

Labour Migration, Transnational Farm Ownership, and the Transformation of Global Agriculture: Identifying Pathways to Intercultural Connection and Shared Belonging in Changing Rural Spaces

FINAL REPORT FOR TOYOTA FOUNDATION RESEARCH GRANTS
PROGRAM

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SUMMARY

This project set out to explore the intercultural dimensions of global agriculture, and to examine the possibilities for new values of shared belonging in increasingly diverse rural places. Its focus was the Australian state of Victoria, which has a rich history of migration and an extensive agricultural industry. Specifically, the project has targeted the regional centre of Shepparton and its surrounds, which are key sites of horticultural production, particularly of apples and pears. With an annual value of \$9 billion, horticulture is Australia's third largest agricultural industry, a sector with significant export strength, and an employer of approximately 57,000 people in 2012-13. It is an industry deeply implicated in the livelihoods, histories, and identities of many rural communities.

Over the course of a year, repeated fieldwork visits have yielded rich data in the form of ethnographic fieldnotes, with approximately 25 semi-structured interviews conducted with migrant workers, local workers, farmers, labour hire representatives, local government staff, and staff in non-governmental and service delivery organisations. Interactions and conversations with many other individuals have also taken place. I have spent time labouring in fruit-picking jobs, alongside diverse groups of workers, and have also conducted participant-observation at community events, farmers' and horticultural industry meetings, and events and activities run by labour hire companies.

Results from the project have highlighted the horticultural sector as a site of great intercultural diversity, and also a site experiencing great challenges in relation to that diversity. Today, the industry faces pressing challenges related to labour and workforce, including shortages of seasonal, 'low-skilled' labour—most often performed by migrant workers and non-White resident workers—allegations of mistreatment and underpayment of some workers, and difficulties in the implementation of the Seasonal Worker Program for Pacific Islanders. However, shortages of harvest labour also co-exist with persistent and chronic local unemployment. Research reveals that questions of who works (and who doesn't), who works *well* (and who doesn't), and who does what work, are subject to local understandings that are often strongly racialised, and reflective of dissonantly imagined pasts. Oft-heard statements that 'locals don't want to do that [fruit-picking] work anymore' reference the industry's reliance on migrant labour, but also obscure the labour performed by non-White residents who are excluded from the category of 'locals'.

The overall finding of the research is that there *are* ways in which diverse groups claim belonging, and through which *shared belonging* can be nurtured in diverse rural contexts, but there are also powerful and pervasive factors that currently act to inhibit shared belonging and produce exclusion.

Ways in which the structure of global agriculture currently acts to *inhibit* belonging, include:

- The structure of horticultural labour, and specifically the industry's requirement for seasonal, highly flexible workforces that can be mobilised on short notice, and dissolved again quickly.
- The use of illegal or undocumented workers, which renders many vulnerable, non-White groups of workers largely invisible.
- A sharp differentiation and stratification between the seasonal/low-skilled workforce and the professional, middle-level horticultural workforce (orchard managers, etc.).
- The failure to acknowledge the contributions to the seasonal horticultural work force of local residents, particularly non-White residents who are frequently excluded from the category of 'local'.
- Socio-economic factors which diminish workers' capacity to enact place-making practices and create a sense of belonging to place and people.

Nevertheless, even in difficult and constrained circumstances, people do work and act in ways that build a sense of shared belonging. The research has identified key factors in this, including:

- Shared experiences of labour, and narratives about a farming work ethic, which provide some basis for identification across cultural divides. Such identifications are tenuous however, with narratives about work ethic also fuelling sharply differentiated and often racially hierarchical labour relations within horticulture.
- The role of churches in strengthening belonging for many diverse groups, and (in some instances) fostering intercultural connection.
- Awareness of global connection. In spite of popular depictions of rural places as parochial, rural communities in the Greater Shepparton Region are in fact highly attuned to the global connections and political-economic context shaping contemporary horticulture. This awareness also has the capacity to foster intercultural connection. For example, although racialised and negative discourses do exist in relation to Asian investment in farming, there is also a strong interest amongst many in possible connections between Australian and Asian horticultural markets.

From this it becomes possible to identify transformations that would encourage shared belonging, including:

- Continuing regulatory reform to reduce industry use of informal contractors and illegal labour systems.
- Continuing regulatory reform to strengthen the rights of migrant workers to return in subsequent seasons if they wish to.

- Transforming local narratives and representations to challenge limited constructions of who is and is not considered local’.
- Cultural and creative initiatives oriented to the connections between transnationalism, identity & place-making.

PROJECT DESIGN

RESEARCH AIMS

Around the world, agriculture is being transformed in ways that have far-reaching consequences for social harmony, intercultural connection, and relationships between people and land. Diverse people and places encounter many shared challenges, including: the growth of global agri-business; ‘land-grabbing’; pressures of climate and environmental change; urbanization; and the migrations of new people to rural areas (Burch, Goss, Lawrence, & Rickson, 1999; Deninger, 2011; Filer, 2011; Kingsolver, 2011; Zoomers, 2010). These challenges bring new people into encounter with one another, generate transformed connections to land and place, and reconfigure social, cultural and political relationships between countries and regions.

This research project has sought to examine these transforming connections within the context of the Australian agricultural sector. In doing so, it has sought to challenge the prevailing emphasis within much scholarly globalization literature on ‘global cities’ as sites of change (Roy & Ong, 2011; Sassen, 2001), with its attendant characterisation of rural spaces as static, traditional, and conservative. At the same time, the project has sought to push back on the frequent valorisation of mobility as the defining feature of contemporary life, through attending to the significance of connection to land and place. Specifically, the project has asked: what potential is there for shared connection to land to give rise to new values of shared belonging?

