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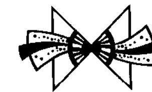
Labor *and* Legality

An Ethnography of a Mexican Immigrant Network



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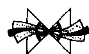
CHAPTER SIX



Los Número Uno
Identity, Dignity, and Esteem

THEY'RE GOOD PEOPLE: LALO

My name is Lalo. I'm from León, Guanajuato, Mexico. In Mexico, we don't have a lot of money, but we live well because we own our own house. That's a big help because you don't have to pay rent, just bills. And the money that I made was enough to support my kids and the house. With what my wife earned, we bought clothes and other necessities.

I have nephews here, and they were filling my son's head with thoughts of coming to Chicago. So my wife said, "Look, why don't you go for a while and we could save money to buy a little business, our own business?" I didn't want to come, but my son was like, "Yeah! Yeah!" We couldn't let him come by himself because he's so young, only fourteen, and it's very dangerous and he's immature. So I said okay, but immigration authorities [*la migra*] grabbed us on the Arizona border. We were going to go back home when some other guys contacted us and passed us through Mexicali.

In Mexico, I used to work as a welder in a tannery. A tannery is where they prepare leather to make shoes. And it's a hard job, but it pays well. The problem is that there are so many people who need jobs, and there's not enough work. So people say, "We're going to go to the U.S. because there's work there." When they come to the U.S., the first thing they do is get a job washing dishes in a kitchen. You put in your time, you move up the ladder, you could be a cook, or even higher. And it pays well. I have a friend who is from León who has been here like twelve years, and he's the chef at an important restaurant. And they pay him well. And so he said "I did what I came here to do; now I'm going back to Mexico." And that's how it is. So

he leaves, but there will be another person under him who is waiting for his opportunity. And the white bosses see that.

There are white bosses that are very good. And there are Mexican bosses that are really good too. There are white bosses that are bad and Mexican bosses that are bad. The worst part about it is that it hurts you, because if you're Mexican, you're not begging for money, you're working for it.

The bosses that I have right now hold the busboys in very high regard, more than the white workers. They have a lot of confidence in them. For example, when Alberto came back from Mexico the last time, it gave me a lot of pleasure to see that Colleen saw him and was like, "Hi, welcome back! Here is your job!" She was happy to see him, and I felt good because he's such a good worker. But still and all, you have to win your boss over. What I say is that if I'm going to win over my boss, I will do it with work and not with gossip, not by telling them, "This guy doesn't do this right, that guy didn't do that."

One day the bosses might tell you, "Very good job," and so you say to yourself, "Okay, now I have won the bosses' trust." You always work the same way, you always do the same things. When there's no work, you don't do as much, of course, but you always do the same things. So when there's a lot of work and everything is good, they say, "Oh, great, cool, these guys are great workers." And so you think that the boss trusts you. But then whatever little thing that the managers or someone else tells them, even if it's about a very good worker, he'll get in trouble. For any little thing.

Do I consider myself a hard worker? Yes, I do. Maybe I'm not as good as the other busboys where I work, but I make an effort. For one thing, and I'm not trying to make excuses, but ever since I can remember, since I was seven years old, I have worked. So now I'm thirty six, and I'm tired. That's the truth. So if I seem a little slow, it's because I'm tired. But I do the best job I can. I'm not going to tell you that I'm as good as the other guys, because I know how they work and I respect them. Maybe if they came to work with me [as a welder in Mexico], then it would be the other way around. But I am learning to do the job that they are good at, so yes, I consider myself a good worker. And I like to work—well, I don't like it, because it wears me down; but it's my job, it's what I get paid for, and I do it with pleasure. Because if I go to work and I'm angry, like some people, "Oh, I have to wash the bathrooms and take out the garbage," it's worse for me. I like it. I like to learn new things so when I go back home I can open a small restaurant.

How would I describe the Lions? That's hard because each one has his own style, his own personality. But they have all helped me and been really cool with me. They have all supported me. Maybe it's because we're all from the same place. Maybe. But I've also seen them help other people who aren't from the same town. They are all good guys, good guys in the sense of good workers. They are workers, that's the word. They are really hard workers. If there's work, they tackle it, they beat it down. Always. They're workers and good people. I'm not sure why they help me so much. Maybe it's because they've struggled just like I have. Whether you're Catholic or not, like they say, help me and I will help you [*ayúdame que yo te ayudaré*]. If you help me today, tomorrow I will help you if I can. So that's how it is here: the guys that work with me are younger than me, and they've helped me so much, telling me how to do the job, sticking up for me with the boss. They were going to fire me once and the other guys said, "No, we need him." That was a big help for me.

The difference between Mexicans and white guys is that white guys don't want to work. They don't want a job that's too hard, or far away, or low paying. Here they blame everything on undocumented people. But that's why we get the jobs, because they know that we want to work no matter what it is. Yeah, there are white guys who are good workers too, and not all Mexicans are good. There's a bit of everything. But the American boss always prefers Mexican workers.

