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Article

CLAIMING EQUALITY: PUERTO RICAN FARMWORKERS IN WESTERN NEW YORK

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Abstract

In July of 1966, a group of Puerto Rican migrant workers protested against police brutality and discrimination in North Collins, a small farm community of western New York. Puerto Rican farmworkers made up a substantial part of the population, and had transformed the ethnic, racial, and gender landscape of the town. Local officials and residents produced and reproduced images of Puerto Ricans as inferior subjects within US racial and ethnic hierarchies. Those negative images of Puerto Ricans shaped the way in which local authorities elaborated policies of social control against these farmworkers in North Collins. At the same time, Puerto Rican farmworkers challenged those existing images and power relations that attempted to stigmatize them as inferior. They affirmed their presence in western New York and, in effect, stood up for their rights as citizens, as Puerto Ricans, and as Latinos.

Keywords

farm labor; agricultural workers; Puerto Ricans; anthropological political economy; social protest

The Puerto Rican studies literature has not fully documented incidents of social unrest and the dynamics of power relations among Puerto Ricans and white residents in rural communities in the US. Most studies of Puerto Ricans concentrate on the development of urban communities in such cities



as New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Hartford (Padilla, 1987; Cruz, 1998; Whalen, 2001; Ramos Zayas, 2003; Pérez, 2004). However, an important part of the Puerto Rican population migrated from rural Puerto Rico to the rural US. What were the experiences of Puerto Ricans who migrated to rural areas?

In the late 1940s, Puerto Rican farmworkers began to migrate in large numbers to the northeast. The Puerto Rican government's migration policies encouraged many Puerto Ricans to leave the island in search for better opportunities. The Migration Division (MD), an agency of Puerto Rico's Department of Labor established in 1948, was in charge of arranging contracts and transporting farmworkers (Lapp, 1989). Puerto Ricans who migrated under government-sponsored contracts were the pioneers and founders of many communities. In some small towns, migrants made up a substantial part of the population, transforming the ethnic, racial, and gender landscape and presenting new challenges for local authorities and residents. Migrants encountered social hostility and a denial of services, together with negative stereotypes of Puerto Ricans.

This article is based on the particular case of social protest in North Collins, a New York farm community, in the summer of 1966. Following an exchange between the police and some Puerto Ricans, workers gathered in the center of the village of North Collins asking for justice and protesting police brutality, segregation, and discrimination. The protest continued intermittently during the days of July 3 through July 8, 1966, and drew the attention of Puerto Rico's MD and of the New York state government. Although direct accounts by Puerto Rican farmworkers are not available, the Records of the Offices of the Government of Puerto Rico in the United States (OGPRUS), located at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, provide valuable information about the incident. The records include handwritten affidavits, newspaper clippings, memoranda, government reports, correspondence, flyers, and minutes that shed light on the interactions of different social actors.¹ The protest in North Collins is an excellent opportunity for analyzing power relations and their relation to government policies toward migrant labor in a rural setting.

1 To be sure, the documentation offers only a partial account of the events of July 1966 in North Collins. It is very difficult to conduct oral history research in the area because most Puerto Rican farmworkers have long left North Collins.

From workers to Puerto Ricans: theoretical considerations

This article examines Puerto Rican farm labor within the Latino studies and anthropological literature on ethnicity, hegemony, political economy, and transnationalism. It is essential to study how local authorities and residents of rural communities produced and reproduced discourses about Puerto Ricans as inferior subjects within US racial and ethnic hierarchies (Grosfoguel, 2003). Those images of racially inferior subjects shaped the way in which local government officials designed policies of social control against Puerto Ricans, and farmers maintained poor and exploitative labor and living conditions. I also

argue that migrants resisted those strategies of power. Puerto Ricans' perceptions of unequal treatment were part of the forces shaping their position in the political economy of farm labor (Smith, 1999, 7–8, 23). Research about the Puerto Rican experience needs an anthropological approach to larger questions of power – in particular, how ethnic formation is part of how power relations are produced and reproduced. Hegemonic process, discourses, and policies, along with resistance to them, have helped shape the constitution of Puerto Ricans, and other ethnic groups (Roseberry, 1996, 82).

Although Puerto Rican farmworkers are rarely mentioned by the ethnic studies literature, they share similar experiences of struggle with other ethnic groups in the US, such as Mexicans and Filipinos. These groups have endured US policies of colonialism and imperialism, while undergoing massive migration from their homelands to the US (Ngai, 2004). Studies of Puerto Rican farmworkers have shed much light on the attitudes and problems encountered by workers in local communities, political economic conditions, unionization, contract labor arrangements, and workers' strategies of livelihood (Nieves Falcón, 1975; Rivera, 1979; Bonilla-Santiago, 1986; Váldez, 1991; Stinson Fernández, 1996; Ortiz, 1998, 101–110; Whalen, 2001, 49–92). In this literature it is clear, although not always at a theoretical level, that government policies have played an important role in shaping the experiences of migrant farmworkers. Similarly, historians and social scientists have documented extensively not only how the political economy of farm labor has sustained the inequalities experienced by Mexican farmworkers, but also its close connections to the policies of the Mexican state (Guerin-Gonzales, 1994; González, 1999). As the North Collins episode shows, the US colonial state in Puerto Rico through its MD had an important effect on the experiences of migrant workers.

I document some of the ways in which Puerto Ricans engaged, opposed, and accommodated to the discursive formations of otherness, but also to their material living conditions (Ortiz, 1998, 5; Smith, 1999; Vélez-Ibáñez and Sampaio, 2002). William Roseberry states that, “What hegemony constructs then, is not a shared ideology but a common material and meaningful framework for living through, talking about, and acting upon social orders characterized by domination” (1996: 80). In order to understand power relations, our emphasis should be on struggle and the points of rupture of this framework where ruling groups are never able to achieve absolute domination. The North Collins case represents an example of points of rupture where common discursive formation cannot be achieved, and where alternative understandings emerge (Roseberry, 1989, 27, 47–48; 1996, 82–83). This demonstrates the way Puerto Ricans have been active in opposing the discursive formations that have defined them as inferior colonial subjects (Ortiz, 1998, 5, 101–110). The main goal here is to document the intersection of objective political economy conditions and power relations with the subjective context of people's attempts to transform their existing conditions of life (Torres and Katsiaficas, 1999, 5).

In order to understand the larger sociocultural factors that caused Puerto Ricans to protest, my approach uses theoretical insights from the literature on immigration and social movements. In *Legacies*, Portes and Rumbaut argue that “reactive ethnicity is the product of confrontation with an adverse native mainstream and the rise of defensive identities and solidarities to counter it” (2001: 284). The clear and open rejection of Puerto Ricans by the local authorities of North Collins reflects how these conditions foster the necessary solidarity that eventually mobilized them to protest against unequal treatment. Solidarity, as Puerto Ricans, became stronger “in the context of a migration that has been disenfranchising and has imposed a de-facto second-class status on a colonial people” (Benmayor *et al.*, 1997, 202). As Sidney Tarrow (1998, 6) points out, contentious collective action reflects a common purpose, a sense of solidarity against social injustice that could lead to sustaining collective action or a social movement.

