

## **Racial Formations in the “Nuevo” South**

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The rapid incorporation of large numbers of Latino immigrants into the lower reaches of the labor market is a development of great historical significance in the U.S. South. Immigrants from diverse nations, primarily in Latin America, are changing longstanding patterns of settlement and seeking jobs and economic opportunity in places like Morristown, Tennessee, Morganton, North Carolina and Atlanta, Georgia (Fink 2003, Capps, Fix and Passel 2002, Suro and Singer 2002). They enter a region whose political economy has long been racialized as a bipolar black-white construct, though with substantial internal variation by time and place. Only since World War II, when a combination of factors including agricultural mechanization, wartime labor demand, and the modern civil rights movement undermined legal and economic constraints on black workers' mobility, did the region's labor markets become integrated with those of the nation (Mandel 1978, Wright 1986). Today, the growing presence of Latino workers throughout the South (a phenomenon that was heretofore largely confined to only two states in the region, Texas and Florida) signals a new form of convergence between the region and the rest of the U.S. (Grantham 1994, Griffin and Doyle 1995), as well as a new era in the larger history of the global South.

Drawing on three years of community-based research, this essay explores the emerging racial formations engendered by Latino immigration to the South. How is the presence of these immigrants, particularly within local labor markets, transforming the largely bipolar racial construct of the region? Data from the 2000 census suggest two major patterns of immigrant employment in the highest Latino population growth areas of the South. One pattern, associated with predominantly white, non-metropolitan areas of the upper South, involves concentration in labor-intensive industries such as furniture and

poultry processing. Paradoxically, the arrival of this new labor force may allow the rural South to retain its dubious historical distinction as a haven for low-wage, labor-intensive industries that fled unionization and the wage demands of workers in other parts of the U.S. (Cobb 1982, 1984, Gaventa, Smith and Willingham 1990). Studies document the extensive hiring of Latino immigrants in poultry processing (Griffith 1995, Guthey 2001, Leiter et al. 2001), textiles (Anderson and Schulman 1999, Engstrom 2001, Hernández-León and Zúñiga 2000, Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2001), and, of course, agriculture (Simpson et al. 1999, Smith-Nonini 2001, Studstill and Nieto-Studstill 2001). Although capital flight and deindustrialization have taken a heavy toll on the employment base of many rural counties—and represent significant contextual factors in some white workers' hostile responses to the Latino presence in local labor markets—it also appears that new immigrants may be facilitating the retention of certain low-wage employers in the rural South.

A second pattern of employment is found in more urban locations with mixed economies, where immigrants cluster in a combination of industries, including construction, services (especially hotels and restaurants) and manufacturing. Curiously, little research has yet focused on labor markets in these historically “non-Latino” southern cities where the largest numbers of new Latino immigrants have recently come to settle. Cities like Birmingham, Atlanta and Memphis lack the multiple, long-established ethnic enclaves of the largest U.S. metropolitan centers, and do not feature the related complexities of ethnic “succession,” extensive ethnic niches, or institutionalized occupational segregation across diverse racial-ethnic groups (Catanzarite 2000, Hum 2000, Portes 1995, Waldinger 1997, Waldinger and Lichter 2003, Wright and Ellis 2000).

Furthermore, these are all majority-black cities, where African American workers predominate in the secondary labor market. These and other southern cities therefore represent important research sites to examine the emergence of new racial formations.

It should be noted at the outset that not all recent immigrants to the South are Latino, nor are all newly arrived Latinos immigrants. Some are U.S.-born migrants from Latino population centers in Texas, California, Florida and other states, and other new arrivals are immigrants from Asia, Europe and elsewhere. Despite these caveats, the overwhelming majority of immigrants who arrived in the South during the past decade are Latino, and the great preponderance of these Latinos are foreign-born, primarily in Mexico (U.S. Bureau of Census 1990, 2000). Moreover, according to our field research, many are undocumented and almost all of such immigrants—regardless of their class background—are employed in nonprofessional, working-class jobs (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000). One consequence of these and other factors is a popular construction of new Latino immigrants that conflates ethnicity with national origin, immigration status, language and class. It is this group, collectively (albeit inaccurately) called “the Mexicans” by some Southerners, with whom black and white southern workers interact in the lower reaches of the labor market, and which this paper addresses under the interchangeable rubric of “immigrants” and “Latinos.”

Field research in one non-metropolitan and one urban county, which are illustrative (though not necessarily representative) of the two settlement patterns identified above, suggests divergent patterns of racial/ethnic interaction and hierarchy, or racial formations. Although both black and white southern workers are responding with anxiety and in certain instances hostility to the immigrant presence in local labor markets,

their responses vary by race, the type of jobs at stake and the local context of employment and racial politics. In highly segmented labor markets like those of the U.S. South, specific jobs occupy positions in a larger hierarchy of opportunity, and carry history-laden meanings involving, among other factors, which racial groups have been hired into them and under what terms. The distinctly white supremacist response of a minority of white workers to perceived job competition from immigrants contrasts dramatically with expressions of a more lateral racial/ethnic rivalry or even solidarity from some African Americans. The findings indicate a complex association between anti-immigrant sentiment and white supremacy, which is articulated in part through a national, distinctly post-9/11 discourse of an embattled America.

