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The Moral Economy of Los Angeles Restaurant Workers

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by

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I still remember my father returning late from work with the smell of cooking oil on his shirts. I have come to associate that smell with the long and strenuous hours he labored as a cook for various restaurants. My mother worked grueling labor, cleaning the restaurants where my father worked. With no resources for daycare I often accompanied them. These were my first lessons on labor politics. This could not have been written without their support throughout the process.

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines the everyday struggles of Los Angeles restaurant workers as they experience, perceive and contest exploitative work conditions. The restaurant industry employs an estimated eleven million workers in the United States, making it one of the largest private employers in the nation. The restaurant industry is thriving; yet, one has to ask, thriving for whom? In spite of their employment in the largest complex of restaurants in the nation, in a growing industry with soaring profits, Los Angeles workers have not reaped rewards commensurate with their labor. As a concentrated site of low-wage employment, restaurant workplace conditions serve as a generative site for researching the impact of neoliberal policies of flexible accumulation regimes in the production of a vulnerable racialized workforce. This project applies James C. Scott's concept of the moral economy to understand the expectations and notions of justice that workers articulate in response to exploitative conditions. Scholarly research has generally defined exploitation of low-wage workers as the surplus taken from workers' wages. Securing surplus value by exploiting labor power is indeed a central part of the process that enables exploitation to occur, yet it tells us little about the subjective feelings of the exploited. Through the use of interviews with nine restaurant workers of color, participant observation, and archival research, this study will explore how restaurant workers define exploitation, navigate tensions, and create solidarities in their everyday lives.

Introduction

Entrevistador: “Que significa trabajar en condiciones de respeto y dignidad?”

Ignacio: “Que te respeten tu trabajo…que te respetan a ti como persona…. dignidad de por ejemplo de que tener la dignidad de cómo un ser humano--que no te sientes como un esclavo… Que sientas el ego de decir—yo soy persona, yo soy un cocinero en realidad, me entiendes? A mí me respetan por lo que soy--¿verdad? A mí me respetan por lo que hago, respetas mi trabajo (…) A veces son cosas que injusticias -- a veces de que te hace sentir mal. Y cuando uno se sienta mal ya no trabajas igual-- te echa perder el día (…) Para el [dueño] piensa que por su dinero es todo. A veces incluso llegan [los dueños] ni buenos días dicen... Y eso es algo feo. Yo me siento mal que el mismo dueño entre o el manejador pasa por todo la cocina y ni diga ‘hi’ ni buenos días. Y yo me siento como… soy un perrito como un animalito.”

Interviewer: “What does it mean to work in conditions of respect and dignity?

Ignacio: “ That they respect your labor…they respect you as a person…for example, to have dignity, like you’re a human being—that you don’t feel like a slave….That I feel confident to say I’m a person, a real cook, do you understand? Respect me for what I do, respect my labor (…) Sometimes there are things that are unjust. Sometimes they make you feel terrible. And when you feel terrible you don’t work the same—you lose a day of work (…) Owners think money is everything. Sometimes they don’t even say good morning….that to me is foul. I feel bad when the owner enters, or the manager passes through the kitchen and doesn’t say hello or good morning. I feel like…I’m a dog or an animal.”

When I first mentioned to organizers affiliated with the Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC-LA) Los Angeles, a group that fights to improve working conditions, that I planned to interview workers for a study I was undertaking many of the organizers suggested I interview Ignacio. Ignacio is a 46 year-old man who migrated from rural Guerrero, Mexico to the U.S in 1991. He has worked in several low-wage industries, beginning in the agricultural fields, moving to the garment industry and lastly with the help of a family friend he entered kitchen labor. I was told that during meetings he often drifts off into momentary naps, a result of the extensive hours he works weekly to make ends meet. However, Ignacio is most known for his fierce opinions, molded by experiences such

as a wage theft claim that left him without pay for months. Out of desperation he had to seek assistance at food banks and shelters to put food on the table. When the topic of work conditions surfaces, his comments contain a reserved and stern tone that clearly reflects the unfair treatment that migrants confront in the industry.

Ignacio's comments and critiques provide context for the importance of "respect and dignity," a phrase commonly used by organizers and low-wage workers during coalitional worker center campaigns. His critiques reflect the depth of his mistreatment throughout his career as a restaurant worker. His experiences are far from unusual and were echoed by a number of workers at the center. Ignacio's critique is a result of a living in a society that often treats working-class Latinxs as subhuman, or as the workers I interviewed have described, like "maquinas (machines)" or "animales (animals)."[1] Ignacio's comments also emphasize that he expects employers to treat him with a basic level of humanity by respecting his labor and not treating him as a slave. He criticizes employers for the higher value they place on money at the cost of worker rights. He charges employers with subhuman treatment at work, voicing his resentment of being treated as if he were a "perrito", a small dog or animal made to feel invisible.

Ignacio's comments highlight the struggles of many of the restaurant workers of color I interviewed in the Los Angeles industry. Their testimonies returned again and again to the methods employers and supervisors rely on that may produce profits but often cause injury to the holistic aspects of a worker's health and well-being. For Ignacio, the issue of low wages and lack of benefits are important, but they are part of a larger picture of what he formulates as the fundamentally unjust way he is dehumanized in the workplace. He desires workplace justice through adequate wages and

[1] I use the term Latinx for inclusive purposes as the x replaces the gender binary found in Latina/o/@ and instead signifies the fluidity of gender identities within the community. The terms Chican@/o/a and Latin@/a/o appear throughout this study in citations of material or when discussing specific historical moments, however I

decent working conditions, as ends in themselves, to be sure, but he also seeks respect and recognition of his humanity.

Traditionally, scholars in the fields of sociology and economics have framed exploitation as a material consideration, mainly defined by the surplus taken from wages in the capital accumulation process. However, central to my argument is that workers provide multiple definitions of exploitation. They are attentive to surplus extraction but also grapple with disrespect, mistreatment, and abuse from supervisors, customers and coworkers that shapes their statuses and identities. In my research, I found that workers like Ignacio voice what James C. Scott calls "moral economies," understandings of and expectations for respect and dignity within the workings of the capitalist system. My findings indicate that restaurant workers seek conditions where their labor and humanity will be respected, valued, and free from physical and psychological abuse. Securing surplus value by exploiting labor power is a central part of the process that enables exploitation to occur, yet it tells us little about the subjective feelings of the exploited. Rather than viewing exploitation as merely an asymmetrical relationship between labor and capital, a helpful question might be how do workers themselves understand what constitutes exploitation? They not only seek an increase in material benefits (wages and healthcare) but attach high importance to dignity; that is, to be valued for their labor while being treated respectfully and humanely. Their knowledge of restaurant workplaces lead them to routinely expect some measure of exploitation even if they deeply resent it, but they emphasize that their tolerance has limits, that even within structures of exploitation there are some conditions that violate what they will endure.

This is not to argue that material considerations are secondary to workers. Clearly low wages, lack of health and other benefits (e.g., sick leave), and their general material precarity is of grave

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employ Latinx when possible. See de Onís, Catalina M. 2017. **"**What's in an 'x'?: An Exchange about the Politics of 'Latinx.**'"** *Chiricú Journal: Latina/o Literatures, Arts, and Cultures* 1, no. 2.

concern. National statistics show that more than one in six restaurant workers live below the federal poverty line. Two out of every five restaurant workers draw wages that place them in extreme poverty, with an income twice lower than the poverty line.[2] Their economic marginality is even further complicated by its intersections with racism, as poverty is experienced most directly by Latinxs and Black restaurant workers.[3] Some migrant restaurant workers also deal with homelessness, often as a result of their employers underpaying them or stealing their wages outright.[4] Restaurant labor not only leaves workers vulnerable through poverty wages, but even under the best of circumstances provides little in the way of health and safety protections, health insurance, or paid sick days. Furthermore, unionization at food and drinking places constituted only an abysmal 1.4 percent in 2014, making these establishments rife with worker abuse, impeding worker protection and claims against wage infractions, hours and working conditions.[5] Only 14.4 percent of restaurant workers receive health insurance from their employers, leaving exorbitant health costs to be borne by workers who already receive low wages.[6]

Many restaurant workers experience the common industry practice of wage theft, which is the non-payment or underpayment of wages and benefits.[7] A study conducted by Human Impact partners,

[2] When using twice the poverty level. According to scholars and analysts who measure poverty, the official poverty rate is considered inadequate at capturing true poverty rates. To account for a more realistic poverty rate, many use double the threshold. For example if the official poverty rate is 20,000 for a family of four, the new threshold is 40,000 dollars see Shierholz, Heidi. 2014. "Low wages and few benefits mean many restaurant workers can't make ends meet." *Economic Policy Institute*

[3] Restaurant Opportunities Center of Los Angeles. 2011. Policy Report: *"Inequality and Opportunity in Los Angeles, the Nation's Largest Restaurant Industry"*.

[4] Lydersen, Kari. 2016. "Homeless but employed: the Chicago restaurant workers living under a bridge". *The Guardian*, April 17. Retrieved June 25 (https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/apr/17/homeless-employed-chicago-restaurant-workers-exploited)

[5] Gleeson, Shannon. 2010. "Labor Rights for All? The Role of Undocumented Immigrant Status for Worker Claims Making", *Law & Social Inquiry*. 35, 3 :561-602 ; Bureau of Labor Statistics. Industries at a Glance: Food Services and Drinking Places. Retrieved August 10 (http://www.bls.gov/iag/tgs/iag722.htm)

[6] Gleeson, Shannon. 2012." Leveraging Health Capital at the Workplace: An Examination of Health Reporting Behavior among Latino Immigrant Restaurant Workers in the United States", *Social Science & Medicine*. 75, 12.

