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Serving Across the Divide: Race, Class, and
the Production of Restaurant Service in Los Angeles

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Sociology

by

Eli Revelle Yano Wilson

2017

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Serving Across the Divide: Race, Class, and
the Production of Restaurant Service in Los Angeles

by

Eli Revelle Yano Wilson

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Professor Rubén Hernández-León, Chair

This dissertation examines the rich social landscapes within upscale restaurants in Los Angeles, common space to both affluent guests and low-skilled immigrant laborers. These settings embody a number of contemporary trends in postindustrial societies today, such as growing inequality, sustained international migration, urban consumption, and service work. Drawing on five years of ethnographic study within three upscale restaurants in Los Angeles, this dissertation asks: how is social inequality both reproduced and contested within these service workplaces? How are boundaries reinforced not only between workers, customers, and managers, but also between coworkers who share few social similarities? Finally, how is labor coordinated across

race, class, gender, and immigration status differences, and to what extent might this yield unexpected opportunities for some workers but disadvantages for others?

This dissertation details how white, class-privileged workers are able to attain more lucrative customer-facing service jobs in upscale restaurants, whereas immigrant Latino workers remain stuck in low-wage, “back of the house” jobs. I argue that these worker inequalities are not only the result of managerial practices (such as discriminatory hiring) that shape the workplace – as traditional labor process theory might suggest – but also by the social and cultural boundaries enacted by various shop floor actors (chapters two and three). As a result, service workplaces become divided into two separate and unequal worlds of work all but closed against one another.

Yet, despite internal divides, upscale restaurants must still find a way to produce upscale service for paying customers. Chapter six describes how some workers are able to help bridge workplace divides and enable a smoother flow of food service on the shop floor. I show how second-generation Latinos, armed with dual socio-cultural attributes and network ties, are able to leverage their “in-betweenness” in this work setting to access higher job rungs in the organization – positions virtually unavailable to their low-skilled immigrant coworkers. The concluding chapter of this dissertation details how this research advances the study of service work, job skills, immigrant labor, and social inequality.

The dissertation of Eli Revelle Yano Wilson is approved.

Chris Tilly

Roger Waldinger

Kyeyoung Park

Abel Valenzuela

Rubén Hernández-León, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2017

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Last but not least, I'd like to thank all of the amazing people who I worked alongside and befriended over the years in restaurants. Though they are not recognizable by name in this dissertation, I have tried to let their stories and experiences spill from these pages in as true a form as possible. I cannot walk into restaurants today without thinking of their laughter and smiles, and our shared moments together.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eli Wilson received his B.A. in Psychology and Sociology (High Honors) from Wesleyan University in 2009. After graduating, he worked for three years in the restaurant industry, holding a variety of positions such as food runner, server, bartender, and manager. During this time he also became a Certified Cicerone™ (beer sommelier), and went on to oversee the craft beer program for a company with three gastropubs in the Los Angeles area. In 2013, he received his Masters in Sociology from the University of California, Los Angeles. He has since published three solo-authored journal articles: “Bridging the Service Divide: Dual Labor Niches and Embedded Opportunities in Restaurant Work,” forthcoming in *RSF: Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*; “Matching Up: Producing Proximal Service in a Los Angeles Restaurant,” (2016) in *Research in the Sociology of Work*; and “Stuck Behind Kitchen Doors?: Assessing the Work Prospects of Latter-Generation Latinos in a Los Angeles Restaurant,” (2017) in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*.

Eli has also given numerous presentations on his work, including at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, the annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP), the Chicago Ethnography Conference, and the annual graduate student conference at The New School for Social Research. In 2016, his paper entitled, “Stuck Behind Kitchen Doors?” won best student paper in the Labor Studies division of SSSP.

Introduction

Javier, a cook in his forties from Oaxaca, Mexico, stabs a grease-splattered food ticket onto the spike. He pushes a plate of Steak Frites onto a long metal counter separating the kitchen from the dining room, then calmly turns back towards the grill where an array of sizzling pans await. Juan, a Mexican American food runner, grabs the dish – along with three more – and walks them briskly towards the dining room. He approaches a group of thirtysomething white men and women and swiftly sets each plate down. The diners glance at the food, none so much as looking up or pausing their laugh-filled conversation. “Thank you,” one of the men grunts.

A minute later, Pip, a slender blonde waitress dressed in a red plaid shirt and fitted jeans, arrives at the table. She smiles easily towards the diners, who are suddenly forced to mild attention. “How is everyone doing so far?” Pip asks. She jokes about the limp fry on one man’s plate with comedic drama. “How about I get you another beer to help with that?” she asks lightly. “Have any of you tried the wheat ale we have on tap tonight? It’s amaaaazing.” Hands raise, more laughter. Pip twirls away. One of the women at the table leans in and mouths, “isn’t she cute? Let’s definitely make sure to tip her well.”

Each day, social scenes similar to the one above repeat on loop inside service establishments all around the country. The one above takes place in a buzzing restaurant in Los Angeles, but it could just as well have been set in Chicago, New York, Houston or San Francisco. These are scenes of inequality based on race, class, and gender that, unlike overt enactments of power differentials, often fall below the radar of scrutiny. With the Great Recession not yet a decade in the past, the urban service economy is in full swing, energizing revitalized city centers with new fitness studios, restaurants, and boutique clothiers – and a professional class willing to spend money in them. In 2016 alone, the restaurant industry generated over a billion dollars in revenue, employing over twelve million people in 800,000 eating and drinking establishments across the United States.

Yet, this economic growth is occurring amidst widening social inequality in our society. More jobs today are located at the top and bottom of the labor market, with little job growth between the two poles. Many of the jobs near the bottom are what sociologist Arne Kalleberg (2011) calls “bad jobs”: employment featuring a deadly combination of job insecurity, low wages, poor benefits, contingent schedules, hazardous workplace conditions, and limited advancement opportunities. The service industry is the epicenter for these bad jobs. Cooks, for example, average less than \$24,000 a year with virtually no employer-paid benefits or employment protections. They have it no worse than many retail cashiers, domestic workers, janitors, backroom stockers, or frontline sales clerks.¹

As has historically been the case, those who work in marginalized jobs in this country tend to be disproportionately immigrants, racial minorities, women, and others on

¹ There are regional differences. For example, according to 2014 Bureau of Labor Statistics, the highest median salary for cooks in Los Angeles was \$27,000, while the national median is around \$23,000.

the fringes of the labor market such as teens and seniors. Yet as the economy shifts, service-based workplaces in urban centers are employing a more heterogeneous mix of workers. The proportion of white, middle-class young workers in service and retail jobs has increased in the past few decades (Besen-Cassino 2014; Lloyd 2010), as has the number of men working in traditionally feminized service jobs, such as “waitressing” (Cobble 1991; Hall 1993). While foreign-born ethnic/racial minorities continue to be overrepresented in these jobs – particularly in immigrant-heavy areas of the country – their offspring are also entering service and retail jobs in significant numbers.

Scholars often treat the jobs that these individuals perform as undifferentiated, unskilled, and undesirable when in fact they can be highly differentiated in terms of skills, work experiences, and earning opportunities. “Interactive” service workplaces, for example, are settings where “production and consumption occur simultaneously, linked in time just as they are brought together in space” (Sherman 2007: 8). This requires that a team of workers deal directly with customers – referred to as the “front of the house” –, while another team of workers deal with the preparation of raw materials usually situated behind the scenes – the “back of the house”. Both are essential to the seamless production of service for guests; there can be no service without the proper goods being prepared backstage in a timely fashion, no provision of these goods to the customer without a guest-facing team.

However, these different subgroups of workers in interactive service workplaces are far from equal. Front of the house service workers often enjoy substantially higher earnings than back of the house workers, particularly in settings where tipping is expected. In metropolitan restaurants, for example, servers and bartenders working full-

time have been known to earn up to \$50,000 annually (sometimes much more, see Haley-Lock and Ewert 2011), whereas cooks and dishwashers in the same restaurants may be struggling to stay above the poverty line (Jayaraman 2014)². Similarly, while working valet in a hotel is hardly more technically challenging than cleaning bedrooms, the earning disparity between each respective worker due to tips can be sizable. In this sense, service jobs that would not appear very different from afar may in fact yield both different work experiences and divergent structural opportunities for workers.

Social inequalities based on race, class, gender, and immigration status often map onto these unequal job opportunities. Walk into a bustling restaurant in Silver Lake or spa in midtown Manhattan today and you will find that those who greet you at the front door do not share the same characteristics as those scrubbing pots or wiping down the floors behind the scenes. Particularly in higher-end establishments in global cities³, front of the house service workers are often more white and class-privileged than back of the house workers who tend to be working-class racial minorities and immigrants (Jayaraman 2011; Sherman 2007; Zukin 1995). These inequalities in turn shape the service shop floor in distinct ways: while the guest area swoons with soft jazz as well-mannered, white service professionals glide around the floor, a scratchy old radio blasts *cumbia* to Mexican and Central American immigrants out of customer view. These two groups of workers may be employed at the same establishment, their respective labors inextricably

² According to the most recent Census report, cooks average just over \$20,000 annually. By contrast, a recent study of the restaurant industry shows that when accounting for tipped earnings, waiters and bartenders working in full-service restaurants average nearly *double* the earnings of cooks and dishwashers (Haley-Lock 2011).

³ I make this distinction to acknowledge that many low-end, quick-serve establishments, particularly in the inner-city, are staffed by racial minorities and others with low levels of formal education – regardless of job position (see Newman 1999; Ehrenreich 2000).

intertwined in the process of service, but they are navigating highly unequal worlds of work.

This study examines the social forces that shape the workplace dynamic within contemporary service establishments. I ask, how are social inequalities reproduced, enacted, and sometimes transcended within low-end service jobs? How are boundaries maintained between front of the house workers, back of the house workers, and customers in these settings, and to what extent can they be destabilized? By analyzing everyday relations between fellow workers, managers, and customers in upscale restaurants in Los Angeles, I aim to draw connections between what Everett Hughes calls the “social drama of the workplace” (2009 [1971]: 345) and the mechanisms reinforcing social inequality. Setting this study in Los Angeles is strategic because the city has one of the largest immigrant populations in the United States, serving as an especially important home for Mexican and Central American immigrants (see Alarcon, Escala, and Odgers 2016). Los Angeles also has the largest restaurant industry in the country, where nearly one out of every two workers is foreign-born (Restaurant Opportunities Center Los Angeles [ROCLA] 2011). Given the steady growth of the urban service economy in global cities – with robust restaurant industries near their beating hearts – it is more pressing than ever to unpack the socially-segregated and structurally unequal work settings found within them.

Theorizing Labor Relations

Throughout much of the twentieth century, the study of labor relations focused primarily on the dyadic struggle between workers and management. Drawing insights from

industrial manufacturing workplaces, scholars sought to understand how managers attempt to exploit workers, and how workers attempt to resist these efforts (Braverman 1974; Burawoy 1979; Roy 1954; Thompson and Smith 2010). Broadly speaking, management seeks to gain an upper hand in this relationship through both direct and indirect means. Managers may attempt to “deskill” the labor that workers do (Braverman 1974), break up unions, move operations overseas to areas with cheaper labor, and/or “scientifically” manage their workforce. Each is an effort to weaken labor’s bargaining power and gain a business advantage. Other managerial methods are less conspicuous, but in effect, the same. In *Managing Consent* (1979), sociologist Michael Burawoy highlights how companies need not impose stifling constraints over employees in order to get them to comply with their subordinate roles. By allowing workers to focus their energies on “making out” on the job and participating in shop floor “games”, Burawoy argues that management makes resistance to broader structural inequalities between workers and managers/owners less the focus. Workers, in effect, “consent” to their marginal place in the labor hierarchy. In similar fashion, managerial efforts to foster shared interests, norms, and values within corporate offices can serve as a powerful form of “normative” control over employees (Barley and Kunda 1992; Fleming and Sturdy 2011). By generating a degree of worker buy-in about the company culture, management can reap the benefits of higher productivity and less turnover without necessarily offering more wages. Each of these indirect forms of managerial control is thought to secure company profits as well as existing labor hierarchies (see Burawoy 1979; Willis 1977).

The growth of service industries has given way to new theories about labor relations and the workplace dynamic. In contrast to traditional workplaces, service

establishments feature a triangular, rather than dyadic, set of power relations between workers, managers, and customers (Korzynski 2002; Leidner 1996). Since customers have discretion over their spending dollar, they have the ability to exert power over frontline workers (Korzynski 2002). They can flex this power by complaining about bad service to management. Facing additional layers of surveillance, frontline service workers have in effect two sets of supervisors bearing down on them instead of one (Leidner 1996; Lopez 2010).⁴

The interaction between managers and customers is often more indirect. Management wants to ensure that guests will have a positive experience while patronizing their establishment, every time. This motivates them to attempt to streamline (“control”) contact between workers and customers (Leidner 1996). A large body of research details how managers institute uniform customer service procedures, scripted greetings, and standardized service props (nametags, information pamphlets). Hochschild (1983), for example, goes into great lengths about how airline managers train new stewardesses on the proper demeanor, appearance, and service style for the job. To ensure the use of such protocol, management may deploy surveillance cameras, secret shoppers, and other technologies aimed at ensuring control in the service workplace.

Underlying management’s attempts to control the corporeality of interactive service workers is that the latter are part of the product to be “consumed”. That is, frontline workers are treated as physical extensions of the company’s brand, and a primary aspect of the guest experience (see Hochschild 1983; Leidner 1993; Sallaz

⁴ The relative power of customers over service workers is undoubtedly heightened in the era of public user platforms like Yelp and Google-plus. These sites allow users to post immediate and largely uncensored reviews of an establishment and its employees online.

2015). A worker appearing disheveled or behaving inappropriately can reflect poorly on the company as a whole in the eyes of consumers. This is particularly true in hospitality settings, where customers are paying a premium to be treated to pristine service amenities and pampered by highly selected workers (Sherman 2007; Mears 2015). While there may be general cultural conceptions of what “good” or upscale service looks like, service amenities need not be uniform across different establishments. Like different brands of cheddar cheese in a grocery store, management attempts to make their particular product distinct in the marketplace. For example, in sociologist Rachel Sherman’s 2007 study of luxury New York hotels, the nature of customer service differed per establishment: one hotel featured a deferential and understated service style, while another touted more personable service. Some service establishments may therefore encourage guests to “consume familiarity” (Erickson 2009), by fostering a relaxed atmosphere for repeat guests (“regulars”), while other establishments may deliberately seek to attract a trendy customer base seeking a chic ambiance of high-end, conspicuous consumption.

The regularization of service in different service establishments would appear to leave workers with little room for agency, autonomy, and personal differentiation on the job. Yet since Hochschild’s pioneering work (1983) in this vein, scholars have shown how service workers are able to pushback against both management and customers. For example, despite facing stringent managerial oversight, service workers often do exhibit deviant and otherwise less scripted displays with clients (Bolton and Boyd 2003). Away from a manager’s gaze, they may elect to appear tired or disinterested rather than continuing to feign a (fake) bright smile. Anthropologists Mars and Nicod (1984) show how waiters try to “gain the upper hand” with customers by subtly controlling aspects of

the meal such as the pace of food delivery and menu recommendations. They may also reprimand disagreeable diners in ways that the latter is unaware of (see Dublanica 2008). In this sense, interactive service workers are able to draw on a number of resources available to them in the workplace to resist oppressive power relations with management and/or customers (Scott 1985).

Despite the asymmetry of their two roles, service workers and customers need not always be in opposition. There are situations where the relationship between the two can appear to be more collaborative than competitive (Korzynski 2002). For example, restaurant servers often attempt to sneak diners free drinks or food items in implicit exchange for higher tips (Erickson 2009). In Richard Lloyd's (2010) ethnography of Wicker Park, neighborhood bartenders and bouncers would visit each other's respective place of employment as privileged guests paying a fraction of the sticker prices.⁵ In these cases, as a function of close relations between customers and guests (Gutek et al 2000), the former are able to enjoy insider privileges beyond the purview of management. Structural asymmetries between workers and customers notwithstanding, certain kinds of workers may be able to temporarily transform service relations into more mutually-beneficial interactions.

Differentiating Service Jobs

Economic and sociological literature has traditionally lumped unskilled service work into a category of labor portraying it as uniformly low status (Blau and Duncan 1967),

⁵ Richard Lloyd notes in chapter 5 of *Neobohemia* (2010) that many of those working in bars and restaurants in Wicker Park would participate in a lively ecosystem consisting of labor then consumption within similar service establishments in which their friends and associates worked.

feminized (Charles and Grusky 2004), and undesirable relative to higher status jobs located outside the service sector (Kalleberg 2011). More recently, scholars of labor have begun to pay attention to differences *between* service workers, taking stock of the divergent skills these workers use on the job, and the intra-worker dynamics that occur on the shop floor (Sallaz 2009). In fact, “interactive” service workers (the “front of the house”) share little in common with non-interactive workers (the “back of the house”). Whereas interactive service workers labor in direct contact with customers, non-interactive service workers operate away from customers and often with material goods. A personal hair stylist or restaurant host may work at the same establishment as an after-hours janitor or dishwasher, but their respective day-to-day labor routines would be foreign to each other.

Arriving at work on different schedules, possessing different skills, and, earning unequal amounts of money, the structural differences between coworkers can engender social cleavages in the workplace (see Abbott 1988). In her study of Wall Street firms, Karen Ho (2009) notes that those who interface with clients are viewed with higher prestige than those who do “mere” administrative work. The two groups of professionals are further symbolically and structurally differentiated by office locations, dress codes, salaries and hiring selection processes (ibid 2009). Similarly, William H. Whyte’s iconic 1948 study of restaurant labor showcased how male cooks attempt to assert control over waitresses by intentionally altering the speed and quality of food that comes out of the kitchen (Whyte 1948; Fine 1996). Such intra-employee fault lines can chronically strain the social dynamic within companies. Whyte detailed how frustrated waitresses were

brought to tears as a result of flare-ups with the kitchen; administrative workers on Wall Street hardly mingle with client-facing workers in their company (and vice versa).

Of course, not all service jobs fit neatly into a front- and back of the house division of labor. Some reflect ambiguous roles that interface with customers while also partially operating behind the scenes (examples include “floaters” in retail stores, or food “expeditors” in restaurants who operate at the threshold between the kitchen and the dining room). Workers in these liminal job roles are often required to interact with multiple, discreet groups of individuals on the job, including managers, customers, and various worker cohorts. This is significant because the unique structural circumstance that these workers find themselves in has the potential to augment their *social* importance in the workplace. Studying restaurant labor, William Whyte (1948) observed that well-liked “pantry” workers were helpful in smoothing over tensions that could arise between cooks and waitresses (such as a backed-up kitchen where food is delayed). However, less well-liked pantry workers often exacerbated inter-employee conflicts (see also Fine 1996).

Like the division of labor in service workplaces, the heterogeneous skills of service work also suffer from scholarly inattention. It is important to keep in mind that service work on the whole has traditionally been considered low status and relatively unskilled labor, suitable for women or disadvantaged workers (Doeringer and Piore 1971). Thus, the formal skills of service work and the criteria by which employers may use to screen employees remains poorly understood. One known aspect of service work is the display of emotional or “affective” labor. First coined by Arlie Hochschild (1983), emotional work is done through manipulating one’s emotions in order to evoke a certain

feeling in customers. In Hochschild's conception, the type of emotional labor done by frontline workers often reflects management's "organizational feeling rules". Workers must follow certain protocol when interacting with customers, such as using scripts, staying on certain conversation topics, and following other guidelines. That said, any given exchange features a blend of company training and personal sociality: how one responds when a customer conversation swings from buying cheeses for a dinner party to the results of the playoff basketball game the previous evening suggests a subtle interpersonal skill set steeped in cultural knowledge, communication skills, and emotional intelligence.

How employers select employees for service jobs is also not readily apparent. Employers are known to value "soft skills", such as the ability to get along well with others and exhibit a pleasant demeanor, as important attributes that new hires must possess (Moss and Tilly 2001; Waldinger and Lichter 2003). Some of these "soft skills" can be honed through meticulous employee training. For example, the use of service scripts, instructional videos, shadowing, and dry-run simulations can ready workers for the real show. Yet other dimensions of "soft skills" are less taught and more embodied by the worker. Warhurst, Tilly, and Gatta (2016) refer to this as "ascribed skills". That is, skills that are less the product of careful training and more reflective of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1984) in the sense of embodied race and class attributes such as whiteness and middle-upper-classness. Being able to produce the right physical appearance, or "aesthetic" labor (Warhurst et al. 2000; Warhurst and Nickson 2007) is associated with being a traditionally attractive, masculine man or feminine woman. Male and female service workers enter into customer interactions "doing" gendered service work

(Hochschild 1983; Williams 1991). Additionally, different kinds of aesthetics may appeal to different consumer niches. Sociologists Carol Ronai and Carolyn Ellis (1989) show that table dancers must consider which clientele they seek to appeal to with their particular “look” (e.g. girl next door, dominatrix, cowgirl, etc). Similarly, bars in hipster neighborhoods may seek out male bartenders with tattoos and beards in order to fit in with contemporary social types for this position.

If front of the house service work is centrally concerned with the ability to skillfully perform emotional and aesthetic labor, what of the skill requirements for back of the house labor? Outside of management, back of the house labor usually involves preparing items necessary for the service floor. This could mean restocking the shelves of retail clothing stores, cleaning countertops at a spa, or preparing *Fettuccine Alfredo* sauce in a café kitchen. Many of the skills of this work require some initial training, but are ultimately geared towards rote, manual labor tasks honed on the job. This does not mean they are simple, nor easily replicated day in and day out on the job. Sociologist Gary Fine describes how cooks must master the skill of *collaborative* food production: they must time their efforts to be in synch with other cooks in order to assemble each hot plate of food made (1996; p.78). Producing a plate of grilled sole with fries and steamed broccoli, for example, means that the grill cook must time the fish with a second cook steaming vegetables to order and a third who must pull a bucket of fries from the deep fryer just as the fish and vegetables are plating. Producing such practical job skills goes unacknowledged in formal measures of human capital (see Hagan, Hernandez-Leon, Demonsant 2015), though it requires considerable experience to cultivate. As a result, back of the house service workers – like their front of the house counterparts – are often

evaluated based on ambiguous measures and contextual displays of skill that may overlook years of workplace savvy not easily translatable on a resume or in a job interview.⁶ In some cases, the opportunity to display these skills to the right managers and colleagues on the job may not be readily available (Iskander and Lowe 2010). Despite the heterogeneous skills needed to access different service jobs, the absence of formal measures and credential requirements makes it difficult to ascertain qualified candidates from less qualified candidates. Instead, managers are left to rely instead on informal, imperfect, and intuitive procedures to make decisions about hiring.

The division of labor within service workplaces is often less variegated and hierarchical compared to many white- or blue-collar organizations. The flatness of service firms is not necessarily a boon for workers, since many service jobs in the front- and back of the house are relatively low in formal skill requirements and job status anyway. Instead, what comes to mark one type of service job in the workplace as higher status or more desirable than another is unclear, and depends on the worker and the workplace. For instance, interacting with customers can sometimes be considered more prestigious than working with lowly materials (ex. tour guides versus porters). Yet, in other settings the inverse may be true: Gary Fine (1996) points out that in restaurants, servers have cash but cooks have status. To add to the murkiness of service hierarchies, jobs higher along job ladders are not necessarily more desirable to all employees. Working as the night shift supervisor at McDonald's, while an attractive option to some, hardly rings of social advancement for a middle-class worker.

⁶ In studying the case of immigrant construction workers, Natasha Iskander and colleagues argue that the informal nature of skill documentation makes it so these workers often encounter difficulties conveying their abilities to potential employers (Iskander and Lowe 2010; Lowe, Hagan, Iskander 2010).

Despite their unclear status distinctions, different unskilled service jobs do offer vastly unequal earning potentials for workers. This is largely because of tips. Tipping remains a controversial practice, one rooted in cultural norms that vary by country, region, service “quality”, and type of establishment, among other things (Azar 2007; Sutton 2007). In the United States, tip earnings are a crucial source of income for many workers, and reportedly top 27 billion dollars annually in the restaurant industry *alone* (Azar 2007). Tips effectively create an opportunity landscape where *some* service jobs are far more remunerative than others. Average customer tips can range from virtually nothing for services rendered (ex. fast food, “professional” services), to a few dollars (ex. hotel valet), to a full 15-20% of the total bill (ex. restaurants, beauty salons).⁷ This can have a dramatic effect on worker earnings, where the income potential from a given service job is contingent on what kind of establishment it is, and what position the worker holds. Higher-end establishments will necessarily garner tipped-employees more earnings as a function of higher prices and wealthier patrons. For example, a bellman at a fancy hotel tends to earn more money than a bellman at a budget hotel simply because wealthy guests often produce higher tips. Alternatively, two different kinds of service establishments can offer vastly different access to tips⁸. A café barista can earn more money than a grocery store clerk despite making similar base wages because the former makes tips, whereas the latter does not.

⁷ For a review on tipping norms and their behavioral underpinnings see Azar (2007) and Conlin, Lynn, and Donoghue (2003).

⁸ This is, on average, the case, although there is anecdotal evidence suggesting that wealthy patrons can be notoriously stingy with tips (Terkel 1974; Thompson 2015).

The most striking earning inequality between workers exists within service establishments that contain both tipped and un-tipped employees. This distinction often follows the organizational cleavage between front- and back of the house labor. In restaurants, for example, servers and bartenders can reportedly earn more than double the money per hour than those laboring in the back of house.⁹ More expensive establishments often yield even greater disparities. According to a recent study, line cooks in Los Angeles average between \$10-13 an hour while servers can allegedly take home tips plus wages that total over \$30 an hour¹⁰. Allegedly, hotel valet working in Las Vegas can earn close to six figures annually due to tips, while untipped parking attendants nearby slave away for \$10 an hour. These differences mean that service workers laboring just feet from each other in the workplace not only use unrelatable skills on the job, but are often subjected to highly unequal earning opportunities.

Race, Gender, and Class Inequality at Work

As Everett Hughes once wrote, the workplace is an “an aggressive and grandiose mixer of peoples, but also a great and sometimes stubborn agent of racial and ethnic discrimination and a breeder of racial doctrines and stereotypes” (Hughes 1971: 76).

Today, a robust body of literature describes the persistence of structural inequalities in the world of work based on gender (Acker 1990; Charles and Grusky 2004; Kanter

⁹ Similar earning discrepancies anchored by tips have been documented in many restaurants around the U.S. (see Haley-Lock 2011, Jayaraman 2011, Gomberg-Munoz 2011).

¹⁰ “Will L.A.’s Proposed Minimum-Wage Hike Harm Restaurants or Help Workers – or Both?” Retrieved on 10/1/16 (<http://www.laweekly.com/news/will-las-proposed-minimum-wage-hike-harm-restaurants-or-help-workers-or-both-5505151>).

1977), race (Tomaskovic-Devey 1993), and immigration status (Cantazarite 2000; Doeringer and Piore 1971). In this sense, existing inequalities between social groups in society at large penetrate the workplace (Tomaskovic-Levey 1993), manifesting as “inequality regimes”: “loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations” (Acker 2006:443). White men continue to hold higher-status, higher-paying positions while women and racial minorities find themselves disadvantaged on the shop floor and in the labor market, often cumulatively so (as pointed out by intersectional scholars, Munoz 2008; Ridgeway 2011).

Social inequality in the workplace is hardly new. In the early 20th century, many industrial workplaces were stratified based on ethnic and racial distinctions between workers (Bodnar 1985). Managers relied on discriminatory hiring logics and the differential treatment of certain workers reflected in workplace policies and selective promotions (Roediger 2012). Such dividing lines at work have stood the passing of time, persisting in spite of anti-discrimination workplace laws instituted since the 1960s (Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2006). The driving forces maintaining inequality in the post-civil rights workplace have likely changed to reflect today’s “color-blind” and formally-inclusive, social, cultural and political epoch (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Ridgeway 2011). In this sense, while the evidence of inequality and job segregation remains relatively straightforward to document, the primary mechanisms that sort people into different jobs today are arguably less conspicuous and involve overlapping societal, organizational, and individual-level processes.

Under ideal labor market conditions, those whose skills and attributes best fit the job are hired for the task. Put differently, worker hierarchies would be derived solely from disparities in human capital (e.g. education, training) between individual applicants. Yet research consistently shows that human capital theories alone cannot account for the persistence of racism and sexism in the contemporary workplace (Tomaskovic-Devey 1993). Nor does *overtly* discriminatory behavior at the individual level account for these inequalities (few people take to being explicitly racist in public). Instead, inequality today tends to manifest in more subtle ways. For example, managers might rely on a variety of fuzzy logics, preferences, and stereotyped shorthands to aid in the employee selection process. As Lauren Rivera’s research shows, hiring managers often hire those who share socio-cultural similarities with themselves, citing the need for new employees to be a good “cultural fit” within the company (Rivera 2012). This parallels the ambiguous hiring criteria of “soft skills” (Moss and Tilly 2001), which Mary Gatta and colleagues (2008) argue often favors middle-class characteristics and whiteness.

The production of inequality is often built into organizational processes themselves (Acker 2006; Tomaskovic-Devey 1993: 6). Research indicates that internal job markets – job ladders within firms – are often influenced by particular social groups who are able to prevent non-members from accessing jobs through various means (Weber [1968] calls this “social closure”). For example, an “old boys network” could informally hold sway over top-level promotions at firm, just as ethnic networks could do the same for floor-level jobs (Waldinger and Lichter 2003; Light and Gold 2000). Workplace policies can also inherently favor some types of workers over others. For example, Acker (2006: 448) argues that the 8-hour workday – performed continuously while stationed

away from the home and family – favors men who commonly assume the role of breadwinning worker. This disadvantages women, who have traditionally shouldered a disproportionate share of responsibilities in the domestic sphere. As Charles Tilly (1998) notes, categorical distinctions based on race, class, gender, or immigration gain their “durability” in specific contexts, from people cumulatively acting upon beliefs about social differences between each.

The specific ways in which social inequalities are reproduced depends on the firm, and on the industry (Tomaskovic-Devey 1993). Here the labor market within service industries deserves closer analysis. The hiring process operates as an important gatekeeping mechanism where managers screen potential employees at the door for characteristics that will contribute to a positive guest experience. For those that will interact closely with customers, hiring managers often consider attributes not found on one’s resume, such as physique, skin color, speech, personality, and gender (Warhurst and Nickson 2009). The lack of formal evaluation criteria leaves open the possibility that gendered, racialized, and cultural preferences dictate *who* gets *what* jobs. Customer service-related positions, for example, are often feminized: they are perceived to be a good fit for women because of their “natural” nurturing and caring qualities (Macdonald and Sirianni 1996; Ridgeway 2011; Williams 1995; Yano 2011). A similar logic holds true for race and skin color in customer service jobs, where whites are often seen as more approachable (Moss and Tilly 2001; Neckerman and Kirchenman 1991). For example, when black and white research assistants were sent to apply for waiter jobs in restaurants with the same resume, whites were called in for a follow-up interview at a significantly

higher rate (Jayaraman 2011).¹¹ Likewise, sociologist Felipe Dias research finds that in Brazil, employers prefer those with lighter skin color, favoring lighter-skinned black applicants to darker-skinned black applicants for hire (Dias 2016).

Hiring employees for a certain “look” also has its built-in biases that span both appearance (Warhurst and Nickson 2009) and class-cultural attributes. A brand striving to portray an all-American image may select applicants based on both their race (white) *and* culture (whiteness). In a 2010 study, sociologists Williams and Connell found that young, middle-class white, and conventionally attractive individuals were hired to mingle with customers in a retail clothing floor targeting a similar clientele.¹²

Ultimately, the social characteristics that companies desire for frontline service workers are influenced by what they think will sell. For example, a cocktail bar dominated by male customers might attempt to hire a female waitstaff to cater to the demands of their clientele (Spradley and Mann 1975), just as a bookstore might seek to hire “respectable” readers to walk the floor and assist customers (Wright 2005). Similarly, a hipster bar in a cool part of town might try to hire creative, bohemian types in order to establish their credibility as a hip establishment (Lloyd 2010). To be sure, getting the job at any of these establishments requires prospective workers to also possess the basic skills associated with the job (e.g. mixing drinks, operating the cash register, knowing products). However, as the perceived preferences of customers creep into

¹¹ This study has been duplicated in other settings and in multiple countries, see Bertrand and Mullainathan (2003).

¹² The 2014 court ruling against clothier Abercrombie & Finch (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission v. Abercrombie & Fitch Stores, Inc) may reduce this practice, or, equally likely, encourage employers to find even more subtle ways of performing hiring discrimination.

management's conception of who should work what job, certain opportunities can become coded by certain socio-cultural characteristics.

The Immigrant Dimension

Today, many labor-intensive, back of the house service positions are racialized as “brown collar” jobs fit for Latino immigrants. This is particularly true in areas densely populated by foreign-born Mexican and Central Americans such as in major metropolitan areas and the U.S. southwest (Cantazarite 2000), where some scholars feel Mexican Americans are at risk of becoming a perpetual working-class (Ortiz 1996; Portes and Zhou 1993).

Employers believe that Latino immigrants are ideal candidates to fill bottom-rung service jobs because, compared with members of other U.S.-born racial groups, Latino immigrants are more accepting of “bad” working conditions and less likely to cause unrest in the workplace (Gomberg-Munoz 2011; Neckerman and Kirschenman 1991; Waldinger and Lichter 2003). In other words, foreign-born Mexican and Central American workers may be favored for hire not for superior job skills *per se*, but for their perceived docility on the job.