### **Economic Boon or Threat?: Conflicting Academic Perspectives on Immigration**

Heated policy debates over the economic impacts of immigration provide the impetus and framework for recent research into job competition between native and immigrant workers (Borjas 1990, 1995, Borjas, Freeman and Katz 1997, Camarota 2001, Card 2001, Cornelius 1998, Hamermesh and Bean 1998, Smith and Edmonston 1997, Waldinger 1997, 1999, Waldinger and Lichter 2003). Proponents of restrictive entry policies point to immigrants' purported harm to the wages and job prospects of low-skilled workers, above all African Americans. Pro-immigrant forces typically counter that the educational level of low-skilled immigrants is on average far below that of African Americans, and that labor market segmentation ensures that new immigrants find jobs that native workers of all racial/ethnic groups have vacated or avoid. (See the summaries in Hing 1997, chapter 7, and Waldinger and Lichter 2003, chapter 11.) This academic

debate recapitulates the popular arguments of the streets: “immigrants take our jobs” vs. “immigrants take jobs that nobody else wants.”

Much of the research into this question involves quantitative data sets regarding wage rates and the pool of jobs in specific labor markets, but no consensus has emerged from the findings. Not surprisingly, many studies find that high levels of immigration are associated with significant economic growth at the aggregate level; immigrants are attracted to areas with expanding labor markets, where they spur further growth through their local expenditures. Research that seeks to tease out the potentially divergent impacts of immigration on different socioeconomic classes and racial/ethnic groups tends to find negligible to slight harm to low-skilled African American workers (see the essays in Hamermesh and Bean 1998). However, no study has found extensive displacement of any group of native workers by immigrants, leaving researchers in a quandary: Why does the popular perception that “immigrants take our jobs” seem to arise so pervasively when there is little quantitative evidence for the claim?

In recent years, some researchers have taken a different conceptual and methodological approach by interviewing employers of low-skilled workers in order to ascertain whether they favor certain racial/ethnic groups in the hiring process. Studies by Waldinger in Los Angeles (1997, Waldinger and Lichter 2003) and Kirschenman and Neckerman in Chicago (1991) find that, in hiring processes where employers are able to disregard level of education, prior work experience, credentials, and other skill-based criteria, they select instead for intangible attitudinal qualities that they sometimes articulate as “people skills.” In these large, urban labor markets, relatively unskilled (and low-wage) work is the province of diverse peoples of color, whom employers tend to

rank by group in terms of “attitude” (but see the discussion of “unskilled” labor in Waldinger and Lichter 2003). Race and ethnicity thereby come to function as proxies for employee tractability and manageability, which employers perceive as more prevalent among Latinos. Although this research has not necessarily explored attitudes regarding immigrants per se, the fact that employers favor hiring Latinos over African Americans and, in certain cases, over whites, could help explain why some native workers in the South perceive the predominantly Latino immigrant population as an economic threat.

The present research extends these other efforts by taking a more phenomenological approach, examining the local economic contexts that draw Latino immigrants and paying serious attention to the job-related experiences, attitudes and perceptions of native and immigrant workers themselves. The purpose is not to adjudicate the question of immigration’s economic impacts, but to probe the origins and content of workers’ perceptions, particularly those of native workers, regarding new entrants to local labor markets. Contextual factors—from recent de-industrialization to racialized patterns of labor resistance—serve to construct and mediate southern workers’ varied responses to immigration. The meaning and value that attach to different jobs, including their role in established local patterns of survival, are also influential. By examining a complex of factors that shape southern workers’ perceptions of immigrants, the present study avoids the excessive rationalism of exclusively economic analyses (and the implied irrationalism of native workers who fear job loss or competition). In addition, although previous research tends to focus exclusively on workers of color, under the assumption that white workers are too racially privileged to compete directly with immigrants for

unskilled jobs, the findings suggest that, at least in the rural South, this is a serious mistake.

### **Methodology**

This essay is the outgrowth of a three-year collaborative project involving the Center for Research on Women (CROW) at the University of Memphis, the Highlander Research and Education Center of New Market, Tennessee, and the Southern Regional Council (SRC) of Atlanta. Funded with grants from the Ford, Rockefeller and Charles Stewart Mott Foundations, in the fall of 1999 these three organizations launched a community-based research effort to document and analyze points of conflict as well as potential collaboration between new Latino immigrants and working-class—primarily but not exclusively African American—Southerners. Recognizing that the changing regional demographics of race and ethnicity were nothing short of historic, we sought to understand the implications of these changes for our organizational strategies regarding racial justice and civil rights, which we had long conceptualized in black-white terms.

Our regional analysis focused on the historically “non-Latino” South—i.e., Kentucky, West Virginia, and Virginia south to the gulf and west to Arkansas, omitting the states of Texas and Florida. (In this paper, “the South” refers to this narrower region.) Our research methods included utilization of standardized sources like the census to document the extent of racial/ethnic change from 1990-2000, as well as participant observation in countless local, state and regional meetings (some of which we convened) regarding immigration and/or multiracial organizing. Insofar as each of our organizations changed in ways that bore on the research topic—e.g., shifts in the racial/ethnic composition of staff and related tensions over political priorities—our own organizational



experiences became part of the database. We met two to three times each year as project staff to build a collective analysis, and conferred with staff at other progressive organizations in the region regarding their dilemmas and initiatives in the changing racial/ethnic context.

