
Original Article

Sorting Black and Brown Latino service workers in gentrifying New York neighborhoods

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Abstract Ethnography, qualitative interviews and census data document a new process of spatial and racial exclusion among Brown and Black Latino workers in New York's service sector. Unlike manufacturing, many service workers directly interact with customers, and therefore employers use race, gender and immigrant status to position workers in front or back stage jobs; depending on their interaction with mainstream clientele. The sorting of workers is a largely hidden process outside the reach of labor regulations. Racialization of workers is more evident in minority neighborhoods undergoing rapid gentrification, as owners import their labor force and clientele from outside the neighborhood.

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.... In this upscale restaurant, most people were white save for an olive-skin bartender with a French accent. A blonde waitress, attired in an exotic summer dress, attended a young and professional clientele. Visible from a small window behind the bar, in a backroom kitchen, Mexican dispatchers, dishwashers and short-order cooks were busy at work Despite this new restaurant's location amidst two communities of Puerto Ricans and Chinese immigrants, none of these local groups were visible in



this site, nor as employers, workers or customers. (Fieldnotes, Lower East Side restaurant: 28 June 2003; 24 August 2007)

.... Twenty five miles up the east river, in the Northeast Bronx and at the heart of a working class, small white ethnic community, the Mexican cooks, busboys and waitress operated visibly in front and backstage jobs. In this well-known restaurant, save for the college-age white female hostess, the waiting staff (a mix of ex-peasant Mexicans and ethnic white males), rushed from one table to another, accommodating a middle class clientele....Most impressive was hearing the menu specials recited by a young Mexican male with broken English and an affected southern Italian accent (Fieldnotes, Bronx, Restaurant: 25 August 2007; 15 April 2009).

These ethnographic accounts from two New York City restaurants help support the main argument of this article: that rapid growth in small services sector establishments disproportionately benefits newer Mexican immigrants at the expense of native and Black immigrant workers within rapidly changing minority neighborhoods. This process is most evident in gentrifying minority New York City neighborhoods where majority of White residents are increasing. Ethnographic, in-depth interviews among employers and workers, as well as neighborhood census data help illustrate how shifts in demography and employment patterns within minority neighborhoods reduce work opportunities for Black Latino immigrants and native minorities. Strikingly, many of these small business firms are owned or operated by ethnic Whites, mainly foreign-born, and by members of the second-generation who now join a growing cadre of entrepreneurs within minority neighborhoods.

The main contribution of this article is to document a growing class and racial *divide* separating the life chances of *Brown* and *Black* Latino immigrant workers, like Mexicans and Dominicans, who are now concentrated in the lower strata of the service sector and especially in retail and food work niches. For almost two decades, scholars have studied the implications of services jobs supplanting manufacturing in New York and other major US cities (Sassen, 1991; Wilson, 1996; Waldinger, 2001; Zeleny, 2010). Bernhardt *et al* (2007, 2010) also argues immigrants and racial minority mobility and incomes were stagnating because of the concentration of workers in low-skill service sector jobs. This article focuses on how race, gender and immigrant status play a role in structuring New York City service sector employment.

Specifically, this article shows that new *spatial and racial divides* characterize the work integration of *Black* and *Brown* Latino groups in New York City service jobs. These divides are accentuated by gentrification and the growth of small firms that frequently serve as points of entry for new immigrants. This divide entails different socio-economic factors than those identified by William Julius Wilson (1987, 1996) as determinants behind the marginalization of

native Blacks after the flight of industries and middle classes from Chicago's inner city neighborhoods. Ironically, in light of Wilson's analysis of middle class flight, we document racialized and gendered labor division patterns that emerge when middle class Whites return to gentrifying and poor neighborhoods.

A significant difference between expanding service and declining manufacturing jobs is noted in that minority service workers usually come into direct contact with customers, increasing the likelihood of interaction with mainstream clientele. Interviews with small service sector employers, as well as ethnographies within small business firms provide evidence of how employers segregate workers within small firms and how this process takes place within rapidly gentrifying, minority neighborhoods. Thus, a second contribution of this article is to illustrate how race, ethnicity and gender combine to affect the employers' positioning of workers in *front* or *back stage* jobs,¹ or in positions that allow direct contact with clientele or are *hidden* from the public. Here, I combine two often-separated modes of sociological analysis – empirical research on race/immigration and the theoretical insights of symbolic interactionist theorists like Erving Goffman – to better understand processes of urban and racial stratification in inner-city jobs. Indeed, I argue that the *ethno-racial* and *spatial* stratification of workers, especially within smaller firms is important to this analysis precisely because where "micro" processes are not easily captured by survey or census data, they contribute significantly to the reproduction of class and race segregation among Black native and immigrant minority groups.

1 I borrow this concept from Irving Goffman's (1959) theories of the presentation of "self" in theatre-like situations, or the ability of individuals to shape their behavior and response these connote in others in "front" or "back-stage" positions or situations.

