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Latina/o identities, the racialization of work, and the global reserve army of labor: Becoming Latino in Postville, Iowa

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Abstract

This article argues that the experiences and group formation of the Latino population in the United States can best be understood by employing a framework which examines global economic and political forces—forces which draw upon Latin America's *global reserve army of labor* to meet and exceed U.S. national labor demands in order to increase capital accumulation. While cautioning against viewing Latinos as a homogenous “culture,” the authors’ framework acknowledges shared racialized historical experiences and examines how a large segment of the Latino population fits into distinct spheres of the U.S. labor and economic system. The authors ground their theoretical framing using a case study of Guatemalan immigrants in a small U.S. Midwestern town. The authors conclude that Latinos in U.S. labor markets are used to perpetuate power dynamics, disrupt worker consciousness, and racialize Latinos around jobs.

Keywords

Latinos, identity formation, labor, global reserve army of labor, neoliberalism, immigration

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The impetus for this article and framework was a trip the authors took to Iowa during the spring of 2012 to collect data for another line of research one of the authors had been working on involving the disruption of transnational Guatemalan networks in Postville after the 2008 immigration raid on the town's *Agriprocessors* kosher meatpacking plant—at the time, the largest producer of kosher meat in the United States and the largest worksite immigration raid in U.S. history (Camayd-Freixas, 2013; Jones, 2012). The raid by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) netted 389 undocumented workers (the majority—290—Guatemalan) in this small Midwestern town of approximately 2200 residents. Situated near the Wisconsin border in northeastern Iowa (near the Mississippi River), Postville had grown over 54% in just 10 years, from 1990 to 2000, mostly as a result of immigration (U.S. Census, 2011–2012).

Drawn at the time by prospective employment, transnational ties, a growing co-ethnic community, and affordable and tranquil Midwestern living, Guatemalans in Postville soon became an indispensable part of the local economy (i.e., through their labor, their purchasing power, and their children's enrollment in the local schools) (Sandoval, 2013, 2014). Many of the local people we spoke to during that April visit told us that Postville would most likely be a ghost town if it were not for the Latino community. At the very least, the local schools would not have enough students to remain in operation and thus employ teachers and administrators; and the town's white children would not have a local school to attend.

At the height of the Latino “boom” in Postville, the town had a Guatemalan bakery, four Guatemalan stores and three Guatemalan evangelical churches. When we arrived in Postville in that spring of 2012 (Olivos' first visit to Postville and Sandoval's eleventh), the town still had a significant Latino presence, particularly in the town's two schools (an elementary school and a middle/high school), and there were a couple of Latino businesses still in operation in the small downtown area. The meatpacking plant had reopened and new waves of immigrants (Somalis, Ukrainians, Mexicans, and Guatemalans) were establishing themselves in the community. Interestingly enough, a significant number of the deported Guatemalans had also returned to Postville under a U-Visa,¹ and some had even returned to their old jobs in the meatpacking plant.

The ICE raid made the small town of Postville infamous in immigration circles (see Camayd-Freixas, 2013). Scholars, filmmakers, human rights activists, clerics, and reporters have all descended on Postville after the raid to document the negative “effects” the raid had on the immigrants and the community—as if the raid and the subsequent deportations were the only setbacks these Guatemalans had encountered or suffered in their lifetimes. The truth is that the Guatemalan immigrants in this town (like many other Latino immigrants and families in the United States) can trace the origins of their U.S. presence, and their cross-generational economic subordination, to the U.S.'s seeds of expansion and imperialism—planted over a century and a half ago in their and their ancestors' countries of origin (Galeano, 1997; González, 2011; Grandin, 2006). Chomsky (2014), for example, argues, when writing about undocumented Guatemalan Mayan workers

in the United States, that “their technical illegality in the United States is but a small part of a system that has worked to control their movement and labor for hundreds of years” (p. 70).

This visit to Postville (and a summer 2011 visit to the Guatemalan villages of Calderas and El Rosario—the origin communities of many of the Guatemalan deportees) prompted the ideas for this article. This article is intended to examine the movement of Latin American labor across geopolitical borders and the nature of “Latino work” in the United States (immigrant and non-immigrants alike). Specifically, we lay out a framework and a case study for analyzing the phenomena of Latino ethnic and labor formation in a “Latino new growth” destination in the United States during an era of economic and cultural globalization and neoliberal policies. We begin by opening a dialogue about what it means to be a Latino. In other words, how do prevailing discourses around cultural nationalism, language, and ethnicity inform the Latino experience in the United States? And how do these discourses overshadow, or even silence, other discourses which attempt to explain Latino identity construction using structural analyses?