In addition, we conducted case studies of Latino immigrant settlement in the three areas where our organizations are headquartered: Hamblen County, located in Appalachian east Tennessee near the Highlander Center; multiracial metropolitan Atlanta, which is home to the SRC; and bipolar, black-white Memphis, “the capital of the Delta,” for CROW. The centerpiece of this field research was interviews with 177 people, including 97 Latinos, almost all of whom were recent immigrants, 54 African Americans, 9 Asians (all of whom lived in Atlanta) and 17 whites. In each racial/ethnic category, there were two groups of interviewees: those selected because as individuals they occupied positions of influence (e.g., civil rights leaders, immigrant rights advocates, local employers of immigrants, etc.); and those identified through a snowball process, most of whom worked in (or were laid off from) nonprofessional positions in local industries. In most instances, interviewers were of the same racial/ethnic background as interviewees. The interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed, except when circumstances made recording impractical (e.g., waiting in line at a temporary agency), or the interviewee declined to be recorded. This essay is based primarily on the research conducted in Appalachian east Tennessee and in Memphis, where we encountered recurrent—but complex and varied—job-related tensions and new racial formations involving African Americans, whites, and Latino immigrants.

### **Latino Immigrant Employment in the Nuevo South**

Data from the 1990 and 2000 censuses confirm a bimodal pattern of Latino settlement. In the eleven states that compose the historically “non-Latino” South (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia), the Latino population grew from 1990 to 2000 by more than one million people, at a rate of 194%. Four states stand out for their high growth rates: North Carolina (394%), Arkansas (337%), Georgia (300%) and Tennessee (278%). As Table I indicates, the five highest growth counties within each of these states tend to lie outside of metropolitan population centers. (This table omits high-growth counties where the Latino population in the 2000 census was still less than 1,000 people.) In all of these non-metropolitan high-growth counties, the economy is heavily dependent on manufacturing, primarily the relatively low-wage textile and poultry processing industries. With the exceptions of St. Francis County, Arkansas and Hoke County, North Carolina, these counties also have disproportionately small African American populations relative to their statewide average. In other words, these high-growth counties exemplify a pattern characteristic of southern industrialization since the “New South” movement of the late nineteenth century: they are all rural areas that, at least initially, drew investors because of their abundant supply of non-union white labor that could be hired for relatively low wages (see Cobb 1984, Gaventa, Smith and Willingham 1990, Leiter, Schulman and Zingraff 1991).

[Insert Table I here]

In contrast to this pattern of high relative growth, the largest absolute increases in the Latino population have occurred, not surprisingly, in the urban South (see Table II).<sup>1</sup>

In Georgia, for example, 62% of the Latino population lives in the Atlanta metropolitan area (where 50% of the state's overall population resides). Southern cities offer a more diversified employment base than manufacturing-dependent rural areas, and new Latino arrivals may be found in a range of jobs at the low end of the labor market. Their places of employment are not unlike those of working-class Latinos in metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles—hotels, restaurants, factories and warehouses—with the important difference that new Latino immigrants in the South tend to be excluded from customer-oriented service and retail jobs (e.g., a clerk in a department store). This is no doubt due to the limited English proficiency of many new arrivals and the absence of a large Spanish-speaking clientele in southern cities. The result is to narrow the employment options for women in particular, who predominate in such positions.

[Insert Table II here]

Despite the wider range of jobs available to Latinos in the urban South, men in particular tend to cluster in a single industry: construction. In DeKalb County, Georgia, for example, part of metro Atlanta, fully one-half of Latino men were employed in construction as of the 2000 census. Although these jobs are dangerous, seasonal and can require significant geographic mobility, they are not necessarily low-wage. Furthermore, building trades unions—like most unions—are generally not strong in the South, but white men have retained disproportionate control of skilled construction jobs in many locations, in part through a long history of exclusionary practices against African Americans. For these and other reasons, the rapid entry of Latino workers into a relatively high-wage sector that African American men have only partially accessed represents a potential flashpoint of job-related tensions. Similarly, the entry of Latino

immigrants into manufacturing jobs in rural areas hard hit by deindustrialization has the potential to evoke antipathy from white workers. Two of our case studies, one in rural east Tennessee and another in Memphis, illuminate these dynamics.

### **Economic Insecurity and White Supremacy in the Appalachian South**

Hamblen County lies in the Tennessee River Valley of Appalachian east Tennessee, nestled between the Cumberland Mountains to the northwest and the Great Smokies to the east. Morristown, the county seat, is home to 43% of the county's 58,000 people, and serves as a magnet for residents of adjacent counties who commute to its industrial parks to work. The remainder of Hamblen County's residents live in outlying areas, where many garden, grow a small amount of tobacco, or cultivate other cash crops to supplement their earnings from conventional but not always reliable jobs. Although its agricultural history remains visible in farms and expanses of green countryside, Hamblen County's employment base lies above all in manufacturing, which began to develop in the first half of the twentieth century. By 1927 there were eight locally owned woodworking mills, and in 1937 Berkline Corporation opened a furniture factory that remains to this day one of the county's largest places of employment. Like many areas of the rural South, Hamblen County's initial industrialization was dependent on natural resource extraction—in this case, timber from the great forests of the Appalachian Mountains.

