated they were beginning to look in the direction of immigrant groups other

than Latino/as, which would not only be plentiful, but a cheaper and more manageable labour force.

> I've heard Thailand, they're very productive people....the productivity of the people that we have now is getting worse, and we feel that it's because they've become more strict on the borders, and they're getting less of the people that really want to get over here and work, and they're doing more of the people that've kinda found out how to work the system ... they're getting less and less productive. ... [O]ur costs are getting more expensive, and it's getting hard. (Randy, part-owner of mid-size operation)

Several employers (both white and Latino/a), saw length of stay in the United States as related to Latino/as' ability to become social insiders and manipulate the system to their advantage. Such insider knowledge, employers claim, spoils the quality of Latino/a workers. As Russ, owner-operator of a mid-size orchard put it:

> [A] person that's been here settled in the United States a long time, they've learned the system, they've learned ... how they can take advantage of unemployment or state industrial insurance ... they've become pretty savvy in terms of what they can get away with, and that's human nature. People are going to learn how to settle in and how to just become a cog in the factory.

Roy, manager at a mid-size operation made a similar point:

> [W]ithin the Hispanic community, there's some change in those that have lived in the country a long time. Maybe they've lived in California, and they kinda migrate somewhat with the crops .... There's a group, and it's within every ethnic group, but we see it mostly because we're hiring Hispanics, some of them ... they're in the system. They know what unemployment is, they know their Medicaid benefits, they know Food Stamps, those sorts of things. And they're only gonna work a certain amount of hours or dollars, where it won't ... disrupt their ability to get some of these services .... As that population assimilates into our culture a bit, gets to know ... bills and switch to our governmental services, many of them don't work hard as they once did.

This finding supports Waldinger and Lichter's (2003, p. 227) point that, at the bottom of the labour market, social insiders are unwanted. Outsider status keeps recent Latino/a immigrants vulnerable, thereby making them ideal workers.

Discussion and implications

The research discussed here reveals that speaking monolithically of the racialized experience of 'Latino/a workers' obscures the multiple and distinct ways that an increasingly diverse Latino/a population is racialized in the United States. The racial stories told about Latino/a workers differ based on generation, length of stay in the United States, apparent degree of assimilation, legal status and gender. Such stories place recent Latino/a immigrants and second+-generation Latino/as differently in the field of racial positions. The former are at the bottom as the most vulnerable and exploitable, but second+-generation Latino/as are also racially subordinated, framed as lazy abusers of the system.

Both white and Latino/a employers use colour-blind discourse to ignore, erase and minimize structural racism and race and ethnicity as sociocultural factors. Among white employers, a colour-blind discourse relies on cultural myths to reinforce systemic racism as a non-issue, hiding and allowing it to continue unabated. By claiming not to see race, and by framing market dynamics as devoid of racial content, agricultural employers act as if race does not matter, creating an illusion of fairness and progressive politics, while reproducing the subordination of Latino/as, and safeguarding white privilege in workplaces. However, adherence to a colour-blind ideology does not preclude the racialized assessment of workers by employers. In everyday business decisions, most employers used race/ethnicity, citizenship, legal status and gender as proxies for worker quality and as markers for the desirability of workers. The racialized assessment of workers was coupled with hiring and recruitment practices that relied on Latino/a worker networks to fill low-end jobs, and on white employer networks to fill management positions.

Culture was used by white employers to frame Latino/as as ideal labourers, and to explain why they tend not to occupy ownership and management positions. The use of the 'soft' language of cultural difference normalized and de-problematized the segmentation of jobs and racial hierarchies in workplaces. As Winant (2001) argues, these forces justify exclusionary politics and policy better than traditional white supremacist arguments can do.

Waldinger and Lichter (2003) posit that immigrant workers are more willing to accept precarious wages and job conditions because they use a dual frame of reference; they remain attached to the communities they left behind, planning to return or remembering the impoverished conditions they faced there. White and Latino/a) agricultural employers also routinely used such a dual frame of reference to de-problematize the exploitative conditions facing Latino/a workers, relative to conditions they would presumably face in their

countries of origin. This finding suggests that improving the conditions facing Latino/a workers in US workplaces necessitates evaluating wages and work conditions relative to those of others *within* a US context. Similarly, the continuous replenishment of immigrant workers from Latin America enables the maintenance of an underclass of undocumented workers who, by virtue of their multiple vulnerabilities, are identified and sought by employers as the most desirable workforce.