Neighborhood Segregation, Service Work and Racial Formation

2 Between 2000 and 2008, the share of foreign born New Yorkers rose from 36 to 38 per cent. By 2006, the Dominican population was estimated at 609,885 whereas that of Mexicans was about half that or 300,000. In the United States, Mexicans are the

The neighborhood and work integration patterns of Dominican and Mexican immigrants, the two largest Latino immigrant groups in New York City, reveal an interesting yet puzzling story about the role of small firms in the racial and ethnic integration of new immigrant groups in an expanding service economy.² The New York City Dominican born population is about double that of the Mexicans population. However, in the last decade, Mexican foreign-born residents in the city experienced the fastest growth among all Latino immigrants (Lobo *et al*, 2004; Cordero-Guzmán *et al*, 2001; Limonic, 2008). Despite their newcomer status, this article reveals, why Mexicans have higher employment rates than Dominicans, especially in small business firms and in minority or majority mixed-race neighborhoods where the two groups tend to overlap.

John Logan's (2002) incisive analysis showed that in the 1990s Dominicans experienced the highest index of spatial isolation – a term that indicates levels of neighborhood segregation – among all New York ethnic groups with an isolation score of 74 per cent. The index of spatial isolation for Mexicans and other Latino groups, in contrast, was below 46 per cent. Since the 1960s and



until the mid-1980s, Dominican residences were concentrated in Manhattan's Washington Heights, West and Central Harlem neighborhoods (Ricourt, 2002). However, new census data, as well as earlier research (Fuentes-Mayorga, 2005; Fuentes, 2007) suggest that the majority of Dominicans are now concentrated in the Bronx and in neighborhoods with a higher share of poor racial minorities.³ The recent study of Rosenbaum and Friedman (2007) reveals that inter-generational spatial and racial exclusion has characterized the "housing and locational" attainments of African Americans and non-White groups like Dominicans. Ironically, the housing exclusion and lower life chances of native and foreign born Blacks occurred during a period when most other groups in New York experienced gains in housing conditions and spatial mobility. Ricourt (2002) suggests that the increased concentration of Dominicans in urban neighborhoods heightens ethnic identity and political participation. However, Rosenbaum and Friedman's research (2007), as well as new data gathered for this article suggests that the urban concentration or the heightened political participation of the group has not translated into better life chances for the employment of Dominicans. Hernandez (2002) also challenges the notion of successful integration of Dominicans in New York, pointing to high persistent poverty and unemployment rates since the early 1990s. New comparative labor market research shows that Dominicans and Mexicans integrate in separate labor sectors despite overlaps in neighborhood spaces (Fuentes, 2007). More important, Fuentes-Mayorga (2005) finds that compared to males, Dominican and Mexican women experience higher levels of gender and spatial isolation within immigrant work niches in New York City.

Over the last three decades, New York City has experienced rapid economic and demographic shifts engendering new forms of class, racial and ethnic divides (Foner, 2001; Kasinitz *et al*, 2004; Bernhardt *et al*, 2007). A 1990s boom in the technology and financial sectors raised demand for highly skilled workers; exacerbating polarization between high and low skilled sectors and increasing class, racial and gender employment divides among workers (Sassen, 1991; Browne, 1999; Bernhardt *et al*, 2007). A key demographic change in New York has been introduced by the increased immigration of Latin Americans including Dominican and Mexicans the two fastest-growing Latino immigrant groups (Foner, 2001; Hernandez, 2002; Smith, 2006).

Until the mid-1990s, Dominicans worked largely in manufacturing on the East coast and Mexicans found agricultural work mainly in the Southwest and California (Montejano, 1987; Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991; Smith, 2006; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994, 2003, 2007). The accelerated immigration of Mexicans to New York City came in response to service sector job growth in specific immigrant niches. Roger Waldinger's earlier research (2001) in Los Angeles and New York shows how the transformation of the service economy increased the racial and ethnic segregation of immigrant and native workers, altering the niche concentration of Dominican and Mexican workers from

largest immigrant Latino group but in New York, the Dominican Republic ranks first and Mexico fourth among immigrants from Latin America (see Rodriguez, 2000; Logan, 2002; and Rivera-Batiz, 2007 for differences about estimates).

³ See also findings by Limonic (2008) and Fuentes (2007), as well as recent data estimates from the 2006 American Community Survey (ACS).

the 1970s through the 1990s. Unlike Waldinger, this article shows how employers' racial and ethnic biases affect the concentration of Brown and Black immigrant workers in different service niches and *front* or *backstage* positions and how gender interacts in this process. With regard to gender, Schrover *et al* (2007) posit that men and women experience less labor market segregation in the secondary service sector where most immigrants concentrate, because these jobs are less regulated. This article suggests the opposite: that gender segregation is more pronounced within the lower strata of the service sector precisely because business firms are less regulated.