Many articles and studies “on Latino groups [in recent decades have] focused on demographic phenomena, language, culture, and other descriptive traits” to describe this group’s formation in the United States (Robinson, 1993: 29). They often highlight the growth of the Latino population in the United States since the 1990s and/or its current status as the largest, and at one time, fastest growing “minority” group in the country and then lay out a series of “implications” this presence has on U.S. society (i.e., schools, national identity, political and social incorporation and public engagement, etc.) (Motel and Patten, 2012; Passel et al., 2011). These studies are useful in that they help policymakers and institutions consider the changing nature of their work and the changing face of this nation. What is missing from many of these studies, however, is an examination of “material conditions, class structure, and cultural change as central to the discourse” around Latino identity formation and presence. In other words, Latinos are diverse groups of people whose commonalities are often homogenized around issues of language or expressive cultural traits. Robinson (1993), however, argues that

cultural and political determinants are relevant, but *subsidiary*, in that they only become ‘operationalized’ through structural determinants rooted in the U.S. political economy and in an historic process of capital accumulation in which Latinos share a distinct mode of incorporation. (p. 30)

Considering the experiences of Latinos through a structural economic approach is not new (see, for example, Darder and Torres, 1998; Hernández, 2002; Moore and Pinderhughes, 1993; Parrado and Kandel, 2010; Robinson, 1993; Suárez-Orozco, 2001, etc.). It is, however, an often overlooked or underappreciated approach. Consequently, our analysis integrates an exploration of the movement of global capital and labor across geopolitical borders (the former is often done with ease, and the latter has resulted in the exploitation and death of many individuals as the

state selectively chooses which labor it lets in and which it criminalizes) and a critique of the neoliberal ideology which legitimizes these exercises of exploitation as necessary consequences as societies move toward “modernization” and the amelioration of world poverty and misery via the “liberation” of economies and capital. We conclude by operationalizing our framework with an examination of how Guatemalan immigrants were structurally incorporated into the meatpacking town of Postville, IA via a distinct mode of low-wage exploitative labor.

Globalization in small town, USA

No examination of the status of Latinos (or other racialized “minorities” in the United States) can be adequately carried out without examining (1) the global economic context of transnational capital and labor networks among and between “central” and “periphery” nation states (or regions), particularly in this era of intense globalization, (2) the racial division of labor, and (3) the simultaneous development of socioeconomic systems of exploitation and racialized inequalities in the United States (Foster et al., 2011; Robinson, 1993). For this reason, we first provide a brief description and analysis of the global context that shapes the experiences of Latinos in the United States as well as structural factors that undergird their identity formation as a Latino “minority” during this era of globalization.

Globalization in its most general sense refers to the shrinking of the world’s virtual spaces via capital investment, technological communication, and information advances. Globalization is also characterized by the “emergence of global markets and post-national knowledge-intensive economies” (Suárez-Orozco, 2001: 345). Suárez-Orozco (2001) refers to globalization as the “deterritorialization of important economic, social, and cultural practices from their traditional mooring in the nation state” (p. 347). In other words, globalization is a “post-national” and “post-geographic” era which includes many social, economic, political, and cultural practices which overlap, crisscross, and bleed over national boundaries making it impossible to map (Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

The last three decades have seen a great increase in the globalized manufacturing of products. Products which were once primarily produced by semi- or highly skilled workers from a particular nation are now assembled across multiple borders by laborers subcontracted by multinational corporations in search of cheap, exploitable, non-unionized labor, lax environmental regulations, easy access to raw materials, and new consumers. Coexisting with the subcontracting and offshoring of labor-intensive production to “periphery” regions of the world (or to nations with poor human rights records, such as China, for example) is the “centralization of decision making and management” in “central” regions (primarily the United States and places like Western Europe). Periphery regions (nations) are those that have historically been used “to supply labor and raw materials for the industrial development” and capital accumulation of central regions (Robinson, 1993). Central regions are those which have historically had the military or capital

power to colonize periphery regions (nations) for their own benefit. We are currently (or still) in the era in which the labor, raw materials, and consumer markets of the “global South” (i.e., Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean Basin, etc.) serve the needs and capital accumulation of the “global North” (i.e., United States) (Foster et al., 2011) (For a more detailed discussion on World System Theory, see Wallerstein (1974), and his conceptualization of the global divisions of labor and intraregional relationships).

Globalization has perpetuated inequitable global flows that benefit the “global North” at the expense of the “global South.” Manuel Castells (2000) argues that contemporary capitalism is different than previous historical periods in that “it has two fundamental distinctive features: it is global, and it is structured to a large extent around a network of financial flows” (p. 502). These financial flows in turn shape the global labor flows that uproot low-income agricultural laborers and force them to migrate to the United States. These financial flows also create what Castells terms, “cultural differentiations.” Cultural differentiations are the ethnic and cultural conflicts that emerge due to the changing nature of the capitalist system. For example, the restructuring of the meatpacking industry has led to cultural conflicts in small town meat processing communities. This is most apparent in how labor in certain industries has changed from unionized white workers to undocumented Latino workers (Schwartzman, 2013). These global nodes of capital and the related restructuring of the meatpacking industry have dramatically transformed the ethnic makeup of small Midwestern and Southern communities. Thus, scholars like Parrado and Kandel (2010) argue that labor demands and industry transformations must be examined when explaining Latino migration to “new destination” areas.

The “space of flows,” as Castells (2000) has termed the material organization that links global networks of actors to political economic structures of society, are empirically visible in these small meatpacking communities. These small, rural, previously predominantly white agricultural communities are anything but isolated however. In fact, they form a node within the network society that ferments exploitative racialized labor conditions. Although they are quite small in terms of population, these meatpacking communities are global towns, transnational spaces that serve as key examples of certain sub networks within the global information age (Miraftab, 2011). As such, they can serve as an example of how an agrarian-based Guatemalan immigrant community is incorporated into a post-industrialized and racialized U.S. labor system.