The identification of Thai workers as a promising alternative to Latino/a labour by several employers points to how the positioning of ethno-racial groups within the US labour queue is relational and dynamic. It responds to and reflects historically specific articulations of race, gender, class and state formation processes shaped by both local and global forces. The seasonal agricultural labour force in the Pacific Northwest has been comprised of various ethno-racial and national groups at different historical junctures: agricultural employers have relied on Chinese, Japanese, Native American, Filipino and white (immigrant and native) workers for filling low-end jobs. The ethno-racial composition of jobs has changed and will probably change again. While US employers have constructed new immigrants from Latin America as ideal workers since the turn of the twentieth century, the toughening of immigration controls, increased surveillance of Latino/a workspaces and communities and the imperatives of competition and expansion facing US agribusiness might force employers to replace Latino/as with labourers from other parts of the world, thereby changing the racialized structure of agricultural work. As the ethno-racial composition of jobs changes, we might expect the ideological terrain to change as well.

The evidence discussed here suggests that the racial division of labour and the hierarchies that exist in agricultural workplaces are not accidental, but produced from day to day by employers through the mobilization of racial ideologies and through practices enabled and sustained by such ideologies. Racial meanings influence employers' perceptions and assessments of workers, and employer practices serve as the mechanism through which racist ideologies become institutionalized and invisible. To contest the social and economic subordination Latino/as continue to face effectively, analyses and political praxis must attend to how racist ideologies become entrenched and invisible in institutional contexts like work. This involves identifying how racial meanings about Latino/as (and other groups) emerge, and are how they are used day-to-day by powerful institutional actors.

The research discussed here also highlights the relational and global dimensions of the racial politics of labour. The racial politics that subordinate Latino/a workers in the United States are bound within a system of *global apartheid* (Amin 2001, cited in Winant 2004, p. 88)

and a racialized global political economy. Those from the global south and east are subordinated in the world-systemic racial order, and their racialization is implicated in their super-exploitation in the global economy. In the context of globalization, if Latino/a workers become scarce or too demanding, agricultural employers have the competitive imperative and the flexibility to tap a cheaper and more readily exploitable labour force, in the US or abroad (e.g. Thai workers). Exploitation is aided by racialization, independently of who is racialized as subordinate. This highlights the need for a coalitional politics of labour, not just among Latino/as, but beyond pan-ethnic boundaries.

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Notes

1. Pan-ethnic labels such as Latino/a or Hispanic are problematic because they obscure vast differences in national origin, mode of incorporation, citizenship, race and class, for example. I use the label *Latino/a*, however, to highlight the shared dimensions of the experiences of these groups and their similar structural location (for illuminating discussions of the origins and political content of the labels Hispanic and Latino, see Gimenez 1998; Alcoff 2005).
2. Racialization refers to the production, reproduction of and contest over racial meanings and the social structures in which such meanings become embedded. Racial meanings involve essentializing on the basis of biology or culture.
3. Racial meanings are also resisted and contested. This paper focuses on how those in power articulate and use racial meanings.
4. Racialization entails the *relational* production of meanings, and the hierarchical placement of racial groups *relative to* one another. Racial stories about non-dominant groups (explicitly or implicitly) entail the production of racial stories about dominant groups, and are implicated in the reproduction of disadvantage for racially subordinated populations, and also in the maintenance of power and privilege for dominant groups. The meanings that circulate about Latino/as in agricultural workplaces need to be examined in relation to meanings that circulate about other groups (including whites).
5. Those identified by the US Census as non-Hispanic white.
6. In 2003, 97.3 per cent of owner-operators in Washington identified their race as white. The second largest group of employers (5.1 per cent) identified their ethnicity as 'Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino'.
7. The vast majority of agricultural production workers in Washington in non-managerial occupations are of Mexican origin (Stromsdorfer 2006).
8. Farm owners/operators, CEOs of agricultural firms and others who occupy supervisory or management positions and have the power to make hiring and personnel decisions, including, crew bosses, foremen, line supervisors, human resources directors.
9. Size is measured as number of employees. The sample included operations between six and 6,000 employees. Businesses with fewer than 100 employees are labelled as small; those

between 100 and 800 employees are mid-size; and those with more than 800 are labelled as large.

10. Differences among Latino/as might not be apparent to non-Latino/as, but are immediately discernible among Latino/as. The author, who is Puerto Rican, conducted the interviews with Mexican employers, and was always 'read' by respondents as non-Mexican given her accent and word usage.

11. The operations owned by Latino/as tended to be small. Seven out of ten Latino/a *owners* worked as foremen or supervisors in larger operations owned and managed by whites, and worked on their own businesses 'on the side'.

12. Colour-blindness revolves around the claim that one does not notice or think in terms of race, and the minimization or denial of racism as a factor that affects the lives of racial minorities (Bonilla-Silva 2006).

13. Macías (2006) shows that for second+-generation Mexican Americans, especially those with mixed ancestry, ethnicity also tends to be situational or optional.

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