The demand-side factors pulling Latino immigrants into U.S. service jobs are complemented by supply-side factors that make it easier for these individuals to locate and access such jobs. A particular migrant group may establish a presence within a specific workplace or line of work following in-roads made early movers. This eases subsequent job access for coethnic immigrants, as incumbent workers actively assist friends and family in securing jobs with their employers (Massey et al. 1987; Waldinger and Lichter 2003). This contributes to larger processes channeling migrants over borders

and into specific kinds of workplaces based on their region of origin (Massey et al. 1987), as well as gender (Hagan 1998). The cumulative effect is what sociologist Mark Granovetter (1985) calls “embeddedness”, where individuals with similar characteristics are employed in similar clusters of jobs. In such a way, many back of the house jobs are effectively “colonized” over time by a particular immigrant group (Griffith 2005).

In-group efforts help maintain these jobs for members of their extended networks. For instance, incumbent workers often inform friends and family of impending job openings before the job is made publicly available (Waldinger and Lichter 2003). This allows their social contacts first access to new jobs – a distinct “strength of strong ties ... since jobs and job information are too scarce to distribute to those to whom one is weakly connected” (ibid: 98-99). Networks, immigrant or otherwise, pattern particular jobs in the workplace, and close off access to them to outsiders.

The cumulative presence of co-ethnic immigrant workers on a given shop floor in turn shapes the internal workplace dynamic of that establishment. For example, social norms on the job may come to reflect hometown (or home region) cultures in the form of spoken dialects or local etiquettes (Smith 2006; Waldinger and Lichter 2003). Work procedures must be translated into two languages, just as training routines can be transformed by “informal training systems” where incumbent workers mentor new coethnic hires on job (Bailey and Waldinger 1991). Each allows workers of a certain social and cultural background to more easily acclimate to a workplace and develop the informal “skills” necessary to function there (see Iskander and Lowe 2010).

Divided Labor Regimes?

Differentiated hiring and closed social networks each contribute to the sedimentation of a white front of the house and an immigrant Latino back of the house in interactive service work. As previously noted, social and organizational segregation within the workplace ensure that those who must work jointly in service of customers share few similarities in skills, cultural references, job tasks, or incomes. Yet, the maintenance of *intra*-worker inequality through various processes has been neglected by recent sociological studies of the workplace. Rachel Sherman's 2007 monograph on luxury hotel workers provides insight into "how managers, guests, and interactive workers negotiated unequal entitlement to resources, recognition, and labor as they produced and consumed luxury service" (p. 3). Sherman argues that workers do not necessarily find their hierarchical relations with wealthy clients subordinating: in fact, they derive considerable status and positive self-concept from their proximity to wealthy guests (p.16). Similarly, in a recent study on the casino industry, sociologist Jeffrey Sallaz (2009) examines how different "service production regimes" affect shop floor life for workers. He argues that the different political and economic contexts of Las Vegas and South Africa facilitate "hegemonic" and "despotic" service regimes, respectively. This yields divergent employee work cultures in each setting: Las Vegas casinos dealers use their greater autonomy to enact tip-maximizing strategies, while dealers in South Africa, facing stronger managerial oversight, are relatively more "passive" towards their jobs.

Both Sherman and Sallaz draw attention to how workplace structures in contemporary service industries deeply affect how workers navigate their jobs. Yet neither scholar directs much analysis to the relationship between *different* workers, who might themselves be divided in various ways. To be sure, Sherman introduces such

distinctions in passing: first, by laying out categories of “interactive” versus “non-interactive” service workers in hotels, and second, when noting that “more often people of color” work in non-interactive capacities and “make lower wages” (2007: p.51).¹³

However, I contend that the ways in which worker distinctions can themselves become forms of “durable inequality” (Tilly 1998) is worthy of primary consideration. Lumping the experience of service workers into a single category vis-à-vis managers and customers risks losing sight of the complex intra-group relationships *between* and *amongst* workers who may be divided by job position as well as race, class, gender and immigration status (see Vallas 2003). Especially amidst the growth of diverse urban service workplaces, the sociology of work continues to lag behind in examining how *service* is produced, contested, and re-shaped across divided lines.

The Case of Upscale Restaurants in Los Angeles

Los Angeles is a prime metropolitan area to study the intersecting vectors of immigration, service work, and inequality. According to recent estimates, more than one in three of the city’s 3.9 million residents are foreign-born. Nearly half of the total population is Hispanic/Latino, while another 11% is of Asian descent. As past studies have noted, the Los Angeles region remains the most important center for Mexican migration in the United States, both numerically and culturally. Los Angeles contains multiple waves of

¹³ Sherman notes in passing a tendency for whites to be positioned in higher-paying, front of the house jobs, yet it is clear that intra-worker *relations* are not her focus. It may also not have been a source of much tension either. As the author writes: “there was a general sense of familiarity and collegiality among workers from different departments” (2007: 104). Prominent racial and ethnic differences between workers are also present in Sallaz’s fieldwork – in Las Vegas, he notes that many of the dealers were Asian immigrants (see p.208) and in South Africa they were native-born blacks – yet like Sherman, this was not the focus of his study.

immigrants from different regions of Mexico, each possessing their own distinct migration histories and settlement patterns (Alarcon, Escala, and Odgers 2016). Each of these factors has made Los Angeles into a paradigmatic multi-ethnic and global city to study not only international migration, but also the inter-generational incorporation of immigrants and their offspring into the social, political, and economic fabric of the city.

Although Los Angeles is perhaps best known for its entertainment industry, it is also home to the largest restaurant industry in the country. It is one that employs over 275,000 workers in roughly as many food and drink establishments. Restaurant industry sales account for billions of dollars in state tax revenue annually (estimated \$4.7 billion in 2007), and represent a major part of the city's enduring attraction to visitors.

Los Angeles' restaurant workforce reflects the diversity of the city in terms of race/ethnicity and country of origin. According to a recent industry survey, over half of all workers are non-white, and nearly one in two workers were born outside the United States (ROCLA 2011). Like in other metropolitan centers, Los Angeles restaurants also employ a significant number of whites, many who are under the age of thirty.¹⁴ As previously mentioned, these individuals are concentrated primarily in front of the house jobs that offer better wages and employment conditions on average than back of the house jobs (ROCU 2014). Undoubtedly, some of this cohort fits popular stereotypes of aspiring starlets who flock to Los Angeles from around the country and moonlight in restaurants while waiting for their big break. Many others do not, and instead choose to engage in restaurant work for a variety of different reasons (I return to this in chapter 4).

¹⁴ According to a 2008 survey by Restaurant Opportunity Center Los Angeles, 31.8% of all restaurant workers in the city are between the ages of 16 and 24, compared to 16.6% of the overall working age population.

With its significant immigrant labor presence alongside younger white workers, the composition of Los Angeles' restaurant workforce is not altogether different than that of other major U.S. cities like San Francisco, Chicago, and New York (ROC-LA 2009; ROCU 2014).

Los Angeles's restaurant industry sports a tremendous diversity of food and drink establishments. These typically fall into one of three main industry categories: casual/quick-serve, "mid-range"/family, and fine-dining/upscale. Casual restaurants are establishments that feature limited customer service amenities and an emphasis on expedient service. This category includes fast-food, taco stands, and counter-service cafes. Mid-range or "family" restaurants feature table service, a casual ambiance, and modest prices. This category includes many national chains such as Olive Tree, Red Robin, and Marie Callendar's, as well as neighborhood Mexican, Chinese, and other "ethnic" restaurants.¹⁵ Lastly, fine-dining restaurants often represent the most formal service standards, prestigious culinary offerings, and expensive dining options in the industry. They tend to exist in wealthy corridors of the city such as the Beverly Hills, Brentwood, Santa Monica, Pasadena, and the downtown financial district. Like other high-end spaces patronized by the affluent, fine dining restaurants have traditionally operated as important spaces for conspicuous consumption amongst the "leisure class" (Veblen 1900; Warde and Martens 2000). They are also prominent labor hubs for the working-class, who must furnish these services (Sassen 1991; Zukin 1995).

Higher-end restaurant establishments feature considerably more complex internal operations than restaurants in the other two categories. For example, a fast food outpost

¹⁵ In the past, "ethnic restaurants" have been treated as a standalone restaurant category (Bailey 1985).

may make little effort to distinguish between those working different job stations on any given day (everyone is simply a “team member”), or a small café may employ a small handful of people to do all tasks required. By contrast, in upscale establishments, front of the house work and back of the house work are often headed by different management teams (e.g. chefs versus floor managers) and differentiated by specialized positions (e.g. fry cook versus *garde manger*), and skills.

Since guests pay much higher prices to dine at fine dining establishments, restaurants often go to great lengths to hire and train employees to meet specific qualifications. At a basic level, this means hiring those who demonstrate strong formal culinary technique in the kitchen, and friendly personalities in the dining room. Yet luxury restaurants also seek to differentiate themselves from competitors based on the nuanced service “theater” (Sherman 2007) they offer, including décor, amenities, and service style (I elaborate on this in chapter 3). For instance, traditional fine-dining restaurants in Los Angeles such as Spago, Providence, and Melisse offer guests an elegant experience where they will be treated to lavish entrée options like steak, caviar, and lobster, plated on fine china and served by suited, predominantly male waiters (a sign of prestige, see Hall 1993). More recently, however, a number of high-end restaurants are seeking to offer a more “casual-upscale”, dressed-down experience to guests. For example, Gjelina, a hugely popular restaurant located in Venice, Los Angeles and open since 2008, has become a modern classic in this style. It features a minimalist décor, t-shirt clad servers, and the perpetual buzz derived from both lively guest conversations and the loud rock and roll playing from overhead.

High-end restaurants also feature the most pronounced social inequalities between different workers. This is because with higher check averages come greater tips, though not necessarily higher wages for the back of the house. As some reports have indicated, at busy, upscale restaurants, it is not unusual for the pay inequity between the highest-earning server and the lowest-paid dishwasher to reach three to one or higher¹⁶. Thus, behind the scenes, *who* has access to *what* job within the restaurant workplace can mean the difference between a potentially upwardly mobile job or just another dead-end service job.

The social organization of upscale restaurant work in Los Angeles is one in which class-privileged whites occupy higher-earning front of the house jobs and working-class, immigrant Latinos occupy lower-earning back of the house jobs. These differences create conspicuous differences in the workplace. While a number of front of the house hold higher-education degrees, many back of the house workers remain undocumented and without formal skills or other labor market credential (Alarcon, Escala, Odgers 2016; Waldinger and Lichter 2003). The latter's precarious work status curtails their relative power in the workplace: immigrant Latinos have been known to be more vulnerable to employer abuses, such as wage theft, not receiving breaks, and exposure to dangerous work conditions (LA Weekly 2016; Milkman, Gonzalez, and Narro 2010; ROCLA 2011).

The drama of inequality in high-end Los Angeles restaurants is what compels this research. Within these settings, the logic of upscale service, the social heterogeneity amongst workers, and the presence of occupational segregation make them rich sites for

¹⁶ “Will L.A.’s Proposed Minimum-Wage Hike Harm Restaurants or Help Workers – or Both? Retrieved on 10/1/16 (<http://www.laweekly.com/news/will-las-proposed-minimum-wage-hike-harm-restaurants-or-help-workers-or-both-5505151>).

social inquiry. This study thus seeks to understand how the mechanisms of inequality shape the contemporary service shop floor, including its labor relations, work processes, and job patterns. How might social inequality be reinforced, contested, or re-configured within this space? Likewise, amidst powerful social and structural cleavages between workers, what enables service to be practically accomplished, and how might this yield new opportunities for some workers?

Methods and Field Sites

This research draws on over five years of ethnographic research within three upscale restaurants in Los Angeles between 2012 and 2017. I employed participant-observation within each of these workplaces while working as a formally employed restaurant server¹⁷. During my time in the field, I accumulated hundreds of pages of field notes (if not thousands), and participated in numerous informal conversations over lunch breaks, during down time, and after shifts at nearby bars. I supplemented this data with 49 in-depth interviews with fellow restaurant servers, food runners, cooks, dishwashers, and managers. I elected for a multi-dimensional ethnographic approach to data collection because it allowed me to observe social relations between different workers, managers, and customers as they unfolded up close, in context, and over time. It is the workers who inhabit these labor settings that are the primary subjects of this story. That said, the restaurants (and their management teams) in this study also remain important components of my analysis, in that they fundamentally shape the shop floor dynamic. These

¹⁷ As per the Institutional Review Board, all informants that I interacted with consistently over the course of this study were aware of my research aims, including management and a handful of “regular” customers at each establishment.

workplaces are prime example of what Pierre Bourdieu calls “structuring structures”, organizations that refract large-scale social trends onto ground-level phenomena. As I found time and time again in the field, why workers named *Xeno* and *Pip* tend to do two very different things in restaurants – with real implications for each – cannot simply be chalked up to “the way things are”. By bringing their experiences to life, I intend this study to complicate common assumptions about restaurant labor: that the work is mostly unskilled and the workers mostly disadvantaged and down-and-out. Rather, framed by a discriminatory selection process reinforced by social boundaries between workers, different individuals are sorted into durably unequal jobs.

The three Los Angeles restaurant in this study have several basic similarities: they each are expensive (\$40+ per person for dinner), medium-sized (30-80 employees), full-service establishments. These three field sites were selected non-randomly. I initially sought out and gained entrance into these three establishments by responding to hiring ads on Craigslist (and other industry website listings) and attending open interviews. This process allowed me to gain further insights into the formal hiring process in these types of restaurants as other prospective employees might experience it. Below, I describe a basic comparison of my restaurant field sites.

Field Site 1: Match Restaurant. “Match” (pseudonym) is a popular, “casual upscale” restaurant located in west Los Angeles near the posh neighborhoods of Santa Monica, Venice, and Brentwood. As an exclusive site for middle-upper class consumption, the primary clientele at Match are white young professionals in their twenties and thirties. These individuals are often a blend of local residents, nearby office workers, and tourists.

As a rule, dining at Match is pricey, though not unusually so for the area: lunch averages \$25 per person, dinner \$40 (before tip, tax, and alcohol).

As of 2013, Match had on staff roughly half a dozen managers and eighty workers split evenly between the front- and back of the house. The demographic breakdown of these employees closely resembled patterns found in many other higher-end U.S. restaurants: servers, bartenders, hosts and baristas were primarily young, white, and college-educated, whereas cooks, dishwashers, bussers and food runners were almost exclusively first- or second-generation Latino men of working-class backgrounds. Servers and bartenders rely heavily on tips, which are handled on an individual basis. This means that servers and bartenders get to keep what they personally accrue in tips after “tipping out” a percentage to the support staff (host, busser, runner, and barista). Most servers agree that tips at Match are “decent”, averaging around \$140 for a six- or seven-hour shift.

Field Site 2: Terroir Restaurant. “Terroir” is an upscale restaurant on the west side of Los Angeles. Formally opened in the fall of 2015 after several years as a “pop-up” (temporary) restaurant, Terroir is a chef-driven, pan-Asian concept serving fresh sushi, dry-aged steaks, lamb, and many other specialties. The average cost of a meal is roughly \$30 at lunch and \$50-80 at dinner, per person, excluding tax, alcohol and tip. Contrasting Match’s yuppie clientele, Terroir’s regulars are more middle-aged and monied (most are either white or Asian American).

Terroir is a more modest-sized operation than Match, with a smaller seating capacity (80 compared to 120), and a staff of 3 full-time managers and 40 employees.

Most of the lead front of the house workers are white, though slightly older (late 20s to early 40s) than the comparable employees at Match or The Neighborhood. Kitchen and support workers are primarily Latino immigrant men, with the addition of two African American men working part-time. Like the other two restaurants, front of the house workers at Terroir rely heavily on tips to supplement their minimum wage earnings. Tip earnings are “pooled”, meaning all tips received by servers and bartenders are combined at the end of the night and distributed based on a fixed percentage to all customer-facing workers. Tip-based earnings thus vary less day-to-day at Terroir than at Match, since high- and low-earning days are smoothed out (the average earnings for servers and bartenders at Terroir are \$25-30 an hour, from my estimates). Kitchen-based employees enjoy higher hourly wages, but since they do not make tips, they average far less (\$10-15 an hour).

Field Site 3: The Neighborhood

“The Neighborhood” is a farm-to-table restaurant and artisan market located in one of the wealthiest areas of Los Angeles. Its intimate dining area seats just under 70 people, and is framed by turquoise-hued banquettes, stressed oak tables, and exposed light fixtures. The decor recalls a quaint and rustic setting; the staff uniforms are variations on simple brown aprons over white collared shirts and blue jeans. The Neighborhood is well-known for its gourmet breakfasts (\$15-25 entrees), power lunches (\$18-30), and luxurious dinners (\$30-50). Its primary clientele is nothing short of the city’s wealthy and famous, many of whom live nearby to the restaurant. The Neighborhood goes to great lengths to accommodate these guests’ every whim, from special orders to private

buy-outs (I elaborate on this in chapter 3). Many of the restaurant's patrons also dine there multiple times per week and for various occasions, including breakfast business meetings, casual luncheons with friends, and dinner dates.

Like at Match and Terroir, the front of the house staff at The Neighborhood is primarily white, split evenly between men and women, with an average age just over 30. Aside from The Neighborhood's white chefs, the back of the house staff is uniformly Latino. Most are foreign-born, though about a third of the cooks and dishwashers at the restaurant are the Los Angeles-raised children of Mexican and Central American immigrants. At The Neighborhood, wages in the back of the house range from \$10-\$15 (not unlike Match and Terroir), while front of the house earnings are the highest amongst the three restaurants, regularly topping \$25 an hour in tips alone.

Xeno and Pip, the Latino cook and white waitress at Match described in the opening vignette, know each other as long-time coworkers. Yet that is where their knowledge of each other ends, for the restaurant is the only space they cohabit. The lives they lead outside of work are worlds apart from one another. This dissertation details lives like theirs within restaurants – driven apart by vector of inequality, but pulled together by the co-production of the meals they serve. The relations between Xeno and Pip thus reflect a broader story of labor, inequality, culture, and immigration affecting millions of American workers today. By examining contemporary service labor from the inside, this study offers new and timely ways of understanding how both social divisions and structural opportunities are threaded into urban workplaces.

Chapter Two

Inside the Divided Shop Floor

The beautifully plated wood-grilled pork chop at Match; the aromatic yuzu-spiced wild Hamachi *crudo* at Terroir; the *tajine* of stewed lamb shank featured on the winter seasonal menu at The Neighborhood: these culinary marvels come perfectly presented, and leave diners swooning for days after their meals. Before any of these dishes ever lands on a dining room table they must first undergo an extensive coordination of materials and labor “backstage” (Goffman 1959). It is one that involves numerous human hands, raw ingredients, verbal communication, and modern technology. From creation to consumption, the “life” of any given dish charts the sequence of food service that must occur in restaurants. It is a chain of mini-events at the core of any restaurant’s labor engine that must be repeated hundreds, if not thousands, of times every day, inspiring restaurant critic Steven A. Shaw to marvel, “to me, it’s more remarkable than sending a man to the moon” (2005; xix).

Restaurants are not the only kind of workplace characterized by a coordination of workers across a formal division of labor. Car manufacturing assembly lines, white-collar bureaucracies, and modern hospitals feature similar organizational elements often more elaborate than those found in interactive service workplaces. Yet what adds

considerable complexity to the labor process at places like Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood is the profound *social* inequality, across race, class, gender and immigration status, that exists between those who must rely closely on each other's labor in order to do their jobs. The middle- and middle-upper class, white servers and bartenders at these restaurants share very little in common with the working-class, immigrant Latino cooks, bussers, and dishwashers. They perform jobs in restaurants completely foreign to one another, and get compensated in highly unequal ways (and amounts) for their efforts. These coworkers may be jointly responsible for getting a wood-grilled pork chop to the right guest in a timely manner, but behind the scenes, their cleavages represent profound intra-workplace boundaries.

This chapter brings readers inside the divided shop floors at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood. It is here that two distinct, but spatially proximate, worlds of work exist in perpetual tension with one another. I show how both structural and social inequalities intersect to challenge the flow of food service in the workplace and naturalize the boundaries that exist between workers. It is a story of how those who learn to eloquently describe the *yuzu-spiced wild Hamachi* entrée tableside come to be profoundly disconnected from those who will assemble this dish in the kitchen.

Organizing Divides: Providing Hospitality Versus Preparing Food

At Match, front of the house workers like Charlie, Andy and Mel feel they are the ones primarily responsible for upkeeping guest hospitality at the restaurant. Charlie (white, 25-years-old) explains, "I like to keep in mind that if I'm looking out for the customer – you know, doing the whole 'customer is always right' thing – then my answer should

never be *no*. So, like, I'm basically here to make people's *dreams* come true." To Charlie, making "people's dreams come true" means doing much more than just taking orders and bringing out food; it means orienting himself completely towards the needs of dining room guests. Many of his front of the house colleagues agree. Mel, a 28-year-old white waitress, says the subtleties of her job actually have nothing to do with food and drink. "You can teach a monkey to wait tables or make a latte," she explains, "but a monkey *can't do what I do*." Mel knows all her regulars' names, and frequently engages in extended conversations with them while she makes espresso drinks or strolls around the dining room at Match. This causes her fellow servers to occasionally roll their eyes when she stops to chat at a table ("we'll see Mel again in ten minutes!") instead of helping run food or buss tables. But mostly, they understand the logic behind Mel's actions – they would do the same.

Being ready for guest interaction requires its own distinct kind of preparation. Sally, a 26-year-old white waitress at Match, says she spends an hour doing her hair and makeup before leaving for work. One day when a coworker commented that due to Sally's "natural" beauty, she shouldn't need to use any beauty products. Feigning hurt, she responded, "I don't just roll out of bed and come to work looking like this!" Hostesses¹⁸ like Neko (32, female, mixed-white, Match) and Penelope (24, female, white, Terroir) emphatically agree. While the stated job of a host is to greet guests at the front desk and handle table reservations, the subtext is obvious. "We are supposed to look good," Penelope mused. Neko explains that she feels the need to avoid wearing the same

¹⁸ I use the gendered term "hostess" here because the overwhelming majority of those employed in this position are women. For example, during my fieldwork, only one man was formally employed as a host.

outfit more than once a month in case that the same guest may return and notice. To prevent such an occurrence, she rotates her combination of tops, bottoms, jewelry, and shoes she wears to work. Other front of the house workers maintain their “look” on-the-go. Rachael, a 32-year-old white waitress at The Neighborhood, uses the reflective metal surface of the espresso machine (located in the server area) as a makeshift mirror. Crouching down eye-level with the machine, she touches up her lipstick and blush before heading out to greet new guests. On stage for a daily audience of strangers and friends alike, front of the house service workers like Mel, Neko, Charlie and Rachael understand that they are laboring not just with their emotions but with their looks, and all in the name of hospitality (Warhurst and Nickson 2007). The fact that they focus much of their energy on ensuring guests have a good time – rather than other tasks like assisting the kitchen or cleaning dirty tables – is simply them doing the job they were hired for.

If front of the house workers are the collective public face of restaurants, one that customers intimately interact with, “support” staff workers can be thought of as the (invisible) glue holding the dining room together. Compared to the servers mentioned above, Victor (food runner), Arnulfo (busser), and Tony (busser) are less concerned about tailoring their behaviors to guests. Their positions revolve around the setup and maintenance of food service, linking kitchen operations to the dining room.¹⁹ Victor (21, male, second-generation Mexican American) is the newest food runner at Match. He was recently promoted from bussing tables, a “hustle” job that he held for six months. Rather than rushing to clear tables when guests leave – his previous mentality when working as a

¹⁹ Somewhat unusually, Terroir does not staff these positions. Instead, Terroir employs a two-tier system of servers and server assistants, both of whom receive the same training. I discuss these differences in greater detail next chapter.

busser – Victor now approaches diners with a smile and a quick “hello” as he drops off plates of food. After doing so, he quickly returns to the kitchen pass (also known as the expeditor station) where he is expected to be if he is not busy delivering food. Victor is proud to have recently figured out how to carry four large plates at once. “When I first started, I didn’t know what the hell I was doing. I used to carry plates all wrong.” He motions one wobbling plate in each hand. “I kept dropping shit too,” he adds with a laugh.

Victor’s newness to food running contrasts with Arnulfo and Tony’s years of experience doing the job. Arnulfo, a Mexican immigrant in his fifties, has been working as a busser at Match for the last two years after having spent the last thirty years doing the same at various other Los Angeles restaurants. Tony, a 51-year-old immigrant from El Salvador, had cooked and bussed tables for the last 16 years before landing as a busser at The Neighborhood three years ago. Honed over time, both Arnulfo and Tony are able to move quickly and silently in the dining room; they each have no problem transporting large numbers of plates and glassware to the dishwasher station. Tony is especially adept at clearing all dishes from a given table then proceeding to wipe the table clean with a wet rag while balancing a full tray of dishes in the other hand. Both Tony and Arnulfo are among the fastest bussers at Match and The Neighborhood respectively, and they are seldom heard complaining about the hard work.

Compared to front of the house workers, support staff workers like Victor, Arnulfo, and Tony remain relatively quiet when present amongst guests in the dining room, but they can be quite vocal elsewhere in the workplace. This is partly a function of their job duties. For example, Rafael, a 30-year-old Mexican immigrant food runner at

The Neighborhood, communicates loudly with line cooks when he is standing at the kitchen pass (separating the kitchen and dining room). Rafael's dialogue with Geraldo (line cook) reflects thick industry jargon mixed with Spanish, such as documented in the field note below:

"Manos por favor!" cries Geraldo, as he sprinkles fried rosemary and sea salt over an order of crispy chickpea fritters.

"Si, chef!" says Rafael.

"Fritters, para mesa veinte y tres, asiento tres, cuatro. Gracias!" Rafael delivers the chickpea fritters to table 23, explaining that the dipping sauce for the fritters this evening is a zataar-spiced yogurt. He then returns to the kitchen pass, where he and Geraldo talk in Spanish about last night's Mexican League football game on TV. (Field note, 7/5/16).

Picking up food and bussing tables, support workers like Rafael operate at the threshold of the dining room and the kitchen. While they move spatially about the dining room, they verbally interact more with kitchen-based workers. Meanwhile, other back of the house workers at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood remain away from customers completely while they busily cook and prep foods, stock ingredients, and clean pots. They labor on goods instead of with customers, and their workflow at the restaurant reflects this. For instance, unlike in the front of the house where workers' schedules generally follow hours open to the public, because back of the house workers do tasks that must be done before opening as well as after closing, their schedules are often longer and less elastic. At Terroir, the morning baker named Svete (40s, male, white) arrives at

5am everyday to begin kneading the croissant dough by hand. The next employee to arrive at the restaurant is a prep cook at 7am. No front of the house staff is scheduled before 10:30 (the restaurant opens at 11:30am for lunch). At the end of the night, the nighttime cleaner Jose (30s, male, Mexican immigrant), finishes up and locks the restaurant for the evening sometime between 1am and 2am. Similarly, at The Neighborhood, the nighttime line cooks arrive at 2pm to begin prepping their *mis en place*²⁰ for a 5:30pm dinner service. On most nights, none leave the restaurant before 11pm after all food orders are complete (last call is 9:30pm) and the kitchen is cleaned thoroughly. By contrast, servers and bartenders arrive at 3:45pm and may be excused for the evening when there are no more guests in their sections.

Compared to work in the dining room, back of the house labor is resoundingly more physically taxing. As multiple cooks explained to me, kitchen work requires strength (lifting pots), dexterity (knife skills), and sheer physical stamina. At each restaurant, cooks work eight to twelve-hour shifts in which they are on their feet the entire time, often hunched over sauced pans, hot grills, or cutting boards, and under sweltering hot conditions. These are under “normal” conditions. During the winter of 2016, the kitchen staff at Terroir was running short when a line cook abruptly quit. This left the other two cooks, Sam and Jon, along with the head chef and the pastry chef, responsible for both lunch and dinner service. For three weeks, Sam and Jon averaged fourteen-hour days, pausing only for a one-hour daily break between 3pm and 4pm.

The unequal time and physical demands of back of the house and front of the house jobs exaggerate the labor distinctions between each type of restaurant job. Many

²⁰ French for “to put in place”, *mis en place* is an industry term for having food ingredients and equipment ready to be used for dinner service.

of these distinctions are out of the hands of workers themselves. From my field notes on a slow Tuesday dinner service at Terroir:

I arrive at the restaurant at 4:30pm, with dinner service slated to begin at 5:30pm. Within the first hour of opening, seven groups of guests are sat in my section, mostly in groups of two and four (“two-tops” and “four-tops”). An hour passes quickly for me: taking orders, pouring wine, explaining dishes, refilling water, marking tables. By 7pm, I fire [order] my last table’s entrees, and no new groups appear to be arriving. By 8:30pm guests are finishing desserts, and my section is clearing out. I join Brady and Chuck [bartenders] to chat while casually polishing glassware. By 9pm, Reynold [manager] sends me home. Yet when I round the corner to the kitchen to say goodbye, I am surprised to see that there is still a ton of work left to do: the grill is still being used (a New York Steak sizzles in the upper right corner), and everything at the dessert station remains set up in case someone puts in a last minute order. It is even worse at the dishwashing station, where a stack of dirty dishes sits next to the industrial sink. I sheepishly wave goodbye to Shawn and turn to leave. (Terroir, 2/20/16)

Dishwashers like Shawn are usually among the last to leave the restaurant. This is because their job duties are subject to a temporal delay: they must wait to complete their work until all plates, utensils, and glasses are cleared from the dining room. Yet, across all three restaurants in this study, front of the house shifts average far shorter than back of the house shifts. Front of the house shifts are typically around six hours in length – slightly longer for those working the “morning” shift (breakfast and lunch), and slightly

shorter for those on the “night” shift (dinner). By contrast, no back of the house shift is scheduled shorter than seven hours, and often runs much longer. Much of the preparatory work of making soup stocks, mixing sauces, marinating meats, and dicing vegetables must be done regardless the “cover count” (expected number of guests) for that day. As a result, back of the house workers are less likely to be “cut” (allowed to leave early) than those in the front of the house whose jobs are directly contingent on guest traffic.

Other structural differences between front- and back of the house service labor reinforce boundaries between them. Front of the house workers are strongly motivated by the opportunity to make more tips, which constitute the bulk of their income. As Morgan, a 31-year-old white waitress at The Neighborhood, puts it, “I want to get in, run around like crazy for a few hours, make my tips, then get the fuck out.” Much like in commission sales jobs, servers and bartenders see less incentive to work hard should customer traffic be slow, or the restaurant overstaffed. A bad ratio of employees to customers means a direct blow to the earnings of each individual front of the house worker. By contrast, cooks like Andrew (30, male, Mexican American) and Juan (21, male, Mexican American), can make more money only through working long hours and accumulating overtime pay. They are incentivized to *stay*, not leave the restaurant. Laboring for long hours “in the trenches” spent side-by-side with the same workers, Andrew describes his kitchen colleagues as a second family (see Chapter five).

However, Andrew, like many other cooks, does not extend the same sense of in-group camaraderie to those in the front of the house. In fact, chronic tension between the kitchen staff and the dining room staff in restaurants has long existed in restaurants. Sociologist William F. Whyte (1948) noted more than half a century ago that the

relationship between waitresses and male cooks on the job was often strained. Whyte described how cooks, attempting to achieve an efficient and steady work rhythm, would view any special request (or error) coming from waitresses as a nuisance at best, a disruption meriting retaliation at worst. In the meantime, waitresses, focused on keeping customers happy and maximizing tips, were motivated to bend rules in order to please guests regardless of the headaches this created for the kitchen.

At Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood, the divergent short-term labor objectives between front- and back of the house jobs also flare into workplace conflict. For instance, at Terroir, Chef Jeremy loathes making revisions to menu dishes. As he sees it, these dishes are works of art: the flavors and presentation are perfectly balanced as is, and to tamper with either dimension of these creations is blasphemy. Yet, reflecting customer requests, this is exactly what servers attempt to do. When Monica (27, white, waitress) or Nathan (23, white, waiter) would inquire whether grilled chicken breast could be substituted for fish in a dish or rice wine vinegar removed from another, Chef Jeremy was quick to fire back, *would YOU scribble all over a painting hanging in a gallery? I don't think so. So why are you doing that to my food??* From field notes:

A guest points to the menu and explains to me: “I’d like to try the lamb entree, but without the sauce – that sounds too heavy, and I have an onion allergy. Do you think you can do the lamb just with some potatoes on the side, olive oil, and no salt?” The revisions seem simple enough to execute, and obviously to the customer’s request reflecting dietary restrictions. I enter revised order notes into

the POS [point of sale] and send the ticket to the kitchen. I know chef is not going to like the idea.

Seconds pass. “WHICH FREKIN SERVER IS THIS?” Chef Jeremy yells from the kitchen. “This is going to taste like crap! You *know* we don’t do this!” I start to explain to him it is related to a guest allergy but think better of it. There is no winning this argument.

“I’m sorry chef –” I begin.

“If the table doesn’t like this dish, we are going to have a problem,” he glares, insinuating that I may have to pay for the \$36 dish if the customer sends it back.

(Field note, Terroir, 2/12/16)

To be sure, many chefs are resistant to changing menu items no matter who the request comes from: as the heads of the kitchen hierarchy, chefs are responsible for ensuring dishes are made consistently and up to a certain quality. However, lashing out at front of the house workers who place requests often on behalf of customers, also shapes a workplace culture in which belligerent exchanges directed at servers and bartenders by kitchen-based workers is the norm. At The Neighborhood, tensions between front- and back of the house workers has escalated to the point where many servers, bartenders, and even dining room managers try their best to never have to ask the kitchen any questions related to the menu. As case in point, on one Tuesday lunch shift, a waiter named Colby (white, 30, male) went around to every other server to inquire whether the sandwich special that day contained traces of garlic. When none of us knew the answer, he then attempted to consult a plastic binder filled with menu descriptions. When this resource

still didn't answer his question, he finally approached the kitchen. The chef gruffly answered "no" in mere seconds, but the exhausting process cost Colby nearly eight minutes, delaying the guest's order at least that long as well as any service to his other tables.