Racial Formation Processes among Brown and Black Latinos at Work

Latin American scholars argue that the racialization of Latino workers in the United States must be understood within the historical framework of European colonization and racialization of subordinated labor. Anibal Quijano (2000, 3) describes this process within a "coloniality of power" framework that confounds race and class divisions in the domination of indigenous and African-American slaves for free labor since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Within this "coloniality of power" framework of relations, capitalism serves to extract resources and at once racialize labor as a means of control and domination. This process can be exemplified in the early plantation economies in Latin America and the United States (including those established in the Dominican Republic and Mexico's Southwest) and in the new stratification of the globalized service economy. Given this framework, subordinated labor in both the United States and Latin America has been associated with free Black and indigenous labor, just as industrialization has been associated with wage employment and European "Whiteness" (Roediger, 1999; Quijano, 2000). Sociologists argue that globalization continues to serve mutually reinforcing purposes, within an expanding service economy, with class and racial labor market divides guaranteeing the constant supply of foreign investment and extraction of non-White immigrant cheap labor in a *segmented* labor market (Bonacich and Goodman, 1972; Fernandez-Kelly, 1983; Sassen, 2007; Bonacich *et al*, 1972, 2008).

Some scholars argue that segmented or split labor markets cannot fully explain the poorer life chances of native Blacks or immigrants since segmented labor markets existed before globalization (Borjas, 1999). But, critical race theorists (Franklin, 1991; Omi and Winant, 1994; Wilson, 1996; Bonilla-Silva, 2003) argue that class and racial marginalization of Blacks in the United States resulted from systemic labor market divisions and discrimination; and that the role of racism as a semi-autonomous factor cannot be overlooked. Immigration scholars have used these racial formation theories to explain the systemic exclusion of Latino groups from US institutions (Montejano, 1987; Rodriguez,



2000; Cordero-Guzmán *et al.*, 2001; Telles and Ortiz, 2008). But, others contend the experience of immigrants cannot be equated with that of ex-slaves or internally colonized minority groups (Ogbu, 1978; Omi and Winant, 1994; Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Kasinitz *et al.*, 2004; Telles and Ortiz, 2008).

Although these debates highlight many relevant issues, this study provides further empirical evidence of how the sorting of Black and Brown Latinos in small business firms developing in gentrifying New York City neighborhoods increase the institutional and ideological racialization of excluded Black Latino groups. The urban integration faced by today's Latinos differs from the experience of Blacks in many US cities during the 1950s and 1960s. Although African-Americans immigrating to the north were concentrated in manufacturing jobs, Latino immigrants now concentrate in service sector jobs. Unlike manufacturing, Latino service-related employment often places them in direct contact with White middle-class clients. In this context, attitudes about race, ethnicity and gender play a key role, especially given employers' widening selection pool among foreign-born workers. Comparing the parallel integration of the two largest Latino immigrant groups in New York City – and contrasting the experiences of Black Dominicans and Brown Mexicans – also provides fresh insights into how material conditions and racial relations and ideologies shape the hiring practices of service employers.

Patterns of Race and Service Employment in New York

New Census analysis and qualitative data reveal that Mexican workers outnumber Dominicans and other racial minority groups within small service sector firms located in racial majority and racial minority neighborhoods. Most significantly, the Census data show that when the share of White population increases in a given neighborhood, Dominican employment rates fall, whereas Mexican employment rates increase.⁴ Moreover, Mexican and Dominican employment rates are negatively correlated although changes in Dominican employment rates are positively correlated with Blacks whereas Mexican employment rates change with those of Whites.

Tables 1 and 2 show the percentage of employed Dominicans and Mexicans within three New York City neighborhoods divided by race, and where at least 50 per cent of the population consists of a majority White, Black or of mixed race ancestry. The correlation between the spatial location and work profiles of the two immigrant groups is also evident across the five boroughs. For example, in Queens, where the foreign born composes the majority, Mexican workers outnumber Dominicans by a ratio of 2:1 (29 per cent versus 14 per cent). In White majority neighborhoods, Mexican immigrants outnumber Dominican by three to one. The most exclusive neighborhoods in Queens, Long Island and Brooklyn show the greatest spatial and racial disparities between Mexicans and

⁴ Public-use micro-data for the 2000 Census 5 per cent sample and the combined 2005–2007 ACS 3 per cent sample provide baseline employment rates for both Latino groups in 45 New York community districts. The share of the White population in each neighborhood serves as a



gentrification proxy. Table A-1 in Appendix A (available upon request) regresses changes in employment rates for Dominican and Mexican populations on changes in gentrification and employment rates for Blacks and Whites. The results show Dominicans' chances of finding employment are negatively correlated with those of Mexicans, and are positively correlated with native Blacks, whereas Mexican's employment opportunities are significantly positively correlated with the employment rates and residential share of Whites in each neighborhood.

Table 1: Residential and employment distribution of Dominican and Mexican immigrants in majority White, Black and mixed race NYC neighborhoods

	<i>Majority White</i>	<i>Majority Black</i>	<i>Racially Mixed</i>	<i>Total</i>
	<i>N=20</i>	<i>N=11</i>	<i>N=21</i>	<i>N=52</i>
Share of residents born in: Mexico	1.2	0.5	3.3	1.9
Dominican Republic	1.3	2.1	9.0	4.5
Share employed born in ^a Mexico	71	66	68	69
Dominican Republic	54	69	57	57

^aShare of population over 15 with a job working or not.