[7] Human Impact Partners. June 2014.Policy Report: "Health Impact Assessment of the Proposed Los Angeles Wage Theft Ordinance".

the UCLA Labor Center, and ROC-LA estimates that every week $26.2 million is stolen from Los Angeles low-wage workers, including many restaurant workers, through payment violations involving "off-the-clock-work", sub-minimum wages, and failure to pay overtime compensation.[8] The effects of wage-theft have ripple effects such as stress, anxiety, poor mental health, depression, and damaged family well-being especially for undocumented workers. [9]

Material precarity impacts the day-to-day lives of workers of low-wage workers including workers of color by creating and exacerbating impediments to climbing out of poverty. Alongside low-wages and the consequences of economic instability are short and long-term effects on workers' mental and physical health related to occupational hazards. Studies have documented that restaurants have among the highest amount of reported injuries and illnesses.[10] In a study conducted by Jenny Hsin-Chun Tsai and Mary K. Salazar, interviews with Chinese immigrant restaurant workers revealed the physical, chemical, enviromechanical (slippery floors, poor equipment) and psychosocial (stress, verbal abuse) hazards at the workplace.[11] The majority of restaurant workers they interviewed reported a high number of psychosocial hazards related to time constraints that cause high amounts of stress, for example not having enough time to eat during their shifts or go to the bathroom. Additionally psychosocial hazards included working under intense pressure, coping with high-business volume, inter-worker conflicts, sexual harassment and abuse by managers. They also found that Front of the House workers (where women are overrepresented) had to deal with stressful encounters with customers who refuse to pay, or while drunk would assault waitresses when they felt dissatisfied with

[8] Restaurant Opportunities Center of Los Angeles. 2011. Policy Report: "Inequality and Opportunity in Los Angeles, the Nation's Largest Restaurant Industry".

[9] Ibid

[10] Minkler, M et al. 2010. "Using community-based participatory research to design and initiate a study on immigrant worker health and safety in San Francisco's Chinatown restaurants". *American journal of industrial medicine*, *53*,4: 361-371.

[11] Tsai, J. H. C., & Salazar, M. K. 2007. Occupational hazards and risks faced by Chinese immigrant restaurant workers. *Family & community health*, *30*, S71-S79.

the service, all of which contributed to high levels of stress.

While this study takes full cognizance of the material considerations of restaurant work, it also emphasizes the multiple ways workers of color experience indignities and define expectations for respect in a racially organized labor market. Through the use of interviews with nine restaurant workers of color in full-service restaurants, participant observation, and archival research this study will explore how restaurant workers define exploitation, and navigate tensions in their everyday lives. Their testimonies evidence connections between their lives and the neoliberal forces that shape their personal struggles. In order to think about the complex problems that restaurant workers face, my research asks, who benefits from the suffering of restaurant workers? How do workers identify the problems they are confronted with? How do workers define conditions of respect and dignity in an industry marked by flagrant discriminatory policies and labor violations?

Central to this study are the experiences and perceptions of low-wage laborers and the insights they provide about their work and the moral economies they invoke to judge workplace practices to be fair or unfair. To observe how workers experience and define exploitation, especially the indignities and unfairness they experience at work requires understanding of how their treatment is shaped by their race and immigration status. The industry's racial regimes encompass serial forms of material devaluation in the form of low wages and harsh working conditions. As eyewitnesses to racialized low wage labor these workers voice perspectives, evidence, ideas and analyses that reveal the effects of the industry's violations of workers' health, dignity, and respect. As George Lipsitz argues, we have much to learn from laboring people because "(...) it has been workers who have voiced the most comprehensive critiques of capitalism as a way of life, not just as a system of production."[12]

[12] Lipsitz, G. 1994. *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s*. University of Illinois Press, p.10

Interview Methods

This project is a qualitative study comprised of participant observation and interviews with nine workers. In addition, this project is informed by three years of participant observation within the ROC-LA organization which provided insight about the industry as experienced by the center's organizers and members. I entered the field in 2013 by contacting ROC-LA because at that time I was planning to study how restaurant owners maintained occupational segregation. I wanted to get a sense of the industry and the problems restaurant workers experienced, exacerbated by the industry's flagrant labor violations. However, after attending meetings and protests and getting to know a number of the workers personally, I found the testimonies I encountered provided rich details about the inner-workings of the Los Angeles restaurant industry and its rampant wage theft, abuse, worker tensions and relationship to federal immigration policies.[13] I went to meetings that covered issues of wage theft, the minimum wage, and various forms of abuses at the hands of employers. ROC-LA held organizing meetings and collaborated with other worker centers whose workplace concerns often overlapped with those of restaurant workers. This allowed me to learn more about labor violations across various sectors in Los Angeles and over time I was able to get to know many of the ROC-LA members. Before I conducted interviews with ROC workers I found it necessary to develop relationships of reciprocity with organizers and members, a subject I will discuss later in this section.

Findings for this study came from nine semi-structured interviews with restaurant workers of color from the Los Angeles area. All of the workers I interviewed are members of Restaurant Opportunities Center Los Angeles (ROC-LA). I am not claiming statistical social science generalizability, from this small set of interviews, rather they are suggestive and illustrative.

[13] To organize transcribed interviews I used Dedoose, a qualitative software program to code and identify themes.

Interviews were semi-structured and questions were influenced by responses. Questions ranged from how respondents began working in restaurants, asking them to describe a typical day, how they get to work, if they considered their workplace conditions safe, and what they enjoyed about the industry and what they wanted to see change. I asked follow-up questions to elaborate on their comments about the industry, city and their workplace. I used certain questions to initiate interviews that were also guided by issues they raised about race, migration, gender, their treatment and manager issues.

Throughout my time with ROC-LA, I attended numerous workshops geared towards educating restaurant workers about their rights covering issues of wage theft and labor law violations. These events occurred either at the ROC-LA office or when in conjunction with other worker centers, would take place at the UCLA Labor Center. During these meetings I sometimes participated in worker discussions, or when asked by staff, I would translate in either Spanish or English for monolingual speakers. I tried assisting with functions, events, and attended ROC-LA protests as much as possible. For example, in 2015 I participated in public debates concerning the proposal to raise the minimum wage in front of LA city council members. At the debates, small business employers, many from the restaurant industry vehemently opposed wage increases. They attended in high numbers since Los Angeles contains a robust restaurant industry and higher wages would heavily impact owner and company profits. During the debate, employers relied on rhetoric that stressed how wage increases would lead them to cut hours and eliminate jobs. Sometimes, employers brought their Latinx employees (in work uniforms) to speak against the raising of the minimum wage. On the opposite end of the struggle, workers associated with various worker centers voiced their reasons for why they needed a raise for themselves and their families. Workers were represented in various sectors, ranging from restaurant workers, to seamstresses, and car wash workers. Many of them shared painful yet powerful testimonies of their struggles in their respective industries. Their stories were conveyed in

strongly worded pleas to the City Council depicting their challenges as result of their low wages and arguments explaining how an increase would be a critical step in securing more dignified work conditions. Along with other worker advocates I voiced my support for higher wages in the Los Angeles area.

Other research activities included accompanying ROC-LA to support a group of BOH workers while they delivered a letter to their employer detailing their mistreatment and abuse. They charged their employer with waiting outside of the restroom if they took longer than a few minutes, with verbal abuse and workplace racism. In a group of approximately forty people consisting of organizers, advocates and workers, we all arrived at the restaurant during business hours and created a peaceful albeit disruptive spectacle. The aim was to support workers and to let employers know that if they were to retaliate, as is often the case when workers stand up for themselves, employees would receive support from the larger community. While most of my observations took place during smaller and less public events such as during organizational meetings, or in private meetings with workers, both private and public observations revealed the varied struggles for dignity and the ways they defined exploitation through a multitude of workplace transgressions.

In my time at ROC-LA I observed the challenges staff confronted due to covering a large area like Los Angeles with a limited number of personnel. I also witnessed the difficulties of organizing workers who had severe time constraints and irregular schedules. Many of the workers were appreciative of the staff for providing support and assistance in response to disrespect and harassment at the hands of their employers. A common issue workers grapple with is loneliness. Workers often feel alone during their work struggles, because either their co-workers are unsupportive or are scared to confront their employers, therefore they feel they have no one to turn to during a crisis. Workers, especially those who constantly volunteered their time to speak at events with fellow members,

commented on their appreciation and respect for ROC-LA organizers, discussing how ROC provided a sense of community during difficult times. ROC-LA staff members were extremely supportive of my project. They welcomed my presence and we developed a relationship of mutual trust. They were extremely helpful when I was trying to secure interviews and they even let me interview workers at their office. During those three years of observation, I established relationships with workers and organizers who discussed the injustices that had propelled them to participate at ROC-LA. I came in contact with countless former and current restaurant workers at ROC who volunteered their time, energy and creativity into the organization. Many of the workers had family obligations and other commitments while holding multiple jobs, yet somehow they found the time to participate because they wanted to see changes in the industry. They were motivated to try to stop exploitative practices and to challenge greedy employers because they experienced indignities and wanted to prevent other workers from going through similar pain. Ignacio echoed the belief that the struggle for improved conditions was bigger than just his experience, when I asked him why he participated at ROC-LA he replied:

"Yo estoy luchando para que no pase esto ya, para que paremos este cáncer…este problema que … [los ricos] dicen 'agarro manos de obra barata, no les pago, los corro… que trabajan un mes, dos meses quince días, lo que sea, una semana gratis'… no les pagan… y la gente no tiene dinero para demandar (…) Es parte del show, el rico más rico y el pobre más pobre. Te roban tu mano de obra. Te roban tu trabajo (…) Que paren esto… que otra persona no sufre lo que he sufrido yo."

"I am fighting so that this stops happening, so that we stop this cancer… this problem. The rich say, 'we'll get cheap labor, we won't pay them, we'll fire them…they'll work one month, two months, two weeks, whatever, a week free'…they won't pay them…and people don't have money to sue (…) It's part of the game, the rich gets richer the poor even poorer. They steal your labor. They steal your work (…) This needs to stop… so that another person doesn't suffer what I've suffered."

Workers shared with me various perspectives about the workplace, ranging from problems with management, to how their workplace replicated a "cycle of abuse" through verbal tirades, and how they were aware that they were not respected by the larger society. Some discussed an abusive

employer, others emphasized missing work hours deducted from their paychecks, or what it was like when bathroom time was strictly monitored by their employer. While restaurant work is difficult, and many labor in those occupations out of necessity, the interviews and time spent with workers served as a reminder that there is another side to the exploitation they encountered. Their struggles in the industry made the work difficult to enjoy, but there were also positive moments. Often, when I asked if they liked working in the industry they responded by discussing how they enjoyed working with their coworkers (when everyone would pull their weight in the kitchen) and most of all that they felt accomplished for the skillsets they had learned on the job. Some understood their work to be like art. I could see how proud they would get when they explained how customers enjoyed their food and service. This is to say that workers are struggling for are not only against exploitation and its material manifestations, but for ways they can enjoy their workplace.