In this article, I first discuss the Puerto Rican migration and economy of western New York from the 1940s through the 1960s. The migration of Puerto Ricans to that region and the incident in North Collins are rooted in economic trends, the dynamics of migration, and the mechanisms of exploitation. Second, I examine the specifics of the incident with the police that precipitated the protest and the ensuing social unrest during the first week of July 1966. Moreover, I analyze the local perceptions of white residents in the community and the living and working conditions of Puerto Ricans in July 1966. Finally, I explore the role of the government agencies in promoting the incorporation of Puerto Ricans into the local communities and the fostering of civil society among migrants from August 1966 to September 1969. How did Puerto Rican migrants carve a place in US civil society? How did they claim their citizenship? The case of North Collins offers a valuable example.

Puerto Rican migration to western New York

In the 1960s, North Collins together with the bordering towns of Brant, Hamburg, and Eden formed one of the centers of agricultural production in western New York. From the late 19th century, the region’s economy relied on the cultivation of small fruits and vegetables, such as raspberries, grapes, strawberries, potatoes, onions, and tomatoes. Farmers produced for the markets of New York City and Canada. This led to the establishment of private and cooperative canneries. The need for workers in the canning industry fostered first the immigration of Italians beginning in the late 1890s, and later, after World War II, the use of African-American, West Indian, Mexican, and Puerto Rican labor. At the end of the 1960s, a mix of Quaker, German, and Italian descendants controlled the local economy and politics (Weller, 1941, 7–11, 34–41; Bowman, 2002, 7–8, 14, 68). Puerto Ricans, at the bottom of this

microcosm with other non-white workers, constituted the majority of the migrant labor force in the area.

North Collins is located 30 miles to the south of Buffalo in Erie County. In 1966, it had a permanent police force of three men, in addition to two temporary officers during summers. The population of the Village of North Collins was 1,000 and the township consisted of 3,000–4,000 people. There were 60 Puerto Ricans residing permanently in the village, and in the nearby area an estimated 40 camps held as many as 1,200 Puerto Rican and southern African-American migrants.²

The presence of Puerto Ricans in western rural New York is a process linked to the colonial control of the island by the US since the Spanish American War in 1898. US colonialism transformed the island into a source of labor. In the first decades of the 20th century, labor agents recruited thousands of Puerto Ricans to work first in Hawaii and later in Arizona. In the 1930s, the effects of the Great Depression accelerated Puerto Rican migration to the US. Many Puerto Ricans abandoned the island looking for better economic conditions in US cities. From the 1940s through the 1960s, Puerto Ricans successfully began to enter the US labor force in large numbers. The Puerto Rican population in the US grew from 70,000 in 1940 to 810,000 in 1970 (Whalen, 2005, 27).

Farmworkers composed an important part of this migration. After World War II, Puerto Ricans began to migrate to work in the farms of New York, New Jersey, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. Puerto Ricans entered to work in the occupational group with the lowest annual income in the US. In farmwork, salaries are low and jobs are temporary. In the 1950s and 1960s, from 10,000 to 20,000 Puerto Ricans arrived to the United States each year with contracts as seasonal farmworkers (Whalen, 2005, 31). In 1968, the average annual income of a migrant working family was \$1,562 for those with other sources of income and \$1,018 for the 57% of households that only worked on farms. In the northeast, the median daily income of a farm worker was \$9.05 in 1968. Migrants also had to confront segregation from the rest of society. Their lives were characterized by frequent mobility, dependence on farmers for housing, and the limitations of space and comforts of the camp (Nelkin, 1970, 5, 7).

The establishment of the MD coincides with the first contract workers brought from Puerto Rico in the 1940s. The scarcity of workers led farmers and cooperatives to contact the government of Puerto Rico in order to initiate official recruitment. As a result, Puerto Rico's Labor Department decided to create a farm labor program. The ineffectiveness of Operation Bootstrap (the development strategy of industrialization through tax incentives) forced government officials to promote stepped-up migration as an alternative way of easing unemployment. The MD's Farm Labor Program arranged the recruitment of workers in Puerto Rico and their transportation to US farms. The MD lobbied the federal government to enforce immigration laws and give

2 Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, OGPRUS, MD, Director's File, Box 1280, "Protests in Migrant Labor Camps- North Collins, New York," File 49, Memorandum from Anthony Vega to Joseph Monserrat, July 12, 1966 (Hereafter citation for File 49 in Box 1280 will be OGPRUS plus name of the document); OGPRUS, MD, Farm Labor, Subject and Resource File, Box 2367, "North Collins Labor Camp," File 41, "North Collins Labor Camps, A Report on the Erie County Migrant Situation by A. Walker Hepler," July 18, 1966.

3 OGPRUS, Farm Labor, Subject File, Box 915, "Commissioner of Labor-Fernando Sierra Berdecía," File 34, Letter from Fernando Sierra Berdecía to Manuel Cabranes, May 12, 1948.

4 "Draft Office Fears Harvest of Trouble From Migrant Workers," *Buffalo Courier Express*, June 11, 1948, p. 6C; OGPRUS, "Minutes of a Representative Group Called by Action of the Clergy Catholic and Protestant regarding Erie County," July 21, 1966.

5 OGPRUS, Activity Report, from Jorge Colón to Ralph S. Rosas, August 3, 1966; OGPRUS, Memorandum from Anthony Vega to Joseph Monserrat, July 12, 1966.

6 *Ibid.*; OGPRUS, Letter from Guadalupe Ruiz to Joseph Monserrat and Ralph S. Rosas, July 20, 1966. "Fewer Puerto Rican Farm Workers Expected," *Buffalo Courier-Express*, June 11, 1969; OGPRUS, MD, Annual Reports, 1981–1982, Farm Labor Program, Table 2.

preferential status for Puerto Rican farmworkers because of their US citizenship (Lapp, 1989, 173–176).³ Puerto Ricans had already been flown to Buffalo since 1948 to work in western New York and by some accounts Puerto Ricans had been arriving in this region since 1946.⁴ Western New York had experienced a deep demand for farmworkers during the end of the war that had not been met by West Indian and southern African-American migrants.