METHODOLOGY

The project has employed an ethnographic methodology, with the project design and fieldwork focused on the lived experiences and everyday practices and understandings of the diverse people who encounter one another in the context of changing agricultural spaces. Principles of inductive and iterative ethnographic analysis (O’Reilly, 2012) have informed the process of both data collection—using participant observation and semi-structured interviews as key methods—and data analysis.

ITERATIVE AND RESPONSIVE DESIGN

The initial project design anticipated two case studies for exploring the transformation of agricultural industries in Australia and the world: firstly, the growing social tensions associated with purchases of farmland by Chinese and other Asian investors; and secondly, the temporary migrations of Pacific Islanders to Australia to work as farm labourers through the new Seasonal Worker Program (SWP). Mildura—a regional centre in the north-west of the Australian state of Victoria—was initially proposed as the site for fieldwork. In keeping with the principles of ethnographic research, this initial project design developed and evolved in response to processes of engagement with key stakeholders. Two developments

were particularly key. Firstly, the site for fieldwork shifted from Mildura to the Greater Shepparton Region, also in Victoria but in the north-central region. This shift in geographic focus reflected the centrality of the Greater Shepparton Region in the Australian horticultural industry, and its significance as a site with both high levels of cultural diversity, and complex challenges related to labour relations (see more below in Research Findings). A second key shift related to the two case-studies. While the research has been attentive to the themes and empirical foci related to both, issues related to seasonal horticultural labour have emerged as particularly paramount for research participants and communities. Accordingly, these became the primary focus of the research. The centrality of seasonal labour issues in the Greater Shepparton Region reflects their significance within the global agricultural sector, as well as within Australian agriculture more specifically. This has been highlighted throughout the project period by debates over the so-called ‘Backpacker Tax’—the level of income tax charged to working holiday-makers who are a key source of horticultural labour—as well as by media exposes of mistreatment and underpayment of some workers within the industry (for example Knott, 2016; McKenzie, 2016). Instead of a limited focus on Pacific Islander seasonal workers, however, the contemporary salience of these issues and debates has encouraged a widening of the initial research focus to also encompass other diverse cultural and ethnic groups involved in seasonal labour, including Afghan and Horn of Africa refugees, Malaysian and other Asian workers, European backpackers, and White Australian workers.

In response to the project’s emergent findings, ethnographic fieldwork was structured in order to gain insights into different stages across the yearly cycle of production and harvest. The timeframe for the research was thus as follows:

Month	Grant notes	Schedule of research activities
May 2016	First disbursal	University ethics processes, initial desk and literature research Initial fieldwork trip and establishment key stakeholder relationships. Record semi-structured interviews with 2 participants.
June 2016		Continue desk and literature research
July 2016		Continue desk and literature research
August 2016		Continue desk and literature research
September 2016		One month intensive ethnographic research. Development research relationships, especially famers, industry and community sector representatives. Record semi-structured interviews with 5 participants. Participant-observation on farms

		and in towns.
October 2016		Transcribing interviews, analysis of interview and fieldnote data
November 2016	Second disbursal	Transcribing interviews, analysis of interview and fieldnote data
December 2016		Two short fieldwork trip (1-3 days each): follow-up with key informants and recording semi-structured interviews with 4 participants. Output 1: Conference paper, 'Labour and (dis)trust in the Goulburn Valley', Australian Anthropological Society national conference, Sydney.
January 2016		Transcribing interviews, analysis of interview and fieldnote data. Drafting of publication outputs.
February 2016		Transcribing interviews, analysis of interview and fieldnote data. Drafting of publication outputs.
March 2016		One month intensive ethnographic research (mid March to mid April). Semi-structured interviews with 8 participants, on-farm participant observation (fruit-picking), participant observation in Shepparton and nearby population centres (Mooroopna, Merrigum). Dissemination of emergent findings through individual consultations with key stakeholders and community representatives.
April 2016	End of grant period	
May 2016		Ongoing drafting of publication outputs.
June 2016		Output 2: Two day national academic workshop, Labour Lines: Indigenous and Pacific Islander Experiences of Labour Mobility in Australia

RESEARCH FINDINGS

THE GREATER SHEPPARTON 'FOOD BOWL'

The Greater Shepparton Region is located a couple of hours drive north-east of Melbourne, within the Goulburn Valley. The Region is a hub of horticultural production—particularly stone-fruit but also grapes and other fruit and vegetable crops, valued at \$229 million (www.victoriasfoodbowl.com.au)—but also faces challenges related to water allocations, competition for overseas and domestic markets, the closure of one of its fruit canning facilities in 2011, and the near closure of the other in 2014. Relatively high levels of cultural diversity feature prominently in the region's 'social imaginary' (Moran & Mallman, 2015, p. 4). Migration here began with English and Scottish frontier orchardists in the late 1800s, continuing with the arrival of Italian, Albanian and other European migrants in the post-War period, and more recently Pasifika, Sikh and other migrants, as well as refugees including from Iraq and Afghanistan. Public narratives celebrate this diversity, but also gloss over racialised hierarchies, tensions, and disconnects (Moran and Mallman, 2015). Stories of pioneering orchardists told in the region's civic spaces and agricultural societies, for instance, obscure that the settlements of lands was, as with other Australian agricultural industries (B. Morris, 1992), a process of frontier colonialism.

