# INVISIBLE ISLANDERS: PRECARIOUS WORK AND PACIFIC SETTLERS IN RURAL AUSTRALIA

Makiko Nishitani
Helen Lee
*La Trobe University*

A growing number of studies have focused on precarious employment in relation to temporary and illegal immigration status. However, few have examined if this precarity is resolved once migrants acquire permanent residency. This article explores the work experiences of Pacific Islander settlers in rural Australia who either overstayed their visas or had temporary visas and later acquired Australian residency. These Pacific people are employed primarily in seasonal labor and find it difficult to gain more secure employment outside the horticultural sector. Even members of the second generation tend to work as casual laborers on farms. The difficulties migrants face in acquiring more stable jobs and their concerns about their children's futures demonstrate the ongoing impacts of initial immigration statuses. We argue that Pacific settlers are "invisible" in ways that exacerbate their precarious situation and that they have been largely neglected in rural migration studies and policymaking in rural areas.

## Introduction

The presence of long-term Pacific Islander settlers in rural Australia has been largely neglected in the literature on the Pacific diaspora. The focus of research has been primarily on settlement in urban centers in the main host nations of Australia, New Zealand, and the United States (e.g. Howard and Rensel 2012; Spickard, Rondilla, and Hippolite Wright 2002). Since the introduction of formal seasonal worker schemes in New Zealand and Australia, research has also

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begun to emerge on this movement into rural areas in those countries. Recent studies of these schemes have tended to focus on their value for Pacific nations' development (Curtain et al. 2016; Gibson, McKenzie, and Rohorua 2008; Maclellan 2009) and for employers within the horticultural industry (Hay and Howes 2012; MBIE 2013). Although these studies contribute to filling in a gap in knowledge about the rural migration of Pacific people, they have ignored the long-term Pacific settlers who already live in the regions that are attracting seasonal workers and who also rely on the horticultural industry for employment.

These Pacific settlers have been rendered "invisible" not only in academic research but also from the perspective of service provision and official statistics. This article explores the causes and consequences of this invisibility and the precarious nature of these rural migrants' employment by focusing on the experiences of Pacific people who currently have permanent residence or Australian citizenship and live in northwest Victoria. Many of them entered Australia with temporary immigration statuses, including student and visitor visas, and then "overstayed" and sought income opportunities in horticultural work as seasonal laborers. Once settled in the rural areas, they went through the difficult process of gaining permanent residency, and many have now been in northern Victoria for twenty years or more. Yet they remain invisible in significant and multiple ways, exacerbating their precarious situation and leading them to depend on what they regard as the security of access to employment as seasonal laborers.

Much of the work on precarity in relation to migrants has focused on immigration statuses without secure residency, including temporary migrants and undocumented migrants (Anderson 2010; Bernhard et al. 2007; Boese et al. 2013; Sigona 2012). These studies have shown that such migrants often have precarious employment conditions that have negative impacts on their lives more generally. Focusing on this connection between immigration statuses without secure residency and precariousness can lead to the assumption that once residency is acquired, migrants' circumstances will improve. However, the experiences of Pacific settlers in rural areas illustrate that this is not the case and that migrants' initial immigration statuses can have long-term effects. As this article reveals, Pacific migrants continue to struggle to find employment other than unstable seasonal jobs, and they are also concerned about their children's precarious futures as many leave school early and work on farms (referred to in the area as "on the block") with their parents in the same temporary and insecure jobs.

## Invisible Migrants? An Underresearched Population

The ethnographic research on which this article is based was conducted between August and December 2014 and between January and May 2016 in northwest Victoria in the towns of Mildura and Robinvale and the surrounding rural area. Participants include seventy Pacific Islanders, including Tongans, Cook Islanders, Fijians, Solomon Islanders, and ni-Vanuatu, who completed questionnaires and in-depth interviews. In addition, interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, such as farmers and service providers. Our field sites are a considerable distance from major cities: Mildura is located 542 km northwest of Melbourne and 393 km northeast of Adelaide, and Robinvale is 90 km southeast of Mildura. According to the 2011 census, Mildura has a population of 31,298, including various Pacific groups, whereas Robinvale has a population of only 3,763, and its Pacific population is predominantly Tongan (AEC Group 2012, 3). The economy of the region is supported by horticultural production, including table grapes, oranges, and almonds. Although the increasing mechanization of farming influences the demand for labor, tasks such as harvesting and pruning still need personnel, and Pacific people have contributed to this work for many years.

