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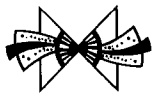
Labor *and* Legality

An Ethnography of a Mexican Immigrant Network



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CHAPTER FIVE

Echándole Ganas
Working Hard

A LITTLE EXTRA: ROBERTO

I came to the U.S. to hang out with white people. No, I'm kidding! Look, the first time I came I was sixteen and I just wanted to see the U.S., and so after a while I went back to Mexico. The second time I came I had a stronger purpose; I wanted to earn some money to see what I could do. I got a job at Uncle Luigi's with Alejandro, and that's where I met everyone from León. Most people who come here from Mexico are from the rural areas, the country, they work on the land. But we are from the city, so there aren't as many of us, you know?

When I first got here, I worked as a dishwasher eight or nine hours a day, six days a week. And they were paying me four-fifty, five dollars an hour [in 1997]. And I was like, oh man, this is crazy. It was a different country, a different language, and you're like, man, what the fuck? You don't know what to do, you don't know what's up. It takes you a while to adapt to the job, to whatever job, it takes a while. But with time, when you're with other Mexicans, they help you because they speak the same language as you. And it depends on you, too, if you want to do well in the job, mentally and physically. And I have worked food prep, busboy, construction, now I'm working as a busboy again, making good money, thank god, and working hard [*echándole ganas*].

Our job is as a busboy, right, but we also do construction, organizing, throwing stuff out, cleaning, so it's a little extra that the boss notices. So it benefits the job, the company, the restaurant, and it benefits us. And they save money, because they don't have to pay people to— you know, they want to take down this wall and we do it

for them. They don't have to pay people to do it. But the other side of it is that it benefits us too, you know? In money, in more hours. Those are benefits. We're not going to come to work and say, no, that's not my job. What do you think they'd say? "Well, do you want to work or not?" But like I said, they know we'll never tell them no.

If you're my boss and you tell me, "You know what, cut the lawn, arrange the flowers, all that," I'll do it for you. And I'll do a good job and moreover I'll do a little extra so that, "Wow!" You come back and "Oh, you surprised me!" You start to win the boss over in the sense that you put effort into the job and after a while he's going to give you more money.

We've been doing this job for a long time and we know the job well. And the bosses know that we know the job, that's why they come and ask us, "Do you think it will be busy this weekend?" They ask our opinion. "Hey, what about this? What do you think about this? Is this good here?" "No, you should change this." "Oh, yeah? Okay, change it." You know, they pay attention to what we say. At Il Vino they know that we know the job well, that's why they ask us what we think.

I think that at work it's always important to be in a good mood. It's contagious. Work is work, right, so if you come to work and you're having problems with someone and you're sad or pissed off, what do the other guys do? You come and everyone is like, "Hey man, what's up?" The other guy is in a good mood, "What's up man?" It makes you laugh even when you don't want to. You say what's up and everything is cool. So being in a good mood is contagious and when everyone is chatting together the time goes by faster. I think that's one of the main things that you have to do, that people have to do at work. Laughter is health [*la risa es salud*] and so it's better to be laughing.

When you work as a team, the job gets done better and faster, and you don't have to kill yourself as much. When we work as a team, we all work together as though we were a motor and the cylinders are, "toom, toom, toom." But if just one is kind of fucked up, now you have to work more, and it's not fair that one guy is like that. And the complaints start, "Hey man, what the fuck?" Like for example if tomorrow is going to be really busy, "Okay, you do this, you do this, I'll do this, you do this." And that's how we do it and everyone is equal. And it's cool, let's get to work. It's not just one person, no one person is going to come and say, "Okay, I want...." No. Everyone is equal, we discuss it, "Yeah, okay, what do you think?" "How about

this?" Like that, "Cool, let's get to work." And we eat our Wheaties and we all work really hard.

On weekend nights, when Il Vino is busy and the lounge is crowded with diners waiting for a table, five busboys get together to stock the bar. I call this "the Busboy Show." First, the busboys load about twenty cases of beer and two bins of liquor onto a wheeled cart. Then they push this cart through the restaurant up to the service station at the bar. Two or three of them will stay on the outside of the bar with the cart and the other two or three will go behind the bar. The bartenders and servers get out of the way. Like a sped-up assembly line, one busboy will snatch a case of beer from the cart and throw it—literally, throw it in the air—to a second busboy standing closer to the bar. This busboy catches it easily and tosses it across the top of the bar, where a busboy standing behind the bar grabs it and throws it to a fourth busboy, who catches it and stacks it in front of the beer coolers. A final busboy will rip open the cases and stock beer in the coolers. They work lightning-quick—it only takes them about a minute to empty the cart. Customers and restaurant employees gather around to watch, commenting on the busboys' strength and speed. The busboys enjoy the attention and ham it up for onlookers, prodding each other to go faster and faster. They also try to outdo one another by throwing the cases as high into the air as they can. Sometimes, when there's a new busboy, the other guys will throw him an empty case just to laugh as he juggles it in the air.

There is universal agreement at Il Vino that the Mexican immigrant busboys are the best workers at the restaurant—an association of Mexican immigrants and hard work that is not unique to Il Vino. In fact, the conception of Mexican immigrants as a laboring class has a long history in the United States, and for more than a century Mexican workers have often been considered a diligent, tractable segment of the U.S. workforce.[1] Ethnographic research shows that the perception of Mexican immigrants as hard workers continues to have popular currency.[2] In particular, many low-wage employers express their approval of Mexican immigrants' apparent willingness to do low-wage, low-status work.[3] But where does this apparent willingness to work hard come from? And why would presumably permanent members of the low-wage labor force put so much effort into being hard workers?