SEASONAL LABOUR IN GLOBAL AND LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

Globally, the horticultural industry (fruit, vegetable and nut production) is notable for its continued reliance on intensive human labour at key points in its production cycles. Tasks such as fruit picking often need to be completed quickly. There is a matter of days, for instance, between when an apricot crop becomes ready for harvest, and when it is ruined. Vagaries of weather and environment make such windows hard to predict, and the exacting specifications of domestic and export markets (for weight, colour, size, as well as for the timing of delivery) add further challenge. The industry thus seeks out highly flexible seasonal workforces that can be mobilised, often on short notice, and dissolved again quickly (Hanson, 2007). The work itself is often challenging, involving tiring and strenuous labour (Holmes, 2013; Underhill, 2015) (Holmes 2013; Underhill and Rimmer 2015), often in full sun, or during irregular hours (asparagus picking, for example, is often done in the hours before dawn). Horticultural seasonal labour exemplifies, in many respects, the 'dirty, difficult, and dangerous' work that, within Global North countries, is increasingly done by migrants from Global South countries, and for whom it is often framed as a pathway to development (Ellerman, 2005). Within Australia, the seasonal labour of temporary migrants and non-White residents and citizens occurs alongside the labour of young 'working holiday makers' (backpackers), who are stereotypically, but not exclusively, Europeans.

SEASONAL LABOUR IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

A growing body of anthropological scholarship is examining the intersections of labour and race within horticulture internationally. In North America, Seth Holmes' (2013) *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States*, explores the experiences of Mexican Oaxacan workers in Washington State, using a medical anthropological approach to highlight bodily experiences of labour and subjection. Ann E. Kingsolver (2011) looks at workers on tobacco farms in rural Kentucky, highlighting the effects of globalisation and labour competition on identities and livelihoods. Other significant studies in the North American context are provided by James Quesada (1999), Daniel Rothenberg (1998) and Miriam Wells (1996). Elsewhere, significant anthropological contributions to the study of global seasonal agricultural labour include Maxim Bolt's (2015) ethnography of Zimbabwean migrants working in farms on South Africa's borderlands. Janet McLaughlin (2010) also considers the experiences of Zimbabwean migrant workers, along with Jamaican workers, in Canadian farmers. Notable non-anthropological contributions include studies from Daniel Rothenberg (1998), Harald Bauder (2008), and Joachim Ewert and Andries Du Toit (2005).

Common to this literature is the identification of precarity, physical difficulty, and poor pay as common features of this work, as well as high rates of use of informal labour. Within the global horticultural context, this literature also identifies significant transformations wrought by economic globalisation, the growth of global agribusiness and concomitant decline of family farming, particularly in the Global North, as well as climate and environmental crises, all of which intensify the precarity and marginality of work in this industry. This literature also reveals the ways that *race* and global patterns of migration function to structure global horticultural labour, with experiences of racism, and racial and ethnic hierarchies of power common features.

SEASONAL LABOUR IN AUSTRALIA

Within Australia, scholarship on the horticultural workforce has often been framed within policy-focused, technical, or economic terms. This includes several studies of the Seasonal Worker Program (Ball, 2010; Ball, Beacroft, & Lindley, 2011; Doyle & Howes, 2015; Gibson & McKenzie, 2011; Mares, 2005; P. Mares, 2007; P. N. M. Mares, 2007), which resonate with a larger body of work on New Zealand's parallel Recognized Seasonal Employers (RSE) scheme (Bedford, 2010; Lovelock, 2008). Hanson and Bell (2007) provide a survey of changing demographics of harvest workers, while Underhill and Rimmer (2015) describe the increased risk to occupational health and safety caused by precarious employment, and Goodall (2015) draws attention to the vulnerability of migrant workers to dishonest labour hire agents. Ruben's (1995) chapter on the place-making practices of fruit-pickers in the Goulburn Valley is a rare (but now somewhat dated) ethnographic consideration of Australian horticultural labour, but has a similarly narrow field of focus and is not centrally concerned with *race*.

A second body of research draws attention to intercultural encounters within regional and rural Australia, including the experiences of newly arrived migrants and resettled asylum seekers (Edgeworth, 2015; Jordan, Krivokapic-Skoko, & Collins, 2011; Schech, 2014), challenging the common depiction of these spaces as culturally homogenous. Aside from some scholarship on Indigenous involvement in pastoral and other agricultural industries (for example Brock, 1995), these studies do not address horticulture or other agricultural sectors as particular sites of industry, livelihood and local identity, and nor do they examine labour as a particular social practice and relationship. Anthropology has made some important contributions to the study of cultural (Merlan & Raftery, 2009) and social and environmental (Connor, Albrecht, Higginbotham, Freeman, & Smith, 2004) rural transformations. Outside a focus on Indigenous-non-Indigenous relations, however, the discipline has engaged relatively little in the study of race and intercultural encounters in regional Australia, with key exceptions including Helen Lee and Makiko Nishitani's current research [ARC Linkage LP150100385] into the experience of Tongan people in Mildura (also Henry, 2012). An effect of this is that the discipline's strengths in illuminating patterns of meaning and practice, and the richness of lived experience, have yet to be fully brought to bear upon the study of Australian life and community beyond metropolitan centres.

In highlighting the imbrications of seasonal labour, race, and belonging in rural Australia, this research has thus begun to map the lacuna between these two bodies of research. It has revealed local narratives about labour as normative and deeply tied to questions of local history and identity. It has highlighted race relations with horticulture as a highly charged set of dynamics that are shaped by, but that also provide a basis from which to consider, transforming patterns of migration (including a national rise in temporary labour migration), political economy and globalisation.