In addition to sociocultural diversity within these Pacific groups, there have been some differences in their treatment under Australia's immigration policies. For example, the Cook Islands is in free association with New Zealand, so its population can work in Australia without any restrictions using New Zealand passports under the Trans-Tasman Travel Arrangement, although since 2001 they have not been entitled to financial support, including welfare payments. In contrast, those who have passports from Tonga, Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu only have preferential visa access to Australia through the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP). Following New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme, introduced in 2007 (Cummings 2013) Australia established the SWP in 2012 after a pilot version was run from 2008 to 2012: the Pacific Seasonal Worker Scheme (Connell 2015; Tazreiter et al. 2016). The SWP is open to ten Pacific nations, and workers stay in Australia for four to seven months at a time, engaging primarily in horticultural work.

The research participants discussed in this article have diverse immigration statuses, including Australian citizenship, Australian permanent residence, or New Zealand passports and visitor visas or are overstayers, the term used in Australia for undocumented migrants. Despite the diversity among Pacific participants, those who have engaged in horticultural labor in the area also have shared experiences of precarity, which are the focus of this article. Since this article examines the long-term effects of initial immigration statuses, it focuses primarily on interview data collected from thirty migrants who have Australian citizenship or permanent residency and stakeholders, including farmers and health care providers.

One of the most striking findings of our research is that all of the participants have expressed the view that Pacific people are "invisible" and largely unknown within the wider community. Stakeholders have welcomed our research because they are concerned about the lack of empirical data about Pacific populations in the area, something that is needed in their policymaking and planning. Community leaders have also welcomed the research because they believe that Pacific people in rural areas receive less attention than other groups. A Tongan woman in Mildura aptly described this invisibility by saying that the Pacific populations are positioned "in-between" Aboriginal people and refugees. As the federal government tries to "share the burden of hosting new arrivals between different localities" by facilitating "the dispersal of asylum seekers and refugees away from major urban centres" (Johnston, Vasey, and Markovic 2009, 93), Mildura has become one of the destinations for refugees and humanitarian entrants (Marston 2003). From the Tongan woman's perspective, Pacific people's generally low socioeconomic status and issues such as precarious employment are problems largely shared with refugees and Aboriginal people. However, most of the government funding and support programs are directed toward the other groups (Anscombe and Doyle 1997; Murray 2010). As a service provider in Mildura explained, "I don't see much that is designed or catering to the welfare of Pacific Islander groups unless they fall into particular visa categories."

Frustration was expressed by migrants as well, and another Tongan woman pointed out that two questions prevent Pacific people from accessing public services in Australia: "Are you a refugee? Are you an indigenous [person]? . . . If I seek help from you, [you will ask,] are you an indigenous? No. Are you refugees? No. Don't meet the criteria." However, the problem is also lack of knowledge. In her study of Pacific people in Wollongong, a coastal city in New South Wales, Vasta (2004, 209) found that many of them did not know "what services are available and how to access them," and the same can be said of those living in the Mildura and Robinvale area.

The invisibility of Pacific people in rural areas is also an issue in the academic and policy literature. In general, the flow of international migrants to rural areas has received less attention than movement into urban areas. Although cities continue to be the main destinations for such migrants, demographers have recently found that this trend is changing and that "the growth of immigrant populations has been greater outside of gateway cities than in them" (Hugo 2011, 152). This tendency is not limited to Australia but is also found in host countries such as New Zealand and the United States (Singer, Hardwick, and Brettell 2008; Spoonley and Bedford 2008). Despite these findings, in migration and globalization studies, rural areas continue to be underresearched. In Australia, there have been some studies since the 2000s of government-led movement of international migrants to rural areas, including skilled migrants through the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme (Hugo, Khoo, and McDonald 2006;

Wickaramaarachchi and Butt 2014) and refugees being resettled (Broadbent, Cacciattolo, and Carpenter 2007). The emergence of studies of the SWP for Pacific people has been part of this general focus on government-led migration programs (Curtain et al. 2016; Tazreiter et al. 2016). Working holiday makers are included in that focus, especially since the federal government gave them an incentive to work in horticulture by allowing them to extend their visas (Tan and Lester 2012; Underhill and Rimmer 2015). Underhill and Rimmer (2015, 25) argue that the uniqueness of horticultural work in Australia lies in the fact that it "is now performed predominantly by international backpackers—young well-educated workers with mostly sound English language skills" as well as undocumented migrants who overstay their visas. However, they do not mention the permanent settlers who also do this work, further illustrating the invisibility of these populations.

