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Barbara Ellen Smith, Marcela Mendoza, and David H. Gissel

## *The World on Time*

Flexible Labor, New Immigrants,  
and Global Logistics

The transnational dispersal of manufacturing, one of the most commonly acknowledged elements of economic globalization, requires a concomitant though less recognized capacity to integrate far-flung supply chains and transport products to their point of consumption. This essay examines emerging flexible labor practices in the logistics sector of Memphis, Tennessee, which is composed of a cluster of industries that contribute to the space-time compression achieved by global trade.<sup>1</sup> Anchored by the world headquarters of FedEx, logistics in Memphis also includes a burgeoning number of "distribution parks," or warehouses, through which diverse corporations move goods in response to global demand. Among employers in this sector, the drive to maximize space-time compression within the physical world of tangible objects and geographic distance is generating employment practices that take the concept of flexible labor, particularly the requirement of temporal flexibility, to new extremes. The workers of choice in this experiment are recent Latino immigrants, whose transnational movement also manifests and contributes to the spatial compressions of globalization. Moreover, their undocumented, immigrant status places them in a spatial and temporal limbo that employers exploit by aligning immigrants' working hours as closely as possible to the unpredictable tempo of global markets.<sup>2</sup>

The section that follows analyzes the linkages between space-time compression and flexible labor practices in the evolution of the Memphis logistics sector. The subsequent section theorizes these linkages, although the use of immigrants as flexible labor has been explored in a growing literature on the casualization of immigrant employment, we conceptualize this trend in new ways by relating it to space-time compression and temporal flexibility within the logic of global capitalism. Following the theoretical discussion we describe our methodological approach and summarize our empirical findings regarding Latino immigrant employment in the Memphis logistics sector. We conclude with a discussion of flexible labor as a new paradigm of work time.



## Delivering the Goods: Space-Time Compression and Flexible Labor in the Logistics Sector

One of the things [Wal-Mart founder] Sam Walton told me several times . . . is that retail is about moving things. It's not about selling things.

—FedEx founder Fred Smith

The nanosecond of electronic transmission has become the temporal standard for movement through space. For corporations that operate in the clumsy universe of physical objects and real time, electronic instantaneity presents a fundamental contradiction. Television, cell phones, the Internet, and other forms of information and communication technology allow advertisers to market products simultaneously and instantaneously all over the globe. In return, buyers can communicate their orders with the same speed. Corporations can transmit this market demand to their suppliers, who in turn access their suppliers, and so on down the chain—all in a matter of minutes, if not seconds. However, in the end, goods must still be moved through time across the great distances of the globe in order for capital to realize any economic benefit. An important consequence of this spatiotemporal contradiction is the elevated significance of logistics, an economic sector that utilizes electronic communication to integrate all forms of transportation with systems of wholesale trade (or distribution) in order to deliver products immediately, if not instantaneously, in response to market demand. The packers, forklift operators, truck drivers, and other workers employed in logistics represent an important element in the economic infrastructure of globalization; by moving goods through space and time, they literally do the “heavy lifting” for global trade.

Memphis, “North America’s Distribution Center,” is the hub for a complex logistical system that integrates the decentralized supply chains of the global economy. Once a key link for the movement of regional products—above all, cotton from the Mississippi Delta—to national and international markets, the warehousing and transportation infrastructure of Memphis now funnels machine parts, furniture, pottery, and innumerable other goods all over the world. Today, Memphis warehouses and related industries employ close to 90,000 people, and the city has more than 130 million square feet of distribution space (Memphis Regional Chamber of Commerce 2003).

The appeal of Memphis as a global distribution hub is not simply its geographic location but also its transportation capacity, centered in the FedEx Corporation. Since its inception in 1972, FedEx has met a niche market for overnight delivery of small packages through an integrated air-ground trans-

portation system (Sigafos 1979). In 1979 the corporation expanded to Canada from its base of corporate customers in the United States, then moved into more global markets as well as home delivery service in the 1990s. Although FedEx now moves products through superhubs in Paris and Subic Bay, Memphis remains The Hub. For more than ten years Memphis International Airport has held the distinction of handling more metric tons of cargo than any other airport in the world (Airports Council International 2004).