This brief discussion on the global context of capital accumulation and labor is important for our analysis and examination of the situation of the Guatemalans in Postville in that it helps us understand the complex web of influences which surround Latinos in the United States as they are structurally incorporated into various exploitative labor markets as the iconic manual laborers and service providers of white America. Furthermore, given the racialized nature of work in the United States, and the fact that Latinos under U.S. Census classification are not considered a “race” but an ethnicity, the dislocation of Latino labor from their

countries of origin to their concentration in U.S. minimum-wage labor-intensive service, food processing, and agricultural industries raises questions as to what exactly is the underlying basis of Latino identity in the United States. In other words, how important is the nature of labor in the group identification of Latinos in the United States? Additionally, how are jobs in the United States becoming increasingly (and identifiably) “Latino jobs”?

Labor and the Latin America reserves

Robinson (1993) in his essay on identity, group formation, and economic and political incorporation of Latinos in the United States identified three clusters of labor at play in the United States that are characteristic of globalized economies and transnational capital. The “top” cluster of “labor” is comprised of the professionals (management, technology producers, engineers, developers, etc.) that oversee the manufacturing operation as well as contribute the technological know-how intended to reduce human (skilled) labor input (e.g., labor costs) and increase productivity. This top cluster is a small percentage of the everyday operations of daily industry and is increasingly being occupied by Asian immigrants as the “fastest-growing, most educated and highest earning population in the U.S.” (Jordan, 2012). The following cluster consists of service sector labor which includes folks in the service industry, local industry (for example, agriculture), and deskilled “assembly line operations which have been subdivided by new technologies” (Robinson, 1993: 35). These are what Robinson calls “dead-end” jobs—jobs that are characterized by a decline in wages, a loss of benefits, and a lack of autonomy and decision making (i.e., the meatpacking industry). Most of these “second-tier” jobs can be characterized by industries that cannot reasonably be offshored in that many of these jobs provide quality of life benefits to elites and managerial professionals or there is still access to the raw materials and cheap labor (or government subsidies) that makes this industry profitable for owners (Chomsky, 2014).

The final cluster of laborers are those who are “completely marginalized from the production process itself, surplus labor, ‘super-numeraries,’ or the structurally unemployed” (p. 35.). These are the folks who Marx would identify as a “disposable...reserve army” of labor—folks whose periphery presence in the labor market benefits the employers in that they have an extra pool of laborers to choose from in their efforts to accumulate more capital and swap laborers from “second-tier” jobs when necessary. This reserve army of labor, however, is not merely a by-product of natural population growth but an integral component of worker exploitation. In the words of Marx (1995), “Capitalist production can by no means content itself with the quantity of disposable labour-power [*sic*] which the natural increase of population yields. It requires for its free play an industrial reserve army independent of these natural limits” (p. 353).

Various factors impact the composition of the reserve army of labor and Marx identified three forms: “floating, latent, and stagnant” (Foster et al., 2011: 9). A comprehensive discussion of these three forms of surplus labor is complex and

beyond the scope of this study, nonetheless, it is important to recognize that in this era of globalization, national surplus labor is heavily influenced not only by the offshoring of jobs but also by the creation of a “global reserve army of labor” in places like Latin America (Foster et al., 2011). Specifically, contrary to popular belief, while displacement and immigration are indeed very real by-products of globalization (Suárez-Orozco, 2001), the immobility (or the regulated mobility) of labor across geopolitical borders is a better characterization of the status of many of the world’s unemployed.² Foster et al. attribute the increase in the global reserve army of labor to (1) “the depeasantization of a large portion of the global periphery by means of agribusiness—removing peasants from the land” and (2) “the integration of the workforce of the former ‘actually existing socialist’ countries into the world capitalist economy”³ (p. 3).

For our discussion and case study, we will see a clear operationalization of item (a) in the experiences of the Postville Guatemalans. Many of these adult immigrants were originally born on Guatemalan flower plantations, aka *fincas*, owned by national landowners and lived a sustenance existence prior to the era of free trade and globalized economies and the plantation’s demise in the early 1990s (Sandoval, 2013). Furthermore, we will examine how Latino labor in addition to being extracted from Latin America becomes concentrated in labor-intensive U.S. industries which underwent restructuring as a result of globalization. And finally, we will discuss how this channeling of labor into certain industries facilitates the social reproduction of a group of people collectively believed to be bound primarily by cultural traits such as language, religion, etc.

Latinos in the United States and the legacy of colonialism

For Latinos in the United States, their classification as the persistent cross-generational and transnational working class facilitates their identification as a subordinate “minority” in the United States (Robinson, 1993). In the case of Postville, Guatemalans (both immigrants and their U.S. children) can strongly attribute their presence in this small town to the restructuring of the U.S. meat-packing industry and their need for cheap labor as well as the global racial hierarchy of the division of labor. Indeed, for many Latinos in the U.S., their social relations with the majority culture represent micro-level interactions reflective of their countries of origin’s relations with the United States. Juan González’s (2011) seminal work on Latinos in America and Latino immigration to the United States provides a blunt and accurate portrait of the root causes as to why Latinos are in the United States in the first place. He writes,