Mexican immigrants' work ethic is often attributed to their "culture" or "cultural background."[4] Not only coworkers and managers at restaurants like Il Vino, but also my colleagues at the university have suggested that Mexican immigrants' work ethic "may be just cultural." This use of

"culture" implies that there is something integral to Mexican society that causes Mexican people to be hard workers, an idea that is widely promoted by management at Il Vino. For example, the general manager says, "They are just phenomenal workers. I don't know what it's like in Mexico, but something happens there. Something is instilled in them from birth I think." To be sure, lots of workers in Mexico do work very hard, but the idea that Mexicans are already and always hard workers—and that hard work is due to Mexican culture—glosses over variation among Mexican workers, ignores the role of inequality in structuring work conditions, and diminishes workers' agency on the job.[5] When it is applied to immigrants, the idea that Mexicans are naturally hard workers overlooks the historical subordination of Mexican workers in the United States, which has given rise to an association of Mexican immigrants and a "willingness" to work hard. For example, Mexican workers in the U.S. are not only typically funneled into low-wage, low-status jobs, but frequently relegated to piece-rate work, temporary contract labor, or non-unionized employment in which income and job security are directly tied to the degree of "hard work" that a worker can put forth. In the end, 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.[6]

The Lions are well aware that they are considered very hard workers, and they turn this reputation to their advantage, reproducing stereotypes of themselves as hard workers and making themselves indispensable on the job. For example, when these workers throw cases of beer to each other (instead of simply and less spectacularly handing them off), they are achieving at least four interrelated effects. First, they are exerting control over how they are perceived by their American bosses, coworkers, and customers. This form of "impression management" (Goffman 1959) taps into U.S. folk culture notions of "Mexican work ethic," reinforcing an association of the Mexican staff with hard work and enhancing their job security at the restaurant. Second, they are cultivating norms of hard work amongst themselves, effectively creating a culture of work that shapes how each busboy approaches his work and perceives his labor. Third, they are responding to particular structural vulnerabilities—financial insecurity, racialization, and social stigmatization—and attempting to manage and reduce these vulnerabilities. Fourth, reproducing racialized stereotypes of "Mexican work ethic" can have the ultimate effect of reinforcing racial circumscription of the Mexican immigrant staff, an unintended but important outcome.

But the Mexican immigrant busboys at Il Vino—whose core members are also Lions—are not always and already willing to work hard. In fact,

they actively and continuously negotiate norms of hard work on the job, and new workers undergo a rigorous socialization process in which they learn to satisfy group expectations. This chapter explores how and why a willingness to work hard is cultivated by undocumented workers on the restaurant floor at Il Vino.

Extra Work, Flexible Work

A Hypothetical Day in the Work Life of an Il Vino Busboy

For Roberto, the work week begins in earnest on Thursday afternoon. His day off is Wednesday, which he usually spends running errands and relaxing with his girlfriend. Thursday morning, Roberto is up and running, briefly straightening the apartment before heading off to the neighborhood gym. He tries to get in at least an hour and a half workout, which he divides between a cardio routine and weight lifting. Afterward, he grabs lunch, a salad or sandwich, then heads back home to clean up, iron his uniform, and rest before going to work.

On Thursdays, Roberto and Rene are the first busboys to arrive at Il Vino and are usually clocked in by two thirty in the afternoon. Even though Thursdays are less busy than Fridays or Saturdays, it is a hectic night for the three busboys, Roberto, Rene, and Leonardo, who are responsible for maintaining the floor and setting up for the Friday rush. When Rene and Roberto arrive on Thursday afternoon, the first thing that they do is get the reservation book and floor plan from the hostess desk. From the storage room in the back of the restaurant, Rene and Roberto chart their day. First, they make sure the dining room is clean for the dinner rush and that the server stations are stocked; they bring fresh bottles of condiments and extra shakers for salt and pepper from dry storage. They cut lemons for water and set them next to water pitchers, which they get from the dish room. They spot vacuum the floor. If there are a lot of reservations or parties, they open new boxes of silverware and bring them to the dishwasher to be cleaned. Then, they check with the bartender and get a liquor and glassware order; wine glasses may need to be brought up from dry storage. They stock the bar with beer and wine. Next they make an "86" list of all out-of-stock menu items to give to the bartenders and servers. Then, they get bags of clean linens from storage, open them, and set them in the server stations for easy reach later.

Finally, they check with servers to see if they need anything, empty the garbage cans, and check bathrooms for paper supplies and soap; while there, they wipe down the counters and spot sweep the bathroom floors. Around four o'clock, Leonardo clocks in and joins the effort.

At some point during preparation, a large party arrives without a reservation. The busboys' walkie-talkies rattle, "Hey guys? We have a party of twelve in section two." Roberto responds, "Okay, I got it." The busboys drop what they're doing and converge on section two, pulling out chairs and pushing tables together. Once the tables are properly arranged and set with napkins, silverware, and side plates, Roberto and Leonardo go back to their preparations and Rene brings twelve glasses of water and three loaves of hot bread to the seated party. An hour later, the dinner rush starts in earnest. From six o'clock to nine-thirty, the busboys don't stop moving. They are filling waters, serving bread, carrying out food orders, clearing plates, boxing leftovers, refilling coffee, bringing wine and ice to the bar, emptying garbages, and turning over tables. Finally, around ten o'clock, the rush dies down, and the busboys' second shift begins.

Leonardo continues to work the floor, while Rene and Roberto start to prepare the banquet rooms for the next day. They study the reservation sheets, noting whether they need to bring out long tables or round tables and how many, the kind and quantity of table linens, the number of chairs, the color of the napkins, and, if the party is banquet-style, the quantity and type of chafing dishes. Setting up the banquet rooms can take an hour or more, as the busboys are continually interrupted to get supplies for the stations, bring out an order for a busy server, empty garbages, or check the bathrooms. Rene is called behind the bar for a half-hour, to help the bartender catch up with the servers' drink orders. As the restaurant empties out, the busboys replenish all of the silverware, linens, and condiments that were used during the shift, and they clean. They clean everything, flipping all of the chairs on top of the tables to sweep the floor, wiping down countertops, doors, and ledges; they even dust the piano. Sometime well after midnight, after all the staff except for the closing server and manager have left for the evening, Leonardo grabs three Coronas from the bar and Rene brings out a plate of cold calamari that he cajoled from his friends in the kitchen. The guys sit down for the first time since they arrived and count their tips.