FedEx’s expansion to new destinations during the 1990s set off a frenzy of warehouse construction in Memphis. Within these sprawling structures, goods are off-loaded, repaired, assembled, packaged, wrapped, and addressed. The warehouse operators may be distributors in their own right, goods-producing corporations such as Cummins Engine, or retailers like Barnes and Noble. In addition, a host of subcontractors actually operates certain warehouses or leases space within them to perform small batch processing.

Speedup in the movement of goods through these warehouses is not just a function of the temporal standard of instantaneity. Other features of the trend toward flexible production are also at stake. Mass customization, that is, the specification of certain features within an overall product line, requires rapid movement along supply chains, as particular components are added to the basic product in response to customer demand. In addition, rapid turnover in the basic product line increases both the speed and the volume of products moving through the warehouses. Just-in-time inventory systems have the same effect. More generally, the global decentralization of production processes (both organizationally and spatially) requires speedy, sophisticated, and comprehensive logistical systems.

Essential to the profitable production of space-time compression by the logistics sector is the availability of flexible labor, that is, people who are willing to work on an as-needed basis. Although the pressure toward speed is relentless, the tempo of market demand is erratic. To take an example from mass consumption, Amazon.com requires an expanded labor force in its warehouses when *The Prayer of Jabez* unexpectedly becomes a best seller, but it also requires commensurate reductions when demand begins to wane. Logistics employers must access workers whose lives are not structured by the temporal obligations of a routinized workweek yet who are nonetheless sufficiently disciplined to be reliable—to show up promptly, work rapidly, and fill orders accurately—but only when needed.

FedEx initially set a high standard, designed to secure loyalty and reliability, for flexible labor in logistics. This corporation defined the terms of work for sorters, handlers, and other operatives at its enormous hub as part time, with



variable schedules, but it also offered a basic fringe benefits package, relatively high wages, and a commitment to job security, that is, permanent employment. Within the southern labor market, in particular that of the Delta sub-region, characterized by low wages, weak to nonexistent unions (especially in the private sector), and meager fringe benefits, permanent part-time jobs with benefits were relatively appealing.

FedEx also encouraged loyalty among many employees by rejecting the rigidities of race and gender segregation that had long marked Memphis as a southern labor market. In a rare published account of FedEx's employment practices during its first decade of operation, Sigafos (1983) noted, "Most of the 800 part-time handlers, keyers, and sorters inside the [FedEx] Hub are young college students who report in around midnight and work an average of just over three hours Monday through Friday. Their starting pay is \$6.91 per hour. Experienced workers get \$9.00 per hour. They are guaranteed 17 1/2 hours of work a week. Not only is there an equal mixture of young men and women in the crew, but also there is an equal number of blacks and whites."

Today, FedEx maintains a similar employment strategy, albeit with a diversified and expanded workforce. Although wages for sorters and ramp workers have fallen in real terms, these employees still receive a benefits package that is unusual for part-timers. (The wages Sigafos recorded would be worth \$14.87 to \$19.37 in 2001, adjusted for inflation, as opposed to the \$10.00 to \$12.00 per hour that entry-level workers currently report.) The corporation's expanded role in global trade during the 1990s fueled a tight labor market as its local workforce grew to more than 30,000.

FedEx's domination of the global overnight delivery market simultaneously drew more and more corporations, especially those for which speed of product delivery offers a competitive edge, to locate warehouses in Memphis. In accord with the "lean" management strategies of the 1990s—as opposed to the nascent form of flexible production that FedEx spearheaded in the 1970s—these distributors offer few of their packers, sorters, and other materials handlers job permanence, a minimum number of hours, fringe benefits, or relatively generous wages. Moreover, utilizing temporary labor supply agencies, they access many of their workers indirectly through a transaction that relieves them of all social obligation to and legal liability for their employees.

Attracted in part by this tight labor market and the prospect of employment, many new immigrants also arrived in Memphis during the latter half of the 1990s. At a very general level, the dynamics of globalization that the logistics sector was both responding to and propelling were at work in the lives of these new arrivals, most of whom came from Mexico, who headed to the United

States in the wake of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the devaluation of the peso, and other developments related to global trade. However, although the global expansion of FedEx created the labor market conditions that attracted these new immigrants to Memphis, most did not find employment with this corporation. Instead, the burgeoning distribution component of logistics, both driving and driven by pressures toward space-time compression, moved quickly to hire these new immigrants indirectly, through temporary agencies, and to define them as completely flexible labor.