The nine workers that I interviewed participated in the organization to varying degrees. Some of them had only been involved with ROC for a few weeks and others years. ROC-LA has a core group of members that are very active in the organization. They help plan events, attend meetings regularly and speak at public protests. Other members were very active at one time, but not now only attended functions sporadically. There are also workers who are not members but came to the center because they enlisted in publically advertised bartending and server classes. Immediately after the classes, the organization held monthly member mixers where workers were introduced to the center's mission, providing an opportunity to connect with other workers. I interviewed people from these groups to include different perspectives. Their varied experiences provided distinctive case studies that reveal how different restaurant workers navigate the industry.[14] I ultimately chose workers that either

[14] Interviews serve as a method to learn about events and activities from the perspective of the people who directly experience them. They can create an opportunity for individuals to describe an aspect of the social world inaccessible to scholars. See Steven Taylor and Robert Bogdan's *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods, p. 88-89.*

currently work or had worked in a restaurant within the last five years. Additionally, a worker's employment had to be at a full-service restaurant typically categorized respectively as either fine-dining or family style. I wanted testimony about the types of restaurants that contain a front and back of the house staff. Although many similarities exist between fast food and full-service restaurant workers, fast food workers were excluded from this study since they possess a different organizational culture. Full-service restaurants possess a longer history of cooking and serving traditions influencing the ways workers are expected to tend to customers and follow "kitchen culture." This is especially the case for fine-dining establishments that adhere to sophisticated culinary practices and want cooks to possess a fundamental knowledge of cooking.

Interviews lasted between forty minutes and up to an hour and a half. Since I speak both English and Spanish, I interviewed people in the language they felt most comfortable. I was interested in how workers of color navigated their work in restaurants, sites where race plays a profound role in where workers begin and end up as well as how they are treated. I selected a diverse group of people to account for different experiences. I interviewed four males, four women and one trans person. Of the four males, three had migrated from various parts of Mexico. The other male was from El Salvador. Of the four women, one was born in South Korea and migrated at a young age to the U.S. Another woman was born in Mexico and had migrated as a young adult. The other two women of color were born and grew up in the United States. I also interviewed one trans worker of color who was born in the United States. The ages of the people in this study ranged from their early 30s into the early 50s.

Although I interviewed workers involved with an organization, the focal point of this study is not about social movements or the organizational dynamics of this worker center, but rather this study is concerned with workers' experiences within the industry and their perceptions of it. What workers have to say about the restaurant culture provides insight into an industry predicated on racial

divisions, immigration laws and emotional abuse. I follow the line of argument advanced by Patricia Zavella (2011) which explores how the "feelings that poor people articulate are more than individual expressions of pain or trauma".[15] She analyzes how the traumatic experiences of poor migrants in her study reveal the structural challenges that create inequality in their everyday lives. While the organization ROC-LA does play an important role in how restaurant workers understand the industry through workshops and campaigns, ultimately I draw on testimonies that highlight personal everyday experiences and perspectives about the workplace for this study.

As a Latino male with past experience as a restaurant worker, my personal biography and history informed my research, especially because my parents are former restaurant workers and migrated to the U.S. from Durango, Mexico. Some of the questions I asked raised issues about exploitation at the hands of employers that were guided by my own observations, experiences and dilemmas working in restaurants in my early twenties. I worked as a busser, an expediter and a bar-back where I was often the translator and mediator between a mostly all white FOH and a predominantly Latinx back of the house. I often saw migrant Latinx workers disrespected, exploited and treated unjustly. The racial tensions in the restaurants where I worked affected how workers treated each other, the conditions of the workplace, and the managers' expectations of labor production. While I did have personal knowledge of the industry, there was a lot I did not or could not know. Evidence from workers provided new insight into the inner workings of restaurants that I was unaware of and had not been previously discussed in the literature I read concerning restaurants.

A considerable amount of literature on ethnographic methods has been written on the subjectivity of a researcher's positionality by race, gender and class, helping interrogate the ways in which a

[15] Zavella, P. 2011. *I'm Neither Here nor There: Mexicans' Quotidian Struggles with Migration and Poverty*. Duke University Press, p. 20

researcher's social position shapes the research process.[16] Identity alone, however, is not a sufficient safeguard to protect research participants from research fraught with harmful consequences to working-class communities. While a shared identity can prove to be helpful, there are also ways that an "insider" role based on race and gender can also mask the class and power-based tensions within communities of color. Maxine Baca Zinn and other scholars have acknowledged the many advantages researchers of color possess when it comes to posing the right questions and seeing racial problems that can result from an insider perspective. She also states, however, that social positions cannot be reduced to a simplified dichotomy of complete "insider" or complete "outsider". Nor does Zinn argue that white people should not study people of color.[17] While scholars of color can potentially lessen harmful relationships, they inevitably work inside structures and answer to imperatives that encourage them to pursue their individual success in academia without regard for the working-class communities of color they study.[18]

Zinn contends that "insider" knowledges and experiences can help scholars hypothesize and theorize the meanings and interpretations of the oppressed and exploited in particular ways, yet identity cannot substitute entirely for an understanding of political economy, structural conditions, and "systemic knowledge." Therefore, this study uses systemic knowledge and workers' theorizations about the workplace as necessary and complementary parts of understanding the challenges restaurants workers face.

During the research process I also wrestled with the question of how as a researcher I could engage the inherent power contradictions of interviewing under the aegis of a Research One

[16] Patai, Daphne. 1991. U.S. academics and third world women: is ethical research possible? [Chapter 9]. In S. B. Gluck & D. Patai (Eds.), *Women's words: the feminist practice of oral history* (pp. 137–153). New York. *: The feminist practice of oral history* 137-153; Collins, Patricia Hill. 2002. *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge

[17] Zinn, Maxine Baca. 1979. "Field research in minority communities: Ethical, methodological and political observations by an insider." *Social Problems* 27.2: 209-219.

institution. I found the work of Laura Pulido insightful, especially where she outlines the ways she came to be a scholar not only through academic shortcomings that provided teachable moments, but also through her activism on behalf of low wage labor.[19] Pulido uses the work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore and her concept of "organic praxis" to explain that scholars who do oppositional work must be connected also to social struggle outside of academia. Pulido provides two frameworks to interrogate power issues if a scholar decides to engage in community work: accountability and reciprocity. As scholars, we are held accountable for our research and actions when we see ourselves as part of a community in struggle. Reciprocity, which is extremely useful, is defined "as a mutual give and take and is something that scholar activists must always be attentive to."[20] The issue of reciprocity is an important aspect of my ethnographic method and I felt it strengthened my research, especially my efforts to capture the real lived everyday experiences of workers.

Throughout my time with the organization, ROC-LA held monthly gatherings for its members, orchestrated events with other worker centers, and was active in the Fight for 15 campaign. I often accompanied them when I could and would sometimes do small favors for the organization such as translation services or speaking on the organization's behalf at events. Additionally, I was active as a ROC-LA member and participated in campaigns that sought better working conditions and labor protections. I also participated in smaller campaigns that targeted abusive employers. After going to events between 2013 and 2015 and getting to know some of the workers and their stories, I asked if they would let me interview them.

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[18] Blauner, R., & Wellman, D. 1973. Toward the decolonization of social research. *The death of white sociology*: 310-330.

[19] Pulido, Laura. 2008. "FAQs: Frequently Asked Questions on Being a Scholar/Activist." In *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics and Methods of Activist Scholarship,* Edited by Charles Hale. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 341-366

Neoliberal Reforms in Los Angeles

In this section, I briefly discuss the neoliberal turn since the 1970s and its implications for low-wage workers in Los Angeles. The structural barriers that cause instability in restaurant workers' lives are compounded in a city experiencing deepening inequality, gentrification, rising rents, cuts to the social wage, and social crises. Therefore, the struggles of low-wage food service employees are not constrained within the walls of the workplace or limited to time on the clock on the job. Restaurant workers have to navigate individual crises, but they also contend with a metropolis suffused with social and economic crises that hit people of color the hardest. Struggling to pay the rent, for example, may appear to be an individual problem, but it is enveloped within a larger crisis of shortages of affordable housing.

Both local and global economic and political processes shape policies that affect the everyday lives of working-class Angelenos. Since the 1970s, the formation of a new economic doctrine began to establish itself in the US with the intent of redistributing wealth upwards.

What scholars describe as the neoliberal turn entrenched itself as an ideological apparatus in conjunction with global market structural transformations. Through an ideology of free-market principles, neoliberalism transformed the power of employers to accelerate the conditions for capital accumulation and altered the material status of workers. David Harvey who has produced seminal works on the subject of neoliberalism defines it as:

"…A theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the

[20] Ibid, p. 351

state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices."

According to Harvey, the central tenets of neoliberalism argue for greater individualization, market driven solutions, deregulation, and the elimination of state social services as methods to open markets, maximize capital accumulation and create a vulnerable labor force. Most workers experienced the effects of such policies which stressed the individual, but the working poor were especially hit hard. In the 1980s, for example, the working poor saw a decline in real wages. Harvey points towards a drop in the Federal minimum wage which in 1980 had "stood on par" with the poverty level yet by 1990 the minimum wage had decreased by thirty percent below that level.[21] Not everyone experienced adverse effects under neoliberalism. Corporations were given new tax breaks and searched for new opportunities to reinvest capital both at home and abroad. The tax rate among the wealthiest of Americans was reduced drastically under the guise of trickle-down-economics. Inequality increased dramatically as part of the political project of neoliberalism. Not only did the policies provide more opportunities for employers to increase profits it transformed how businesses operate and the power employers can wield to implement practices that undervalue the labor of workers.

The era of neoliberalism gave primacy to market-based employer-favored strategies that streamline production and the organization of the workplace. Harvey's analysis of flexible accumulation argues:

"The labour market has for example, undergone a radical restructuring. Faced with strong market volatility, heightened competition, and narrowing profit margins, employers have taken advantage of weakened union power and the pools of surplus (unemployed or underemployed) labourers to push for much more flexible work regimes and labor contracts (…] But more important has been the apparent move away from regular employment towards, increasing reliance on upon part-time, temporary or sub-contracted work arrangements."[22]

[21] Harvey, D. 1989. *The condition of postmodernity* (Vol. 14). Oxford: Blackwell, p. 25

This is especially the case in Los Angeles restaurants where surplus populations of migrant workers are pitted against each other to increase competition, treating workers as disposable. Consequently, low-wage restaurant workers often navigate precarious work conditions. In the restaurant industry, workers' schedules are irregular and often fluctuate on a week-to-week basis. Many times their schedules fluctuate weekly, and they rarely have fixed hours. When they are not needed they may be asked to clock out earlier than scheduled or asked to take additional shifts if the establishment becomes busy. These practices illustrate the ways that restaurant employees' time, wages, and pay are not fixed and can stymie a stable income.

