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Class, Migration And Bordering at Work: The Case of Precarious Harvest Labour In The Uk

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on symbolic bordering perspectives as a conceptual frame to highlight practices that shape the reproduction, justification, masking and distancing of precarious work. Via a case-study of the UK harvest labour market in 2020–2021, at a time of Brexit and COVID-19, we use media, employer and locally-based worker insights to show how us–them bordering practices are embedded within low-wage horticultural work. Three interrelated everyday bordering tropes are identified from the analysis of the data. First, while migrant harvest work is celebrated as valuable and essential, it is also portrayed as work achieved by, and suitable for, a constantly shifting, multi-dimensional, and therefore ambiguously defined ‘other.’ These ‘others’ and their work are notably valued in so far as they perform their work in particular ways that define them as ‘good neoliberal agents.’ Finally, a particular focus at the height of COVID-19, was on how low-wage ‘others’ were portrayed as providing service and duty to align with a national ‘community of shared values.’ These interrelated symbolic forms of bordering help to mask the exploitative nature of low-wage work and perform an important role in contemporary (transnational) class production/ reproduction.

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This paper draws on symbolic bordering perspectives as a conceptual frame to highlight some of the practices that enable and shape the reproduction of precarious work. Using the case of low-wage and low-status harvest work in the UK, we illustrate the role of symbolic bordering in masking the exploitative nature of some forms of work, and in distancing those engaged in the bordering from recognising or acknowledging its precarity.¹ While these empirical insights are specific to one country (UK) and one sector (horticulture), at a particularly unique time (of Brexit and COVID-19), our goal is, more broadly, to illuminate key bordering processes of othering that create the conditions for the stratification of work and society.

Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy (2019: 19) use the term bordering scape to refer to any sets of relations, groups, communities or geographical entities within which bordering takes place as everyday practices. Our analysis focuses on the specific 'bordering scape' of UK harvest labour markets. This bordering scape has been impacted by a UK government aiming to cut immigration (somewhat in response to popular/media-generated anti-immigration sentiment) and intent on pursuing a 'hostile environment' that exposes many of those passing through the (increasingly fortified) UK border to various forms of exclusion and subjugation. This 'border spectacle' (De Genova 2013) directly contributes to the production and reproduction of a precarious migrant labour force in the UK and beyond (involving both 'legal' and 'illegal' migrant workers). In addition, the bordering scape is shaped by the specificities of 'Brexit' (Consterdine & Samuk 2018; Halfacree 2021) and by the global COVID-19 pandemic (Scott & O'Reilly forthcoming).

The ways in which highly marginal precarious work is constructed and maintained helps us to appreciate, in particular, the complexities of contemporary socio-economic positions in neoliberal societies, and associated us–them divisions both between labour (harvest workers) and capital (farmers/managers) and within labour (e.g. between different types of workers) and within capital (e.g. between different types of farm). Power, privilege, resources, and rights are unevenly distributed in contemporary societies, and this unevenness is multi-dimensional and dynamic. A bordering perspective reminds us that boundaries and communities are shaped through ongoing processes and practices, are intersectional and multi-dimensional in nature, and are subtle, shrouded and subject to constant flux (Anthias 2021; Cohen 1985).

While our focus on symbolic bordering underlines the intersectional, multi-dimensional and fluid nature of contemporary inequalities, our research focuses in particular on migrants engaged in precarious work and so class dynamics are especially relevant. As van Hear (2014) observes, in migration studies class has been underemployed by scholars. Rye's (2019) work is an important exception and underlines the heightened complexities of class when examined through a transnational lens. As we found, those doing precarious work are often embedded within a transnational structural context involving moves from lower-income more peripheral economies to higher-income core economies. The symbolic bordering emerging out of this transnational structural context acts in the interests of capital (and sometimes in the interests of

¹ Exploitation is used throughout the paper in a broad sense. It is not viewed as relating only to what is defined by the state as illegal but seen as emerging out of highly unequal power and control dynamics between labour and capital. Precarious work involves work that is low-wage and temporary/insecure.

the local working-class) with exploitation/precariety effectively 'out-sourced' to an international working-class (Milkman 2020; Schierup et al. 2015; Strauss 2018).