In North Collins, farmers established the Brant Cooperative in the early 1950s with the purpose of arranging contracts for workers through the MD, and transporting and housing them in camps. This situation changed in 1960, when farmers ended the cooperative and the recruitment of workers through the MD. By the mid-1960s, most of the migrants in Erie County were working without government-sponsored contracts. Migrants came directly from Puerto Rico and New York City, where employment agencies or farmers recruited them. In addition, workers themselves approached farmers who were looking for hands. Migrants also came from Florida, where they contacted farmers who owned properties in western New York.⁵ Without the initial efforts of the MD, however, many fewer Puerto Ricans would have been drawn to farms in western New York. The MD facilitated the establishment of migration networks. The migrants of the 1950s became the veterans who paved the way for many other migrants, most without contracts.

It is difficult to estimate the number of Puerto Ricans who migrated as farmworkers to the US, because of their high mobility and seasonal migration. The only statistics available are from the number of contract farmworkers. For example, in 1966, the MD facilitated the migration of 19,537 contract workers to the US, and from that total 2,301 migrated to New York State (Bonilla-Santiago, 1986, 77).⁶ However, these figures do not include the many farmworkers without contracts.

The majority of Puerto Rican farmworkers had been agricultural workers in Puerto Rico. Migrants were also mostly landless dwellers who lived in and worked on sugar, coffee, and tobacco estates. Their principal reason for migration was the lack of work on the island. Most migrants also had limited or no knowledge of English and were illiterate in Spanish. Because of the costs involved in transporting workers, migrants were very young single men between 18 and 20.⁷ When whole families migrated, women worked in domestic employment, canneries, or cleaning and cooking in the camps. More often the crew leaders were the only ones who migrated with their families. In New York, migrants arrived for the harvest in mid-April, living in camps or renting houses. Far from their families and with no life experience beyond the farms and small towns, new migrants concentrated on saving money to send back to their families. Some returned to Puerto Rico in November.

Migrant workers without union or government contracts were at a disadvantage. The MD's contracts usually paid workers between 20 and 40 cents per hour more than the average salary paid to non-contract workers. Some

farmers offered a bonus per hour paid at the end of the harvest.⁸ In 1966, farmers in Erie County paid most non-contract workers \$1.00 an hour, some with a deduction of 10¢ to be paid at the end of the season; most received no overtime and were not covered by workmen's compensation.⁹ While the harvesting was going on, some workers spent their day in the fields and then late afternoons and evenings in the canneries. After the harvest period ended in November, some workers stayed working in the nurseries and canning factories.¹⁰ Even after establishing themselves in the community and working in other occupations, some Puerto Ricans worked in the farms on weekends, holidays, and vacations. By 1966, Puerto Ricans had established at least an 18-year presence as farmworkers in western New York.

"They don't speak American"

"This is America, and they don't speak American. So they get nothing to drink," the owner of Roeller's Grill, a local bar in the town of Eden, told a *New York Times* reporter in July 1966. Like many stores in Erie County, Roeller's Grill did not serve Puerto Ricans. The July 17, 1966 *New York Times* article titled "Puerto Rican Migrants Upset Upstate Town" made reference to a Puerto Rican crowd armed with bats, bricks, and Molotov cocktails ready to burn down the village of North Collins.¹¹ These events obviously indicated that the conflicts between local residents and Puerto Ricans in western New York had peaked that summer.

A fight involving Carlos, a Puerto Rican resident, the chief of police, and Anthony, a local resident and the son of the village clerk, had precipitated the protest. On July 3, the chief stopped, beat, and held a Puerto Rican by the name of Pablo because of a traffic violation. After Carlos inquired about bail for his friend and was denied information by the local judge, he made some remarks to the court and left the courtroom. By instructions of the judge, the chief chased him and told him to stop at a distance of 50 feet. When Carlos did not stop the chief reportedly took his gun out and ran after him, hitting him on the head and forehead, and taking him by force. Anthony got involved in the arrest. It is not clear if Anthony helped arrest Carlos or José, another Puerto Rican farmworker who was also arrested. José testified that Anthony had stopped him at gunpoint and told him, "Don't move or I'll shoot you."

On July 5, 1966, the local authorities of North Collins and Puerto Rican community leaders from Buffalo urgently contacted the Regional Office of Puerto Rico's MD in the Rochester area.¹² They informed the MD that a group of Puerto Ricans had almost rioted against the local police and the town authorities. For the government of Puerto Rico and its local offices throughout the US, this incident of social unrest and its probable repercussions represented a possible backlash against Puerto Rican communities and the MD's efforts to encourage migration from the island. The MD assumed the role of a mediator

7 OGPRUS, Memorandum from Anthony Vega to Joseph Monserrat, July 12, 1966.

8 *Ibid.*

9 OGPRUS, Application for Migrant Labor Registration Certificate by Geo H. Agle's Sons, April 20, 1966.

10 OGPRUS, Activity Report, from Jorge Colón to Ralph S. Rosas, August 3, 1966; OGPRUS, Memorandum from Anthony Vega to Joseph Monserrat, July 12, 1966.

11 The Puerto Rican population in North Collins was composed overwhelmingly of male farmworkers. The documentation of the protest only makes reference to the migrant workers, along with some Puerto Rican farmworkers who were residents of North Collins.

12 OGPRUS, Activity Report, from Jorge Colón to Ralph S. Rosas, July 19, 1966; OGPRUS, Box 2367, File 41, "North Collins Labor Camp,

Special Report on the situation of North Collins, N.Y.," July 19, 1966.

in the conflict. The office immediately sent a representative to assess the circumstances and ease tensions.

The following day, Jorge Colón, a MD officer, arrived to evaluate the situation and resolve the conflict. At 1:00 pm, Colón visited Mike's Rustic Bar, one of the few businesses that served Puerto Ricans in an area that included the towns of Eden, North Collins, and Brant. In the locale, there were about 50 Puerto Ricans "talking about the most effective way to burn" the town buildings, police cars, and commercial establishments that refused to serve them. One of the Puerto Ricans in the group stated that he had 20 cars from the nearby camps and cities "loaded with bricks, bottles of gasoline, bats and stones for the event." Another Puerto Rican, nicknamed "Superman," indicated that they had 20 guns and pistols. Colón persuaded the group to channel their grievances formally. They agreed under condition that authorities would arrest some of the individuals involved in the mistreatment of Puerto Ricans.¹³

13 *Ibid.*

On the same day, at about 4:30 pm, cars of workers began to arrive in North Collins. The chief of police was dispersing the people with the police dog. Colón was able to convince the police to remove the dog and let him handle the situation without the use of force, which they agreed to do. By 6:00 pm, there were an estimated 300 workers on Main Street. Colón contacted the mayor of North Collins, who provided a hall for a mass meeting. He asked the town officials to let people express their grievances in order to dissipate the tension.¹⁴ Colón told the town judge to be quiet at the meeting in order to maintain order and peace.¹⁵ Puerto Ricans listed 15 questions and concerns for the local authorities, mostly dealing with accusations of police harassment.¹⁶ The mayor and town officials indicated that they did not have knowledge of any of the problems brought up by Puerto Ricans but they would conduct an investigation into the matter. After the meeting Colón convinced those attending "to walk home in silence," easing some tensions among workers.

