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Ethnicity, Well-Being, and the Organization of Labor among Shade Tobacco Workers

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Abstract

The cultivation and processing of shade tobacco in the Connecticut River Valley (United States) is highly specialized and labor intensive, and dependent on a multi-ethnic workforce of migrant farmworkers from Latin America and the West Indies. Production is structured through an ethnically reified division of labor, constituted by historical migration patterns, English language ability, and racially-informed perceptions of what constitutes a 'good worker'. Regardless of position, these workers find themselves geographically and socially isolated, and subjected to hazardous and exploitative working conditions. This paper will explore the effects of these conditions on workers' physical and emotional well-being. Using Foucault's notion of governmentality, the paper demonstrates the ways in which these deleterious effects are embedded in workers' internalizing of race and ethnicity as naturalizing principles for self-regulation and the organization of work, and in neoliberal forces that produce a surplus of temporary, highly mobile workers from the global south.

Keywords

ethnic relations; farmworkers; Jamaicans; Mexicans; migration; occupational health; Puerto Ricans tobacco

Agriculture in the United States has long depended on a vast labor pool whose members can, as if by magic, be available to work when there is tilling and planting and weeding to be done and, just as magically, disappear from view once the harvest has been gathered. This historic sleight of hand depends on a class of exploitable workers, predominantly from Latin America and the Caribbean, who have few opportunities for employment in their home countries. It also depends on the general public's willful suspension of disbelief regarding the labor conditions that bring into existence the food on their plate, the flowers on their table, or the tobacco in their cigarette. Despite considerable variation in crop production, employer-worker relations, and the organization of labor within the US agricultural sector, workers typically experience high levels of exploitation, substandard housing, and hazardous working conditions.

These outcomes, coupled with the disruption of family life and feelings of dislocation that so often accompany labor migration, place farmworkers' overall health and well-being at risk (López 2007). Poverty and exploitation in the fields are nothing new, of course, as the writings of Agee (1988 [1939]) and Steinbeck (2006 [1939]), and the photographs of Dorothea Dix and Walker Evans in the 1930s, so eloquently attest. Indeed, twentieth century agriculture's reliance on a temporary, migratory workforce, and the concomitant shift of economic risk from employer to worker, foreshadowed those current processes of economic

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neoliberalism that structure much of contemporary working life (Molé 2010). Given the apparent continuity of hazardous and exploitive labor practices in the fields from the 1930s to the present (Griffith and Kassam 1995; López 2007), one may be left with the impression that little has changed since the times of the dustbowl. However, the particular ways in which farm laboring conditions are manifested and experienced—and their effects on health and well-being—are the product of specific histories, ecologies, modes of production, and economic conditions embedded within broader global processes and conditions.

A case study of shade tobacco cultivation provides a useful lens through which to examine these processes and relationships as they pertain to worker well-being. In particular, such a focus may provide important insights into the ways in which the dialectical relationship between local conditions and globalizing forces, between macro and micro processes of social control and labor fragmentation, contribute to the structural vulnerability of these workers.

In contrast to an increasingly Fordist approach to agricultural production in the United States, shade tobacco production in the Connecticut River Valley is highly specialized and labor intensive, with modes of production more analogous to those of the 19th century than the 21st. Paradoxically, this form of tobacco—which is used as wrappers for cigars—is a global product par excellence. Once the leaves are harvested and dried, for example, they are shipped to the Dominican Republic to be sold at auction to cigar factories throughout the island. There, the workers use the leaves to hand roll the cigars. After the cigars are assembled and packaged, most of these luxury goods find their way to the international market, including the US.

The global character of shade tobacco is also manifested in its cultivation and processing, since this work is carried out by a multi-national workforce of migrant farmworkers from Latin America and the West Indies. These activities are structured through an ethnically reified division of labor, constituted by historical migration patterns, English language facility, and racially and nationally informed perceptions of what constitutes a ‘good worker’. Regardless of position, these workers find themselves geographically and socially isolated—including from one another, via structural segregation by race/ethnicity—and subjected to hazardous and exploitative working conditions.