We elucidate interrelated bordering tropes associated with precarious harvest work that serve to perpetuate the lines between the 'us' of employers, media and locally-based workers and the 'them' of the worker. The notion that harvest work is 'work that ambiguous others do' invokes a constantly-shifting, all-encompassing 'other' that can include diverse (national) migrant groups as well as, sometimes, locally-based workers. The trope of the 'good neoliberal agent' serves to justify why harvest work requires certain types of worker. Finally, the related trope of a 'community of shared values' (Anderson 2013) celebrates hard work as providing service and duty for the nation. This last process emerged out of the particularities of COVID-19, but is a bordering process more widely recognised by Anderson (*ibid.*). Crucially, these tropes act as symbolic borders by drawing attention to the perceived qualities and failings of (other, not us) precarious workers, rather than the quality (or lack) of the precarious work they perform. We will now move on to examining the context of our research and our methodology.

EXAMINING HARVEST WORK IN THE UK DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Advanced capitalist societies have become reliant on precarious work, and on a class of precarious worker, many of whom are now international migrants (Milkman 2020; Schierup et al. 2015; Scott & O'Reilly forthcoming; Standing 2011; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss & Cassidy 2019). The question is what are the practices through which 'systems of differential inclusion and resource allocation' are enabled? (Anthias 2021: 11). We examine this through the symbolic bordering practices observed in our research on harvest work in the UK. Given this work is precarious, it hardly comes as a surprise that class bordering emerged strongest out of our analysis.

The supply of temporary migrant harvest labour to the UK has, over recent decades, come from Central and Eastern Europe: from Poland following 'A8' EU enlargement in 2004; and from Bulgaria and Romania following 'A2' EU enlargement in 2007. The Brexit vote on 23 June 2016 threatened this supply with freedom of movement for EU workers ending, as a result of the UK leaving the EU, on 1 January 2021 (Halfacree 2021). Alongside this, the COVID-19 crisis, from March 2020, further threatened the supply of harvest labour (Scott & O'Reilly forthcoming).

In response the horticultural industry in the UK launched a 'Feed the Nation' campaign that was then rebranded with government (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs [DEFRA]) support into a 'Pick for Britain' campaign. These two campaigns were designed to attract resident UK labour back into the fields to make up for the declining supply of migrant harvest workers, but were abandoned in 2021. In addition, the UK government, after considerable industry lobbying, introduced a 'Seasonal Worker Pilot' scheme in 2019 to allow low-wage foreign workers to enter the UK for up to six months to work in food-based horticulture. The scheme was initially capped at 2,500 migrant workers, then 10,000, before being expanded to 30,000. In December 2021, the pilot scheme became a permanent visa regime and was extended until 2024 and expanded to up to 40,000 guestworkers from an unlimited number of source countries. The current seasonal worker visa regime (2022–2024) also now takes in ornamentals, whereas the initial 'seasonal worker pilot' (2019–2021) applied only to

edible horticulture (Scott 2022). The shift from free movement to visa-based harvest migration signalled a further change in the nationality of migrant workers. Where once Polish and then Bulgarian and Romanian workers had performed low-wage harvest work in the UK, the new visa scheme signalled a shift to Ukrainian nationals. When in early 2022 Russia invaded Ukraine, the scheme was forced to include other countries (generally much further afield).

Brexit, COVID-19, the Pick for Britain campaign, and the Seasonal Worker visa collectively gave our UK research a particularly unique context. Nevertheless, the arguments put forward concern the role of symbolic bordering in the production/reproduction of precarious work more broadly conceived: a class-migration nexus that has much wider global relevance (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss & Cassidy 2019).

The paper draws on two sources of data from a research study undertaken by the authors during 2020–2021 examining the experiences of agricultural employers and locally-based workers during and beyond the COVID-19 crisis. The first data source is an extensive analysis of national, regional and local news media coverage of harvest work in the first six months of the UK COVID-19 crisis (1 March 2020–1 September 2020). The second data source is in-depth interviews with 21 horticultural employers and UK-based harvest workers during January 2021 to August 2021.²

The media analysis searched the 'LexisLibrary UK' 'News' archive on two key search terms for the 1 March 2020 to 1 September 2020 period: 'Land Army' and 'Pick for Britain'. Articles were then included in our analysis if they focused on UK labour issues in food production in the context of COVID-19. Duplicate articles and very small entries (such as one sentence letters) were omitted. This yielded 134 useable articles: 89 results for 'Land Army' and 45 results for 'Pick for Britain.'³

The interviews built on previous research in the field by approaching existing and new farm contacts for in-depth discussions about the nature of their work during 2021. We also communicated with the DEFRA, the Association of Labour Providers (ALP) and the Countryside and Communities Research Institute (CCRI) as key gatekeepers.⁴