The central argument . . . is that U.S. economic and political domination over Latin America has always been—and continues to be—the underlying reason for the massive Latino presence here. Quite simply, our vast Latino population is the unintended harvest of the U.S. empire. (p. xvii)

González's work provides a useful starting point for examining the linkages between Latino presence in the United States and their displacement from their countries of origin. A brief historical survey is necessary to understand that the labor roles Latinos occupy in present-day United States is not a new phenomenon of exploitation. Since 1492, resources (natural and human) from the "peripheral region" of what is now known as The Americas (i.e., Latin America and the Caribbean) have been essential to European (and for the last century and a half, United States) (central regions') wealth accumulation and geopolitical interests (Galeano, 1997; Grandin, 2006; Smith, 2013). Using Robinson's (1993) four major stages of capital accumulation, the 15th to mid-19th century era of Spanish and Portuguese colonization and settlement in the Americas is the mercantile period of capital accumulation.

The colonial relationships between these European nations and the territories of the Western Hemisphere are fairly easy to identify and describe. Spain and Portugal used their economic and military might to extract natural resources and labor from the Americas to fill their economic coffers and feed their military machine so that they could continue waging wars of expansion in Europe and to protect their mercantile routes (Galeano, 1997). Simultaneously, with their intrusion into the regions of the Western Hemisphere, these nations had to develop new systems of racial hierarchy to justify labor distribution and social relations in the Americas (Quijano, 2007, 2008). Indeed, for a world that before only knew black, white, and Asian, finding a place for the "Indian" seemed like the next logical step in developing social classifications that warranted rigid racial, class, and political hierarchies. In the words of Quijano (2008),

the idea of race, in its modern meaning, does not have a known history before the colonization of America . . . Social relations founded on the category of race produced new historical social identities in America—Indians, blacks, and mestizos—and redefined others. (p. 182)

New Spain's colonization era of Latin America is characterized by Galeano (1997) as one of pillaging. He writes that "the Latin American colonies were discovered, conquered, and colonized within the process of the expansion of commercial capital" (p. 29). This pillaging of resources (precious metals like silver and gold, and natural resources like wood and rubber, for example) for the sole purpose of benefiting European nations and enriching European conquistadors (and the businessmen who financed them) precluded native populations from assuming any decision-making authority, sovereignty, or access to the capital accumulating trades in their native regions. In fact, it was not until the descendants of these colonizers began to feel their own political and economic aspirations limited by the misfortune of not being born in the motherland did they begin to develop Pan-American nationalist identities and loyalties that eventually led to the independence movements throughout the Americas. The racial system of labor control

remained intact, however, as “an articulation of all historically known previous structures of the control of labor—slavery, serfdom,” etc. (Quijano, 2008: 182).

Colonialism in Latin America did not end with the independence movements of the early 19th century; instead it got a new ringleader. Mexico fell victim to U.S. expansionism and *Manifest Destiny* starting in the 1830s, culminating in the loss of half its territory in 1848 with the Treaty of the Guadalupe Hidalgo. The transfer of Caribbean Latin America was cemented in the late 1890s with the U.S. victory in the Spanish/American War. The 20th century was the century of U.S. interventionism in Latin American trade, governance, and political ideology. This is best exemplified by U.S. military interventions (the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Nicaragua, etc.), the overthrows of democratically elected officials spanning over a period of six decades (Francisco I. Madero in Mexico, José Santos Zelaya in Nicaragua, Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala, Salvador Allende in Chile, etc.), and direct interventions in bloody civil wars (Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador) (Grandin, 2006).

Currently, Latin America still finds itself strongly entrenched in a neocolonial relationship with the United States through “free trade” policies that continue to extract natural and human resources for the benefit of the U.S. economy and U.S. businesses. Military might has been (mostly) replaced by economic power, as U.S. businesses and banks exert their influence over wretched leaders and powerful Latin American families whose own malfeasance provide them with rich benefits from this arrangement.⁴

The proximity of Latin America to the United States is one of the strongest factors influencing the political and economic relations between these two regions. Latin America has long served as a testing ground for U.S. foreign military, political, and economic policies prior to global deployment (Grandin, 2006). Using both hard and soft power, United States rise to world power has been characterized by state-sponsored racial violence (domestic and abroad) as well as international militarism and economic imperialism (Grandin, 2006). This is most evident in the way this country has inhumanely treated Latin American immigrants. The cases of Central American refugees (mostly from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua) denied legal humanitarian immigration entry to the United States during the U.S.-backed civil wars of the 1980s to the militarization of the U.S./Mexico border which has channeled poor Mexican and Central American labor migrants to their deaths in Southwest deserts are all testaments to the disposability of Latin Americans within the U.S. political and cultural sphere (American Civil Liberty Union of San Diego and Imperial Counties & Mexico’s National Commission of Human Rights, 2009; Chomsky, 2014).

Latinos and the restructuring of the Midwest meatpacking industry

The restructuring of agricultural production in the U.S. Midwest has led to the “Latinization” of rural America (Baker, 2003; Broadway, 2000; Camayd-Freixas,

2013; Cantú, 1995; Dozi, 2008; Lewis, 2009). These demographic changes are similar to those being seen in other Latino “new growth” areas throughout the United States, such as the South (Gozdziak and Bump, 2004; Marrow, 2009; Smith and Furuseth, 2004) and the Pacific Northwest where undocumented Latinos are the real environmentalists, replanting the forest after commercial deforestation and natural disasters (Brown, 2000; Sarathy, 2006, 2012).