As sociologist Gary Fine notes, "customers demand prompt service, forcing servers to pressure cooks. Cooks resent these demands in that they do not benefit from this pressure; servers do – shaping their distinct monetary perspectives" (Fine 1996: 98-99). Exacerbated by asymmetrical labor tasks, an uneven workload, and unequal compensation, workers often perceive the distinctions between front- and back of the house workers to reflect personal differences. Rather than seeing themselves collectively as restaurant colleagues, workers often expound negative character generalizations about those who work "on the other side". The spatial demarcation of these workers does not help. For example, at The Neighborhood, cooks have an unobstructed view of the server station, where servers, floor managers, and support staff workers often congregate when not actively with guests. Yet for cooks like Rodrigo (24, male, 2nd generation Salvadoran), seeing this only confirms his frustration with servers:

Rodrigo: It's weird. I mean, I *want* to say that I like the front of the house. I want to say that. But that would be a really big lie. I mean at first, when I got put on the line, I didn't think too much about it. Like, OK they are doing their job: take orders, ring tickets, and we do ours, we cook it. As time went on, you see how some of the servers, they make these really random requests.

EW: like what?

V: It's like, they'll ring in something really specific when we are already really busy. And I have to leave for the other [prep area] to grab it, and when I come back I'm even more in the shit than before. So I'm like uh, Jeremy [server] will ring in these stupid-ass mods. And then at the same time, he will be just kind of standing there, this goes for Jeremy *and* Loraine [waitress], they'll both be there chilling, talking.

EW: and you'll see this out of the corner of your eye?

V: no, not the corner of our eye, it'll be *right in front of us*. They'll pull out their phones, check messages or whatever. And I'm like, what the fuck, I'm getting yelled at, *and* this fucker makes more money than me?? So I'm just like, what the fuck? (Interview, 8/4/16).

Rodrigo, like other cooks, views the people that work in the front of the house as lazy, undisciplined workers undeserving of the money they make. While Rodrigo mans three sauté pans at once, he sees “them” standing idle, making annoying requests of the kitchen, and complaining incessantly about bad tips that he will see none of anyway. Meanwhile in the front of the house, Charlie, the server passionate about “making guests’ dreams come true”, is unlikely to agree with any of Rodrigo’s accusations. Food is only one element of the hospitality he wishes to create for guests at his tables, and kitchen workers like Rodrigo that “give him shit” are another impediment.

Different Jobs for Different People

George, a 22-year-old white waiter from Indiana, describes getting into waiting tables at a local sports bar during his junior year of college. He recalls briefly starting out as a food runner then waiting tables within two months. Initially, working in a restaurant “seemed like fun” to him, and allowed him to some good side money. “After I graduated college, I wanted to move to L.A., to see something new and exciting. So I figured, the easiest way to support myself quickly was to look for a serving gig there too,” he says, adding, “but this is just for now, you know? Like, before I get my career going.”

Erin, a 26-year-old white woman, has already made several strides on her career outside restaurants. Having graduated with a Master’s degree in social welfare at a nearby private university in 2012, Erin currently works as a full-time elementary school counselor during the week while waiting tables on weekends during Match’s popular brunch service. She explains that all her close friends also work at the restaurant (“I even got some of them jobs here!”), so it is more like a social hour for her. “Plus, I get to use what I make in tips as my ‘play’ money!” she laughs.

Jonathan, a 37-year-old white waiter at The Neighborhood, just got married to his longtime girlfriend. A former sous chef and culinary school graduate, Jonathan initially took the job at The Neighborhood in order to supplement his income waiting tables at another prestigious restaurant in the city. By pooling earnings from both his serving jobs plus his wife’s job in media, Jonathan figures he will be able to pay off his wedding expenses within six months, and save enough for a down-payment on a “modest” house within the next year (the medium house price in the neighborhood he is looking to buy is \$600,000). Jonathan says he misses the social aspect of working in the kitchen, but not

the long hours or the responsibility. “When you are a server, when you are done with your shift, you are done,” he says.

Victor, a 20-year-old born to working-class Mexican immigrant parents in south Los Angeles, never aspired to work in restaurants. Nonetheless, his first job was at Subway where his mother also worked. He was 16 years old at the time, and making minimum wage. A couple years later, one of Victor’s older cousins helped get him a job as a busser at Match. “I didn’t know *anything* about restaurants back then,” he tells me, shaking his head. “I had barely been to any, especially any fancier ones. But I was making a little bit more money here than I was at Subway, so that was good.”

Gilberto, a 37-year-old Mexican immigrant, remembers looking to take whatever job he could get when he first crossed the border from Tijuana. He was eighteen years old and without papers when he came to Los Angeles. Gilberto initially found work at a car wash through a fellow migrant contact from his hometown in the state of Oaxaca. At the car wash he was paid under the table. A few years later, he started working at a fast food chain across the street from the car wash. He has worked in restaurants ever since then, and has cooked at a number of different kitchen throughout Los Angeles. “Italian, French, Spanish, you name it, I’ve cooked it,” he says with a laugh.

As in many higher-end restaurants in Los Angeles, lead front of the house workers at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood do not share the same social characteristics as those scrubbing pots or sweating over the hot grill. The majority of servers and bartenders are relatively young, class-privileged, white men and women. By contrast, cooks and dishwashers, as well as bussers and food runners, are almost entirely

immigrant Latinos men. George, Erin, Victor and Gilberto belong to different social worlds. Their race, class, gender and cultural inequalities are accentuated by the structurally different positions they hold within the restaurant. Enacted in the workplace, these distinctions come to serve as inter-group boundaries (see Blumer 1958), and naturalized into socio-culturally “typed” jobs. From my field notes at Match Restaurant during the summer of 2013:

Charlie, George, Erin and I have wrapped up our closing sidework, and take turns clocking out on the POS [point of sale] system. It is around 3pm. As we walk down the pass towards the rear exit, Charlie hoops about his cash tips, and does a playful little jig. “Let’s hit the bars, baby!” cries George, “I say Galley today!” (yesterday, it was O’Malloy’s Pub). Glancing in the kitchen, I see Xeno and Juan still hunched over cutting boards. They look at us, expressionless, and continue sharpening their personal knives. The knives give off a hollow, clanging noise. Both are preparing to head to their night shift jobs in nearby restaurants. Just then, Charlie blithely opens the front door and strides outside; the noise of knives gives way to the sounds of the street. (Field note, 5/14/13).

Twentysomething, white, single, and college-educated,²¹ servers like Charlie, George, and Erin live in the now: they take afternoon drinks at bars instead of prioritizing their saving, and approach their restaurant jobs casually (I describe chapter 4). However, their actions estrange them from their Latino coworkers in the kitchen like Xeno and Juan,

²¹ At the time fieldwork began in 2012, my personal characteristics were similar: I was 26 and a relatively recent college graduate, in addition to being mixed-white.

who cannot afford to treat their low-wage jobs the same way, and must instead head to second jobs in the evening. In this way, what little solidarity they may have felt with one another (it was a smooth shift with no errors that day) gave way to an overwhelming sense of social distance.

Socio-cultural boundaries between restaurant workers are also reinforced through their divided social networks. Individuals within a given network tend to exhibit similar traits, or “homophily” (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001), and help those within their social-similar circles connect to job opportunities (Granovetter 1974). As a result, networks lend clumpiness to the social and cultural composition of the workplace. They also further the distinctions between the two worlds of work in the workplace. For example, many of the cooks at Match are not only Mexican immigrants, but immigrant men from nearby towns in Oaxaca.²² Or blood relatives. For example, a napkin-roller named Perla (20, female, 1.5-generation Mexican) first landed her job through her uncle Xeno, who is a veteran line cook at Match. Six months after getting hired, Perla got her younger cousin a job as a prep cook, whom she often commutes with to work. “I have a big family,” she laughs, marveling at how many family members she has working at Match.

The way Rachael (32, white, female) landed at The Neighborhood as a waitress reflects a similar influence of networks, this time in the front of the house:

²² Research shows that certain jobs can become “colonized” by networks of male, immigrant, Mexican and Central Americans, where job entry is virtually regulated by the group, and on-site work norms are heavily influenced by the worker’s imported culture (Massey, Durand and Malone 2002; Waldinger and Lichter 2003).

“I met Morgan (31, white, waitress), briefly, through a yoga friend. And that friend was like, ‘you guys are both blonde, both actresses. You should hang out!’ (laughs). I barely knew Morgan at the time. But she was in commercials, and my mutual friend was encouraging us to hang out. So we met a few times ... One night she got too drunk on wine and passed out. The next day I told her, ‘I’m an actress, looking for a restaurant job.’ She helped me get a job at The Neighborhood.” (Interview, 10/9/16).

As Rachael and Perla demonstrate, networks help channel different people into different types of jobs (I explore this in more detail next chapter). But in doing so, networks also shape the respective social worlds in the front- and back of the house, where the interpersonal distinctions associated with each form boundaries of membership. In this sense, fitting in with social and cultural norms in the kitchen means *not* fitting in with those in the dining room. It would be unusual to see a server at Match or The Neighborhood hustling between two jobs while catching a ride with a relative in order to get to work, just as it would be equally off-beat to see a dishwasher blithely throwing his or her paycheck towards tonight’s local bar tab.

Tension, Distance, and Conflict on the Shop Floor

Charlie, the free-wheeling white server, and Xeno, the industrious Latino cook, struggle to find common ground amidst the strong social and structural currents pulling them apart. They do different jobs, speak different languages, and approach their lives in and out of the workplace in different ways. As I have shown, the inequality between Charlie

and Xeno as coworkers characterizes the broader distinction between front- and back of the house worlds of work in restaurants. As a result, the organizational threshold between these two dimensions to interactive service labor become transformed into a chronic site of intra-employee tension, estrangement, and conflict.

In its most banal form, workers may simply ignore each other on the shop floor.

From my field notes at Match:

I take my lunch meal to the break area beyond the kitchen. It is prime break time – right before the lunch rush – and there are two tables already taken. Around one sits three white servers who alternate between furious texting on their cell phones and chatting loudly with one another. On the other sits four immigrant Mexican cooks, three of which are hastily shoving food into their mouths. The fourth is fast asleep. I hear Charlie, one of the servers seated at the first table, call out my name, “Eli, so glad you could make it to the party!” He speaks loudly and directly over the heads of the cooks, including the sleeping cook. Charlie continues, smiling, “Crystal and I were just talking about where to head for a beer after work!” (Field note, 10/7/12).

In the above scene, Charlie’s actions suggest that he registers only his young, white tablemates as colleagues and important interactants. He makes this clear by including me into an ongoing conversation while blatantly excluding his coworkers one table over. A similar process of selective social ignorance cuts the other way. At Match, immigrant Mexican immigrant dishwashers, prep cooks and line cooks would often clock in and out without anyone in the front of the house ever being aware of the personnel change. This

was less the case at Terroir and The Neighborhood, where kitchen employees need to pass through the server station in order to access the POS system in order to clock out. However, the interaction between coworkers was often just as limited: immigrant Mexican dishwashers at Terroir like Bonifacio and Gregorio would approach the POS system without bothering to acknowledge any of the white servers and bartenders in their midst. Similar to Charlie actions at the lunch table, Bonifacio would clock out then head straight to the kitchen to slap hands with each of the cooks before leaving for the day.

Reflecting shop floor cleavages, front of the house managers are often similarly unaware of back of the house personnel changes. The lack of communication can become problematic. The following occurred at Match on a Wednesday afternoon:

“Where’s Xeno, I need that chicken sando on the fly!” yells Kyle, the floor manager on duty. A guest has just complained about the wait time for his chicken sandwich. It is near the end of the lunch shift, and there is no chef on duty until the dinner chef arrives in half an hour.

“Xeno just left,” says Jose, who has just arrived and is prepping his station for the night shift, “and I didn’t see the ticket. I’ll fire a sandwich right now.” Kyle throws up his hands, exasperated. (Field note, Match, 3/10/2013)

In the above scene, Xeno likely “checked out” with the kitchen manager on duty (his direct supervisor), leaving Kyle in the dark. However, Kyle’s obliviousness towards kitchen personnel change in large part reflects his own social membership in the workplace amongst white, English-speaking front of the house employees. Though

kitchen processes are out of his jurisdiction, Kyle generally doesn't register what "they" are doing in the (immigrant Latino) back of the house anyway.

Social distance in the workplace can also be neatly illustrated by taking stock of who knows whose name. Even at this most basic level of interpersonal acknowledgement, many servers do not, in fact, know the names of their coworkers preparing the food. On a Saturday afternoon at Match, Pip, a 25-year-old white woman and two-year veteran waitress, confessed she still has difficulty remembering who works in the kitchen. "There are so many of them," she said, "besides, all I care about is that the food comes out quickly with no errors, you know?" Similarly, at The Neighborhood, servers would often exchange quizzical glances at each other after an unfamiliar Latino cook or dishwasher would pass by them heading into the kitchen. Observing this occur one day, I decided to see whether Fernando, a food runner standing nearby, knew the identity of our "mystery" kitchen coworker. "That's Enrique. He started last week, he's Tony's [food runner] friend," he replied matter-of-factly.

Nor do Latino cooks always know who is serving the food they make. In this sense, frayed lines of communication – much less mere acquaintance – run both ways. At Match, Jose, an immigrant Mexican line cook in his early forties, would occasionally flag me down to ask who "the one with glasses" was (Jerry), or to relay a question to "the blonde girl" (Pamela) about what she meant by an order ticket reading, "SLMN NO GRLC, NO OIL" (salmon cooked with no garlic or olive oil).

The smaller scale of operations at Terroir eases the estrangement between front-and back of the house workers somewhat, without necessarily eliminating it. With about half as many workers present in the restaurant at any given time compared to Match or

The Neighborhood (15-20 compared to roughly 30), employees at Terroir have more opportunities for close interactions across organizational lines. This has helped some front of the house workers befriend back of the house workers. For example, Bobby, a tall, white server in his late thirties, is well-liked amongst the Mexican dishwashers for his deft sexual jokes he directs towards them every time he drops off dirty plates (“did I hear you say you wanted my *culo*, *Papi*? Absolutely, I’ll give it to you. Can you wait until after work or should we head into the walk-in [fridge] right now?”). Yet few other dining room-based workers at Terroir go to such lengths to establish rapport with their kitchen coworkers as Bobby does, and vice versa. Spatial proximity does not necessarily breed closeness. One Saturday dinner service in December of 2016, I overheard Reggie (28, white, server), chatting with Chef Jeremy at the kitchen pass about a new restaurant that had just opened up three doors down. Two line cooks, Rita and Hilario, listened on in silence, just feet away. Afterwards, Reggie leaned over to me and whispered, “hey Eli, our new line cook’s name is Rita, right? Did she start last week?” Reggie was partially correct: he got the cook’s name correct, though they had already been working together for three weeks.

Research by social psychologists consistently finds that we tend to perceive in-group members as heterogeneous (“we are all different”) and out-group members as homogeneous (“they are all the same”)²³. The lack of meaningful contact between white servers and Latino kitchen workers in restaurants allows each to circulate generalizations, often negative, about the other. These are exacerbated by the fact that few servers have ever worked in the kitchen, just as few cooks have ever worked in the front of the house:

²³ For a review, see Quattrone and Jones (1980) and Taifel (1982).

each doesn't understand what it takes to do the other's job. Servers are often bewildered at why the food takes so long to reach their guests, and are quick to speculate: so-and-so must be having a bad day, or that "the new guy" must be stupid. The reality is often more complicated – less personal. As a sous chef named Cassandra explained to me, "ten steaks might come in the hot side at once and that cook will get behind, he'll be playing catch up the rest of the shift". Likewise, the "laziness" that some cooks attribute to front of the house workers is partly fueled by their own ignorance about what exactly the latter are doing when they appear to be "standing around". For instance, at Match and The Neighborhood servers must use their personal phones as calculators in order to estimate how much change to give back to customers. Given the estrangement of front and back of the house workers on the job, those on both sides of the divide are prone to flattening the experience of the other.

There are some issues that go beyond mere misunderstandings, and deepen the fault line these two worlds of work. Tip earning can be a particularly sore spot. Tips, which flow primarily to the white service staff, trickle down to the Latino support staff, and stop short of the kitchen, draw out social inequalities between workers. This often strains rapport between coworkers, who are unequally rewarded for a busy day of labor. The following field note takes place at the end of a hectic Sunday brunch at Match:

I was happy that service for all my tables went smoothly today. Diners in my section also tipped well, averaging over twenty percent of each bill. Before leaving, I duck into the kitchen to crack a joke with Xeno and Juan and thank them for doing a good job on the line today. I had received no customer

complaints and lots of compliments on the food. Xeno, looking weary after nine-plus hours of hard cooking, turns to me and says, “it was really busy today, yeah? You guys must have made a lot of money in tips. Like, what, two hundred dollars maybe?”

“Yeah, we did ok,” I say, thrown by the line of inquiry. We both stare off towards the dining room. “But not two hundred ...” I protest.

“How much you made then?” he interrupts, staring at me and looking more tired.

“Uhhh, we don’t make *that* much money here ...” I stammer. Xeno grunts and walks away without a word. (Field note, Match, 2/5/13)

As Rodrigo mentioned earlier, Latino cooks often privately hold lukewarm or outright negative perceptions of their white coworkers in the front of the house. I asked Rodrigo to elaborate on this sentiment:

Rodrigo: “Every now and then – well I guess it’s more like every time I see them counting their tips – I see those bigass wads It’s like ... (pause). When I get my check? I have to immediately separate \$700 from my check, which goes into rent, bills, car payment. And it’s like, fuck, I only have \$300 or \$400 more to make last two weeks. Which is virtually impossible. It’s *hard* to save money, you know?”

.... And when I see them get their checks, it’s like, cool, I like getting my check.

But I don’t go all, “oh look how much I got!”

EW: you hear some of them say that?

R: yeah! And when I hear that, I'm like I'm getting paid this much and this asshole is getting paid that much? And all they are doing is ringing in a fucking ticket, walking to the table I'm just like, something. Is. Not. Right. (laughs, shakes his head). Something is *definitely* not right!" (Interview, Rodrigo, 8/4/16)

Most Latino back of the house workers have a general awareness of the earning disparity between themselves and their highly-tipped, front of the house coworkers. Yet over the course of my fieldwork, I witnessed few examples of the former attempting to actively contest the distribution of tips, such as by complaining to management about the restaurant's tip-out policy, or by attempting to renegotiate tip distributions directly with servers.²⁴ I contend that this may have to do with the structural vulnerabilities (e.g. lack work authorization, limited resources) of many immigrant Latino workers at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood²⁵. Instead, most simply try to make the best out of the circumstances. Some support workers have moved between back of the house positions that offer better opportunities. For example, Tony and Rafael have both switched from kitchen-based jobs to support jobs in the front of the house, citing the easier working conditions and higher earnings of the latter. Others chose to reframe the issue more

²⁴ Generally, each restaurant maintains a house policy for "tipping out" support employees such as bussers, food runners and baristas that reflects both state laws and employee discretion. In California, tips may be pooled together from all workers and distributed, or done on an individual basis. See: Restaurant Business. "Standard Tip Out Percentages." Retrieved on 1/5/17 (<http://www.restaurantbusinessonline.com/operations/advice-guy/standard-tip-out-percentages>).

²⁵ By comparison, during my fieldwork I witnessed more incidents of white hostesses actively complaining about their tip-out percentages than I did Latino back of the house or support workers complaining about theirs.

favorably. As one cook told me, “it’s not all about the money. Cooking is a labor of love, and I make enough to live.” Of the few times I heard cooks voice more incendiary comments about the earning inequality with the front of the house, it was spearheaded by cooks with socio-cultural characteristics most similar to white front of the house workers. Consider the dialogue between Eric (a U.S.-born Latino cook), Tony (college-educated white cook), and myself at Terroir:

Eric and Tony are cleaning the grill in the kitchen as I walk up to them towards the end of a busy Saturday night. Tony pauses, eyeing me sideways, and says, “oh, so looks like you guys are singing a different tune now that you’ve made a lot of money tonight.” His voice is thick with sarcasm.

“Huh?” I say, feigning shock. “What do you mean?”

“Before the shift you people were complaining about being tired or whatever, but now everyone is bouncing around, happier cuz that you’ve made good tips!” He shakes his head. Eric nods and smiles sheepishly. He looks down and continues cleaning.

“Well, where’s *my* tip, huh? Huh?!” Tony adds, smirking. (Field note, Terroir, 11/14/15)

27-years-old, college-educated and from a middle-class background, Tony is clearly an outsider in Terroir’s majority-Latino kitchen line. Yet his race and class attributes likely contribute to his outspoken discontent with how tips are distributed. Though Tony and I were by-and-large on friendly terms – hence his bold humor – the fact that he was willing to raise the elephant-in-the-room issue about tips is noteworthy. Such a public display of

discontent aimed towards the front of the house is a more inflammatory gesture than I witnessed any immigrant Latino kitchen coworkers make. More often, Eric's silent agreement with Tony's comment is typical.

Service Disruptions

The cleavage between white front of the house workers and immigrant Latino back of the house workers can also threaten the flow of food service itself. While I have previously noted the tension between cooks and servers – workers with conflicting incentives on the job – the layering of social inequality based on race, class, gender, and immigration status atop structural inequalities in the workplace exacerbates these issues. For example, while many white, class-privileged servers have never personally worked in the kitchen, many also do not speak or understand Spanish – the de facto language of the kitchen at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood. The profound lack of communication between servers and kitchen workers that often results – coupled with mutual incomprehension about how to do each other's jobs – can create service problems for both parties. Unmitigated, these problems can feed into bigger ones. Consider my notes from a particularly painful lunch shift at Match, one in which entrees were taking over 30 minutes to reach tables and multiple menu items were out of stock (“86'd”).

Xeno (line cook) explained what happened from the kitchen's perspective.

Charlie and Moore (servers) had ordered dishes during the heart of the lunch rush that had been 86'd for hours. This meant that Xeno and the other cooks had to inform a manager to track down Charlie and Moore to convey the news, then wait

for the latter to ring in new orders. In the meantime, the kitchen had to pause anything else coming out for that table (to ensure all entrees arrive at the same time). In addition, “the skinny girl with the red hair” (Samantha) was pushing entrees that required the most labor-intensive preparation for the kitchen. This in turn bottlenecked the kitchen, and the delays in food service started to mount.

It is clear to me that servers are oblivious to these kitchen issues, or their role in causing them. Just earlier in the shift, I remember Jerry (server) commenting: “jeez, it’s like all of them [the Latino cooks] went out partying last night and are hungover this morning! Why is it taking so long?!” (Field note, Match, 7/1/12)

That day, Xeno and his fellow Latino cooks on the line likely shook their heads at how incompetent the *gringos* in the front of the house are (*why didn’t Charlie know not to order items we are out of? Why does “the red haired girl” keep ordering one item?*). By contrast, servers in the dining room were equally baffled as to why the kitchen was so delayed, and ready to make up their own reasoning (“it’s like all of them went out partying last night and are hungover”).

The unwillingness or inability to talk to each other is closely related to the unwillingness to go out of one’s way to help. This is problematic in a setting where cooperation is so integral to smooth service. For example, at The Neighborhood, guests are allowed to order from a small “tapas” menu between the hours of 2:30-5:30pm when the main kitchen is preparing for dinner. During this time, kitchen management is rarely present (Chef Carlton usually goes out for a smoke behind the restaurant). Servers often complain that when they ring in an order ticket during this time, it never gets made

promptly. Rachael (waitress) would lean over the kitchen pass and yell, “hey guys, helloooo? I ordered hummus and olives ten minutes ago! Who’s gonna do it today?” Juan (25, male, 2nd generation Mexican) would wordlessly trudge over to the ticket machine, glance at the order and then back at Rachael, then take his time assembling the items.

Personal beefs between white servers and immigrant Latino cooks on the shop floor can also spill over into food service problems. At Terroir, a white waitress named Dorothy complained that Carlos and Jorge, two Guatemalan prep cooks, were “talking shit” about her in Spanish (Dorothy does not understand Spanish). When management dragged their feet getting involved, Dorothy took matters into her own hand. She announced loudly that she refused to enter the area where Carlos and Jorge were working, which happened to be next to the dishwashing station. Her actions left her front of the house coworkers (including me) scrambling to help buss her tables and bring dirty dishes to the dish pit. Juggling these extra duties atop their own, each server had less time to attend to guests seated in their sections. In my section, water cups went empty, crumbs remained on tables, and more than a few guests began looking around to see where their server was.

At Match, a food runner named Antonio (2nd generation Mexican American) told me he was going to “slack off” on his job duties during lunch service in retaliation for the paltry tips he was receiving from a certain waitress. He made it clear that his diminished efforts would not be noticeable enough for management to call him out for poor performance, though the perpetrator would have to work harder to “upkeep” tables in her section – running food, clearing plates, and readying the table for the next party. Without

the same support from Antonio, the waitress was not able to “turn” her tables as quickly. This caused the restaurant to seat fewer guests, and her to make less tips that day.

Conclusion

The structural distinctions between front- and back of the house restaurant labor already puts these two types of workers at odds with one another. One works *with* guests, while the other works *on* food, each with different pressures. Yet upscale Los Angeles restaurants like Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood, this organizational cleavage gains teeth from race, class, and gender-based inequalities that also span this divide. White, class-privileged front of the house workers and working-class Latino back of the house workers interact with one another in ways that expound their social distance: Charlie registers only his fellow (white) servers as peers and colleagues in the lunch room; Manuel brings in homemade tamales for the kitchen staff only; Dorothy avoids interacting with the “surly” Latino dishwashers; Xeno and Mary don’t know each other’s names after two years of working together.

These fault lines do not always manifest as overt problems (though they sometimes do), but rather as social boundaries in the workplace reinforcing two separate and unequal worlds of work. It would be easy to view the social organization of the restaurant shop floor as solely the product of two distinct groups drawn apart into different cliques, much like a high school playground. The symbolic boundaries workers enact on the job are real, but they are only part of the story. It ignores the crucial role management plays in framing these boundaries, channeling certain individuals onto either side of them, and patterning occupational segmentation upfront in service workplaces. I

turn now to examine the connection between the production of upscale service at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood and the unequal opportunities facing different workers that result.

Chapter Three

Producing Difference

A big-name Hollywood celebrity – and regular diner at the restaurant – has bought out The Neighborhood for the evening. By mid-afternoon a team of workers is busily preparing the dining room for a lavish dinner set for thirty VIP guests. One decorative element involves a large wooden partition that separates the dining room from the back kitchen areas.

“Hey Eli, check it out!” calls Deborah, pointing at the barrier/prop. “It’s like Trump has already started building his wall! See -- all the white people are on that side [dining room], and it’s only us Mexicans over here!” She chuckles, “looks like you are stuck on the brown side now.” (Field note, 11/29/16)

When one dines out in Los Angeles, New York, or San Francisco, why are all the servers white, and – as Deborah alludes – the kitchen workers “brown”? Earlier I showed how social and structural boundaries between different workers exacerbate the feeling that the workplace is split into separate and unequal worlds of work. Yet what remains unclear is management’s underlying role in shaping a polarized shop floor dynamic in restaurants. Dating back to Karl Marx, scholars of labor have sought to understand how management attempts to control the means of production and gain the upper hand in labor relations with workers (Burawoy 1979; Thompson and Smith 2010). In dictating wages, policies, and other structural and cultural elements of the shop floor, management shapes much of the labor conditions that employees must navigate on the job. This also involves the

social organization of the workplace, in which different groups of workers based on race, class, gender, or other characteristics may labor in different capacities (see Charles and Grusky 2004; Kanter 1977; Lee 1998; Roediger and Esch 2012).

In many ways, the fact that certain jobs are ascribed with social attributes is hardly new. In the United States, women have long been associated with care work and secretarial roles (Charles and Grusky 2004; Ridgeway 2011), men with blue-collar work and management, immigrants with unskilled manual-labor (Cantazarite 2000; Waldinger and Lichter 2003), and teenagers with “stopgap” jobs such as babysitting and fast-food cashiering (Grugulis and Bozkurt 2011; Oppenheimer and Kaljmin 1995; Osterman 1980). Today, the social-typing of labor is thought to be less a product of active discrimination and more the result of a subtler set of employer preference and cultural norms for certain jobs (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Ridgeway 2011; Tilly 1998). For instance, employers seeking to hire new employees often make judgments based on a person’s intangible qualities, such as their perceived likeability (Moss and Tilly 2001) or “cultural fit” within the company (Rivera 2012). Hiring managers may also look to industry standards for implicit hiring standards (Dimaggio and Powell 1983), and rely on existing racialized or gendered standards for certain lines of work. These decisions – say, to hire young women for one type of job and immigrant, non-white men for another – can become ingrained as institutionalized hiring practices, normalized over time.

Yet how might the logic of upscale service, backed by managerial practices, contribute to the reproduction of social inequality in the workplace? As a rule, management in interactive service workplaces strives to hire employees who, in addition to being dependable laborers, are able to help the company provide a “quality”

experience to customers. This means different things in the front of the house versus in the back of the house. In restaurants, management seeks front of the house personnel who will ensure that guests have a positive dining experience, and back of the house personnel who possess the culinary skills to properly execute food orders in a timely fashion. This distinction can be usefully re-framed as what is *not* needed for each type of work: kitchen-based employees need not be able to produce “emotional” labor for guests, whereas dining room workers need not be able to prepare food. These contrasting labor objectives can often slip into social and cultural shorthands for different jobs: the kind of person who interacts pleasantly with guests is unlikely to be the same kind of person willing to toil over a hot grill in the kitchen.

In this chapter, I examine how management at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood channel with different social characteristics into divergent service jobs that offer unequal labor opportunities. Specifically, I argue that management’s strategic decisions regarding hiring, service protocol, and shop floor policies reflect a logic of upscale service with powerful racial, class-cultural, and gendered assumptions. This in turn underlies the occupational segregation found in upscale service establishments. Yet, just as retail brands in a shopping mall seek to differentiate themselves to remain competitive to their target clientele (Pettinger 2004), the respective service regimes at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood also maintain notable distinctions. In the latter part of this chapter, I compare and contrast how each restaurant attempts to structure their brand of upscale restaurant service, in turn sculpting the workplace dynamic found within them in different ways.

Hiring “Brown Collar” Labor in the Back of the House

Restaurant hiring managers look to Latino immigrants to fill jobs that are labor-intensive, low wage, and away from customers (Gomberg-Munoz 2011). In immigrant-heavy urban centers like Los Angeles, this has contributed to the racialization of cooking, bussing and janitorial work as “brown collar jobs” associated with immigrant Latina/o women and men (Cantazarite 2000). As anthropologist Ruth Gomberg-Munoz writes, “the notion that working hard is attributable to ‘Mexican culture’ naturalizes Mexican immigrants’ subordination and reduces their work performances to a putative cultural inclination for socially degraded, back-breaking labor.” Another aspect of this cultural frame for “brown collar” jobs is that managers often see Latinos as less likely to cause problems than members of other social groups, such as African Americans and whites (Neckerman and Kirschenman 1991). Whether or not this is empirically true is beside the point: these social and cultural stereotypes deeply influence the demand-side of the labor market for service work, and managers use these short-hands to make staffing decisions.

For restaurant managers, hiring Latino immigrant workers to unskilled service jobs can also be the most expedient option available. Wally, a 30-year-old, mixed-white manager at The Neighborhood explained to me what happens when a back of the house job opens up at the restaurant:

Wally: “Every time we have a job opening in the back of the house, I have ten resumes in my hand ready to fill it.”

EW: And who are these resumes?

Wally: they are friends and family of the cooks.

EW: so they are also Latino?

Wally: yeah – all of them. And they are ready to work, so it’s convenient. It makes my job easier.” (Interview, 11/28/16)

Wally describes Latinos, particularly immigrants, as the low-hanging fruit for hire when kitchen and support jobs need to be filled. It has been this way at each of the four restaurants he has managed in Los Angeles over the past decade. If someone quits, Wally can be looking at “ten resumes” tomorrow, each recommended by incumbent Latino workers that he knows to be reliable and hard-working.

Other hiring practices perpetuate the racialized nature of back of the house restaurant work in the city. For example, when managers recruit back of the house workers from Craigslist and other industry job sites (e.g. Harri.com or Workpop), it is not uncommon for these advertisements to be written entirely in Spanish as illustrated by the following ad on Craigslist’s Los Angeles forum:

“Muchas oportunidades de empleo en los mejores restaurantes de LA

Si esta buscando trabajo o tiene en mente cambiar de trabajo? Tenemos muchas oportunidades de empleo que apoyan la diversidad y autenticidad de la Cultura Latina. Aplica a través de Harri.com y podrás encontrar un sin número posiciones abiertas para ti! Anímate y descubre nuevas posibilidades para tu futuro.