The first step in the analysis, with both the media and interviews, was an overall reading and familiarity with the data, followed by open (descriptive) coding, focused (analytical) coding and then working with co-constructed codes to cluster them into broader patterns of meaning, and finally developing organising principles within the context of our research questions, theoretical frames and critical analysis (Braun & Clarke 2021; O'Reilly 2012). It is important to note that symbolic bordering, by its very nature, is not easily observable or discernible: much remains unspoken, implied or identified through omissions rather than statements. Similarly, and relatedly, precarious work/workers are often relatively invisible on an everyday level – society often prefers to shroud low-wage insecure work (Lever & Milbourne 2017; Milbourne

2 The 'Picking for Britain' research project (www.glos.ac.uk/content/picking-for-britain/) received no external funding but was supported financially by a small internal grant from the University of Gloucestershire.

3 The UK media is divided mainly according to: 1) coverage (local/ regional versus national press); 2) format (broadsheet versus tabloid) and 3) politics (left, centre or right-wing). Generally, there was no clear divide along any of these three dimensions in the way that harvest labour was reported in 2020.

4 One of the caveats in our sample is a failure to capture locally-based (British) workers who applied for harvest labour and did not end up lasting the season, or who were not employed at all.

& Coulson 2021; Scott & O'Reilly forthcoming). Thus, the us-them divisions within precarious labour markets were illuminated first empirically (inductively) and then developed with overt reliance on the theoretically-informed lens of bordering.

Having described our research and conceptual framework, we next review literature that relates harvest work, precarity and social class, before explicating our findings in more detail focussing on the significant and recurring themes or motifs associated with processes of symbolic bordering.

PRECARIOUS WORK AND ITS CLASS-BASED NATURE

Our review of previous literature reminds readers that seasonal harvest work (usually now delivered by migrant labour) is precarious, is stratified within secondary labour markets, and therefore invokes class-based distinctions. Academics have highlighted the precarious nature of harvest work historically (Newby 1977; Verdon 2017) and have recently argued that workplace intensification has taken place as this work has been increasingly carried out by migrants (Rogaly 2008). Intensification involves the ratcheting up of effort required by workers (especially seasonal harvest workers) to achieve a given (usually minimum) wage and has been particularly associated with the changing use of piece-rates and labour market intermediaries. It has become increasingly common for horticultural employers, particularly across Europe and the United States, to look to international labour markets to supply seasonal migrant workers to fill the low-paid, insecure (and therefore precarious) jobs they insist they need to offer in order to meet global pressures of intensification and consolidation (see Consterdine & Samuk 2018; King, Lulle & Melossi 2021; Molinero-Gerbeau, López-Sala & Şerban 2021; Scott & Rye 2021).

In the context of the agriculture-migration nexus (King, Lulle & Melossi 2021) employers have become so dependent on low-wage, temporary migration that it is now unusual for local labour to harvest crops in any of the higher-income core economies. Further, the relationship between harvest migration and labour market segmentation has consistently been recognised in empirical work, illustrating the location of migrant work within secondary markets (Doeringer & Piore 1971; Hoggart & Mendoza 1999; Piore 1979; Rye & Scott 2018). The state is also often complicit in the precarity associated with harvest work; for instance, through the construction of specific types of visa schemes for migrants (Anderson 2010; Strauss & McGrath 2017) and/or tolerance of informality (Molinero-Gerbeau, López-Sala & Şerban 2021).

Whilst harvest workers occupy a highly marginal class position in the host country, many renegotiate and reframe this position on a transnational basis (Rye 2019), engaging in transnational 'arbitrage' to maximise the value of precarious work (Jakobsen, Scott & Rye forthcoming). Further, in the context of low-wage labour migration to rural areas of Europe, class-based bordering seems to operate both at work and with respect to wider community integration (Moore 2013; Villa 2019). The need for a transnational and intersectional perspective on social positioning is illustrated in Anthias' concept of translocational positionality, that reminds us how categories 'articulate in concrete social relations [...] operating across place, scale, and time' (Anthias 2021: 10). To conclude, harvest work tends to be precarious, occupying marginal socio-economic positions, but this marginality is complicated: with transnational positionality often enabling working-class migrants in the host country to engage in middle-class practices back home.

BORDERING AS A PROCESS

Our concern is to understand symbolic bordering in relation to precarious work, with a particular emphasis on class. Symbolic bordering is an ongoing, subtle, shrouded process of making and confirming 'us' and 'them' constructions that shape inclusion and exclusion. While most recognisable when aligned to putative visible characteristics (such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, age) or to an identifiable, bounded place (Lamont, Beljean & Clair 2014), they can also (and perhaps more powerfully) be multi-dimensional, complex, dynamic and unbounded. The shifting nature of who belongs within (us) and who belongs outside (them) of various communities, and ongoing challenges with respect to the very idea of community, is a key feature of contemporary life; and our focus here is on its ambiguous and shifting nature and the way this serves to border precarious work.