This paper will situate the effects of these conditions on workers’ physical and emotional well-being. In the context of neoliberal forces that produce a surplus of temporary, highly mobile workers from the global south, the structural vulnerability of these laborers are embedded in workers’ and growers’ understandings of race and ethnicity as naturalizing principles for the organization of work. More specifically, structural vulnerability—and its negative effects on well-being and occupational health—is constituted through the spatial, temporal, and ideological demarcations within these farms based on the national origin of its workers, which in turn reflects particular hegemonic conceptions of work, worth, and personhood.

Following a description of the study methods, I offer a brief overview of the history of shade tobacco and its long-term dependence on migrant labor, then discuss the particular living and working conditions that exist on these farms. With this foundation, I then describe the multiple cleavages between workers based on race/ethnicity and national origin. I argue that these antagonisms create a form of governmentality (Foucault 1991) that limits the ability of workers to advocate for improved occupational health and safety. Lastly, I attempt to link these forms of govermentality to a consideration of structural vulnerability (Hernández-Rosete Martínez 2005) as the medium through which the global circulation of labor and commodities is manifested.

METHOD

Data are derived from the qualitative component of a larger, mixed method study on alcohol use and HIV risk among migrant and stationary farmworkers. The dataset from tobacco workers consisted of 19 semi-structured interviews and three group interviews, in addition to field notes from extensive participant observation at six of the region's tobacco farms. Field work was carried out between 2002 and 2004. Qualitative interview participants were drawn from workers who had completed the survey portion of our study. We stratified the sample to account for the ethnic distribution of workers on the farms. Likewise, each group interview consisted of tobacco workers representing the three dominant national groups: Jamaicans, Puerto Ricans, and Mexicans.

Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were entered into MS Word. The research team developed the coding manual. All transcriptions and field notes were then coded by the researchers using a thematic analysis approach (cf., Miles and Huberman 1994) via the ATLAS.ti software package, Version 5.2 (Mohr 2006). We utilized standard procedures for ensuring consistency, including parallel coding of initial transcripts until coding agreement was achieved, and periodic audits of subsequent coded transcripts. Tentative findings were discussed during research team meetings, and these results subsequently were cross-validated to ensure credibility.

STRUCTURAL VULNERABILITY AND GOVERNMENTALITY

Daniel Hernández-Rosete Martínez (2005) has characterized structural vulnerability as those forms of social, cultural, political, and economic marginalization directed toward subaltern populations that result from particular constellations of power et. These relations, which serve to perpetuate relations of dominance, result from specific, asymmetrical matrices of power affecting particular groups of people within a given place and time (Hernández-Rosete et al. 2008). Thus, the characteristics of Connecticut-based farmworkers' vulnerability results from historic migration patterns, the modes of production required to cultivate and process shade tobacco, and the global conditions that create both the push and pull factors that draw informal migratory labor streams to the region from Latin American and the Caribbean.

However, structural vulnerability is not merely the product of coercive measures imposed by powerful interests (e.g., cigar companies, farmers, job brokers, government bureaucracies). In order for these oppressive mechanisms to be maintained over time, they must become internalized through the lived experience of social beings. In the current context, this taken-for-granted quality of structural vulnerability—which is analogous to what Gramsci (1988) refers to as common sense—has come to underlie all social relations on the farms.

Michel Foucault's notion of governmentality provides a useful framework for understanding how structural vulnerability is maintained over time. Governmentality in its most general sense refers to the organized practices, rationalities, and techniques through which subjects are governed (Burchell 1996; Dean 1999; Foucault 1991; Mayhew 2004). These organizing approaches are manifested through the actions of individuals, either singly or collectively, in order to influence the ways in which they conduct themselves (Burchell 1996). As discussed below, farmworkers' individual self-governance—and the hegemonic processes through which it is comprised and expressed—reflects prescribed notions of the embodied self in general, and of race, nation, and utility in particular. Not coincidentally, reproducing these notions of selfhood is critical to the disciplining of an otherwise free-floating migratory work force (Gómez Carpenteiro and Duke 2008). More concretely, governmentality has the effect of compromising worker health and well-being by fomenting ethnic competition and diminishing the likelihood of workers' advocating for improved labor conditions.