14 *Ibid.*

15 OGPRUS, Memorandum from Anthony Vega to Joseph Monserrat, July 12, 1966.

16 OGPRUS, Activity Report, from Jorge Colón to Ralph S. Rosas, July 19, 1966.

On July 8, Colón had to petition officials to lift a curfew. He also attended a conference of local officials at the Fire House Company where they were planning to disperse people with fire hoses in case workers would gather again in the center of North Collins. Colón told local officials to be patient and try to solve the conflict peacefully. He also added that, "they were better off chasing hoodlums and the teenagers who came around calling the P.R. dirty names that might lead to problems."¹⁷ Peace prevailed in the village following meetings with Puerto Ricans, government officials, and representatives of churches and community organizations during the months of July and August of 1966.

17 OGPRUS, Activity Report, from Jorge Colón to Ralph S. Rosas, July 19, 1966.

18 *Ibid.*; OGPRUS, Statement from Carlos Vazquez Malavez, July 24, 1966; OGPRUS,

This confrontation was not the first that workers had with the police (Montgomery, 1966, 60).¹⁸ Puerto Ricans suspected and mistrusted the local police for various reasons. They complained to the MD about the chief of police's arbitrary mistreatment of Puerto Ricans. Bernabé, a resident of North Collins since 1951, who served as interpreter between the police and detained Puerto Ricans, declared that the chief of police asked Puerto Ricans how much

money they had in their pockets, fined them accordingly, took their money, and released them without providing any receipt for the fine.¹⁹ Other Puerto Ricans pointed out that the chief had ordered Puerto Ricans not to congregate in front of their houses between 5:00 a.m. and 7:30 p.m.²⁰ These examples testify to the tense relationship between Puerto Ricans and the police. The protest of Puerto Ricans in North Collins was not an isolated and impulsive incident. It was actually the culmination of many grievances that Puerto Rican farmworkers were holding against the local police, government, businesses, and employers.

Discourses, social conditions, and power relations

The *New York Times* article on the protest in North Collins opened the public debate on the situation in Erie County (Montgomery, 1966, 1, 60). It shows how this seasonal migration of mostly Puerto Rican men had impacted the perceptions of residents. In North Collins, white residents talked about “the trouble we’re having,” referring to tensions with Puerto Ricans. Farmworkers’ reactions surprised local officials, who thought that migrants were well treated. Some comments made by the mayor portrayed the attitude of residents; he told the *New York Times* reporter, “They walk by here on the road and I wave at them and they laugh and smile. One time I was going to throw away an old bed – it was my mother’s I guess – and I offered it to them. You should have seen them, carrying it down the road on their heads. Real happy, you know!” (Montgomery, 1966, 60). Many residents thought that workers lived under appropriate conditions. The mayor and the chief of police attributed the situation to outside agitators, because they believed that farmworkers experienced less discrimination in North Collins than in nearby towns.²¹ The mayor acknowledged that the residents had not paid attention to the living conditions, but he argued that this was the first time that people had approached him about it. Residents believed that the spotlight had been turned unjustly to them and that this was a common problem in most migrant areas.²²

As in many other communities throughout the US, some residents felt that the culture and lack of English language skills of Puerto Ricans were the main problems they had. Some farmers and residents believed that migrants had a different culture and did not need the same things that white residents did (Nelkin, 1970, 56; Nieves Falcón, 1975, 60–78, 92). In North Collins, the wife of the chief of police claimed, “The place is a paradise compared to what they’re used to living in.... Of course you or I wouldn’t want to live like that, but I believe they like it fine” (Montgomery, 1966, 60). As the July 1966 incident showed, however, Puerto Rican farmworkers did not like their living and social conditions, or the segregation and discrimination they encountered from the local population.

Some of the town officers in North Collins in 1966 were former members of the Brant Cooperative, and they may have influenced the township’s attitudes

Press Release, July 13, 1996; OGPRUS, MD, Regional Director’s File, Box 1280, “Protests in Labor Camps-North Collins, N.Y.,” File 48, “List of Puerto Ricans who had paid fines for parking violations,” undated; OGPRUS, Box 1280, File 48, newspaper clippings, undated.

19 OGPRUS, Statement from Bernabé Rivera, August 15, 1966.

20 OGPRUS, Statements from Bienbenido Mendez and Roberto Torres, July 24, 1966.

21 Stephen Crafts, “Report from North Collins: ‘This Trouble We’re Having,’” *Spectrum*, July 29, 1966, p. 8 in OGPRUS, Box 2367, File 41.

22 OGPRUS, Box 1280, File 49, “Minutes of a Representative Group Called by Action of the Clergy Catholic and Protestant regarding Erie County,” July 21, 1966.

against Puerto Ricans. The Brant Cooperative's closing in 1960 was a response to the expenses in running regulated camps in optimal living conditions. Another complaint was that it was common for workers to desert their contracts after arriving at the airport, or else to abandon the camps. Farmers also confronted problems collecting the money that they had lent workers to travel, putting the MD in an embarrassing position.²³

23 OGPRUS, Progress Report on Projects, from Jorge Colón to Carlos Gomez, August 24, 1966.

In the North Collins area, farmers became independent in their own recruitment of workers. They paid lower wages to workers who walked in or whom they illegally hired on the island. In the latter case farmers violated Puerto Rican law by sending workers their airplane tickets and flouted both state and federal laws by offering five cents to recruiters for every dollar earned by each worker.²⁴ The consequence for workers was that farmers paid them less and they lacked the protection of workers' compensation insurance.²⁵ They were paid 20–40 cents an hour below the minimum for contract workers. In 1966, only one farmer was paying the basic minimum wage. Other farmers called him a fool because he was trying to pay a decent living wage.²⁶

24 "Policía establece toque de queda para los Boricuas en la aldea de North Collins, N.Y.," *El Diario*, July 15, 1966, p. 2.

25 OGPRUS, Memorandum, from Anthony Vega to Joseph Monserrat, July 12, 1966.

Most Puerto Ricans voiced complaints about places where they interacted with the local community. As Felix Padilla (1987, 11) argues, most ethnic conflicts take place not at work but in the places of social reproduction, such as the bars, stores, and camps. In these places, the local population perceived Puerto Ricans' need for housing, education, recreation, and health care as a threat. Jorge Colón, migration official, visited several residents and business owners without identifying himself on July 6, 1966. He heard constant criticism from white locals against Puerto Ricans.²⁷ In a meeting of Catholic and Protestant clergy, Father Bernard Weiss of North Collins Church of the Holy Spirit argued that the July 1966 protest was related to the workers' behavior. He stated, "Too many complaints relate to bars; not enough to knocking on the doors of the churches."²⁸ However, Puerto Ricans did not feel welcome in most places, including churches, and not all visited bars with the purpose of drinking. In addition to being places of recreation, bars were the only establishments in town where they could eat. Puerto Ricans and the local population interacted in bars and stores, so it is no surprise that the North Collins protest happened within the town and not in the farms and camps where most Puerto Ricans worked and slept.

