

REVIEW ESSAY

Latin Americans and African Americans in the U.S. Slaughterhouse Industry

***On the Line: Slaughterhouse Lives and the Making of the New South.* Vanessa Ribas. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016.**

***Scratching Out a Living: Latinos, Race and Work in the Deep South.* Angela Steusse. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016.**

David Stoll, Middlebury College
dstoll@middlebury.edu

How do high levels of immigration affect U.S. workers? Could the arrival of newcomers reduce racial conflict by buffering relations between Whites and Blacks? Or will new demographic configurations make racial discrimination more intractable? In the contemporary United States, concerns about jobs and race frequently converge in how immigration from Latin America affects Black America. What happens when Latin Americans join African Americans in the country's agricultural fields, hotels, construction sites, meatpacking plants, and other places of work?

Some distressing answers to this question are offered in two new ethnographies of slaughterhouses in the southern United States. Each examines how Latinos and Blacks interact in an industry known for low wages and bad conditions. Even though meatpacking is one of the most dangerous industries in the United States, the federal government's Occupational Safety and Health Agency (OSHA) has been conspicuously absent in exercising its regulatory authority. Unchecked by regulators, employers have relentlessly sped up production lines, which leads to ever higher rates of repetitive-motion injuries. The majority of workers spend only a few months or years before quitting. To keep a plant organized, given this reality, a labor union must regularly incorporate the new arrivals. Yet what if this new labor force does not speak the same language as those workers already in the union?

Angela Steusse—a graduate student in anthropology at the University of Texas—spent four years trying to organize Latin American poultry workers in central Mississippi. She was part of a desperate effort by several unions, including the Laborers International Union of North America (LIUNA), to help Black-majority locals sign up new Spanish-speaking workers

who had previously shown little interest in joining. Steusse refers to the newcomers as Latinos, but they tend to identify themselves in national terms, as Mexicans or Guatemalans. When they reach for a collective term, it is *Hispanos*, thus emphasizing the language they share as opposed to a common regional origin in Latin America.

Steusse served as an English–Spanish translator, helped to start a workers' center, organized consciousness-raising sessions, and, to develop her research, conducted focus groups and personal interviews. In language alone she found an almost insurmountable barrier to meaningful communication between Latin Americans and African Americans. The fundamental difficulty, Steusse emphasizes, is a long history of racial suspicion and antagonism. Mississippi poultry plants are located in small towns where Blacks and Whites have long lived in separate social worlds. Until the 1960s, poultry plants excluded Black workers. Soon after the first Blacks joined production lines, many of the Whites left. Once the labor force was predominantly Black and began to unionize in the 1970s, Whites sometimes played the role of strike-breakers.

It was at this point that poultry companies began facilitating the migration of Spanish-speakers to Mississippi, although large numbers did not arrive until the 1990s. Recruitment strategies included the following:

1. through the Texas Employment Commission in the border town of Brownsville—despite relocation subsidies, most of these workers soon quit;
2. through the “Hispanic Project,” which brought nearly 5,000 migrants from South Florida to two towns in Mississippi with a combined population of less than 10,000. Since 80 percent of the Hispanic Project consisted of Cubans, their legal status as refugees gave them the wherewithal to reject the bad conditions, so most of them soon quit;
3. from the Mexican border again, but now through networks that drew indigenous Mexicans from the states of Veracruz, Oaxaca, and Chiapas;
4. through an intermediary agency, South Florida Transit, which brought to Mississippi Argentines, Uruguayans, and other South Americans. This cohort of workers had arrived on tourist visas,

overstayed them, and was now desperate for any kind of employment;

5. through the plant's own employees, who were paid \$600 cash bonuses for recruiting each new worker who stayed at least three months. Thus, a Peruvian advertised for co-nationals from his hometown, with the result that Steusse "met agronomists, engineers, doctors, librarians, and psychologists" from the city of Arequipa, who were now "deboning chicken and learning how to file worker's compensation claims" (p. 88);
6. through labor contractors who, once federal authorities forced plants to fire workers who lacked valid social security numbers, reintroduced the dismissed workers to the plants with fraudulent paperwork or none at all—the kind of enforcement gap that has enabled some employers to continue evading the law.

By the time Steusse arrived in 2001, Spanish-speakers predominated in most central Mississippi poultry plants. What did this mean for Blacks? Perhaps surprisingly, they did not accuse the Latin Americans of taking their jobs. However, Steusse noticed two ways that the arrival of immigrants worsened conditions for native-born workers. First, rental housing became more crowded and expensive for all working families. Second, the companies became choosier about rehiring former employees; no longer could these workers quit, rest up for a period of time, then return to work. For the companies, this was a legal way to discriminate against citizens and give preference to immigrants.