Many Pacific people move to rural areas without involvement in any government programs, including the thirty residency holders discussed in this article, of whom sixteen initially overstayed temporary visas, five had New Zealand passports, two successfully obtained skilled visas after studying in Australia, and the other seven came to Australia through family reunification schemes or partner visas. While these diverse channels have been used by Pacific migrants for many years, their experiences have received little attention. An important exception is Mark Schubert's (2009) study of Fijians in Griffith, New South Wales, a rural town with a predominance of horticultural work for its Pacific population. Schubert explores how the settled Fijian population supports their undocumented compatriots. Since Schubert's research, the influx of workers through the SWP has created new challenges for long-term settlers in areas such as Griffith, as has occurred in northwest Victoria. Recent studies calling for a further expansion of the SWP have not taken into account any of the potential impacts on the settled Pacific population (Curtain et al. 2016).

The invisibility of Pacific people in rural areas is also evident in census data. It is well known by stakeholders as well as researchers that census data in horticultural areas such as Mildura and Robinvale do not accurately represent the population in general (McKenzie, Martin, and Paris 2008). For example, while the 2011 census shows that 169 people in Robinvale either are born in Tonga or have Tongan ancestry (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015), a Tongan community leader estimates that there are about 500 Tongans there. A service provider in Mildura acknowledged that there is a lack of information available to migrants, including those from the Pacific, that explains the purpose of the census and the benefits of participation, such as the use of census data to influence funding of hospitals and other services and for policymaking. As in other communities, there are many Pacific people who do not complete the census forms for a range of reasons—reluctance to give personal information, not understanding the form, not having time, and so on—and, of course, there are some who choose to remain invisible due to their status as overstayers.

Service providers recognize that one of the ways to solve the problem of Pacific people's invisibility is to build up trust and stable communication channels with their communities. Efforts to achieve this can already be seen in some government schools and hospitals in the Mildura and Robinvale area that employ Pacific cultural liaison officers. However, even with their help, service providers are still struggling to build relationships with the Pacific population. For example, a health worker in Robinvale acknowledged that the only Pacific person he knows in the area is the cultural liaison officer with whom he works and added, "I don't even know who's the minister of the Tongan church here!" In addition, organizations can usually employ only one liaison officer who will be from a specific ethnic group within the broad category "Pacific Islanders." Liaison officers are typically Tongans or Samoans, as these are the largest Pacific populations in the Mildura and Robinvale area. While each officer tries his or her best to support all Pacific populations, Amelia, a Tongan liaison officer in Mildura, admitted that she cannot provide the same service to all groups. For example, one of her roles is to visit households, and although she can communicate with Tongans in their own language, she cannot do the same for other Pacific clients. In addition, Amelia explains that the poor English proficiency of some Pacific settlers contributes to their invisibility and reduces their likelihood of accessing services and interacting with the wider community. She claims that such Pacific people "can't come to terms with communicating with the *pālangi* [Anglo-European] people; they don't know how or they don't want to make mistakes in front of them. They are too scared."

This resonates with stakeholders' concerns that they do not have strong communication channels with Pacific communities, which is also due to the important role that churches play as community hubs in the Pacific diaspora (Lee 2003; Macpherson and Macpherson 2009). While this can provide important support networks within communities, it also tends to reduce the level of people's engagement with the wider society. Ministers of Pacific churches are expected by their congregations to act as counselors and social workers, and this can lead them to act as gatekeepers to the community. A service provider in Mildura observed that because any issues affecting members of church congregations tend to be directed to ministers, ethnic churches are unintentionally "masking those issues." Since there are no official "reporting lines" established, the information provided to ministers is not transmitted to community organizations, service providers, and government agencies.