26 OGPRUS, Press Release, July 13, 1966.

27 OGPRUS, Activity Report, from Jorge Colón to Ralph S. Rosas, July 19, 1966.

28 OGPRUS, "Minutes of a Representative Group Called by Action of the Clergy Catholic and Protestant regarding Erie County," July 21, 1966.

Residents of farm communities and farmers acted to control the visibility of workers because of the possible threat they posed to the existing power relations and "values" of local residents. Most migrants lived in camps separated from residents. Farmers and crew leaders ensured economic exploitation by attempting to isolate migrants. Workers' lack of English and the fact that for some it was the first time outside Puerto Rico allowed farmers to control them. Some workers thought that to remain in the US they could not leave the camps. Crew leaders also made the situation of farmworkers worse by threatening them with retaliation if they talked to government officials. In some cases, crew

leaders exercised absolute control over workers by providing them with food and transportation. The crew leaders served as intermediaries, particularly because most workers did not speak English. They often discouraged workers from venturing into towns. Illegal sale of alcohol in camps was encouraged with the purpose of keeping workers in the camps (Nelkin, 1970, 12, 20, 55–56). Migrants often dreamed of buying a car in order to travel to the cities and towns. No matter what the attempts of farmers, crew leaders, or residents, migrants found ways to leave the camps (Haddad, 1982).

Puerto Ricans claimed that the police, courts, government officials, and commerce treated them unfairly. They indicated that the police imposed curfew on Puerto Ricans, and did not allow them to walk freely on the sidewalks and streets. Some complained that they were typically found guilty without proper access to translation of court proceedings. Local officials did not allow them to establish businesses and barred them from voting on elections. Another issue was that school officials refused to register Puerto Rican children because they did not speak English. Problems also arose because workers were mostly single men and a few of them dated local white and Native American women.²⁹ One complaint against the police was that the chief told white women not to go out with Puerto Ricans.

As for the health care of Puerto Ricans, some physicians refused to treat migrants and some farmers were careless about providing health coverage for injuries. One example was a Puerto Rican woman who worked for six months with a broken arm without health care (Montgomery, 1966, 60).³⁰ Local authorities considered the needs of Puerto Ricans to access government services to be a burden to the community.³¹

The conditions in the camps were often deplorable. After the incident, the MD and the New York State Department of Health began inspecting the camps, finding some without health permits and finding violations in 23 of the 33 camps visited. Some camps were crowded and dirty, lacking bathrooms, potable water, and mattresses. Other camps operated with fire hazards and open sewage. In one instance, workers used a creek for bathing and rags for beds.³² Another case was of some workers paying \$15 weekly for lodging in a shack built in the back yard of a home in North Collins.³³ Tony, a migrant who came to western New York from Puerto Rico in 1952, recalls that when he arrived to the camp it was a barn that the farmer had converted into barracks. There was a strong odor of manure that made him sleepless for four days.³⁴

Because of the poor conditions of most camps, workers sought to rent rooms, apartments, or houses in the local community, but landlords usually refused to rent to Puerto Ricans. For example, a migrant stated that while he earned \$80.00 a week and had plenty of money in his pockets, he had to sleep in a car because he could not find anybody to rent him a room.³⁵ Housing discrimination forced workers to stay in the camps, to move to the cities, or to go back to Puerto Rico when the farm season ended.

29 The proximity of the Cattaraugus Reservation of the Seneca Nation (four miles from North Collins) and the fact that Native American women frequented the bars serving Puerto Ricans led many Puerto Rican migrants to marry Native American women. OGPRUS, Report from Eulalio Torres to Joseph Monserrat, "Conditions of Non-Contract Puerto Rican Agricultural, Migrant Workers in Chauttaqua and Erie Counties, New York," August 18, 1966; OGPRUS, Memorandum, from Anthony Vega to Joseph Monserrat, July 12, 1966.

30 OGPRUS, Progress Report on Projects, from Jorge Colón and Carlos

Gomez, "Raymond Walker and John Colloca-Owego, N.Y." August 24, 1966.

31 *Ibid.*

32 OGPRUS, Activity Report, from Jorge Colón to Ralph S. Rosas, July 19, 1966; OGPRUS, Activity Report, from Roberto Mendoza to Anthony Vega, July 15, 1966; OGPRUS, Progress Report on Projects, from Jorge Colón and Carlos Gomez, "North Collins, N.Y.," August 26, 1966; Montgomery, "Puerto Rican Migrants."

33 OGPRUS, Progress Report on Projects, from Jorge Colón to Carlos Gomez, "North Collins, N.Y.," August 25, 1966.

34 Conversation with author, September 18, 2005.

35 OGPRUS, Letter from Guadalupe Ruiz to Joseph Monserrat and Ralph S. Rosas, "Tuesday's Evening Meeting in North Collins, N.Y.," July 20, 1966.

36 OGPRUS, Box 1280, File 48, newspaper clippings, undated.

37 OGPRUS, Activity Report, from Jorge Colón to Ralph S. Rosas, "Visit to Albion, NY," August 3, 1966.

Low salaries were another matter of concern. For example, a worker who had picked 600 flats of strawberries in a week received a pay of \$63, but the deductions for food and transportation reduced his pay to \$25.20. The workers added that every time they went into town to eat they paid \$5 for two meals.³⁶ In some cases, workers hired by employment agencies in New York City complained about the lack of work after the agencies brought them to the camps.³⁷ Keeping a large pool of workers secured a cheap labor force (Rivera, 1979, 242).

Farmers, crew leaders, local officials, and the police formed the power structure that workers immediately confronted in these communities. Reinforcing inequality and segregation could ensure the availability of a disciplined labor force. However, Puerto Ricans were not passive subjects. They challenged the existing power relations and material conditions. Many Puerto Ricans working in the farms with or without contracts escaped the camps. After all, they had arrived looking for better living conditions, and this implied continuously moving until they found proper working and living conditions.

Publicity given to the North Collins situation allowed many migrants to voice their concerns. Puerto Ricans living and working in other towns, such as Albion and Dunkirk, began to reveal their critical living and working conditions.³⁸ In Dunkirk, community leaders argued that there were 98 families, a total of 368 residents, and 400 agricultural workers "sleeping on dirty floors, chicken coops and pig pens." They claimed that discrimination against Puerto Ricans was the principal problem and they had been successful in avoiding public protests several times.³⁹ The biased perceptions and attitudes of local residents against Puerto Ricans worsened their critical working and living conditions.