We draw on a sociologically-informed experiential and interpretive approach to borders first advanced in the 1980s when Cohen (1985) redirected the focus on communities as fixed entities with essential or immutable characteristics towards the symbolically drawn (and redrawn) boundaries of exclusion and inclusion that are part and parcel of community-making. A community, whether it be a nation-state or local, shifting sets of relations, is represented by those involved as sharing common values, norms and moral codes. However, the specific *content* of these values, norms and codes, can at any time be reinterpreted by members as a means to include and exclude. For Cohen (1985), 'the community' can connote at one and the same time the nation-state, other local small sets of relations and other senses of us and them, including class differences, ethnicity, gender and so on; its ongoing construction is always about drawing boundaries invoking similarity and difference.

With respect to labour migration more specifically, Anderson (2013) draws attention to the ways in which contemporary neoliberal nation-states, as communities, embrace the individual freedoms and rights of 'us' by evoking communities of shared values that are in need of protecting or defending from 'them.' Here, the construction or invocation of outsiders of any form (illegal migrants, benefit scroungers, lazy workers) can be employed to remind the insiders of what they/we stand for, and migrants (among others) can be deemed worthy or not of the privileges of membership of the community of shared values. These acceptance and exclusion processes are constantly shifting, especially with regard to immigration controls, which can be manipulated to create the groups of workers and relations to labour markets in specific ways as required by employers (Anderson 2013: 10). The politics of immigration control, for Anderson, is a constant manoeuvring of the categories of 'us and them.'

Focussing on bordering as a process, when thinking of migrants, shifts focus away from conceptualising migration as unidirectional and permanent, towards how migration is managed, in bordering scapes, in relation to processes of identity and belonging, inclusions and exclusions, and practices and discourses of 'us' and 'them.' For Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy (2019), who is granted access to where, under what conditions, and who is permitted to belong, is an ongoing process shaped by sets of ideas, discourses and practices. The specificities, the everyday banalities, of making and remaking borders are thus shifting processes. But, further and more critically, in terms of their structural context bordering processes always reflect *political* projects of belonging, and play a role in the widening of inequalities (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss & Cassidy 2019: 29).

Anthias' work, and her focus on intersectionality, further reminds us of the role of bordering in the reproduction of (classed, gendered, ethnic and other) divisions and inequalities. The concept of intersectionality here provides a heuristic (Anthias 2021; Collins 2019), a tool for understanding the intersections between processes of subordination and exclusion, within which class, status, power, ethnicity, nationality, gender intersect. Anthias (2021: 10) calls for examination of the daily, intricate processes that make and maintain physical, territorial, social, political, economic and symbolic borders. These processes – of inclusion and exclusion, which are made and remade on a daily basis by actors with diverse sets of power and informed by deep-seated assumptions of rights and belonging – serve to create the social divisions that have long been the focus of her work on migration.

Symbolic boundary processes then reflect, mask and support exclusion and inclusion processes, and help to produce and reproduce inequalities. As Lamont, Beljean and Clair note (2014: 577) we are not necessarily talking here of inequalities 'in which a dominant party wilfully creates a situation that works to the detriment of the subordinate group, mostly by depriving it of material resources.' Although we can objectively admit that also happens, rather we are interested here in how symbolic domination works as a practice to 'create the conditions for social boundaries' (Lamont, Beljean & Clair 2014: 580). For these authors, processes of racialisation, stigmatisation and evaluation are especially notable in boundary making. In our research the symbolic 'other' is ambiguous and shifting, with essentialising characteristics drawn on and discarded as communities of us and them are drawn and redrawn, at times, as we shall see, even including local workers as 'other.' We now critically examine the symbolic bordering tropes we identified in our media analysis and in our interviews.

BORDERING AT WORK

As outlined above, our research revealed three interrelated tropes that we conceptualise as related to processes of symbolic bordering. First, while the work (as with the workers) was celebrated as valuable and crucial work, it was also portrayed as something other people do, especially those from more peripheral lower-income economies. These others were defined in multi-dimensional and shifting ways. Second, those doing the work were deemed of value in so far as they were able to act as 'good neoliberal agents.' Again, the emphasis was on the qualities of the (migrant) worker rather than on the quality of the work. Third, there was a particular focus, at the height of COVID-19, on how low-wage 'others' can/should provide service and duty to align with 'a community of shared values' that reinforced a sense of them and us.