Ahora mismo tenemos **50 Back of House positions** en importantes restaurantes de alta calidad ofreciendo empleos de: Executive Chef, Baker, Dishwasher /

Porter, Line Cook, Pastry Cook, Pastry Chef, Sous Chef, Prep Chef, Event Chef y muchas posiciones más. Lo único que necesita hacer es crear un breve perfil para aplicar a una o a todas las posiciones que hay disponibles en Harri.com. Qué está esperando para cambiar su futuro?”²⁶ (Craigslist LA, 9/9/15)

Other industry job postings treat the ability to speak Spanish as a veritable job requirement, one listed alongside other “necessary” skills such as previous cooking experience. This is more often the case for back of the house jobs (many kitchen workers are Spanish monolingual), or for restaurants located in neighborhoods that are predominantly Spanish speaking, such as Boyle Heights or East Los Angeles. Consider the following ads found on Craigslist during the spring of 2016:

“Hiring Cashiers & Cooks with Great growth opportunity

Job Requirements:

- Must be at least 18 years of age
- Able to work varied shifts including holidays & weekends
- Excellent customer service skills

²⁶ English Translation:

A lot of employment opportunities at the best restaurants in Los Angeles

Are you looking for work or want to change jobs? We have a lot of employment opportunities that support the authenticity and diversity of Latin culture. Apply through Harri.com and you will be able to find many open positions! Get excited and find new opportunities for your future.

Right now there are job openings for 50 Back of House positions at important and high-quality restaurants, these include Executive Chef, Baker, Dishwasher / Porter, Line Cook, Pastry Cook, Pastry Chef, Sous Chef, Prep Chef, Event Chef and many more. The only thing you need to do is create a short profile and apply to one or all the positions available at Harri.com. What are you waiting for to change your future?

-Positive attitude

-Attention to detail and quality

-Bilingual in English & Spanish Preferred

-May lift materials and/or product up to 50 pounds or more.”

(Craigslist, 4/1/16, emphasis added)

“Good Restaurant²⁷ is looking for DISHWASHER EXPERIENCE:

fast

neat

bilingual

multi task

organized”

(Craigslist, 4/29/16)

Part time cashier position bilingual spanish and english. \$10 an hour, 5 days out of the week. Monday, wednesday, friday, saturday and sunday, afternoon shift. 4pm to close. Please stop by (address removed) for an application or call me.

(Craigslist, 5/9/16)

These ads showcase the way in which back of the house jobs in Los Angeles, along with some cashiering jobs, are conveyed as work for Latinos. Ideal applicants need to be ready for hard work, willing to accept low wages, and able to communicate with their

²⁷ Pseudonym to protect restaurant’s privacy.

(likely) Spanish-speaking coworkers on the job. While these ads stop short of requiring applicants to be of Mexican or Central American ancestry, they insinuate nearly as much.

Reinforcing Privileged White Space in the Dining Room

“It’s like when they hire, they are trying to hire the same person over again! Like, look at the newest class [of servers] – all blond, skinny and beautiful.” (Crystal, 24, white, Match waitress)

Research shows that employers consistently prefer applicants that they believe possess “soft skills”, defined as “skills, abilities and traits that pertain to personality, attitude and behavior rather than to formal or technical knowledge” (Tilly and Moss 1996: 253). This is particularly true in service work, where managers are likely to think of frontline employees as the face of the company while they are interacting with guests on the shop floor (Pettinger 2004; Williams and Connell 2010). Yet, leaning on intangible or embodied traits to make hiring decisions for interactive service jobs often favors white, middle-class, and conventionally attractive applicants (Gatta, Boushey, Applebaum 2009; Williams and Connell 2010; Warhurst and Nickson 2009).²⁸ Such criteria also disadvantages a variety of others, such as racial minorities, the working class, and those who are overweight or otherwise less aesthetically appealing. In other words, it is a

²⁸ Lauren Rivera’s research shows that many white and highly-educated managers in professional firms express an interest in hiring candidates that are socially and culturally similar to them, perceiving these candidates to be a better fit within the company (Rivera 2012, 2015).

multi-pronged assemblage of class, race, gender, and culture that employers often implicitly consider for customer-facing positions.²⁹

Front of the house hiring at upscale restaurants like Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood effectively leaves an open door for white, middle-class young adults to get hired, while all but closing the door on others. Below is an excerpt from an interview with Courtney, a 28-year-old African American hiring manager at The Neighborhood:

“Although it is unsaid, it is very clear from seeing [the owner]’s energy, what kind of people he wants here. If [the owner] had a perfect world, every employee would look like Morgan [waitress]. Every employee would look beautiful, blue eyes and blond hair. And walk gracefully. And people who look like Kevin [waiter]. Full of them ... it’s his ideal world. And it *used* to be like that here! And then Katie or another manager gave Geraldo [waiter, immigrant Mexican] a shot, and that was a thing ...” (Interview 9/6/16)

Courtney feels pressure to continue curating new front of the house hires to meet the owner’s expectations. Within this hiring context, the decision to give an immigrant Mexican man (Geraldo) a chance to wait tables amongst an all-white staff stood out as highly unusual. It may have also come with consequences for the person who hired Geraldo. According to another manager at The Neighborhood named Catelyn (50, white, female):

²⁹ While many immigrants fill kitchen jobs in New York City, like Los Angeles, Sharon Zukin’s study (1995) reveals immigrants possessing more “urbane”, middle-class mannerisms were more often given desirable jobs in restaurants (Zukin 1995: 154-173).

So it's very clear what kind of person [the general manager] wants to hire. And I've only hired black, Latin – you know what I am saying? And one particular person told me, *I'm not hiring right*.

EW: what did they say about who needed to be hired for what roles?

K: it's not like anyone has actually talked to me about these things –

EW: because that would be illegal –

K: -- exactly. But ... (pauses).

EW: it sounds like you are getting the subtle cues of it ...

K: oh, it's not very subtle, I'm sorry. They are not saying, specifically, "hire her, she's blonde haired blue eyed." They are saying, "she's bubbly and bright, just what the people want." (Interview, 4/5/17)

For managers, violating cultural and organizational norms of hiring white, "beautiful" people to interact with guests can jeopardize their standing in the company. Like Catelyn, who was told she "wasn't hiring right", Courtney remembers being put in a very tough situation in the summer of 2016 when she was fielding open interviews for a vacant hostess position at the restaurant. Three African American women applied and were awaiting interviews. Courtney remembers her stomach churning: with two African Americans already on a modest-sized staff, she felt that hiring on another black person would violate the owner's unspoken, racialized expectations for front of the house employees.³⁰ While the standards for front of the house hiring may be publicly framed as

³⁰ Just one month after this conversation took place, Courtney's concerns on this issue took care of themselves: both black waiters at The Neighborhood quit unexpectedly.

“bubbly and bright” or “graceful”, the racial and class screens are clear enough – especially for those whose jobs depend maintaining this image.

Of course, discriminatory hiring based on race, gender, or sexuality has been illegal in most parts of the United States for some time, and employers are careful to avoid any such accusations. Yet there are ways in which hiring *select* “diversity” need not necessarily upset the social organization of restaurant work. For example, Courtney describes the tokenism that she says exists at The Neighborhood:

“You have to sprinkle in everyone else. So you have your dominant, which are normally white. That’s what *should* be dominant – that’s not my view. I’m saying, this is your dominant: I want my white, beautiful, tall servers, and I want the Latinos and everyone else on the line, dishwashing, bussing, all that.”

(Interview, 9/6/16).

The “sprinkling” of racial diversity on the shop floor is thus a calculated way in which management can point to egalitarian hiring practices without necessarily altering the fundamental social order of the workplace (see Kanter 1977: chapter 8). In my view, the non-whites hired as servers and bartenders at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood were hardly “risky” to their images. Aside from skin color, most fit the intangible ideals for front of the house jobs, such as possessing a physically-fit body type, middle-upper class demeanor, and/or an outgoing personality. Hiring “diversity” can also be image building. Chris, a white male bartender in his late thirties – and a twenty-year veteran of the industry – explains: “at almost every high-end restaurant that I’ve worked at in Los

Though I could find no firm evidence that they were pressured out, the timing certainly suggested it may have been more than a coincidence.

Angeles and New York, the hiring has been like a casting call – in that [management] seems to be trying to match certain roles that they want ... I want *this* kind of look, and *that* kind of personality.” As Chris points out, hiring token non-whites to round out an otherwise all-white “cast” can be brand-affirming rather than merely a defense from potential lawsuits.

Like in the back of the house, management also relies on employee social networks to help fill out the dining room staff with the “right” kind of workers. By my estimate, throughout my fieldwork, roughly one out of every three new front of the house hires at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood arrived through existing connections with (white) servers, bartenders, baristas, hosts, and dining room managers. For example, when Terroir changed general managers in January of 2016, within a week of his hire, Theodore, the incoming manager, introduced three of his friends that would be joining us as part-time servers. He described each as a brilliant and hard-working restaurant “pro” whose work he could vouch for firsthand (no further vetting of these new hires was performed).

Managers also lean heavily on formal job postings to find the right individuals for front of the house jobs. Most server and bartender job vacancies at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood are cross-listed on Craigslist and other industry hiring websites. Explains Wally, the manager at The Neighborhood, “the people that drop off resumes [at the restaurant] are primarily for the back of the house. We have to go out and *look* for servers because no one is walking in and dropping off resumes” (interview, 11/29/16). Without the assurance of a prospective hire’s personal character that comes with

employee referrals, some online job postings take to stating their ideals for front of the house candidates explicitly:

“HOT Servers Wanted~ Special Events** (Metro LA/SGV/LB/SFV)

Do you have HOT looks and mad skills?

Then we are looking to hire you for Special Events both for the holidays and all year round!

MUST BE VERY AVAILABLE

Our agency is looking to hire experienced professional servers with a great package of both looks, personality and skill!

Post your resume in the body of your response, along with RELEVANT serving experience, and if we like what we see, we will contact you to interview in the next 48 hours. But you must be available while the gigs are HOT!

All work is part time on call.” (Craigslist, 9/28/15)

“Model/Waitress Wanted

We have Immediate Position for a Waitress for a new high end Japanese Restaurant in Pasadena. Also experience in a restaurant is Preferred.” (Craigslist, 11/4/15)

Such ads are unusually forward about their de facto job requirements, no doubt spurred on by the anonymity of Craigslist posts (notice that restaurant names, addresses, or specific identifications are not listed). As the first ad describes, ideal applicants of both sexes should feature a “great package of both looks, personality and skill”. The second

suggestively conflates “model” and “waitress”. It is also not uncommon to encounter job postings asking that applicants submit a headshot or full-length photo along with their resume.³¹ Yet other more mundane ways of describing the qualities of front of the house jobs whittle down the pool of prospective job candidates. For example, many front of the house jobs are listed as part-time, on-call, or both. Others require “open availability” without a guarantee of full-time employment. By making unreliable earnings and limited job hours standard issue, front of the house service jobs primarily attract individuals with a buffer of class resources and schedule flexibility (those that can, in a sense, “afford” the unpredictability). This “pay-to-play” system discourages less class-privileged workers as well as those with families who may require a steadier paycheck (I explore this topic at greater length next chapter).³²

Other “pre-screening” practices also uphold the aesthetic and social standards for customer-facing restaurant jobs. Studies show that employers make judgments about an applicant’s racial background, gender, sexuality, and class based on stereotypes about their name, residence, and other information that might be listed on their resume or job application. As gatekeeping mechanisms, these informal assessments can dictate who gets the callback before any interviews even commence (Dias forthcoming; Jayaraman 2011; Rivera and Tilcsik 2016). At Terroir during the winter of 2016, during lulls in service, the general manager would scrutinize the resumes of those applying to be servers at the restaurant. “If we want to play in the big leagues, we need to start attracting

³¹ From my experience, this practice is more common amongst smaller restaurants that are both less likely to be aware of the dubious legality of this practice or more likely to fly under the radar of labor enforcement agencies.

³² A study by UCLA’s Labor Center (2015) notes that part-time and on-call work is particularly challenging for young, working-class individuals.

servers who have worked at Spago, Valentino, Capo, those kind of places,” he would say, mentioning top fine-dining restaurants in the city. Requiring extensive serving or bartending experience at top-notch restaurants also ensures the social caliber of applicants. It means that potential hires have already passed unspoken hiring standards at similar reputable restaurants. This in turn helps maintain the social status quo in front of the house jobs.³³

Lonnie, a manager at Match, reportedly has his own system for sizing-up potential hires, though I did not observe it in practice. According to Crystal, the waitress described earlier, when applicants arrive at the restaurant, she would tell them to wait while she flagged down Lonnie to inform him of the situation. Lonnie would then covertly observe the potential hire from a safe distance and signal to Crystal whether to tell the applicant to wait for an interview (“we’re hiring, would you mind waiting up front so I can introduce you to a manager?”) or indicate there were no job openings at the moment. “It is all about looks,” Crystal mused, shaking her head when recalling the practice.

Whether or not Lonnie indeed implements his hiring “system” as Crystal describes, other managers seek to proactively recruit their front of the house staffs using other methods. At Match, diners themselves may be treated as potential hires. Mel, a 25-year-old waitress at Match, explains how she first got the job:

“I thought this place was so cool and, I wanted to work here, you know? In fact, I used to be a regular, especially for brunch. So one day, Kyle (mgr) came up to me and we talked. He’s like, *do you want a job?* And I’m like, *sure!*”

³³ Sociologists Paul Dimaggio and Walter Powell (1983) would call this “normative isomorphism”, whereby common practices in the industry (e.g. hiring standards) are upheld.

At the Neighborhood, several front of the house workers landed their jobs after being a customer for years. Cassandra (22, white, female, part-time line cook), describes how she and her family used to dine at the restaurant regularly while she was in high school. “One day we were eating and Chef [Morgan] came by. My father mentioned that I was looking for a summer job and Chef was like, “why don’t you come work for me? So that’s how I started,” she explained. By treating restaurant patrons as a steady stream of potential hires, managers keep a tight grip over who is offered a job.³⁴ While making their obligatory rounds in the dining room greeting guests, Kyle and Morgan strike up casual conversations that can sometimes transform into informal interviews.

Not all hiring mechanisms described above manifest the same way at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood, and I detail this variation later. Still, as gatekeeping mechanisms within the logic of upscale service, they all have a similar effect in the workplace: those with certain social characteristics are either turned away at the front door or channeled into unequal and mutually exclusive service jobs.

Managing Difference

Inside the restaurant, managerial practices also reinforce boundaries between front- and back of the house workers in a number of ways. The divisive organizational conditions they help perpetuate often contradict official discourses of workplace unity: like in many other workplaces, managers at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood often preach

³⁴ Crystal had previously worked as a server in San Diego, and was subsequently offered a server position. Customer-hires with no restaurant experience are initially offered more entry-level positions such as food running or hosting, though I did not witness a customer-hire ever offered a dishwashing job (even temporarily).

collectivist sentiments to the staff such as “we are all one family” or “let’s take care of each other out there.” Actual proceedings suggest otherwise. For starters, by design, the hierarchical structure of kitchen labor makes it so that few kitchen-based workers have any contact with dining room staff on the job. Cooks are often told to go through the chef on duty to relay information to other non-kitchen coworkers, and vice versa. For example, at Match, servers are not allowed to communicate directly with line cooks during service. I found this out the hard way:

A guest flags me down to say she forgot to specify that the cream sauce should be on the side instead of directly on top of her omelette. I hurry back to the kitchen to convey the message to the cooks. I go directly to Juan [line cook], who I know is manning the egg station today. I begin to explain the new revision to him when Chef Eric (Executive Chef) screams over to me, “Hey! Don’t talk directly to him, you give *me* the instruction, then *I’ll* relay the message!” Humiliated, I repeat the special instructions to him while all the cooks pause to look on. (Field note, 10/5/12).

Servers are forced to follow a formal chain of command that discourages them from communicating directly with line cooks. To be fair, management argues this is done for practical reasons: the person responsible for directing the flow of food production – the chef – wants to know what is happening in the kitchen at all times. Yet, this practice can also be socially alienating: servers and cooks, often separated at the kitchen pass by only a few feet and a simple spatial divider, are forced to direct their communication towards a

third party in order to convey even the most basic information (*sauce on the side for the chicken on twenty-one! Nut allergy on five!*). At The Neighborhood, one of the chefs is notorious amongst the server staff for ignoring attempts at verbal communication with the kitchen entirely: any change in a food order must be written down and submitted to him on a “refire” ticket.

Staff meetings are also rarely held for the whole staff. At Match and Terroir, meetings are advertised on the backroom board as “servers and bartenders only”, or “mandatory for all kitchen personnel.” At these meetings, management often approaches these two worker cohorts differently. The former receive handouts composed entirely in English, including many that are provided as part of ongoing training and education. The latter frequently receive bilingual Spanish-English meeting notes limited to the bare minimum information. For example, at The Neighborhood, daily front of the house “pre-shift” meetings regularly feature food tastings and discussions of new dishes, wines, and seasonal produce. By contrast, back of the house workers are scheduled to arrive at different times for their shifts, and immediately begin setting up their workstations. Any meeting for the latter is usually hastily arranged to discuss formal changes in company policy or employee legal rights (such as when management changed healthcare package providers in the fall of 2016).

Other procedures suggest that management approaches white front of the house employees and Latino back of the house employees as entirely different groups instead of coworkers. The unequal training regiments for new hires at each restaurant showcase this difference. Front of the house hires generally go through at least two interviews with different managers, and must be approved by each. Some also “stage”, an industry term

for a “trial” job run, during one of their initial visits to the restaurant. Successful hires then proceed into a formal training period of roughly 10 days (less for hosts and support workers) designed to familiarize them with the restaurant’s food menu, wine list, and guest service protocols. During these trainings, managers go through extensive efforts to welcome new hires to the “team”. For instance, during my front of the house orientation at Terroir, Jim (general manager, white, male, 40s) spent the first hour of each six-hour training day doing group icebreakers. Jim would encourage us to be goofy and personal while getting to know one another. This lasted for a full week, at which point the icebreaker hour had transformed into a veritable social hour amongst friends. Yet servers and bartenders were never formally introduced to any of the back of the house workers who were also present in the restaurant during this time.

At all three restaurants, informal hiring and on-the-job training for back of the house hires is the norm. In contrast to the formal hiring measures and elaborate training servers and bartenders receive, kitchen hires are usually given a quick interview by the head chef (often in basic Spanish, or with the translation help of a bilingual English-Spanish employee) or a “stage”, followed by on-the-job training shadowing an incumbent employee (see Waldinger and Bailey 1991).³⁵ This difference is illustrated in the following chart:

³⁵ Staging is more common for higher-skilled hires in the front- or back of house, such as grill cooks and servers.

Hiring & Training Practices

	FOH*		BOH*	
	Hiring	Training	Hiring	Training
MATCH	2 interviews w FOH mgrs	5 day orientation, 3 day shadow, service test	interview w chef	on the job
TERROIR	1 interview w FOH mgr and/or stage	10 day shadowing	interview w chef and stage	on the job
THE NEIGHBOR- HOOD	3 interviews w FOH mgrs and/or stage	10 day shadowing, service test	interview w chef and stage	on the job

* excluding
management

As I have described, the presiding logic of upscale service provision at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood shapes a socially and structurally divided workplace. Yet, the restaurants in this study also maintain their own characteristic “brands” of service. As I describe below, these brands, along their corresponding managerial practices, nuance the workplace dynamic and the nature of social inequality found within them.

Proximal Service at Match Restaurant

Striving for a “casual-upscale” aesthetic, Match has done away with white-linen tablecloths and other fine-dining embellishments. In its place is trendy décor of exposed cement walls, high ceiling fans, and modern art. Arguably the capstone of Match’s “hip” service brand is the restaurant’s *proximal* service style, which I define as peer-like service exchanges between workers and customers in a commercial setting (Wilson 2016).

Contrasting formal service norms found in traditional luxury service settings (ex. fancy

hotels, black-tie banquets), under the logic of proximal service, the symbolic differences between server and served are played *down* rather than *up*. At Match, the person who greets you at the dining table acts more like a peer than the help.

Match management orchestrates the production of socially-close service in several important ways. Front of the house hires are screened for a particular array of embodied characteristics that allow them to resemble the age, race, and class-cultural characteristics of the restaurant's primary clientele. As a result of the restaurant's selective hiring, servers, bartenders, baristas and hosts at Match are overwhelmingly young, white, recent college graduates. Their image deliberately blurs distinctions with those who dine at the restaurant.

Match seeks to inculcate proximal service through distinctive training and workplace policies. For example, during training for front of the house workers, new hires are given guidelines for demeanor and self-presentation when with customers. However, the guideline for "proper" conduct when with guests involves considerable flexibility, customization and autonomy on the part of employees, and contrasts the strict managerial control over employees' emotional displays found in other service settings (Hochschild 1983; Leidner 1993). As a staff trainer named Sarah noted during orientation, service at Match means practicing a certain brand of friendliness:

"Sarah acts out what a timid server looks like, as she tiptoes with an aghast expression on her face towards our trainee table (six of us). We laugh as her eyes dart back and forth, shoulders hunched, trying to stutter out a word. She then snaps out of the skit, bellowing "*be* confident! For god's sake, they know they

are at a restaurant, and the server is there to do a job. They expect to be interrupted at some point!” She follows this with: “A lot of service is *confidence*. When you have to interrupt a table in conversation, do so boldly and with purpose. When you are walking by a table on a busy shift, slow down and appear *calm*. Customers take a lot of cues off the waitstaff, so if you appear out of control, that is how they will perceive the service.” (Field note, 3/22/12)

Unlike explicitly themed service featured at places like Hooters (sexually suggestive service), Dick’s Last Resort (surly service), or Bubba Gump’s (movie-themed service), Match provides few required scripts, acts, or routines for how to interact with diners. The “training” of Match’s variety of proximal service is in this sense a far less conspicuously engineered and easily repeatable product. As Sarah suggests, servers should exhibit a confident, calm, and affable style of service as opposed to being too deferential or business-like. Servers should not be so rushed so as to feel uncomfortable if a customer wants to casually chat. In effect, servers are encouraged to appear *cool* in multiple senses of the word, embodying leisure rather than serious labor.

Match’s front of the house dress code also provides workers with substantial leeway in what may be worn to work. Workers must simply display “good personal hygiene,” wear fitted jeans and tops that feature the color white and “no large logos, advertising or slogans.” Match’s dress code thus plays up servers’ sense of personal style and fashion, and sets the tone for their interaction with guests. Floor managers exaggerate this with loose monitoring of server attire:

The manager on duty, Kyle, gathers the servers together for a pre-shift meeting at 8am and says, “as you know, our dress code is to dress trendy with the primary color being white.” The servers look at each other and smirk. Crystal rolls her eyes and says jokingly, “am I trendy enough for you today?” She points to her striped, loosely hanging black-and-white t-shirt.

Kyle pauses to look at her, then, with a shrug, says, “sure?” He resumes reading off his meeting notes. (Field note, 11/4/12).

Servers are encouraged to thread the line between fashion and function with their attire, and face only minor sanctions for dress code violations. As a result, servers assert extensive fashion vanities on the job. For example, female servers will often come to work wearing a combination of jewelry, scarves, hats and jackets, all of which are virtually unregulated by the dress code. Match’s dress code facilitates more conspicuous attention drawn to servers’ personal fashion choices and sexualized labor in the workplace (Warhurst and Nickson 2009). This helps to frame a dining room environment where fashion-savvy workers are “on display” (Crang 1994) amidst the hip, moneyed patrons who come to the restaurant to consume the whole experience. On multiple occasions, I witnessed restaurant diners who, unable to rely on conspicuous visual cues to differentiate staff from patron, would inquire *do you work here?* to a series of people before finally arriving at someone who could direct them towards the restroom.

Managers also enhance the general ambiance of proximal service. They stroll from table to table joking and shaking hands with diners, and, on occasion, “comping” (giving away for free) food and drink items. Match’s formal policy on comping states

three occasions to which discounts may be applied: for the immediate family of employees, off-the-clock coworkers, and guests celebrating a special occasion. In practice, complementary items are given out at the restaurant much more liberally and strategically. Regular diners may find their appetizers or desserts mysteriously taken off the final bill by managers; friends of servers might find several beers arrive at their table unordered and off the bill. Bestowed upon select guests, the distribution of “free stuff” (McClain and Mears, 2012) helps solidify the dining room as a space for symbolic inner-membership.

Of course, proximal service is at least as much about producing exclusion as it is inclusion. The race and class characteristics all but required to enact proximal service with Match’s clientele of white young professionals make it difficult for those who don’t fit this mold to break into front of the house ranks. Specifically, the farther one is from embodying youth, whiteness, trendiness, and upper-middle class habitus, the more likely you are to be channeled into other jobs at Match such as cooking, bussing, or dishwashing. In many cases, the least likely candidates for proximal service roles are the Latino immigrants already employed there. This in turn severely curtails internal job ladders at the restaurant, particularly between the front- and back of the house. At Match, one is hired to socially-typed positions that are difficult to break out from without other resources at your disposal.³⁶

Le Temple Gastronomique at Terroir

³⁶ I describe how some Latino workers are able to access mobility pathways in restaurants in Chapter Six.

Terroir strives to be a destination restaurant, one where expertly-prepared food and drink are the primary showcase. The kitchen, helmed by a decorated chef and industry veteran named Jeremy, is the star of the show. Nearly every dimension of Terroir's internal organization is aligned to the theme of *professionalized* service, from its interior ambiance, glamorous website (featuring images of Terroir's menu items), hiring and training regiment, and behind the scenes procedures.

The restaurant's customer service style is guided by fine-dining traditions. Service is formal and understated, with the waitstaff expected to maintain a clear asymmetry between themselves and guests (the latter treated as symbolically superior to the former). As Chef Jeremy explained to the front of the house staff during orientation, "we are striving to be service professionals, and the main tools to help us improve are product knowledge and perfecting the steps of service." At Terroir, "perfect service" – as Jeremy likes to call it, means that tables should always be clean and set with the proper cutlery for each course, uniforms (pressed white collared shirts and black slacks for both men and women) are always kept crisp, guests are always served their food from the left and drinks from the right, and guests never need to ask for anything.

Terroir's management attempts to maintain "perfect service" through a system of training and supervision aimed at reinforcing its principles. In the kitchen, Jeremy himself finishes every plate with a clean wipe and garnish before sending it off to the dining room; any food item not to his liking is hastily handed back to cooks to be re-plated, or worse, re-cooked. In the front of the house, Jim, the general manager, often reminds servers and bartenders to speak in hushed tones and keep side conversations to a minimum when the restaurant is open for business. During down time, servers are told to

“fill the space” in the dining room by standing alert in a vacant areas of the floor until food needs to be brought out or a guest requires assistance.

Managers are unafraid to correct employees for their errors on any of these measures.

The following are from my notes on a pre-shift meeting on customer service:

Jeremy tells us, “we need to absolutely, at all cost, avoid some bad service stuff that I’ve been seeing the last few days. If I see you doing any of these, I’m going to call you out for giving *Denny’s* service, and yes, that is meant to be an insult.” Jeremy demonstrates: he holds one plate in each hand, and begins to walk towards us looking like he is in a daze.

“Who has the Black Cod?” he mimes, holding one of the plates up. We sit in silence, listening. Jeremy snaps out of acting. “No more auctioning food!” he says, his voice nearing a shout. “At this level, we shouldn’t have to discuss this any more!” (Field note, 1/16/16)

Highly structured by formal fine-dining service rituals, interactions with guests at Terroir should never strive to outshine the food or interfere with guests’ privacy. Whereas Match’s brand of proximal service encourages playful intimacy between workers and diners, Terroir’s brand of “perfect” service stresses maintaining respectful distance between the two (“great service should be invisible,” Jeremy explained). The difference in service brands between the two restaurants is most striking when comparing how front of the house workers at each restaurant might conceivably interact with the same type of customer. At Match, if a waiter were to approach two similarly-aged women, he might

lead with a casual, somewhat flirtatious greeting – followed by a free mimosa (I witnessed this on many occasions). If the same service scenario were to occur at Terroir, the conversation would be exceedingly polite, with the server quickly moving into menu explanations and fielding drink orders.

Under the logic of Terroir’s professional service, the kitchen is the creative showpiece and the dining room ambiance plays an important, yet ultimately supporting role. Although servers are trained to be assertive with tables, they are to do so in a depersonalized way. Servers are told to guide guests through the menu, helping them understand Chef Jeremy’s philosophy on cooking while “upselling” them by encouraging a “balanced” (and expensive) order of appetizers, entrees, wines, and desserts. Should guests wish to alter dishes, servers are instructed to politely steer them towards other dishes they may prefer. When a server named Nathan protested that it shouldn’t be a big deal for the kitchen to make a small alteration to a dish, Theodore (manager, white, male, 40s) replied, “that is *not* our policy here. It is your job to find out what else the guest would enjoy instead.”

Terroir’s service professionalism also shapes its philosophy towards hiring and training employees. Rather unconventionally, the restaurant employs no official “support” staff in the dining room, such as bussers or food runners. Instead, management employs a two-tiered front of the house hierarchy that features servers and server assistants. Jim explained to me how this better aligns with the restaurant’s philosophy of service professionalism:

“Servers here do everything. And both servers and server assistants are trained the same; assistants should be able to answer any question about the menu and recommend wine pairings. The idea is that server assistants will try to make it up to the server position to get a bigger cut of [tips]. So yeah, everyone has to learn how to ‘own’ the table” (Field note, 9/23/15).

By training all dining room-based staff the same and encouraging workers to build their skills, Jim clearly lays out the knowledge and experience that the restaurant tries to cultivate in its employees. It is a package that, compared to Match, relies less on certain embodied traits (class, culture, and physical appearance³⁷) as job criteria to access lead front of the house jobs. While servers and bartenders at Terroir remain primarily white, they are also slightly older, less uniformly college-educated, and have more experience in fine-dining establishments (server assistants have similar characteristics to servers, just younger and less fine-dining experienced). As mentioned earlier, Jim wants to hire employees who have previously worked at Spago and Capo, not those who look like they just stepped off a modeling runway.

Terroir’s emphasis on “perfect”, professional service shapes its organization of the back of the house as well. Because the nightly menu requires substantial skill training to execute, kitchen workers are differentiated into a number of ranks.³⁸ Perhaps a result of

³⁷ Higher-end restaurants have been known to employ more male waiters, who are traditionally associated with fine-dining and a more prestigious image for the establishment (see Cobble 1991; Hall 1993).

³⁸ Despite the restaurant’s modest size, Terroir employs a junior sous chef, three line cooks, two bakers, one garde manger, two prep cooks, and three dishwashers, along with the occasional “stage”.

this organizational culture, most of the kitchen staff are focused on soaking up culinary knowledge from the head chef and the lead sous chef and building their personal careers. For example, a line cook took a pay cut to work at Terroir and “learn”, while another, a second-generation Salvadoran named Hilario, previously worked as a food runner (“I made much more money back then,” he laughs), but has since fallen in love with cooking professionally. Hilario arrives at the restaurant early and leaves late, taking advantage of Jon’s (sous chef, 40, Mexican immigrant) tutelage making stocks, perfecting cooking times, and mastering flavor compositions.

The well-defined job ladders in Terroir’s front and back of the house coupled with management’s express interest in employee skill development provide a contrast to the job fixidity under Match’s proximal service. At Terroir, Jim encourages server assistants to compete for the next available server job, while the head chef tries to help line cooks develop their culinary techniques in order to reach to the next kitchen station. That said, Terroir still hires primarily white men and women as servers and server assistants, and immigrant Latino men in the lower-rungs of the back of the house. In this sense, while the restaurant’s management may be interested in forwarding a brand of skilled fine-dining and cultivating these skills amongst its staff, it is decidedly more agnostic about disrupting institutionalized inequalities of opportunity³⁹ that run deep throughout the industry.

Personalized Luxury at The Neighborhood

³⁹ This recalls scholarly critiques of “color-blind” policies (ex. Bonilla-Silva 2010), which ignore deep-set social inequalities in our society that continue to tilt the playing field in favor of whites.

The Neighborhood strives to be an intimate neighborhood dining experience for those who can afford it. It is designed to evoke the feeling of personalized luxury⁴⁰: delicious, farm-fresh food served the way *you* like it, and offered up by a friendly and accommodating staff. Many of The Neighborhood's wealthy diners come in multiple times each week, and for a wide variety of occasions. It is not unusual for a guest to hold a morning business meeting at The Neighborhood over coffee, meet a friend for lunch there hours later, then reserve a table for dinner the next evening with the family. With each visit, the smiling host, server, and/or manager greeting them at the front door will know their name, their kid's name, their favorite seat, and likely their favorite menu item. All of this is accomplished by design.

The Neighborhood's management is certainly not unusual in its attempts to personalize service, particular for repeat guests (Erickson 2009). Hair stylists try to remember your name and favorite cut, the local Laundromat knows to handle your clothes a certain way, and the staff at the corner diner chimes "welcome back!" and "come back soon, ok?" when you walk in and out of the door. Yet under the logic of *luxury* personalization – one oriented towards a wealthy white clientele – management goes to great lengths to ensure that a core group of regular diners get the service experience they want. At The Neighborhood, personalized service has been elevated to high art.

Many of the internal processes at the restaurant are shaped with luxury personalization in mind. For example, the Neighborhood caters to "SDs" (special

⁴⁰ This recalls Rachel Sherman's (2007: 6) description of luxury service as "limitless entitlement to the worker's individualizing attention and effort."

diners)⁴¹ by offering highly customizable menus, exclusive off-menu specials, and the distinct feel of insider access. Front of the house staff and floor managers are instructed to keep extensive notes on guests using the restaurants OpenTable software, involving everything from a guest's favorite table to sit at, their usual food and drink order, allergies, service preferences, and even the names of their family members.⁴² New hires must acquaint themselves with SDs and their special preferences as a part of their training. For example, when I began training as a server at The Neighborhood, I was told to check the "guest card" (containing diner notes) before greeting *any* new group of diners at the table. This is because guest preferences may include how to perform service routines themselves: one SD's profile reads, "does not like server to ask, 'how is everything' when approaching the table"; another's profile specifies that a large bottle of room temperature still water should be waiting on her table upon arrival.