Additionally, many Los Angeles low-wage jobs are a combination of precarious informal and formal labor. Many employees hold a series of jobs, sometimes simultaneously that compel them to deal with a high turnover rate, a lack of overtime, and what Ruth Millkman refers to as the "causalized labor regimes" that began to flourish in the 1970s. During the neoliberal turn, employers began to incorporate more workplace practices that saw the evisceration of workplace protections.[23]

Since the 1960s increasing capital mobility led many industries in Los Angeles to relocate to regions with less labor regulations and pools of low-wage labor resulting in the city's deindustrialization, eventually decimating its manufacturing job base by the 1990s. [24] In *My Los Angeles,* Edward Soja explains that the people most immediately affected by economic restructuring are low-wage workers. The onset of deunionization, the weakening of collective labor power, and neoliberal restructuring allowed employers to implement strategies that would reduce labor costs while creating exploitative conditions. The wave of deindustrialization gave rise to a greatly expanded service sector economy. As Mike Davis relates in *City of Quartz*

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[22] Harvey, D. 1989. *The condition of postmodernity* (Vol. 14). Oxford: Blackwell, p. 150

[23] Milkman, R. 2006. *LA story: Immigrant workers and the future of the US labor movement*. Russell Sage Foundation. p. 8

[24] Davis, M. 2006. *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles (New Edition)*. Verso Books.p. xiii

"As manufacturing employment shrinks, an already precarious low-wage workforce is further compressed into a limited spectrum of service-sector jobs in restaurants, hotels, office, theme parks, and private homes."[25]

The compression of workers into a limited sliver of low wage jobs also created a series of crises that fueled competition between the employed and the unemployed. Davis further notes how the service-sector economy is highly volatile for workers, consisting of small businesses vulnerable to fluctuations of the market.[26] Although corporate entities have become a sizable portion of the food service industry, small businesses remain significant. As a result of the inability of small businesses to withstand a crisis they resort to informal and often illegal workplace practices to generate profits. The rise of the service-sector economy also takes place against the backdrop of growing inequality within the city.

A study by the California Poverty Measure (which takes into consideration more factors than the standard poverty rate), calculates the Los Angeles poverty rate at 26.9 percent. This figure still underreports poverty and does not capture the full extent of people's struggles. It does demonstrate, however, the severity of inequality in the region. In 2013, an independent commission was formed by the LA City Council to report on fiscal responsibility and job growth. Their investigation revealed that living conditions were reaching a tipping point for poor people. They found that almost 28 percent of working Angelenos are paid poverty wages.[27] Part of the misery is attributed to the city's high unemployment rate, the lack of job growth, the cost of healthcare services, and an ill-equipped transportation and education infrastructure, which place strains on the working poor. For example, José a 36-year--old migrant from Oaxaca, Mexico explains how the structural issues in the city include problems of housing and the time that it takes to get to work:

[25]Ibid, p .xv
[26] Ibid
[27] Los Angeles 2020 Commission. 2013. Policy Report: "Time for Truth", p. 5

> "Aquí la gente latina, viven varios en un apartamento…de 200 [dólares] cada quien para poder vivir tu en tu propio apartamento. Yo he conocido gente que tienen dos trabajos para vivir en su apartamento"
>
> "Y luego no viven cerca de los trabajos, viven donde está más barata la renta….Hay un señor que vive en Bell…dice que para llegar a las diez sale de las siete de la mañana (…)La gente viaja muy lejos….Todos nosotros, los que trabajamos en restaurantes sabemos donde te pagan más…"
>
> "Latinos here live with a lot of people… Each person pays 200 so they can have their own apartment. I've know people that have two jobs so they can pay their rent.
>
> "And on top of that they don't live close to where they work, they live where the rent is cheaper…There's a man who lives in Bell…He says that to arrive by ten he needs to leave by 7. People have to travel far…All of us who work in restaurants know where they pay you more…"

José describes how a man he knows has to leave at seven in the morning because of the mismatch between where better paying jobs are and where restaurant workers can afford to live. According to José Some of the better paying jobs are located in Hollywood or near Downtown Los Angeles, areas where restaurant workers cannot afford to live on their wages. Many workers in the city rely on public transportation to get to work often requiring multiple buses. Given Los Angele's peak traffic times, a commute across the city's neighborhoods can take hours.

The low-wage job market creates a set of structural challenges and obstacles that make it nearly impossible to climb out of poverty. Part of the difficulty for poor people to find decent employment is that the type of jobs that provide a decent living are hard to come by and geographically dist. Faced with growing inequality, low-wages, and a low-wage labor sector that undervalues the labor of workers, employees often have to accept occupations and conditions marked with flagrant workplace violations.

Why Study Restaurant Workers?

Nearly thirty years ago, sociologist Gary Alan Fine wrote his influential ethnography, *Kitchens: the culture of restaurant work*. He details in this book the significance of restaurants as social worlds mediated by unruly yet often fruitful relationships among workers, management and customers. He argues that kitchens serve as important sites for understanding workplace structure and organization because they contain complex inter-employee relations. Fine notes that places that profit from the sale and production of food, reveal something crucial about capitalist society as they are representative of "(…) free- market capitalism, production lines, a consumption economy and interorganizational linkages."[28] Fine directs sociologists toward the world of restaurants by depicting how they can serve as a lens into a world of essential occupations often referred to as unskilled by larger society. Fine indicates that by focusing on the labor processes between the front and the back of the house, restaurants can generate insight into a production process that requires workers to constantly negotiate inter-worker relations.

Fine's research for *Kitchens* was conducted during the late 1980s, a time of sweeping economic changes led by the revanchist neoliberalism of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. The tide of neoliberal policies that attained critical mass in the 1980s gave rise to an ideological apparatus that weakened the power of labor. New policies were implemented in the wake of ideological assaults that blamed low-wage workers and the unemployed for falling profits and the fiscal crises of the state. Policies that targeted low-wage workers and shredded social safety nets had a devastating impact on poor people everywhere. Low-wage workers were expected to do more with less, as they confronted wage stagnation, capital flight and outsourcing of jobs. While capitalism has always burdened workers, the assaults under neoliberalism created an assortment of uphill battles for the working poor. These dynamics were largely absent from the otherwise admirable and insightful work done by Fine

[28] Fine, Gary Alan. 1996. *Kitchens the culture of restaurant work*. Updated ed. Berkeley, CA: University of CA Press.

in *Kitchens*, as were discussions of the degrees to which racism, sexism, and workplace abuses impacted the everyday lives of low-wage restaurants workers.

Today, restaurants are one of the largest private employers in the nation, employing approximately eleven million people.[29] They provide point of entry employment for the working poor including undocumented migrants. Restaurant workplace conditions are a richly generative site for exploring the impact of neoliberal policies of flexible accumulation regimes complicit in the production of a vulnerable racialized workforce.[30] These economic practices have affected the ways businesses operate, producing new forms of workplace organization, labor control, and unpredictable wages and hours that open new pathways for exploitation. The cumulative and varied problems emanating from the current labor conditions to which restaurant workers are subjected reflect the state's unwillingness and perhaps inability to provide basic protections against abuses from employers such as illegally and immorally low-wages, wage-theft, and the evisceration of social services. These practices are not isolated or aberrant transgressions by individual malefactors, but rather inevitable consequences of neoliberal structural adjustment programs designed to redistribute wealth upward.

Fine conducted his study in Minnesota at a time when that locale and kitchen work staffs throughout the U.S. were more proportionately white and male than is the case today. Yet, the contributions of migrant labor do not go unnoticed in Fine's preface to his new edition. He declares that restaurants would close down if not for the hard work of the undocumented migrants they employed. He follows the lead of many people in the industry, including celebrity restaurant chef Anthony Bourdain who recently defended undocumented immigrants from Donald Trump's call to deport all "illegals" from this country. Bourdain explains, "As for how restaurant owners would fare if

[29] Shierholz, Heidi. 2014. "Low wages and few benefits mean many restaurant workers can't make ends meet." *Economic Policy Institute*.

undocumented immigrants weren't around? "They'd be up the creek".[31] If restaurants would be so impacted economically that they would be forced to shut down without undocumented workers, we need to ask why. Why would they inevitably close? Why do restaurant owners rely heavily on undocumented workers? The strong demand to hire workers with legal vulnerabilities prompts sociological questions about workplace power, inequality and racial labor regimes. Because restaurants rely heavily on exploitative practices to produce profits, their workplace policies are likely to engender abusive work conditions.

