Agrarian Spaces, Race, and Legibility: Latino Immigrant Farmers and Exclusion at the United States Department of Agriculture

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In this article we investigate how Latino immigrant farmers in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States navigate United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) programs, which require monitoring and surveillance for participation. We argue that this surveillance leads to the increased racial exclusion of immigrant farmers from USDA opportunities, impeding the transition to a “new era of civil rights,” as has been proclaimed by USDA leadership. This interview-based study builds on existing historical analyses of farmers of color in the United States, and the ways in which their farming practices and racialized identities fail to be deemed “legible” by the state. We show how the state’s requirement for agriculture’s standardization and monitoring is at odds with immigrants’ desire to maintain diverse growing styles and anonymity in their fields. This disjunction, combined with a well-founded historical distrust of the US government, leads to unequal access to basic agrarian opportunities for Latino immigrant farmers. This study contributes to academic and policy discussions concerning immigration, identity, and agrarian transitions for farmers of color.