Cultural values are another factor hindering Pacific people from openly discussing their problems with others. A Cook Islander man in Mildura observed,

> When you ask Pukapukan [a cultural group within Cook Islands], when they are sick, when they have a broken or really crook, broken leg, broken hand or suffering from disease of whatever, you ask him, honestly, you ask him "how are you?" Other cultures, races, ethnic groups [would say], "I'm terrible, I have pain, or my arms are broken, I have this disease, I don't know what to do." But the Pukapukan response is different. The Pukapukan response is "I'm OK," even if they are having their last breath. . . . That's the culture. . . . The only time they can say they're no good is not them. It's the other person. The other person can tell them they're no good.

During the interview, he was speaking as a Cook Islander, but in the quote above he specifically identifies himself as a Pukapukan. Therefore, the extent to which his observation is applicable to all Pacific people is debatable; however, within the Tongan community, there is certainly a cultural value of stoicism and a reluctance to seek help, particularly from non-Tongans (Lee 2003). As one Tongan woman in Mildura asserted, "We trust our family and those people that we know well, and [we prefer] to seek support from them, and be helping each other." Since the Pacific population in Mildura and Robinvale is comprised of people with diverse immigration statuses, a further factor increasing their invisibility is that overstayers are highly reluctant to seek help outside their own community for fear of detection and deportation. Undocumented migrants are typically associated with invisibility (e.g., Bernhard et al. 2007; Sigona 2012), making it more difficult to gain information about either their numbers or their needs.

The many factors that make Pacific Islander settlers "invisible" exacerbate their precarious situation because the issues and problems they face and even the size of their populations are not being communicated to those who can provide support beyond their own local ethnic community or church congregation. In contrast, backpackers who work in the same horticultural industry have a stronger voice; they top the list of people complaining about their employment to the Fair Work Ombudsman (Beilharz 2016) and are more accessible to researchers (Underhill and Rimmer 2015). Recently, Pacific workers employed through the SWP also have gained attention for their exploitative conditions (Hermant 2016). These cases create the false impression that only working holiday makers and temporary workers are detrimentally affected, masking the issues that Pacific settlers have been dealing with for many years.

## Precarious Horticultural Work

The Mildura and Robinvale area was multicultural long before the recent influx of refugees being resettled (Department Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs 2003), as the area has attracted diverse international migrants seeking work in the horticultural sector. According to the 2001 census, 33 percent of horticulturalists in the Mallee Statistical Division, which covers Mildura and Robinvale, "spoke a language other than English at home" (Missingham, Dibden, and Cocklin 2004, 29). The history of migrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds moving to rural Victoria can be traced back to the late nineteenth century, when southern European settlers migrated to the area. They continued to migrate throughout the two world wars and more recently in the 1970s and 1980s (Missingham, Dibden, and Cocklin 2006). They purchased small-scale farms that created stability for their families, and they encouraged upward mobility for their children by investing in their education (Price 1963). From the 1980s, when their children found jobs outside the farms, they began employing migrant workers, including backpackers and Pacific people. Most of the research participants are working for either Italian or Greek farmers, with only a few working for Anglo-Australian farmers.

Richard, a second-generation Italian migrant in Robinvale who inherited seventy acres of vineyard from his parents, explained this historical shift in the use of harvest laborers: "Years ago, you worked on one farm, your family worked all together; it was okay but today it's just too hard. Family is all separated, and by yourself, you've gotta employ lots of workers." Richard described his difficulty managing the cost of hiring personnel and how, in order to save money, he transformed half of his family vineyard into a garlic farm. He can manage that by himself for most of the year except during harvesting, when he employs forty people for three to four weeks. In contrast, table grapes cost him much more because it takes about three months for fourteen people to complete harvesting his thirty-five acres of vineyard. In addition, he employs ten to twelve people for about three months for pruning. Therefore, from the workers' point of view, table grapes provide jobs for about six months, while garlic provides work for only a few weeks.