In the context of repeated rollbacks of state spending on programs intended to aid the working poor, the injuries and indignities of restaurant labor reveal the state's role in skewing opportunities and life chances along racial lines, especially for migrants of color. Restaurants are sites of uneven struggles among migrants, capital, and the state. Many of the exploitative conditions found in the back of the restaurant, an area where the majority of undocumented laborers are employed, are a result of the state's use of what Nicholas De Genova terms "the everyday production of migrant illegality" whereby the state imposes a juridical status of "illegal alien" as a social condition.[32] Reversing the common-sense that permeates political and public discourse, De Genova depicts illegality as something produced by the state (through artificially low immigration quotas) and capital (by refusing to obey minimum wage and maximum hours laws, honor workplace safety obligations, or pay legally mandated benefits.) The state enacts deportations and facilitates exploitative conditions, causing traumatic experiences that ripple out through migrant communities. For undocumented workers, exploitation is advanced through the laws and policies of the state, supporting the interests of

[31] Wang, Joey. 2015. "Bourdain: Trump's deportation plan would 'shut down' every U.S. restaurant". MSNBC, October 15. Retrieved August 25, 2016 (http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/bourdain-trumps-deportation-plan-would-shut-down-every-us-restaurant)

[31] Wang, Joey. 2015. "Bourdain: Trump's deportation plan would 'shut down' every U.S. restaurant". MSNBC, October 15. Retrieved August 25, 2016 (http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/bourdain-trumps-deportation-plan-would-shut-down-every-us-restaurant)

employers seeking a vulnerable and easily exploitable workforce.[33] The state criminalizes migrants at the same time restaurant employers profit from their precarious status.[34]

Three decades after the release of *Kitchens,* the growth of restaurants has reached unprecedented heights. The amount of capital circulating through employer profits, state taxes, and corporate boardrooms has made restaurants a powerful player in the world of capital accumulation. Data from the 1987 Census recorded a sizeable 150 billion in sales, which by 2009 blossomed to 453 billion dollars.[35] While small businesses account for a large percentage of restaurants, the image of a small business operated by a small tight-knit family is now overshadowed by the reality that corporations are powerful players in the industry with multiple restaurant chains nationwide. The chain Darden Restaurant Inc., for example, reports revenue of 1.61 billion dollars per quarter. [36] With a lot of capital at stake, restaurant owners spend significant energy to influence political projects that maintain low wages and weaken labor protections.[37] But while profit-based incentives drive industry practices, the proliferation of restaurants can also be attributed to the role of culture and the income inequality that created more disposable income for the wealthy. Neoliberalism's rise in disposable income for the wealthy created a new and growing demand for service workers, jobs largely filled by migrants. [38] As many of the manufacturing jobs left Los Angeles, the working poor filled service sector jobs in high demand. In Los Angeles, more nannies, domestic workers, and kitchen workers were hired. With

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[32] De Genova, Nicholas P. 2002: "Migrant "Illegality" And Deportability In Everyday Life." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31, 1: p. 422.

[33] De Genova demonstrates how the historical development of the state's criminalization of migrants is a product of interventions and adjustments to historical moments of social crises.

[34] De Genova further discusses the process of what he refers to as "deportability," as its objective does not attempt to achieve the removal of all undocumented migrants, rather deportability acts as a method to discipline and control labor.

[35] See Gary Alan Fine, Statistical Abstracts

[36] Jargon, Julie. 2015. "Darden Bags a Profit, Raises its Outlook". The Wall Street Journal, December 18. Retrieved August 25, (http://www.wsj.com/articles/darden-bags-a-profit-raises-its-outlook-1450444220)

[37] During the fight for 15, restaurant owners vehemently opposed raising wages. The National Restaurant Association pays lobbyists to fight against pro-worker measures.

[38] Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. 2001. *Domestica: Immigrant workers cleaning and caring in the shadows of affluence*. Univ of California Press.

money to be made through the discretionary spending of people with disposable incomes as a result of increasing income inequality, restaurants took advantage of surplus populations that were vying for jobs in a precarious market.

The emergence of cooking blogs and nationally televised chef competitions, and the increase of celebrity-driven chef restaurants also illustrate a booming "foodism" movement.[39] A testament to the cultural ascension of food culture in society, many casual fine-dining restaurants showcase popular chefs. The food movement has created a desire for people to participate in unique dining experiences without having to spend Michelin star prices. Yet such affordable prices directly affect the production, organization and pay of workers. In a capitalist system, the objective of a business is to make a profit. Excess profits for employers come at the expense of workers. Owners can accumulate profit without unjust labor practices, but they can secure super-profits through intense exploitation of the workforce.

In her seminal work on waitressing, historian Dorothy Sue Cobble argues that restaurant work is emblematic of the new and expanding service sector in the era of deindustrialization.[40] As many scholars have argued, service work is critical to the economy and restaurant labor, in particular, is unaffected by the flight of many production jobs overseas as a result of increased capital mobility. As many manufacturing production sectors left the U.S. to search for transnational labor pools with lower wages and fewer workplace and social protections, the service-economy emerged as a key terrain for migrant workers, people of color, and the working poor, a group which comprises what D.G. Kelly calls the "new working-class". Kelley pushes scholars to reconceptualize their understanding of the working-class and to move beyond images of factory workers who are mostly white and male. Instead

[39] Oren, Tasha. 2013."On the line: format, cooking and competition as television values." *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies* 8.2.

[40] Cobble, Dorothy Sue. 1991.*Dishing it out: waitresses and their unions in the twentieth century*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press

he instructs us to look in struggling suburbs or toward industries where an increasing amount of occupations entail labor in food services, retail sales, or nursing home care. [41]

With an increasing new working class in restaurants, today's struggles that involve restaurant workers build on the legacies of past struggles for dignity. Restaurants have historically been a site where workers experienced the effects of racial discrimination as customers as well as laborers. In the Southwest, Mexicans were often excluded from dining in numerous establishments in certain areas such as Texas. During the Jim Crow era, battles in the South against white supremacy were waged at a time when Black people were violently excluded from eating meals alongside white people. Yet, while Black people were turned away from eating in the front of the restaurants they were not barred from cooking white people's food or washing their dishes. In his autobiography, Malcolm X discusses the anger provoked by this indignity, recalling how he started working in restaurants with other Black men because of the readily available employment there. He expressed humiliation at having to wear the uniform of a soda jerk or a Pullman Porter because these outfits signaled his servitude to whites, providing food and drinks he was not allowed to buy as a customer. Restaurants have reflected the inequalities of different eras, first and foremost by maintaining a color line that disparately impacted the material lives of their employees. To this day, restaurants are sites of struggles for advancing labor rights, securing dignified work conditions and combating structural inequalities. As one of the largest low-wage employers, they have become epicenters for campaigns like the Fight for 15 and Anti-wage theft campaigns that demand livable wages and legal protections at work.[42]

[41] See chapter 5 of Kelley, R. D. 1997.*Yo'mama's disfunktional!: Fighting the culture wars in urban America*. Beacon Press.

[42] Social movements such as the Fight for 15 are not only calling for an increase in wages, but also respect of their labor. These movements have gained traction because of the immorally low wages, constant abuse in the workplace, and societal disrespect of countless low-wage workers. While, the campaign is largely aimed at fast-food workers, many restaurant workers in full-scale restaurants have joined the movement.

The multitude of structural obstacles workers face are compounded by a kitchen culture that exacerbates their mistreatment and promotes physical and psychological abuse. Labor is the largest operating cost in restaurants, and where owners rely on immoral methods to maximize profits. A strategy like hiring a vulnerable workforce of undocumented workers to pay illegal wages and exploit them will increase their profit return. In restaurants, rest breaks are almost unheard of, which is technically a form of wage theft since workers are entitled by state law to breaks and a thirty-minute lunch period during a full shift. Overtime is seldom paid to kitchen workers, especially those who are undocumented. Tactics like this came up again and again during the interviews conducted for this study, and they are common industry practices. In fact they are central practices within restaurant culture. Such strategies ultimately burden all workers but impact disproportionately workers of color economically, physically, and emotionally. I argue that methods like these that owners use to achieve larger profits are not the product of the abnormal greed of individuals, but rather are inherent in the culture and economy of restaurants today.

How restaurant workers of color are treated affects entire communities because the pay and abusive treatment they administer ultimately ripples out to entire neighborhoods. Since the time of Fine's study, transformations in the economy have changed how many restaurants operate, but the culture of restaurants remains essentially the same. What does hold true is Fine's call to understand the social world of restaurants. In the Los Angeles restaurants that are the focal point of this study, race, gender and migration status create a multitude of challenges for workers every day.

Material Reality of Restaurant Workers

> "There's a lot to complain about, either you're not being paid right, you're not getting your rest break, you're tired, you're working so many jobs, you're not being treated correctly-- by a manager, by a coworker. I feel like restaurant workers are pretty vulnerable to a lot of things. We're really tough people but we're also vulnerable and being thrown all kinds of blows." – Mac

Restaurants serve as unique sites for understanding divisions of labor because their production, service and consumption processes usually take place within the same building.[43] In restaurants there are divisions between Front of the House (FOH) and the Back of the House (BOH). Workplace segregation based on race, gender and citizenship in restaurants lead to differentiated levels of health, pay and work. The divisions of labor in restaurants produce regimes of occupational segregation, as gendered and racialized workers are perceived to be more appropriate for particular occupations based on ideologies designating some groups as more suitable for a position than others. Racial divisions most noticeably can be observed through the racialized spatial organization of the restaurant between and the front-of-the-house (servers, bartenders, hosts) and back-of-the-house (cooks, dishwashers, prep cook) occupations.

Restaurant occupations are commonly considered as what Denise Segura describes as "secondary jobs," positions characterized by high turnover, low wages, job instability, and few possibilities for advancement.[44] Divisions of labor in restaurants between the back and front are influenced by a worker's race, gender, and citizenship status. In Los Angeles restaurants, Latinx workers make up 58.6 percent of workers, and over half of workers are foreign born. The racial pattern of employers hiring mostly all male Latinx workers in restaurants demonstrates how Back Of the House (BOH)

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[43] See Fine, Gary Alan. 1996. *Kitchens the culture of restaurant work*. Updated ed. Berkeley, CA: University of CA Press.

[44] For the division between primary and secondary jobs see Segura, Denise. 1984. "Labor market stratification: The Chicana experience". *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, *29*, 57-91 and Reich, M., Gordon, D. M., & Edwards, R. C. 1973. A theory of labor market segmentation. *The American Economic Review*, *63*, 2 : 359-365.

occupations are representative of what Liza Catanzarite refers to as "brown-collar jobs".[45] Scholars have noted the ways in which the racialized processes of hiring based on race are wedded to the state's criminalization of migrant persons through laws and deportability.[46] Los Angeles is particularly important to the study of racialized labor as it is home to the largest Latinx immigrant population in the United States. Latinx migrants hold most of the back-of-the-house jobs in Los Angeles.

In the front of the house in Los Angeles restaurants, the highest paid positions are in fine-dining establishments, where the best jobs are generally reserved for white men and women. Women account for 52 percent of restaurant jobs, but they occupy 64 percent of FOH positions. In the FOH women of color are usually given the day shifts that will produce the least amount of tips. In restaurants, women of color deal with what Denise Segura calls a "triple form of oppression" because of their race, gender and the nature of their work. According to a study by ROC-LA, "Female restaurant workers of color reported a median wage of $9.32 per hour, while men of color reported a median wage of $9.97 per hour, and White women reported a median wage of $17.86—92% higher than the median wage for women of color"[47]. Studies have shown that Black people are especially hit hard by discrimination as research has shown the anti-blackness pervasive in employers' selection of employees.[48] Discriminatory hiring practices leaves Black people confined to the least remunerative positions and leads to their near exclusion from fine dining and top tier restaurants.