Mexican immigrants who work in food and beverage service are typically segregated into the lowest-paid jobs as busboys, line cooks, and dishwashers.[7] Even though these jobs are socially degraded, a willingness to be diligent and tractable is expected from immigrant workers in these positions; it is an essential feature of their labor. Alejandro explains that, as a busboy, "Most of the employers will tell you straight out, 'You're going to do what we ask you to do.' They'll say to you, 'You're going to be a busboy but if I call you and ask you to do this, you're going to do it.'" Indeed, the managers at Il Vino demand flexibility from the bus staff. The general manager says, "I mean, it's not really a busboy's job to clean up vomit off the floor, but... I think that we just look at them as busboys and they will do really whatever you ask them to do. From garbages to cleaning out toilets to—you know. So I think we're harder on them in that we take it for granted... and expect that they will do whatever we ask them to do." This sentiment is echoed by other supervisors at restaurants in Chicago, who identify Mexican immigrants' willingness to do "whatever we ask" as an important component of their labor. Whether a customer locks his keys in his car, the owner's mother needs a ride somewhere, or someone has made a mess in the bathroom, the busboys invariably take care of it. The busboys are called on to do all tasks that do not fit into anyone else's job description, and the more unattractive the task is to other workers at Il Vino, the more likely that it will fall to the busboys. As Lalo says with a hint of humor, "For us, everything is our job."

Doing extra work has become part of the everyday routine for the Mexican immigrant busboys at Il Vino, resulting in an increased and diversified workload. They routinely work twelve hours straight, sometimes leaving only to be back at work a few hours later. But working long hours and keeping up with the workload is only the beginning of being an Il Vino busboy; Il Vino busboys not only have stamina, they have talent. They pride themselves on anticipating the needs of customers and servers and on having things ready before they are asked. They are excellent busboys, but they also know how to bartend and can wait tables themselves in a pinch. They lift heavy food trays high above their heads, often one in each hand, and deftly maneuver through crowds. They expertly balance full trays of glasses of water and almost never spill (and if they do, they will never hear the end of it from their friends). The busboys can carry three cases of beer on their shoulder and wind their way from the back of the restaurant to the bar without bumping into a single customer or employee. (See Figure 5.1.)

The busboys at Il Vino have not always had such a heavy workload. Over the years, they have slowly taken over responsibility for more and

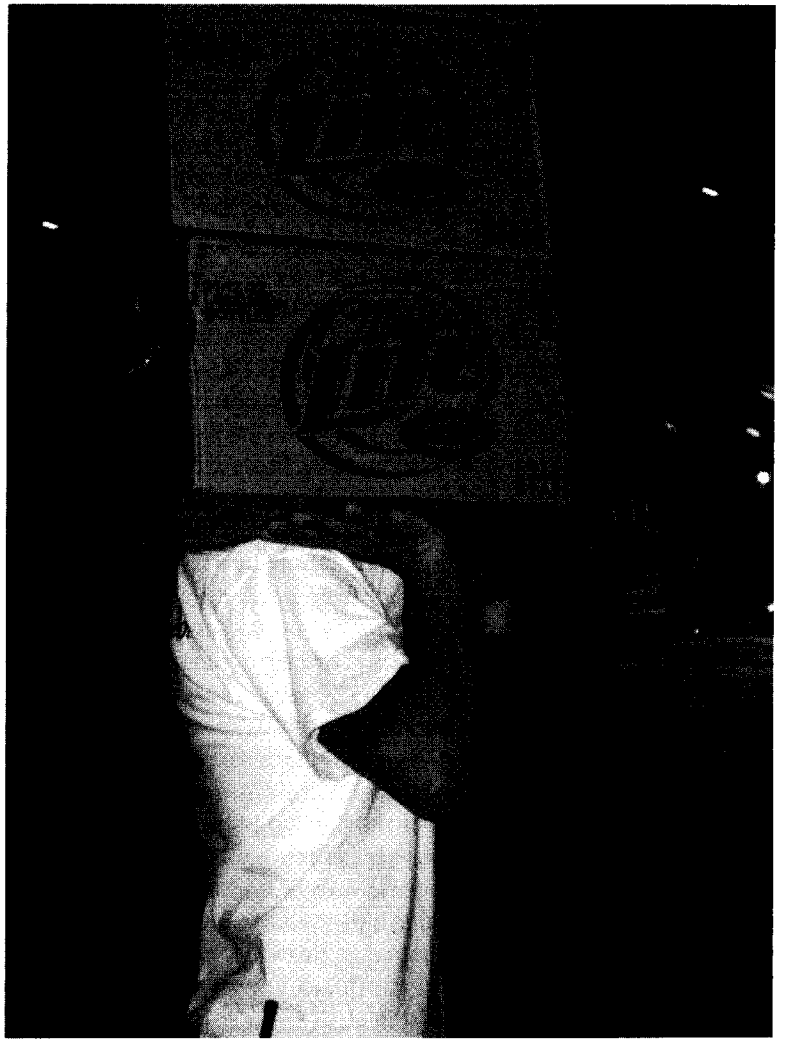

FIGURE 5.1 Leonardo carries three cases of beer to the bar on his shoulder. *(Courtesy of the author)*

more tasks. For example, in the past the waitstaff at Il Vino helped clean by vacuuming their sections and wiping down the server stations after the restaurant closed. But the busboys say that the servers did such a half-hearted cleaning job that they, the busboys, would have to clean up after them and, over time, the waitstaff's cleaning chores became the busboys'

responsibility. Roberto explains his frustration: "Sometimes there are things [that need to be done] and it's not that you don't have anything else to do, it's who's going to do it? They're not going to do it. So there was a time when we just started saying, 'I'll do it, I'll do it, I'll do it.' And that's how it stayed. It's still that way.... Now we have to do it. If we don't, there'll be problems for us." What starts out as "extra" work can easily slide over into the busboys' area of responsibility, resulting in an ever-expanding definition of their job description.