However, unlike the company towns of the textile industry or the pattern of single industry dominance found in much of the rural South, Hamblen County's manufacturing sector rapidly diversified. Beginning in 1950, companies making synthetic fibers, apparel, hosiery, paper products, plastics, auto parts and other manufactured goods

increasingly built factories in the county. The lack of unions, low wages, and overwhelmingly white population (95% as of the 1990 census) were consistent draws. During the restive 1970s, boosters in the local Chamber of Commerce advertised the county's "very favorable labor situation," as evidenced in the "loyalty, sense of responsibility and dedication to the fundamental principles of justice and fair play [that] set [Hamblen County's work force] apart from the present day concept of a blue collar worker." Manufacturing employment quadrupled from 1950 to the present, though the 1% increase from 1990-2000 was far lower than that of previous decades. Today, the largest private employers are Berkline Furniture, MAHLE, Inc. (which makes aluminum pistons), Lear Corporation (automobile seat frames), Shelby Williams (contract seating), and Koch Foods, a poultry processor (Morristown Chamber of Commerce 2003).

Diversification did not protect workers in Hamblen County from the dislocations of economic restructuring that swept through the "Old Economy" industries of the U.S. manufacturing sector over the past two decades (Bluestone and Harrison 1982). Deindustrialization and capital flight to yet lower wage areas hit Morristown's furniture workers in particular; automation decreased job opportunities in the rayon plants; and contingent employment practices meant that workers who lost their jobs had to apply for new positions (in some cases even the same positions) through temporary agencies rather than a personnel office. The capital mobility of globalization came to Hamblen County not only through the movement of factory jobs to Mexico, Singapore and elsewhere, but also in the form of new investors, often in more capital-intensive production processes, from Europe and Asia. The mayor of Morristown sought to frame these recent changes in positive terms, as evidence of economic dynamism:

...We have seen major changes as portions of the furniture industry leave us.... Now you end up with a lot of plants that hire in the 50 to 250 range, with a few over 1,000 but not many. What used to be the chief output—say fiber at American, Inc. or furniture—are...replaced by other things, a lot of which are automotive in nature. We have eight of the Fortune 500 manufacturing companies operating in this area, and those are all American owned, but they provide less of the jobs than our international plants. We have about 13 international owned plants that fly about eight different flags.... Recently one of our larger companies was purchased by the Chinese who promptly closed it down and took the manufacturing back to their home in China. There is a constant interplay.

For workers with a history in Hamblen County's factories, these changes in product mix and corporate ownership mean spells of unemployment, diminished job security, and in some instances lower wages and the loss of fringe benefits. Older workers are particularly hard hit. Although certain of the new, relatively capital-intensive manufacturers offer wage and benefit packages that are excellent by local standards, their jobs tend to go to young graduates of local community colleges rather than to the 45- or 50-year-old laid-off furniture worker with a high school education. One young African American woman commented:

Morristown has always been a factory town, and a lot of the factories have closed or are closing, especially furniture factories. ...[W]e were always known for Berkline and Lee Industries. And Berkline has been sold and Lee Industries have been shut down, Shelby Williams the last I heard was going to shut down or move... As far as a problem in the work force, what I've seen has come as a result of NAFTA, because everybody ...thinks all the jobs have been sent to Mexico, and a lot of them have.

Into this context of economic tumult and insecurity, Latino immigrants began to arrive in large numbers during the 1990s. By the time of the 2000 census, the Latino population of Hamblen County had ballooned by 1,785%, outnumbering the small but longstanding black population and becoming almost 6% of the county's residents in the space of ten years. The Latino population was predominantly foreign-born (77%), and most originated from Mexico. Already bitter about the movement of local jobs to other

countries, including Mexico, many white working-class residents viewed the entry of Latinos into local labor markets as an aggressive threat that added insult to injury. Letters to the editor of the Morristown paper began decrying the Latino presence. One Latina commented, speaking of her white co-workers: “They view me badly, they don’t want me, they hate me.” A white woman recounted:

I just experienced this on the weekend: someone decided to come up and start telling me—and she didn’t even know me, that was the first time I had met her—that she had just lost her job because of the immigrants. I said, “How do you know that?” She couldn’t give me an answer, but I think what it went back to is that the job she had before this, ...that plant had shut down to relocate to Mexico. Then the place where she lost her job just last week had a few immigrants employed there, and when she lost her job she just naturally assumed that was why.

Within the locally defined hierarchy of manufacturing industries in Hamblen County, the jobs that many of these new arrivals secured in poultry processing and furniture production are among the least desirable—but for local workers, both black and white, still sometimes necessary—in the county. Koch Foods, the poultry processor, “where they actually kill the chicken, clean the chicken, cut the chicken up, package it, freeze it, and ship it out” is at the bottom of the hierarchy, followed by furniture work. One white woman described local attitudes toward jobs in poultry processing:

We’ve always called it the “chicken house,” and it was like—if you hit rock bottom, it was even a joke, if you lost your job or got laid off or whatever it was, like I would do anything before I have to go work in the chicken house. That’s something that was always said, and there were horror stories about the working conditions and what you were exposed to and the way the employers treated their employees....