Workers of color disproportionately occupy BOH occupations, which entail the longest hours and the greatest health and safety risks. Restaurant workers who work in the BOH deal with high levels of

[45] Catanzarite, L. 2000. Brown-Collar Jobs: Occupational Segregation and Earnings of Recent-Immigrant Latinos. *Sociological Perspectives*, *43*,1: 45–75.

[46] De Genova, Nicholas P. 2002): "Migrant "Illegality" And Deportability In Everyday Life." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31, 1: 419-447;

[47] Restaurant Opportunities Center of Los Angeles. 2011. Policy Report: "Inequality and Opportunity in Los Angeles, the Nation's Largest Restaurant Industry", p.58.

[48] Shih, Johanna "...Yeah, I could hire this one, but I know it's gonna be a problem': how race, nativity and gender affect employers' perceptions of the manageability of job seekers", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol 25,

verbal abuse, disciplinary measures, have the fewest advancement opportunities and face discriminatory practices because of their race, gender and migration status.[49] People of color are separate from their white counterparts in the industry as they work in the lowest paid occupations, the most physically demanding positions and are paid the lowest wages. The intersections of gender and race create particular challenges for women of color who often work in the BOH and deal with issues of sexual harassment from managers and coworkers within the restaurant.

Restaurants are an expanding and thriving industry integral to the U.S. labor market, yet one has to ask thriving for whom? On a national scale, the restaurant industry is one of the fastest growing sectors of the U.S. economy. The restaurant industry employs an estimated 11 million workers in the United States, making it one of the largest private employers in the nation.[50] Yet, the billions of dollars projected in sales, along with the billions of dollars in sales taxes reaching local, state and national governments is at the same time a part of a system of exploitation of workers in the forms of low wages, no benefits, and working conditions that are detrimental to the health, income and dignity of workers.

On the local level, Los Angeles is home to the largest restaurant industry in the nation. The city has more than 18,289 restaurants where more than 321,005 workers are employed.[51] Full-service restaurants, which are the focus of this study, have steadily increased over the years. As of 2014, they

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Issue 1, 2002; Neckerman, Kathryn M., and Joleen Kirschenman. "Hiring Strategies, Racial Bias, And Inner-City Workers." *Social Problems* 38, no. 4 (1991): 433-447

[49] Restaurant Opportunities Center of Los Angeles. 2011. Policy Report: "Inequality and Opportunity in Los Angeles, the Nation's Largest Restaurant Industry".

[50] Shierholz, Heidi. "Low wages and few benefits mean many restaurant workers can't make ends meet." *Economic Policy Institute* (2014).

[51] U.S. Census Bureau; generated by Eric Arce; using American FactFinder; <http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=BP_2014_00A1&prodType=table >; (July, 2016).

accounted for a total of 7,821 establishments with over 165,000 employees[52]. Restaurants are a sizeable part of the economy with a high amount of capital circulated through the regional economy. In 2014, Los Angeles restaurant sales amounted to $16 billion in revenue. Full-service restaurants neared the $8 billion mark.

According to a report by the Los Angeles Food Policy Council, restaurants and drinking places pay average annual wages of 18,553[53] dollars. With regard to the wages of specific positions, the Bureau of Labor Statistics provides an overview of Los Angeles-/Long Beach area annual salaries by occupation: cooks were paid annual averages of $23,880, food preparation workers $20,780, dishwashers $19,300, and waitresses $24,570[54]. In 2011 the Restaurant Opportunities Center of Los Angeles conducted a study of 562 restaurant workers and found that eighty one percent of restaurant workers were employed in positions where the hourly median wage was below 10 dollars. [55]

While the psychosocial hazards have already been discussed in a prior section, physical hazards also characterize restaurant work, especially for back of the house workers who have to negotiate the dangers of hot temperatures and sharp objects under a heavy workload. A community-based participatory research project in San Francisco's Chinatown District surveyed migrant restaurant workers and found that most workers reported an occupational injury in the past 12 months. The study discovered that 48 percent of workers had been burned, and 40 percent suffered cuts during that

[52] U.S. Census Bureau; generated by Eric Arce; using American FactFinder; < http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ECN_2012_US_00A1&prodType=table >; (July, 2016).

[53] Los Angeles Food Policy Council. 2013. Report, Los Angeles Food Policy Snapshot. Retrieved June 5, 2016 (http://goodfoodla.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/LA-Food-System-Snapshot-Oct-2013-small.pdf)

[54] Bureau of Labor Statistics. May 2014 Metropolitan and Nonmetropolitan Area Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates: Los Angeles-Long Beach-Glendale, CA Metropolitan Division Retrieved June 15, 2016 (http://www.bls.gov/oes/2014/may/oes_31084.htm#35-0000)

[55] Restaurant Opportunities Center of Los Angeles. 2011. Policy Report: "Inequality and Opportunity in Los Angeles, the Nation's Largest Restaurant Industry".

time.[56] What is less known is how these injuries and their attendant psychological stresses impacted any particular worker's individual bodily and mental health in the long-term.

The Moral Economies of Los Angeles Restaurant Workers

E.P. Thompson introduced the concept of the moral economy to examine the social conditions that precipitated food riots in England during the late 18th century and early 19th century. According to Thompson, many of these social protests emerged in response to rising food prices. Factions of the working class had characterized increased prices as unfair based on the traditions of an older moral economy – an unwritten but socially shared sense of fairness – that held that raising food prices for profit at the expense of people's ability to purchase the food was unacceptable[57]. Thompson urged scholars to understand history as a product of human relationships involving real people as they grapple with structural changes in their everyday lives. By observing the conflicts, tensions, and solidarities of the English working class, Thompson underscored the ways their own conscious efforts and actions shaped history.[58] For him and for the scholars who follow his lead, class consciousness does not flow objectively from people's positions in the economy, but rather represents a collective consciousness of exploitation and a commitment to combat it.

Drawing on the work of Thompson, political scientist James C. Scott applies the concept of the moral economy to examine how colonial exploitation radically altered the social cohesion of agrarian communities in Southeast Asia.[59] Villagers in the region had to grapple with a massive influx of

[56] Chang, C., Minkler, M., Salvatore, A. L., Lee, P. T., Gaydos, M., & San Liu, S. 2013. "Studying and addressing urban immigrant restaurant worker health and safety in San Francisco's Chinatown district: A CBPR case study."*Journal of Urban Health*, *90,*6: 1026-1040.

[57] Thompson, E. P. 1966. *The Making of the English Working Class*. New York: Vintage Books, p. 63

[58] Ibid, p. 12.

[59] Scott, James C. 1976. *Moral economy of the peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*. Yale University.

internal and external pressures placed on traditional subsistence norms, especially on reciprocity, and social insurance patterns. Scott's analysis argues that structural changes to social conditions violated the moral economy of villagers in relation to their conceptions of acceptable and expected levels of dignity, health, subsistence and material conditions.

By revealing the complex and often contradictory feelings of the exploited as they *experience* injustice, Scott's study offers a view of exploitation from below. He argues that peasant resistance to violations of their moral economies must be contextualized within their traditional understandings about what should be considered fair and tolerable. Scott defines the concept of moral economy in relation to peasants as "their notion of economic justice and their working definition of exploitation- their view of which claims on their product were tolerable and which intolerable".[60] Further, it is also important to understand that what constitutes exploitation for people on the ground can conform to, diverge from, or overlap with scholarly definitions. For instance, what someone may deem as exploitative emanating from a Marxist analysis of surplus-value, may not be the same as what is deemed exploitative from a moral economy perspective that focuses on violations of traditional norms and expectations.

Scott presents a definition that many socialists and non-socialists would agree is essential to study. He contends that a central theme when defining exploitation concerns how someone or some group is benefitting from the labor of others.[61] This study does not try to argue against the usefulness of a Marxist approach to the labor theory of value, but it does seek to reconceptualize and broaden the scope of what is considered exploitation by emphasizing the different approaches people may use to define it[62]. Rather than viewing exploitation as merely a relationship between the extraction of

[60] Ibid, p. 3
[61] Ibid, p. 157
[62] Marxist scholars examine the transfer of surplus from the worker to the non-producer (who bought the labor-power through the form of wages) as unit of analysis to define exploitation.

surplus-value, a helpful question might be how do workers themselves understand what constitutes exploitation?

While an analysis of political economy is critical to understanding the material conditions of the working-class, a purely economic depiction of exploitation obscures the ideas, analyses, and concerns which workers use to evaluate whether conditions are just or unjust. Scott asserts that real actors offer a "more reliable guide" to behavior about exploitation. He contends,

> "If the analytical goal of a theory of exploitation is to reveal something about the perceptions of the exploited—about their sense of exploitation, their notion of justice, their anger," then a framework of exploitation must begin with the actors and not with an "abstract standard".[63]

While macrosocial abstract theories of exploitation are critical for examining the mechanisms that create the landscape for exploitation, contradictions exist between abstract theories and the subjective feelings of the exploited. What workers may consider to be exploitative is not only what is being taken from their paychecks. Exploitation encapsulates concerns about their psychological, physical and spiritual well-being as they perceive it to be compromised by conditions that attempt to strip them of their dignity and violate their moral economy.

Influenced by the work of E.P. Thompson, James Scott, and scholars of the Black Radical tradition such as CLR James, Robin D. G. Kelley uses memories of his personal experiences as a teenage low-wage worker at McDonald's in 1978 to explore the dynamics of working class self-activity [64]. Kelley explains how the battles that he and his coworkers engaged in were not so much about their wages, even though many of them came from poor Black and Chicano backgrounds, but more about the ways they experienced work, for example, what clothing they wore and the style in

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[63] Scott, p. 160.

[64] Kelley, Robin D. G. 1994. *Race rebels: culture, politics, and the Black working class*. New York: Free Press; For working-class self-activity see Rawick, George. 1969. "Working Class Self Activity." *Radical America* 3, no: 22-31.

which they wore it. Kelley goes on to explain that the things that they fought for were outside the boundaries of what is generally considered to be political:

> "Like most working people throughout the world, my fellow employees at Mickey Ds were neither total victims of routinization, exploitation, and racism, nor were they rational economic beings driven by the most base utilitarian concerns. Their lives and struggles were so much more complicated".[65]

For Kelley an understanding of class-consciousness, labor issues, and politics must include subjectivities that encapsulate how workers define their pressing challenges beyond the traditional view of economic labor struggles.