Sometimes the busboys look for extra work to do to stay busy during slow periods. Once, during a slow lunch shift, Rene decided to clean the bottoms of all of the chairs in the unused parts of the restaurant (only the front section of the restaurant opens for lunch). Table by table, the busboys flipped the chairs upside down and wiped down the legs with soapy water. If there was gum or other unidentified gunk on the bottom of the chairs, they used razors to scrape it off. On another slow day, Rene and Alberto cleaned the alley and the back walls of the building with a power-washer, then climbed extension ladders to dust the wood beams and fans attached to the ceiling. The busboys explain that keeping busy not only makes the day go by faster, but helps ensure that their hours do not get cut during slow periods. In fact, management's most common complaint about the bus staff is that they "milk the schedule" by keeping more busboys working than are really necessary.

When Il Vino first opened and every night was busy, the busboys' work was necessarily more confined to the narrow definition of what a busboy's job includes. As business has slowed down, there has been increasing pressure for busboys to do more varied work, in fewer hours, and often with fewer workers. By diversifying the tasks that busboys perform, Colleen and Tony avoid having to hire other workers to do things like maintenance, cleaning, landscaping, and painting. Since the owners have mostly refused to hire additional workers, all of this extra work is absorbed by the existing busboy staff, resulting in a much heavier workload for them. At one meeting with the busboy staff in the winter of 2007, the general manager justified the busboys' intensified workload by explaining to them that they actually had two distinct jobs. One is to support the service staff (busboy narrowly defined), for which they earn tips. Their other job is to "work for the owners," for which they earn an hourly rate at or just over the minimum wage. The manager told the busboys that, if they did not want to do the extra work, he would pay them "server wages," the amount that waiters and bartenders make (at the time just over $4 per hour) instead of regular wages ($7.50 per hour). By identifying extra work as the justification for the busboys' wages, management instituted "extra" work as part

of the busboys' regular responsibilities. By asserting that any busboy who doesn't want to do it can choose not to and be paid a reduced wage, management gives the appearance that extra work is voluntary, heading off charges of exploitation.

The ever-expanding list of busboys' responsibilities is taking its toll on the workers. Some of the busboys either have other jobs in the morning or children that they help get off to school, resulting in regular sleep deprivation. The nighttime busboys also feel frustrated at what they see as poor management decisions that result in too much work for them and not enough work for the daytime busboys. Although many nighttime busboys also work during the day, in the past there has been conflict between the two groups because the nighttime busboys felt that they did a disproportionate amount of work, and the daytime busboys begrudged the fact that the nighttime guys made more money. The busboys also dislike inefficient or disorganized servers who cause them more work. Even though they appreciate the value that comes with having a lot of responsibility, the busboys also resent the caprice with which work is heaped onto their shoulders.

While being asked to take on extra work is a source of complaint when workers are talking amongst themselves, there is universal agreement that complaining to management should be avoided. In fact, the busboys often respond promptly and with energy, if not enthusiasm, when called on to do extra tasks. They demonstrate their "willingness to work" by performing extra work without complaint and with alacrity. The workers even have a name for this performance—*echándole ganas*—which literally means "putting desire in it," but can be roughly translated as "putting effort into it," or "putting your back into it." But echándole ganas does not always come easy for workers, and the busboys continuously negotiate and enforce norms of hard work on the restaurant floor.

Learning the Ropes: Humor and Hazing

Even when Mexican immigrants come to the U.S. prepared to work hard, they still must be socialized into the work culture of their U.S. jobs. At Il Vino, most new busboys, including brothers, cousins, and childhood friends of the Lions, have a hard time keeping up with the pace and expectations of the job. Even those Lions who have worked at Il Vino for many years must be resocialized to work hard after extended vacations in Mexico. The core group of Il Vino busboys (Rene, Roberto, Leonardo, Chuy, and Alberto) who have worked there for many years negotiate expectations of their labor through their interactions with each other and with their

coworkers and managers. These norms, in turn, regulate the labor of all Il Vino busboys.

When a busboy is hired at Il Vino, the first thing that happens is he gets a nickname. Every Lion has an unflattering nickname: Dumbo, Unibrow, Flower, even Manuel's kids are called *los bastarditos*, or "the little bastards." When a new busboy starts at Il Vino, he is likely to be working hard, trying to get along, when suddenly he finds that the other guys are laughing at him. They have probably decided that he looks like some cartoon character, or maybe a monkey or giraffe, and maybe they have even posted a picture of the character on the wall in the storage room with the new worker's name written on it. When Frank, a young white man, began working as a busboy several years ago, the other guys decided that his rather big belly reminded them of Homer Simpson and Frank became "Homero." One particularly messy busboy was briefly nicknamed "Katrina," after Hurricane Katrina, the storm that devastated the U.S. Gulf Coast in 2005. As soon as he understood the joke, "Katrina" made more of an effort to keep his tables neat, and the busboys found something else to tease him about. Arturo, a Mexican man in his mid-thirties who worked at Il Vino for two years, moved a bit slower than the other busboys, so the guys sarcastically called him "Ferrari." When they wanted him to move faster, the busboys would call Arturo over their walkie-talkies, "Hey Ferrari, vroom, vroom, vroooooom!" The trick for any new busboy is to be good-natured about the teasing, as any show of anger or hurt feelings will only result in more—and more unflattering—teasing. The busboys also have nicknames for most of the servers, and, in case you are wondering, I am "*la Ruda*" (the rough or aggressive one), a play on my name and an unfortunate comment on my interviewing style.

