“Farmworker Reality Tours: Challenging Assumptions About Oregon’s Latino Immigrants”

While many residents and visitors to Oregon are familiar with the Woodburn Outlet stores, the state’s second largest economy, most are unfamiliar with the conditions that exist directly behind the mall. In the agricultural fields west of the mall, workers are subjected to unsafe working and living conditions, including exposure to pesticides, unregulated labor conditions, and substandard housing. Amid the strategies that community leaders are using to challenge these conditions, one deserves critical and scholarly attention. Through the “Farmworker Reality Tour,” outsiders participate in a political education project that seeks to transform their thinking about issues of immigration, labor, family, and community development.

For more than a century, tourism into neighborhoods has provided a channel through which tourists “experience” the ethnic Other. Through the “gaze,” tourists consume a version of communities of color that maintains their own social position, and that “publicly declares and perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgement and enjoyment of racial difference” (hooks 1992: 21). However, amid criticism that ethnic tourism maintains essentialist construction and even exacerbates social stratification, political education projects emerge in which knowledge producers from marginalized communities construct representations of their “home” that allow for self-definition, agency, visibility and voice. Through Farmworker Reality Tours, visitors to Woodburn experience a tourism educational project that complicates the stories about immigrants that dominate public discourse. Community organizers represent immigrants as hard-working and major contributors to local and national economies. Guides from the Farmworkers’ Development Corporation act as knowledge producers who disrupt the prevailing narrative about immigrants in general, and Latinos in particular. As Santos and Buzinde assert: “Such representational practices have the power to reorganize people’s sense of self, build alternative conceptions of realizable futures, and consequently function as agents of social transformation” (2007: 323).

As a sociologist, I am interested in understanding what compels non-immigrant people to take these tours, what they believe pre/post-tour, and what they do with the education received through these tours. During my participation in LARC, I will gain access to this research site, engage in ethnographic observations of the tours, and conduct interviews with participants and project organizers. I am interested in understanding how these “reality” tours inform and challenge the thinking of participants, and the extent to which participants’ thinking changed (moving knowledge into action) following the one-day “experience” of the living and working conditions of farmworkers.

Funding: I do not currently have any grants, but have identified two potential funding sources. The first is through the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality (Hispanic Initiative) and the second is Russell Sage, both of which offer small research grants for community-based research.
Collaboration with Undergraduate Mentee: The undergraduate I will work with is a strong critical thinker and writer, and well-equipped to engage in independent and original research. Katie’s critical analysis about politics and social (in)equality is so laser, that I am usually the one learning from zir (and lamenting that I have lost my own “edge”). Ze is conversant in several interdisciplinary discourses, namely ethnic studies and queer theory, which are at the centerpiece of zir research. I say all of this simply to acknowledge that ze is as likely to challenge and teach me, as much as will collaborate and mentor. The area I think I will best be able to support Katie is through the research process itself, helping zir to develop a sample, collect data, and analyze results.