No matter what, people will still keep coming here: and no matter what, the bosses are still going to need them. I heard on the television that they say there are twelve million undocumented people here who don't pay taxes.[1] How much money are they losing? So the government says, we are losing so much money that we could use for hospitals, schools, for undocumented people themselves. Okay, so don't make them citizens, but at least give them permission to work. The country wins because they get their taxes, and the restaurants and factories can increase their production—everyone wins. The U.S. is a nation of immigrants. So if they build a wall, the Mexicans will build a tunnel. Or a higher ladder. They'll always be jumping the border.

The three previous chapters explored how the Lions navigate the terrain of work and society in the United States through their everyday activities. This chapter examines the more subjective side of workaday life—investigating

how undocumented workers develop identity and dignity that engages and negotiates their political, racial, and class-based circumscription.

Race, Class, and Illegality: Structural Dimensions of Mexican Immigrant Identity

In the United States, the ascription of people into racial categories has been particularly acute in the creation of the categories "black" and "white," but when immigrants arrive in the United States, they are racially classified too. These classifications subsume immigrants' regional, class, ethnic, and national differences so that, for example, Latin American immigrants in the United States are typically racialized as "Latino," "Hispanic," or "Black," collapsing differences among their self-ascribed ethnic identities and places of birth.[2]

The construction of a "Mexican" identity in the United States is both emblematic of this process and historically unique. It is emblematic in that Mexican residents of the United States have undergone a racialization process that conflates nuances in their regional, ethnic, class-based, and gendered backgrounds.[3] For example, national distinctions between Mexicans and other Latin Americans are generally not recognized in U.S. government programs, census data, and official publications, and Latin Americans tend to be treated as a homogenous cultural group.[4] In fact, the very label "Hispanic" was created at the height of Chicano militancy in 1969 to submerge the particular histories of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and other Spanish speakers into a broad and generic cultural group, weakening their particular political demands.[5] Many Mexican immigrants, Mexican Americans, and other Latin Americans in the United States have responded by forming just such a "Latino/a" community that generates solidarity and feelings of shared experience. Divisions within this community, however, have anything but disappeared; Latino/a identity is nuanced with respect to class, gender, nationality, and ethnic origin.

Homogenization of Latin Americans can have regional particularities; because of the large Mexican population in the Chicago area, Latin American workers in Chicago are often labeled "Mexican," even when they may actually be from Central or South American countries. The Lions and their co-workers and friends all call themselves "Mexicans" and rarely use the term "Latino/a." In this chapter, I also prefer to describe the Lions as Mexican rather than Latino for two reasons: first, to avoid conflating the experiences of Mexican immigrants with the experiences of all other Latin American immigrants, and second, because "Mexican" is associated with

the working class and illegal status in a way that "Latino" is not, and these are two important components of the Lions' social identities.

The formation of a Mexican identity in the United States is historically unique because of the particular association of "Mexican" with working-class and illegal status.[6] The salience of illegal and working-class status to Mexican identity can be explained by the association of Mexicans with a long-term labor migration that is increasingly dominated by unauthorized entries. While other immigrant groups have also tended to be associated with the working class, the perpetuation of Mexican migration as a labor migration, combined with increasing restrictions on legal entry and enforcement-oriented "operations" concentrated on the southern border, has collapsed Mexican/illegal/working class identity in a historically contingent way.[7]

In recent years, highly publicized and polarizing debates about immigration have relegated popular perceptions of Mexican immigrants in the United States into two widespread one-dimensional types. Although one stereotype is putatively positive and the other very negative, all stereotypes reduce people to one-dimensional ideas about their difference and can perpetuate segregation and dehumanization.

The first widespread stereotype of Mexican immigrants in the United States can be called "Mexicans as illegal aliens." This conception of Mexican immigrants identifies them as iconic illegal immigrants and stigmatizes them as lawless, unclean, uneducated, and threatening interlopers who paradoxically steal jobs and leech public assistance.[8] As the fodder of conservative cable news shows, radio programs, and high-profile local political campaigns, this stereotype has wide popular currency. As a result, Latin American immigrants in the United States have become especially vulnerable to social alienation, exploitation, harassment, and hate crimes in recent decades.[9]

The second prevailing stereotype can be termed "Mexicans as hard-working immigrants." This conception of Mexican immigrants locates them in hegemonic narratives of "America as a nation of immigrants" and "America as a land of opportunity." Mexican immigrants, even the undocumented, are portrayed as sympathetic figures who have earned a moral claim to American citizenship by striving to improve their lives just as generations have done before them. This stereotype emphasizes Latin American immigrants' religiosity, family orientation, and work ethic and is frequently promoted in immigrant rights discourses.[10] Both of these stereotypes—"Mexicans as illegal aliens" and "Mexicans as hard-working immigrants"—continue to abound and are applied (sometimes simultaneously) to Mexican workers in restaurants like Uncle Luigi's and Il Vino.