This use of humor is not all fun and games. Teasing is a critical part of the hazing process in which new busboys are socialized to be hard workers. The busboys agree that working together at the same level of intensity is important, and they use teasing to pressure each other into working hard in a nonconfrontational way. For their part, new busboys who must be taught the ropes count on the more established busboys to show them how to work. Luis explains: "Among the Mexicans we tell each other [to work better], right?... We trust each other to say, 'Look man, work harder, pick it up, okay?'... It's very important to us that someone helps you, tells you to work harder, or supports you." Busboys even receive instructions on informal work practices, like "looking like you want to work" by always walking quickly and responding to requests with enthusiasm. This socialization process establishes work norms and weeds out busboys who are not motivated to work hard or do not want to work as part of the team.

Much of the busboys' socialization takes place during the course of work via walkie-talkie radios. The busboys at Il Vino use walkie-talkies with earpieces to pass information, instructions, and requests to each other while they mind their respective sections of the restaurant. Managers can also tune in to the busboys' radio frequency to ask them for things. When the restaurant is busy, these radios can be extremely useful for keeping the work flow seamless and efficient. For example, a manager may come on the radio to ask the busboys to empty the garbage in the women's bathroom. One of the busboys, usually whoever is least busy or whose section is nearest the bathroom, will answer with an "I got it." The rest of the busboys then know who is going to empty the garbage and they will take care of his section for him. While he is emptying the garbage in the women's bathroom, the busboy is also likely to check the men's room garbage and the kitchen garbage cans, saving him from having to empty those later. In addition, since he will have to empty the garbage cans in the back of the restaurant near the storage rooms, another busboy may come on the radio and ask him for a favor: "While you're back there, I need two bottles of house Merlot for the bar." If it is likely to be a busy night, the busboy may grab four bottles of Merlot and two extra bottles of Cabernet, knowing that the lounge busboy will probably need them at some point in the night.

When the restaurant is not busy, early and very late in the night, the walkie-talkies serve a more light-hearted purpose, allowing the busboys to keep up a constant joking banter. The busboys take turns being the butt of each other's jokes, and even joking is often termed in the language of work. For example, a lot of chitchat over the radios is likely to provoke a playful, "Is that all you guys do, is joke around? Why don't you get some work done?" from another busboy. Or if a busboy is particularly busy the other guys might tease him, "Hurry up! Hurry up! Your waiters are calling for you! You better step on it!" Or a busboy might be interrupted during his dinner break by a frantic "Hey, where are you? The boss is looking for you!" only to find that the caller was playing a practical joke on him. If a busboy's section appears dirty, or if a table needs water, another busboy might come to help him and say to the server, "Where's your busboy? You don't have a busboy tonight or what?" Through joking, the busboys not only reinforce expectations of work, they also subtly discourage any tendencies toward self-aggrandizement or individuality. An over-eager busboy who asks "Hey, do you guys need anything? I'm not busy" might be answered with, "No, and don't be such a kiss-ass."

Sometimes play simply provides diversion and release after a hard day's work. One Saturday, as the busboys were cleaning after the restaurant

closed, I noticed that Roberto had black hash marks swiped on both cheeks, like an NFL player or a guerrilla warrior. Then Rene walked by with a big, black hand-print on the back of his bald head. Later, I saw Chuy with the same black stuff smeared on his white undershirt. It turned out that Chuy had swiped the inside of a motorcycle exhaust pipe with his fingers, blackening his hands with the soot in the pipe. He swatted Rene on the back of the head and wiped his fingers on Roberto's cheeks, then ran away from them, giggling. Rene and Roberto quickly discovered the source of the soot and exacted their revenge. Practical joking and playing are an important part of the busboys' interactions and are a welcome distraction from the stresses of work. If they sit down to eat together before they start work, Rene might squirt ketchup in Roberto's seat, then Roberto is likely to return the favor by wiping the ketchup on Rene's ear. Once Roberto sprayed Leonardo in the face with a strong floral perfume; Leonardo got hold of the bottle and pretty soon the entire busboy staff stank like cheap feminine perfume. Playing at work not only provides a welcome distraction from the drudgeries of repetitive work, but strengthens the workers' social bonds as well. These bonds are crucial for creating and maintaining norms of teamwork.

Working as a Team

All of the immigrant busboys who work at Il Vino generally agree that having a team-oriented approach to work is the best quality that a busboy can have, while the worst busboys are those who act individualistically or are bossy. Alberto explains that, "It's important to work as a group because if you work in a group, you and your friends, the work is easier. When we do things together or help each other it's not so hard. Like if he needs something and it's far away and you're back there, 'I'll get it for you.' So, yeah, it's important to work together or as a team. It's much better." Not only does teamwork make the busboys faster and more efficient, it diffuses stress and insulates individual group members by spreading responsibility and accountability throughout the group. The group-oriented organization of work for busboys at Il Vino is encouraged by several factors, which I turn to briefly.

First, the busboys are treated as a group by management. Management will rarely directly reproach a busboy who they think is not doing a good job. Instead, they reprimand the busboys who have worked at Il Vino for the longest time, effectively making the more senior busboys responsible for the job performance of all busboys. The general manager says,

> There isn't really a direct manager [of the busboys], so it's amongst themselves. And I think that even as far as ownership goes, every time there's a problem they go to an experienced busboy and say, "Can you take care of this?" I've seen that a million times. [The owners go to] Rene, Leonardo, sometimes Chuy, but mostly Rene and Leonardo. Maybe they look at them as the boss, but they'll make them go say, "Shit or get off the pot" [to a weak busboy].

Being held responsible for the performance of the group encourages the more senior busboys to take an active, group-oriented approach to directing work flow.

Also, working as a group improves job performance for the group as a whole and for each worker, making everyone's job easier and more pleasant. The busboys acknowledge that no one of them always feels like working hard; rather, it is their performance as a group that accomplishes the work well, quickly, and consistently. Working cooperatively allows the workers to have an occasional bad day because they know that their friends will help pick up their slack. Alejandro says, "If you know that somebody got your back, then you do something for them. You learn who you can count on and who you cannot... if you don't feel like working you could call somebody last minute and they would go and cover you." Having friends that you can count on helps relieve some of the pressure associated with long hours of stressful, repetitive work.