WORK THAT AMBIGUOUS OTHERS DO

Global neoliberalism relies on complex and shifting flows of heterogenous labour force and differential rates of pay for different kinds of labour in different parts of the world, where various bordering processes are vital as regulatory mechanisms. (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss & Cassidy 2019: 13)

Harvest work was presented within the media we analysed, and by the employers and locally-based workers we interviewed as work that was vital, necessary, crucial. At the same time, it was taken for granted that the work was best performed by someone else, who would do it more gladly or was better suited to it. It was often assumed these others would be migrants, but the specific nationality, where mentioned, was

almost of secondary consideration. The nature of the 'other' was therefore defined loosely, using shifting, imprecise terms.

Headlines in *The Times*, for example, invoked the essential nature of the work while simultaneously presuming the work would need to be done by someone who is not 'us': by east European workers, or Romanians, or foreign workers who are rescuing the country from their plight:

They voted firmly for Brexit, but for many farming communities the sight of hundreds of east European workers returning to British fields could be the most welcome one in weeks. Several planeloads of Romanian fruit pickers and vegetable croppers are being flown to the UK to stop thousands of tons of asparagus, strawberries, raspberries and other crops going rotten. (The Times, 19/04/20)

Britain won't work without unskilled migrants; From fruit pickers to carers, the country is crying out for foreign workers and it's a fallacy to say Britons want those jobs. (The Times, 21/05/20)

Employers we spoke to, similarly, framed the need for migrant rather than 'British' workers as inevitable, implicitly invoking the global neoliberal context that Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy (2019) argue structures daily bordering practices.⁵ They attributed the failure of the 'Feed the Nation' and 'Pick for Britain' campaigns, discussed above, to the unreliability of local workers and thus emphasised the established norm of migrant harvest labour. In the following quotes these migrants are 'people' a 'workforce' or 'tools' rather than a fixed group. They are anyone other than 'us.'

Typically, we're trying to recruit about 300 people [...] to satisfy our seasonal needs. You know, the need for this seasonal workforce is not new [...] it's been there forever'. (Keith, Employer/Manager)⁶

We've predominantly relied for our harvest on migrant workforce and that's always been the way ever since we've been in the business. It was only because of the pandemic and also fears around Brexit that we switched towards a Pick for Britain using a UK national workforce to bolster our foreign labour last year. (Charlie, Employer/Manager)

Further distancing is created by taking for granted that it is migrants who do harvest work and that this is a functional need of business; further masking is achieved by a denial that it could be viewed as migration at all. One employer told us:

I just want the tools to be able to do our job. Tools here are water – we've dug reservoirs – and labour. The crying shame is we had a fantastic scheme in SAWS [the now defunct Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme]. Well run immigration scheme, diverse, motivated, closely monitored, standards maintained, no exploitation, fantastic success story. That is the

⁵ The term locally-based workers is used by us to refer to those who are not part of the international migrant worker population in the UK. However, other terms, such as British worker, were used by our respondents and we have tried to represent that usage where relevant. Note: our work was confined to Britain and did not take in Northern Ireland.

⁶ We have used pseudonyms for all workers, employers and managers. Note that in some cases workers had become managers: they are identified here in the role they were drawing on in the specific quote.

solution. We are not taking jobs from people here, it is not a migration it is a seasonal exchange. (Keith, Employer/Manager)

What really stood out for us, in addition to the loosely defined terms for *worker*, was the changing nationality or ethnicity of the currently favoured harvest labourer. Drawing from different societal and cultural contexts as conditions change, employers and managers spoke of: 'our highly motivated seasonal workers,' 'our seasonal workers,' 'our foreign labour force,' 'the migrant workforce,' 'the Romanians,' 'the Polish.' The local workers we interviewed similarly spoke of: 'the larger group of pickers,' 'the other workers,' 'the usual workers,' 'the harvest workers,' 'the Romanians and the Bulgarians' and 'the ones who come for the season.' The low-wage 'other' is, like the labour it performs, a flexible construct (Scott and Rye 2021). One farm manager, for example, was able to go through the history of the different nationalities his farm had hired, from having up to 20 different nationalities at any one time, to then having to give preference to European workers because of the closure of the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (Keith, Employer/Manager). Another spoke of initially recruiting from Belorussia, Georgia, Ukraine, Lithuania, then from Poland and now from Bulgaria and Romania: 'it's very much a sort of evolvement' as different nationalities move on to other things (Roger, Employer/Manager).