Meatpacking is an industry that by its nature cannot readily be outsourced as the hogs are feed and grown in the Midwest. It is this industry that is the driving force behind small town Iowa’s demographic change for it is an industry which increasingly demands low-wage, non-unionized laborers willing to expose themselves to long hours and sometimes dangerous working conditions (Parrado and Kandel, 2010; Sandoval and Maldonado, 2012; Wells and Brine, 1999). Historically, meatpacking was a unionized job that was centered in urban areas, but shifted in the 1950s to rural areas due to improvements in both the technology of meat processing and the need to be closer to the production sites (Huffman and Miranowski, 1996). Being in rural areas also helped “to reduce transportation costs and associated risks to livestock and, not coincidentally, to decrease the likelihood of union organizing” (Kandel and Parrado, 2005: 452). The union rates in meatpacking plants dropped 55% from 1963 to 1988 (Huffman, and Miranowski, 1996; Trabalzi and Sandoval, 2010). Meanwhile, from 1980 to 2000, the Latino composition of the meat processing industry grew from 8.6% to 28.6% (Parrado and Kandel, 2010), and the turnover employment rate increased dramatically since the 1970s upwards to an annual turnover rate as high as 400% (Kandel, 2009). Thus, the restructuring of the meatpacking industry under the neoliberal economic context of the 1980s resulted in the breaking of the unions, the opening of new global markets for meat, and the structural (labor) incorporation of Latino workers.

Meatpacking (much like agricultural work decades prior) during the past decades has become an identifiable “Latino job.” As Kandel and Parrado (2005) explain,

the physical demands and work conditions of meat processing employment relative to other employment with comparable wages, particularly in labor-short rural areas, have fostered exceptionally high employee turnover rates that have helped to spawn labor recruitment practices focused on Hispanics, particularly immigrants. (p. 452)

This larger restructuring has directly increased Latino migration into small town America, as corporate meatpacking plants aggressively recruit from Latin America. The reliance on the Latino labor force in the meatpacking industry, as well as in other low-wage, labor-intensive jobs, has resulted in the racialization of this industry. A similar trend happened in the poultry industry after the 1980s, when industry transformation (i.e., new processing techniques, etc.) and free trade agreements (i.e., NAFTA, Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA)) led to the rearrangement of U.S. and Latin American labor forces. For the poultry industry,

this meant a decrease in African American poultry workers and a significant increase in undocumented Mexican and Guatemalan workers (Fink and Dunn, 2000; Schwartzman, 2013).

Economists characterize these labor markets as “segmented labor markets,” where secondary labor markets fluctuate on a daily basis and informality and non-institutional regulations and protections are the norm (Valenzuela, 2003). These types of jobs are service based (gardeners, housekeepers, day laborers, cooks, etc.) or can also include some industrial based ones such as forestry workers and farmworkers (see Chomsky, 2014). These are “Latino jobs” in that they rely on racialized and gendered relationships of exploitation that maintain racial divisions of labor (Quijano, 2007, 2008). These “Latino jobs” are firmly embedded within neoliberal political economic policies in which the state plays a role in selectively regulating (and creating surplus) labor. Latino labor thus represents a vulnerable section of the global reserve army of labor—a labor force that is created and exists within political and economic networks that encourage transnational migration across borders.

From the industry side, the “ethnic succession” of industry workers constitutes a conscious approach for maximizing profits. In other words, using vulnerable undocumented workers not only “solves” potential labor crises (i.e., potential unionization, demands for safer work environments and living wages, realistic output quotas, etc.) but also addresses likely profit-cutting ones as well (i.e., labor shortages, increased federal regulations, health scares, input expenses such as feed and equipment, etc.) (Schwartzman, 2013). Undocumented Latino workers are essentially the “silver bullet” used to confront industry labor and profit concerns.

From agrarian laborers to industrial Latino workers

While there are some minor differences in our case study, the story of the Guatemalans in Postville is not unique in comparison to the small town racial transformations that took place across the U.S. South (and other “new destinations”) in the 1990s and 2000s (Foxen, 2007; Loucky and Moors, 2000). The Guatemalan community in Postville grew from three “pioneer” immigrants that made their way to Iowa via Texas in 1995 to their height of 800 Guatemalans right before the raid. This rapid growth was influenced by three factors: (1) The meat-packing company’s relentless demand for Latino labor (which included the plant directly recruiting in Guatemala); (2) The informal transnational networks that immigrants used that flowed through employment recruitment networks, lending networks, remittance transfers, and smuggling networks (Sandoval, 2013); and (3) the immigrant “friendly” welcoming environment of an increasingly multicultural Postville.

Using the framework developed thus far, we now examine the structural incorporation of this racialized low wage exploited labor force by describing: (1) the reasons why the Guatemalans had to leave their communities, (2) how they entered

the U.S. labor market, and (3) how capital interests used Latino “ethnicity” as a way to manipulate labor and social relationships in Postville.