Along with the front of the house staff, floor managers and chefs are also intimately involved in the production of personalized service. SDs are regularly treated to special perks and preferential treatment:

At around 5:45pm, Chef Morgan greets a family of four that has just sat down on the table closest to the kitchen. He leans over the banquette separating the dining room and the kitchen with a big grin on his face. "And how you are today,

⁴¹ The acronym is changed to protect the privacy of the restaurant.

⁴² OpenTable's website reports that diners are more likely to return to a restaurant that knows their favorite drink, special requests, and seating preferences (http://openforbusiness.opentable.com/insider-information/hospitality-reviews-repeat-guests-personalized-experiences-matter/?cmpid=em_Insider2016&et_cid=1791636&et_rid=11846269).

Madam? Sir, how about yourself?” he asks the elderly man and woman at the table. They chat for a few minutes. After the group orders, Morgan approaches the table again, holding two plates. “Now here we have a squash blossom fresh, just harvested this morning from our friends up in Malibu,” he sets down one plate. “And this [points to the crispy dish] is what we turn them into with a little magic in the kitchen. Enjoy, my compliments.” (Field note, 8/5/16)

Management actively encourages regular diners to treat The Neighborhood like their home away from home. This also involves allowing SDs to access areas of the restaurant that are usually off-limits to guests. For example:

At about 11:45am, I watch three young kids leave their table and walk straight into our staff area. Kevin [waiter] and I quickly turn to each other and then to Courtney [manager] for how to proceed, but she only encourages them along. The kids go straight up to the kitchen pass near where Chef Morgan and Chef Eric are standing. To my surprise, both chefs immediately perk up, smiling brightly at them. While the kids’ parents watch on, Chef Matt teases, “we are going to have to put you two to work! Here, this plate is for you, would you mind placing it over there for me?” While this is going on, the lunch rush is building. Behind the chefs, I see Ignacio and Rodrigo [line cooks] working hard: a whole lineup of food orders still need to be made, and the chefs are no longer assisting in the kitchen.

“My gosh, it’s like we are their personal living room,” James mutters to me under his breath. (Field note, 8/23/16)

At The Neighborhood, the “stage” for personalized luxury service is expanded to include parts of the kitchen, and select kitchen workers (usually chefs) must be ready to perform emotional labor with guests (ex. being friendly with intruding kids). Meanwhile, workers must find a way to proceed with their food service tasks while SDs enter select backstage areas, place orders after-hours, and make special requests regarding food and drink items⁴³.

The production of luxury personalization at The Neighborhood directly influences the implicit requirements of the job. Front of the house workers (along with others) need to be willing and able to accommodate the restaurant’s wealthy circle of regular guests. Meanwhile, the back of the house staff must continue providing the necessary labor to support The Neighborhood’s brand of personalized luxury service. This distinction is evident in the restaurant’s staffing. Entry level jobs in the front of the house, such as hosting and cashiering, function as veritable job hubs for the young adult children of restaurant patrons. During the summer of 2016, three of the four hostesses at The Neighborhood grew up within a couple miles of The Neighborhood, in well-to-do white families. For example, a hostess named Sonia (21, white, female) told me she has fond memories of eating here “often” with her father when she was growing up. Matthew (22,

⁴³ An SD named Mark, a Jewish man in his mid-forties, proudly explained to me one day that his standard breakfast meal was so specific that management decided to create a special button in the point of sale system just for him (“Mark’s Scramble”). Another SD is notorious for arriving for dinner right at the closing bell. Management never turns his request for a multi-course meal down.

white, male) was also raised in the neighborhood, and currently works three days a week as a cashier following his graduation from an East Coast college. Strategically hiring the children of neighborhood residents to part-time jobs is one way in which management builds its brand of personalized service while securing “strong ties” between the restaurant and its core patrons (this is similar to Match’s propensity to hire customers to the staff).

The composition of The Neighborhood’s primary front of the house staff, especially those who work its popular daytime meal services (breakfast, lunch, weekend brunch), differs. So does the logic behind their employment. Like doorman for wealthy apartments, servers at The Neighborhood are supposed to be ever-friendly, ever-present, and un-threatening, akin to a “professional working-class” (Bearman 2005: 3). Their success at the restaurant is less predicated on embodied racial and class characteristics or fine-dining training than at Match or Terroir, respectively. Many come from a range of social backgrounds. For example, amongst the fifteen daytime servers during the summer of 2016, six were non-white (two black men, one immigrant Mexican man, two Mexican American women, and one Filipina American woman). In stark contrast to Terroir’s front of the house staff, many servers at The Neighborhood did not have formal fine-dining training or experience prior to getting hired.⁴⁴ However, it is not that front of the house service standards at The Neighborhood are any more slack, it is just they emphasize different things. A waitress named Sally is particularly well-loved amongst the restaurant’s SD guests. Raised by working-class parents, Sally is a 27-year-old, third-generation Mexican American with a high-school education. Standing just over five feet

⁴⁴ The Neighborhood’s dinner staff was more consistent with the front of the house social characteristics already discussed: on a team of two men and four women, all were white.

tall with a stocky-yet-curved build, she previously worked at two family-style restaurant chains before getting hired at The Neighborhood in 2015. Sally treats every guest in her section to her big personality and uncanny ability to remember customer particularities. Sally frequently re-names diners “honey,” while showering their kids with extra affection. When an SDs walks in, Sally often pre-orders their preferred meal with the kitchen then proceeds to greet them affectionately. By contrast, Derek, a young, white college-graduate, was fired from The Neighborhood allegedly because of numerous guest complaints about him being “cold” – including one from an SD.

If the race- and class-based exclusivity of customer-facing positions is comparably loosened under The Neighborhood’s personalized luxury service style, management still leans heavily on low-wage “brown-collar” labor backstage. This is because making personalized luxury service look effortless requires considerable time, labor, and resources. The overwhelming majority of this toilsome labor is done by foreign-born as well as second-generation Latinos at the restaurant, where all but two of the nearly 40 cooks, prep cooks, dishwashers, bussers, food runners, and cleaners at The Neighborhood are Latino, the vast majority men. While some of these workers have been able to advance up limited job ladders within the back of the house (I detail this in Chapter 6), many are destined to remain in the vast pool of marginalized labor needed to upkeep personalized luxury service in the dining room.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described how the logic and management of upscale service reinforces social inequality amongst workers at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood.

Managers initially structure job opportunities by relying on socio-cultural stereotypes and industry norms to make hiring decisions for front- and back of the house positions.

Lucrative customer-facing positions “should”– to borrow Courtney’s earlier language – be reserved for whites, particularly those who are young and embody a class-privileged habitus. Meanwhile, labor-intensive back of the house jobs offering low wages and difficult work conditions are earmarked as “brown collar” jobs fit for immigrant Mexican and Central American men. This gatekeeping process, aided by homophily (i.e. social similarity) in employee networks, segregates the workplace into distinct channels of labor typecast by race, class, and gender.

The firm-specific service regimes at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood further nuance the specific hiring practices, training routines, and workplace policies found in different restaurants. Each has different implications for workers. Sally, the waitress popular at The Neighborhood for her ability to offer personalized charm to the restaurant’s wealthy patrons, would likely not fit in at Match Restaurant. At Match, the logic of proximal service leads managers to screen front of the house employees for embodied class-cultural traits that Sally does not possess. Match’s logic of service also further estranges a young, white, upwardly-mobile customer service staff from a working-class, immigrant Latino kitchen staff, dramatizing the social and symbolic distinctions between them in the workplace.

Yet, with her resume of casual restaurant experience, Sally also does not meet Terroir’s ideals for front of the house workers. Terroir’s emphasis on fine-dining service professionalism frames its preference for slightly older, well-trained industry veterans in the dining room, and skilled kitchen talent in the back of the house. These individuals

forward Terroir’s image of offering “perfect” fine-dining service. On one level, the heightened fine-dining formality of Terroir brand means that less skilled and experienced workers will be unlikely to access the highest positions in the front or back of the house hierarchies. However, relative to the upscale service models at Match and The Neighborhood, Terroir’s culture of skill development and employee growth under its professional service brand may allow more merit-based job mobility (either horizontal or vertical) for its workers.⁴⁵

Through following particular logics of upscale service, management fundamentally structures the labor conditions that restaurant workers face. Yet management cannot dictate the work experiences of their employees, nor how the latter relate to the job. To better understand the service workplace dynamic within upscale restaurants requires a closer examination of the work worlds inside both the front of the house and the back of the house. By considering the shop floor perspectives of workers themselves, the next two chapters analyze how different cohorts of employees – those possessing vastly unequal socio-cultural characteristics and channeled into the workplace by different means – navigate the job conditions they encounter.

⁴⁵ These things are always more complicated in practice: in my five months of fieldwork at Terroir, I witnessed few examples of workers crossing from back- to front of the house jobs, or making substantial mobility strides from, say, dishwasher to floor manager. Despite local workplace conditions at Terroir, workers must also contend with prevailing structural inequalities within the industry at large.

Chapter Four

Flexibility, Play and Privilege in the Front of the House

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. One hundred percent. I was dating my boss, I was making tons of money, I was getting drunk whenever I wanted, and I was losing sight of anything that mattered to me.” - Rachael, 32, waitress.

Each week, Charlie and Rachael, servers at Match and The Neighborhood respectively, are scheduled “on the floor” for four shifts. This totals roughly 28 hours of work at the restaurant per week, leaving time for each to pursue other hobbies and aspirations outside the restaurant (Charlie plays guitar and sings vocals in a local band; Rachael is an accomplished theater actress). They have each been doing this for years. Many of their friends also work at the restaurant, which can make shifts fun and social.

Yet like their server and bartender colleagues, both Charlie and Rachael are paid minimum wage⁴⁶ (excluding tips). Neither has ever received a raise, promotion, or job benefits from their restaurant employer. When Rachael fell ill in the fall of 2016, she

⁴⁶ The California minimum wage changed from \$9 in 2013 (when I was conducting field work at Match), to \$10 in 2015 (while I was at Terroir). It had bumped up again to \$10.50 as my fieldwork at The Neighborhood wrapped up in early 2017.

“gave away” her shifts to other workers and did not see any sick pay. Whereas Charlie says his monthly earnings were slashed in half during an especially rainy November in 2012 when few customers came through the door at Match.

On one hand, it is no accident that Charlie and Rachael are employed in the front of the house at upscale restaurants. As described last chapter, management seeks to hire a team who will “look good and sound right” when representing the restaurant’s upscale service brand with customers. Young, white, attractive, and from middle-class backgrounds, each fits the bill perfectly. Like many of their front of the house colleagues, Charlie and Rachael are great with the guests, and socialize easily with the affluent white diners who patronize Match and The Neighborhood.

While it may be clear why upscale service establishments seek out workers who embody the socio-cultural and aesthetic ideals for front of the house labor, it is entirely less clear why such class- and race-privileged young adults would choose to remain employed in restaurants. In the United States, front of the house restaurant work regularly involves volatile work conditions that include contingent work schedules, insecure employment, unpredictable earnings, flat mobility ladders, and few workplace benefits (Jayaraman 2014). When Rachael got sick, or Match (where Charlie works) had an unexpectedly rainy November, the job provided no safety net. In this sense, although servers and bartenders in metropolitan centers do not necessarily earn low wages – some full-time employees are able to exceed \$50,000 in annual earnings (Haley-Lock and Ewert 2011) – they nonetheless contend not only with other undesirable job attributes but also a job that offers them little occupational prestige (Blau and Duncan 1967).

In this chapter, I examine how white, middle-class servers and bartenders at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood engage with the labor conditions they encounter in the front of the house. The fact that Charlie and Rachael say they are able to “embrace” their volatile jobs waiting tables cannot, I contend, be explained solely as a function of their youthful naivete, class privilege, or exploitation by management (as Marxists might argue). Instead, by considering the relationship between workers’ race- and class-privileges and specific workplace conditions, I show how front of the house workers are able to *achieve* desirable labor arrangements for themselves despite volatile service jobs. By drawing on potentially high tips, malleable schedules, and a social work atmosphere, these workers use their volatile restaurant jobs to nonetheless complement their broader lifestyles centered on flexibility, sociality, consumption, and leisure. This chapter thus highlights the ways in which a socially-privileged cohort of workers are able to access exclusive amenities embedded within front of the house service jobs.

Volatile Work in the Front of the House

Scholars describe “precarious” labor, along with related concepts such as contingent labor (Barley and Kunda 2001), non-standard work (Kalleberg 2000), and casual labor (see Menger 1999), as a term for an assortment of sub-optimal work arrangements that deviate from the Fordist-era norms of the early and mid-twentieth century. Work during this time was principally characterized by full-time employment with a single firm, often coupled with union contracted wages, gradual upward mobility, and substantial workplace protections. Precarious labor breaks with these characteristics. Those employed in precarious jobs today – many of them located in the service industry – often

face instability in their working lives, be it from low wages, unpredictable earnings, “on-demand” work schedules, fire-at-will employment regimes, or limited protections from employment violations (Kalleberg 2009).

Scholars note that precarious jobs are common in the restaurant industry (Jayaraman 2014). Front of the house and back of the house jobs feature different elements of precarious labor. Excluding management, back of the house service jobs are usually lower in pay than front of the house service jobs, though the latter are usually more volatile. This is because the earnings and schedules of tipped, front of the house service workers are highly contingent upon customers: how *many* enter the restaurant on any given night, and how *much* they tip. Tips, for instance, can constitute half or more of a restaurant server’s overall earnings (Haley-Lock and Ewert 2011). This makes servers – like other tipped employees in the front of the house – heavily dependent on the goodwill of customers. In similar ways, the hours that front of the house employees work are also contingent on customers. A busy shift can mean long hours – a dinner shift stretching into the wee hours of the morning or a lunch shift dragging on until dusk. On a slow night, several front of the house workers might unexpectedly find themselves “cut” (dismissed early) by a manager, or called off their shift entirely. Because of the looming threat of incomes and labor hours subject to change without advanced notice (Halpin 2015), front of the house service workers must contend with a volatile relationship with their jobs.

Career Uncertainty for Young Workers

Consistent with cultural stereotypes, many servers, bartenders, and hosts in urban restaurants are relatively young (Jayaraman 2014). Research shows for young adults, early labor market experiences are often characterized by rapid job moves and industry changes (Oppenheimer and Kalmjin 1995). This is a time when many young adults, particularly those from middle-class backgrounds, are figuring out what line of work suits them best by effectively “trying on” different jobs. Typically, this period of job churning is followed by fewer subsequent job changes – usually by one’s late twenties – and incremental wage growth as one’s occupational career path begins to solidify (Oppenheimer and Kalmjin 1995; Osterman 1980; Topel and Ward 1992).

Times are changing. When young Americans enter today’s labor market, more of them are competing for unstable jobs, nonstandard work arrangements, and a growing number of jobs at the top and bottom. These conditions make it increasingly unlikely that workers will be able to smoothly “age out” of unskilled service jobs and into upwardly-mobile professions (Cote and Bynner 2008).⁴⁷ While this is certainly an easier prospect for race- and class-privileged workers able to draw on college degrees and higher-quality social networks, it is hardly a guarantee – especially as the sunk costs of time and career choices begin to solidify (Carroll and Powell 2002). Charlie and Rachael are no longer fresh out of school, and have been working the same job unrelated to their respective college degrees for years.

Growing labor market uncertainty may also be affecting how younger generations are approaching their work lives. Without the promise of a stable career or even a

⁴⁷ Research shows that insecure attachment to the labor market is even more pronounced for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who, forced to compete with higher human capital peers for available jobs, encounter difficulty accessing even entry-level service jobs (Besen-Cassino 2014).

dependable paycheck, some workers are placing greater priority on the *non-economic* dimensions of their jobs. For example, more workers today are seeking out flexible job schedules, increased job autonomy (being one's own boss), or a variety of other intangible perks in their work lives (Barley and Kunda 2006; Mears 2015).⁴⁸ Under this logic, an appealing job could be one perceived to be glamorous (modeling), “cool” (bartending or whole-animal butchery), socially outgoing (café barista), or fashionable (high-end retail) (see Besen-Cassino 2014, Mears 2008; Williams and Connell 2010). For example, according to recent study by Yasemin Besen-Cassino (2014), middle-class young adults employed as café workers relished in the opportunity to “hang out” with their friends and peers while on the job (they seemed to care less about earning just above minimum wage). Creative workers too, such as musicians and artists, have been known to actively seek out non-traditional work lives; some opt for bohemian work-lifestyles stereotypically associated with the creative process (i.e. “the struggling artist”, see Menger 1999; Umney and Kretsos 2015). In this sense, volatile, unpredictable labor arrangements may be seen as more appealing to some workers than others, particularly those buffered by a “safety net” of class resources.

Still, labor scholars remain rightly skeptical that workers can positively experience volatile or precarious jobs, especially long-term. Instead, they tend to view this peculiar relationship to work as strongly conditioned by class privilege and youth – short-term, unserious gigs for a middle-upper class young adult. It is also undeniable how workers willing to overlook or deprioritize basic conditions of the job (like wages)

⁴⁸ For example, Barley and Kunda (2004) report that many Silicon Valley technology contractors voluntarily leave stable, well-paying jobs at reputable firms in order to pursue careers as “hired guns.” These individuals eschew traditional ideals of stable employment in favor of build-your-own, “free agent” work lifestyles (Pink 2001).

benefit management. By allowing workers to relish in largely immaterial job perks (ex. the ability to “be yourself” on the job, see Fleming and Sturdy 2011), management is able to sidestep the provision of traditionally better quality employment in the form of benefits, job security, and higher wages (see Besen 2006; Fleming and Sturdy 2011; Mears 2015; Sallaz 2015). Put differently, a workplace culture in which workers are able to have fun and express themselves may ultimately “serve[s] to expose the sociality of employees for use within the labor process as motivation and emotional labor” (Fleming and Sturdy 2011: 184).

Regardless of how management may indirectly profit from the hiring of certain employees, at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood, many front of the house workers do not feel like they have it that bad (“I can do whatever I want”). I contend this is not merely lip service, a hoodwinking over employees, orchestrated by management. Instead, to understand this perspective demands analyzing how certain workers, aided by their privileged social characteristics, are able to navigate the “volatile” job conditions they face to craft desirable labor arrangements for themselves. As I show, for many of the middle-class, white servers and bartenders in this study, the ability to *embrace* interactive service work is an achievement made in context. It is a story of particular kinds of workers leveraging the particular structural opportunities made available to them.

Flexing “Contingent” Schedules

At Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood, front of the house workers use a variety of means to gain control over their unpredictable work schedules. Some strategically deploy

social capital with managers and fellow workers. According to a hostess/server named Neko (32, mixed-white, female):

“I keep a very strategic, super friendly relationship with managers. It’s all for me, though. Its ‘cuz, well, making friends with the hand that feeds – like the person who makes the schedule – it’s important for me.” (Interview 2/3/15).

Neko is proactive in her attempts to secure a work schedule that best suits her needs. By developing rapport with the scheduling manager, she says she gives herself the best chance to be scheduled on the most lucrative shifts (Friday and Saturday nights). She can also “usually” get time off when she needs it.

Sapphire (27, white, waitress) approaches her relationship with management very similarly, but with a different schedule aim: she wants to ensure she is panned on very *specific* shifts, though not necessarily the most lucrative. She also uses her relatively long tenure at the restaurant (she has been at Match for four years) as a bargaining chip. As Sapphire explains it:

“Nowadays, I can pretty much work when I want. And my thing is, I make sure I never work two days in a row. They give me three daytime shifts a week, spaced every other day, and a station that’s not so hectic. Then everyone is happy.”

(Interview, 1/13/15)

Employees also use an extensive system of “shift switching” to customize their contingent schedules. Each week after the new schedule is released, workers collaborate with one another via phone, text, or in person to talk about intra-employee schedule changes. During this time, workers trade shifts with each other, give away unwanted shifts, or pick up extra work as needed. For well-connected servers like Sean and Sapphire, “shift switching” works with remarkable efficiency:

Sean [waiter, 29, white]: You can always – well, *usually* – get someone to work for you if need be. There’s jobs where that’s not an option. So it’s pretty cool that, say, a friend calls you and tells you he’s in town for the night and you can easily get the time off –

Sapphire: – and there’s *always* someone looking to give away a shift. So if you need the extra cash, you can just take them up on that. (Interview, 1/13/15).

Once the schedule is posted, managers rarely intervene to prevent front of the house workers from making shift switches amongst those trained to work the same job. As a manager at Match named Kyle explained to a group of servers one Sunday, “so long as we can check the books and know who is going to come in that day, we know that you guys have lives outside of here. And we are happy to accommodate.”

Even with management’s *laissez-faire* stance on schedule adjustments, workers often find ways to bend the rules further. Coworkers offer up informal trades amongst themselves just hours before the shift is supposed to begin. Sometimes without explicit manager approval, a different employee would simply show up to “cover” the shift.

Tammy, a 28-year-old white waitress, illustrates an example: “I might have an audition pop up last minute and I’ll need to get my shift covered in the next few hours. Like *that day*. I’ll text people [at the restaurant] and get multiple texts back telling me they’ll do it, and *do I need anything else?*” Julie, a 40-year-old waitress at The Neighborhood, was able to take a four-day trip across the country, booked just days in advance. After some finagling with fellow servers, she managed to trade shifts with coworkers in order to free up her schedule to accommodate. In this sense, shift switching – especially when done without much notice, operates like a Maussian “gift”: an exchange made amongst social ties with the implicit expectation of reciprocation at a later time.

As one might expect, the ability to gain control over volatile restaurant schedules cannot always be done so easily. It is not uncommon to hear front of the house workers griping about getting stuck with a “horrible” schedule for the following week. Rarely can everyone’s schedule request be accommodated week in and week out, especially with the kind of specificity (i.e. Sapphire) and flexibility many desire. Staffing issues at the restaurant can also affect front of the house employees’ ability to pick up more work or secure time off. This was the case when I was hired at The Neighborhood. Two servers had been abruptly fired the previous month, and since then, the rest of the server staff had been working overtime. When I completed my training, Alexandra and Morgan (waitresses) let out a tremendous sigh of relief. “Finally,” Morgan exclaimed to me on my first official shift at the restaurant, “we can all stop working so damn much!!”

Schedule adjustments cannot easily be done by just anyone either. Informal shift switches are more often performed amongst close social ties – friends, and not mere

coworkers. Because of the sometimes under-the-table nature of these exchanges, employees selectively forward such offers, as illustrated by the field note below:

Towards the end of our shift, Andy has taken to offering money to stay on for her. She approaches me while I input customer orders at the server terminal, saying “I *gotta* get to a friend’s birthday party and Lonnie (manager) won’t let me go. I’ll give you twenty bucks if you’ll stay for me, just tell him you’ll handle my tables.” (Field note, Match, 8/1/12).

During the summer of 2012, Andy and I would frequently socialize outside of work, frequenting bars and occasionally the beach after work. In a bind, she approached me to help her out (I did). Yet, other workers can recall times when their efforts to negotiate schedules with coworkers or managers failed. Below, Emily, a 24-year-old white waitress at Match, recounts her frustrations with her arrangement:

“I don’t know what it is. I’ve been here like four months already, and they’re still giving me only two shifts a week! It’s like, how *do they expect me to pay my bills* working that little? I tried talking to Lonnie (manager) about it, but it’s the same story every week.” I suggest she should ask other servers if they would give up any shifts. She replies, “I tried that, but everyone always seems to want their shifts. I think this place is *waaay* overstaffed, so it sucks for me.” (Field note, 6/15/12).

Unable to convince management to give her more shifts and unsuccessful in building the right social cache with coworkers, Emily never established the necessary in-roads to achieve schedule flexibility at the restaurant. She quit shortly before her fifth month on the job. Emily's case is a poignant reminder that management still dictates volatile schedules for front of the house employees. Those best able to remake these labor conditions to fit their needs are often well-networked and only seeking to work at the restaurant on a less than full-time basis.

Blending “On the Side” Pursuits

Front of the house workers also embrace what their jobs as servers, bartenders, and hosts allows them to do *away* from the restaurant. The ability to work shifts that are relatively short (5-7 hours), high-earning, and flexed to fit their schedule allows middle-class, white front of the house workers to devote themselves to alternate occupational pursuits, educational degrees, or leisure hobbies. In this way, amongst race- and class-privileged front of the house workers at Match, Terroir, and the Neighborhood, the prospect of threading restaurant work with “something else” is deeply embedded in the workplace culture. This is especially true at Match, where as described last chapter, servers and bartenders tend to be younger and more uniformly class-privileged than at either Terroir or The Neighborhood.

Sean, a 29-year-old waiter at Match, moved to Los Angeles from Las Vegas six years ago in order to pursue a career in comedy. Having worked as an upscale restaurant server in both cities, Sean explains that his job has always allowed him to mold his schedule around the next comedy gig. He says he has been upfront about his priorities

with Match management – comedy comes first, restaurant work second. For Sean, blending these two occupations, despite their differences on paper, comes with built-in advantages. For example, a good portion of Sean’s comedic content he uses in standup shows is derived from “stuff I’ve seen or heard while on the floor” in restaurants. “Plus, I can practice my comedy routines with customers at the table,” he adds. “It’s like having a captive audience! People love it when their server can make them laugh, so I’ll try out stuff, you know, have some fun.”

Others also find straddling “professional” jobs and front of the house restaurant jobs unproblematic, even complementary. Erin, a 26-year-old white waitress at Match, continued waiting tables three days a week after graduating with her Masters of Social Work degree from a nearby prestigious university in 2012. Following her degree, she initially saw waiting tables as a buffer to sustain herself while buying time to hunt for the perfect job in her professional field. Yet even after securing a salaried job as a high school counselor, she decided to remain serving at Match for the weekend brunch shifts. Erin explained that after being at the restaurant for the previous year, many of her closest friends worked there (she had even helped a college friend land a serving job). “So why not [continue]?” she said. As a single woman, there were other perks too: “I make pretty good money, I can do the job with my eyes closed, and I get to work amongst good-looking people, you know, the kind of people I might hang out with outside of here!”

Erin is not alone in appreciating how front of the house restaurant work can complement one’s ongoing professionalization and personal growth in other avenues of life. For instance, at The Neighborhood, many servers and bartenders arrive to their shifts after attending college classes and professional workshops, teaching yoga, and

attending meetings with clients from other jobs.⁴⁹ Working flexible, (potentially) high-earning shifts allows these individuals the luxury of “trying on” loosely related jobs, many of which are also service-related.⁵⁰ This is particularly true for younger workers less committed to a career path. For example, at Match, a 21-year-old waitress named Ryan also works twice a week as a hostess at a popular marine-themed bar. She views working at Match as her primary job, but is proud that she can call up the bar and work “whenever I feel like it.” Similarly, a bartender named Betty (27, female, mixed-race) fills out her weekly work schedule by waiting tables at a high-end hotel up the street. She views the change of job scenery as preferable to the monotony of one workplace:

“Three months ago, my schedule each week was even busier, but at the same time *fun*, you know? I would work Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays over here, and Tuesdays, Fridays and Sundays over there,” Betty says.

“Why don’t you just ask [Match] management for more hours here?” I ask.

“Oh *god* no!” Betty exclaims, “three shifts is enough for me. I’d get super burnt out with things over here if I worked more.” (Field note, 3/1/13).

Many of the jobs that front of the house workers also undertake require similar emotional and “aesthetic” skills to the ones they already use in restaurants. This in turn eases the cost of transitioning between jobs. For example, Sally, a 26-year-old white waitress at

⁴⁹ Scholars sometimes refer to this as “portfolio” or “boundaryless” work lives in multiple jobs (see Arthur 1994; Smith 2010).

⁵⁰ Among the most common alternative jobs held by front of the house workers at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood were yoga instructors, live theater actors, tour guides, boutique retail store clerks, and part-time models.

Match, would sometimes arrive for her Friday night shift fresh off working at a nearby beauty salon in Santa Monica. Waltzing through the restaurant's front door, Sally would clock in, tie her server apron over her clothes, and stride – smiling and laughing – towards the dining room. Rachael, another actress-waitress at The Neighborhood, would sometimes arrive to her shift with dramatically different makeup and hairdo. On one such day, she explained that she had just come from a photo shoot for a new play production. Pointing to her neon eyeliner and freshly permed hair, she said with amusement, “it was an 80’s themed shoot today, hence *this*.” Employees like Betty, Ryan, and Rachael see their customized labor arrangement as a lifestyle of choice. The extra work they juggle hedges the volatility of their jobs while also providing other perks (change of scenery, socializing).

A minority of workers at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood see their part-time, front of the house restaurant jobs as their sole occupational focus. They embrace the lifestyle that substantial tip earnings, short work hours, malleable schedules, and few take home responsibilities affords them. These individuals tend to be one of two types. First, there are the young, middle-upper class workers who undoubtedly see themselves as “passing through” restaurants before landing in more professional occupations. As Charlie, a 24-year-old white server notes:

“The way I see it is, we are going to work for the rest of our lives, right? And when we have families and mortgages and stuff than it will really kind of force our hand, right? So why rush it? Here, I get to work a few days a week, then go home and *do whatever I want*.” (Interview, 10/9/12).

Servers like Charlie see serving or bartending gigs as “great for now” allowing them to enjoy a social, consumerist, and exciting lifestyle while they are young. Indicative of this mentality, Moore (server, 26, white) told me he likens working for tips to the thrill of gambling, while Charlie views his ever-shifting work schedule as exciting (*you just don’t know what you are going to get!*). Though this attitude was not shared by a majority of front of the house workers in this study, those with this approach are more commonly found at trendier, youth-oriented service concepts (Match).

The second type of workers that embrace restaurant jobs exclusively are known as “lifers”. Lifers in particular view the amenities of front of the house restaurant work as favorable to other occupational alternatives. Helen, a 34-year-old white waitress, explains her relationship to waiting tables:

“I flippin’ love it. Before, I had the career in stage production that I went to college for, and was doing it as a profession. I was making a living doing it ... and it was a dream, exactly what I wanted to do. But this, being a server, *is ten times better than that*. Like, it Really. Doesn’t. Suck. (laughs). I make plenty of money, I live on the beach – like, *on* it – in my own apartment, with a car and health insurance. Totally self-sufficient. I can get time off when I want it. 100% flexible. I say, hey guys I want a week off, and if management doesn’t give it to me, I just go to the employees and switch around my schedule that way.

(Interview, 1/25/15).

Greg, a 37-year-old white waiter, currently splits time at The Neighborhood and Veritas, another fine-dining restaurant in the city. He is a self-proclaimed “lifer”, and has previously worked for a decade in restaurant management as well as in the kitchen. Like Helen, he loves the fact that working in the front of the house allows him a low-stress lifestyle in which he earns enough money to have a sense of financial freedom. Raised in a middle-class family and himself a culinary school graduate, Greg is aware of the low opinion some people will have about him “only” being a waiter. Working at high-end restaurants help him manage this critique:

“When people say, ‘where do you work’ and I say, ‘Veritas,’ it’s not like, ‘I’m just a server.’ ... [at] those high-end places, you can be a restaurant lifer and its not like, ‘oh, why are you only waiting tables? What’s next?’ It’s not what’s next, its oh wow, you’re at *Veritas*.” (Interview, 8/22/16)

Industry-committed “lififers” like Greg and Helen are more common at upscale restaurants emphasizing skill and experience (ex. Terroir and The Neighborhood) as opposed to embodied hipness (ex. Match). Many of these individuals have worked other jobs in and out of restaurants, which has given them perspective on their current positions. They embrace front of the house restaurant labor not as a gig that is “great for now”, but instead for their foreseeable future.

Playing at Work

“The first thing I do when I get into work is a check the schedule to see who I’m gonna be chillin’ with today. And I get genuinely excited to see that so-and-so will be on with me. Like, we just get to hang out, have a good time together, and make some money.” (Leroy, 28, mixed-white, waiter, Interview 11/25/12).

As opposed to the monotony that can come to characterize people’s working lives – particularly those in low-skill occupations (see Terkel 1974) – front of the house restaurant employees at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood cherish the ability to play while at work. Using the leeway that management grants them to see to it that guests are taken care of, servers, bartenders, and hosts infuse service labor tasks with behaviors normally associated with leisure. These experiences in turn refashion their day-to-day labor as a hybrid of work and play – as Leroy puts it, “chillin’”. Although not all front of the house workers relate to their restaurant jobs this way, most in this study do, with slight variations. I discuss some differences that exist under the different upscale service logics of Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood.

Arlie Hochschild (1983) famously argued that because management seeks to “commercialize” workers’ emotional displays on the job, workers risk becoming alienated from their emotions and detached from their jobs. Yet at Match, this does not characterize the general mood of front of the house workers. Amidst service tasks such as refilling water, taking orders, and running food, they laugh, socialize, and move about the dining room with few restrictions. During a busy lunch or dinner shift, a group of workers might break into song or dance in sync with the overhead music. When we worked together, Charlie (the waiter described earlier) was particularly fond of

encouraging both staff and diners to sing along with him as he meandered between tables carrying plates of food humming popular songs by Vampire Weekend, Hot Chip, and Beyonce.

Workers also make public shows of affection towards fellow coworkers and regular patrons in the restaurant. At Match and The Neighborhood in particular, these displays are often conspicuous:

While taking down a four-top's order, I am interrupted by the sound of Betty squealing with excitement as two girls walk in the front door. Betty races out from beyond the bar and across the dining room to embrace both girls in an extended group hug. Some of the diners she passed by seem delighted, and continue to watch the prolonged hug occurring in their midst. (Field note, Match, 7/15/12).