Steusse's most troubling discovery was the general lack of solidarity between Blacks and Latin Americans. She assigns a larger share of the blame to the latter. Latinos readily accepted the racist tropes of Black criminality and laziness, in opposition to their own work ethic. Steusse also explains this lack of solidarity in terms of the two groups' "vastly divergent backgrounds," "different yardsticks," and "divergent ideologies" (pp. 165–166), which I would call very different orientations to their shared class position as proletarians.

Blacks were very conscious of their forebearers' struggle against exploitation and racism. "This is not slavery days anymore!" (p. 140) provided all the justification they needed for resisting company demands to speed up production. The Latin Americans also knew how to slow down a production line, but they had a much higher level of identification with the job, as if submitting to company demands were a necessary test of character, to prove that they were worthy of respect. Because of their determination to send remittances home and *salir adelante* ("get ahead," pp. 56–57), many seemed willing to put up with any mistreatment.

Steusse does not dwell on what brings such large numbers of Latin Americans to such terrible jobs. I would argue that Peruvian engineers and psychologists butchering chickens are, despite their dip into the proletariat, middle-class financial entrepreneurs. Their goal is to obtain higher incomes than they can back home, to which end they have frequently sold assets, borrowed from relatives, and signed contracts with moneylenders.

Another clue to what engenders mass migration can be found in the story of a Guatemalan named Baldomero Félix. Félix is an ex-soldier in the Guatemalan army, a union activist, and a quasi-patriarch for a thousand other Mam Maya-speakers who have shown up in Mississippi from his indigenous town in Guatemala's western highlands. Crucially, Félix claims to have more than doubled his income by receiving the \$600 bonuses for each compatriot he brings to Mississippi. "I brought my brothers and sisters, then my cousins. Then my cousins brought their brothers. Then they brought their families, like a chain" (p. 90).

Steusse mentions that Félix's friends have arrived with "coyotes" (human smugglers). What she fails to grasp is that, for those eager to go north, Félix himself is a coyote—as is any migrant who joins the profitable enterprise of bringing more relatives and neighbors. At a minimum, Félix is advising his charges on how to violate U.S. immigration law without getting caught; it is also very possible that he and other early arrivals are loaning these migrants money at high interest rates. Back in Guatemala, men such as Félix have become a new class of proprietors and employers.

Black union leaders are very aware of how their organizing efforts have been structurally undermined by large businesses facilitating the immigration of Latin American workers:

See, the whites don't want Hispanic or black to go too far up the ladder. Our problem with the Hispanics is, you know, we done went though all of this—killings, and hangings, and all of this—to get where we are. We got some power now. And then they comes in and say, "I'll do that." And you say, "Wait a minute, we're using that as leverage to get up the ladder further." And the white people turn around and say, "Well, hey, I ain't got to pay. I ain't got to do this or that because I can get him to do it." And there goes your power, right out the window (p. 115).

To put this in other terms, U.S. citizens defending their rights are being undermined by a system that exploits immigrant workers with few or no rights. Ironically, it is the newcomers who put the most credence in the American Dream of upward mobility. How many times has this tension been played out in U.S. labor history?

In the case of the Mississippi Poultry Workers' Center, Latino workers never really became involved in running it, so after Steusse's departure the organization fell apart. Worse, this disappointing outcome can be seen as a part of a larger trend: in 2014, the number of union locals in Mississippi poultry plants was half what it had been a decade before. As for Steusse, after a decade of trying to overcome Black-versus-Brown tension on plant floors, she poses many good questions from her research experience but has few clear answers.

Steusse's study is impressive, though it is not a workplace ethnography. She never worked on a processing line and rarely made it inside the factories. In contrast, sociologist Vanesa Ribas spent 16 months as a production worker in a North Carolina slaughterhouse, which enables her to cut deeper into the prejudices that many Latin Americans harbor as they encounter U.S. racial hierarchies. In the case of the pseudonymous Swine Packing Company, where Ribas was employed, it began hiring large numbers of Hondurans in the early 1990s, after its efforts to recruit anti-union White workers failed and its employees voted to join the United Food and Commercial Workers.

By the time Ribas did her fieldwork in 2009 to 2010, the toughest butchering lines were staffed mainly by Hondurans, Mexicans, and Salvadorans, with African Americans predominating only in some of the less physically demanding finishing work. When federal identification enforcement pressured the company to fire unauthorized workers, it started contracting large numbers of Haitian refugees who had been resettled in Virginia. As in Steusse's case, various rules—no hiring of anyone with a criminal record and no rehiring of former workers—enabled the company to engage in legal discrimination against U.S. citizens.

The slaughterhouse was physically grueling and emotionally difficult for Ribas. As a Puerto Rican fluent in English and Spanish, she won trust on both sides of the language barrier. Both language groups asked her to translate their problems to the other group, and she was able to delve into their conflicting perspectives. Similar to what Steusse found in Mississippi, Black workers in North Carolina did not feel particularly threatened by Latin American immigration. But they did have to endure a lot of racial insensitivity on the part of their foreign coworkers. For example, a playful Honduran woman tells a Black coworker that he looks like a gorilla, while another cannot grasp what is wrong with the N word. A Latina tells a Black coworker that she will come to work painted Black so that, just like him, she will not have to work very hard.