This conjuncture of interrelated trends—the growth of global trade, immigration, flexible production, and space-time compression—set the stage for an experiment with flexible labor practices in Memphis that, although dramatic, is not unique. Distributors in the logistics sector are creating a labor supply system that can respond flexibly but reliably to the intermittent but intensive labor demand of their worldwide distribution channels. In order to accomplish this, they are exploiting the spatial and temporal limbo of undocumented immigration by requiring that workers align the temporality of their lives as closely as possible to the unpredictable tempo of global markets. These employers achieve space-time compression in the material world of global trade through the imposition of a regime of labor discipline that is marked by the flexibility of time.

### Flexible Labor and the Control of Workers' Time

Flexible labor, or as-needed, at-will employment, is part of the trend toward nonstandard work. Although certain nonstandard arrangements, such as the permanent, part-time jobs at FedEx, may guarantee at least a minimum number of hours in a set workplace, the flexible labor that we observe in Memphis warehouses imposes on workers great spatial and particularly temporal unpredictability. In practice, this means

- temporal flexibility, wherein the days and hours of work are defined by the employer and may change at any moment, and the term of employment is short, and
- spatial flexibility, or movement from job to job (and workplace to workplace) as required by market demand.

Although the description above applies to many forms of casual employment, the flexible labor that we observe in logistics and seek to theorize is driven by a specific and ominous logic. This variant of flexible labor may be distinguished from other post-Fordist innovations not simply by its great spa-



tiotemporal unpredictability out, more importantly, by the dynamic that drives this unpredictability. A tight, direct linkage between global product markets and the local labor market, secured through the electronic transmission of information, defines the "flexibility" required of workers in logistics. This relatively unmediated linkage to globalization and its great pressure toward space-time compression yields a specific form of flexible labor that is extreme in its spatial and especially temporal irregularity.

Flexible labor in logistics also involves a new, post-Fordist relationship between the space and time of work. As David Harvey points out, Henry Ford and his imitators organized the space of the workplace in rigidly confining terms, epitomized by the assembly line, in order to control the pace of work. "Time could then be accelerated by virtue of the control established through organizing and fragmenting the spatial order of production" (Harvey 1989, 266). Paradoxically, even as flexible labor "releases" workers from the routinized temporal obligations of a forty-hour workweek and the spatial fixity of a single workplace, it also secures for employers more indirect but powerful forms of control. If, under Fordism, employers organized and fragmented the space of the workplace, in the post-Fordist context of labor power that is deployed according to the unpredictable tempo of global markets, employers indirectly organize and fragment workers' time. For employers in logistics, the goal is not temporal domination for its own sake, however, but a greater command of space. The control of workers' time enables corporations to compress and thereby better compete within the space of the globe.

Perpetual availability to work when an employer summons, with no guarantee of when that may happen or where that work may take place, is far from an appealing arrangement for most people. Flexible labor means not only unpredictable wages but also chaotic personal lives: last-minute appeals for transportation, undesirable child care arrangements, and disrupted households. To be sure, unstable employment has long been a fact of life for certain groups of U.S. workers, such as working-class African American women and men, who predominate in the Memphis labor market. They were only briefly, if ever, part of the Fordist social contract, and the employment circumstances of many such workers are now on the decline (Bernhardt and Marcotte 2000; Cobble and Vosko 2000; Wilson 1996).

However, for the regimen of flexible labor that they are institutionalizing in the Memphis logistics sector, employers are seizing upon new immigrants as workers of choice. Legal vulnerability due to undocumented status and the situational predisposition to work hard that is characteristic of first-generation immigrants are not the only factors accounting for this preference. A nu-

anced interaction between the insecurity of immigration and flexible labor is also at work. New immigrants live in a spatiotemporal limbo that articulates all too well with the irregularity of flexible labor. Transient and insecure within the space of the nation-state, they are also temporally dislocated—outside the history and sedimented cultural practices, including work ways, of the host country. This may be particularly true in locations like Memphis, one of several "new destinations" for immigrants in the South, where there is no ethnic enclave to ease immigrants' transition to new ways of life.