Today when I arrive, Morgan and Courtney [waitresses] are standing in the dining room talking with an older woman. They return to the bar area holding two Cashmere sweaters. "Aren't these beautiful?" admires Morgan, draping the dark purple one on her shoulders. "Elizabeth said it was a present for both of us! They are probably really expensive."

"She thinks we are like her granddaughters or something," chimes Courtney.

(Field note, The Neighborhood, 10/4/16)

The social interactions that unfold between workers and others in the public spaces of restaurants do not always reflect formal steps of service. In their looseness, front of the house employees like Charlie, Betty, Morgan and Courtney feel that being at the restaurant grants them liberties to socialize and “be themselves” while at work (see Fleming and Sturdy 2011; Marshall 1986). The nature of these interactions differs between restaurants and based on the clientele: at Match, relations are mostly between age peers; at The Neighborhood, these relations are more often between older-aged regulars and younger-aged workers (“we are like her granddaughters”). Below, Rachael describes how serving tables allows her to make personally rewarding relationships:

“Hospitality ... it is an energy, a relationship ... whether the guest want to be left alone, discuss wine for an hour, be your best friend. And I have a really hard time with the last one – you don’t get that yet (laughter). Then there is someone like Alexandra, who focuses on building relationships above all else. She is giving people the *experience* of dining out, you know what I mean? But I also have my regulars. Like, this guy is taking me to the [Los Angeles] Rams game tomorrow ... you develop a relationship. A different kind of relationship. Because I will never get up and hug you. And that reminds me of my old colleague at Houston’s, he was so fake. My regulars would say, we don’t want to talk to him, he seems saccharine. (Interview, 10/9/16).

For Rachael, personal payoff for serving guests at The Neighborhood, particularly regulars, is similar to that in wedding planning: there is emotional payoff in helping

deliver an unforgettable experience for the client. And the leeway that management allows servers to do their job is what enables this process. Like in wedding planning, there is no fixed way to do service. Rachael's no-frills service style likely contrasts, as she attested, the "fake" and "saccharine" style of her former colleague at the same restaurant.

Obviously, restaurant management often does shape what goes on in the "service theater" (Sherman 2007) within its walls. In contrast to Match and The Neighborhood, front of the house workers at Terroir are less apt (or able) to "play around" under the restaurant's culture of professional fine-dining service and austere ambiance. However, servers and bartenders often find other ways to enjoy their autonomy in the workplace. For example, as opposed to exhibiting chummy camaraderie with colleagues and guests, many front of the house workers at Terroir say they cherish the opportunity to interact with sophisticated food and drink at work while showcasing seasoned hospitality skills. For example, Michael, a forty-year-old white bartender, thoroughly enjoys being able to guide diners through a multi-course meal paired with beers, wines, and cocktails. Much like a city tour guide⁵¹, at each step of the meal, he talks extensively with guests, pouring little samples of wine for them to try ("if I feel like it, I'll join them in trying the wine, too ... just to be sure" he adds). Bernard, a 27-year-old waiter, says he loves the pace of working in the dining room when it gets busy. He keeps a mental tally of the service steps he needs to perform for each of his tables. He then sets to work, all hustle. "I'm like a junky," he told me. "I've tried to leave the industry, but I just keep coming back for more of that adrenaline. There's nothing like the rush."

⁵¹ Sociologist Jonathan Wynn (2010) argues that city tour guides do the work of "re-enchanting" the urban environment that they and tour participants are passing through.

As mentioned earlier, a higher proportion of servers and bartenders at Terroir and The Neighborhood are “lifers” than at Match. They are drawn to the former two restaurants’ culture of skilled professionalism, as well as working amongst other employees who are serious about the job and remaining in the industry. As Bernard and Michael illustrate, while these workers are less likely to “play around” while working, they take advantage of the autonomy and guest-first focus of their jobs in other ways.

Front of the house workers favorably contrast the dynamic perks of front of the house restaurant work to the “dull drums” they perceive in other work environments. Here is Neko, the hostess/server, again:

“Now, I realize I’ve never really worked a true desk job before – so take this with a grain of salt – but I’d rather *die*. (laughs). Here at the restaurant, I get to be on my feet, meeting all kinds of great people. So yeah, you’d have to pay me a whoooooole lot of money to work a desk five days a week.” (Interview, 2/3/2015).

Neko recognizes her opinion is partly based on a cliché of workaday desk jobs. Yet, her preference for front of the house restaurant jobs echoes the sentiment of her colleagues that do have experience outside the industry such as Helen (former stage manager), Erin (high school counselor), and Pip (office assistant). Pip, a 25-year-old waitress, describes why she took a server job at Match following her office assistant job at a nearby public relations firm. “I just couldn’t do it anymore,” she explained. “I’m a *people* person, you know? And that job was just so damn *boring!*”

Greg, the waiter described earlier, also makes a distinction between his experience being a restaurant manager versus being a front of the house worker. He prefers the latter:

EW: Why did you leave your GM [general manager] job at Saltine? That restaurant seems to be still doing well from what I hear ...

Greg: it just wasn't for me. I saw myself much more effective as a server, because I could be a little more casual and relaxed while talking about, and having a high knowledge of, food and beverages. Instead of, like, trying to calm irate people down all the time." (Interview, 8/22/16)

Drawing boundaries around what front of the house service work is not (boring or stressful) allows servers to positively appraise their jobs. As Greg notes, the job conditions that a front of the house position in restaurants affords him, such as having a "high knowledge" of food and beverage, are not necessarily reflected in back of the house or front office jobs.

Having certain personal qualities may also help front of the house workers get the most out of the job. Servers and bartenders often feel that certain personalities, such as extroverts, are a natural fit for what the job entails. Sean, the waiter and aspiring comedian, feels being a "people person" gives him a natural advantage. Below, he and fellow waiter Leroy discuss how they assess diners while approaching a new table:

“The first thing I do is I read who my table is. Say it’s a group of guys about my age. I might choose to greet the table with, ‘hey ladies how’s it going?’ I get a kick out of that, and so do they.” (Sean, Interview, 1/13/15).

“What you are trying to do is make a connection with your table. If you make them laugh, not only will you and them have a better time, they are also much more likely to give you a good tip.” (Leroy, Interview, 11/25/12).

As illustrated above, customizing interactions with guests is not only in the interest of good service, it can also be personally rewarding. Sean displays his easy comedic charm to select tableside audiences (“I get a kick out of that, and so do they”); Leroy seeks to make social connections with guests that simultaneously pad his tips; Michael recommends optimal wine pairings, then tastes the wine along with bar patrons. Each of these workers demonstrate how those in the front of the house feel they are able to enjoy a dynamic shop floor experience that blurs traditional distinctions between work and play.

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter has examined how front of the house workers at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood negotiate jobs that subject them to unpredictable schedules, fluctuating incomes, and little job security. Restaurant servers and bartenders, while not necessarily low earning, nonetheless face “volatile” work conditions that include unpredictable schedules, no benefits, limited work hours, and a lack of job security. These conditions,

to go along with the low job prestige the job offers them, should render front of the house restaurant jobs less attractive to young, upwardly-mobile, white workers. Instead, by examining the relationship between worker attributes and job structures, I show how these particular workers are able to *achieve* desirable labor arrangements for themselves within front of the house jobs in upscale urban restaurants. Direct class resources and race-based privileges (such as hiring preferences) these workers enjoy certainly contribute to their ability to positively experience their jobs, but alone do not explain the whole story. Upwardly-mobile, white servers and bartenders come to embrace their jobs by strategically drawing upon “flexible” schedules, a blend of occupational pursuits, and the play-like environment within the front of the house. Doing these things in turn helps workers manage the most volatile dimensions of their jobs.

The carefully screened characteristics of front of the house workers at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood undoubtedly frame their relationship to the job. The relative youth, whiteness, and class-privilege of the service staff at each restaurant augments their ability to “consume” service work as desirably fun, flexible, and social (Besen-Cassino 2014; Shigihara 2015). This is perhaps most true at Match, where workers are the youngest and most socially homophilous. To paraphrase what multiple servers at Match told me, working in the dining room is essentially like taking part in one big party, every day. If so, that party remains distinctly invite-only, and best enjoyed “for now”.

Embracing front of the house restaurant work also rings true amongst self-described “lifers”, those committed to staying in restaurants long-term. As I have described, these individuals are more often employed at skill- and experience-driven

service establishments like Terroir and The Neighborhood. While these individuals may be less compelled by the prospect of “playing around” while on the shop floor, they nonetheless appreciate the relative autonomy the job grants them in other ways (e.g. spending more time with some guests than others) – as well as their proximity to gourmet food and drink.

This chapter contributes to scholarship on interactive service work, inequality, and youth labor markets. Research shows that more young adults today are engaging in service and retail work within post-industrial urban centers (Clark 2004; Lloyd 2006; Ocejo 2014), and that many of these workers do not seem to be experiencing such jobs as marginalizing, volatile, or even low in prestige (Besen-Cassino 2014; Mears 2015). Yet, as I argue, the *ability* to embrace volatile, “bad”, or precarious jobs are not available to just any workers, and have strong race- and class-based connotations.

For those who do work in front of the house service jobs at upscale, urban establishments like Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood, the shape of the job looks different. Scholars argue that younger generations are prioritizing customizable, self-directed, and build-your-own work careers (George 2008; Neff, Wissinger and Zukin 2005). Previously, desirable opportunities that offer this were thought to exist primarily in high-skilled labor markets such as Silicon Valley’s tech industries (Barley and Kunda 2004) or in elite “creative” labor markets (Florida 2005). My research suggests that some workers may be *achieving* preferable labor arrangements for themselves in far more unexpected territory, such as in the restaurant industry and other interactive service establishments (George 2008).

Front of the house work is, of course, only half the labor story of any given restaurant. As I turn now to examine back of the house labor at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood, the divided and unequal nature of this setting once again comes to the forefront. The immigrant and U.S.-born Latinos employed as cooks, dishwashers, bussers, and cleaners do not relate to their restaurant jobs in the same ways as those detailed in this chapter. The difference between these perspectives reflects not only socio-cultural asymmetries between upwardly-mobile white workers and immigrant Latino workers, but inequality-reproducing processes operating within upscale service establishments themselves.

Chapter Five

“Brown Collar” Careers in the Back of the House

“I didn’t choose the kitchen life, the kitchen life chose me.” - Geraldo, line cook.

Geraldo, then a 20-year-old undocumented immigrant from Oaxaca, had never stepped foot in a professional kitchen before landing his first restaurant job flipping burgers at McDonald’s. He had previously worked for under-the-table cash at a car wash across the street from the brightly-lit golden arches. Fourteen years later, Geraldo is now the highest paid line cook at The Neighborhood, the leader of the “a.m. team”. He says he loves his job, his strong relationship with the white head chef (“he is super fucking cool”), and his enduring friendships with his fellow Mexican and Central American cooks on the kitchen line. However, despite working almost fifty hours a week at the restaurant, Geraldo’s wages are barely enough to support his wife and two kids. So, to augment his earnings, four days a week Geraldo heads to a Beverly Hills restaurant where he is a food runner on the evening shift.

Geraldo’s labor situation is not unlike that of many immigrant Latinos working back of the house restaurant jobs. In Los Angeles, nearly one out of every two restaurant workers is foreign-born, and two out of every three are Latino (ROC-LA 2009).

According to a recent Pew Hispanic Research Center study (2015), service occupations have the highest proportion of undocumented immigrants found in any industry – more than *doubling* the proportion found in the next-highest industry, construction (33% compared to 15%). Moreover, owing to discriminatory mechanisms in the industry channeling immigrant Latino workers into the lowest job rungs, their numbers in certain areas of the workplace (e.g. the dishpit, back kitchen) approach 100%.

Understanding Geraldo’s complex relationship with his job – he “loves” working in the kitchen but can barely make ends meet – showcases the complexities underlying immigrant labor in the restaurant industry and similar labor settings in the secondary labor market in this country. This chapter offers an in-depth examination of a deeply immigrant Latino world of work within the back of the house of restaurants like Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood. It is one that gets its bright boundaries not only from structural distinctions from front of the house labor, but also social inequalities (of race, class, gender, and immigration status) mapped closely onto these two divergent labor spheres on the shop floor.

I ask, how have immigrant Mexican and Central American workers transformed the jobs in which they work to reflect gendered and socio-cultural space? To what extent do their labor experiences reflect both marginalization as well as a commitment to “brown-collar” careers in Los Angeles? Drawing on in-depth interviews with workers as well as extensive ethnographic observations, I showcase how the Latino men employed as cooks, dishwashers, bussers and food runners, infuse a hierarchical back of the house restaurant culture with ethnic camaraderie and masculinity. Many of these workers also approach their jobs with a complex mixture of commitment, struggle, and pride. I show

how this manifests differently for kitchen and “support” jobs. While both types of restaurant work are similarly racialized and gendered as “brown collar” jobs for immigrant Latino men, I contend there are important differences between what these jobs offer to workers.

“Brown Collar” Labor in the Service Industry

Existing research on the types of jobs that immigrants are concentrated in today provides a blueprint for how to understand the work conditions they face. As previously noted, immigrant labor “niches” gain their social composition from both internal dynamics within the niche and external forces. Employers have been known to draw on racialized and gender-stereotyped hiring when attempting to fill vacant positions. Discriminatory hiring involves cultural frames of certain social groups as more or less appropriate for certain jobs. Many employers favor Latinos, especially immigrants, for physically-strenuous or un/semi-skilled service jobs because this group is thought to be more tolerant of the difficult working conditions these jobs offer (Gomberg-Munoz 2011; Neckerman and Kirschenman 1991). Since these jobs are not particularly desirable to most Americans, immigrant social networks and employer “tastes” (Becker 2010) are largely in-synch in shaping what kind of individual fills these jobs.

While some immigrant jobs are associated with high-skilled work (e.g. Indian immigrants working in computer software), many others are typically associated with unskilled, bottom-rung jobs undesirable to many Americans (Cantazarite 2000; Peri and Eckstein forthcoming; Waldinger and Lichter 2003). Research suggests that the concentration of a group of immigrant workers in one job has ambiguous implications for

workers situated within them. In this sense, understanding how “niching” affects workers depends on a number of factors, including the human capital of the worker as well as the particular industry.

Differentiating roles and job experiences *within* categorically-similar immigrant jobs has gone largely unexplored in sociological scholarship. Instead, the focus is generally on the processes of how niches form, and how they are maintained (Massey et al. 1987; Waldinger and Lichter 2003). Yet, particularly in jobs with low skill requirements, there is no reason that these connections need be confined to any one setting. A given niche may, for example, link individuals who hold different hierarchical positions in a workplace, or connect those in formally different industries.

In areas of the country with large immigrant Latino populations, “immigrant” jobs go hand in hand with the racialization of these positions as “brown collar” jobs. “Brown collar” jobs reflect the socio-cultural stereotype connecting Latino workers, especially the foreign-born, to unskilled, labor-intensive service jobs (Cantazarite 2000). The racialization of certain jobs adds new dimensions to the study of these occupations, in that labor analysis cannot be divorced from *who* is doing the work. Yet the racialization of certain work also flattens meaningful distinctions between different kinds of “brown collar” jobs which may in fact offer very different labor characteristics to workers. For instance, the racialization of service labor can accelerate the transformation of these “brown collar” immigrant jobs from ones that are foreign-born to a mix of foreign- and U.S.-born (see Bonilla-Silva 2010; Lee and Zhou 2015). As “brown” workers come to contrast white or black ones, Latinos with a different relationship to the migration process as well as different socio-cultural outlook, begin to conflate in the eyes of employers and

the public (Kasinitz et al 2008; Rumbaut and Portes 2001). Racialized service jobs are also likely to feature workers of heterogeneous immigrant generation, and country of origin (e.g. Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico, etc). Owing to these differences, those working brown collar jobs today may not necessarily hold the same relationships to the job as one another.

Immigrants in the Restaurant Industry

Restaurant work has long stood as quintessential jobs for new entrants to this country. Because of the low linguistic and technical skill requirements of these jobs, unskilled immigrants who may not speak English well can still find (bottom-rung) work in restaurants relatively quickly.⁵² As historical migration patterns to the United States shifted away from Europe and towards Mexico, Central America and Asia in the post-1965 years, so have the demographics of the foreign-born workers in the restaurant industry. Street taco stands, Vietnamese pho cafés, and Indian restaurants now dot urban landscapes – reflecting some of the imported cuisines of migrants – while Greek diners, Italian pizzerias, and Irish pubs have transformed into largely symbolically ethnic establishments.

Recent immigrants are concentrated in the urban restaurant industry in two primary capacities. First, they fill a majority of jobs within ethnic eateries tied to their mother countries, including that of small business owner. These are generally small restaurants located in immigrant enclaves of the city, where co-ethnic employment may be informal, under the table, and tied closely to familial networks (Light and Gold 2000;

⁵² Krishnendu Ray (2007) notes that in 1900, 63% of Employees of Hotels and Restaurants in New York City were foreign-born.

Portes 1995; Zhou 1995). Many of these restaurants do not have on payroll more than a handful of workers, often, just one or two (ROCLA 2011).

Second, immigrants commonly labor within non-ethnic or “symbolically” ethnic restaurants, but in distinct capacities.⁵³ The foreign-born are predominantly employed in back of the house and behind-the-scenes capacities (Bailey 1985; Waldinger and Lichter 2003). The jobs they fill represent the lowest rungs of the workplace hierarchy, and frequently deal with the most labor-intensive and monotonous tasks such as cleaning, bussing, and food preparation.⁵⁴

This means that today, “brown collar” restaurant work in cities like Los Angeles is not only embodied in Mexican and Central American ethnic restaurants, but also in distinct jobs within the restaurant industry as a whole. Within the latter, as I have shown in chapter two, these social and symbolic boundaries weigh heavily on the culture of the workplace, reinforcing social distance between workers, and etching divergent worlds of work. Yet, observing only the difference between Latino and non-Latino labor spheres risks flattening the complex social relations, labor experiences, and worker perspectives found *within* “brown collar” restaurant jobs.⁵⁵ Each of these aspects of back of the house

⁵³ While this employment pattern may be most commonly associated with foreign-born workers in American casual restaurant stops, in large cities like Los Angeles and New York it can also include a process of “ethnic succession”, resulting in Chinese ownership of sushi restaurants, and Mexican immigrants cooking Korean tofu soups (see Ray 2007: 111-112).

⁵⁴ Recent research by Giovanni Peri and Susan Eckstein (forthcoming) indicates that “cooks” and “dishwashers” remain among the most heavily concentrated jobs for Mexican immigrant men in the country. When considering both foreign-born and US-born workers, Latinos as a group occupy the overwhelming majority of all back of the house jobs, and 2 out of every 3 restaurant jobs *overall* (ROC-LA 2011).

⁵⁵ Sociologist Tessa Wright (2007) identifies three distinct perspectives of minority and migrant restaurant workers in England: those seeking career progression, those looking

shop floor culture are shaped by the concentration of immigrant and second-generation Latino men in these jobs. By examining “brown collar” restaurant work at the level of the shop floor, this chapter provides a more complex portrait of work life within the back of the house.

Committing to the Daily Grind

Comaraderie with “the Guys”

While white, culinary school-trained, male chefs are over-represented in the top positions in the back of the house hierarchy at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood⁵⁶, the overwhelming majority of line cooks, prep cooks, and dishwashers are Latino men. The dining room hierarchy is similar, where white men and women are employed as managers, servers, and bartenders, followed by a uniformly Latino and male support staff (with the exception of Terroir, which does not staff bussers and food runners). With race and gender strongly mapped onto the social organization of the workplace, many of one’s immediate coworkers are of the same race, class, gender, and immigration status. This contributes to the strong camaraderie that many back of the house workers share.

 Laboring alongside one another in close quarters sometimes for upwards of ten hours straight, cooks are known to develop close, homosocial bonds (see Fine 1996). Yet at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood, these bonds are also informed by workers’ shared ethnic- and migration histories. Many Latino cooks talk about their “team of

for a chance to better wages, and those using the work as a stepping stone to a new career.

⁵⁶ Across all three restaurants, there was only two non-white chefs (the Asian American chef-owner at Terroir, and a sous chef at Match), and one female (sous chef at The Neighborhood).

guys” as others might an athletic squad or military unit. Many are from similar home states in Mexico and Central America, the result of years of network connections into specific workplaces and directed migration channels. Geraldo, a 34-year-old cook at The Neighborhood, sums up the special bond he feels for his team of four cooks⁵⁷ he works with each morning shift: “you know how they work. And you know they got your back if you need something. I really love those guys.”

The close connection Geraldo has with his co-ethnic, back of the house “team” is hardly unique. During the dinner shift at The Neighborhood, three Latino cooks, Alan, Marcos, and Hernandez, constantly rib each other out of customer view. All between the ages of 20 and 30, their conversations feature extensive use of occupational slang⁵⁸ and generational Spanish phrases associated with men (*e.g. No mames, guey!* [no way, man!]⁵⁹). Talking rapid fire to one another while working on the line, their communication is almost exclusively in Spanish, except when addressing the white chef. Other Latino cooks playfully nickname each other *gordo*, *feo*, or *bonita* (fatty, ugly, pretty). Used as terms of endearment, these names signal their in-group closeness. Nicknames are rarely extended towards white servers, bartenders, or managers. Female back of the house workers also may not receive a nickname, as was the case for two

⁵⁷ In the summer of 2016, this included a core team of two immigrant Mexican men, one second-generation Mexican man, and one part-time white woman. When the white woman left to return to college that fall, she was replaced by another immigrant Mexican man.

⁵⁸ Gary Fine (1996: 61) has also noted the extensive “backstage” lingo that exists in kitchens, and the animated way it is used during meal service rushes.

⁵⁹ This phrase literally translates to “don’t suck” (*mamar*), followed by a term of address used amongst friends (*guey*). It is mostly used amongst friends to express disbelief.

immigrant Mexican women who briefly worked at The Neighborhood as dishwashers in the fall of 2016. The core team in the back of the house is firmly male and Latino.

On the shop floor, certain informal practices also become emblematic of a group culture in the back of the house deeply informed by the social characteristics and shared culture of those employed there. For example, at Match, while the cooks prep their workstations in the morning before opening hour, they blast *bachata* and *cumbia* on a scratchy portable radio. Formal management policy indicates that all “kitchen music” must be turned off once service begins. Yet, this simply causes the music to be driven underground: the radio would remain on during service, albeit with the volume down and stashed between two large bags of potatoes. Done perhaps as everyday resistance – or just to make the job a little more enjoyable – such ingrained practices of a Latino shop floor are not so easily uprooted by managerial strictures.

Many Latino line cooks and prep cooks distance themselves from the food items they are preparing for guests in the dining room. Unlike chefs, cooks rarely have any creative input on how they are made or plated. Yet this disconnect is particularly poignant at Match, where immigrant Mexican cooks often must prepare what they see as “white-washed” Mexican American foods. For example, on a Thursday afternoon I witnessed Xeno and Juan, two of the lead line cooks, preparing “fish fajitas” with organic black beans, and a “Tofu Scramble” burrito (featuring chorizo-spiced tofu). Xeno later jokingly referred to these dishes as “gringo Mexican food”, feeling no personal connection with them. On another occasion, a prep cook named Felipe ridiculed Match’s homemade red salsa, which he was personally responsible for making in huge batches.

He grimaced, explaining to me in broken English, “one day I bring *my* salsa I make at home for you. It is so much better than this crap!”

By contrast, “family” meals made for, and by, back of the house staff often reflect the preferred culinary traditions of immigrant Latino cooks. Many, for example, are proud of their hometown specialty dishes, which never sniff the menu at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood. Jon, the sous chef at Terroir and a native of Veracruz, Mexico, is fond of making what he refers to as “fish stew” for family meal. It is a patchwork dish that Jon makes with leftover fish and vegetables scraps from the night’s service, spiced with an aromatic blend of seasonings inspired by his coastal hometown’s seafood cuisine. Other workers practice alternate food traditions that are then circulated amongst coethnic, back of the house employees. At The Neighborhood around Christmas 2016, I arrived at work to find Enrique and Manuel, both natives of Oaxaca, Mexico, passing around homemade pork and green chile stuffed tamales to the kitchen and support staff. Similarly, at Terroir, the two immigrant Mexican dishwashers share a private stash of habaneros and dried chili peppers that they bring out and add to their lunch meals.

Because food and drink sharing amongst Latino back of the house workers is thus largely confined to within-group lines, these exchanges thus provide a good indicator of who is a part of which social circle in the workplace. During the daily 3pm “lunch break” at Terroir, Latino cooks often sit and eat together, apart from white front of the house workers. At The Neighborhood, when Fernando (food runner) and Nacho (busser) arrive for the dinner shift, they immediately say hi to the kitchen staff and inquire whether any of them would like a latte or cappuccino from the espresso machine. After fielding makeshift orders from the Latino cooks, they proceed to make these drinks, place them in

paper cups, and pass them on to the kitchen. Later that night, these same cooks often reciprocate the gesture: should spare food from the kitchen be available, Manuel (sauté cook) and Juan (*Garde Manger*) sneak “gifts” towards Fernando and Nacho first. No evidence of this parallel shop floor culture in the back of the house appears on the menu; in fact, it is hardly even evident to their white front of the house coworkers, or management.

Loyalty to Mentors

The co-ethnic and male camaraderie back of the house workers share with one another is not the only type of social bond they evince on the shop floor. Many maintain a strong sense of loyalty towards individuals who have mentored them on the job, especially non-Latino chefs and managers.

Jon, Rodrigo, and Manny each illustrate the deep connections they feel for their respective bosses. Jon, the sous chef mentioned earlier, has worked for Larry (the chef-partner of Terroir) for the past ten years. When Larry told Jon he was thinking about opening a new restaurant in 2013, Jon says he instantly agreed to help him out should he be called upon. Jon explains why he had no second thoughts:

“Chef Larry gave me a chance to prove myself, and I’ll never forget. I’d follow him anywhere if he wants my help. Yes, he can be difficult [to work for]. But he is fair, and he has been good to me all these years.”⁶⁰

⁶⁰ One of the white sous chefs at Terroir also exhibited similar loyalty. Two months into his employment, he told me this place wasn’t the right fit for him. He dragged his feet on leaving, and when he finally found another position, he gave one month’s notice – far above the industry standard. “I feel bad for chef, and I’d like to see him succeed,” he told me.

Rodrigo, like many of the veteran Latino cooks at The Neighborhood, feels similarly about the restaurant's head chef, Morgan. As Rodrigo told me, "the only way I'm leaving this place is if Chef [Morgan] leaves. If he leaves, I'll be ready to follow him. Otherwise, I'm here for the long run, I love working at The Neighborhood." Rodrigo says he has received two raises from Chef Morgan, moving him from \$10 to \$14.50 an hour over three years. Along with his latest raise, Morgan sat him down to tell him how valuable he is to the team. It was a rare direct complement from the chef, who is usually short on praise and quick to get on cooks for sub-par work (by his standards). That conversation was one that Rodrigo has since taken to heart: he consistently arrives early and stays late at the restaurant, well after clocking out.

Mentoring relations in the kitchen frequently reflect tough love, as well as the hierarchical relations in this subspace. Many Latino cooks are quick to note that the same chef/mentors that have "shown them the kitchen ropes" have also driven them close to tears through their sharp criticism. The loyalty oaths sworn to chefs and other mentees can also act as a double-edged sword. Similar to the bonds between bosses and secretaries in white-collar workplaces (Kanter 1977), sworn "fealty" can more often hold back those in subordinate positions, not bosses. For example, while Rodrigo puts in unpaid hours at the restaurant to show his "commitment", Jon has supported Chef Larry in his various restaurants instead of attempting to break into the ranks of lead chef himself.

Bonds characterized by this kind of tough love and intense loyalty are less common between Latino support workers and their dining room managers. They do still

exist on occasion, often following similar patterns as those in the kitchen. For example, following the death of his father, a food runner named Manny left The Neighborhood to return to Mexico. When he came back to Los Angeles six months later looking for work, he was able to reconnect with his former boss, Michele:

“I was working on Sawtelle [Boulevard] at a Japanese restaurant as a dishwasher at the time. I used to work nights, from 4pm on, but the last bus ended at 11. So it was hard getting home ... then I received a call from Michele [former manager at The Neighborhood], telling me, *come back home*. That was it. I put in my two weeks, and came back to The Neighborhood.” (Interview 9/21/16)

Before his return to Mexico, Manny describes how Michele helped him learn the techniques of fine dining, how to set a dining room properly, and how to treat guests.

“Where I’m from, I had never heard that stuff before. Michele was the one who taught me everything,” he says. Manny remains deeply appreciative of how Michele has helped him; he wonders aloud whether he would leave his current job if Michele, who left The Neighborhood in the winter of 2015, came calling again.

Mentorship loyalties in the back of the house reveal the complex social ties that Latino cooks, bussers, and food runners maintain in the workplace. Transcending ethnic or kin-based connections, mentorship ties to white chefs and managers are forged through the hierarchical structure of the workplace. It is one in which Latino workers feel that certain individuals have directly helped them succeed by sticking up for them (recall Jon’s earlier comment, “Chef Larry gave me a chance to prove myself. I’ll never forget”).

In this sense, the intensity of mentorship ties, often to non-Latinos, is also distinctly shaped by the disadvantaged characteristics of Latino back of the house workers. Many must still contend with their undocumented status along with low human capital and continued discrimination in the labor market, all of which compromise their ability to access better jobs. Many back of the house workers thus remain appreciative towards bosses that they feel have helped provide them a stable, “home” workplace, regardless of the shortcomings.

Re-Masculating Kitchen Work

Like other blue-collar labor setting dominated by men (Willis 1977), Latino cooks, bussers, and dishwashers re-inscribe the work they do as accomplishments of masculinity, fortitude, and skill. This in turn helps back of the house workers frame symbolically superior work selves – especially in relation to front of the house employees (see Fine 1996).

Back of the house workers like Anthony, Victor, and Fred talk about their ability to withstand the physicality and stress of the job like a badge of honor. The ability to “get shit done” – whether by pressing a finger to a scalding steak to test its doneness or carrying four plates out to a table at once – can be a source of pride and favorable self-perception. Most kitchen workers have physical scars and cuts from years on the job particularly those dealing with knives and scalding oils on a daily basis. Anthony, a 30-year-old, second-generation Mexican cook, treats his scars as evidence of the *real* work it takes to make it in the kitchen. They are the physical evidence of an occupational rite-of-passage. One day, Anthony decided to show me his “collection” of past kitchen-related

injuries: he uncovered dozens of scars dotting his forearms, hands and neck. None seemed to alarm Anthony himself (in fact, I appeared more aghast than he did).

In the back of the house, as multiple workers attested, the unspoken goal is not to prevent injuries from occurring, only to be able to “suck it up”. In dealing with adversity without complaining, Latino back of the house workers feel they are doing exactly what their *gringo* front of the house colleagues cannot. As Rodrigo, the cook described earlier, explains:

“Front of the house? I’m sorry, but *you can’t do what we do*. The shit I’ve gone through in the past – the thing is, no one or no thing at The Neighborhood bothers me at all. A grown man screaming at me about a [food] ticket? That’s nothing. I’ve seen some fucked up shit, that’s not about to scare me. But I’ve seen other people kinda wilt under the pressure.” (Interview, 8/4/16).

Rodrigo treats his ability to tolerate stress and borderline verbal abuse as a sign of his masculinity and toughness at work – traits he sees no evidence of amongst his coworkers in the dining room, both male and female. Manny, a cook who has previously worked as a food runner, offers similar perspective:

“Once you enter the back of the house, you learn so much. Different feelings. Feelings don’t really exist in the back of the house. You have to leave your feelings at home. Like a soldier going to war. Like, when a soldier goes to war,

it's either killing or being killed. In the back of the house, it's, 'get it done, get it done.' That's the mentality." (Interview, 9/22/16)

In the need to "leave your feelings at home", Manny points out the emotional fortitude needed to succeed in the back of the house. To be able to face a "kill or be killed" work environment each day is reserved for those that can stand up to do fire. By emphasizing the stoicism required for the work, Manny codes back of the house work culture as expressly masculine. Some of his Latino coworkers are more explicit about the fact that women don't belong in professional restaurant kitchens. One male cook, who did not wish to be named, offers a gender-reductionist view of men and women in the kitchen:

"You scream at me, I get pissed – that's it. But I take it. You scream at a woman? She walks off the line, starts crying in the bathroom. Now, there are times that we might get a female chef that is hardcore, like Chef Coryn⁶¹. It's like she has no feelings! (laughs). Well, she *has* feelings, but I guess she keeps them inside." (Interview, 9/22/16)

As the above example illustrates, only women able to "soldier up" and "leave emotions at the door" may be accepted into the hardy occupational fold of the back of the house.⁶²

⁶¹ Former sous chef at The Neighborhood.

⁶² Christine William's classic study (1991) of male nurses and female military personnel details the gendered nature of certain occupations, in which certain stereotypically masculine traits are attributed to some jobs and feminine traits to others.