Source: 2005–2007 ACS, author's tabulation *New York PUMAS (community districts) from Ruggles et al (2010). Integrated Public Use Microdata, usa.ipums.org/*

Table 2: Spatial distribution and employment of Dominican and Mexican immigrants

<i>Neighborhood</i>	<i>Population (%)</i>			<i>% of immigrant adults working</i>	
	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Mixed</i>	<i>Dominican</i>	<i>Mexican</i>
Morrisania/Belmont	12	37	51	54	71
Kingsbridge Heights/Mosholu	20	22	58	57	57
University Heights/Fordham	8.7	35	56	63	70
Mott Haven/Hunts Point	19	33	48	49	64
Washington Heights/Inwood	29	13	57	54	67
Morningside/Hamilton Heights	38	32	30	48	63
Central Harlem	13	77	10	54	78
East Harlem	23	35	42	38	66
Upper East Side	87	3.6	8.9	45	68
Chelsea/sol;Clinton/Midtown	75	8.2	17	64	71
Lower East Side/Chinatown	43	10	47	41	64
New York City	45	28	27	57	69
Bronx		23	35		59
Manhattan	57	17	26	52	68

Source: ACS 2005–2007, see Table 1 notes for source and employment definition.

Dominicans. The pattern is equally pronounced in mixed race neighborhoods undergoing rapid gentrification like East Harlem, the Lower East Side, Losaida, Williamsbridge and Chinatown: areas where Mexicans outnumber Dominicans. The spatial and class disparity between the groups is even greater in the 12 neighborhoods where this study's qualitative data was gathered (see Table 2).

What causes the spatial and class employment disparities between these two groups? We argue that demographic changes and firm growth in New York

**Table 3:** NYC employment growth in small retail and service sector firms 1998–2006

<i>Sector employment</i>	<i>Employment growth %</i>		<i>Share in firms with less than 50 employees</i>	
	<i>NYC</i>	<i>Study areas^b</i>	<i>NYC</i>	<i>Study areas^b</i>
Manufacturing	-27	-24	31	62
FIRE-information services	2.3	10	53	51
Retail trade	13	20	64	82
Educational services	21	51	18	30
Health care and social assistance	16	71	31	37
Accommodation and food services	19	23	69	90
All establishments ^a	7.7	8.0	47	56

^aCensus County Business Patterns, employees for week including 12 March, 12–09. censtats.census.gov/cgi-bin/zbpnaic/zbpsect.pl (employment estimates by firm size use means of CBP firm size range, scaled to total).

^bThese are the Bronx and Manhattan neighborhoods listed in Table 2.

neighborhoods favor Mexican over other racial minority workers. Table 3 shows that between 1998 and 2006, employment grew by about 8 per cent in the neighborhoods selected for the qualitative study. Over 80 per cent of the employment growth took place in firms with less than 50 employees. Service employment grew rapidly; and, in the neighborhoods included in this study retail employment grew by 20 per cent. In New York City, almost a third of Mexican born residents work in restaurants and food services, whereas less than 10 per cent of Dominicans work in these niches. Table 3 confirms that New York manufacturing employment continues to decline (see Waldinger, 2001; Bernhardt *et al*, 2007).

Census data suggests gentrification and service industry growth has benefitted Mexican immigrants at the expense of other immigrant workers in New York neighborhoods; but to understand why this is happening, we turn to the qualitative data.

Data and Methods

This study is based on ethnographic observation of 20 small business firms and semi-structured interviews with 25 employers and 86 workers. Most of the data was gathered between 2000 and 2003, with follow-up interviews in 2007 and 2009. The ethnographic findings offer insight into how Dominican and Mexican workers are sorted by race, gender and immigrant status. Goffman's concept of "front stage" and "back stage" interaction can be used to describe how Brown and Black Latino immigrants find themselves sorted by race and gender into "front stage" or "back stage" jobs. "Front stage" positions expose workers to mainstream and middle-class clients; "back stage" worker

sin contrast work behind closed doors and in jobs that involve little to no face-to-face interaction with clients.

Entry in the Dominican and Mexican community was facilitated by my participation in an earlier study sponsored by the *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (1997–2000). Earlier contacts with a number of community agencies that had participated in the Carnegie Project facilitated my initial access to a handful of Dominican and Mexican respondents. Also, earlier contacts with a Mexican couple through an East-Harlem Catholic church allowed me to volunteer in sports and religious events attended by Mexican families. Being the daughter of an immigrant Latina factory worker, a 1.5 or “in-between” immigrant generation facilitated my contacts with Latino workers and native, ethnic White employers, who identified with my “hard working” immigrant analogy (see Smith, 2001, 2006). However, my being a light skin Latina without a discernable Mexican or Dominican accent sometimes aroused suspicion among respondents, especially the undocumented. But this same ethnic and racial dissonance allowed me to gain the confidence of ethnic White employers and middle-class Latino gatekeepers.⁵