Commensurate with this, employers talked extensively about how omnipresent and longstanding is the need amongst farmers to attract a migrant other, or anyone who is not local:

And as you will know, as well, our experience is not unique, every other developed economy has exactly the same problem [...] to the extent that, in places like Thailand now, or in China, they're having to bring in migrant workers to do what is really tough, mundane work that the indigenous workforce, as an economy develops, does not want to do. (Keith, Employer/Manager)

Locally-based workers also spoke of the work being stigmatised, that British people do not want to do that sort of work, here othering the work as well as the workers and again consolidating the sense of an ambiguously defined other that is simply 'not suitable for us.' One said: 'I think it is the fear of the unknown, I mean people don't know what harvest work is do they? [...]. I think most people who do it, do it for the money, because they (meaning the migrants) can work really quick.' (Diane, locally-based worker). Another said: 'I don't think the general public knows what fruit picking is' (Roxie, locally-based worker).

To summarise, there was no single easily identifiable 'other' deemed suitable for low-wage and low-status harvest employment. The working-class, at least with respect to precarious horticultural work, rather constituted an ambiguous sense of alternative that depended upon a multi-dimensional and dynamic us-them construction (Newman 2006). Thus, in agreement with the literature on bordering, reviewed above, exclusionary and inclusionary processes associated with othering are produced and reproduced on an everyday symbolic basis. This reflects the messiness of contemporary stratification processes, and the success of fluidities to 'enable the projects of capital, providing pools of cheap labour at different times' (Anthias 2021: 19) as illustrated by farmers Keith and Roger, above. Furthermore, implicit in this assumption that harvest work is work undertaken by someone other is a supposition that temporary

and seasonal work is particularly suited to anyone from socio-economically peripheral economies or positions. This leads us to examine more carefully the related trope that informs the perceived nature of the work and its workers.

GOOD NEOLIBERAL AGENTS

The Good Citizen is the liberal, sovereign self: rational, self-owning, and independent, with a moral compass that enables him (sic) to consider the interests of others. (Anderson 2013: 3)

The trope of the good neoliberal agent, identified in our research, is related to the ambiguously defined others' need for the work. In the context of global neoliberalism, workers are 'good neoliberal agents' when they conform to required temporal-spatial rhythms: working when there is work, living adjacent to work, prepared to go without pay when work is scarce, and returning home when the harvest ends (see also O'Reilly & Scott 2022). Employers we spoke to illustrated this perspective when they explained of 'them':

They are often people from poor communities who know how to work hard or on the other hand they are very educated people such as doctors and dentists even who just enjoy being outdoors and enjoy earning good money relative to where they come from. They all send their money home. (Tom, Employer/Manager, quote from field notes)

The guys coming over from Romania, or wherever they are coming from, they are coming for a season, to earn money, and their only objective is to earn money. (Charlie, Employer/Manager)

As above, note how often the pronouns 'they' and 'them' are used, and compared with 'we' or 'us.' One of the locally based workers spoke of the 'other' workers in the fields with her:

They will come and they will work whatever hours for whatever money and they're quite happy to do absolutely anything and they don't complain about things, whereas I think we're quite spoilt in the way that we are used to things a certain way. (Diane, locally-based worker)

Employers explain (justify) the constantly shifting landscape of labour with reference to workers viewing work as a stepping-stone rather than permanent employment (O'Reilly & Scott 2022). As one employer reflected, there is a natural, self-chosen, lifespan to the good harvest worker. But always it is 'their' transnational context that enables this perspective:

It can be anything, they've all got a plan, you know, some of them are earning some money to help the family farm back in their country. Some are working for a few years to build a house. Some it's education, and so on. So, most of the pickers, although you will get good returnees, typically three to four years is the lifespan of a typical seasonal worker, and then their life moves on. (Roger, Employer/Manager)

Good neoliberal agents bring with them qualities associated with their status as migrants, do not complain about conditions, and are prepared to move on when no longer required. They are especially valuable in a transnational context (Anderson

2013). One manager even said if the government can ensure he gets the numbers he needs (i.e. sufficient visas) he would be happy to escort his workers to the airport to make sure they go home afterwards (Roger, Employer/Manager).