Pacific settlers in the area engage in the longer-term seasonal work, such as table grapes and almonds, while the short-term harvesting jobs are often undertaken by working holiday makers and international students primarily from Asia, who are organized by contractors. Richard explained,

> Asians are taking over. Pacific Islanders, Tongans or Fijians, they are around, but not as many. Ten years ago, there were a lot more Tongan people, Fijian people. They are still around but Asian contractors come around and they supply all Asians, very little Pacific Islanders in that group. Contractors approach us and they bring workers. Before they [Pacific people] came to the farm, knocked on the door, and [farmers] employed them. But today, the contractors got everything together. . . . They [Pacific people] used to come as family . . . a big family group of

> six or seven people . . . because being in there for so long, right, everyone knows everyone. That's why the Islanders work in one farm and stay there for ten years. They work on that farm all the time but now it's changed. Contractors changed everything.

Richard started employing "Asians" (mostly Malaysians and Vietnamese) because of the convenience of having a contractor in charge of arranging his workforce. During the research, no Pacific people were encountered who had lost their jobs because of these contractors. However, Richard's description of Pacific workers matches participants' accounts, as they work seasonally for specific farmers for many years, also utilizing networks of family and friends within their own ethnic group. A Cook Islander man in Mildura explained, "Cook Islanders, they worked on one farm, and then two brothers [owners] separated, and the most of our people work in these two farms." Job security for Pacific people therefore relies on their relationships with employers, creating a precarious situation particularly in the context of shifting agricultural methods and labor hiring practices. If farmers change their crops or begin to rely on contract workers, including through the SWP, rather than personal approaches by workers, Pacific settlers risk losing their main source of employment in the area.

Purchasing farmland is no longer affordable for migrants, as they have to compete with large-scale agribusiness, and in any case it would be difficult for most Pacific people to save enough money due to their ongoing obligations to send remittances to kin in the islands. Therefore, Pacific people have continued to work as landless seasonal laborers, and they still prefer to secure their employment directly from farmers rather than using contractors to find jobs in order to avoid losing the margins that contractors take. Many research participants emphasized the importance of good relationships with their employers, and while they admit that there are "bad farmers" who may underpay people or not pay on time, they said that if that happened, they would not return to that farmer the following year. However, their strategy to secure employment—creating a relationship with a "good" farmer who pays workers fairly—relies heavily on farmers' goodwill and does not address the precarity of their employment.

Even if one is employed by a "good" farmer, harvesting jobs are inherently precarious. Generally, most of the harvesting jobs are available only during summer and autumn, and wages are determined by the amount of produce that a worker can pick. For example, participants reported that, for grapes, a worker is currently paid between AUD$2 and AUD$3.50 per box, which weighs around 8 to 10 kg, with rates depending on the quality and kind of grapes and their destination (e.g., exported overseas or sold by domestic supermarkets). According to workers, if you are a "quick picker" who can fill up many boxes, it is possible to earn more than AUD$1,000 a week; some people can even earn more than AUD$1,500 a week. Since most people can earn a lot of money only during a period of three to four months, workers want to pick for as many hours as possible each day. However, the weather can hinder this, as working hours are limited on days above 40°C, which is common in that region, and while it seldom rains in summer, even a short shower ruins a day's work because fruit cannot be harvested when it is wet.

Another source of precarity is that settlers need to survive periods with little income, unlike those in the SWP, who stay in Australia only temporarily. Undocumented migrants cannot access any government support when unemployed, so they strive particularly hard to save while they have work. Pacific people with Australian residency have access to welfare payments (if they meet the eligibility criteria), but they also try to save as much as possible during their working months. However, creating savings is more difficult for them, as they are under more pressure than overstayers to contribute to remittances and meet other familial obligations and community expectations. Tongan settlers reported that fund-raising groups frequently visit the area during summer, when people have more disposable income. A Tongan man with Australian citizenship said everyone in Tonga knows about Robinvale:

> There are heaps and heaps and heaps of groups come from Tonga to raise money and Robinvale, I can say it's the best area. They got money. When we first arrived here in the early days, when the groups come in there they raise up $10,000, but now they just come up to $20,000, $30,000. . . . Like the schools, most of the schools they just come around, the church, they just come and ask for money to help build a church or a place for the minister. Robinvale is well known in Tonga. . . . Every group thinking about coming to Australia for one month, Robinvale the first one, was put on the list.