Kylie, a 23-years-old white woman and one of only three female line cooks I witnessed in this study, describes the “special treatment” she received in an all-male kitchen:

“I don’t like that I get treated differently, but I think I do. Like, when [chef Eric] is in his random good moods, he’ll be like, ‘oh here, eat this.’ And be really nice, not give it to anyone else. And I think it might be because I’m a girl. Or Chef Morgan will be like, try this, and I’ll be like, ok. But I really wish I was just not treated any differently. But I feel like it’s because it’s me, and I’m a girl ... um ... a lot of people think I need help carrying stuff too. And I’m like, no, I’m good. When I first started here, it’s funny, the [male] prep cooks in the back would be extra nice to me. They would be like, oh I’ll put away all this stuff for you. Don’t worry. And I was like, literally, shut up, I can do my job. And they would be ...ohhh, ohhhh.... But seriously, *I can do my job!*” (Interview, 10/17/16)

For Kylie, the paternalistic treatment she received from her male colleagues in the back of the house, many of whom were older than her, made her feel like she wasn’t accepted as a true equal. It reaffirmed to her that she was in a man’s domain. So, too, did the physical horseplay between Latino cooks that would sometimes commence at end of the shift at The Neighborhood. When the chef on duty would leave the kitchen, several of the male Latino cooks would begin “rat tailing” each other, using twirled kitchen rags as makeshift whips. They would chase each other around the kitchen, darting behind wall partitions to stay out of view from the dining room customers. Meanwhile, Kylie would

look on, hastily cleaning her kitchen station. Management would sometimes be of little use in curbing such behaviors: on one busy Saturday dinner service, Chef Morgan brought in a six pack of beer for the kitchen staff to drink while they were cleaning up; twenty minutes later I peered into the kitchen to see him arm wrestling with Anthony near the back kitchen sink. While such horseplay on the job is clearly intended to be good-naturedly, it also marks an inner group culture of the back of the house that women like Kylie must either deal with or ship out.

Differentiating “Brown Collar” Skills

Laboring in a hierarchical shop floor culture alongside mostly fellow immigrant Latino men allows back of the house workers to experience their jobs as spaces of camaraderie, mentorship, and masculinity. Each of these aspects imbues the work with meaning and sets it apart from front of the house work. It also shapes to how Latino back of the house workers approach their work lives, longer-term. Whereas many white, upwardly-mobile servers and bartenders in this study embrace their jobs as temporary while focusing on their activities outside of restaurants (see Chapter 4), Latino back of the house employees often feel far more committed to careers in the industry. The latter perspective manifests in two different ways that are in turn patterned by job differences within “brown collar” restaurant work. Latino cooks are more inclined to say that their jobs are helping them build skills and acquire relevant job experience for their long-term careers. By contrast, food runners and bussers emphasize how their jobs allow them to *economize* their working lives, earning more money per hour than kitchen workers while doing less physically-taxing work.

Within the respective kitchens at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood, many Latino cooks invest in their own equipment, such as knives, knife bags, chef tweezers, tongs, and specialty spatulas. They view having personalized tools as a virtual requirement in the kitchen. However, for working-class Latino immigrants making scarcely over \$10 an hour, purchasing such items can also amount to a serious financial burden. Enrique, a line cook at Terroir, told me how he saved up for months to finally buy a high-quality, Japanese-made vegetable knife (he bought it used on Ebay, for \$150). Rodrigo says he borrowed Chef Morgan's high-end German designer knife for his first three weeks working the garde manger station before finally getting his own personal knife. He spent the next two months paying it off.

Expending limited personal resources on cooking gear furthers cooks like Rodrigo and Enrique's commitment to laboring in the kitchen as a kind of "sunk cost". Others demonstrate equally strong commitment to kitchen careers by seeking to improve their cooking abilities. This was evident to me when I asked Geraldo and Pedro, lead line cooks at The Neighborhood and Match respectively, to recount their previous work experience in restaurants. Both drew attention to the skills they have gained from each of their jobs. Below, Geraldo offers a linear narrative of his career progress, beginning from his first job at McDonald's at age 22:

"At McDonald's, I learned to go super fucking fast. Boom, boom, boom [makes quick chopping motions]. Then when I went to the BBQ place, they started telling me, it is really important for you to care [about the customers]. And I also started understanding – funny, I didn't realize this until now – I started

understanding *timing*.⁶³ Then when I was at the hotel, that's where I started learning better technique: how to make Italian food, French food. Now here at The Neighborhood, where the food is fancier, I've learned much more about plating. How to make food look beautiful." (Interview, 11/6/16).

Geraldo talks about his previous kitchen jobs by showcasing the cumulative knowledge he's gained. Different restaurants have providing him with different opportunities to refine his craft through speed, timing, technique, and plating. Doing so does not always require jumping jobs. Other cooks, such as Pedro (29, Mexican American), have developed in their kitchen careers through moving stations and advancing up the back of the house hierarchy within one establishment. Pedro described to me his own journey to becoming a professional cook at Match, from his first months washing dishes, to prepping basic foods (peeling potatoes, chopping onions), to assembling dressings and sauces, to making salads on the line, and finally, to grilling big-ticket items, like steak and pork chops.

For cooks like Geraldo and Pedro, honing kitchen-based skills is not just indicative of their commitment to kitchen careers. It is also a source of personal pride, one they take with them well beyond the workplace. Jorge recalls how gratifying it was to show off his cooking acumen to his family for the first time: last year, he prepared his mother, who is a Salvadoran immigrant, a Ribeye steak dinner – perfectly seasoned, seared medium rare, with a side of *pomme puree* – for her birthday.

⁶³ "Timing", as Geraldo would later explain to me, involves being able to keep mental tabs on how long certain items are going to take to ready. The goal is to have everything finish at once: the cold salad made to order, the French fries from the fryer, the burger, medium-rare, from the grill.

Many of the skills that Latino kitchen laborers work hard to gain on the job, such as kneading pizza dough, handling porcetta, and timing the grill, may not qualify as formal skills broadly valued in the labor market. Nor do they offer these workers the prospect of high wages or job prestige, either.⁶⁴ Yet in a hierarchical workplace environment in which few workers have access to college degrees or formal job certifications, seeking opportunities to develop one's cooking skills can provide structure to one's work life as well as garner respect from one's community of peers.⁶⁵ Cooks like Andrew⁶⁶ and Geraldo both offer such sentiments, while deemphasizing the monetary aspect of their jobs:

“For me, the perfect moments in the kitchen are when I can catch one of the chefs, Morgan or Eric, when they want to talk about the food. Like how it is put together, *really* talk about a dish. That's really the perfect day. Like the other day I got to pick Morgan's brain about this sauce I was making, and he talked with me about it. Because they are really busy, but they also know so much.”
(Andrew, Interview, 6/10/16)

EW: Others have told me working with Chef Eric can be difficult. Why do you seem to enjoy it?

⁶⁴ Occupational prestige scores from GSS 2012. “Waitress/waiter in a restaurant is 3.7, “cook in a restaurant” is 3.9, and “TV repairman” is 4.0.

⁶⁵ Other scholars have noted similar phenomena amongst working-class immigrants (see Hagan, Hernandez-Leon, and Demonsant 2015; Waldinger and Lichter 2003).

⁶⁶ Born to immigrant parents, Andrew is unusual amongst his kitchen colleagues in that he graduated with a four-year degree from a University of California school. This likely contributes to his more cerebral approach to cooking philosophy.

Geraldo: “because the guy is super fucking talented. He presents his plates in a super nice way. I really love the way he works. I do. And I really want to – *I would like to reach that level someday.* (Geraldo, Interview, 11/6/16. Emphasis mine.)

As these quotes demonstrate, Anthony and Geraldo are able to find value in kitchen-based careers that otherwise offer “bad” labor conditions. Yet, not all Latino back of the house workers are willing to accept this trade-off.

Many of the Latino men working as bussers and food runners at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood approach their jobs in ways that contrast their kitchen-based, co-ethnic colleagues. To Nacho, a 33-year-old Mexican immigrant man, the idea of seeking the occasional “perfect” moment in the kitchen – with an oft-surly chef breathing down your neck the rest of the time – is simply not worth it. A father of three young children, Nacho says that three years ago he left the kitchen, and now works as a food runner at The Neighborhood. With some notable exceptions, support workers like Fernando do not necessarily aspire to climb restaurant job ladders any higher than the rung they currently are. Comparing themselves to their kitchen colleagues, they are likely to highlight how their present jobs working in or near the dining room allow them to enjoy shorter work hours, higher earnings (due to a tip-supplemented income), and less work-related stress. They should know: like Nacho, many have at some point worked in the kitchen as well. Julio, a 50-year-old Mexican immigrant, has been bussing tables at Match for two years, and in other Los Angeles restaurants for the last eight. He spent the previous decade as a line cook in the city. When I asked him why he left the kitchen, Julio grimaces as he

mentions the bad working conditions (“it is so hot”) and low pay he consistently faced. He hopes he will never have to cook in a restaurant again, and has taken to preaching the relative merits of working as a busser or food runner to his former kitchen colleagues, including his U.S.-born son.

Julio is far from alone in his vocal encouragement for fellow Latino friends and former colleagues in the kitchen to seek work outside the kitchen. As a food runner named Fernando (34, male, immigrant Mexican) explains:

“I’ve actually tried to tell some of them [Latino cooks] to come work in the front of the house with me before. Like, Jorge especially. Jorge, I see him drinking so much coffee in the kitchen each day, like 6 or 7 cups. And he looks really stressed. So I told him, quit all that, and come work out here! He said he didn’t want to. Same thing with Raul and Geraldo. I told them to work out here [in the dining room]. I’ve told them many, many times. But Raul told me his English isn’t good enough, plus he doesn’t like people. (laughs). He said he wouldn’t know what to do if a customer complained. I told him he could just find me, but he said he’d rather not try. Geraldo – I don’t know why he doesn’t.” (Interview, 2/3/17)

Emphasizing the superior working conditions offered by “support” jobs in restaurants, workers like Fernando and Julio feel they have found a long-term role for themselves as bussers and food runners. As Fernando told me one day, he has a family to care for (including his parents in Mexico), and he feels he can better do this by working a job that

nets higher earnings per hour and leaves him less physically taxed. Instead of pulling grueling ten-hour shifts in a hot kitchen, Fernando figures he can buss tables during brunch shift and have enough energy to run food at another restaurant for dinner service if need be.

Still, with their steadfast commitment to working in the restaurant industry, why don't Latino support workers try to access better restaurant jobs beyond their "brown collar" jobs? Certainly, some do with varying degrees of success (I examine this in more detail next chapter). Yet, many others remain lukewarm at the prospect of moving into jobs that would involve substantially more interaction with (white) guests. Enrique, an immigrant Mexican food runner at Match, provides perspective on the issue. Unlike most of his fellow support workers, Enrique briefly worked as a restaurant manager at a popular gastropub in west Los Angeles. Below, he explains his decision to quit management and return to food running:

Enrique: I was making pretty good money, but it was so stressful. Funny... the only problem – so crazy – I was so frustrated. When I was working as manager, there were just so many things to do, *everybody needs something*. This one wants one thing, this one, another ... And I had to be like (mimics serving a guest), "oh, you want me to do this one thing for you?" So, yeah, the money was good but it was so stressful for me, I didn't like it. I worked as a host too for a while, but it was the same thing. And most people were nice, but then they would get mad every now and then ... Eventually, I told the owner I just want to bus tables again. I want to just say *Adios, bye bye* to customers. And so they said sure, and moved

me back. Now, if there are any problems with the customers, I just say, “talk to your server.” That’s it. God bless. (laughs). And that is what I am trying to do at Match too, not have any contact with customers. Because that was what was so stressful. (Interview, 5/22/13).

For Enrique, the challenges of navigating a culturally foreign world of work proved daunting. Moving into management gave him a higher income – along with a visible role of responsibility in a dining room full of affluent, white guests. It meant shifting his primary work interactions from fellow Latino immigrants in the back of the house to white diners and servers (where, in his words, “everybody needs something”). It meant switching from shuttling plates of food out to tables to providing *hospitality* to those sitting at them. Each of these transitions meant crossing the symbolic divide in restaurants, from a Latino back of the house job to a white front of the house one. For Enrique, this proved too much for to handle over the long run. In wanting “to just say *adios, bye bye*” to customers, he, like many of his coethnic, immigrant colleagues in the back of the house, expressed an interest in returning to the familiarity of back of the house work – albeit for substantially less pay.

Conclusion

At Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood, the common threads that characterize the labor experiences of Latino workers in “brown-collar” restaurant jobs abound. This is largely because of social and structural inequalities shaping who works these jobs: kitchen and “support” jobs in upscale Los Angeles restaurants are overwhelmingly filled

by lower skilled, immigrant Latino men. These conditions in turn shape these workers' relationship to the work, and to their enduring careers in the industry. In this chapter I have described the strong co-ethnic and gender-based camaraderie that Latino workers exhibit on the shop floor, as well as their intense loyalty to (non-ethnic) mentors. Each provides them with a degree of community and occupational pride. These sentiments are only sharpened through favorable comparisons with a (white) front of the house cohort of workers. Unlike the latter, many Latino back of the house workers at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood remain committed to their restaurant careers for the foreseeable future⁶⁷, and are proud of the nuanced skills they must display on the job (though they are not necessarily financially rewarded for them).

In examining such complex relations to the job, this chapter nuances monolithic accounts of “bad” service jobs and the unskilled immigrant populations that work them. In restaurants, not all “brown-collar” service jobs are the same, just as not all Latino workers approach these jobs the same way. I have shown that while many Latino cooks exhibit a careerist commitment to building their culinary skills and advancing to higher kitchen posts, their co-ethnic colleagues in support jobs say they prefer the simplicity of less demanding and comparably higher-earning jobs – even at the expense of stagnating in these roles. I should stress again that, in many ways, the choice is not theirs to make. Many external factors continue to shape why immigrant Latino workers, forced to navigate racial discrimination, a lack of resources, and, often, irregular immigration status, are located in particular lower-rung posts within restaurants and other service

⁶⁷ A number of Latino workers expressed an interest in eventually returning to their home countries, though for none was this an immediate priority. Their anticipated return migration ranged from a “two or three years from now” to “when I’m ready to retire”.

sector workplaces. Workers' own interpretations of their labor situation are thus likely to reflect a good deal of post-hoc justification: *I was dealt this hard-luck hand and now I'm making the best of it.*

That said, the contributions of this chapter remain significant for what they teach us about the “brown collar” worlds of work within contemporary service workplaces. Those who work these jobs often experience them as highly differentiated, socially close-knit, and tacitly skilled – jobs they didn't necessarily choose, but often are pursuing long-term. This is particularly true in the kitchen, where despite “bad” labor conditions, Latino workers also encounter an occupational environment that can spawn mentor-apprentice relations, co-ethnic and male camaraderie, and skill growth opportunities.

The past two chapters have examined how workers in each of the highly unequal worlds of work within upscale restaurants relate to the divergent labor conditions they face. While these two employee cohorts remain largely separated by social and structural conditions on the shop floor, their boundaries are also selectively porous. The final empirical chapter of this dissertation thus shifts to the issue of occupational (im)mobility within this divided work setting. Under the social and cultural logic of upscale service, how might Latino back of the house workers be able to get ahead and ultimately access new mobility pathways?

Chapter Six

Bridging the Divide: Mobility Pathways and Closed Doors

I have thus far described how white, upwardly-mobile workers and working-class immigrant Latino workers come to occupy divergent and unequal worlds of work within upscale Los Angeles restaurants. Channeled into front of the house and back of the house jobs, the cleavages between these two cohorts reinforce a segregated shop floor in which certain jobs are virtually closed off from one another based on race, class, gender, and immigration status. Within this context, the prospect of job mobility, particularly for those in low-wage back of the house positions, would appear slim.

Yet, a divided workplace may also yield unexpected opportunity. As I have detailed in chapter two, the occupational segregation at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood frequently poses a series of problems for the production of service behind the scenes. Immigrant Latino cooks and white servers at the restaurant share few common skills or social rapport – let alone the ability to speak in the same language. Social network scholars note that in organizational contexts that feature a lack of ties between employee groups – known as “structural holes” – workers that can link together these disconnected clusters can increase their value in the workplace (Burt, 2005). Just in

the way translators are essential when two parties cannot speak the same language, workers with the ability to bridge social divides can garner personal advantages, particularly when these “brokers” are well culturally assimilated within the organization (Goldberg et al 2016). The opposite is holds true. Those socially *isolated* in the workplace may find themselves cut off from the flow of information and opportunities, miring them in place. In this sense, while not feeling comfortable socializing with some of your coworkers on the job may be relatively inconsequential (often, quite normal indeed), being systematically disconnected from entire groups of upwardly-mobile can be much more limiting for one’s career (Granovetter 1974, 1985).

There are other ways in which access to higher paying jobs in restaurants may not be closed to all Latino workers. While race and class remain powerful screening mechanisms for managerial and customer-facing jobs, a growing body of research shows that workers must also be *cultural fit* within the company. In service establishments, this can mean not only sharing similar tastes and interests with fellow workers (Rivera 2012), but also being culturally-attuned to the company’s customer base (Lloyd 2010) and service brand it wishes to expound (see chapter three, also Pettinger 2004; Williams and Connell 2010). For example, in a casual café attracting a young crowd, the real value of a barista might not be in making perfect lattes, but in the ability to ensure the café’s clientele feels welcome by infusing the service interaction with pop cultural jokes and generational slang (Besen-Cassino 2014). With this in mind, workers with non-normative race and class characteristics for customer-facing service jobs may nonetheless possess other embodied traits (ex. youth, coolness) that employers are likely to see as “looking good and sounding right” for their brand (Williams and Connell 2010).

A growing body of research shows that latter-generation Latino workers bring to the job different attributes from their foreign-born Latino colleagues, despite similar race and class characteristics⁶⁸. These attributes may allow the former to work in different job capacities than the latter. Since the majority of the second generation is bilingual in English and Spanish (Portes and Rumbaut 2006), they possess a natural skill that can prove advantageous certain labor markets, particularly those featuring large populations of Latino immigrants (Alarcon et al 2014; Hernández-León and Lakhani 2013; Morando 2013; Rumbaut 2014). For example, Villa and Villa (2005) found that in a New Mexico border region, 62% of employers either required or preferred to hire Spanish-English bilinguals, as these workers would be better able to communicate with not only a Spanish-speaking customer base, but also Spanish-speaking employees in the workplace. Likewise, as a function of coming of age in the United States and engaging with American social institutions, 1.5-, 2nd, and 3rd-generation Latinos are likely to possess the “soft skills” of personality and demeanor (Moss and Tilly 2001) valued by employers but rarely listed on job applications (see Rivera 2012). Compared to immigrants, U.S.-born Latinos employed in interactive service-based institutions have a better chance of relating to non-Latino workers, customers, and managers on the job, and intuitively understanding American mores of hospitality.

In this chapter I examine the occupational mobility prospects of latter-generation Latino workers employed at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood. In a socially- and structurally divided workplace in which class-privileged whites systematically occupy

⁶⁸ Waldinger, Lim, and Cort (2007) find that the children of Latino immigrants are likely to experience “lateral” mobility, assuming working-class jobs once they enter the labor market.

higher-earning jobs than immigrant Latinos, how might latter-generation Latinos be able to access better labor opportunities? I show how the children of immigrant Latinos are able to leverage their *in-betweenness* – characterized by bilingual skills, bi-cultural sensibilities, and diverse network ties in the workplace – in ways that help them advance into more desirable restaurant jobs virtually inaccessible to their co-ethnic, immigrant colleagues.

In contrast, who remains mired in the worst “brown collar” jobs in restaurants, and what contributes to their immobility? Many of the most marginalized workers at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood are immigrant Latino workers that are disproportionately undocumented, female, unskilled in kitchen work, and unable to communicate English at all. These traits, especially when compounded together, trap workers in what I refer to as the “back closet”, with the door to higher-earning jobs in the front- or back of the house virtually shut. By examining the worker characteristics and organizational pathways associated with getting ahead (or not) in upscale restaurant work, this final chapter speaks to broader themes of occupational mobility pathways, inequality, skills, and interactive service work in global cities.

Leveraging In-Betweenness: The Case of Latter-Generation Latino Workers

Accessing jobs through the backdoor

Perla, a 1.5-generation Latina who arrived in Los Angeles at the age of six, recalls looking for a job after graduating high school without a clue what she wanted to do. She explains, “my uncle Xeno was working as a cook at the time [at Match]. He said, uh, why don’t you come work with me at the restaurant? So I was like, I don’t know, sure!”

Victor, a 19-year-old second-generation Mexican, relied on help from his older cousin Mario to get him a job at Match. He says Mario, a food runner at Match at the time, did him a favor by telling management that, “he is a good kid and a hard worker.”

Like the first generation, Perla and most other latter-generation Latino workers have bypassed formal hiring channels to land their restaurant job. Instead, they tap social connections to immigrant Latino cooks, bussers and dishwashers. Drawing on ethnic social capital to get the job at Match has further implications for 1.5- and second-generation Latinos once on the job. When Victor and Perla were hired, they each received informal job training from the incumbent workers who helped them secure the job. During Victor’s first few days at the restaurant – his first restaurant job ever – the manager’s only instruction was to “wear a black shirt” and shadow his cousin Mario. Mario showed him how to clear tables, carry more than one plate at once, and move around the dining room quickly without bumping into people. After demonstrating to management he could perform these tasks sufficiently, Victor joined the full-time “support” staff at Match. He was penned into the schedule for four lunch shifts the following week.

Perla was first told to train at the dishwashing station. She was 18 at the time and working alongside her uncle Xeno, whose job as prep cook consisted primarily of chopping heaps of potatoes and onions before meal service. Xeno showed Perla the basics of dishwashing: how to scrub excess food off plates, operate the automated dishwashing machine, and clean up the station afterwards. “Most of all, he taught me how to move *fast*, because I didn’t know what I was doing back then,” she laughs, recounting her first few weeks laboring trial-by-fire at the restaurant.

While latter-generation Latinos like Victor and Perla enjoy insider access to employment and training at the restaurant through ties to incumbent Latino workers, leaning on these resources comes double-edged. Because of the low-rung jobs that many Latino workers are mired in, drawing on ethnic resources virtually guarantees that the children of immigrants will begin their work careers at the bottom of the organizational ladder, and likely in the back of the house. They are limited by what Granovetter (1985) calls the problem of *embeddedness*: constrained social networks with too many strong ties with in-group members and too few linkages to out-group members. Workers like Victor and Perla are essentially fast-tracked into marginalized restaurant jobs by relying on their social connections with immigrant Latinos for employment. Thus, while ethnic social capital provides the children of Latino immigrants an initial foothold into relatively closed service workplaces, these resources alone rarely help them advance into better jobs.

Building a career

With few exceptions, latter-generation Latino workers at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood do not want to stay in bottom-rung restaurant jobs. Despite the perks of working alongside immigrant family members and friends, many soon realize that the work is hard and monotonous, the pay too low by their standards (see Piore 1979). Instead, they aspire to advance in their careers both inside and outside restaurants. According to Jorge, a 23-year-old, second-generation Salvadoran:

Jorge: after working Garde Manger [pantry station] for, like, a year and a half, I kinna got irritated.

EW: Why?

J: I just felt like I wasn't learning anything new. I knew the entire station already, and I told [the head chef], am I ever going to get trained on something else? Because this is making me kinna want to leave, if I'm not going to learn anything else.

EW: good for you for speaking up.

J: yeah, I thought they were going to move me up on their own. But when they never did, I was like, aw fuck this, I'm not about to just keep doing this. And I told [sous chef] too, I don't want to work gard-ma any more. Then I got my raise and I was still like, I want to do something else. So I told him, *put me on something else*. Because if I do the same thing over and over again, I'm just going to get bored and want to leave. (Interview, 8/4/16)

Jorge illustrates a willingness to work hard – so long as he keeps learning and moving up the ranks. While his current job as pantry cook is several notches above that of dishwasher or prep cook, he nonetheless views it merely as a career stepping stone to more satisfying (and lucrative) kitchen jobs in the future. The same goes for Pedro, an affable, 29-year-old born to immigrant Mexican parents in Los Angeles. Pedro was first hired at Match as a dishwasher (prior to the restaurant he worked odd jobs at a nearby harbor dock – his longest stint was 8 months spent spraying down private boats for under-the-table cash). Yet in spite of his rickety resume and lack of industry experience,

Pedro has since undergone a remarkable rise through the kitchen ranks. Recalling the time when he was a dishwasher, Pedro explains:

“They asked me, ‘do you want to learn to cook?’ I said, ‘for sure!’ And they let me start handling food. Three months later, [sous chef] comes up to me when I was prepping and asks me what I would think about working pantry. And I said *hell yeah*. They knead the pizza dough, do the salads, handle the *porcetta*. And once you accomplish that, then you move to making pizzas. Right there, that’s the top of the heap, you know? That’s where I wanted to be.” (Interview, 5/23/13).

Armed with a clear grasp of the kitchen hierarchy, Pedro’s has set his sights on reaching the top. In rising through the ranks at Match, Pedro has passed a number of his foreign-born coworkers along the way. He credits this to his drive to be the best, his willingness to, as he put it, “do what is necessary”.

The aim for career advancement is not limited to latter-generation Latinos employed in the kitchen. Victor, the 19-year-old Mexican American described earlier, has never washed dishes or worked a professional grill – nor is it his goal to. Instead, Victor strives to “make the most out of working here” in the short-term:

Victor and I talk while we wait for the next series of dishes to run at the expeditor station [connecting the kitchen to the dining room]. He explains to me that he sees himself working as both a line cook and a server at Match. “I’d really like to

alternate between the two jobs. I figure, to learn how to cook while I'm here? That's probably a good thing to know when I get older," he says. "So I told Chef Eddie that I want to work the line, you know, work some shifts as a cook, some as a runner." He has also talked to a front of the house manager about becoming a server. "Serving is where the money's at," Victor muses. "The servers here make a bunch of money in tips."

Given his ambitious goals at Match, I am surprised to hear that Victor doesn't expect to stay in restaurants very long. "I wanna be out of here in less than a year, that's for sure. *No way am I gonna stay here long term.* I should have my mechanic's certification by this summer [2013], then hopefully I can work in a shop after that." (Field note, 5/22/13. Emphasis mine).

Like Pedro and Jorge, Victor sees his current job as a stepping-stone. Unlike them, Victor aspires for career achievement outside the industry. He thus frames his goals at Match as temporal opportunities: cooking is "useful", while serving yields cash. Neither interfere with Victor's longer-term aim of becoming a car mechanic (he is currently taking part-time classes for his certification).

Not all latter-generation workers have been so successful accessing better jobs and getting ahead in their careers while employed in restaurants. Some feel their opportunities have been impeded. When I first met him, Antonio, a 23-year-old, second-generation Mexican man, said he wanted to become a server at Match. Like Victor, Antonio was quickly promoted from bussing tables to running food. Within six months, Antonio again began speaking to management about joining the ranks of the servers he

worked alongside in the dining room. Management initially expressed interest at the idea. Yet, on two separate occasions, Antonio saw new servers hired from the outside while no offer to train him was made. Antonio grew frustrated at the repeated “delay” in his promotion, and began looking for serving jobs elsewhere. Two months later, he was offered a job waiting tables at a nearby restaurant and abruptly quit at Match.

The careerist perspectives latter-generation Latino workers adopt towards their jobs also exhibit their in-betweenness. Coming of age in Los Angeles, workers like Victor and Pedro are less apt than their foreign-born colleagues to view low-paying service jobs as sufficient. Compared to the latter, the children of immigrants do not approach their labor with a “dual” frame of reference (Waldinger and Lichter 2003), in which bottom-rung employment opportunities “here” can still be viewed as preferable to available jobs found back “there” in one’s country of origin. Instead, combined with their relatively young age, many latter-generation Latino workers adopt a “move up or move on” career mentality. They are willing to look for better opportunities elsewhere should they view their upward progress within restaurants as insufficient or too slow.⁶⁹

Nor are the occupational perspectives of 1.5- and second-generation Latinos identical to their class-privileged, white coworkers in the front of the house. The latter often view service and retail jobs as short-term “gigs” to be done while completing higher education degrees or pursuing creative professions (Besen-Cassino 2014; Dublanica 2008; Wilson 2016). By nature of their more humble class origins, the latter-generation Latino restaurant workers in this study are more likely to remain committed to climbing

⁶⁹ Research by Andersson, Holzer and Lane (2005) shows that amongst unskilled workers at the bottom of the labor market, horizontal mobility – moving between employers in the same industry – is associated with accessing better job opportunities.

job ladders within restaurants or similar workplaces. Jorge dreams of being “at the top of the [restaurant] heap”, not of becoming a university dean.

Brokering Communication

Many 1.5- and second-generation Latino workers socialize easily with both their immigrant Latino and white coworkers in the workplace. Some, like Antonio (food runner) and Anthony (cook), choose to eat lunch at the break table alongside white servers and bartenders one day, only to trade English for Spanish and join a group of middle-aged Oaxacan cooks the next. This unique social currency carries with it substantial advantages: it allows latter-generation Latinos to draw on their social and cultural in-betweenness to not only interact with estranged social groups in the workplace, but also function as everyday cultural brokers. Strategically occupying this liminal role helps these workers display their importance to management, giving some (but not all) access to job ladders virtually closed off to their immigrant Latino coworkers.

Undoubtedly, part of the reason for Pedro’s rapid series of kitchen promotions has been what he is able to do away from the grill: he is a *connector*. During busy lunch rushes, Spanish-speaking cooks seeking to communicate something to the white Chef (whose Spanish is limited) turn to Pedro first. Pedro calmly listens to the cook – while remaining focused on the food – and translates the statement into English for the chef (“Chef, Carlos says the fryer is running too hot, that’s why the French fries keep burning”). Pedro also plays a similar role brokering communication between servers and cooks. On multiple occasions, I witnessed white servers bypass managers and other

cooks to approach Pedro directly with a customized food order. Hardly looking up, Pedro would shout out to the other line cooks and relay the message in Spanish. Through his in-betweenness, Pedro quickly gained a reputation as one of the informal leaders of the kitchen. As a server aptly put it, “Pedro is the point-man who can hook you up when you need something.”

Perla, whose uncle first helped her get a job Match, also operates as a social bridge at the restaurant. When she is around, Perla’s workstation as a napkin roller (located in a hallway connecting the server station to the kitchen pantry) often turns into a buzzing social hub when she is around: Mexican male cooks and white servers of both sexes exchange jokes, pass bites of food or shots of orange juice (occasionally, beer) with one another, and relax. Perla is often at the center of all this, lubricating social interaction by translating jokes and compliments between Spanish and English, delighting everyone with her carefree laughter. Yet on her days off, these same employees rarely interact, finding it altogether too difficult to navigate their social, linguistic, and occupational asymmetries.

Other latter-generation Latino workers act as on the spot go-between for white managers who need to communicate with Spanish-speaking back of the house workers. At The Neighborhood, two second-generation, bilingual Spanish-English employees often function in this capacity. In the kitchen, a cook named Felipe, who is 22-years-old and born to Salvadoran immigrants, accompanies Chef Carlton when he needs to talk with the morning dishwashers that do not speak English, like Angel and Camila. A hostess named Katrina (28, Mexican American) offers similar informal services for white

managers in the dining room; in the winter of 2016, she was also asked to sit in on two interviews with potential immigrant Latino back of the house hires.

Latter-generation Latino restaurant workers like Katrina, Pedro, and Perla facilitate connections between a Spanish-speaking back of the house and an English-speaking front of the house at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood. In this sense, the value of their in-betweenness has both social and structural dimensions: they are able to make the employee culture in the workplace more cohesive while also bridging the flow of service communication. Nonetheless, the payoff for displaying in-betweenness can often be uneven: while Pedro has enjoyed a series of promotions in the kitchen, Perla remains relatively uncompensated and unrecognized for her true contributions at Match.

Displaying Hipness

Most latter-generation Latino workers recognize that making “good money” at the restaurant – to borrow Victor’s expression – means accessing lead job front of the house jobs alongside class-privileged whites. Yet by nature of their class and race, it would appear these individuals would be nearly as excluded from better-paying jobs as their immigrant Latino colleagues. Instead, latter-generation Latino workers are more likely than their immigrant coworkers to be employed in this capacity, or at least on track to do so. This is particularly true at Match Restaurant as opposed to Terroir or The Neighborhood. Their edge in the former, I argue, stems from their ability to embody the socio-cultural traits valued in Match’s hip, youth-oriented dining room.

Amidst trendy, affluent, white patrons, front of the house workers must not simply recite the daily specials, but *perform* them appropriately. They must enunciate

each colorful descriptor while not looking too stiff and scripted when doing so. This means that beyond merely taking food orders, servers must frequently converse with diners about pop culture, speak using West Coast intonations and slang, and dress the part of a hip young person. Several latter-generation Latinos at Match embody the right kind of “habitus” for this kind of service shop floor.

Arturo, a 1.5-generation Mexican American, got a job serving tables at Match after working a decade as a busser and food runner at a handful of different Los Angeles restaurants. Bilingual, Arturo speaks nearly unaccented English and easily socializes with both kitchen workers and servers alike. He always arrives to work wearing a white collared shirt, neatly-pressed, the sleeves rolled up to his forearms. According to other servers, Arturo has mastered how to “read tables,” industry-speak for tailoring one’s service to the needs of each respective group of customers. Arturo engages some guests by leading off with jokes and an easy smile, laughing about last night’s Dodgers game. With others, he remains more reserved, speaking in quiet tones while deftly whisking away dirty plates. Despite being born in Mexico to working-class parents, Arturo’s command of American dining etiquette and other nuanced social cues honed since moving to Los Angeles as a pre-teen affords him a rich cultural toolkit from which to assemble his service style.

At Match, other latter-generation Latinos have advanced towards lead front of the house jobs by embodying the restaurant’s hip service brand. For example, Antonio, the second-generation Latino described earlier, stands over six feet tall with a broad build, easy smile, and an eye for bohemian fashion (he arrives at work wearing colorful plaid overshirts, ripped jeans, and Vans-brand shoes). While other bussers and food runners

would relax with the cooks during meal breaks – speaking entirely in Spanish – Antonio would stay with servers to chat about craft beers and new bar openings. Many servers came to feel that Antonio possessed the right assortment of socio-cultural and physical characteristics to fit in waiting tables at Match. According to Mary, a white waitress in her mid-twenties:

“[Antonio] has what it takes. He just knows how to treat customers. Like, he speaks perfect English. And he does the little things well [she demonstrates setting a plate down on a table gently]. *He even looks the part*, you know? I think it’s only a matter of time before he gets promoted.” (Field note, 10/6/12. Emphasis mine).