The system of tip distribution also encourages teamwork among the busboys. The servers at Il Vino put fifteen percent of their tips in a locked box at the end of each night. When the busboys finish cleaning, they retrieve the tip money and divide it into equal shares. This encourages teamwork because their tip income is based on collective effort; thus it is in each busboy's interest to make sure the others do well. The system of tip distribution also gives busboys leverage to apply pressure on those who they feel are not doing their share, and the busboys frequently assert that they are "not here to earn someone else's money."

Finally, established network and social ties among busboys facilitates a group orientation. All of the busboys come from the same hometown in Mexico. Several are related and have friendship ties that extend from nearly a decade to a lifetime. They mostly like and trust each other; this makes it easier for them to work as a team.

As vital as teamwork is for the busboys, it is not enough to simply work together. Busboys must conform to norms of equality and reciprocity in their work relations with each other. The significance of equality and helpfulness among the busboys is demonstrated by the distribution of leadership among the group and by the active suppression of boss-like behaviors. Even when one busboy is a nominal head busboy, he should be

careful to work as hard as the others and not act bossy. This quote from Lalo shows how the busboys view Roberto's management style: "The leader that I have now [Roberto], the Mexican, he'll say to me, 'This is what we have to do for tomorrow. When you have time, see about this. When we're not busy, when the work has died down, we'll come and help you.' And he helps you and that's how it is." It is imperative that busboys in leadership positions continue to work as hard as the other workers because, if they do not, they can easily lose the respect and cooperation of the group.

In fact, many busboys who have been named head busboy were fired or demoted not long after their promotion. This is because promotion to a managerial position can disrupt the cohesion of the group and exclude the promoted busboy from the group's insulation. This happened to Leonardo, whose story is presented in the next section of this chapter, and to a young white worker named Frank, whose story appears in the next chapter. Rene and Roberto, who reject being in a formal position of authority, have been able to walk a fine line between appeasing the managers and avoiding the appearance of being a boss among their friends. In fact, Rene's strategy as manager is to "manage" as little as possible and to lead by example, often picking up slack himself. Because of the team orientation of the work group, Rene can count on his fellow busboys to help him. He says, "When me and Chuy work together I would tell him, 'Look, you do this and I'm going to do that.' He would say, 'Yeah, that's cool, I'll do it.' The guys from the apartment, Juan, Leonardo, and Roberto would come by, 'What are you doing? I'll help you.' And it was faster that way." By adopting a management strategy in which he picks up other workers' slack, Rene may add to his own workload, but he also reaffirms the stability of the group and puts subtle moral pressure on his fellow busboys to work harder as well.

Covering and Criticizing: Protecting the Group and Enforcing the Norms

In spite of the light-hearted nature of the busboys' banter, social acceptance in this work group depends on adherence to standards of work, and those who are not considered good workers can become alienated. Alejandro explains how this works at Uncle Luigi's:

> Say if you're in charge of the waters and you see an empty table and you're like "Oh, I'm in charge of the waters, I don't do that," I don't like that. If you have the free time, you go and do it. The same thing, you probably go to the bathroom and a table walks in, then somebody else will do the waters. And when people don't do that, the other workers will come and say, "He's not, he doesn't want to do this, he's lazy, we always have to look for him when we need him, etcetera."

When a member of the work group is having a bad day, is unreliable, or in general does not work at the same high level as the others, the busboys have various mechanisms for protecting the group and enforcing the norms.

When a busboy who is esteemed by the group is not contributing his share, the other workers will cover for him. Occasionally, a busboy may come to work intoxicated or upset and the other busboys will take over his section and send him home for the day. If the busboys pitch in and cover his section adequately, management may not even notice that they are missing a worker. Rene explains how they would try to protect a former busboy who got drunk and missed work: "I would tell [the bosses], 'He's sick, he's that,' but I was just lying.... I never said anything because in any case we all did his work among us. We all made the same and that was that." In fact, by covering for each other, the busboys can wield a considerable amount of influence in determining whether a busboy keeps his job or is fired. For example, Lalo moves more slowly than the other guys and has been on the managers' chopping block on more than one occasion. But the other busboys earnestly defend Lalo, telling management how helpful he is to them, and he has never been fired. While covering has the direct advantage of keeping management from interfering with the group, it is also a preferred strategy to "bossing" a fellow coworker because it protects the parity and social stability of the team.

When a worker has lost the esteem of the group by being a chronic drag on his coworkers or by failing to demonstrate the same level of energy and enthusiasm as the others, resentment can develop. The busboys usually deal with this by increasing levels of peer pressure. When the restaurant is busy, the senior busboys will cover for the slow worker to keep management from noticing weakness in the work group. But when they are cleaning or setting up, the busboys may slow down their own work, or even stop working entirely, until the slow worker catches up. This puts serious pressure on the weak busboy. If the situation still doesn't improve, a sit-down discussion with the slacking worker may be in order. Luis explains that, "Look, there is a time and place to say something. Like when we stay and have a drink after work, we'll tell him, 'Listen man, you suck, you sucked tonight. Try to do better.' And among the Mexicans we tell each other, right?" In extreme cases, the busboys will stop covering for a slacking worker and allow his weakness to be exposed to management; this usually results in the weak busboy's

dismissal. This is a last resort however, and the workers prefer strategies that do not expose themselves to interference by management or risk the cohesion of their team.

The following case provides an example of how the busboys use teasing and peer pressure to enforce normative work behaviors, but will eventually withdraw their protection of a slacking coworker. When Leonardo started at Il Vino, he did double duty, working as a busboy and dishwasher during the day and cleaning at night. Leonardo proved himself to be a hard worker and was finally promoted to a night busboy, where he worked as a solid member of the group for four years. Leonardo was well-liked and well-respected by the other busboys, as well as by the waitstaff and management at Il Vino. Then he got promoted to head busboy and everything changed.