Analyzing ethnicity and other forms of association within the histories and processes of domination, William Roseberry (1996, 74–75) argues that events and experiences that lead to rebellion and the ways people express it emerge from complex and changing discursive formations and power relations. The case of North Collins provides many discursive instances of how local residents perceived Puerto Ricans, as well as the social conditions and power relations wherein workers struggle to make a living. Their struggle and related languages of contention are integral part of their material conditions of living, and the historical forces that had brought Puerto Ricans to North Collins.

Aftermath: the state and civil society

The July 1966 incident raised awareness of the conditions of farmworkers in western New York. The federal, state, and Puerto Rican governments asserted their presence in the region, seeking to decrease tensions by establishing communication between the workers and the residents. Government officials aimed to foster civil society with the creation of community organizations and centers in order to incorporate Puerto Ricans. The Lieutenant Governor, the

New York State Commission on Human Rights (NYSCHR), the New York State Assembly, the MD, and the office of US Senator Robert F. Kennedy got involved in the investigation. Community leaders, politicians, and government officials held meetings and hearings, and toured the region during the summer of 1966.⁴⁰

On July 26, 1966, federal, state, and MD officials and local community organizations held a meeting in North Collins. Several proposals came out from the meeting. One was to obtain loans for farmers so they could improve migrants' housing. The Erie County Health Commissioner expressed its desire to work with the Community Action Organization of Erie County, Inc. (CAO), an anti-poverty program, by providing medical aid and transportation to workers. The town supervisor stated that the local government did not have any funds and resources available to implement programs for migrants. State, federal, and MD officials responded by indicating that there were federal and state government subsidies available for housing, health facilities, sanitation, and children's day care. Other local officials stated that there were no problems and that outside agitators had instigated workers to revolt.⁴¹ This meeting revealed that local government officials and some residents did not accept their responsibility for what happened and would continue denying their duties toward farmworkers.

Some residents of North Collins obstructed the efforts of community organizations that offered solutions to the problems of farmworkers. Thomas A. Penna, representative of the CAO, found opposition from the white residents of North Collins to creating programs for Puerto Ricans. Local authorities and residents "were hopeful to run out all Puerto Ricans from North Collins in due time." The CAO had not been able to find a space to rent for a community center in North Collins because the space would be used as a meeting place for Puerto Ricans.⁴² By October the CAO had been able to establish the North Collins Migrant Center offering adult education, recreational activities, and assistance to migrants with social and economic problems.⁴³ The Spanish American Organization (SAO) was also operating as a support group for residents and migrants in the area.⁴⁴

In July of 1966, Lt. Governor Malcolm Wilson ordered the NYSCHR to investigate the situation of Puerto Ricans in North Collins. Commissioner Emil L. Cohen issued a report of the situation in the summer of 1967.⁴⁵ Cohen did not find any reasons for alarm and defended the measures taken by the government. He also defended employers and storeowners. Cohen indicated that the challenge was to establish a cooperative and programs that would be fair to both migrants and farmers.⁴⁶ He found that the previously discriminatory establishments were serving Puerto Ricans, except for one in the Town of Eden. The report concluded that discriminatory practices were not present at the time of the investigation, and that farmers legally operated the migrant camps. Primarily, the report simply relied on the word of storeowners. For

38 *Ibid.*

39 OGPRUS, Letter from Guadalupe Ruiz to Joseph Monserrat and Ralph S. Rosas, "Tuesday's Evening Meeting in North Collins, N.Y.," July 20, 1966.

40 OGPRUS, Flyer, "Migrant Information Meeting YWCA, July 26, 1966."

41 OGPRUS, Activity Report, from Jorge Colón to Ralph S. Rosas, August 4, 1966.

42 OGPRUS, Report from Eulalio Torres to Joseph Monserrat, "Conditions of Non-Contract Puerto Rican Agricultural, Migrant Workers in Chauttaqua and Erie Counties, New York," August 18, 1966.

43 OGPRUS, Activity Report from Jorge Colón to Anthony Vega, "North Collins Migrant Center," October 20, 1967. OGPRUS, Letter from Jorge Colón to

Anthony Vega,
September 20, 1967.

44 OGPRUS, Letter
from Joan Vasquez
(SAO) to Edwin
Rivera, July 22, 1969.

45 OGPRUS, File 49,
“Human Rights
Commission Report”
by Emil L. Cohen,
Commissioner, Inv.
2209-66, June 26,
1967.

46 OGPRUS, Box
1280, File 48,
newspaper clippings,
undated.

47 OGPRUS,
“Human Rights
Commission.”

48 *Ibid.*

49 “Niegan discrimen
contra Boricuas en
North Collins,” *El
Tiempo*, August 5,
1966, p. 3.

50 OGPRUS,
Memorandum, from
Eulalio Torres to
Joseph Monserrat,
“Follow-up to my
report of August 18,
1966 relative to
Puerto Rican non-
contract agricultural
workers actually
employed in
Chautauqua and Erie
Counties of New
York,” September 12,
1966.

51 OGPRUS, Report
from Eulalio Torres
to Joseph Monserrat,
“Conditions of Non-
Contract Puerto
Rican Agricultural,
Migrant Workers in
Chautauqua and Erie
Counties, New

example, Cohen stated that, “After due investigation in those cases, the proprietor of the establishment gave sufficient assurance of his full and continuing adherence to the letter and spirit of the Law against Discrimination.” The lack of a serious consideration of the accusations expressed by farmworkers shows that the investigation was just a way to dissipate the tensions in the area.⁴⁷

In fact, the report assigned a large part of the blame to the farmworkers concluding that the conflict had occurred because of a lack of communication between workers and residents.⁴⁸ The Commissioner said that the socio-economic inequalities of farm labor were a cause of the conflict, but alleged that specific situations of segregation and discrimination did not exist.⁴⁹ Likewise, the report argued that the problem occurred because of the lack of recreational facilities, and the resulting “congregation of numbers of persons on the streets, many of whom might prefer to spend their time in athletic and educational activities,” but it failed to offer recommendations to the government. The NYSCHR merely hoped that churches and community organizations would improve the channels of communication between workers, farmers, residents, and officials.

The report contradicted the findings of the New York State Legislature. On August 21, 1966, members of the Joint Legislative Committee on Migrant Labor of the New York Assembly toured some of the camps where migrants lived in Erie and Chautauqua counties, and Long Island.⁵⁰ New York State Assemblyman Arthur Hardwick, Jr. of Erie County, an African-American legislator, categorized the working and living conditions of farmworkers as shameful and outrageous.⁵¹ The Joint Legislative Committee noted that local county health officers did not enforce the sanitary code effectively because many inspectors were friends and neighbors of farmers (Nelkin, 1970, 56–57).