SEASONAL LABOUR AS PRECARIOUS LABOUR

For workers, the demand for flexibility and the unpredictable nature of horticultural production results in significant levels of precarity. Here, I understand precarity as the condition of hyper-flexible, insecure, often risky labour relations. This is a condition understood widely within the literature to be on the rise within the global labour force, particularly within late, neoliberal capitalism (Bourdieu, 1998; Harvey, 2005; Kalleberg, 2009). This shift is associated with the demise of Fordist models of production and the emergence of 'flexible accumulation' (Harvey, 2005), and the rise of immaterial labour (Tsianos & Papadopoulos, 2006). A key aspect of precarity, so understood, is its relationship to changing temporalities of work and labour. Tsianos and Papadopoulos (2006) highlight the collapsing of the delineation of productive/non-productive time, and of home/work and public/private, as well as the loss of the sense of the lifelong scope of the worker, within which productive labour time forms one element of a lifespan that also includes periods of unproductivity (whether due to illness, unemployment, or old age). Precarious workers are, as Bridget Anderson describes, those who are 'available when required, undemanding when not' (2010, p. 300).

Precarity is also widely linked to the impact of increased migration on many workforces, with precarity identified by many as a particular condition of migrant labour, including (and for some, particularly) in the Global North. Thus, Lewis et al. (2015) argue that precarity is intensified as migrants create a seemingly endless pool of potential labour, offering capital the choice of different bodies of comparably efficient, but differently priced, labour. Take-up of migrant labour is not only motivated by economic factors, though, and they note that it is also informed by understandings of migrant workers as harder-working, more reliable, and prepared to work longer due to their lack of choice or the levels of competition for lower-end jobs. Systems of 'stratified rights' (L. Morris, 2001) for migrant workers in Global North countries are also understood to contribute to the experience of precarity, as are complex arrangements of sub-contracting and labour agents that make it difficult to protect labour or human rights (Anderson & Rogaly, 2005).

In relation to seasonal horticultural labour, these qualities of precarity are reflected in the heavily casualised nature of the work, in the predominance of piece-rates (as opposed to fixed wages, or even fixed hourly rates), in the demand for flexibility, and in the highly variable and sometimes unpredictable hours either demanded of, or available to, workers. The particular experiences of migrant workers within the horticultural industry (who make up a very large section of the seasonal workforce) also resonate with key findings in the literature on precarity. Particularly significant is the observation about the loss of the lifelong scope of the worker. As Seth Holmes (2013) also observes in his study of Mexican migrant farmworkers in California, a key advantage of migrant workers for capital, and for nation-states, is that they need not exist for the state or employer outside their productive capacity. When they are sick, pregnant, or too old to work, the workings of migration regimes (informal in Holmes' case, formal in the case of SWP workers and working holiday makers in Australia) ensure they are relocated back to their countries of origin.

Within the Greater Shepparton Region, as in other Australian horticultural sites, shortages of harvest labour co-exist with persistent and chronic local unemployment. Research for this project has revealed that questions of who works (and who doesn't), who works *well* (and who doesn't), and who does what work, are subject to local understandings that are often strongly racialised, and reflective of dissonantly imagined pasts. In the Greater Shepparton Region, the SWP is one of a number of labour pools to which farmers turn to recruit seasonal labour. Other potential sources of labour include backpackers on Working Holiday Maker visas, who are usually not exclusively European; labour contractors who organise groups of (often non-White) workers, across a spectrum of legality; and 'locals'. This latter category is both nebulous and loaded. Popular, oft-heard statements from farmers, local residents, and representatives of council and service sector organisations, declare that 'locals don't want to do that [fruit-picking] work anymore'. These statements reference the increased significance of migrant labour within the workforce, and the shift away from the early to mid twentieth century when family members provided

much of the labour on farms, supplemented at harvest time by itinerant ‘cane-cutters’ who would travel down from QLD after the cane season and work the harvest in Shepparton before moving on to Mildura. But the popular narrative also serves to conceal and epistemically exclude many contemporary workers, including settled refugees, new migrants and other non-White residents who are excluded from the category of ‘locals’, as well as the small number of White, settler-descendent workers, often quite socio-economically marginalised, who do continue to work in seasonal labour. Common assessments of an absence of Indigenous participation in the industry workforce, meanwhile, belie an extensive history of Indigenous labour in the industry’s formation, one that is clearly remembered by local Indigenous Yorta Yorta people, even as it is largely overlooked in dominant collective rememberings.

EXPERIENCES OF SEASONAL LABOUR: EXAMPLE ONE

TRUST IN CHANGING TIMES

Labour, and the shared experience of labour, is one basis for trusting relationships, one that has powerful normative and imaginative traction, but is also under strain.

Manaia¹, a Samoan worker in his 60s, talks positively about the relationship with the two growers, Albanian brothers, he has worked for, for 16 years. Manaia came to the area with his (then young) family in 1997. He worked first on another orchard, before moving to this one where he has been since. The first orchard was good, fine, he says, but there was a high level of surveillance – managers overseeing people’s work, monitoring when they checked in and out, their hours, etc. What he values about the orchard where he is now is that there is “trust”. When he is doing work that pays an hourly rate (thinning, pruning, other farm work other than picking), he keeps a record of his start time and finish time in his notebook. At the end of each week he takes his notebook to them and they write down the times that he worked and pay him accordingly. The farmers trust and respect the work that Manaia and his brother-in-law do. At the same time, Manaia feels trusting towards them because they are fair, and they base their treatment of him on their own knowledge of the work and the conditions. If he is working thinning, for example, and the work is more difficult than usual, the owners know and are understanding about it taking longer to finish a row. Sometimes, if it is difficult picking (e.g. there are less plums on the tree), the owners will increase the bin rate to compensate.