## Methodology

The research on which this article is based began as a relatively innocent, descriptive effort to develop basic demographic and employment data on the Latino immigrant population of Memphis, whose growth during the 1990s was dramatically evident in the city's historically bipolar, black-white social milieu. Conversations and formal interviews with new immigrants accessed through ESL classes, Catholic churches, and other social contexts in Memphis alerted us to the significance of the distribution sector, accessed through temporary staffing agencies, as a key entry point into the local labor market for both women and men. We therefore undertook, beginning in May 2000, an ongoing investigation into Latino immigrant employment in local warehouses. This included a telephone survey of temporary agencies and distribution sector employers; personal interviews with bilingual agency staff, Latino immigrant workers, and employers; tours of local warehouses; and field observations at temporary agencies frequented by Latino immigrant workers.

Although this field research yielded rich and detailed qualitative data, we also sought other methods through which to quantify the use of Latino immigrants as flexible labor. These included analysis of standardized national data sources such as *County Business Patterns*, the *Census of Population*, the *Census of Wholesale Trade*, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEO-1 data file). Unfortunately, all of these data failed to quantify reliably the overall Latino presence in Memphis, including Latino employment in the distribution sector. The U.S. Census indicates that the total Hispanic population of the Memphis metropolitan area is not large, but it increased by 245 percent from 1990 to 2000 (from 7,986 to 27,520). By contrast, calculations based on school enrollment records and other sources estimated that the local Latino population could be at least twice the official count (Burrell et al. 2001). National employment data are equally misleading. For example, the EEO data file, the most detailed national source on patterns regarding race/ethnicity in



employment, indicates that Latinos have made no significant inroads into permanent warehouse employment. In 1997 a paltry 134 Latino workers were recorded in wholesale trade establishments with more than 100 employees. *County Business Patterns* data indicate that employment by personnel supply companies in Shelby County grew by 147 percent (from 7,854 to 19,423 workers) between 1989 and 1997. While neither the racial/ethnic nor industrial composition of this workforce can be discerned, these aggregate data are at least consistent with our hypothesis that the Memphis distribution sector is shifting toward flexible labor secured through temporary agencies.

### Latino Immigrants and Flexible Labor

We were hired for one week [in a small packing plant], but I did not last more than two days there. . . . The first day, the supervisor asked us to stay and keep working until 10:00 P.M. (We had started at 7:00 A.M.) I was telling my coworkers, "We shouldn't stay, they are being despotit (*muy despotas*)," but a woman replied, "I've been one month without a job, I have a child, my husband doesn't have a job either," so we stayed. They told us, "Come tomorrow morning [at 7:00 A.M.] to work until 11:00 A.M." I returned the next day, to be faithful to the temporary agency, but with the idea to call [the bilingual staff] to request a change. At 11:00 A.M., the supervisors told us that we should stay that day until 10:00 P.M. . . . I left, [but] many Latinos were still there and kept working. (Interview, April 22, 2002)

In Memphis, distribution sector employers increasingly use Latino immigrants to create new, flexible terms of employment. Typically hired by temporary staffing agencies, which assume all liability for wage payment, worker grievances, and quite importantly, proof of immigration status, Latinos (as well as African Americans and other immigrant and refugee groups) meet the distribution sector's demand for "spot market" labor. They may work at the same job for a few hours or as long as a year, but they are typically hired for the day or, at most, the week. Lacking fringe benefits such as health insurance and pensions, as well as those more customary benefits such as sick leave and paid vacations, Latino immigrants may be hired briefly, cheaply, and flexibly. The wage they receive is the federal minimum or slightly above—typically \$6.00 to \$7.50 per hour.

The temporary staffing agencies that connect these flexible workers with available employment tend to specialize by occupation, with more than 40 percent of their placements in the blue-collar sector (Brogan 2001; Gonos 1997).