Regarding the accusations against the police, on July 7, 1966, the chief of police and Anthony were arraigned on felony charges in a preliminary hearing. Carlos, the Puerto Rican arrested, had signed the warrant against the chief, and José, a farmworker, signed against Anthony.⁵² The chief and Anthony were charged with second-degree assault, but both were found innocent by a judge from the nearby town of Hamburg.⁵³ The judge also asked the District Attorney’s Office to investigate if a grand jury had to be summoned in order to determine if people were trying to incite a riot in North Collins.⁵⁴ Local authorities and residents of North Collins continued to blame the situation on outside agitators.⁵⁵

This incident expanded the visibility of the MD in western New York. Local activists urged Puerto Ricans to register with the government of Puerto Rico and come from Puerto Rico under a contract.⁵⁶ The MD also began educating or as they said it, “indoctrinating” new contract workers arriving in Erie County about their rights and responsibilities. MD’s officials thought that it was essential that workers understand their duties and learn English in order to



ensure the success of the Farm Labor Program.⁵⁷ The agency together with local government, canning factories, and farmers began to offer English classes to workers.⁵⁸ In Buffalo, the MD and representatives of the Puerto Rican Social Club, the Council of Christian Organizations, the Mutual Aid Organization, and the Latin American Democratic Club met for the purpose of organizing a federation of organizations.⁵⁹

Another of the immediate solutions offered by the MD was to remove unsatisfied migrants from the area. The MD contacted the Travelers Aid Society, which offered to help those who wanted to leave the area.⁶⁰ However, workers did not want to leave the camps, both because farmers owed them wages and bonuses, and because farmers were changing the conditions in the camps by providing new mattresses and repairing the premises.⁶¹

The MD began an intensive campaign to encourage farmers to hire contract workers in the area. Most farmers and representatives questioned and challenged the MD programs. Nevertheless, some farmers decided to participate in the Farm Labor Program.⁶² By promoting the establishment of contract labor camps in Erie County and restricting the movement of non-contract workers from Puerto Rico, the MD expected to set an example to farmers who were still relying on walk-ins.⁶³

The MD also worked with county officials on the closing of several camps. The Erie County Health Department closed four of the 42 camps. One of the camps had 11 shacks occupied by more than 40 people. The shacks were made of wood and cardboard, 15 feet by 10 feet and 7 feet high, and lacked running water. The structures were old and full of holes. Many of the camps not closed were similar to those condemned by the Health Department (Montgomery, 1966, 60). However, the Erie County Health Commissioner stated that inspecting dairies, restaurants, and hotels were his priorities over the situation of the camps, and claimed that some residents were living under worse conditions than migrants. For government officials, the needs of Puerto Rican migrants were less important than the needs and health of the local population.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, the problems Puerto Rican migrants faced in North Collins and nearby towns continued. In 1969, a representative of the SAO was calling for a meeting to discuss alleged housing discrimination of Puerto Rican families in Durkin. They also complained about the ineffective Migrant Center and asked for the removal of its director.⁶⁵ The problems of migrant workers continued because the general attitude of farmers, politicians, and government officials was that migrant labor in the northeast was a transient population. They thought that migrants were a temporary problem and the mechanization of agriculture would eventually eliminate the need for this labor force (Nelkin, 1970, 70). However, Puerto Rican migrants who settled in western New York were not about to go away, as their continuing advocacy for better treatment made clear. After 1966, the Puerto Ricans counted on institutions such as SAO

York,” August 18, 1966.

52 OGPRUS, Memorandum from Anthony Vega to Joseph Monserrat, July 12, 1966.

53 OGPRUS, Box 1280, File 48, newspaper clippings, undated.

54 “Migrant Workers Case: Grand Jury Study Asked by Justice,” Buffalo Courier-Express, September 27, 1966.

55 “Falsos agentes federales provocaron a obreros Boricuas de North Collins,” *El Tiempo*, July 19m, 1966, p. 2;

“Suspenden jefe policía de North Collins por actitud agresiva contra los Boricuas,” *El Tiempo*, July 20, 1966, p. 3; OGPRUS, Box 2367, File 41, “Special Report on the situation of North Collins, N.Y.,” July 19, 1966.

56 OGPRUS, “Minutes of a Representative Group Called by Action of the Clergy Catholic and Protestant regarding Erie County,” July 21, 1966.

57 OGPRUS, Activity Report, from Roberto Mendoza to Anthony Vega, July 15, 1966; OGPRUS, Activity Report, from Roberto Mendoza to Joseph

Monserrat, July 18, 1966.

58 OGPRUS, Progress Report on Projects, from Jorge Colón and Carlos Gomez, August 24, 1966.

59 OGPRUS, Activity Report, from Jorge Colón to Ralph S. Rosas, August 4, 1966.

60 OGPRUS, Activity Report, from Jorge Colón to Ralph S. Rosas, July 19, 1966.

61 OGPRUS, "Report on Conversation with Mr Anthony Vega Regarding the North Collins Situation," July 15, 1966.

62 OGPRUS, Letter from Jorge Colón to Anthony Vega, September 20, 1967.

63 OGPRUS, Memorandum, from Eulalio Torres to Joseph Monserrat, "Follow-up," September 12, 1966.

64 OGPRUS, Progress Report on Projects, from Jorge Colón to Carlos Gomez, "Conditions of N. Collins are situation and developments," August 24, 1966.

65 OGPRUS, Letter from Miriam Alicea, Section Leader of Puerto Ricans of Buffalo to Edwin Rivera; OGPRUS Activity Report, from Edwin Rivera to Ralph S. Rosas,

that could organize more formal challenges to the existing political, social, and economic conditions.

Another recourse against the poor, the living conditions, discrimination, and segregation in small towns and camps, was to move to nearby cities, such as Buffalo and Rochester (as elsewhere to cities like Chicago, New York City, Hartford, Springfield, and Boston). Those who took this path expanded and established many Puerto Rican urban communities. These migrants fostered and maintained the necessary networks – between those new communities and Puerto Rico's neighborhoods – for finding employment and housing, and migrating (Whalen, 2005, 31). In Erie County, the steel and automobile industry attracted Puerto Rican migrants leaving agricultural work. They often combined work in agriculture and manufacturing.

Puerto Rican farmworkers arrived in the cities in a period in which white flight and postindustrialization were undermining employment and the human service infrastructure of many cities. Thus, they became a cheap labor force for declining industrial and agricultural sectors of the US economy (Grosfoguel, 2003, 165–166, 184–190). During the 1970s, these adversities were not going unchallenged by Puerto Ricans. Many community organizations and social movements emerged in Puerto Rican communities through the United States (Torres and Velázquez, 1998). The North Collins case was part of the many riots and protests that during the 1960s cemented the sense of solidarity, justice, and citizenship among Puerto Ricans that would be amplified in the 1970s (Tarrow, 1998, 6).