SHADE TOBACCO PRODUCTION IN THE UNITED STATES

In order to develop a clearer understanding of the characteristics of structural vulnerability among shade tobacco farmworkers, one must first examine its history and unique modes of production. Although cigarette tobacco is cultivated in warm, humid climates, the northeastern state of Connecticut is the world's leading producer of shade tobacco. The Connecticut River Valley's mild summers and rich, alluvial soil make it an ideal ecological region for cultivating these temperamental plants. Consequently, tobacco is Connecticut's number one agricultural export in dollars, accounting for $30 million in annual sales (Wolfe Boynton 2007).

Also in contrast to cigarette tobacco, which ultimately is ground into a coarse powder, the economic value of cigar wrapper tobacco is completely dependent on the integrity of the leaves. A single tear or blemish can reduce its value on the international market by 50 percent or more. As a result, this form of tobacco is extremely labor-intensive. Plowing and planting are the only stages of production that rely on heavy machinery. All remaining stages of production, cultivation, curing, and packing are carried out by hand. As a result, shade tobacco growers estimate that each leaf is handled ten times, a far higher number than for most agricultural products.

Shade tobacco was introduced into Connecticut from Sumatra around 1900. Initially, farm labor was carried out by area farmers and their families, most of whom were Polish immigrants. Over time, these farms became reliant on seasonal, proletarianized labor from local communities, and from a migrant labor force consisting of African Americans from southern states (Duke et al. 2004).

The Second World War resulted in chronic labor shortages in the tobacco fields. Citing the importance of tobacco to the national economy, the Connecticut Valley Shade Tobacco Growers Association petitioned the US government to allow foreign guest workers to serve as farm hands. As a consequence, large numbers of Jamaicans arrived in Connecticut to work in the tobacco fields, a pattern which continues to this day. Jamaican laborers receive work contracts brokered through the Jamaican Department of Labor. Workers who are selected and pass the required medical screening receive a temporary agricultural work visa (known as an H-2A visa) from the US government (Griffith 2006). Many of the Jamaican workers we interviewed were in their 40s or 50s, and had been coming to Connecticut for years to work in agriculture.

In addition to Jamaicans, a sizable population of Puerto Rican workers subsequently joined their West Indian counterparts in the tobacco fields following the war, principally from rural communities on the island. As a possession of the US, Puerto Rico's residents are US citizens and consequently do not need visas to work on the mainland. However, they too typically arrive at the tobacco farms through contracts between the grower and labor brokers on the island.

More recently, Mexican laborers have established an increasing presence in some of the region's tobacco fields. At the beginning of our research, most Mexicans had H2a work visas. However, in subsequent seasons, fewer Mexican workers were in possession of these documents. The latter were particularly vulnerable to exploitation, and to resentment by their fellow workers. This shift in migration pattern is directly attributable to structural changes in the international cigar market. Prior to the beginning of our fieldwork, for example, sales of luxury cigars had grown exponentially. Beginning in the mid 1990s, these products were marketed in Cigar Aficionado Magazine and other venues as both a safer alternative to cigarettes and as symbols of success and a luxuriant lifestyle (Burns 1998). As a result, cigar smoking enjoyed a brief renaissance among young professionals in the US,

including women. During the three seasons in which we carried out our research (2002-2004), however, the trend had already peaked, and the reduced fortunes of the shade tobacco industry had important consequences in terms of the workforce. Although Jamaicans remained the majority of the workforce throughout, due in no small measure to their ability to speak English, other migrant groups had different fortunes. The number of Puerto Ricans workers notably diminished from one year to the next. During the 2003 growing season, for example, one of the largest tobacco farms in the Valley employed 100 Jamaicans, and only 20 Puerto Rican workers, a significant decrease from the year before. As US citizens, many of these workers felt that they had the right to advocate for better working and living conditions, and were not reticent about bringing to the growers' attention unsafe or exploitative living and working conditions. However, as the international cigar market contracted, fewer of these workers were invited back, replaced by workers who were more dependent on staying in the good graces of the grower. Lastly, at the beginning of our research, most Mexican workers, like their Jamaican counterparts, arrived with labor contracts and H2A work visas in hand. However, in subsequent years, an increasing number of these workers lacked papers, because their labor was less expensive than those holding legal documents. Equally important, because undocumented workers did not sign labor contracts with their employers, they enjoyed fewer labor protections than contract workers.