Many of the Guatemalan immigrants working in the meatpacking plant in Postville were from two small villages in Guatemala (Calderas and El Rosario), which actually should be counted as one since they are about a ½ mile apart and many family members live in both towns. They were peasant agricultural workers that lived and worked in a large coffee and flower *finca* (plantation) called *Finca Concepción*. Most of them had been born and raised on this plantation near the city of Dueñas, in the Department of Sacatepéquez, picking coffee and roses and also living off subsistence agriculture in the land owned by the finca. Life on the finca was not easy as one of the Guatemalan immigrants explains: “Sometimes the agricultural farm owners became too abusive . . . if the [laborers] harvested lots of corn, beans, and peaches, their boss (the agricultural farm owner) would take half of their harvest and leave them with the other half.”

Guatemala’s transition into the global economy created instability in the country since the 1960s (Robinson, 2000). This was a gradual and conflicted transition that saw Guatemala’s markets deregulated in the 1990s and early 2000s, and culminated with the CAFTA and other neoliberal trade agreements with the United States. This transition into a system of neoliberal deregulation destabilized Guatemala’s markets and the price of the agricultural products. The *Finca Concepción* was a victim of this neoliberal transition and went bankrupt and closed in 2001. This resulted in “the Postville Guatemalans” and their families being forced to relocate off the finca and into the surrounding areas. It was during this period that they established two informal settlements, which later became “aldeas” (small towns which are formal settlements administered by the municipality). As the aldeas grew, so did the pressure to sustain the livelihoods of the growing communities. The only means of local economic sustainment was subsistence agriculture in lands around the settlements that families were able to rent and the collection of wood products in the nearby forests. Another manner was migration, out to the urban cities, or the United States.

By early 2000s, immigrants making their way to the United States, and Iowa in particular, had slowly grown. Yet, as other residents of the aldeas began to see the remittances coming from the United States, and how those family members that received them invested in their homes or bought more agricultural land, more residents decided to make the trip up North to try their luck. Similar connections were being made across the country as Guatemalan towns created transnational labor ties with U.S. towns such as Morganton, North Carolina (Fink and Dunn, 2007) and Providence, Rhode Island (Foxen, 2007).

Before the finca’s closure in 2001, the Guatemalan community in Postville was growing slowly, about 50 people between 1995 and 2001. These initial immigrants, however, were the ones that helped set up the networks and system that helped others migrate after the finca’s closure. This initial migration period was a slow six-year process, a period when the informal transnational economic relationships were being established between the two global nodes (Postville and Calderas/El

Rosario). The informal recruiting by the meatpacking plant, the immigrants' kinship networks, and the smuggling system eventually linked both global nodes via the movement of the laborers. The Guatemalans had been "depeasantized" in the 1990s and early 2000s as a result of neoliberal socioeconomic policies and soon thereafter these "depeasantized" laborers joined the ranks of the global reserve army of labor and ended up becoming industrial agricultural laborers in Postville's non-unionized meatpacking industry. The Guatemalan aldeas essentially became labor pools for Postville's meatpacking plant. Additionally, Postville maintained the "right" conditions for encouraging and sustaining a large amount of low-income, easily exploited, non-union workers via jobs in a deskilled marginalized industry as well as affordable and accessible housing (Leerkes et al., 2007).

The Postville Guatemalans gained access to the U.S. labor market via informal kinship and friendship networks that helped them get into the country and directly into the meatpacking plant. The meatpacking plant's demand for cheap, exploitable, undocumented labor was the initial catalyst and then the key ingredient that sustained the access to this global reserve army of labor. In fact, the meatpacking plant had relied on undocumented labor since it started in the late 1980s, as it first employed undocumented Eastern Europeans (Bloom, 2000; Camayd-Freixas, 2013). The transition to Latino labor occurred in the mid-1990s and transformed to mostly Guatemalan labor in the early 2000s. The Postville Guatemalans were incorporated into this Midwestern town's labor force by a combination of the plant's specific labor needs as well as the social networks that developed in the plant that brought immigrants from Guatemala directly to Postville.

The meatpacking plant successfully recruited laborers by providing the conditions within the plant that made it easy for displaced, landless agricultural workers from Guatemala to gain U.S. employment. The workforce was an ideal pool of labor as they were extremely productive, vulnerable due to their undocumented status, and politically docile because of the great risks they were taking. Additionally, they had nothing in terms of income in Guatemala. Their labor in Guatemala was primarily directed toward sustenance not wealth accumulation. The Postville Guatemalans reported that plant managers were impressed with their work and asked key members of the Guatemalan community to "tell their friends" that there were jobs in the meatpacking plant.

From 2002 to 2005, the Guatemalan population in Postville grew dramatically from about 50 to about 500. As the Guatemalan community grew, so did the labor abuses in the plant, and it became more difficult to hide them, especially in a small town of just 2200 people. One of the Postville Guatemalans explained some of the abuses that workers had to endure such as "workers being cheated out of money [or] not being paid for overtime."

The incorporation of the Postville Guatemalans into the global reserve army of labor and their consequential outmigration from Guatemala to Iowa can be explained as consequences of larger historical, political, and economic neoliberal policies directly pushing them out of their villages. U.S.-supported interventions helped create a violent civil war that killed about 200,000 people and also displaced

other Guatemalans and contributed to their outmigration to neighboring countries as well as the United States (Chomsky, 2014). Yet, the “right” labor conditions also needed to exist in Postville in order for the rapid expansion of the Guatemalan community to occur. The Guatemalan population in Postville reached about 800 before the raid destroyed the community. These exploitative and vulnerable conditions also contributed to the labor and sexual exploitation of women that occurred in the plant and which, unfortunately, are outside the immediate context of this article but are nonetheless worth further examination (Sandoval and Hernandez, 2014).