Even the locally-based workers who were doing farm work for the first time tended to associate it with the necessities brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. They portrayed themselves as good neoliberal agents prepared to step up and help out where necessary, but maintained the symbolic boundary by reminding us they prefer more secure employment with prospects and would revert to this after the lockdown. One worker told us:

I really was not comfortable being on furlough. If there was something I could do to assist the company then I would rather do that than sit at home [...] as a young professional I am now thinking about career and longevity though [...] well this is only for three weeks. I can do anything for three weeks. (Neil, locally-based worker)

Workers we spoke to admitted that the work is hard but gave the sense that if (other) people were desperate enough then they would do the work. It was difficult to pin down who these workers might be if not migrants. Employers and local workers all agreed this sort of work no longer suits those who did it in the past – such as parents of young children, students, people who are looking for a summer escape – nor anyone who might have to travel for work. As for themselves, they were doing it, temporarily, because they are virtuous. This reinforces the community of shared values, which we go on to discuss further below, while also mapping the nature of entitlement (Anthias 2021), in this case entitlement to good work for ‘us.’

SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY

The ‘choice’ to be exploited and its associated misery is not confined to migrants. (Anderson 2013: 180)

At the onset of COVID-19, in order to encourage British people to do harvest work in the face of a potential migrant labour shortage, a symbolic bordering trope emerged that centred on the notion of duty and service for a wider national good. This is inextricably related to the tropes above of the ambiguously-defined other and the good neoliberal agent. Here, illustrating the shifting nature of the ‘other’ who is expected to do the work, it is British workers who were asked to fill vacancies, and boundaries applied through invoking what is the *right* thing to do for anyone who shares ‘our’ values. Thus, problems of labour supply were linked to problems of locally-based workers not fulfilling their duty and not serving the employer/nation rather than to issues of job pay and quality (see also Scott & O’Reilly forthcoming), and a community of shared values (Anderson 2013) was invoked to draw boundaries between us (who would be happy to support and to serve the country) and them (who would not). In this case, however, ‘they’ are no longer the migrant harvest workers but the locals who won’t do the work ‘they’ (migrants) normally do for ‘us.’ And it is this new ‘them’ (the local workers) who should step up and be good neoliberal agents.

The rhetoric employed in this bordering process centred on the need for a ‘Land Army’ to ‘Feed the Nation’ and ‘Pick for Britain.’ The terms invoked a heroic and nationalistic narrative that drew on metaphors of war and so continued to draw boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ while trying to inspire locals to do the work that others normally do:

The Government is preparing to launch a Land Army-style 'Pick for Britain' campaign to prevent crops rotting in fields [...]. A nationwide initiative is expected to be launched within weeks to encourage anyone from university students to laid off hospitality workers to pick fruit and vegetables in the 'national interest' [...]. The campaign carries echoes of 'Dig for Victory' and the Women's Land Army, the two major national campaigns launched during the Second World War in order to keep the nation fed. (Telegraph Online, 26/03/20)

The Norwich Evening News (NEN) talked of: 'Churchillian rhetoric,' a 'call to arms' and a 'wartime spirit to inspire a new Land Army to get this important job done' (NEN, 28 March 2020). This language continued to be used beyond the beginning of lockdown (in March 2020). In May 2020, for instance, there was pressure to re-invigorate these campaigns: locally-based 'British' people had apparently failed to swell the ranks as expected. Prince Charles was asked to help with this and his intervention on 19 May 2020, via a video appeal, was widely reported in the press. Once again heroic wartime rhetoric was deployed:

This is why that great movement of the Second World War – the Land Army – is being rediscovered in the newly created 'Pick for Britain' campaign. In the coming months, many thousands of people will be needed to bring in the crops. It will be hard graft but is hugely important if we are to avoid the growing crops going to waste. I do not doubt that the work will be unglamorous and, at times, challenging. But it is of the utmost importance and, at the height of this global pandemic, you will be making a vital contribution to the national effort. So, I can only urge you to Pick for Britain. (Prince Charles cited in EADP, 23/05/20)

What is being constructed through this language is a community (us): where the ambiguous other who must address low-wage labour shortages now (albeit temporarily) includes locally-based/British workers, as the boundaries of the community shift to accommodate the needs of the employers (see [Cohen 1985](#)). Invoking a patriotic and nationalistic duty, and in turn a community of shared values, this is then a further way of ambiguously defining the worker who must be a good neoliberal agent and serve where and when required even if pay and conditions are below customary levels. There is, accordingly, honour in hard work and failure to serve is an individual (worker) rather than systemic (work) failure.