WORKING AND LIVING CONDITIONS

Because of its unique cultivation, harvesting, and processing requirements, shade tobacco presents a host of challenges to workers' well-being. Because its leaves wither and burn in direct sunlight, for example, workers construct large mesh tarpaulins over the fields once the plants have sprouted. The temperature and humidity under these tarps can be quite high. During the warm summer months, it is not uncommon for the temperatures under the mesh to reach over 33 degrees Celsius. As a result, workers often complained of suffering from heat exhaustion and dehydration.

Because the price of each tobacco leaf is dependent on their being cosmetically perfect, the plants are sprayed with insecticides and fungicides during cultivation. It was common for workers to be ordered back into the fields a short time after spraying, without being provided appropriate protective gear. This exposure resulted in skin rashes, eye irritation, and respiratory problems. These maladies comprised the lion's share of workers' health complaints. In addition, because there were too few washing machines to accommodate the large temporary work force on most farms, workers were compelled to wear insecticide-tainted clothing, often for days on end.

Moreover, workers were discouraged from wearing gloves even when they were available, because they would impede the delicate handling of the tobacco leaves. This lack of protection would not only result in exposure to industrial chemicals, but would cause some workers also suffer from green tobacco sickness. A condition caused by handling tobacco plants, green tobacco sickness occurs when nicotine in the leaves is inadvertently ingested through the skin, resulting in an overdose of the drug (Arcury et al. 2001; Quandt et al. 2000). Although the resulting nausea and vertigo are temporary, green tobacco sickness may result in a worker missing one or more days of work and consequently, a significant reduction in remittances to send home to their families.

Access to clean water was another common complaint. Many workers reported, for example, that washing stations were often in short supply in the fields, despite their importance for rinsing off chemicals, or for sanitary purposes after using the restroom. In addition, potable drinking water was not always available at work sites. Some workers believed that the absence of water was deliberate, rather than the result of neglect: "Right now, they are even

restricting the water in the field. After noon they hide the water so that the workers don't go to drink water and take time from work. And the sun really hits you and you really become thirsty… It's not easy."

Once the tobacco has been painstakingly hand-harvested, the leaves are sewn into bundles. This activity requires speed and dexterity, and the repetitiveness can result in neurological stress injuries. The resulting bundles are then hung from a series of wooden beams in the curing shed, extending to a ceiling that can sometimes reach 6 meters (20 feet) or more. This work is particularly dangerous, since it requires workers to balance from each beam in order to pass the bundles to the uppermost reaches of the barn. Accidents are a common concern during this stage of production, with some workers reporting spinal and other injuries resulting from this process.

On some tobacco farms, workers also complained about the quantity of available food. Despite being charged $50 per week for meals, rations were considered meager, given the physically demanding nature of the work. Accordingly, most workers reported suffering from near-constant hunger pangs, and feeling light-headed from hunger by the end of the work day. Moreover, the housing conditions were notably poor on each of the farms visited by the research team. The barracks were hot and over-crowded, offering little privacy. Unlike the tobacco barns, which were freshly painted and meticulously maintained, and in many instances aesthetically attractive (O'Gorman 2002), the workers' barracks were inevitably in a state of disrepair.

In addition to threats to workers physical well-being, difficult working and living conditions also had negative impacts on their emotional well-being. For example, because labor camps were so isolated from population centers, workers often complained of boredom in the evenings or on days when rainfall made it impossible to work in the fields. Likewise, many workers suffered from a profound loneliness resulting from the necessity of leaving their spouses, children, and communities behind in order to earn a living. As discussed below, however, a relatively unique characteristic of shade tobacco farms that negatively affected emotional well-being concerned the segregation of workers, and the racial/ethnic antagonisms that such separation both engendered and exacerbated.