In one sense, then, these immigrant workers “took jobs that no one else wanted,” but our Latino interviewees had also found work in more desirable manufacturing sectors, including furniture, fan assembly, plastic fence production and even auto parts.

Moreover, within the repertoire of survival strategies among white and black workers in Hamblen County, even stigmatized jobs in poultry processing represented fall-back positions in hard times.

Latino immigrants also unsettled the dualistic racial hierarchy of black and white in Hamblen County. Most interviewees—white, black and Latino—agreed on the intense hostility that some white workers in particular expressed toward new immigrants, and both black and white residents observed that Latinos had replaced African Americans as the chief target of white racism. This served to engender sympathy, rather than competition, between African Americans and Latinos. Two comments by different African American women illustrate this dynamic:

I think that the Hispanic community and the African American community get along a lot better than the Caucasian community in certain areas because of us both being minorities.... I noticed how the Caucasian community tends to lean more toward the Hispanic community now as far as the hassling and giving them a hard time and the racial comments and that sort of thing.

I think [the racial tension] is more between the Latinos and the Caucasians than it is the blacks.... [Latinos] are different and new, and then too they are moving in and probably taking over what [whites] consider their territory.... For years the white man has gotten used to the blacks and now another group comes in and it's just changed.

Significantly, both government agencies and organized hate groups played similar roles in contributing to local white working-class antipathy toward Latino immigrants. In 1995, just as immigration to Hamblen County and east Tennessee more generally escalated sharply, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) announced Operation South P.A.W. (for “Protecting American Workers”), a brief and largely symbolic series of raids to enforce immigration laws in the interior South. The Knoxville newspaper, in an article titled “Residents Laud Aliens’ Roundup,” reported that “legal



residents of the region, angry over losing jobs to illegal aliens, stood in the streets and cheered the agents on.” Ron Kidd, an INS supervisor from the regional office in Memphis, was quoted: “Seldom have we been welcomed with such open arms by the public. To have people stopping us on the street, shaking our hands and applauding is an eye-opener to the most seasoned INS veteran” (*Knoxville News Sentinel* 1995).

More recently, in January 2002, the Morristown-based chapter of the Ku Klux Klan organized a rally at the courthouse in neighboring Cocke County, one purpose of which was to protest “the growing non-white flood of illegals into our communities.” Literature promoting the event called for closing the nation’s borders “before American-hating foreigners pollute and destroy your community. We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.” The rally drew about 50 Klanspeople, with additional supporters in the crowd. However, a counter-demonstration, organized by the NAACP, Jewish anti-defamation groups and others, drew 800-1,000 people. In addition, a celebration of diversity at the local high school, supported by the mayor and district attorney, was held to counter the Klan’s message of hate.

In view of stubbornly pejorative stereotypes about white Southerners, it is important to stress that this overtly white supremacist response to Latino immigration was not the product of some presumably pervasive neo-Confederate racism. Many people in Hamblen County have sought to welcome new immigrants, health professionals and other service providers have organized to meet the needs of Spanish-speaking clientele, and local churches have in some instances begun to offer services in Spanish. The mayor of Newport, the town where the Klan rallied, is African American, elected by an overwhelmingly white population. Moreover, the Klan’s ecumenical hatred—directed

toward Jews, communists, homosexuals, African Americans, etc., as well as immigrants—made allies of many individuals and organizations in the area.

Nevertheless, it is instructive to examine seriously the complex of negative attitudes expressed toward Latino immigrants in Hamblen County, for they extend beyond the specific question of job competition and reveal larger political themes that contribute to the processes of racial formation. Although factors specific to the context of Hamblen County evoked white hostility, local expressions of anti-immigrant sentiment drew their ideological strength and framework from decidedly national, rather than regional, themes in conservative thought. These include the conflation of whiteness with American identity, a class resentment that defines the “real” Americans as “working people,” and a militant nationalism that is combined with disdain for the established government (Castro 1999, Ferber 1999, Perea 1997, Sanchez 1997). Within this perspective, greatly potentiated by the events of September 11, foreigners threaten white supremacy and the already precarious status of working people—both of which are symbolically represented by an endangered America—while elected officials do nothing effective to protect the citizenry. The chilling implication is that it will be necessary for “people” to take matters into their own hands. A local labor leader expressed this complicated and ominous perspective in a statement that is worth quoting at length:

I don't think [residents of Hamblen County] are actually against the people because they are Mexicans. I think it is sort of a complex deal where they are mad at the government for opening the doors. They know they are losing their jobs to foreign competition, and [the Mexicans] don't really care about the jobs that much; ...they are just over here on a free ride. They don't ...really care about America...

I'll tell you what I hear through the grapevine: we are going to have a real problem here in America. It will probably wind up being racial. I'm not saying anything against the Latino, but I hear there are groups here in the South and the

Midwest that is just ready to roll if things don't change. I'm not a fanatic, and I'm not reading this out of any kind of lunatic magazine, but I'm thinking people are really getting down on the politicians more and more...[T]here is not going to be any kind of move made...to change anything to benefit the working people. And I think the NAFTA thing and losing the jobs—if this economy drops down, I believe [America] is going to be a violent place.