Becoming Latino in Postville

After the fire [that destroyed the Guatemalan bakery] the Somalis opened the place where they pray, set up for food and served the firefighters. I mean where else would that happen? Only in Postville. God bless them. In a building rented from a Jewish landlord. Go figure. There’s some really, amazing, wonderful things that happen here, too. And, that’s what never gets reported.

-Postville Community Organizer

Postville sells itself as a multicultural small town, but in reality, it represents what Castells (2000) rightly sees as a drive to increase “geographic and cultural differentiation of settings for capital accumulation and management” (p. 2). Capital dictates the cultural changes in the town and the racialization of various workers. The ethnic makeup of the laborers and the exploitative nature of the meatpacking work in Postville dramatically changed this small town in less than 15 years from a homogeneous white Midwestern town to an ethnically stratified mosaic of various ethnicities providing the industrial meatpacking labor. It is a story of displacement and the creation of a multicultural town based on the labor needs of the town’s industry giant. One Guatemalan summarized the relationship in the following manner: “when we [the Guatemalans] arrived we displaced the Russians. They were forced to leave. There were Czechoslovakians, Russians...so essentially they were European. We displaced them.”

Conflicts also emerged over the emergence of the Hasidic Jews who owned the meatpacking plant (Bloom, 2000). Further cultural clashes emerged as the Latino community grew yet the meatpacking plant shifted their recruitment efforts toward Somali refugees (who are Muslim) after the raid occurred (Grey et al., 2009). Capital’s drive for the most exploitable labor force dictated (and continues to dictate) the cultural and ethnic changes in this town and the racialized division of the workers made them easier to manage and exploit.

Guatemalans were racialized into Postville’s labor force as low-wage, vulnerable, industrialized Latino workers. Furthermore, the town’s white population’s essentialist views of Latino cultural characteristics created a “welcoming” environment in the town. The white population appreciated the fact that the Guatemalans

were quiet, did not complain, stayed mostly to themselves yet contributed their labor to the plant and their income to the commercial activities in the mostly vacant town. As one long-time Postville resident explained,

I was at the post office to send some mail and there was a white guy from New York and he was really mad because the lady working at the post office was too slow for him. It was not like New York style and he was mad and arrogant. And finally when he left, the postlady [sic] said, "you know, we didn't know how good we had it." And I said, "What do you mean?" And she said, "Well, we were always complaining about all these Guatemalans in Postville and not speaking English and this and that." And then she goes, "But you know compared to these other people that are here, they were like so nice that I wish we could get them back." And I said, "Well, maybe this had to happen for you guys to realize that not all Hispanics are bad."

The meatpacking plant perpetuated this racialization in Postville. There was initially tension between the Mexicans who had first worked at the meatpacking plant in the early 2000s and the Guatemalans who were growing exponentially during that time. The meatpacking plant's management built upon this inter-ethnic tension to help maintain its docile and productive workforce. They did this by advancing the ethnic stereotypes in terms of the work ethics attributed to the various "Latinos" in the plant (Mexicans as complainers and lazy versus Guatemalans as hardworking, quiet, and good natured). These stereotypes and subjective cultural characteristics were also perpetuated via the recruitment networks and practices of the meatpacking plant. One Guatemalan who had worked in the plant explains how he was encouraged to recruit more Guatemalans because they were more docile, compliant, and worked without complaining or filing grievances. "So when I asked about work for these young men [from Guatemala], they [the plant managers] said, 'If they're from Guatemala, yes. If they're Mexican, no'. There were a lot of them, approximately 200 Mexicans without work. But they didn't want Mexicans. I then called Texas so that these young men would come from Guatemala."

The racialization of Latinos in the town kept ethnic power dynamics between whites and Latinos in place and contributed to the marginalization of the Guatemalan community. The essentialization and stereotyping of work ethics helped maintain conflict between Mexicans and Guatemalans keeping the Latino communities divided and perpetuated white privilege within the plant and in the Postville community. Guatemalans were systematically placed in the shadows and relegated to a regiment of proper behavior where they were not allowed to exercise their rights as workers or even their civil rights as residents of Postville. The cultural clashes perpetuated by the changing nature of capital helped maintain the structure of exploitation and inequality that existed within the meatpacking plant and within the Postville community. The "cultural differentiation of capital" (Castells, 2000) created a climate within the meatpacking plant that made it easier to exploit Guatemalans and created a racialized climate in Postville that

relegated Guatemalans to second-class residents. Hence, capital accumulation and the division of labor dictated the racialization of both the plant and the town.

Conclusion

We began this article by examining what it means to be Latino. We asked the following questions: how do prevailing discourses around cultural nationalism, language, and ethnicity inform the Latino experience in the United States? And how do these discourses overshadow, or even silence, other discourses which attempt to explain Latino identity construction using structural analyses? We put forth the notion that it is important to understand the experiences of Latinos and their formation as a group in terms of socioeconomic and political factors. In this case, Latino identity formation for Guatemalans in Postville was linked as much to their labor as to their language and cultural traits.