On the bottom of their status and skill hierarchy are those agencies, which essentially represent the street-corner labor pool institutionalized and moved indoors, that place unskilled laborers by the day. "Work Today, Get Paid Today" they advertise. Although few immigrants seem to access them, other agencies offer more long-term placements and represent the top tier of the blue-collar sector of the industry.

Our survey of temporary agencies in Memphis suggests a strong trend toward the employment of Latino immigrant workers in the warehouses of the distribution sector: 53 of the 95 agencies that we surveyed actually referred workers for blue-collar jobs, and 44 (83 percent) of those 53 agencies hired Latinos. Moreover, 17 of the Latino-employing agencies had hired bilingual (English/Spanish) staff to communicate with applicants; another was in the process of hiring a bilingual staff member, and yet another was actively seeking Latino applicants through a church-sponsored ESL class. Agencies without fully bilingual staff typically had one employee able to converse in basic Spanish, and most had translated their applications into Spanish.

Twenty agencies provided estimates, ranging from 1 to 100 percent, of the Latino portion of their workforce; the median was 25 percent. Not surprisingly, agencies with bilingual staff tended to hire a larger proportion of Latino immigrants, but all reported an increase in such applicants. One interviewee estimated that the percentage of Latino immigrant workers hired by his agency jumped from 1 percent in 1999 to 25 percent in 2000. As of July 2001, one of the larger agencies (as measured by the number of Latino workers) was managing 900 Latino contracts, primarily with major warehouses; over the preceding two years, the agency had compiled a database of some 10,000 Latino applicants. Another agency that began employing Latino immigrants by the week three years ago had, as of July 2001, 2,900 Latino applications on file and estimated an average weekly employment of 250 Latino workers.

It is important to keep these numbers in context. Memphis is a predominantly working-class, African American city with a tiny (official) Latino population. According to the 2000 census, the entire Latino working-age population in the metropolitan area is approximately 17,000. Even the most generous population estimates (see our figures above) place the Latino population at 5 percent of the Metropolitan Statistical Area total. Nonetheless, 83 percent of temporary agencies specializing in blue-collar employment hired Latinos, and they represented one-fourth or more of the workforce at more than 20 percent of those agencies.

The relative significance of supply and demand—that is, whether Latino immigrants, as new and often undocumented entrants into the Memphis la-



bor market, focus their job search on temporary agencies, or whether such agencies seek out Latino workers—is impossible to discern, but it is clear that both dynamics are at work. Agency staff who were willing to discuss racial/ethnic considerations in hiring typically referred to Latinos' temporal reliability and flexibility (see below) and/or to the ethnic-specific demand of contracting employers for Latino workers. It is clear that at least some, if not most, corporations are intentionally selecting for Latino immigrant hires. Three of the four warehouses that we toured were moving to create all-Latino workforces in their unskilled distribution operations, and the fourth had subcontracted these operations to a company that employed a workforce that was half Latino.

Employers cite an array of reasons, many of which involve explicit temporal considerations, for their interest in Latino immigrant workers. These include punctuality and good health, both of which were associated with reliability, willingness to work overtime (flexibility), and intensity of work effort (productivity, or output per unit of time). "Latinos are very dependable, very hard-working," commented one employer in a typical statement. "Mexican workers never get sick," said another. Recent research focused on employers' racial/ethnic hiring preferences in other cities has documented a tendency to emphasize intangible, attitudinal qualities, or "people skills," in hiring processes where level of education, prior experience, and other skill-based criteria are negligible (Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991; Lichter and Waldfinger 2001; Waldfinger 1997). These qualities function as euphemisms for worker tractability and manageability, which employers associate with specific racial/ethnic groups, particularly Latinos. We certainly heard such assessments in our interviews—for example, "The companies like to hire Mexican workers because they are humble"—but the greater tendency was to emphasize work habits and attitudes with temporal implications, particularly flexibility, reliability, and productivity.