⁵ I was pregnant during the initial field research therefore I was warmly welcomed by my women respondents, as well as by supervisors at small business firms (stores, restaurants, dry cleaners and so on) that I first visited as customer, conducting participant observation and ethnography. I faced the greatest barriers interviewing Asian employers. However, a college friend of my brother, as well as the inter-racial marriage of one of my nieces to a Chinese-American business owner in midtown Manhattan,

Key Findings

The growth of small firms: Gender, racial and ethnic divides

Among the Bronx’s foreign-born population of about 386,000 Mexicans and Dominicans were the fastest growing groups from 2000 to 2006, increasing by 84 per cent and 39 per cent, respectively. Moreover, from 2000 to 2008, 14,233 small firms opened in the Bronx. The fastest growing among these were firms employing 20 to 49 workers. The changing demography of workers at *Domenico’s*, a butcher shop in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood, reflects the rapid growth of immigrants in the service sector as predicted by migration expert Saskia Sassen (1991) and labor racialization scholar Edna Bonacich *et al* (2008).

Domenico’s is located in an area known for ethnic restaurants and specialty food shops catering to a mainly White ethnic working class clientele. But, 70 per cent of people in this neighborhood are racial minorities (mostly Blacks and Latinos). Since the mid-1990s, *Domenico’s* clientele has expanded to include young White urban professionals and new cohorts of ex-peasant immigrants from Mexico and Eastern Europe. This rapid demographic transformation is also evident in new shops and restaurants opening near *Domenico’s*: three new Mexican-owned restaurants, two Albanian coffee shops and a deli owned by Asian immigrants.

Anthony, *Domenico’s* owner, is a second-generation Italian-American who grew up working in his father’s store. His father came to the Bronx in the 1950s



at 17, right off a farm in Southern Italy; at 26 he purchased the store with the help of an older brother. When Anthony was growing up, only Italian co-ethnics worked at *Domenico's* including one woman employee, a paternal aunt who tended the cash register on weekends, did the payroll and kept the books. After inheriting the store, Anthony assumed sole control of the store, the payroll and a growing staff of all immigrant Mexican workers.

Fifteen years ago, Anthony's first hire was Juan, a Mexican male now 37-years old. Anthony, Juan and another older Italian man in his late 60s now run the store with a staff of 18 Mexican men. When the boss is not around, Juan takes phone orders, closes and opens the store and on occasion takes the day's revenue to Anthony's home in a nearby affluent suburb. In 2000, Juan and two other men were the only visible Latino workers in this store. Ethnographic research later revealed that at least four other Mexican males worked in the basement in *backstage* jobs: cleaning and preparing meats for sale or storing meat in large freezers, never dealing with customers directly.⁶ By 2009, there were at least 10 Mexican workers, all males, visible at the front or adjacent back counters of the store, cutting or preparing meats for sale, storage or display. With the exception of an older Italian male in his late 60s and two other males, all workers are from *Puebla*, Juan's home state and one of the largest Mexican sending regions for New York immigrants. Juan and his Mexican staff work 12-hour shifts, from 6 am to 6 pm, six days a week plus overtime during Holidays. Hourly wages range from US\$7.50 to \$12 without overtime pay, medical or vacation benefits, except for Juan and two other men sponsored as legal immigrants by Anthony.

Analysis

Evidently, Anthony and other small service employers sort their workers by racial phenotype and immigrant status: Juan and three light-skin Mexican males, legal immigrant workers, cover the main counter, cutting meats, serving clients directly and taking orders for delivery. Asian restaurant owners in New York tourist areas similarly station light-skinned Mexicans in *front stage* jobs, at Sushi bars, for example, next to Japanese workers all of whom dress in Japanese preps and sport deferential Asian demeanors. Similarly, Mexicans in Italian restaurants near *Domenico's* are prepped in buttoned-down shirts with gelled crew cuts, and speak English with an affected, Southern Italian accent, mimicking an ethnic White *presentation of self*. At *Domenico's* Juan's proficiency in Italian is surprising, actually superior to his English; and he seems to affect a "Southern Italian accent" when greeting and taking orders from older, established, White working class Italian clients. All Mexican workers positioned in *front stage* meat store and restaurants jobs have mixed meso-American and Iberian racial features that clearly distinguish them from Blacks

allowed me access to this Asian employer and to other Asian employers using snow ball methods.

⁶ About five younger Mexican males, work in the Store's basement, bringing the animals bought by distributors in Brooklyn and New Jersey; cleaning the carcasses, washing the floors at all times before closing. They are all in their early 20s and most live outside of the neighborhood.

and other Afro-Caribbean Latinos, especially from the Puerto Ricans and Dominicans who dominate this neighborhood. Employers' narratives reveal that these darker-skinned immigrants are perceived *a priori* to be undesirable workers. Although employers rarely refer directly to race, their deliberate exclusion of Black workers increases the groups' racialization and exclusion service jobs.