White antipathy toward Latino immigrants in Hamblen County is neither exclusively racist nor distinctively southern. Rather, it partakes of a larger ideology that is all the more powerful because of its acceptable appeal to a nationalism that disguises white supremacy within imagery of an embattled America. It is this ensemble of mutually reinforcing beliefs—rather than a more narrow ideology of racial exclusion—that frames the local process of racial formation and links it directly to the dynamics of national politics.

### **Economic Rivalry and Racial Solidarity in the Delta**

Memphis, Tennessee, center of a metropolitan area encompassing some 1.1 million people, lies on the banks of the Mississippi River at the juncture of Arkansas, Mississippi and Tennessee. Ever since the early 1800s, when the city emerged as an important way station for the westward movement of people and goods over land, as well as a port serving traffic on the river, the transportation and distribution sector has been a mainstay of the economy. Cotton, shipped from the huge plantations of the Delta to Memphis warehouses and brokered through its cotton exchange, became both fuel and symbol of the city's growth (Sigafoos 1979). The close interdependence between Delta agriculture and the mercantile economy of Memphis made the city a magnet for rural migrants from Mississippi, Arkansas and west Tennessee, and tied its white elites to the conservative racial politics and exploitative labor practices of the Mississippi Delta. The influence of this history can still be felt in a repressive social and political atmosphere

that some residents describe as an “urban plantation.” Black poverty rates are high (35% for children under the age of 18), median household income is 45% below that of the white population, and deep class cleavages within the African American population, among many other factors, stymie initiatives toward racial justice (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000, Honey 1993, Pohlmann and Kirby 1996, Schmidt 1997).

Today, Federal Express Corporation, which is headquartered in Memphis, anchors the city’s economy (Sigafos 1983). Although its overnight delivery service epitomizes a technologically updated distribution sector, no longer dependent on cotton and river traffic, local jobs in warehousing and transportation remain far from high tech. For black men, jobs as packers, forklift operators, truck drivers and other manual positions in the distribution sector represent their largest source of employment (19.1%), followed by production jobs in manufacturing (15.3%) (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000). Black workers, both women and men, dominate blue-collar jobs in the city, far out of proportion to their representation in the local labor force.<sup>2</sup>

During the 1990s, the aggressive expansion of Federal Express set off a frenzy of warehouse construction in the Memphis area, as companies for which speed of product delivery is an important consideration sought to locate facilities close to “The Hub.” The resulting tight labor market drew rapidly escalating numbers of Latino immigrants, particularly men, and in warehouses, factories and construction sites these new Spanish-speaking arrivals and the city’s black workers increasingly encountered each other (Mendoza 2002, Mendoza et al 2001). By the time of the 2000 census, the Latino population of the wider metropolitan area had grown to 27,520, an increase of 265% in the space of ten years; however, researchers using vital statistics and school enrollment

records estimate that the actual number could be at least twice the official count (Burrell et al 1997, 2001).

As in Hamblen County, there are many contextual factors in Memphis that would seem to encourage hostile attitudes toward Latino immigrants, in this case among black workers. Perhaps most important is the eagerness of white employers, when presented an alternative to African American workers, to access the new immigrant labor force. Although employers across the spectrum of Memphis businesses have either hired Latino workers or hope to do so in the future (Mendoza et al 2001), it is particularly noteworthy that this is happening in the stronghold of black male working-class employment: the distribution sector. Personal interviews with employers in four large warehouses revealed an extreme interest in, indeed preference for, Latino workers. In three of the four warehouses, employers were moving to create *all*-Latino work forces in their manual labor positions, and the fourth had subcontracted that operation to a company employing a work force that was half Latino. Temporary labor supply agencies, which funnel many workers to these warehousing jobs, have hired bilingual staff to help meet the increased demand for Latino workers. One such agency reported a database of 10,000 Latino applicants during a two-year period. Agency personnel and warehousing employers explained the interest in Latino workers by asserting that they are exceptionally dependable, reliable, flexible and productive, with the implication often made explicit that “other” workers do not exhibit these traits (Ciscel, Smith and Mendoza 2003).

African American workers in Memphis also encounter Latino immigrants at the building sites of the construction industry. This is one of few workplaces where these two groups of color also interact with whites as co-workers. Indeed, the building trades

are among the last bastions of relatively high-wage blue-collar employment for white working class men in Memphis—a position that they have defended historically through exclusionary practices toward other workers (Honey 1993). Even in this majority-black city, where African American workers predominate disproportionately in blue-collar jobs, the construction trades are still 50% white (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000).

Nevertheless, Latino workers have gained more than a foothold in this industry: they rose from a negligible portion of the labor force in 1990 to account for 18% of construction workers as of the 2000 Census. Latino men have utilized the networks of migration to organize highly mobile crews to do plumbing, roofing, carpentry, painting, bricklaying, drywall installation—in short, most jobs in the building trades except electrical wiring. Hired at a reported \$11.00-16.00/hour, they earn wages that are excellent by local standards for blue-collar work.<sup>3</sup> Construction represents by far the largest single source of employment for Latino men in Memphis, 36% of whom work in this one industry. Indeed, in cities across the South, the entry of Latino men into construction is so pronounced and consistent as to warrant a far more extensive research effort than this case study permits.