ETHNIC CONFLICT AND GOVERNMENTALITY

As the above discussion suggests, the ability of migrant workers to advocate for themselves is difficult even in the best of circumstances; as temporary laborers dependent on growers and labor contractors for their continued employment, workers who lobby for improved living and working conditions run the risk of being denied a contract for subsequent seasons. However, despite the commonality of workers' lived experience as outsiders in Connecticut's rural landscape, collective forms of advocacy were difficult to achieve due in no small measure to deep cleavages based on ethnicity and national origin. The diminishing fortunes of the cigar industry, and the increased competition it engendered, only exacerbated worker tensions. These ethnic divisions provided the foundation for modes of governmentality that diminished worker solidarity and, ultimately, contributed to the negative health and well being of these workers.

In order to improve their chances of being invited to return for the following season, laborers took great pains to be perceived by the grower as stoic, uncomplaining, and hardworking, even when carrying out hazardous tasks. Jamaicans enjoyed a well-deserved reputation in this regard. One, for example characterized the working conditions on the farm as "awful…It effects us a whole lot." However, he was quick to add, "we're here for a reason…we've got to live with certain things." Jamaicans spoke frequently, and with justifiable pride, about their ability to use their wages in Connecticut to subsidize their own

farms and ranches, or to pay for the education of their children. Jamaicans' ability to bear up to these difficult circumstances, coupled with their facility as native speakers of English and their greater experience with tobacco cultivation and production, have made them highly desirable to growers, and it is not uncommon for these workers to return to the same farm for ten seasons or more.

It would be erroneous to view Jamaican workers as indifferent to their plight, however. Many perceived their situation within the context of their ancestors' historic struggle as an enslaved people. For even the most docile worker, seasonal employment on a plantation overseen by whites would raise uncomfortable parallels. Referring to the poor treatment that they receive doing farm work, a worker remarked that, "We as a black man be slaves…'Get up! Go!' Not because you're a white man, or you're a black man or what say you. They can just push you around."

Apart from working conditions, social isolation was a particular concern with tobacco workers. For the Jamaicans in particular, residing in an isolated rural area could prove daunting. For example, on more than one occasion, local residents would call the police in response to the presence of large numbers of Afro-Caribbean men queuing up to call their families from a nearby convenience store pay phone. Jamaicans' somewhat privileged status on the farm thus afforded little protection from prejudice since, from local residents' perspective, farmworkers were ethnically marked as Latino, while the presence of black men in their midst was indicative of urban criminality. Despite local expectations regarding Latinos' unmarked status as farmworkers, these laborers also were viewed with suspicion beyond the perimeter of the farm. For example, some Mexican workers complained about their treatment in these predominantly white, insular communities: "We can't go out to the stores, because we're afraid that then they'll call the police or something….here there's a lot of corruption, racism."

Despite these shared experiences of prejudice and exploitation, workers' laboring identities were structured through tropes of difference rather than solidarity. Understanding these processes involves uncovering the ways in which the multiple dimensions of identity intersect within the cultural, social, and ideological structures that constitute lived experience and daily life (Durrenberger and Doukas 2008). In the current context, these cleavages were often structural in nature. For example, because of their English proficiency, Jamaican workers engaged in different—often more highly skilled—job duties than Latino workers. Furthermore, as Jamaicans tended to be more involved in the processing of tobacco than their Latino counterparts, they were usually able to remain on the job for a longer period of time. In addition, West Indian laborers were housed in separate barracks from their Latino counterparts, ostensibly because of linguistic differences. One farm even hired separate cooks for their Jamaican and Puerto Rican workers. As one Puerto Rican worker noted while pointing at the Jamaicans' barracks, "They have their life (over there) and here we have ours."

The relationship between Jamaican and Puerto Rican workers was complex on each of the tobacco farms we studied. Their lack of fraternization was largely the result of these two populations speaking different languages. However, Puerto Ricans' status as US citizens on the one hand, and perceptions of Jamaican workers as having privileged positions, also caused conflicts. When asked about what he would like to change about his living and working conditions, for example, a Puerto Rican worker expressed the ambivalence that many of his countrymen felt about their Jamaican co-workers:

> Changing things is difficult. We would have to talk to the farmers. I don't know, that's my opinion. But it's difficult because we are the only ones with citizenship. Imagine those who are not. I don't even want to think how it is like for them, the

> Jamaicans. They have to put up with everything. In my case, I am not forced to accept anything, because I have the door open, I can leave at any time. So, I feel sorry for them. I think they don't even realize that, but live as if they had everything. They even push us around. They criticize us. I don't understand them.