Languages of citizenship

The North Collins case shows how discursive formations and power relations have moments of rupture in which people openly resist them. As in this situation, when these ruptures occur, sometimes government agencies are willing to mobilize their resources and convince people to channel their grievances through institutional channels. Government agencies and their officials may foster civil society by encouraging the creation of community organizations in order to prompt political and social participation. But these actions are responses to the initiatives taken by the disadvantaged groups. Puerto Ricans were not mere receptors of government designs. Puerto Ricans in western New York struggled to improve their living conditions and establish their presence in the region.

The political involvement of farmworkers was intimately connected to their relationship to the US colonial state in Puerto Rico. The role of the government of Puerto Rico in the migration of Puerto Ricans is central in examining the experiences of farmworkers. Michael Lapp (1989) in *Managing Migration* as well as Gina Pérez (2004) in *The Near Northwest Side Story* have documented the various roles played by the MD. They argued that the MD worked as a

public relations agency to promote a positive image of Puerto Ricans, influenced private and public agencies' responses to their migration, facilitated their assimilation, and attempted to create a constituency among Puerto Ricans (Lapp, 1989, 205; Pérez, 2004, 46–48, 68–71). The colonial relationship of Puerto Rico to the United States offered a unique opportunity to the government of Puerto Rico to assert its presence and shape the formation of Puerto Rican communities through the northeast. The MD acted contradictorily as a quasi civil rights organization and labor union. It fought to protect the civil, labor, language, and cultural rights of Puerto Ricans as US citizens while incorporating them into ethnic identity politics.

Although the colonial relationship of Puerto Rico with the United States does not allow a traditional analysis of transnationalism, Puerto Ricans, as well as other colonial subjects, actually cross political, social, and cultural borders similar to migrants from nation-states (Duany, 2000, 7; Grosfoguel, 2003, 192–211; Pérez, 2004, 1–16). Analogous to the Mexican consulates, the MD promoted state formation and sustained transnational practices in Puerto Rican communities by providing services such as forms of identification, community organization support, job placement services, English as a second language classes, and assistance in the application for welfare services, among others. Similar to other nation-states, Puerto Rican government officials were unable to assert direct legal coercion and violence over migrants. However, they collaborated with local and federal authorities in order to maintain certain economic and political conditions, while actively challenging ethnic inequality (Smith, 2003a, 301–303, 2003b, 727). They promoted citizenship and membership by fostering community organizations as forms of civil society in Puerto Rican communities. Membership in the Puerto Rican community was a way to create a common discursive framework.

In the case of Puerto Ricans, their US citizenship provided them with a privileged legal position in comparison to other Latina/o groups. The MD encouraged Puerto Ricans to take advantage of their US citizenship. The irony is that while Puerto Ricans could escape the exploitation that past and contemporary undocumented workers cannot avoid, they experienced the same exploitative and poor labor and living conditions. The MD acted contradictorily as a labor organization and, at the same time, as a hindrance to independent labor organizing efforts. The agency, vainly attempting to control migration to the United States, left many workers stuck in unwanted situations, as in the North Collins case (Rivera, 1979, 239–264). Like the Mexican consulates, the MD aimed at developing a loyal and politically strong Puerto Rican community in the United States, a strategy that replicated Puerto Rico's domestic social and economic policies and complemented US labor policies and the demands of agricultural interests for cheap labor (Torres and Katsiaficas, 1999, 8). However, the citizenship and membership claims of Puerto Rican farmworkers in North Collins should also be understood in the way their struggle to improve

“Meeting with Puerto Ricans in North Collins on July 27th 1969,” September 9, 1969.

their working and living conditions shaped the constitution of their ethnicity and their engagement in the political process (Smith, 1999, 198–199).

One important aspect of the North Collins protest is that it shares the same history of tensions and inequality with other past and present Latino populations in rural and urban areas. The negative images of workers, the lack of appropriate housing (overcrowding), exploitation, non-payment of wages, retaliation, violence, threats, dangerous and unsanitary conditions with little access to medical care – these are some of the same problems of present-day farmworkers and day laborers. Rural and small town New York shares many social features ascribed by scholars and commentators to the south. This incident reflects that some sectors of local populations are not willing to accept the visibility of workers from a different ethnic and racial background. The circumstances of protest in North Collins were and are a very common problem confronted by farmworkers and day laborers. Current anti-immigrant incidents in Farmingville, New York, where Mexicans have been beaten or their homes set on fire, show us that the same conditions prevalent in North Collins continue manifesting in other communities throughout the United States (LeDuff, 2000; Gootman, 2003).⁶⁶

66 “Immigrants Find the Island a Mixed Blessing,” *New York Times*, December 27, 1998, pp. A1, 11; “4 Charged in N.Y. Mexican Immigrant Attack,” *New York Times*, July 15, 2006.

Incidents like this one in North Collins help us to understand how negative attitudes of whites against Latina/o workers shape the political economy of farm labor and state policies of agriculture. Lack of assimilation is used as a pretext by ruling groups to devise technologies of control and discipline and to exercise their power against subalterns. The problems in North Collins did not emerge from cultural misunderstandings between residents, authorities, and Puerto Ricans, but from the struggle to impose and maintain certain power relations. Puerto Rican farmworkers demonstrated the weakness of such power relations. The attitudes and actions of local authorities and residents together with those of Puerto Ricans show us that assimilation is not the solution of the problems confronted by Latina/o communities, rather social justice and labor rights are ways to alleviate exploitation. Thus, departing from an anthropological political economy approach I have attempted to establish how power relations, economic conditions, and discourses are linked to processes of state formation (Roseberry, 1996; Smith, 1999).

In western New York, Puerto Rican farmworkers experienced a discursive formation that stigmatized them, but the North Collins fiasco is also an example of how they resisted through protest, and claimed their rights as US citizens. In addition, the government of Puerto Rico through its MD played an important role in mobilizing these workers as well as promoting their insertion into ethnic identity politics and cheap labor. However, their US citizenship and the presence of the MD did not protect them against similar problems experienced by farmworkers, either citizens or undocumented. Their advantage as citizens who could receive food stamps and housing enforced even more those negative images of Puerto Ricans. The unequal exchanges of labor, goods,

and technologies between the US and Puerto Rico and the perceptions of white residents pushed Puerto Ricans to the urban ghettos where they continue being second-class citizens. They could escape and become visible, but what they could not escape was inequality and poverty. These social, economic, and political conditions are still pervasive in Puerto Rican communities. The migration of many thousands of Puerto Rican farmworkers to the US is a rich and important story that deserves to be explored.

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