On multiple counts, then, it would seem likely for African American workers in Memphis to view Latino immigrants as an economic threat and to respond accordingly. Surprisingly, interviews with 26 black workers yielded few references to job displacement; rather, they articulated a range of diverse and subtle attitudes regarding Latino co-workers and, more generally, the Latino presence in Memphis. Some black workers did report that *other* blacks complained of Latinos “taking our jobs,” but only one of 26 interviewees actually voiced such an attitude herself. (However, it should be

kept in mind in interpreting these findings that they are based on a small convenience sample of workers, all of whom were employed at the time of the interview and most of whom worked in the distribution sector.)

Black workers' observations and commentaries about Latino immigrants ranged through language barriers, food habits, sexual attraction, the racism of white employers, pace of work, sanitary practices, and a host of other topics. Unlike the white workers of Hamblen County, many black workers in Memphis interact with Latinos not only at work, but also in their rapidly diversifying neighborhoods, on basketball courts, and in other settings. Moreover, many interviewees' assessments of Latinos were contradictory and varied with the topic at hand. For example, a 27-year-old African American man described some of the Latinos in his neighborhood as "trashy," but later asserted of work relations in a distribution facility: "I can get along with them. I don't have a problem with them, I talk to them, laugh with them, smile with them. I don't have a problem with them. It's not *them*—do you know what I'm saying?" (The unspoken problem is the white employer—or perhaps whites more generally—rather than Latino co-workers.)

Many of the black workers whom we interviewed also expressed a sense of economic commonality with Latinos. Comments from three different black men, all of whom worked in the same packing plant with Latino co-workers, illustrate this attitude: "I'm out here struggling just like they are." "They are trying to make a living like I am." "Just like anybody else, they need to work.... Who am I to say they shouldn't be over here?" The absence of an exclusionary sense of entitlement to their jobs among these black men is striking—particularly in contrast with the attitudes expressed by white workers in Hamblen County.

At the same time, the belief that Latinos, as immigrants, were eligible for special economic benefits from the government—an inaccurate but widespread perception at all three research sites—evoked some of the most heated comments in the interviews. One African American man from Mississippi, who had spent time in prison where there was “conflict every other day” between blacks and Latinos, commented: “Every race always, in my opinion, has something bad to say about the black person.... Man, they come over here and get shit free, taxes free—give us a fucking break. It will come back on them, it will come back on this raggedy ass country.” Another worker stated: “All of them that are coming over here get money... to start stores and live here. The way I feel, we are the ones that built all of this, and we can’t get shit.”

Two arenas of work-related conflict that were mentioned most frequently by blacks—and to which Latinos attested as well—were language differences and a complicated set of issues surrounding the acceptable intensity of work effort. Problems with language differences far exceeded the mechanics of communication. Several African Americans expressed skepticism that immigrant workers really could not understand English; they suspected that Spanish speakers exploited the language difference, calculating when it was in their interest to understand and when they were better off feigning ignorance of English.

The resulting tensions were the subject of several commentaries by black workers at the packing plant, where communication difficulties could reduce production and, ultimately, pay. For the line leaders, responsible for maintaining production on a specific conveyor belt, the pressure and frustration were particularly acute. One line leader commented:



In my opinion, some of them [Latinos] work good, and some of them try to ease their way by, because they will pretend like they don't understand what you are saying. So, in my opinion, I feel like if you are not bilingual, ...if you don't understand what I'm trying to tell you, then what do you look like working for me?

This same worker also pointed out that the problem lay in part with higher management, “the people you work for. They put pressure on you, and then you put pressure on the people that work on your line.” Hiring bilingual line leaders to circumvent such communication problems could also generate resentment. One twelve-year veteran of the plant, also a line leader, commented: “When they [Latinos] first started coming about three years ago, the ones that were bilingual and could run the lines, they were given more money than the line leaders that were already here and were treated better and everything else.”

The most complex and potentially divisive issue that black workers articulated—which Latino workers echoed even more loudly—involves the intensity of work effort. “Being worked like a Mexican” has become for black workers in Memphis a slang phrase that connotes extreme exploitation. “Mexicans work cheap” is a related assertion that stings the pride of many immigrant workers, perhaps especially men. As one Latino construction worker passionately argued, mimicking the claims of African American workers: “‘They [Latinos] are cheap, they are miserable!’ Why do they [African Americans] say that? Because we make much more money than they do! Our wages are higher than theirs.” The additional counter-assertion by some Latino workers that “we can work twice as fast and produce twice as much [as] other workers” is clearly a source of pride. The related implication that African Americans are lazy and “don’t want to work” is often made explicit. Some black workers counter this insult with a different

analysis: “[T]hese Mexicans come in and out of here, and a lot of times they think they are better workers, and like I said some of them do work good. You have a lot of blacks that work good, but you are not going to use [exploit] a black person too long.”