Immigration scholars note that immigrant and minority workers in lower strata less regulated service sector jobs can be abused by employers (Bernhardt *et al*, 2007). We find that these employers are also inclined to hire workers from outside the neighborhood, excluding native and immigrant Blacks, especially from jobs that entail high degrees of visibility and face-to-face interaction with White clientele. This process of *racial and class exclusion* recalls the labor market experience of native Blacks (Wacquant and Wilson, 1989; Wilson, 1998). Further, as the following example of *Tabran* illustrates, the quest for cheap labor leads these employers to hire particularly vulnerable (undocumented) Brown immigrants instead of native and foreign born Black workers, who may demand higher wages and better work conditions.

Tabran: Imported labor and the shifting fates of Black and Light-Skin Latinos

Tabran is a large gourmet food store located on Manhattan's Upper West side, just a 15–20 min bus ride away from the Dominican Washington Heights neighborhood to the north. Owned and operated by three generations of an Eastern-European family, its labor force grew from 40 to over 200 employees since the 1970s. Most workers at *Tabran* are Dominicans, 70 per cent of whom have Afro-Caribbean phenotypes. All Dominican workers commute from outside *Tabran*'s affluent neighborhood. Recently, however, immigrants from Eastern Europe such as Albanians, have begun to replace some older Dominican workers, especially women.

Tabran's main store attracts a mainly local, White and affluent clientele, whereas a small cafeteria adjacent to the main store caters to tourists and long-time residents including the elderly and those with lower incomes. Nadia, a very light-skinned Dominican female worker with dyed ash blonde hair, in her late 50s confirms this distinction. She has worked at *Tabran* for nearly 25 years, working the cafeteria's cash register since the late 1990s: her greetings seamlessly differentiate old-timers (like me) from tourists and newcomers. She was a great help, confirming changes I noted during the 7 years I studied *Tabran*'s workforce.

During her first 5 years, Nadia was undocumented at *Tabran*'s and worked without medical insurance or paid vacations. Her direct contact with clients began shortly after she got her green card, but it took almost 10 years to get promoted from stocking shelves to working with the public. With the smile of



someone used to servicing the wealthy, Nadia confided that she feels lucky to still work at *Tabran*, given how many of her Dominican co-workers have lost their jobs: “... Mucha de la gente con la que yo empezé, ya se han ido o la han sacado de aquí!”⁷ As far as she knows, everyone working more than 30 hours a week receives full benefits. Shifts average 8–12 hours; hourly wages range from \$8.50 to \$20 depending on function and seniority. Nadia confirms what her boss says: *Tabran* never hires undocumented workers. However, when I ask “what about the guys who work the night shifts, the kitchen or the basement?” she always smiles. “Bueno, Los prietos trabajan por la noche; pero esos no hablan español, son Americanos.” (Well, Black guys work the night shift; but they do not speak Spanish, they are all Americans!)

Interviews with Nadia and other workers confirmed the spatial and racial stratification of workers at *Tabran*. Black Dominican men and other recent West Indian and African males work the early or late night shifts, making deliveries, stocking shelves, moving boxes in the basement and providing security: all *back stage* functions that require little or no face-to-face interaction with clients. However, people in *Tabran*’s *front stage* jobs, like Nadia, tend to be gendered (women) and racialized (light-skinned). As with Nadia, immigrant women or light-skinned Latino workers work at short order food counters, inside the store or cafeteria where clients move quickly in line *en route* to the cashier, without much chance for real interaction. This is not to say that women – just 3 of every 10 workers at *Tabran* – are never found behind closed doors. Some women do work in the kitchen preparing produce and ready-made foods; others, particularly second-generation girls who are mostly Dominicans, and recently hired ethnic Whites, work invisibly in upstairs offices doing inventory, receiving telephone orders and collecting and paying bills. But in general, the inexperienced, recently hired and/or those with Black or darker physiognomies assist behind the scenes.

⁷ Many of the people who started with me have left

Analysis

The pattern of *spatial and gendered racial* work segregation is even more apparent in *Tabran* than at *Domenico*’s, and is more noticeable because of the firm’s large size. These stores were compared with more than 20 other restaurants and food stores in the areas, where the qualitative data was gathered using 2006–2008 ACS Food and Accommodation sector employment data. The workforce was broken down first by race, then by gender and last by immigrant status. Data gathered for this study show that in firms with less than 100 workers, the employment ratio of men to women is seven to three. In small firms, although fewer in number than men, Latina women tend to occupy *front stage* jobs (such as waitresses) whereas men more often work in kitchens and labor-intensive cleaning jobs that are *backstage positions*. An exception could

⁸ Robert Fairlie's 2004 Small Business Advocacy Report (SBA, 2008) report seems to contradict this article's findings by suggesting smaller firms tend to hire male, young, uneducated and unmarried immigrants, but this does not explain what happens to immigrant workers when firms grow or what role race and gender plays in small firm hiring, and what about women immigrants? Consistent with the SBA report, we agree women and racial minorities are more likely in 100+ workers firms that must conform to EEOC regulations.

be said to exist among men doing deliveries but these workers are also out of clients' view in most restaurants. Thus, work is simultaneously gendered and racialized especially inside small New York firms, operated by the foreign born who generally prefer to hire immigrant workers.⁸