Many Puerto Rican workers had a less understanding view of their Jamaican counterparts, however. For them, Jamaicans' reticence about standing up for themselves was couched in racialized and sexualized terms, as evidenced in this group interview with Puerto Rican workers:

> FW1: I don't get along with them (Jamaicans).
>
> Interviewer: How come you don't you get along with them?
>
> FW2: (Laughing) It's because he hates black people!
>
> FW1: And why not? It's because some of them are submissive (*plegaos*).

The term *plegao* (or *plegado*) literally means bent over, and has an overtly sexual connotation of being in a passive or receptive role in a sexual encounter. This descriptive term, in addition to *apatronado* (a sycophant) was frequently used by Puerto Ricans to describe Jamaican farm laborers, the implication being that the latter are all too willing to do what they are told by the grower without complaint, no matter how dangerous or demeaning. Some of these perceptions clearly have to do with notions of race in Puerto Rican society more generally (Landale and Oropesa 2002), as indicated by the above exchange. However, Puerto Rican workers' privileged position as US citizens plays at least as important a role. As one such worker opined, "I think it must be because they [Jamaicans] are very submissive people. These are very humble people, as opposed to we Latinos who are part of this country."

For their part, Jamaicans felt that they had a stronger work ethic than other farm laborers. A Jamaican worker expressed a common sentiment about their self-identity as diligent laborers: "We do in one day what an American worker, or Puerto Rican worker do for maybe three days…and we are getting the same pay as the Puerto Rican or the Mexicans or the Americans." Another worker agreed with this sentiment, adding that "We are the hardest working people in this country."

In contrast, many Jamaicans viewed Puerto Rican farmworkers as unindustrious. Oftentimes, for example, Puerto Ricans' self-advocacy was interpreted by their Jamaican colleagues with suspicion, as a way to shirk their responsibilities on the farm. Moreover, Jamaicans pointed to Puerto Ricans' drinking behavior as an additional causal factor for explaining their work habits. As a Jamaican worker noted, "The main problem is that when the Puerto Ricans drink on Fridays, they don't wanna work Saturday, they don't wanna work Sunday, and they don't wanna work Monday."

However, Jamaicans' concerns about working alongside Puerto Rican and other Latino laborers extended beyond perceptions of their relative industriousness. Many felt that the medical evaluation they received prior to their departure both certified their overall healthy physical condition, and established a baseline against to monitor themselves against subsequent health threats. Although these workers articulated health concerns pertaining to their work on the tobacco farm (e.g., heat exhaustion, chemical exposure, accidents), most of their concerns pertaining to infectious disease were articulated in terms of exposure to workers who may not have been as thoroughly screened. A Jamaican worker explained the role of their pre-migration physical examination in shaping their subsequent vigilance this way: "(Let's say that) there is a glass of water, and each of you drink outa my cup. You know the type of person and type of medical (exam) we go through, right? And we drink

outa another person's cup…So if (other workers) carry a disease, we don't know. We know (that) our bodies come here healthy."

Jamaican workers frequently complained about Latino sanitary practices, noting that the latter tend to spit on the ground and that, as one worker observed, "They use the bathroom different than us Jamaicans." In contrast, as another worker observed, "The Jamaicans, what they are doing is up to my standards in terms of health." Consequently, Jamaican workers strongly supported the need to maintain separate housing from their Latino counterparts, not because of linguistic differences—which was the growers' stated reason for maintaining separate barracks—but because of sanitary issues and fear of contagion: "We all Christian brothers, but everybody carries a different symptom. That's the whole point. So we should divide ourselves like this. We're supposed to sleep with our fellows."

Thus, for Jamaicans workers, national identity and group membership are constituted through tropes of moral (industriousness versus sloth) and physical (cleanliness versus contagion) hygiene. In other words, the distinctions that Jamaicans make between themselves and Latino workers are codified and demarcated through bodily practice, as vehicles for the efficient production of labor, and as vessels that must continuously be vouchsafed against microbial pollution.