The flexibility that distribution employers require involves not only an individual worker's willingness to tolerate spatiotemporal unpredictability, but also the employer's institutional capacity to summon a sufficient quantity of workers when global markets dictate. Employers clearly rely on immigrants' elaborate social networks to secure this latter form of flexibility. Information about job availability and the hiring process, including the extent of any document verification, circulates rapidly not only within the Latino immigrant networks of Memphis but beyond. One agency staff member reported that, when he needs additional workers for a specific client, he merely informs certain of his Latino employees; within forty-eight hours, their family members

and friends from California and elsewhere arrive for work. In one recent instance, he needed 100 workers for immediate job openings and called 30 Latinos who had put their names on a waiting list; by the next morning he had 105 applicants waiting in line for the new jobs.

Flexibility at the individual level involves more than the willingness to work for short periods of time in different locations, possibly on different shifts, for modestly variable rates of pay—all of which are standard features of temporary employment arrangements. Latino immigrants are expected to be infinitely *available*—to go to a new job immediately, to work overtime on demand, and to move to a different shift. As one agency staff member commented, "Hispanics are valued because they are on time at the work site, they work hard, do not complain, and are always ready to do overtime." When jobs are available, workers are hired on the spot and sent to a warehouse immediately. In one instance, applicants were given maps showing where they needed to go for a drug test. They were also handed a map to the warehouse. They had to buy shoes with reinforced metal toes (they were advised to go to Payless or Wal-Mart) before showing up for work. They were required to wear short- or long-sleeved T-shirts and pants (for men and women). They had to report to work on the same day, carrying a picture ID and proof that they had taken the drug test. They also had to watch a thirty-minute training video (translated into Spanish by an agency employee) before leaving the agency.

In temporary employment, where work is by definition not reliable, neither are many workers. Agency staff and warehouse managers repeatedly praised the "reliability" of Latinos, meaning that they consistently and punctually showed up for work. One human resource manager at a large warehousing operation that contracts with three different temporary agencies for workers stressed that hiring Latinos is not a matter of complying with affirmative action or increasing diversity. "It is a business necessity," because Latinos are the kind of employees that the company needs. He asserted that they are reliable and highly motivated and do not miss work: "They are more than a body that shows up to work."

However, for Latino immigrants as for anyone else, life sometimes intrudes on work obligations in the form of illness, transportation problems, or lapses in child care. Temporary agencies and corporate employers have responded to Latinos' occasional "unreliability" with tactics ranging from helpful to coercive. For example, the spatial unpredictability of warehouse employment represents an obstacle for workers without independent and reliable means of transportation. Although a potential problem for all low-wage workers, it is particularly acute for immigrants, who may have insufficient documentation



to obtain driver's licenses. The Latino applicants whom we interviewed and observed at temporary agencies invariably arrived in groups that either shared use of a single vehicle (through collective ownership or kin/friendship ties) or paid the driver-owner to transport them. Some of these drivers functioned as "labor brokers" who sold not only transportation but also job referrals. Once a job was secured, however, getting to and from work required other arrangements. Certain agencies actually provided transportation for workers, for which they charged \$3.00 to \$4.00 a day, to and from work sites.

Employers also enforced reliability through the manipulation of workers' wages. Several workers reported receiving lower hourly wages for an entire week after one episode of tardiness or absence. For example, one Latino worker telephoned his multinational employer to report that he would be absent that day. Because the person to whom he spoke could not understand Spanish, he was paid minimum wage (\$5.15/hour, a \$2.35/hour decrease) for the entire week. This worker escaped the more severe punishment for absenteeism, which is being fired.

Despite such treatment, "Los hispanos trabajan muy duro" (Hispanics work very hard). Repeatedly we heard testimonials from agency staff and corporate employers about Latinos' productivity and work effort. As one plant owner commented, "Immigrants come from a self-selected group that really wants to work." Workers who express reservations about working conditions or the intensity of required effort do not last. One Latina reported, "I told my supervisor that I shouldn't be lifting so much weight because I was pregnant, and she fired me the same day." One agency staff member commented that Latino immigrants worked so hard for so many hours, he wondered why they didn't "explode." He noted that the thousands of Latinos he has processed for employment are relatively invisible in the public spaces of Memphis—in part because they fear racism, crime, and deportation, and in part because they spend all of their waking hours at work: "Latinos are like ghosts; they come to work and then they go home."