In addition to financial precarity, employment in the horticultural industry impacts workers' health. While the Australian health workers interviewed focused on Pacific people's lifestyle-related diseases, including obesity, diabetes, and heart problems, farmworkers are more concerned with the physically challenging nature of their work, which leaves them aching and exhausted; with how many chemicals are used on the farms, which affects people with sensitive skins and can cause long-term health problems; and with how the hot weather drains their energy (see Holmes 2013).

Exposure to the health risks of horticultural work can continue for many years given the difficulties of finding other forms of employment and the lack of income security in old age. While the majority of SWP participants are males between twenty-one and forty-five years old (Joint Standing Committee on Migration 2016: 16–17), the age range of settlers who work in the horticultural industry is much broader: children may help their parents during their school holidays, teenagers work seasonally when they leave school, and older people continue to work due to lack of retirement savings. In fact, it is not uncommon to see Pacific people older than sixty working on farms, especially New Zealand passport holders, who are ineligible to receive the Age Pension.

The most negative descriptions of horticultural employment are commonly heard from the children of migrants who were born and raised in Australia or New Zealand. For example, Sālote, who grew up in Mildura, is now in her late twenties and works with her parents and two brothers on a farm as a harvest laborer. The farmer grows diverse fruit crops, including table grapes, mandarins, oranges, lemons, grapefruits, and avocados, helping Sālote's family to secure employment from mid-February to mid-December. During the two months when they have no income, Sālote's family has to live on their savings. Although her family members are Australian citizens and thus are eligible for unemployment benefits, they have not applied for them, of which Sālote is proud. When asked if her employer pays her family members fairly, her answer was "no":

> Like I went to school so I've got a bit of knowledge and going out to the block I just know we're getting underpaid and we're not getting everything that we should, because we should be getting some super but we're not and there's just other people that are getting underpaid by contractors.

In Australia, by law any employees who are older than eighteen years and earn more than AUD$450 before taxes in a month are entitled to be paid superannuation on top of their wages, to be accessed on retirement from the workforce. However, the employers of most of the research participants working in the horticultural industry are not paying any superannuation. Sālote's explanation highlights that without knowledge, people cannot fully understand their rights and entitlements or even recognize problems. None of the research participants were aware of avenues of support, such as the Fair Work Ombudsman, so they had never officially reported any problems. Even Sālote, who has some knowledge, does not know where to report work-related issues or how to solve problems such as underpayments and false deductions. In any case, addressing such problems is risky: Sālote recalled that her family once tried to ask a farmer to pay their superannuation, but he "comes up with excuses and just threatens to give us the sack . . . that's why we ignore it."

## Secure or Precarious? Relative Perspectives on Horticultural Work

Boese et al. (2013, 318) argue that there are two ways to treat the concept of precariousness in relation to employment: first, "in the sense of objective conditions of heightened insecurity, as these are produced through both legal regulation and social practice," and, second, as "individual experiences of precarious conditions . . . and the perceptions and feelings of precariousness or insecurity that may arise out of these experiences." Both apply in the case of the Pacific settlers in our study; however, it is also important to acknowledge that feelings of precarity and security can be relative. Horticultural work in the Mildura and Robinvale region is seen by many Pacific people as a safer, more secure option than living in Australian cities or in their home country.

Almost all Pacific Islander interviewees who have worked in the horticultural industry raised their initial immigration status as a factor leading them to work in regional Victoria, and more than half of them had spent time as overstayers. As with other industrialized countries, the Australian government prefers skilled migrants and thus offers limited options for unskilled workers, the category into which most Pacific people fit. In fact, the Australian government regards Pacific people as potential overstayers, so obtaining even visitor visas is difficult and can require family members in Australia to pay bonds so they do not breach their visa conditions. However, if they manage to get to Australia, many people try to stay as long as possible in order to support their family in the homeland because income opportunities in Pacific countries are limited. A Tongan man in his forties who overstayed his student visa and was eventually granted permanent residency through marriage with an Australian woman said, "Sometimes people talk: going to heaven is easier than coming to Australia, and it's right. It's still hard. Because the law is very strict." Some overstayers are caught and deported, but there are also those who have been granted permanent residency by one means or another, depending on the immigration regime at the time. It is not unusual for them to fight for this for more than a decade, until their residency is granted or they are forced to return to the islands.