The body likewise served as a locus of Puerto Rican workers' negative conception of their West Indian counterparts. From this point of view, Jamaicans' embodied their alleged subservience to the growers, both physically (as a marker of race) and metaphorically via tropes of sexual subservience (as indicated by the term plegao). Puerto Ricans' dependence on labor contracts, coupled with their limited facility in the English language and their overall low status relative to Jamaican workers, consigned them to the structural category of 'foreigners' despite their US citizenship. Moreover, the increasing number of Mexican workers without H2A visas in hand meant that they now had to compete with a Spanish-speaking labor force that was highly desirable to growers, since were willing to work for lower wages.

Cleavages also existed between Spanish speaking laborers. Puerto Rican workers often decried what they viewed as Mexican's lack of work experience in tobacco cultivation and their reticence to join them in advocating for better conditions. Mexican laborers, in contrast, felt that their Puerto Rican counterparts treated them in a condescending manner, due to their legal status and to Boricua perceptions of rural Mexicans as unsophisticated. These negative views likewise were driven by the intense competition between both groups of workers, each of whom were at a disadvantage due to their lack of facility in English. As non-citizens, Mexican workers considered themselves particularly vulnerable to the whims of the grower, both in terms of being subjected to hazardous labor conditions and because of concerns that they may be the first to be laid off as the season draws to a close.

CONCLUSION

Threats to the physical and emotional well-being of farmworkers toiling in New England's tobacco fields are manifold: intense heat, chemical exposure, poor sanitary conditions, boredom, loneliness, substandard housing. The structural vulnerability to which these laborers were subjected derived from the particular constellation of power relations that existed on the farms, and the global circulation of labor and capital more generally. Benson (2008, after Lowe 2003) has noted that migrant labor camps are power saturated spaces created by the status of its inhabitants. In the current context, working and living conditions, the farms' location relative to communities in the region, and the spatial organization of these enterprises, are each the product of common sense notions of race, hierarchy, and

Otherness, which, in turn, contributes to the structural vulnerability of these workers. That is to say, workers' treatment by supervisors, farmers, and residents of surrounding communities, is predicated on their status as dark skinned Others (Kingsolver 2007).

Moreover, these conditions—and the health problems they engender—reflect growers' perceptions of workers as foreign, as a temporary presence, as members of a vast, replaceable labor pool for whom fostering worker satisfaction is, at best, a minor concern. For example, growers frequently perceived the worker housing they provide as superior to that in their home countries. "Why else would they return year after year?" they would be quick to ask.

Antagonisms between workers greatly diminished their ability to advocate for themselves. These frictions, occurring at the intersections of labor, race, competition and citizenship, became both embedded in social relations and embodied through social discourse. However, ethnically-based tensions between workers are ultimately a product of the capitalist division of labor, which lends itself to ethnic/nationally-based differentiation and antagonism. Philippe Bourgois' study of the multi-ethnic workforce in Costa Rica's banana plantations, for example, mirrors to a remarkable degree the forms of ethnically-based antagonisms seen in New England, including the relatively enhanced status of Jamaican laborers relative to those of other ethnic groups. On these Central American plantations, as on Connecticut's tobacco farms, the ethnically reified division of labor results in "a pressure cooker for generating ideology and for escalating ethnic markers into an antagonistic framework" (Bourgois 1989: 223).

This "antagonistic framework," expressed through differences based on race, citizenship, and moral and physical hygiene, and reflecting intense ethnically-based competition for jobs and work assignments, provides the foundation through which governmentality on the shade tobacco farms is manifested and reproduced. This resulting fragmentation of worker solidarity limits the ability of these laborers to address collectively the detrimental working and living conditions they face, and the social suffering that these conditions engender. The balkanization of these workers, coupled with the short term duration of their work assignments, makes their prospects of organizing for better wages and conditions extremely remote, particularly if engaging in such activities would reduce the likelihood of being invited to return for subsequent seasons. As a consequence, workers' physical and emotional well-being is likely to remain compromised from one growing season to the next.

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Biography

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