Although Antonio did not end up becoming server at Match – he took a server job at a similar restaurant nearby – his case nonetheless showcases how his embodied social and cultural characteristics render him “suitable” for front of the house work in ways that many of his immigrant Latino coworkers are not.

Some latter-generation Latino workers also find fit within The Neighborhood’s brand of personalized luxury service. A 27-year-old, third-generation Mexican American waitress named Sally has become one of the anchors of the “day shift” (breakfast and lunch service). Though she did not complete her associate’s degree at a local community college, Sally’s bright and bubbly personality complements her encyclopedic knowledge of guest’s names, favorite tables to sit, and typical orders. Sally is especially good with guests with kids: at the table she kneels down next to them, offering the kids little gifts

such as orange juice, a homemade cookie, or a game to play while they wait (management encourages servers to provide kids these freebies). Guests at The Neighborhood love her warm presence in the dining room. While Sally remains one of the few Latinos on a primarily white service staff, she clearly possesses the right demeanor and intuitive skill set to succeed in this capacity.

Profiting from Diverse Ties

Enabled by their in-betweenness, latter-generation Latino workers often foster meaningful ties with those outside the immigrant niche of the back of the house. These diverse connections in turn help them gain powerful advocates in the workplace, advocates that provide tangible and intangible resources key to their advancement. As a food runner at Match, Victor spends his down time waiting for finished plates of food to arrive at the expeditor station. It is an area that (white) servers frequently approach looking to assist with getting food to the dining room. As a result of his proximity to servers, Victor has participated in (and *overheard*) numerous conversations about the high tips servers and bartenders receive each day. This has made him increasingly frustrated with his paltry share of the tips (he calculates he makes roughly a third of what servers make). He has also gained confidence in his own ability to wait tables. “It’s pretty simple what they do,” Victor told me after work one day, “I mean, I can do that for sure: just bullshit with customers, get them what they want, then make a bunch of tips.”

Working in direct proximity to others in more desirable jobs has also helped Perla, the napkin roller, in similar ways. Throughout her two years working at Match, she has befriended many white servers who enjoy hanging out and talking with her during

their shifts. Pip and Susie, both white waitresses in their mid-twenties, regularly suggest that Perla ask a manager to see if she can become a server herself. One afternoon I overheard Pip saying, “practice approaching me with drink orders, Perla!” Embarrassed, Perla shook her head and blushed. Susie followed with an encouraging, “you can do it! C’mon you’d be great. It’s easy!”

While Perla has yet to follow her server-friends’ advice in inquiring about a server position, the positive reinforcement and ad hoc training she receives through her connection to these upwardly-mobile white workers will likely influence her career path. Manny, a 33-year-old, bilingual Mexican American who came to the U.S. as a pre-teen, describes how his close relationship with Michele (manager, white) helped him gain valuable workplace skills:

“When I first started, I didn’t know how to grab three plates, how to bring food to the table. I didn’t know any of that. Serve from the left, pick up from the right. Basically, manners. That kind of etiquette of dining. That is what Francis taught me. I didn’t know nothin’ about tannins, a nice Sauvignon Blanc, rose, pinot noir. Francis was a brother of mine. [He] taught me how to serve food, describe a dish. Say different words about a plate when you serve it. Instead of saying, ‘these are chili fries’, saying ‘these are some *hand-cut* fries with a *house-made* cheese, stuff like that. (Interview, 9/21/16)

As scholars have noted, finding support from higher social- and human capital individuals can often be a critical factor in one’s occupational success and upward

mobility, especially for Latinos from working-class backgrounds (Agius Vallejo 2012; Morando 2013). Manny's fond recollection of how Michele helped him understand the "etiquette of dining" shows how he has personally gained from his connection with this white, college-educated restaurant manager. With so few opportunities to receive formal training at the restaurant, the ability to deploy the right nuances of luxury service in upscale service establishments eludes many of Manny's fellow foreign-born, Latino back of the house coworkers.

Contending With Immobility: The Case of Immigrant Latino Workers

Occupational segregation based on social characteristics continues to relegate immigrant Mexicans and Central American restaurant workers to brown-collar jobs that pay low wages for hard labor. In contrast to latter-generation workers, the foreign-born often lack the capital (social, cultural, human) or attributes (in-betweenness) that would allow them to forge in-roads into more lucrative front of the house or managerial positions. Instead, many of the immigrant workers at each restaurant remain in the same or similar back of the house position for years, if not decades. Should they wish to earn more money, many, such as Sergio and Nacho, seek out second (or third) jobs rather than expecting to obtain better quality restaurant jobs held overwhelmingly by non-immigrants. Sergio, a 37-year-old Mexican immigrant line cook, calculates that he works over 80 hours a week as a full-time cook at The Neighborhood and another nearby restaurant. Similarly, "Nacho" (described earlier) busses tables on the dinner shift four days a week while doing apartment maintenance during the daytime for a multi-unit apartment complex near his home in central Los Angeles.

To be sure, a number of immigrant workers at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood say they have received promotions or small hourly raises within the realm of the back of the house⁷⁰. After years of laboring in Los Angeles restaurants, many have gained an understanding of their importance as workers to the operation. This includes the kind of wages they expect to make. Geraldo, the line cook described earlier, explains his approach: “nowadays, I know what I’m worth to the company. I didn’t get that when I was younger, I just wanted any job. (laughs). Now I know what experience I bring in the kitchen – and I want to get paid for it.” Geraldo knows it can be challenging to find and retain good, hard-working back of the house help. In the summer of 2016, he put his money where his mouth was. After threatening to quit at The Neighborhood to join some former coworkers at a new restaurant in Venice Beach, Geraldo says the head chef “begged” him to stay, offering him an extra dollar an hour (he accepted).

Other immigrant workers prove just as savvy about their restaurant jobs. “Maestro”, a 31-year-old cook, says that despite being at The Neighborhood for three years, he still gets calls “every week” from former employers and colleagues asking if he would be interested in leaving his current job to join them. Maestro is aware that job jumping is a viable strategy to obtain relatively better job offers for similar work. So far he has turned them all down while professing loyalty to The Neighborhood, though he is quick to add, “but I know that I have options.”

Geraldo and Maestro illustrate the possibilities for incremental wage gains and stepwise promotions within “brown-collar”, back of the house labor spheres. The

⁷⁰ Reports of labor infractions, such as wage theft, no breaks offered, and withholding of workman’s compensation, are common in the restaurant industry (Jayaraman 2014). However, since I did not investigate whether employees had experienced such violations in the past, I cannot speak on this matter specifically.

strategies they use to hedge their jobs and vie for better offers are similar to those employed by immigrant workers seeking to get ahead in other unskilled and semi-skilled industries (Hagan, Hernandez-Leon, and Demonsant 2016; Lowe, Hagan, and Iskander 2010). Over time, workers are often compelled to find ways to make the most out of their otherwise humble labor circumstances.

One-dollar wage gains and small position changes aside, immigrant Latino workers in restaurants often struggle to climb job ladders *beyond* the immigrant labor niche. They encounter a glass ceiling of opportunity. For example, Jon, the striving *Veracruzano* cook at Terroir, has secured his place as the head chef's "right hand man" through years of loyal service and hard work (the head chef is an upwardly-mobile Asian American man). It is a position he is very proud to be in. Lately, however, Jon tells me that he has grown frustrated with his circumstance. "I've been with [chef] all these years, cooking his food, making his reputation," he explains, "but where is *my* name, after all? It is nowhere on any of [Chef's] restaurants, not even as sous chef or chef de cuisine or something. It's like I don't exist." Never formalized, Jon's years of "loyalty" leading this chef's kitchens have come with little professional recognition.

Geraldo, too, feels he may have hit a snag in his career at The Neighborhood. Like Jon, he has made it near the top of the line cook hierarchy (he is the highest paid cook) by exhibiting leadership and tremendous culinary skills. This is a far cry from his first restaurant job flipping burgers at McDonald's for minimum wage eight years ago. After three years heading "the line" in The Neighborhood's kitchen, the only workers above him are the two sous chefs and the head chef, all culinary school-trained white

men. Geraldo fears he can advance no further. He describes his tepid feelings about one of the sous chefs:

“My thing is, you as a sous chef, I know that you are holding a bigger level [of responsibility], but you also have to show how you got there. And you have to be able to teach, to mentor. To approach people in a different way other than being a fucking dick. And that was what pissed me off. He will make himself a sandwich while we are busting ass setting up all the stations. And he’ll make that sandwich for himself and be a dick, then yell at us for not being ready! And so when he would do that, I would yell back at him many, many times. But right now, I let him be, I don’t see him as a sous chef. *How he got named sous chef, it’s a question on my mind.* (shrugs). Why is he a sous chef??” (Geraldo, interview, 11/6/16)

To be sure, many workers encounter blocks to their advancement at a given company based on the job above them being occupied. This is particularly true at higher reaches of the company, where pyramid-shaped organizational hierarchies begin to narrow (Kanter 1977). Yet, in service settings like restaurants where desirable jobs are ear-marked either for middle-upper class whites or those with expensive culinary degrees, the blockade is more systematic than merely circumstantial. It is not one that Latino immigrant workers are likely to surpass by simply “waiting it out” or trying harder. (In the summer of 2016, a sous chef position at The Neighborhood did open up: Geraldo, to his disappointment, was not considered for the job).

A similar occupational ceiling exists for immigrant Latinos working as bussers, food runners, and other support roles in the front of the house. Few, regardless of their proficiency on the job, penetrate the higher-earning ranks of lead front of the house workers. Again, prevailing cultural frames for these positions suggest their race- and class-based unsuitability. For example, the former general manager at Terroir was fond of referring to support workers as *eses*, a Spanish slang for “bros” or “dudes”. He meant it playfully, even affectionately. Yet by categorizing bussing tables and running food as work done by “*eses*” in Los Angeles, he reveals the social categories differentiating brown-collar work from middle-class white work. Running food to customers may be only a small step away from *servicing* customers, though I did not personally witness a single “*ese*” considered for a promotion along these lines over the course of my research⁷¹. That job pathway, which involves crossing racial and class boundaries, is seldom available.⁷²

The few immigrant Latinos working as servers and bartenders at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood further illustrate this rule. A 47-year-old Mexican immigrant named Rudolfo is a full-time server at The Neighborhood, and has previously worked as a bartender at a high-end Italian restaurant in the city. Yet despite his years of front of

⁷¹ The handful of immigrant Latino servers and bartenders had all previously attained this title. All that I talked to recount the years of struggle it took to get there (see Rudolfo’s story below).

⁷² The racial (and gendered) component to job pathways is perhaps more clearly evident when comparing the restaurant work careers of immigrant Latinos to whites. Whereas white men mostly recount beginning as dishwashers and food runners only to move up to serving “in less than a year”, white women describe entering restaurants as hostesses and baristas before becoming waitresses.

the house experience, every time Rudolfo switches restaurants, he has had to return to bussing tables. He explains below:

Rudolfo: after Deluca [high-end Italian restaurant] closed, I started working at this place up the street as a busser called Biletta.

EW: as a busser?

R: yeah.

EW: but weren't you used to more money as a bartender at Deluca?

R: it was hard. It was hard. *It was like starting from the beginning.* Because at Deluca I had my beautiful schedule, had my TV at the bar, a chance to taste wine and food, blah blah blah.

EW: so you only switched jobs when Deluca closed?

R: yes. Deluca closed after 22 years. I worked there for 11 years. And in fact, [one of the managers at The Neighborhood], she saw me working at Deluca, and she was the one that eventually helped me get a job here at The Neighborhood.

EW: But you started at this other restaurant Biletta as a busser in the meantime?

[R nods]. Couldn't you have told a manager that you were previously a bartender?

R: like I said, every restaurant is different. That's the reason. I mean, my goal was to be a bartender eventually, you know. But I wanted to see how they work first, if they make good money ...

EW: what position did you apply for at Biletta?

R: bartender. But they said no, we don't have any available, would you like to work as a busser? And I took it. And then six months later, Francis [mgr] saw me, and told me, would you like to come work over here? So I started as a busser at The Neighborhood three days a week. (Interview, 8/10/16. Emphasis mine)

At Deluca, Rudolfo was used to making \$200 in tips per night as a bartender. His subsequent bussing jobs, including at The Neighborhood, averaged half of that if he was lucky. It took Rudolfo nearly *four years* (!) to finally get the opportunity to work in a lead front of the house position again. Should he leave The Neighborhood, the same pattern is likely to repeat: he will be offered a brown-collar job all over again. So common is this pattern in his Rudolfo's career that he has even developed his own rationale for these demotions: he gets to "see how they work first", take his time learning the menu while bussing tables or food running. However, none of his non-Latino front of the house colleagues seem to share in this logic. One day, I casually asked a group of white servers whether they would be willing to accept a job bussing tables. They looked at me like I was crazy. One even scoffed, "would *I* do *that*? Hell no!"

Restaurant patrons can also implicitly reinforce the occupational ceiling for immigrant Latinos. Consider the following field note from The Neighborhood:

A middle-aged white couple is sitting at the bar while I am bartending. I have seen them in here before. They ask me about my "school project", and we begin talking about the issue of immigrants doing the jobs in restaurants that no one else wants to do. Just then, Nacho, the food runner, sets down two entrees and one

side to share in front of the couple. I leave to attend to other tasks. A few minutes later, I swing by to inquire about the food (they had ordered my recommendations). The man resumes our previous conversation.

“You know, at the same time, there’s a reason you are in the position you’re in, and he [points at Nacho, who is facing the kitchen] is in the position he’s in,” the man explains. “When he came over here, he said [imitating Nacho], ‘this is the chicken. This is the potato. This is the cabbage.’ Now when you just described the dish, there was a lot more detail, a lot more knowledge.” (Field note, The Neighborhood, 1/16/17).

In some respects, the diner is right: Nacho and I likely described the plates of food very differently. It is also my job as a server to know the food with more detail than food runners are generally required to (servers at The Neighborhood are required to learn the ingredient list for each dish, useful for assessing allergies). Yet the main “skill” that I, as a highly educated white male, may have displayed to the guests has little to do with memorization. My presentation of self within the service interaction, steeped in middle-upper class cultural capital and honed from years of dining out in upscale restaurants, is precisely what the diners expect from lead front of the house workers. Not that their perception of Nacho is negative. It just follows a different logic: *immigrants are good at hustling, whites are better at hospitality.*

Trapped in The Back Closet?

In many labor settings, the lowest job rungs are often filled by the most marginalized and structurally disadvantaged workers. This is no different at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood. Dishwashers, napkin rollers, and cleaners, back of the house positions that often pay barely over minimum wage, are more likely to be women, undocumented immigrants, and those with few labor market skills or English speaking abilities to offer.

⁷³ It is in bottom-rung service jobs that workers are likely to remain trapped, unable to access even the incremental job gains described above. In this way, while these jobs may serve as occupational springboards for some – recall that Pedro, the rapidly-promoted kitchen manager at Match, began as a dishwasher – for others, they function more like a back closet, locked and shut.

Marginalized workers relegated to “back closet” restaurant jobs are most likely to be hampered by a confluence of social and structural disadvantages. According to Mexican sociologist Rafael Alarcon and colleagues (2016), compared to immigrants workers that regularize their work status, undocumented workers are crowded in the lower “segment” of restaurant work, and “do not show upward occupational mobility, but rather horizontal circulation among lower-end jobs” (p.104). Yet taken alone, I find that lacking work authorization, like the absence of professional cooking skills or English language abilities, does not *necessarily* doom one’s ability to climb back of the house job rungs in an unskilled, immigrant workplace located in a global city. At The Neighborhood, for instance, dishwashers were more likely to be undocumented, but so was a lead cook and several bussers and food runners.

⁷³ At Terroir and Match, there was also a minority of non-Latino individuals working as dishwashers. At Terroir, for example, one previously homeless white man worked part-time at the dish pit, as well as two black men.

By contrast, facing *multiple* layers of social and structural disadvantages almost certainly dims immigrant Latinos' employment prospects, relegating them to the back closet. At The Neighborhood, for example, undocumented immigrant women, two from Mexico, one from Guatemala, and the other from El Salvador, make up four of the six dishwashers at the restaurant.⁷⁴ None speak English comfortably, nor have ever worked as line cooks despite years of back of the house labor in the city. Most days of the week, Carmela and Maria arrive at 8am for the morning shift – disappearing into the back corner of the kitchen out of site from both the main kitchen and the dining room. Around 3pm they are relieved by Jolanda and Sandra, who work the dinner shift and continue cleaning pots, pans, and dishes until the restaurant closed around 11pm. At Terroir, two middle-aged immigrant men, Horacio and Hector, both from Mexico and with limited English abilities, take turns manning the dishwashing station for the lunch and dinner shifts. The head chef hired both in the fall of 2015 with the help of Jon (his foreign-born, Latino “right hand man”), who sat next to the chef during makeshift interviews located on one of the back tables in the dining room and translated English to Spanish and vice versa. Neither Horacio nor Hector did any task other than wash dishes and occasionally peel potatoes for the duration of my fieldwork at Terroir.

Conclusion

Though most Latino restaurant workers begin their careers in bottom-rung jobs, the immobility of vulnerable foreign-born Latinos contrasts the steady gains made by latter-

⁷⁴ In addition to working as dishwashers, two of these women told me they also work as house cleaners, a common occupational niche for Mexican and Central American women (Alarcon, Escala, and Odger 2016; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001).

generation Latinos on the job. Buoyed by their socio-cultural characteristics and relative structural advantages (e.g. U.S. citizenship), many latter-generation workers have been able to forge occupational mobility pathways within Match, The Neighborhood, and Terroir. Workers like Pedro and Victor continue to leverage their in-betweenness in a divided, customer-service based labor setting in order to help them gain a leg up to better jobs. Immigrant Latino workers, unable to navigate the workplace the same way, must instead contend with a shortened menu of “brown-collar” jobs, lateral mobility, and a glass ceiling of opportunity concocted from a heady mix of race, class, culture, and immigration status inequalities.

Furthermore, some of the processes enabling latter-generation Latino workers to get ahead ironically serve to confine other foreign-born, monolingual Spanish workers in bottom-rung, “back closet” service jobs. As sociologist Laura Lopez-Sanders’ research has shown, the presence of “embedded cultural brokers” in the workplace can be a double-edged sword that can keep vulnerable Latino workers, such as those lacking work authorization or unable to speak English, stuck in the lowest job rungs and dependent on brokers (Lopez-Sanders 2013). In addition, as bilingual (and bicultural) workers profit from playing this role on the job, management is relieved of the need to formalize labor protocols that could potentially allow marginalized foreign-born workers an opportunity to build the skills necessary to advance in the workplace.

In sum, strong race, class, and gender norms for different service jobs continue to dictate who gets primary access to better opportunities in restaurants. This, in turn, makes up the social context of the workplace that nuances the opportunities and potential career trajectories of foreign-born Latino workers and latter-generation Latino workers.

Both differ markedly from that of their white and class-privileged front of the house colleagues, who, by nature of their class resources and other advantages, enjoy primary access to higher-earning jobs. In this sense, different individuals enter restaurant jobs on unequal footing, and their subsequent (im-)mobility pathways come to reflect these distinctions.

Conclusion

Serving Across the Divide

As upscale urban restaurants, Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood function as social playgrounds for those that can afford to patronize them. Inside, they are orchestrated so that guests can relax over fine food and drink while being attended to by a staff that is at once personable, accommodating, and professional. In a city known for Hollywood glamor and immigrant labor, high-end restaurants in Los Angeles are not unlike many of the other luxury service establishments that dot its wealthy neighborhoods. Restaurants, hotels, bars, spas, designer boutiques, and fitness studios are all integral parts of the “entertainment machine” transforming downtown urban areas across the country into vibrant spaces of consumption (Clark 2004; Ocejo 2014).

These contemporary trends of work and play also reflect the growing inequality that threatens to embed itself further within our society’s social, economic, and cultural fabric. Many of these inequalities refract onto service shop floors like the ones at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood, where ground-level actors must wrestle with their consequences. Today, merely attending to the labor distinction between workers and managers – or even “triangular” relations between workers, managers, and customers – is not enough: it misses a richer story of the workplace threading together the forces of

international migration, service work, urban culture, and social inequality. What takes place in the back of the house, tableside, at the kitchen pass, and in break rooms is often as complex as the messy, diverse cityscapes in which they are situated. In this sense, while my research examines three specific upscale restaurants in Los Angeles, it also speaks to broader processes of inequality, inter-group relations, situated skills, and immigrant labor affecting contemporary workplaces in the United States, as well globally.

At Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood, various mechanisms of inequality reinforce a divided service shop floor based on race, class, gender, and immigration status. The symbolic boundaries separating two unequal worlds of work in the front of the house and back of the house are enacted by workers, managers, and customers alike. These boundaries close off one type of job from the other. They also create new opportunities for some workers to be able to transcend them.

Within the front of the house of restaurant labor, class-privileged, white men and women work as lead servers and bartenders. By contrast, in the back of the house, working-class, immigrant Latino men labor as cooks, dishwashers, bussers, and cleaners. Despite being housed under the same roof and linked in the production of service, these two types of restaurant jobs, like the workers who fill them, remain profoundly divided. Front of the house workers perform “interactive” service with guests, laboring primarily with their emotions and appearances instead of with their hands. “Non-interactive” service workers do just the opposite, performing physically intensive jobs mostly away from customers that involve cleaning, cooking, and stocking. Moreover, in the United States, the two types of jobs also offer highly unequal earning opportunities to their

respective workers: front of the house workers enjoy substantially higher incomes than those in the back of the house because of customer tips. This earning discrepancy – which can reach three to one or higher – is reinforced by workplace policies and industry norms that ensure tips are distributed solely amongst customer-facing workers in the front of the house.

The social distance between class-privileged white workers in the front of the house and immigrant, working-class Latinos in the back of the house can deeply affect shop floor life in restaurants. That is, layering sharp social boundaries atop occupational inequalities estranges these two cohorts from one another. As I describe in Chapter Two, the lack of common ground between workers effectively closes one world of work off from the other. This can lead to myriad problems in the workplace, ranging from chronic intra-employee tensions (along group lines), severed communication, and disruptions in the flow of food from the kitchen to the dining room, and back. It breeds a profound disconnect between fellow restaurant coworkers who, along with management, must ultimately find a way to jointly produce service across the divide.

Management has much to do with shaping the occupational estrangement within upscale restaurants. This has less to do with overtly prejudiced practices than in the past. In Chapter Three, I showed how the logic of upscale service reinforces social inequality amongst workers at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood. Managers initially channel class-privileged whites and immigrant Latinos into dissimilar jobs by seeking to hire the former to customer facing roles (where they “look good and sound right” for the job), and the latter to manual labor-intensive roles away from customers. Acting as gatekeepers, managers rely on socio-cultural stereotypes and racialized industry norms to inform

hiring decisions for their upscale service brands. I have argued that this process segregates upscale service workplaces into distinct labor cohorts typecasted not only by race and gender, but also by embodied forms of class and culture.

Not all upscale establishments feature a workforce patterned the same way. Many seek to differentiate their service brands into distinct commodities for sale (Pettinger 2004; Sherman 2007). In doing so, they indirectly nuance the workplace dynamic found within them. While all three restaurants in this study adhere to the basic logic of upscale service – with its characteristic social divide – they each maintain their own variants: in Chapter Three, I compared Match’s “proximal service” model to Terroir’s “professionalized service”, and The Neighborhood’s “personalized luxury service”. The range of upscale service brands these restaurants represent are not meant to be exhaustive; instead, I have shown how specific logics of service further sculpt the social organization of the workplace as well as the inequality found within it. Under Match’s hip, trendy service ambiance, front of the house workers are more likely to be screened to “all look the same” – adhering to a narrow set of physical and socio-cultural ideals favoring whiteness, youth, and middle-classness. By contrast, under Terroir’s traditional fine-dining service style, management places greater value on the need for skilled veterans with fine-dining experience. This fosters a work culture at Terroir that encourages more skill- and knowledge-based job growth than at Match, where embodied race, class, and aesthetic ideals largely dictate access to higher-earning, front of the house jobs. The Neighborhood represents another brand of upscale service. In the latter’s attempt to produce “have it your way” luxury service for wealthy guests, front of the house workers at The Neighborhood are monitored for their ability to exude friendliness

while anticipating VIP guests' every needs. While this may loosen race-based ideals for front of the house hires (The Neighborhood has the most racially front of the house diverse staff), it can also jeopardize the standing of employees who guests do not perceive as "likeable". Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood all fall in the same category of upscale restaurants in Los Angeles, but their respective buffing and branding sculpts worker opportunities in different ways.

Workplace divides also affect the ways in which workers in the front of the house and back of the house approach their unequal jobs. As Chapter Four detailed, the relative youth, whiteness, and class-privilege of the dining room service staff enables many of these workers to "consume" interactive service work as desirably fun, flexible, and social. Specifically, I show how servers and bartenders are able to draw upon their class resources as well as "flexible" schedules, blended occupational pursuits, and a play-like work environment to positively manage service jobs that are otherwise economically volatile, part-time, and traditionally working class. In short, many of these class-privileged workers are able to "embrace" the short-term seductions of waiting tables ("it's great – for now!") while downplaying its long-term shortcomings.

Few workers in the back of the house would characterize their restaurant jobs the same way. This is not necessarily because the immigrant Latino men employed as cooks, bussers, and dishwashers experience their job as exceptionally marginalizing. Rather, many remain committed to their working-class careers in restaurants, enjoying strong bonds with their co-ethnic colleagues, as well as to their mentors. They are proud of the skills they continue to hone on the job. Working stable, full-time schedules within a rigidly hierarchical kitchen culture (Fine 1996), many Latino cooks also garner positive

self-concept through favorable comparisons to the *lazy gringos* in the front of the house. In this sense, the immigrant Latino, male, and hierarchical culture of the back of the house shapes an occupational culture at distinct odds with that found in the front of the house.

Of course, not all those in “brown-collar” jobs navigate the labor conditions they encounter the same way; some are more successful than others. Although most Latino restaurant workers begin their careers in back of the house jobs, the steady gains made by many *latter-generation* Latinos contrast the job immobility experienced by immigrant workers more likely to be undocumented, female, unskilled, and unable to speak English. In Chapter Six, I showed how latter-generation Latino workers in this study have been able to leverage their socio-cultural *in-betweenness* in a divided service workplace. By drawing on diverse social ties, acting as cultural brokers, and embodying the right “fit” for (some) front of the house jobs, these individuals have been able to access new occupational mobility pathways to higher-earning positions in restaurants.

By contrast, those most likely to stagnate in marginalized jobs in the “back closet” of restaurants are disproportionately foreign-born, monolingual Spanish, undocumented, and female. Especially when these characteristics are coupled together, such workers can find their ability to advance in a workplace severely compromised: women struggle to fit into a male-dominated work world, monolingual Spanish speakers struggle to communicate with a largely English-speaking, white management (and front of the house), and undocumented workers struggle with powerlessness in an already “precarious” job setting. Additionally, some of the very processes that enable latter-generation Latino

workers to get ahead, such as cultural brokerage, can further trap the most vulnerable of their Latino colleagues in bottom-rung jobs.

The central story of this dissertation remains ever changing. By applying a microscope to the labor dynamics within upscale restaurants in Los Angeles, this study makes it clear that contemporary workplaces not only reflect existing social inequalities, but also refract new ones. In this sense, moving the dial on the dynamic relationship between worker demographics, managerial practices, and consumer tastes is sure to impact labor conditions within these settings. For example, the growth of second-, third-, and even fourth generation workers from immigrant families is reshaping the demographics within many workplaces. This process shows little sign of stopping. It also brings up new questions: if cultural brokerage and bilingual communication have been characteristic shop floor experiences (and points of leverage) for the children of immigrants in the workplace, how will further shifts towards co-ethnic, *monolingual* English communication affect these opportunities? Will the social, cultural, and symbolic boundaries separating worker subgroups, such as those in this study, remain intact?

Similarly, the rise of middle-class Latino families in Los Angeles are also likely to affect the nature of service establishments in the parts of the city they are concentrated in. Altering the social composition of primary consumers can mean potentially re-writing the service ideals that companies wish to put forth. In this sense, managers at Match, Terroir, and The Neighborhood are catering their service brands to the “tastes” of restaurant patrons that are overwhelmingly white and middle-upper class. How might, for instance, attempts to produce *socially-proximate* service for middle-class Latino

families engender different hiring ideals in the front of the house based on race-, class-, and gender? On the other hand, the question may be more appropriately framed as “if” instead of “how”, for time and time again the forces of social inequality manage to reinvent themselves in similar and durable ways (Tilly 1998).

The restaurant industry is also undergoing a period of upheaval. Worker advocacy groups such as Restaurant Opportunities Centers United (ROC) have started to expand the public discourse on dining establishments from concern about *what* is on people’s plates, to concern *for* the workers who put it there (Gray 2014; Jayaraman 2014). Recent campaigns by ROC are squarely aimed at improving labor conditions for restaurant workers. For example, one prominent campaign included spearheading an effort to raise the federal minimum wage for tipped workers from its current rate of \$2.13 per hour, where it has stood for 26 years (Jayaraman 2014). Other ongoing efforts by the group involve providing legal support to restaurant workers victimized by employment violations (ex. withheld wages, no breaks, discrimination), hosting free “fine dining” skills training classes for workers, and creating a user-accessible list of restaurants that use “High Road” labor practices (like a Yelp service sorted by employment quality rather than user opinions).⁷⁵ Each aims to provide better conditions for more workers in an industry notorious for “bad” jobs and unfair labor practices.

There are also individual restaurants and industry personalities that have emerged as outspoken critics of the industry’s working conditions. In Los Angeles, for example, Good Girl Dinette pays all its employees a “living wage” while actively providing them with growth opportunities in both the front- and back of the house. It joins a number of

⁷⁵ Interview with Kathy Hoang, Director of Restaurant Opportunity Center of Los Angeles, 3/8/16.

other restaurants nationally that are attempting to do the same. Others have sought to wrangle with American's tipping practices, citing the impact tips have on the nature of employment and inequality within the industry, especially in the United States (Lynn 2006). In fact, the earning inequality between tipped servers and un-tipped, low-wage cooks in major U.S. cities like San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York has been blamed for the recent "crisis" of qualified restaurant cooks in these cities.⁷⁶ Danny Meyer, a star restaurateur and co-owner of Gramercy Tavern and Shake Shack in New York, has made several public statements arguing against the practice of tipping entirely. He has since set about putting his actions where his words are: in the fall of 2015, he announced the rollout of "no-tip" policies and higher wages for his employees to be phased in at each of his seventeen restaurants – along with substantially higher menu prices⁷⁷.

Other restaurants are grappling with inequalities between restaurant workers in different ways. In Los Angeles, some chefs and restaurant owners are becoming more

⁷⁶ "How a Dire Cook Shortage is Wrecking American Restaurants." Retrieved on 3/10/17 (<https://www.thrillist.com/eat/nation/how-americas-cook-shortage-will-make-restaurants-pricier>).

⁷⁷ As of the writing of this dissertation, the rollout of no-tip policies at Danny Meyer's restaurants and others that followed his lead are still ongoing – and met with considerable resistance. No-tip restaurants, despite their good intentions, have encountered serious pushback from both consumers and staff alike. See: "Public might not be ready for service charges." Retrieved on 12/10/17 (<http://restaurant-hospitality.com/consumer-trends/public-might-not-be-ready-service-charges>); also "Joe's Crab Shack Tried Getting Rid of Tips. It Didn't Last Long." Retrieved on 11/2/17 (http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/13/business/joes-crab-shack-tried-getting-rid-of-tips-it-didnt-last-long.html?_r=1).

adamant in their calls for a lower legal minimum wage for tipped employees in the city⁷⁸, as they stare down a rising minimum wage over the next ten years. Others have sought to retool the food service workflow of restaurants to allow cooks to earn tips legally. “We don’t have any servers,” said the chef-owner of Scratch Bar in Los Angeles, just prior to its opening in 2015, “the cooks and the chefs will be our servers.”⁷⁹ By eliminating front of the house workers entirely, Scratch Bar’s service model allows cooks and other back of the house workers to interact with customers and accrue tips.

Each of these trends remains small and limited in scope relative to the industry at large – Davids taking on Goliaths, armed with the few tools they can muster. Like many things, it will be difficult to supplant business-as-usual inequality deeply embedded within upscale urban service establishments, especially when so many workers, managers, and customers have something to gain from keeping things just the way they are. More workers still have learned to manage their work lives accordingly – through second jobs and exit strategies out of the industry. In the meantime, at The Neighborhood, Geraldo and Rachael will continue clocking in five days a week. They might smile at each other in passing, faintly, for Geraldo is coming from an 8-hour shift at another restaurant, while Rachael was enjoying brunch with friends that she would have preferred not to leave. Geraldo dons a chef’s coat, Rachael ties on a waitress skirt, and they both head into the same restaurant in different directions.

⁷⁸ “Will L.A.’s Proposed Minimum-Wage Hike Harm Restaurants or Help Workers – or Both?” LA Weekly.

⁷⁹ “Philip Frankland Lee will open with no servers at his new Scratch Bar and Kitchen in Encino.” Retrieved on 2/1/17 (<http://www.latimes.com/food/dailydish/la-dd-scratch-bar-encino-20151030-story.html>).

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