A White farmer and a prominent figure in the community, Richard, also offers accounts of the ideal of trust based on shared labour and labour ethic, which are also accounts of the threats to this ideal. Like many people in the area, he bemoans the lack of ‘local’ (by which he means ‘White’) labour today. Back in the day, so to

¹ All names have been changed

speaking, everyone did that work. It was, as another White local put it, a 'rite of passage' to spend a season or two picking fruit. But there is a sense of a new generation of White youth who won't, or can't, do the work. As Richard puts it, 'people don't know how to work any more', and he compares the young local generation today with the cane-cutters – the itinerant workers who would start their labour routes in the QLD cane fields, and who are talked about by Richard and others in mythic terms. They could fill 17 bins in a day, he says. It's not that they didn't find the work hard – no one denies that it's incredibly hard – but they pushed through it. That is, they had a particular kind of character, a shared ethic that created the basis for shared identifications and for trusting labour relations, and that is seen as missing in the current generation of local White youth, and particularly those youth who are associated with the urban, chronically unemployed and highly marginalized underclass concentrated in Shepparton town. As Richard puts it, 'Everything that's built the person up comes out through their hands and their feet and their character'. Later in our conversation he says, 'Different trees yield different fruit'.

If the poor White population in Shepparton yields bad workers, better fruit, to run with his analogy, and new identifications and alliances are emerging across race lines. Richard talks, for example (and others talk similarly) about his success employing Afghan workers and others. 'They' know how to work, and they have the 'character' required for it, the kind of character that Richard values in himself and the older generation of farmers. They also 'understand authority'.

The figuring of labour as a basis for trust also plays out in the *distrust* that farmers express about politicians. And I'm not trying to suggest here that distrust in the political class is a unique attribute of farmers, but rather that the ways that distrust is articulated and fashioned is reflective of this particular value attributed to labour as constitutive of relationships and commonality. So Marco, a retired farmer, declares about Scott Morrison, the Liberal minister involved in dragging out the debate over the Backpackers Tax over the past year – 'I'd like to see him come out and put a bag on his back and climb a ladder picking apples'.

At the same time, however, many farmers are themselves increasingly removed from the kinds of work that Marco would like to see Scott Morrison do, and that Richard sees as constitutive of character and a kind of farming identity. Farms are hierarchical places, and they get more hierarchical the bigger they get. Richard may well see in his workers qualities that he also identifies in himself, and thus point to shared experience and character, but his positive disposition to them is also on the basis of their respect for authority, which is to say their perceived willingness to work within a hierarchy that is also quite markedly racialised. As farms get bigger and more corporatized, the work done by those at the bottom of this racialised hierarchy becomes increasingly differentiated from the work done by those at the top, who often find themselves—and often unhappily so—in roles more akin to business managers than to farmers.

In this widening space between farmers and labourers, exacerbated by the increasingly bureaucratic demands of managing workforces, an increasingly significant role is played by contractors and labour hire companies. Labour hire agents can provide workers on a scale that farmers need, and that many farmers could not organize themselves on a one-by-one basis. They also take care—or are meant to take care—of the mass of paperwork now associated with horticultural workforce, including—nominally at least—checking visa status and work rights. For some, labour hire agents and contractors represent a way to “clean up” the industry, to ensure that it is regulated, to give farmers confidence that the workers they are using are legit, and to give workers confidence that their various entitlements are being met. In other words, they can be mechanisms for increasing trust within labour relations. But the growth of these mediating actors also poses new challenges, both for farmers and for workers. Unscrupulous labour contractors charge workers for all kinds of expenses, deducting money from their pay for accommodation, transport, food, etc, and stories abound of workers (often temporary migrant workers) who expected to be earning hundreds of dollars a week, and found themselves instead with just twenty or forty dollars in their pay packet. But the possibility also emerges that honest contractors might be duped by dishonest farmers. Manaia, the Samoan farmer quoted earlier, describes the dilemma like this. When the middle men are involved, ‘you do not know where the trust is’. If workers are underpaid, you don’t know if it’s because the farmers didn’t pay the money, or the middle men didn’t distribute it. In this situation, where there is no immediacy of relationship between the worker and farmer, you can’t have trust in this situation. Both farmers and workers worry about the dangers this situation poses.

EXPERIENCES OF SEASONAL LABOUR: EXAMPLE TWO

NI-VANUATU WORKERS IN THE SEASONAL WORKER PROGRAM (SWP)

This group of 20 workers were employed at a fruit-packing shed, packing bins of apples, pears, pomegranates and plums sent to the shed by a range of farmers who use the shed to sort and pack their produce. The work involves standing alongside a conveyor belt, sorting fruit as it passes along in order to separate it into Class 1 (best quality), Class 2, and juice grade (blemished) product, and pack it accordingly. Of the group of twenty, 18 were women, ranging in age from early twenties to early 50s. Most had children. Five of the workers were here for their third season in a row, and the rest were on their first placement through the SWP. The group lived at a caravan park in a town outside of Shepparton, which was also home to another group of, mostly male, ni-Vanuatu workers working on a local tomato farm.

All of the group of twenty workers had willingly, often enthusiastically, pursued employment through the SWP. While some of the literature on precarity has

understood precarity as a condition of life, not simply of work, that is marked by abjection (for example Butler, 2004), it's important to say that this is not how the women I spoke to described their lives or working status. Indeed, many pointed to positive aspects of their labour migration experiences. They did, however, also narrate other aspects of their experience that speak strongly to precarity, often described by them in terms of vulnerability, insecurity, unpredictability, or a perceived absence of trust.

Time pressure

The ni-Vanuatu workers in the packing shed are paid an hourly rate, which is generally considered preferable to piece rates. They feel the pressures of time, though, in other ways. Instead of the pressures of piece rates—needing to work fast enough to make a half-decent wage—it is the pace of the conveyor belt that sets the speed at which they are required to work. Added to this are the farmers who often stand in the sheds, behind the workers, watching as their crops are sorted and packed. They exert pressure for speed, but also on grading—if too many fruit with 'defects' are packed in the Grade 1 or Grade 2 boxes, the farmers (and the packing shed) risk having shipments rejected. But the farmers also want to keep as much of their fruit as possible out of the less profitable juice grade bins. Like all aspects of seasonal work, it's a constant, never-ending series of minor calculations that weigh risk, cost, time, profit, and risk against each other. The pressures that these calculations exert on worker's labour are keenly felt. The manager of the packing shed describes the group as working well, for the most part. It's a challenge though, she says, when so many work on 'Island time'—a passing comment that at once references (albeit unreflexively) the encounter of different cultures of work and temporality that do occur within the context of the SWP, and reveals the persistently racialised terms through which groups of workers are categorised, imagined, and evaluated.