The head busboy does not get paid more than the other busboys, nor does he attend manager meetings like all of the other managers do; his job is basically to translate directions from management to the bus staff and keep any wayward busboys in line. Rene, who has seniority, is often the preferred head busboy but does not like being formally in charge. So when the management staff decided that they wanted to have a formal head busboy in the spring of 2008, Rene declined the position and Roberto was in Mexico. It was Leonardo's turn.

As soon as Leonardo was granted nominal management status, his work habits changed, as did his attitude toward working as part of a group. He began spending more and more time on the phone with his new girlfriend and would ask the other busboys to cover his section for him. At times he would disappear from work for an hour or more. Since Leonardo was a long-standing and valued member of the group, at first the other busboys covered for him and only chided him mildly for his behavior. But instead of going back to normal, Leonardo's conduct got more and more intolerable. He started ordering other busboys to do his work, even calling them his *gatos* (literally "cats," or "car jacks" but in this context it means "chumps"). Luis complained, "He spends the night talking on the phone to his girl and tells us, 'Gatos, gatos, I need this, gatos help me do this and this and this.'" The waiters and waitresses in Leonardo's section started to notice his long absences and complained to the other busboys about him. As they split tips and drank beer at the end of the night, the other busboys would try to talk to Leonardo about his behavior. Luis says, "When he got really bad, we would tell him, 'Look man, cut it out, you're going too far, okay? Why are you on the phone all night and you don't help out?'"

Leonardo's work habits still did not improve, and gradually—after several months—the other busboys started refusing to do his work for

him. They stopped checking on his section and would only help when a member of the waitstaff asked them directly. Without the insulation and protection of the group, Leonardo's erratic work behavior called the attention of the general manager, who immediately demoted him and put him on the lunch shift, where he made very little in tips. Leonardo's work habits had been slipping for months, but it was not until the other busboys withdrew their protection of him that the managers became aware of his weaknesses. Chastened, Leonardo had to prove himself all over again, and it took him a year to get back in the other busboys' good graces and to re-earn his place as a nighttime busboy. This case not only illustrates how important the work group is to each busboy, but also how it functions to insulate members and to sanction them in extreme circumstances.

Why Work Hard? Dimensions of Willingness

Since most workers (and undocumented workers in particular) usually must do what is asked of them to keep their jobs, whether or not they are eager to do it should be beside the point. But for unskilled workers whose jobs are loosely defined, the "attitude" a worker conveys can be an important quality that either adds to or detracts from his value as an employee (see Waldinger and Lichter 2003). Mexican immigrants in the United States are primarily manual laborers (only 4 percent are in management or business),[8] and their desirability as low-wage employees is determined less by qualities like education, training, and experience and more by qualities like reliability, flexibility, and attitude. Displaying a "good attitude" can give undocumented workers an advantage in low-wage job competition, and low-wage employers consistently compare Mexican workers favorably to American workers in terms of their "willingness" and capacity for hard work.[9] As one employer put it, "'[I]mmigrant men are going to work much harder and take more crap than any black man... will take'" (Waldinger and Lichter 2003:177). The Lions are well aware that having a "good attitude"—often described as being willing to work or wanting to work hard—is an integral part of their job. Luis says that, "Wanting to work is very important because someone who doesn't want to work won't work hard. On the other hand, a person who works hard, who likes his work, that makes him work better, he wants to go to work. In fact, for me the best quality that a busboy can have is a desire to work." At restaurants like Il Vino, the Lions' "willingness" to work hard is encouraged both directly and indirectly by their unauthorized status.

Many workers, like Alejandro, Leonardo, and Omar, acknowledge and resent that undocumented status constrains their employment

opportunities and forces them to be compliant and willing. Leonardo says, "When you come from Mexico and you don't have anything, all you have to offer is that you are a good worker and you want to better yourself." Omar agrees and says that, for undocumented workers, being pliant can make the difference between keeping or losing a job: "They know we are illegal, so if I complain, what do you think they will say to me? 'There's the door if you don't like it.'"

Yet these workers also believe that having a good work ethic can reduce or even overcome the vulnerability associated with being undocumented. Leonardo continues, "If you're a good worker, nothing, not even being illegal, will ever affect you." Luis concurs: "Not having papers doesn't affect you [at Il Vino]. If you work hard and you know what you're doing, the bosses themselves are going to say, 'Oh this guy works hard, let's promote him.'" Indeed, busboys at Il Vino receive significant material and social benefits for working hard. The busboys earn tips from waiters and waitresses, who are more likely to tip generously when they are pleased with their busboys' work performance. They also receive considerable esteem from their American coworkers and managers, extending the benefits of working hard beyond economy and into the realm of autonomy and respect. For example, Rene observes that: "[The bosses] are always noticing who works and who doesn't work. And when you win them over, they don't watch you anymore, they give you—you win their respect." As I explore in more depth in the next chapter, gaining esteem for being a hard worker can enhance the dignity of undocumented immigrants who are highly stigmatized as "illegal aliens," while gaining autonomy and respect on the job may be particularly important for undocumented workers who are subject to constant and arbitrary supervision.[10]

Cultivating a reputation as hard workers also helps undocumented workers monopolize employment opportunities in the low-wage job market. Alejandro has had nearly twenty years of experience working in restaurants and has been busboy, busboy manager, and—unique among his friends—a waiter during this time. Alejandro has learned one thing well: he can manipulate stereotypes of Mexican immigrants as hard workers to promote employment for himself and his friends. He described one situation in particular to me, in which the owners of Uncle Luigi's had opened a second restaurant and hired a young, all-white bus staff:

> And [the managers] told me, "They cannot handle it, [and] there's twelve [of them]. I want you to go over there and teach them how to work good."...I went down to the office and I said, "If you want to keep all these people working, you're going to need them. I can do, I'll bring five, six of my friends and we can do all this work. So you decide. You want to keep twelve people and not get the job done, or six guys and get the work done, and probably be cheaper for you." [The owner said], "Done. Get them."