Preferences for Imported Labor: The "Browning" of Service Work

Smith's longitudinal ethnographic work among first and second generation Mexicans in New York City documents that some Mexican employment niches appear racialized, given the concentration or "browning" of the group in specific services (Smith, 2006, 35). However, the ethnographic findings above, as well narratives of employers in this study, indicate both a growing predilection for Mexican labor, as well as a higher segregation of immigrant workers by race and gender. It is this employment mechanism and Mexican bias that affects the labor niches of Mexicans and increases the group's visibility and perception as "hard working ethnics." This, I argue is what facilitates the "ethnicized" versus "racialized" adjustment of Mexican and Dominican groups in New York. Both our qualitative and the Census data suggest that expansion of homogeneous Mexican labor niches effectively excludes a growing number of native and foreign-born Black workers in small business firms opening in minority neighborhoods. Although the exclusion of Black workers from gentrifying neighborhoods in New York City and Philadelphia has been documented earlier (Lee, 1998; Newman, 1999), this has not yet been documented among Black Latinos.

To disentangle the role of race and class in the hiring decisions of small business firms, employers were asked if they ever hired native or foreign born Blacks, and in what capacity. Our findings corroborate the earlier findings of Newman (1999), Lee (1998) and Smith (2006) on how employers conflate class and racial ideological biases to favor cheap and easy to exploit immigrants over more empowered and racialized native groups. While buying meat at *Domenico's* for the holidays I ask Anthony, the owner, if he had ever hired Blacks, Puerto Ricans or Dominicans. Addressing me with the same casual shrug and uneasy smile he made every time we met, he said,

No, I know my father hired mostly Italians and a few Puerto Rican guys used to work in the back, but, I never have Look, these guys are not interested in this kind of work. This is dirty work: this requires dedication, skills, trust. You need to trust people to let them work with you in a family cash business! (Meat store owner, Bronx)

Smith (2006, 36) argues that Mexican workers in New York City are usually favorably perceived by ethnic White employers for their willingness to work



hard and for cheap wages, compared to native Blacks and Puerto Ricans. Indeed, this willingness to be exploited is viewed by employers as an admirable ethnic immigrant *rite of passage*. Yet, when employers were asked if they would hire Blacks or Dominicans from the local areas, they usually made some reference about the group's laziness or lack of skills. In the few instances when employers did hire Black workers they were usually foreign born, imported from outside the neighborhood and placed in "back stage" functions, away from mainstream clientele:

Q. Do you hire black people?

A. Of course. I have had a couple of people from Africa, from Guyana. They're nice people. They're good workers, respectable. I also have one of our closest allies, who I consider family, not an employee ... he is Jamaican. And I trust him with my life. He's security. He watches this place when I go home. He stays here throughout the night. He supervises, he makes sure that nothing is missing, that no one touches anything, that everyone is safe.

Q. So, you've never had black African Americans from the Bronx serving in your restaurant?

A. No. They never came. I've never even interviewed one. Would I employ one? Sure I would. I would employ a person if he's purple, if he's qualified, as long as they could do the job (Italian-American employer, Bronx).

I did not counter argue that Black men working as security guards are hired to protect the store from robbery by other, similar-looking Black people from the neighborhood. Again, subtle racialization processes surfaced in interviews that place minorities in less visible or *back stage* jobs, such as working as security guards in parking lots or after hours.

A middle class Bronx Latino auto-repair shop owner expressed opinions similar to those of neighboring second generation, ethnic White employers:

Q: Have you ever hired a Dominican worker?

The last Dominican I hired did not want to come [to work] on Saturdays ... they are all lazy Mexicans don't like to argue with you. If I tell him to do something, they do it. In my other shop, I had another Mexican ... they like to work and they do good work. Dominicans come to ask me for work, Hondurans too, and blacks too. But I can't just hire everybody. I have to know where they come from and who recommends them. I also have to watch them closely to see if they can do the job (Latino employer, repair shop, Bronx).

The exclusion and racialization of Dominicans and other native Black groups in service jobs was a recurrent theme across employers of all backgrounds – first or

second generation immigrants: both prefer more vulnerable immigrant workers, “imported” from outside the neighborhood:

Q. Have you ever hired a Dominican or a Puerto Rican, or any black person from this neighborhood?

A. Never Puerto Ricans, never Dominicans. The groups that have worked here were Colombians, Mexican, and Ecuadorians for the most part.

Q. But never Dominicans?

A. Never Dominicans.

Q. Do you know why?

A. No. I think I have a Puerto Rican guy that works; he's like one of our head chefs in one of our locations. But he's more Americanized. He's been educated here. He still keeps his past but ... most of these people are not interested in these jobs. They are different today than when I first came to this country ...

Dominicans, like blacks, they don't want this kind of work! (Greek Restaurant owner, Queens)

These narratives illustrate the diverging views about Dominican versus Mexican immigrants: racial bias is hidden by rationalizations grounded on economic considerations. A second generation ethnic White employer in his early 40s illustrates this conundrum:

Q. So you tell me you once hired a Dominican worker. If a Latino worker comes to look for a job, can you tell where he or she is from?