Insecurity

The SWP is sold as a scheme with strong safeguards for workers, and it's in this sense that it is billed as a key plank of Australia's development activity in the Pacific, as well as part of the clean up of the industry (specifically, efforts to decrease the use of 'illegal' labour). One of the safeguards is the requirement for employers to guarantee a minimum of 30 hours per week work, averaged across the duration of a worker's stay. In practice, though, the working week for the ni-Vanuatu group is highly unpredictable. Workers find out each day whether or not they are working the next day, and whether they are on the daytime or night shift. Most want to be working more hours than they are. More fundamental is the unpredictability regarding whether they will be able to return in subsequent years. The availability of an experienced, returning workforce is also billed as a feature of the SWP (workers can theoretically return in successive seasons), but the experience of the ni-Vanuatu workers has been that it has been the minority who have been able to do this. Over the last three years, the group has found out only at the end of each season who was and wasn't going to be invited to return. The insecurity acts as a powerful

disincentive against complaining, and intensifies the day-to-day pressures of speed and performance.

For the ni-Vanuatu workers on the tomato farm, this insecurity is further exacerbated by the payment of piece rates. The workers have guaranteed minimum hours, but what earnings this translates into depends on a range of factors including the type and size of the group. This harvest season, the crop at the tomato farm was reportedly poor. Small tomatoes, and fewer fruit on plants, mean it is longer and harder work to fill bins, and fewer bins equates to lower pay. This, coupled with the regular deductions from workers' pay (for accommodation, transport, health insurance, etc. – a major source of grievance), means that many were making a pittance.

Negotiating precarity

The experience of precarity in seasonal labour is not by any means unique to the Pacific Islanders employed through the SWP: to varying degrees, this is felt by all workers engaged in this kind of work. There is a key difference, though, between the ways in which SWP workers and some other workers—specifically, European backpackers—are able to negotiate the experience of precarity, and this relates to the degree of constraint on their movement. Put very simply, where SWP workers are effectively bound to one employer, backpackers can, and do, move in search of better conditions. This is not in any way to diminish the ways in which these young workers can also experience exploitation, but it is to point to a powerful tool that these workers are able to mobilise in their negotiations of the work. The kinds of micro-calculations of cost and benefit that farmers and others in the industry make are also made by workers, and backpackers will leave farms where crop quality is poor, move to areas where the bin rate is higher, or seek out crops with better returns. SWP workers do not have the option to do this.

In April this year, five of the ni-Vanuatu group working on the tomato farm ran away from their designated employer and accommodation at the caravan park. The group were receiving consistently poor wages as a result of the poor quality of the crop, and the men—all with young families back home—were not managing to send back the money they hoped to. In leaving in search of better work elsewhere, the men were acting in much the same way as the European backpackers, but with dramatically different consequences. Leaving the farm, they were immediately designated absconders. Any work they might find would, necessarily, be illegal. The Shepparton News ran a story about the men. The headline, 'A Trail of Disappointment', seemed apt enough, until it became clear the disappointments being referenced were those of the labour hire agency and the farmer, who 'has been burnt by his experience with foreign workers'. Here, too, as so often whenever cracks emerge in the labour system, racialised narratives emerged from within them. The discussion of the SWP in the article raised both the assumption that Pacific Islanders would be 'accustomed to tough manual labour', and the suggestion that the men had failed to make money because they'd 'been sitting around' all day.

'Unfree' labour, race and coloniality

In challenging the usefulness of the opposition between 'free' and 'forced' labour, Lewis et al. (2015) advocate instead for the idea of 'unfree labour'. Here, coercion is not focussed at the point of entry into work (as in slavery, or the blackbirding that echoes contemporary Pacific Islander labour migrations), but at the point of exit. In Miles' (1987) earlier theorisations, unfree labour emerges from the imposition of restrictions by the state that limit migrants' capacities to commodify their labour power. The kinds of temporary labour migration that Australia is increasingly enacting, including the SWP, work in many ways to produce unfree labour. They do this through acting to ensure the temporariness of people's migrations, in turn preventing the kinds of claims for belonging and social citizenship that longer-term stays might enable. They also act, critically, *through* their legality. This fact resonates with scholars of labour migration and precarity who have urged us to look beyond the kinds of exploitation and vulnerability produced by illegality (although these certainly warrant our attention), to the ways in which legality itself produces exploitation and vulnerability, and indeed the ways in which immigrations controls themselves produce illegality, as in the case of the absconded men (Anderson, 2010).

FACTORS INHIBITING BELONGING

In inquiring into the potential for new values of shared belonging in rural spaces, the research has identified significant factors that work to inhibit such belonging. The experiences of seasonal workers are highly significant here, because in many ways structures of labour relations and migration function in ways that purposefully act to limit possibilities for workers' belonging. Yet, seasonal workers are, as farmers and industry representatives themselves emphasise, absolutely critical to the viability and profitability of the industry.