It is illegal to employ people without work permits in Australia, so it is difficult to find work in urban areas, but many undocumented migrants still have access to jobs in horticultural areas such as Mildura and Robinvale. Farmers are concerned primarily with getting their fruit harvested in time and so may not question prospective employees' visa status (Mares 2005). A Tongan man in Mildura who now has permanent residency reflected on his migration process:

> We just heard about Mildura. Because when we were staying in Sydney, me and my wife [were] both illegal in Australia, so we couldn't find a permanent job, so we heard about Mildura . . . it's easier for illegal immigrants to have jobs here. That's [fruit] picking, so we decided to come and see.

As undocumented migrants and New Zealand passport holders in Australia cannot access welfare payments or the Medicare system of free public health, it is essential for them to find paid work, even if the job is characterized by unstable income as discussed previously. David, a Cook Islander man in Mildura who has been working on a farm for twenty years, explains,

> The only opportunity is here, you don't have to be Einstein to work on the farm. It's all common sense. So they [Cook Islanders] started moving here. The money, when people see money, they forget about their problems. . . . A few people started coming, then the news spread, the word of mouth.

As people can make up to $1,500 a week during the harvest season, this makes them feel "secure" compared to their life in the islands or in urban areas in Australia where they experience unemployment. Those who have established relationships with particular farmers over a number of years also tend to regard their seasonal work as secure and ongoing. In describing the work, they tend to downplay the negative, more precarious aspects and focus on their perceptions of security as well as positive aspects, such as the camaraderie between workers.

However, horticultural work does not offer opportunities for socioeconomic mobility, such as promotion to higher-paid work or even gaining more stable employment. Therefore, while horticultural jobs generate instant immediate income, which migrants regard as a form of security, some long-term settlers with permanent residency or Australian citizenship do seek other opportunities. For example, David, quoted above, acquired Australian citizenship in 2014, making him eligible to receive government financial support for education, so he enrolled in a diploma of social work at a technical college. He explained,

> I felt I did everything that I need to do on the farm because in the farm, there's nowhere else to go, like to further yourself. You cannot develop your skills. I thought I learnt everything I need to know and there's no progression for me. I felt that I needed to use my skills elsewhere. I felt that I can bond with people, or I found it that I have a gift for communicating with people, so utilise all my skills in that area. So I thought I go back to school.

While many Pacific people would prefer to have more stable employment, few pursue the path of adult education, and there are limited options in Mildura and Robinvale for unskilled employment. In addition, as stated earlier, it can take more than ten years for overstayers to acquire permanent residency, making it difficult to apply for other forms of employment outside the horticultural industry.

Even for Pacific people with permanent residency, the wider community's stereotype of them as "fruit pickers" is so strong that they often feel stigmatized and prevented from obtaining other jobs. As Vasta found in her study of Pacific people in Wollongong, "Not only are Pacific Islanders discriminated against because of their skin colour, they are also stigmatised as being uneducated, untrained and only useful for unskilled labour" (Vasta 2004, 207). The experiences of Eseta, a Tongan woman now in her fifties, illustrate just how difficult it can be to escape the fruit-picker stereotype. Eseta moved to Mildura from Sydney in 1994 to join her mother but did not like fruit picking. She already had permanent residence in Australia and so began looking for another job but claims it took her twenty years until she finally found a part time job in 2014. She describes how she felt during her job-hunting period:

> Very long and it's made me a little bit depressed, because I don't want to be under welfare system for very long, because I just couldn't help it. My husband is doing seasonal work and sometimes it rains; sometimes there's no work. It depend on the weather and also the market from overseas and local markets for the fruits to go through. It's very frustrating. You wanted to have a proper job to be employed and help but just couldn't. I try to get into the retail area like shops. Same thing, they just looked at me and maybe they think my age is getting [old] and maybe they think that I'm not capable of doing anything good, but I have been trying so much. I've tried so much as long as I can get employed. I even applied for petrol stations, dry-cleaners.