### Conclusion: The Price of Flexible Labor

The space-time compressions of globalization appear to be shifting the temporality of work. An extensive literature documents (although only recently has begun to emphasize) the temporal dimensions of contemporary employment trends related to economic globalization and flexible accumulation—the growth of nonstandard work arrangements, speedup in the pace of work, increased overtime, and the related erosion of leisure time (Epstein and Kalleberg 2001; Hinrichs, Roche, and Sirianni 1991; Hochschild 1997; Kalleberg

and Epstein 2001; Schor 1991). However, critics tend to emphasize either the impermanence of nonstandard jobs and the insufficiency of nonstandard work hours or the imposition of higher workloads across a range of occupations, industries, and employment arrangements. Workers can meet the pressure for greater output only by intensifying the pace and/or extending the hours of their work. In these analyses the temporal problem is, in essence, either too few or too many hours of work.

This case study of Latino immigrant employment in the Memphis logistics sector points to a qualitatively different innovation: temporal unpredictability, or what we term flexible labor. Although the more commonly recognized temporal configurations of nonstandard employment and lengthy workdays violate the Fordist paradigm, they are not new. In the Memphis area, for example, episodic jobs off-loading barges (a "nonstandard" work arrangement) and more long-term but grueling labor from sunup to sundown in Delta cotton fields long predate the rhythms of Fordism. What appear distinctively new in the present era are work-time arrangements that collapse the distinction between work and leisure, or work and life, by requiring infinite availability to labor. The closest employment precedent in recent history is the on-call arrangement, confined primarily to skilled, emergency service workers such as nurses, firefighters, and paramedics; however, this diverges from newer, flexible labor arrangements in its greater job permanence as well as predictability in the duration of call. Moreover, the rationale for such on-call employment arrangements was and is the unpredictable nature of human emergency and need, not the vagaries of global capital. Today, it is the direct linkage between global product markets and local labor markets, made possible by the electronic transmission of information, that dictates the unpredictable tempo and potentially unremitting work requirement of flexible labor.

### Notes

1. This form of flexible labor is sometimes referred to as "numerical" or "external" flexibility, to distinguish it from flexibility in knowledge and tasks required of workers in high-performance firms. (For a review, see Kalleberg 2001.)

2. When referring to our case study of Memphis, Tennessee, we use the terms "immigrants" and "Latinos" interchangeably. Although recent immigrants to Memphis/Shelby County originate from many different countries around the world, the majority of arrivals since 1990 have come from Latin America. In addition, although there have been people of Spanish-language heritage in the area for many years, most are recent arrivals (i.e., since 1990—see the text for relevant data). According to the 2000 census, 69 percent of Latinos in Shelby County are of Mexican nationality.



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Lucia Vargas

## Media and Racialization among Young, Working-Class, Latina Immigrants

Russell King and Nancy Wood (2001, 1–2) suggest three main roles for the media in the migration experience. One is the potential for the global media, rich in images of northern wealth, to stimulate a desire to migrate in people from the South. Another is the role played by transnational media, such as the World Wide Web and satellite television originating in the home country, in the politics and cultural identity of immigrant individuals and communities. A third is the effect that the host country's media constructions of immigrants have on immigrants' own experiences of inclusion or exclusion. In this essay I study these roles at the level of everyday reception practices. My task is to shed light on how young, working-class, Latina immigrants<sup>1</sup> use media forms and meanings to accept, accommodate, or resist the subordinate place assigned to them in their host country. I am specifically interested in the part that media play in the emergence of racialized subjectivities among this youth.

Uprooted by war, political instability, and the international division of labor, the vast majority of immigrants from Latin America to the United States are assigned to the lower strata of their host society. For them, the reconstruction of identities that occurs in migration has often involved racialization—the process, as defined by Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartman (1998, 33), "by which certain bodily features or assumed biological characteristics are used systematically to mark certain persons for differential status or treatment." Recognizing that racialization processes are overdetermined, I argue that, since the media are heavily implicated in the accelerated identity construction work that occurs during migratory processes, they have become mighty tools for the racialization of Latino immigrants. My observations are anchored on an action-research project on critical media literacy that I have been carrying out with immigrant young women who live in Durham, North Carolina. The project is far from complete, yet it gives me the opportunity to explore the issues at hand in a concrete situation. I suggest that Latino immigrant