In this study of restaurant workers, I demonstrate that the type of acceptable and desired workplace conditions laborers envision are informed by ideas of respect and dignity. The types of restaurant conditions workers critique and theorize about include material considerations, but are not limited to them. Often while at work, they find themselves disrespected by their employers, customers and their co-workers. I start by examining, the subjectivities of workers and seek to understand their perceptions of unfair or fair working conditions, how oppressed people's struggles for economic well-being are not separate from seeking a workplace of dignity.

In this endeavor, I follow a line of argument enabled by Scott's definition of moral economy to explore how Los Angeles restaurant workers of color make sense of industry-wide conditions marked by flagrant injuries to their health, well-being, and material conditions. I use the concept of moral economy to observe how restaurant workers evaluate which work conditions they deem intolerable and which strike them as acceptable and even pleasurable. Restaurants are part of the low-waged service-sector economy where job security is often fragile and where workers are seen as replaceable.

[65] Kelley, Robin D. G. 1994. *Race rebels: culture, politics, and the Black working class*. New York: Free Press, p. 3.

Workers are vulnerable to employer abuse and high employee turnover is rampant in the industry.[66] The high turnover rate is often attributed to restaurant employees' restlessness. But this "restlessness" is not an abstract psychological predisposition but rather a rational calculation made in the context of the class struggle. A willingness to search for new employment often stems from evaluation of the work culture of a particular restaurant and finding it unsuitable for the worker's financial needs and psychological well-being. Ultimately, if a transgression of a worker's moral economy is viewed beyond their limits and if their financial situation allows it, then they may decide to leave for another job. Although job security is fragile in any one workplace, job opportunities are abundant since restaurants are a booming part of the service-sector economy. A high turnover rate which has its emotional and financial costs to workers, benefits employers who can pay lower wages and treat beginning workers more harshly. Yet at the same time, the expected high turnover rate enables workers to measure which jobs are seen as more exploitative and which ones seem more fair and more tolerable than others.

Los Angeles restaurant workers are subject to the consequences of life in a neoliberal city. Neoliberal policies and flexible labor practices come into being in a city where rents are high and it is difficult to secure transportation on low wages.[67] Housing insecurity and transit racism compound the injuries of verbal abuse, oppressive workplace hierarchies, and forms of disrespect from managers and other workers. Restaurant workers contend with great challenges to pay their rent and get to work. When they arrive at the job, they grapple with lack of labor protections and a kitchen culture that treats them poorly. These conditions raise shared but varying sentiments about exploitation. [68]

[66] Restaurant Opportunities Center of Los Angeles. 2011. Policy Report: *"Inequality and Opportunity in Los Angeles, the Nation's Largest Restaurant Industry"*, p. 31

[68] See Scott. *Moral Economy of the Peasant*, p. 157

Findings

Verbal Abuse

"I think there's just different models of what abuse can look like in the restaurant industry." – A.K.

"Everyone that works there is a sensitive person and I think that's something to say about kitchens. People who work with food are usually very sensitive people. Meaning, they're emotional and they put that into their food. It's hard to be emotionless and make food. Because you're creating something and you're doing it with your hands and you're doing it with your team"….You want to be proud of it…Even if you're hard as stone as fuck you're still producing." – Mac

For workers, exploitation comes to mean not only the low monetary compensation for their labor, but also the emotional toll of working in an inhospitable industry where the alienations of labor impact their minds, bodies and spirits. Many of the workers I interviewed identified how they were berated and humiliated by supervisors or even other co-workers. These were some of the central critiques of working in the industry. During these moments, workers made claims to moral economies, to notions of respect and dignity, articulating their versions of just conditions by citing their transgression, analyzing how they were verbally abused, the trauma they experienced and the workplace conditions that created stress and physical pain in their lives. The abusive practices that occur in restaurants today are even consumed as entertainment in popular reality shows. "Hell's Kitchen" scenes often depict celebrity chef Gordon Ramsey screaming, yelling and berating kitchen workers. Ramsey constantly throws plates and screams in the faces of cooks. For the workers in this study, such disrespectful and violent abuse had become a normalized condition of working in this industry. As the subjects in this study recalled painful situations, they expressed how it caused assaults to their personal dignity. The type of normalized abusive culture enacted by chefs screaming to correct a "problem" or humiliate workers is a routine but an injurious part of everyday experiences for workers in the industry. These types of practices and assaults create traumatic experiences that are too

often dismissed as trivial. For instance, in *Kitchens,* Fine claims, "While anger is found in kitchens, it often blows over like a squall at sea despite being memorable at the time. If a kitchen is a family, yelling is part of family dinners…" Such a metaphor of the family unit is representative of the paternalistic relationships employers develop with their employees and also the type of cultural acceptance that attends such hostile practices. Adrian, a woman of color who is a pastry chef and has worked in restaurants for over a decade, discusses how those interactions do not blow over but linger:

> "Them just screaming at you. They would humiliate you. One guy…he would purposely humiliate me in front of everybody in there. I had been doing… like 9 years into it. I took a pay cut to work for him. He would embarrass me. He'd clap his hands, 'excuse me come here' in front of them 'look at this, look at this shit…this is awful', and everybody would stop. I couldn't handle it. I was like I'd never been yelled that that badly by this dude. I started drinking immediately every day after work. I just couldn't deal with it. He was the one dude that broke me".

Adrian, along with other workers I interviewed, described these interactions as the "culture of violence" and "cycle of abuse" constantly reproduced in restaurants and that remain etched in workers' lives in traumatic ways. The ways that chefs or supervisors attempt to correct a problem is often a spectacle, serving as a warning to others that this kind of treatment may be administered to them as well.

Yessica, a queer Chicanx and former server from the Los Angeles area has worked in restaurants since she was a teenager. In her interview, Yessica elaborates that when it comes to certain restaurants, they can become sites of abuse. The kitchen culture is described as the constant pressure to produce a quality product in a timely manner; this pressure spreads from management, to the chef, the sous chef, and then the line cooks. Yessica states:

> "Most chefs are assholes…They yell at their staff. It's all gone to their head they're in this leadership position, most of them aren't good leaders… There's a culture of violence with this chef that started that new wave, new trend of being mean to your staff. They're under a lot of pressure too… A lot of those cooks are underpaid and they're demoralized…and they have to answer to the chef who sometimes is lazy and doesn't do anything and puts all the work on the underpaid people"

Yessica points toward the culture of restaurants as an overarching problem. For chefs it is culturally acceptable behavior to yell at their employees. The abuse is learned and reproduced through cultural cooking practices and because of workplace divisions are strained during stressful times. Kitchen culture creates divisions among workers and from owners all the way to chefs and sous chefs which refracts mistreatment onto others.

Mac, a 30 year-old trans worker of color and a former FOH worker who now works in the BOH argues that this treatment is cyclical and reproduced among workers:

> "I also think it's just [the] cycle of abuse that happens in a different way. Like you talk about domestic violence and sexual abuse being a cycle that affects the generations after. I really think that even in culinary school they teach that type of dynamic. The way that you are disciplined is by being yelled at and that's the fear that you're going to ride under, that's why you're going to do things a certain way. It's because you're fearful of being yelled at--like verbally accosted. The sous chef that I have now, I put all my money on him being abused in the same way that he's treating…either in his family or in his workplace. I think a lot of comes from French kitchen etiquette (…) I think it comes with a lot of trauma. I think people are very traumatized. I'm traumatized by it. It makes you… it builds anxiety. If you ever leave a place you take that with you. Speaking of things that you take home with you, you know? I think that's something affects you for the rest of your life. It's that kind of conditioning.

Mac addresses how this abuse is passed down by chefs in the workplace but also to students in culinary schools. He argues that disciplining is enforced through public spectacles and being afraid of another incident reoccurring therefore making workers afraid to make mistakes. According to Mac this is a learned process that happens as a result of institutional factors or even possibly stemming from family dynamics making the entire process what he terms a cycle of abuse. Later in the interview, Mac also raises the issue of the hyper-masculinity needed to work in restaurants and how such toxic masculinity sets a tone in the kitchen that you have to endure verbal tirades in order to not appear weak. Adrian raises a similar point by explaining the ways workers attempt to conceal the hurt and pain those moments have caused.

> "They [restaurant workers] are really sensitive. Them coming off hard is really just a front. Everybody just wanted to be treated with respect and they're not. It's hard you work so hard, you make no money and you're extremely passionate about what you do and you still get shit on every day. It's hard to be tough about it. It makes you sensitive. You get your feelings hurt a lot. You can't let that out, you have to hide it".

While wages are important, in my research I argue that wages alone do not encompass accurately the ways that workers define respect. It is not only material conditions that restaurant workers are attempting to change. For them the unfairness of the job was emblematized by the constant verbal abuse they experienced. Adrian, and others, emphasized that violations to worker's feelings are also incredibly lasting. There are serious consequences to verbal abuse and humiliation. As an outlet, many workers have explained that they or their co-workers have turned to alcohol, drugs and some suffer from emotional distress. This is also on top of the pressure of intense work production. Yessica indicates this point by elaborating:

> "You're working in a violent workplace, you may take that home. That can cause a lot of substance abuse. Substance abuse is really big in kitchens. There's always alcohol. Because you're working long shifts, and you're overworked and you're underpaid and you're talked down to."

Several workers, mainly BOH employees discussed how alcoholism is pervasive among staff. They either pointed to ways that they were treated in the workplace, or the stress of production as reasons for why some turn to alcoholism. Yessica's statement indicates that institutional factors such as night shifts, the strains of exploitation and the low wages are all contributors to drinking. The workers discussed in this section discussed not only what they consider exploitative, but also what they were unwilling to tolerate in the workplace

Immigration Status and Workplace Dignity

Workers in interviews recounted the instances of disrespect they experience in the restaurant industry. Undocumented workers explained how abusive behavior by employers and coworkers is linked to their immigration status. In addition to producing a climate that allows employers to pay

low-wages, or even to withhold them, migrant "illegality" is accompanied by a lack of retirement benefits, the absence of mental and physical healthcare services, and an increase in workplace conditions that cause accidents. A restaurant worker without legal work authorization is confronted with the likelihood of hyper-exploitation and abusive treatment. These challenges contribute to the long and short-term stress, worry, and emotional duress associated with being an undocumented migrant. In a study by ROC, a third of the 562 workers they interviewed reported experiencing verbal abuse motivated by their race.[69] Along with a kitchen culture that disciplines through humiliation, many undocumented workers suffer mistreatment as a result of their vulnerable legal status and their racialization in a highly exploitative industry.