Belonging denotes bonds of attachment both to place, and to other people. Indeed, these are often inextricable (Dominy, 2001), and in settler colonial contexts like Australia, both are necessarily also imbricated with the reverberating effects of colonialism and the forms of contestation to which these give rise (Read, 2000). Belonging speaks to 'terrains of commonality that delineate the politics and dynamics of "fitting in"' (Fortier, 1999, p. 42). It is both relational and dialogical, negotiated within particular contexts of identity, emotion, and ethical and political values (Yuval-Davis, 2011). The literature on belonging insists that belonging be considered in relation to not-belonging (Slater 2007).

The research has identified a number of key factors which act to inhibit shared belonging—or, in other words, to produce not-belonging—both for seasonal workers and for culturally and ethnically diverse groups resident in the area.

THE STRUCTURE OF HORTICULTURAL LABOUR

The structure of horticultural labour, and specifically the industry's requirement for

seasonal, highly flexible workforces that can be mobilised on short notice, and dissolved again quickly, acts to inhibit belonging for many horticultural workers. Particularly since the 1970s, the industry has relied heavily on temporary labour migrants from Asia, Europe, and the Pacific. In this context, not-belonging can be seen to be produced through temporary labour migration schemes that foreclose any possibility of citizenship. Working Holiday Maker and Seasonal Worker Program visa programs, for example, prohibit workers from bringing family members with them, and place strict time limits on the time migrants can spend in the country. These are systems of 'stratified rights' (L. Morris, 2001) designed to prevent the progression of temporary labour migration to more permanent forms of residence, with their attendant rights.

THE USE OF ILLEGAL OR UNDOCUMENTED WORKERS

While there are efforts to reduce the use of undocumented and informal labourers, the use of such workers remains a major problem in the industry. Informal workers are often non-White, and highly vulnerable. By nature of their precarious status they are highly dependent on labour hire agents and contractors who organise them, have limited rights, and are often intentionally concealed from—and thus disconnected from—wider communities.

STRATIFICATION BETWEEN SEASONAL AND MIDDLE-LEVEL WORKFORCES

Interviews with workers, farmers and farm managers reveals a sharp differentiation and stratification between the seasonal/low-skilled workforce and the professional, middle-level horticultural workforce (orchard managers, etc.). Many farmers within the industry worry about the availability of seasonal labour, but this is generally viewed in terms of numbers from year to year, and there is little expectation of this being a returning workforce. Farmers also worry about securing middle-level managers and horticultural professionals. *This* workforce, however, is envisaged in ongoing terms, as linked to the sustainability, culture, and local identity of the industry and the region. There is little movement between these workforces, with the exception of a small number of refugee residents who began in fruit-picking work and have since purchased their own orchards. This stratification and differentiation means that concerns about 'local' workforce and industry and community belonging are usually framed in terms of middle-level or professional horticultural positions, not so-called 'low-skilled' ones.

CONSTRUCTIONS OF 'LOCAL'

One consequence of the industry's increased reliance on migrant labour has been that this has become the dominant narrative about seasonal labour, to the extent that the continuing contributions to the seasonal horticultural workforce of local residents are often overlooked. These local residents include many non-White residents (both local residents and Australian residents who travel for work) who are excluded from the category of 'locals'. This includes workers like Manaia, in Example

One, who has worked for decades in the industry and is a resident. It also includes Malaysian and other Asian workers who are Australian residents but popularly assumed to be migrants. The oft-heard phrase, 'locals don't do that work anymore', serves to perpetuate a conflation of 'local' and 'white'.

FACTORS CREATING BELONGING

SHARED EXPERIENCES OF LABOUR

Shared experiences of labour, and narratives about a farming work ethic, *do* provide some basis for identification across cultural divides. Thus, for example, many farmers who bemoan the lack of a work ethics among young 'local' (White) youth—those youth who are disengaged from seasonal work—will point favourably to the work ethic they see in many newly arrived migrant or refugee workers, or temporary labour migrants. These assessments can include elements of co-identification and assertions of commonality. However, it should be stressed that these are often ambivalent and sometimes tenuous. Narratives about work ethic are also often highly racialized, and can fuel sharply differentiated and hierarchical labour and intercultural relations.

KEY ROLE OF CHURCHES

Local churches play a key role for strengthening belonging for many diverse groups, and (in some instances) fostering intercultural connection. Churches are key sites of belonging for different cultural and ethnic groups, and also serve as sites of welcome for temporary labour migrants. The group of ni-Vanuatu workers described in Example Two have strong links to a local Anglican church, which has provided a community for them, shared resources, and given material and emotional assistance. They are described by the ni-Vanuatu workers as 'family'. Other churches have similarly provided important spaces of sociality.

AWARENESS OF GLOBAL CONNECTION

In spite of popular depictions of rural places as parochial, rural communities in the Greater Shepparton Region are in fact highly attuned to the global connections and political-economic context shaping contemporary horticulture. This awareness also has the capacity to foster intercultural connection. For example, although racialised and negative discourses do exist in relation to Asian investment in farming, there is also a strong interest amongst many in possible connections between Australian and Asian horticultural markets. As one prominent public figure described it, 'Asia is the future' for the Australian industry. This awareness of connection provides some basis for intercultural exchange and a sense of a entwined interests and futures.

STRENGTHENING SHARED BELONGING

In examining the experiences of diverse groups, the research has identified four future pathways towards new values of shared belonging through connection to land.

1. Continuing regulatory reform to reduce industry use of informal contractors and illegal labour systems.

This is not only about 'cleaning up' the industry or reducing incidences of exploitation or mistreatment. Reducing the use of informal labour is also key to strengthening the sense of belonging of workers, and to enabling more equal intercultural relationships.

2. Continuing regulatory reform to strengthen the rights of migrant workers to return in subsequent seasons if they wish to.