Although framed by employers (and some academics) as a difference in work ethic and labor productivity, this conflict arises at least in part from the discrepancy between African American modes of labor resistance and immigrant workers’ strategies for economic survival. For black workers, not being “used” or “worked like a Mexican” invokes a tradition of resistance against the racialized super-exploitation of their labor, most starkly institutionalized—and still in the historical consciousness of many black Southerners—in the brutality of slavery. Working slow, working “to rule” and simply working at a pace deemed commensurate with the rate of pay and quality of working conditions are all time-honored forms of labor resistance (see Goings and Mohl 1996, Kelley 1994, Scott 1990). Although Latino immigrant workers in the “Nuevo New South” have already demonstrated their capacity to organize and contest what they consider unjust treatment (Fink 2003), the daily, collective practices whereby workers undermine managerial control and maintain their own acceptable pace of work run counter to immigrant survival strategies and the vulnerability of undocumented workers. Out-performing American workers is a means of maximizing the likelihood of retention by employers, as well as countering any disparagement attached to “immigrant,” “illegal alien” or “Mexican.” A group interview involving three Latino construction workers in Memphis analyzes the related tension between African American and immigrant workers:

R1: I think the problem of discrimination from blacks against Hispanics is because the blacks are used to work at a certain speed. When we arrive, we work as fast as we can so we can be recognized. This is what bothers the American

blacks, because in a certain way, we are competing.... They are not happy because we try to do our best...

I: And do they confront you right away when they don't like it?

R1: Yes, in a certain way, but they are not mean.

R2: They say, "Slowly, take it easy." If you want to slow down, you feel uncomfortable because you think the boss will say something. He might not, right? But you feel uncomfortable anyway.

At a more theoretical level, this conflict may also be interpreted as a painful illustration of the way that differential rates of labor exploitation can become framed as racial/ethnic conflict. Latino workers are not unaware of the implications of their extremely high work output: employers ratchet up expectations, so that the pace of work can become intolerable. Moreover, setting the level of extra work effort—one that makes the immigrant indispensable to the employer yet does not allow for unacceptable levels of exploitation—was a subject for negotiation and even dispute among Latino immigrant workers themselves. The following lengthy but extraordinarily revealing exchange between two Mexican immigrants, both men, illustrates these conflicting considerations:

R1: I [worked] in a [construction] company with all Hispanics. The bosses were Americans, but all Mexican, and everyone went really fast, but really fast, hitting bricks and blocks. Over there and over here, and the jobs were over like that. Now, I've come back to the company [where I was before], and I still go really fast....

R2: But I think that, after all, that could work against Hispanics. Yeah, because every time they demand more for less pay. If you produce more, they are paying you less, right? And as we say, [the result is] to "burn up" the work, to devalue it...

You have to be better, but... I don't want to give my labor to an American. If they ask me for 10 boxes, maybe I'll make 11 because my quality should be better, but I don't have any reason to make twenty... I experienced that [in a combination warehouse and manufacturing facility], didn't I? They asked for 15 monitors, and there was always someone who shouted: "I made thirty!" Why make thirty? Why make thirty if they are asking for fifteen, right? I thought the

people who made thirty were half crazy. I mean, OK, I can make thirty monitors, too. But why am I going to make thirty if they are paying me for fifteen? Either I make sixteen, or I make seventeen.

In sum, the intensity of work effort is among the most profound and divisive sources of conflict between African American and Latino immigrant workers in Memphis. Although some African American workers do fear and resent what they perceive as job displacement by Latinos, other work-related concerns are more prominent among those we interviewed. For *both* groups, surviving with dignity at work is a common desire, but it drives widely divergent strategies for influencing employer authority. However, black workers' sense of economic, and to some extent racial, commonality with Latino workers, and both groups' desire to resist the undue exploitation of their labor may yet provide the common ground required for unity.

## **Conclusion**

Latino immigrants are transforming the bipolar racial construct of the U.S. South. Although this study focuses primarily on local labor markets, far more is at stake than job competition at the local level. Many workers—black, Latino and white—are well aware that it is not simply local labor markets, but the political economy of the globe that is changing; the complexity of their work-related tensions, complaints and analyses reflects that awareness. The immigrant presence in the U.S. South is an important element in processes of globalization involving flows of capital, labor migration and newly complicated configurations of racial/ethnic identity, national origin, class and immigration status—all of which contribute to racial formations in the region. Unfortunately, although Latino immigration opens up the fixity of the black-white divide in the South, it does not diminish the force of white supremacy. Whether the emergent

racial formation places African Americans on the bottom, as in Memphis, or Latinos, as in Hamblen County, whites remain on top. However, the case studies also suggest that the activation of white racism can make allies of blacks and Latinos, creating possibilities for collective action and new racial formations—indeed, even the un-making of race—which have rarely existed in the bipolar South.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>In absolute terms, Latino population growth from 1990-2000 in Virginia exceeds that of Tennessee. However, this table includes Tennessee because of its high relative growth (see Table I).

<sup>2</sup>Black workers, both women and men, account for 72% of “material moving” workers and 62% of production workers in Shelby County (where Memphis is located), even though they are only 42% of the labor force overall. (The smaller proportion of black workers in the labor force vs. the population as a whole is due to different age distributions and labor force participation rates between blacks and whites, especially among men.)

<sup>3</sup>This wage range is based on interviews, conducted by Federico Gomez, with 23 Latino construction workers in Memphis. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Employment Statistics Survey (2000) indicates a wage range between \$8.30 and \$12.97/hour for unskilled and semi-skilled construction jobs in the area.

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