The highly exploitative conditions found in restaurants are made possible since employers utilize the state's production of illegality to hire undocumented Mexican, Central American and Asian workers. With an influx of labor pools, employers treat migrants as replaceable and disposable. The shift to hiring migrant workers has changed the dynamics and organization of kitchens. Owners take advantage of a labor pool with few labor protections and who rarely pursue formal claims when labor violations occur. Without the hyper-exploitation of migrants in restaurants, the growth and profits of the industry would not have accelerated at such a rapid pace. For undocumented people, finding employment has its own set of challenges. Programs such as E-verify have created obstacles for workers to find well-paying stable jobs. With a highly competitive job market and limited employment options migrants are forced to accept working conditions that violate their notions of respect and dignity.

Paco an undocumented Salvadoran migrant came to the U.S. in 2013. He worked as an engineer in his home country, but migrated to find work. He overstayed a tourist visa and reluctantly entered

[69] Restaurant Opportunities Center of Los Angeles. 2011. Policy Report: *"Inequality and Opportunity in Los Angeles, the Nation's Largest Restaurant Industry"*, p. ii

the restaurant industry. It was difficult for him to perform some of the tasks that he was not accustomed to in his middle-class life back home. Paco was used to working in an office, however, when he came to this country all of his degrees and certifications had no value. He found work in various low-wage industries, including a seafood distribution center that he eventually quit because of his body's reaction to working in a freezer. His muscles and joints would ache from the cold temperatures, keeping him up at night. He also worked in a factory that painted metals. The job was dangerous, where he labored in intense heat. Eventually he burned his hands, something that could have been avoided, he says, if the supervisors supplied the proper safety gloves.

Paco began working in restaurants as a bus boy. He recounted his reaction to learning about the job duties he would be performing. He grappled with how he felt internally and paused briefly before choosing the right words:

> "Igual fue drástico y hasta cierto punto un poco chocante (…) Cuando yo llegue al restaurante… y cuando pues me dijeron que me trabajo iba ser una escoba, un trapeador, y una pala para recoger basura …Hubo un tiempo en cual no lo podía digerir... sufría mucho internamente aceptarme que yo estuviera haciendo eso… Pues en un área abierta en un restaurante donde había mucha gente…wow…"
>
> "It was drastic and even shocking (…) When I arrived at the restaurant… and when they told me that my job would be with a broom, a mop, and a dustpan to pick up trash… there was a moment in which I couldn't accept it… I suffered a lot internally because I was doing this… Well it was an open area in a restaurant where there was a lot of people…wow…"

He struggled with how that type of labor was perceived as menial both in his home country and the United States. He was also frustrated that his degree meant nothing once he arrived here. After all, he was educated, and an engineer in El Salvador, a title that came with prestige. During the interview, he constantly recounted the ways he was treated unfairly on the job because of his immigration status. It bothered him the way he was talked to, and the ways other Latinx immigrants treated him as well. Part of his frustration with his co-workers stemmed from his

supervisors being less educated than him. What seemed to bother him even more than that was how immigration laws created hierarchies, competition and tension among migrants and citizens. Paco goes on to identify the hierarchies within legal categories in the immigration system:

> "Aquí hay tres grupos el que no tiene nada, ni papeles ni nada, el residente y el ciudadano. Así es la sociedad…Cuando tú estas a ese nivel [indocumentado] cuesta mucho…yo pienso que cuando ya tú tienes papeles pienso…de que entras a otra categoría a nivel de trabajo de donde ya te respetan un poquito…Para nosotros los indocumentados abusan y no nos respetan."
>
> "Here there are three groups, a group that has nothing, not papers or anything, the resident and the citizen. This is how society is...When you're at the level of being undocumented it comes with a cost… I think that when you have papers…You'll enter another level of status where they'll respect you a little more…For us the undocumented, they abuse us and they don't respect us."

Paco's comments connect the state's use of migrant "illegality" to the way they experience disrespect in the workplace. His legal status intensifies his mistreatment and shapes the ways he experiences exploitation in the workplace. He later discusses that his managers can tell where you are from, if you have proper work authorization, and how long you have been in this country. In his experience, employers "se aprovechan" or take advantage of this information and use it against migrants to exploit them. He resents not only the long hours he work for little pay, but at the forefront of his critiques is the way he is disrespected and exploited because of his liminal legal status.

José migrated from Oaxaca, Mexico when he was a teenager. He reluctantly started working in kitchens because his uncle had informed him that it would be a lot of work and that most likely a manager would be "fucking with you constantly". But out of necessity he entered the industry, beginning like many migrants as a dishwasher. José goes on to explain how in restaurants there are racial divisions in between the back and the front. He elaborates:

"En un restaurante es donde mucha gente ha estado dividida por la cocina y el frente del restaurante. Hay mucha gente Americana en frente y todos los Latinos estamos atrás…simplemente puedes ver el racismo ahí. Porque realmente ni saludas a la gente del frente a veces. Tú nomás conoces de la cocina. Con ellos nomás hablas…la meseras nunca vienen y te saludan o algo…"

"A restaurant is where a lot of people are divided by the kitchen and the front of the restaurant. There's a lot of Americans in the front and all the Latinos are in the back…Simply, you can see the racism there. Because really you don't say hello to the people in front. You only know the people in the back. You only speak with them…the servers never come to say hello…"

The racial divisions not only create inequalities in pay and job placement, but they also shape the ways undocumented migrants of color experience the type of workplace treatment. Like many of the workers in the preceding section, José discusses a situation in which he was berated and humiliated by a chef. Verbal abuse is common in restaurants but the way it happens and to whom it happens reveals how chefs often attack vulnerable workers. José believes that it was his race and immigration status that made him a target:

José: "Un chef hace años me grito, … me tira mi plato de comida en la basura...y me dijo que si yo no tenía ganas de trabajar ahí que me fuera porque el tampoco no quería que yo fuera parte de la familia de ahí."

Entrevistador: "¿Era Americano?"

José: "Un Americano (…)Yo era el único latino ahí."

José: " Years ago a chef yelled at me…he throws my plate of food in the trash… and he said that if I didn't have the desire to work that I should leave because he didn't want me to be part of his family there."

Interviewer: "Was he American"

José: "An American (…) I was the only Latino there."

He left immediately after he was verbally abused. José goes on to say that his boss called to apologize and wanted him to return but he could not after that incident. He was one of the few workers that worked multiple stations. José continues, "El patrón o el manager o el chef te mira si

tienes tus papeles en orden, van con ese motive de asustar…" He explains that his coworkers, who possess legal documents have more options for employment therefore they are not expected to work as hard as migrants.

Carlos had a similar experience to José in that he also experienced verbal abuse and that for a long time he did not have proper work authorization. Carlos came to this country, or as he says, "me trajeron" (I was brought here) when he was three years old. He began working in fast food until he switched to full-service restaurants. He proudly tells me he started working at the bottom as a dishwasher until he worked his way up to lead line cook. Carlos describes how working in a kitchen as a migrant can be difficult because of the way you are treated. He points toward language being used as a weapon against Latinxs during times of conflict:

> "La tensión [del racismo] que se vive. Creo que por los mismo como te digo el preparador no quiere ser cocinero de línea hasta que se siente agusto de comunicarse. Hay mucha gente que no respeta... A la mejor saben que la persona es inmigrante o no…simplemente no respeta como trabajador y tratan de utilizarte como si fueras un animal."
>
> "You can feel the tension caused by racism. I think for this reason that a preparer doesn't want to be a line cook until they feel comfortable communicating. There's a lot of people that aren't respectful… maybe they know a person is an immigrant or not…but really they don't respect you as a worker and they trying to use you like you're an animal."

Carlos expresses that the racism is so powerful and evident that you can feel it. The racism at work is a large enough concern for migrant workers that they hesitate to move up in position, even if the pay is higher until they feel comfortable to defend themselves. Since kitchens are also hotbeds for inter-worker conflict, migrant workers want to make sure they can protect themselves when arguments arise. Carlos comments on a moment where such a situation took place:

> "Sí, experimente momentos de tensión donde el manager llegaba y comenzaba a gritar al cocinero o el encargado de línea. En ese tiempo yo era en un restauran (…) deje que me gritara… dije que no me dijera de cosas y de ahí yo seguí y le grite atrás.

> Le pude entender de que no porque el es manager me tiene el derecho de gritarme. Yo también como trabajador me puedo defender."
>
> "I've experienced moments of tension where the manager would come in and begin to yell at a cook or the line cook. At that time I was at the restaurant (…) I let him yell… I told him not to shout those things and then I began to shout at him. I made him understand that just because he is a manager doesn't mean he has the right to yell at me. As a worker I can also defend myself."

Carlos points to a line of respect that many supervisors often cross. It is important for him to defend himself in the argument, and in the process to maintain his dignity. He stresses how certain coworkers and supervisors will treat migrants like animals by berating them. Dehumanizing injuries like these shaped how the people in this study define exploitation and abuse in the industry.

Conclusion

I have described how the restaurant workers I interviewed discussed their moral economies, their expectations for respect and dignity in the Los Angeles restaurant industry. I examined what workers considered to be exploitative and how certain examples of workplace transgressions defined their limits of what they considered unacceptable and exploitative. While exploitation is generally defined through the money made by paying low wages, the methods that employers use to increase profits also take away from a worker's mental and physical health through demeaning and unsafe working conditions, long and unpredictable hours, sparse benefits, and verbal abuse that together damage the mind, body and spirit.

While many workers sought material changes, such as wanting a higher wage and healthcare benefits, it was evident that their chief concern was to work in an environment where they were respected and free from physical and psychological abuse. Their interviews revealed their critiques against state structures, such as federal immigration laws that cause violations to their

moral economies. The analysis of the interviews sought to broaden the scope of how exploitation is defined by centering the experiences of the actors. Exploitation is not simply an economic relationship, it is subjective experience defined by real life actors.

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