This is relevant particularly to workers in the Seasonal Worker Program. All SWP workers interviewed in this research expressed a wish to return, but workers often do not know if they will be returning until after they have left the country. This experience of precarity limits their capacity to enact forms of place-making and to build ongoing relationships. It sustains the (incorrect) characterisation of seasonal workers as interchangeable, abstract units who come and then leave, rather than as contributors to the industry and community.

3. Transforming local narratives and representations to challenge limited constructions of who is and is not considered local'.

The ways in which conceptions of 'local' function to exclude and silence call for critical and creative challenge. This is a task for government, industry, and community-sector actors alike.

4. Cultural and creative initiatives oriented to the connections between transnationalism, identity & place-making.

The arts have an important role to play in celebrating new and diverse forms of belonging. This pathway is closely linked to the one above, and involves disrupting and reframing ideas of who and what is 'local', and of the ways that people forge connections to people and place. Increased transnationalism and new forms of labour mobility increasingly reveal the limits of ideals of belonging that assume permanent migration and fixed settlement.

PROJECT OUTPUTS

Research has yielded two key project outputs to date.

1. Conference paper, 'Labour and (dis)trust in the Goulburn Valley', presented at the Australian Anthropological Society national conference, Sydney, December 2016. This was a contribution to a panel examining the financialization of everyday life, and values of speculation and trust.

Abstract:

This paper explores the precarious relations of (dis)trust and sociality associated with seasonal labour in the Goulburn Valley. A long-established part of the production systems of horticultural and agricultural industries, contemporary seasonal labour is increasingly inflected with the effects of the economic and ecological uncertainties that permeate those industries: climate change and water shortages, the growth of global agri-business, farm closures, and (often heavily racialized) panics over 'land grabs'. The workers who undertake seasonal labour are also changing, as dedicated temporary labour migration schemes bring Pacific Islanders from places also experiencing ecological and environmental uncertainty, and as the Working Holiday Maker visa scheme brings European backpackers but also (non-White) others whose use of the scheme was unintended by its designers. The encounters that result involve competing assessments of value—of land, labour, and their products—as people work in uncertain times towards different imagined ends.

2. Workshop, Labour Lines: Indigenous Australian and Pacific Islander Experiences of Labour Mobility, 22-23 June 2017. This two-day workshop, organised by Dr Stead in collaboration with Prof Jon Altman and Dr Tiffany Shellam at Deakin University, was an innovative and productive activity bringing together anthropologists, historians, geographers, sociologists and others to explore themes of race, coloniality, transformation and continuity in relation to labour mobility in Australia.

Seventeen presentations from leading national and international scholars, responded to the following questions:

- What are, or have been, the experiences of Indigenous and/or Pacific Islander peoples of labour mobility in both rural and metropolitan Australia?
- What imaginaries, ideologies, and affective experiences inform the labour mobility of Indigenous and Pacific peoples?

- For what, and whose, ends have Pacific people and Indigenous Australians laboured, both historically and today?
- Where, and in what ways, do past and present experiences of labour mobility by Pacific and Indigenous Australian people resonate, diverge, and intersect?
- What are, or have been, the responses of Indigenous and Pacific peoples to labour mobility, and to the forms of intercultural encounter that labour mobility produces? What cultural and imaginative resources do Indigenous and Pacific peoples bring to their experiences and negotiations of labour mobility?
- What does a consideration of Indigenous and Pacific Islander experiences in relation to one another reveal about the experience and practice of Australian coloniality, and the geographies of power underpinning the historical and ongoing constitution of 'Australia' and Australian spaces?

The papers were diverse, covering aspects of mission history, the mid-19th century origins of the Pacific labour trade, contemporary fly-in-fly-out mining labour, horticultural seasonal workers, and much more. Underlying this diversity, strong commonalities of experience emerged, with key themes including the ambivalent role of regulation in both ameliorating and reproducing colonial inequalities, the privileging of particular conceptions of work and labour at the expense of others, and the role of labour relations in colonialist efforts to produce and discipline particular kinds of Indigenous and Pacific Islander subjects. There was a terrific and generous exchange of ideas, and Dr Stead, Prof Altman and Dr Shellam are working towards an edited publication.

Abstract for Dr Stead's paper:

This paper considers the experiences of a group of ni-Vanuatu workers employed through the Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) in the Victorian horticultural industry, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in the Greater Shepparton Region over 2016-2017. Seasonal horticultural labour—which includes fruit-picking, pruning, thinning and packing—is highly precarious work. The workforces that are pulled together to complete this work are often markedly differentiated by race, as well as by migration status, and these differentiations affect the ways in which different groups of workers experience, and are able to respond to, this precarity. Thus, Pacific Islanders employed through the SWP experience much greater levels on constraint on their mobility than, for example, European backpackers employed in similar jobs on Working Holiday Maker visas. In considering the experiences of the ni-Vanuatu workers in the Greater Shepparton Region, I argue that these constraints render Pacific Islanders more vulnerable to exploitation and to the precarity of horticultural work, producing forms of 'unfree' labour that entrench racialized hierarchies. Significantly, precarity is revealed here as a condition produced by, and through legality.

ONGOING PRODUCTION OF OUTPUTS

Additional to these two completed outputs, a book manuscript and two journal articles are currently in development. Also in development is the edited collection bringing together the papers presented at the Labour Lines workshop, which will include both a sole-authored paper from Dr Stead, and a co-authored introduction by Dr Stead, Dr Shellam, and Prof Altman. It is anticipated that these outputs will be finalised and published in the 2017-2019 period.

Funding from the Toyota Foundation Research Grants Program has provided critical support for the fieldwork on which these outputs draw. I extend my sincere thanks to the Foundation for their generosity. I look forward to seeing these outputs through to final publication, and to continuing to engage with project participants and stakeholders in order to share the findings of this research.

Dr Victoria Stead

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