A. Yes. I can not only tell where they're from, I can tell if they do drugs. You get a keen sense. I can tell if someone is a thief if they come in to speak to me. You can tell. The thief offers too much.

A. I have professional thieves in this industry, and everybody in this industry when they're working in the position of a bar, everyone steals. The trick is not to get greedy ... I know – everybody knows – that in restaurants there's going to be a certain amount of theft. They don't think of it as theft ... (Italian restaurant owner, Bronx).

Overall, ethnographic observations and employers' narratives suggest hiring strategies that reflect a preference for vulnerable and cheaper Mexican labor, with prevailing racist ideologies hidden by “moralistic” references to the better “work ethic” of immigrant groups. This research also suggests that as the pool of Black and Brown Latino immigrant groups grew after 1965, service sector employers’ hired more Brown immigrants, especially Mexicans. The ethnic and social inclusion of Mexicans is self-reinforcing, and leads to more immigration and benefits for earlier cohorts: recall Juan at *Domenico*'s meat store whose employer sponsored his legalization after



10 years of employment. Though these narratives do not clearly separate class and race in the hiring of Mexican labor, census data shows Mexican employment rising with increases in White population and growth of small firms in gentrifying neighborhoods. Moreover, the increased visibility of Brown Mexicans in front-stage jobs and the concomitant relegation of Blacks and Dominicans to “back stage” jobs further illustrates the role of race in the sorting of Brown and Black Latinos. The browning of service labor sectors and the racialization of excluded groups reinforces exclusion driven by ingrained racial bias of employers and the clientele they serve, as one employer succinctly explains:

A people forget that they’re in New York, that New York is the melting pot of the world. So, like, I have an Oriental fellow who works for me. I have actually customers that get offended and that won’t let him serve them especially in this area of the Bronx, where we are. Although it’s not completely Italian any longer, when we came here, it predominantly was ... There are a lot of prejudices towards blacks. It’s gotten lighter, but you still have patrons, like old-timers that ... can’t understand how I employ black people (Restaurant owner, Southeast Bronx).

Racial and Ethnic Stratification of New York Latinos Workers

Interviews with Mexican workers confirm that most have a very clear view of their *ethnic* or “in-between non-racial” status. Mexicans see themselves as neither White nor Black, but as a separate group with its own history of migration and work relations in the United States. Cordero-Guzmán *et al* (2001), Smith (2006) attribute this new “in between” racial status only to Mexicans, given their unique history as temporary, migrant workers. However, Mexican workers’ narratives suggest most are aware of employer’s preference for their services, attributing it to both their historical reputation as submissive, hard workers and vulnerable, undocumented status:

I arrived in upper Manhattan. My father lived in 137th street and Broadway [the Dominican/Harlem community]. I got a job that same week in this restaurant where my cousins worked. Three of my cousins worked there, all without the papers; but their boss likes them and asked if they could bring me (Mexican male, West Harlem).

... I came here under very favorable conditions. Other people, Mexicans as well as others, have a lot more difficulties. I think the young Mexican kids have the greatest problems here But, some of the Dominican kids



I see in school, their fathers are in jail ... (Mexican woman, au pair, Brooklyn Heights).

Dominican narratives often complain that Mexicans take their jobs, and there is a broad consensus among both immigrant groups that Dominicans are discriminated against and excluded from jobs where Mexicans predominate. Interestingly, first generation Dominican born respondents in my study were not aware that race or close racial physiognomy with native Blacks played a significant role in their exclusion from service jobs; many instead, attributed their exclusion to the presence of cheaper Mexican labor or to the disappearance of “good” jobs. A dissonant imported notion of race and class standing (see Andujar, 1997; Candelario, 2007; Merenstein, 2008), as well as pattern of racial self-identification prevents first generation Black Dominicans from seeing the correlation between their declining life chances in the service sector as one similar to native Blacks or even Puerto Ricans.

Conclusions and Theoretical Reflections

This article documents new patterns of racialization and ethnicization, or ethnic inclusion, among Dominican and Mexican workers in minority neighborhoods undergoing rapid demographic and economic growth. Census and qualitative data help identify a number of factors leading to the racial and ethnic stratification of service workers in New York City through the 1990s. Recurring patterns of work and race relations continue to forge similar patterns of racial and class divides between Black immigrant workers and new immigrants through divisions reinforced by the hiring practices of less regulated small firms opening in gentrifying *minority* neighborhoods in New York City.

Wilson (1987, 1996) explains the social isolation of African Americans as manufacturing jobs disappeared and the middle class fled to the suburbs. Marginalized Black Dominican immigrants experience this same self-reproducing culture of exclusion although becoming newly racialized segments of the Latino urban poor. Ironically, this article shows that gentrification and the return of the middle class, as entrepreneurs or customers, leads to new forms of racial and class isolation, racial and ethnic stratification and sorting that not only reflects material conditions, but also cultural ideologies justifying the exclusion of new and old Black immigrants.

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