We used the case study of Guatemalans in Postville, Iowa to illustrate our arguments. This case study is important (though not unique) in that it encapsulates many of the factors that we feel are important in understanding how Latin American immigrants become Latinos in the United States. For example, we have a group of people with origins in a country that has suffered some of the most violent and unashamed forms of U.S. intervention. As heirs to a legacy of colonialism (Camayd-Freixas (2013) refers to them as “the orphans of globalization”), these Guatemalans lived on agricultural plantations for several generations only to be displaced by the invisible hand of free trade and globalization. And while their lives off the plantation may have resulted in “less” physical exploitation, their work as sustenance farmers did not provide them the means to make a living. As a result, the global forces of capital accumulation and labor exploitation forced them to incorporate themselves into the global reserve army of labor and migrate to the United States to sell their labor as Latino workers in industries that were undergoing radical “racial”/ethnic successions.

Labor recruitment and transnational networks led them to Postville, Iowa, a small Midwestern town experiencing its own form of industrial change, labor demands, and cultural conflicts. Since the 1970s, downward wages and non-unionized work has made the meat processing industry undesirable for many “native-born” workers creating a labor vacuum for plant owners. As such, employers in Postville began tapping into Latino populations in the United States (mostly Mexicans) and soon thereafter into the global reserve army of labor, a labor force created by neoliberal economic policies. While in Postville, the Guatemalans were integrated and employed using subjective criteria established by the U.S. historical and cultural legacy of racism. In other words, they landed in the dead-end “Latino job” of meatpacking. They became Latino as much for their labor, as for their cultural characteristics.

The case study and arguments we present here are our attempts to center discussions on Latino identity formation around socioeconomic structures and how those structures and capitalism are used to manipulate labor via racialization

mechanisms. Latinos, for all intents and purposes, are people on the borderlands. They live on the edge of whiteness in that most are classified as a white race on the U.S. Census yet by their labor they are anything but white. That is, they are the iconic manual laborers, increasingly being channeled by U.S. institutions into low-income, physically demanding jobs which serve to comfort bureaucrats and professionals and accumulate capital for employers and corporations. Yet, unlike past generations of southern and eastern Europeans who found their white identities in the working class industries of 19th-century America, Latinos have long been cemented into the social margins via the control and racialization of their labor. Chomsky (2014), for example, in examining the historical role of labor in United States and Mexican “company towns,” argues that the “most important border [between the workers] was the internal or racial one that kept Mexicans and Americans socially separated from each other, even as they labored in a single, integrated economy” (p. 55). Thus is the case of the Postville Guatemalans.

They were employed by the largest employer in the town (contributing vast amounts of labor and money into the local economy), yet they still existed as cultural and political “others.” We therefore argued here that Postville is an example of what Castells (2000) terms, “cultural differentiation of capital.” The changing cultural identity of the Postville population was in large part due to the capital demands of increasingly vulnerable and exploitative labor which was linked to various ethnic groups. Cultural tensions and conflicts also emerged as the meatpacking management manipulated subjective cultural characteristics between their workers to create inter-cultural competition and conflict as the ethnic succession of the industry shifted from Eastern European, to Mexican, and finally, to Guatemalan (prior to the raid).

We contend that the experiences and identity formation of the Latino population in the United States must employ a framework which examines global economic and political forces—forces which draw upon Latin America’s *global reserve army of labor* to meet and exceed U.S. national labor demands and the accumulation of capital. This exploitative system is embedded in neoliberal ideology and deeply rooted in historical colonial and racial relationships between the United States and Latin America. Postville teaches us that becoming Latino in the United States is very much linked to a continued history of colonialism, U.S. imperialism, labor systems of exploitation, and essentialist cultural stereotypes and characterizations of vulnerable workers. Furthermore, we stress the point that Latinos are identified as much by their labor as by their language or “culture.” Latinos in U.S. labor markets are used to perpetuate power dynamics, disrupt worker consciousness, and racialize Latinos around jobs. We therefore challenge scholars of Latino studies to further delve into the sociopolitical and economic context of identity and group formation. One cannot understand how the Guatemalan immigrant meatpacking workers in Postville became Latino without understanding their relationship to global capital and the political economic restructuring of the meatpacking industry.

We conclude this article by urging fellow scholars of Latino studies to reassess paradigms and perspectives which cling to celebrated narratives around cultural nationalism or cultural traits as the primary factors shaping or sustaining Latino identity and group formation. We advocate for an approach that not only acknowledges class conditions but also interrogates historical and contemporary socio-political and economic forces which maintain Latinos at the margins.

Notes

1. The U-Visa applies to immigrants, including undocumented immigrants, who are the victims of certain serious crimes and who have cooperated with authorities in the prosecution of the perpetrator.
2. As we will see later in this article, laborers who actually do emigrate out of their countries of origin do so with the help of very well established transnational social networks and labor conditions and opportunities (Sandoval, 2013).
3. China is an excellent example of this phenomenon.
4. The last two decades, however, has seen a rise in “Leftist” governments (mostly in South America) who oppose historic U.S. imperialism and intervention into their domestic affairs (i.e., Venezuela, Bolivia, Paraguay, Ecuador, etc.)

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