Alejandro wielded stereotypes of Mexican immigrants as particularly hard workers to persuade his boss to hire his friends. For Alejandro and his co-immigrant friends, a "willingness to work hard" is a special feature of their labor power that they can strategically draw on to make their labor more attractive to employers.

Consent and Contradiction

Working hard supplies both material and non-material benefits for the Lions, but it creates contradictions for them as well. For example, while the Lions perform a willingness to work, they are reluctant to see themselves as deferential. In fact, they develop narratives that emphasize Mexican workers' physical bravery and resistance to abusive treatment. When the Lions workers sit around together and have a beer after work, they relish telling "war stories" in which a Mexican worker heroically confronts an abusive boss. These narratives are usually David vs. Goliath-style stories in which a Mexican worker stands up to an abusive boss, who is usually left cowering in fear. Invariably, the worker also loses his job. Luis remembers a conflict that occurred when he was a dishwasher at Uncle Luigi's:

> We were really busy in those days and sometimes we would get behind on washing the pots and [the boss] would scream at us, "Move! Fucking wetbacks, move! Move, motherfuckers!" He was an asshole and no one liked him. Whenever he got angry he would come into the kitchen and take it out on the wetbacks. The other dishwasher who worked with me was bigger than me, taller and thicker. And one day he said to the boss, "You're not going to talk to me like that." He was tired of the insults, he was on the brink. And so they were about to fight but the managers called the police. The police came and the managers told them that the Mexican was fired but refused to leave. So they fired that guy; well, he quit really.

Lalo recounted a story in which he threw food in his abusive manager's face:

> Once, I was working at a Chinese restaurant and it was always really busy. So you had to be really quick preparing the pork, the

> vegetables, the shrimp, everything. And the owners were really nice, if you worked hard they noticed it and were really nice to you. But there was a kitchen manager who was a slave-driver and I had problems with him. He got mad at me one day and we got into it, and well, I couldn't take it any more and I threw a basket of shrimp in his face. Ha ha. And they fired me. They fired me. Ha ha.

Even though the Lions rarely engage in physical violence, these "war stories" repudiate any notion that they are passive or meek. Like most war stories, these are probably exaggerated but are nevertheless significant in the context of vulnerability that undocumented status confers on these workers. Narratives about standing up to the boss, challenging him physically, and putting one's job at risk highlight workers' self-respect and reveal that their "willingness to work" has its limits.

These limits are particularly revealed when workers discuss their plans for the future: Alejandro, Rene, Chuy, Manuel, and Luis have all expressed a desire to get a union job. Tellingly, they state their goal as "getting a union job," as opposed to work as a union carpenter or brick-layer or electrician, indicating that they are at least as concerned about being part of a union collective as they are about the work itself. For Rene, the appeal of being in a union has as much to do with autonomy as job security. He explains that, "If I get a job with the union, then when somebody asks, 'Where do you work?' I can tell them, 'Oh, I'm Local 399,' instead of 'I work for this guy or that guy.' Then you don't belong to anybody, it's more of a professional job." Workers' goals of unionization suggest that, under different circumstances, these "willing workers" might not be so different from more politicized immigrants described elsewhere.[11]

Ultimately, cultivating a social identity as hard workers provides several short-term advantages for undocumented Mexican workers, including control over the composition and organization of their work group and a measure of financial stability and social esteem. Yet a reputation as hard workers also has unintended implications for undocumented workers. While being known as "hard workers" has the benefit of making the Lions indispensable at their jobs, it has the side effect of reproducing various exploitative aspects of their work, including intensification of their labor characterized by increasing workloads for the same pay.

Notes

1. De Genova 2005; Gamio 1971 [1930]; Gutierrez 1995; Heyman 2001.
2. Coutin and Chock 1997; De Genova and Ramos Zayas 2003; Waldinger and Lichter 2003.

3. De Genova 2005; Neckerman and Kirschenman 1991; Waldinger and Lichter 2003.
4. Gutierrez 1995; Moss and Tilly 2001; Waldinger and Lichter 2003.
5. See also di Leonardo 1998; Gershon and Taylor 2008 for critiques of this use of culture.
6. While anthropological notions of culture usually avoid this kind of naturalization of inequality and difference, Appadurai (2004:60) notes that culture in an anthropological sense has typically referred to "one or other kind of pastness"—beliefs and behaviors that are presumably traditional, slow to change, and permanently present in a local, bounded social group. This notion of culture has been criticized for assuming distinctions between groups of people—and homogeny within them—that are, at best, amorphous and fluid (Appadurai 1996, 2004; Douglas 2004; but see Rosenblatt 2004). Further, traditional anthropological conceptions of culture may diminish the role of Western domination and expansion in the creation, differentiation, and study of putatively bounded cultural groups (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). In response, anthropologists have increasingly turned their attention to the ways in which shared meanings and social identities are continuously created and recreated in everyday interactions (e.g., Gershon and Taylor 2008; Rao and Walton 2004; see also Willis 1977). A conception of culture as "those differences that either express, or set the groundwork for, the mobilization of group identities" (Appadurai 1996:13) emphasizes the situational, dynamic construction of norms, boundaries, meanings, and group identities and the way that these take shape as part of broader economic and sociopolitical landscapes (Rao and Walton 2004; Sen 2004). This is not an entirely new use of "culture," as it strongly resembles the "shop-floor culture" that Burawoy (1979) describes in his ethnography of factory workers.
7. See also Adler 2005; Fine 1996; Stepick and Grenier 1994.
8. Pew Hispanic Center 2009.
9. De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, 2001; Portes and Rumbaut 1996:41.
10. Of course, being esteemed for being a hard worker and being stigmatized are not contradictory. Gutierrez (1995) shows how racial stereotypes about Mexican workers in the U.S. have historically been used to justify their placement in difficult and degraded jobs (see also Pedraza and Rumbaut 1996).
11. E.g., Brodkin 2007; Smith-Nonini 2007; Zlolniski 2003, 2006.