When, as discussed above, relatively few British-based workers rose to the challenge, the community of values was reinforced using a sense of disappointment with them for failing to be good neoliberal agents as required by the country at this difficult time. A Daily Telegraph headline read: 'Fruit and veg pickers appeal brings in only 112 British workers; Farmers disappointed after just 0.2 per cent of 50,000 applicants are willing to take the jobs on offer' (Daily Telegraph, 28/04/20). Similarly, employers complained:

I think people struggled with the, well it's the rigidness of a full time job [...] and it's stressful work and potentially monotonous. (Charlie, Employer/Manager)

All needed extra training in comparison to the Romanians and Bulgarians because they are not used to the outside, physical nature of these jobs. They also had a much higher absence rate, they were quite good at saying

they had a tummy ache on Friday so they knew they couldn't work again till Monday, because you've got to give 48 hours for a sickness bug before you return to work in a food environment. (Margaret, Employer/Manager)

Those locally-based workers who did rise to the challenge were critical of their compatriots who failed to deliver. One locally-based worker, Graham, said: 'I'd like it not to be considered a job with stigma. People have a romantic dream or think it's beneath them [...] we really are a nation of snowflakes now.'

Somewhat contradictory to Anderson's (2013) argument that migrants are often portrayed as *not* sharing our values, we have seen above and in more detail in our media analysis (Scott & O'Reilly forthcoming) that these migrants are celebrated for doing exactly that. But 'economic migration is often unashamedly cast in terms of the value that they bring' (Anderson 2013: 10) and in this case their values make them 'of value' to us. The 'service to the community' bordering trope aligns positive personal traits with precarious, demanding, repetitive and relatively low-paid harvest work, and invokes a community that both includes and excludes. In the process it focuses, rather illuminatingly, on workers' 'duty to serve' rather than on the characteristics of the work offer. It is a further way of symbolically bordering harvest work, using inclusion and exclusion processes to serve the needs of global neoliberalism.

CONCLUSIONS

Symbolic forms of othering work as a practice to (at least partly) create the conditions for social class boundaries, and to mask the concomitant conditions of exploitation (Anthias 2021). They also serve to distance the precarious work/workers from those who benefit. As noted, the exclusionary and inclusionary processes associated with othering in the context of precarious work and stratification employ ambiguous, shifting and intersectional categories. We illuminate these processes drawing on empirical material from the UK's harvest labour market as a bordering scape (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss & Cassidy 2019).

We identify three interrelated tropes of symbolic bordering. Most obviously, harvest work is positioned as 'work that others do,' an othering that makes those positioned outside such work feel a sense of distance, and possibly safety, from the lower echelons of the labour market. Further, in order to respond to changing (global) conditions, those identified as suitable are fluid and changeable and therefore the invoking of the 'other' can be ambiguous. A further, related trope is that of the 'good neoliberal agent': migrants and workers who work hard and flexibly (as and when required) and return elsewhere when the harvest ends. This construction emphasises the qualities of, but not the constraints faced by, migrant and low-paid workers and is silent with respect to the exploitation faced. Similarly, and specific to the onset of COVID-19, harvest work was associated with a sense of 'service to the community' of shared values whereby a failure to fill precarious labour market vacancies with local workers was overtly and implicitly tied to personal deficiencies (a lack of duty, service, patriotism) rather than to the structural absence of decent work. In turn, the putative decency of the community (in this case Britain) is held intact.

There is a clear pressure associated with the provision of precarious work in neoliberal societies that means certain aspects are emphasised whilst others remain hidden; and even those that are emphasised are discussed on certain terms and in certain ways.

It is the job of critical academics to ask questions around who is being constructed as suitable for what kinds of work, how this work is being portrayed, and why this might be the case. It is also important to question the precarious work being provided and to focus on this provision at a structural level, to consider alternatives, as well as to interrogate the way in which such work is unveiled to the researcher and broader public.

Overall, capital depends upon the continual supply of good neoliberal agents. However, the presence of precarious work, and the relatively poor pay and conditions associated with it, can threaten this supply. To alleviate this threat, highly dynamic and multi-scalar (nationally and transnationally emplaced) class production/reproduction processes emerge. A symbolic bordering perspective helps us to understand such processes. Through this perspective, we see that precarious work is subject to forms of othering: it is normally constructed as work suited to migrants from relatively peripheral lower-income economies. However, at times of crisis, where migrant inflows are threatened, precarious work can become re-orientated towards a domestic labour force, who nevertheless still try to keep a distance from it. Ultimately, the emphasis of capital on securing a working-class who are willing to do precarious jobs is what has driven low-wage migration and Western states, through the resurgence of guestworker migration schemes, seem focused on maintaining this. Options such as improving the pay and conditions available to the working-classes, and trying to avoid precarious work in the first place remain off the table for now.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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15

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