While Latin Americans brazenly stereotyped their Black coworkers, the latter usually did not respond in kind. "African American workers rarely talked about

Latina/o workers in ethnoracial terms, meaning that they were far less likely to verbalize characterizations of Latinas/os as a group" (p. 79). That is, they were not likely to say, "Hispanics are taking our jobs" or even "Tell that Hispanic to throw the meat on the line correctly" (p. 79). While Blacks could be critical of Latinos, they tended to focus on personal failings rather than racializing them—for example, a quarrel between two women, which pits "Lydia be talking junk" against "I'm sick and tired of this Black slut" (p. 175).

Like Steusse, Ribas notes the tendency of Latinos to blame Blacks for supposedly being lazy. In actuality, she points out, nobody in a meatpacking plant could possibly be lazy because the pace is too intense. What does differentiate the two groups is that, while Blacks generally resist company demands to intensify production, Latino workers tend to accept the legitimacy of these calls. Accusing Black workers of laziness was, in effect, an attempt to pull them down to their own level of exploitation—Blacks "should have to work like we do" (p. 191). Even more perversely, while Latinos voiced generous assessments of Whites, they accused Black foremen of being racist and identified them as their oppressors. How could this happen in an industry, a state, and a country run by White people? Latinos are at the bottom of the plant hierarchy, Ribas explains; many of their supervisors are Black, and Whites on production lines are few. It is "within the social organization of labor" (p. 181) that Latinos feel the most exploited, Ribas concludes, and that is why they blame Blacks for their subordination rather than Whites.

Both Ribas and Steusse set a high standard for labor ethnography. What does their research mean for the U.S. labor movement? Both show that Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's "invisible weight of whiteness" (cited in Ribas, 196) defines the racial system. But Latin Americans' relationship with Whiteness does not begin with their arrival in "El Norte." Many come to the United States with strong, unapologetic preferences for light skin. One reason for Latino antagonism toward Black coworkers, Ribas notes, is indignation that they are being put under the authority of persons whose skin is darker than theirs.

A second reason, both researchers agree, is that *Hispanos* have a hard time developing solidarity with each other. The different and frequently conflicting national, regional, ethnic, and class identities that Latin Americans bring to the United States are the most obvious reason for this solidarity deficit. Another reason, often less obvious to sympathetic Anglos, is immigrants' intense consciousness of competing against one another for jobs and other scarce resources. These rivalries can even stretch back to their home communities and the competition between different

family networks. If anything pulls Latin Americans together, Ribas concludes, it is their feeling of being exploited by Black coworkers.

At the suggestion of labor researchers and immigration activists, U.S. labor leaders have decided not to oppose high levels of immigration from Latin America and elsewhere. One argument is that the U.S. economy needs large amounts of foreign labor. Yet low-wage labor markets have long been saturated with workers. Meatpacking companies claim that high rates of worker absenteeism and turnover force them to hire immigrants, but these problems really stem from the companies' own cost-cutting strategies. As Steusse points out, complaints about labor shortages can be an excuse to malign and dismiss native-born workers who are unwilling to subject themselves to abusive treatment. As for the labor shortage allegedly facing the Mississippi plants, when federal identification enforcement finally chased out most of the unauthorized immigrants, abundant local applicants stepped forward.

A second argument for the acceptance of high levels of immigration is that these newcomers consist of refugees seeking sanctuary, giving them a human right to enter the United States. Certainly, some labor migrants meet the legal test for refugee status—fear of individualized persecution—but most do not. If the immigrant-rights movement succeeds in extending refugee status to anyone who claims to be oppressed in their country of origin, meatpacking companies and

like-minded employers will have even more wherewithal to defeat labor organizing.

Unfortunately, the ease with which companies recruit one migration chain after another reflects wider trends in U.S. labor markets. Black leaders and civil-rights organizations have given strong support to Latino immigrant-rights organizations, for the best of reasons. Yet judging from immigrant-rights rhetoric, there is no such thing as too much immigration. Is this really the case? Not for anyone who believes that the rights of U.S. workers should take precedence over the rights of the next cohort of immigrants, few of whom come from the lowest classes of their own country.

We cannot assume that the interests of working-class Americans and immigrants are closely aligned if many of the immigrants, in their countries of origin, come from the upper working class, lower middle class, and even the professional middle class. If immigrants are also making every effort to be upwardly mobile, then this is definitely not a recipe for class solidarity. Indeed, their aspirations make them far more tractable for employers than working-class Americans and, as a result, an effective antidote to unionization. In light of the current state of labor organizing in the meatpacking industry, the refusal to give priority to the rights of native-born workers over those of immigrants will perpetuate an effective strategy for keeping out unions.

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