The burden of stereotypes and the added obstacle of high rates of unemployment in Mildura and Robinvale affect not only the migrant generation but also their children. Here, we can observe the long-term effects of the parents' initial immigration statuses that led them to choose seasonal work. That work becomes generational as eventually their children also become seasonal laborers "on the block." Many Pacific people acknowledge that this is a problem; for example, Finau, a Tongan man in Mildura and a father of four children, observed that since he moved there in 1993, "I hardly see any youth, any of our youth further than picking. They just fall from school and out at the block. From school, getting married, and out at the block." Many interviewees gave particularly negative descriptions about horticultural work once they began speaking about their children's employment options; precarious aspects of the work that they downplayed in relation their own situation seemed less acceptable when they thought of their children's futures.

There are several key factors leading Pacific Islander youth to leave school early and join their parents in seasonal work. One is the rural location, which provides limited options for education and employment. Finau, quoted above, says, "Mildura is limit[ing]. It limits the things we do in here. . . . Mildura raises the children here until they finish the high school. When they move onto the university or stuff like that, the option is to be in city." Although the other research participants share Finau's view that cities offer more opportunities for migrants' children, many young people remain in the area and follow their parents into horticultural work. As a cultural liaison officer, this issue is of concern to Amelia, who explained how children may understand seasonal work:

> Sometimes they [children] think it's easy job. They will go out there with mum and dad and pick a lot of boxes and maybe he'll get paid maybe $400 or whatever for example, and they will think that it's easy money. . . . For them to go out and look for jobs . . . it's a big thing for some children. So they think "oh yeah, go out and pick with mum and dad. That's easy. Let's go out there, follow them and get that money."

Most research participants said that they have taken their children to the farms where they work. While some did this to teach them how hard the work is in the hope that their children will choose a different path, others use their children's labor to increase their household income. A service provider raised his concern about low school completion rates for children in Pacific communities, explaining that when children reach high school age, some become part of the family workforce "on the block" with their parents. He claimed that some high school children take weeks away from school to help their parents during the picking season, further limiting their chances of completing high school and having different careers.

## Conclusion

Southern European migrants who settled in rural northwest Victoria from the late nineteenth century experienced upward mobility by purchasing orchards and vineyards and investing in their children's education. From the 1980s, they employed backpackers and other migrant workers, including Pacific people, as seasonal laborers. Many of the Pacific people were drawn to the area because their status as overstayers was less likely to be an obstacle to finding work than in the cities. Although many settled in the region and managed, often after a long struggle, to gain permanent residency, they did not become landowners or farmers, and most have continued to rely on precarious seasonal horticultural employment. From an objective perspective, relying on unstable income earned in the harsh conditions of such labor is clearly associated with precarity. However, from many Pacific migrants' point of view, the "easy" accessibility of income through fruit picking is initially considered to be an "opportunity" that generally provides them with feelings of security rather than precarity. Permanent residency also provides a form of security, as there is no longer the threat of deportation and access is granted to social welfare and free medical care, yet precariousness in relation to employment does not necessarily improve. For those who have been unable to convert their overstayer status and for New Zealand passport holders, life is even more precarious, as they have no access to government benefits. Those who aspire for more stable employment struggle to find other jobs and find themselves stigmatized as "fruit pickers." The long-term impact of Pacific people's initial immigration status therefore has meant that most have remained in work that offers no career opportunities and no job security and that takes a significant toll on their physical health. The impact continues to resonate, as many of their children leave school early and follow them into seasonal labor.

This article has shed light on the experiences of this underresearched, "invisible" population of Pacific settlers in Australia. To a great extent, they remain invisible in population statistics and government policy as well as in the academic literature on rural migration. Although they have contributed to their invisibility to some extent, through their self-reliance within their own communities and the desire of overstayers to remain undetected, Pacific migrants are increasingly aware of problems that their relative invisibility creates and believe that they have been neglected by policymakers who have focused primarily on Indigenous Australians and the influx of refugees. Falling "in between" these groups and unused to accessing support through the wider community, the issues facing Pacific people—including the precarity and poor conditions of their seasonal work—have not been addressed by government agencies and service providers. With the current focus on the SWP, Pacific people who have settled in rural Australia continue to be ignored despite this program threatening to further exacerbate their precarious situation by bringing temporary workers into the horticultural sector that Pacific settlers have relied on for many years and to which they have made a significant but unacknowledged contribution.

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