Mojarones and Pacos: Race, Class, and Illegality at Il Vino

At Il Vino, categories of work are mapped onto categories of race, class, and legal status, segregating Mexican workers and reinforcing their circumscription on the job. This segregation is so persistent that the busboys at Il Vino are widely referred to as "the Pacos," a clear reference to their Mexican origins. Although the busboys have been complicit in reproducing racialized stereotypes of themselves as very hard workers (as described in the last chapter), it is ultimately the managers, not the workers, who decide who gets to work and in what jobs. Thus, in this section I explore managements' beliefs about their Mexican immigrant employees.

There are three levels, or "tiers," of management at Il Vino. The highest tier is "general manager"; the general manager oversees all other managers and is responsible for maintaining seamless operations between different sections of the restaurant. The second tier is occupied by two "floor managers" who are responsible for the minute-by-minute operation of the restaurant and who take care of customer requests and complaints. The third tier consists of "section managers," who are in charge of segments of restaurant operations. Among section managers, there is a "server manager," who supervises the hosts, servers, and bartenders; a "party manager," who takes care of catering, entertainment, and banquet parties; and a "kitchen manager," who is in charge of the kitchen staff and the menu. Notably, the kitchen staff mostly hails from Jalisco, Mexico, and is Spanish monolingual. The kitchen manager also speaks Spanish, but he is Puerto Rican, not Mexican. Since none of these managers is formally in charge of the busboy staff, busboys have some autonomy in how they manage their work group, but they are also subordinate to the entire management staff, as all managers interact with the busboys and give them instructions throughout the workday.

The management staff at Il Vino generally agrees that the Mexican busboys are "the best workers that we have." The general manager describes them as "phenomenal workers," while one floor manager says that the busboys are "awesome" and "the backbone of the place." Managers frequently explain the Mexican workers' superior work ethic in terms of their "culture," but they also acknowledge that Mexican workers have financial needs that "motivate" them to work hard. The kitchen manager explains, "You know what you're going to get from a Mexican immigrant, especially straight from Mexico; if they're coming from Mexico they're in need. . . So, out of necessity, they're going to give you a bigger effort than somebody here who's established." A floor manager agrees, "It's motivation. It's not

more like Desperation?

confidence; anyone could do the job. It's just a matter of if you're willing to be a hard worker. If you're lazy, if you've had everything handed to you your whole life, [you won't be as motivated].... If [the busboys] had papers, they might not be such hard workers." Whether they believe that work ethic is cultural or compelled by need (or both; there need be no contradiction here), the management staff agrees that the busboys are more self-motivated, hard working, and compliant than other workers at Il Vino. This raises an apparent paradox—why are the hardest workers at the restaurant also in the lowest-paid positions? Why aren't busboys rewarded for their hard work with pay raises and promotions?

Some of the managers attribute the Mexican workers' circumscription into the lowest paid jobs to an established association of Mexican immigrants with certain jobs. The general manager says that theoretically he would promote a Mexican busboy to server, but such an arrangement would violate the restaurant industry's "common sense." He explains, "I think that, and once again it's going to be stereotypical, but I think that people look at the industry and think that Hispanics are supposed to be busboys, which means in turn that they're going to be phenomenal at it." A floor manager agrees and says, "Just judging by experience, at least in my business, [the bosses] prefer the Mexican worker over any other race for the jobs that they do, because they know they're getting pretty much an honest day of work out of them compared to what they'd get from somebody else." Management also attributes workplace segregation to the Mexican workers themselves, who are presumed to want to work as busboys. The kitchen manager explains, "I would say it's a comfort thing, where if there's a group of Mexicans working in one area, it's really hard for them not to work with them.... If given a chance to choose, they're going to work where they're more comfortable, and I think that comfort is going to be where their people are at." In a twist on perceived preferences, the general manager attributes the Mexican workers' circumscription to the social pressure of their work group. He says, "I don't think they'd want to [wait tables]. The other guys would make fun of them or would laugh at them, for sure they would give them a hard time."

But managers have other reasons for keeping Mexican workers in back-of-the-house jobs. One frequently cited factor is a perceived language barrier, which would make it difficult for Mexican workers to interact frequently with English-speaking customers. When they are asked what holds back Rene and Roberto, who are highly fluent in English but still work as busboys, managers fall back on economic rationales for the segregation of Mexican employees. The kitchen manager explains that he wishes the economy in Mexico was better, but adds that "at the same time, if it weren't that bad, then how many businesses [in the U.S.] would go under because you can't afford, you really can't afford the wages of an American to do what a Mexican does. You would have to pay a pot scrubber fifteen dollars when you can pay [a Mexican] guy seven dollars to do the same job." Similarly, the catering manager argues that the restaurant needs Mexican workers because Americans like him disdain low-wage jobs: "It's sad to say, they're coming here to try to better themselves and they're doing jobs that other people would look down on. You know, I'm not going to mop a floor, I'm not going to clean a toilet, where this is just an individual looking to pay some bills and survive, and I don't think they look at jobs as being demeaning. They just look at it as a job, and it's better than what they had before." Even when the segregation of Mexican workers is glossed as workers' preferences, managers widely and openly acknowledge that there is an economic dimension to maintaining them in the worst-paid jobs.

The managers at Il Vino effectively rationalize exploitation of undocumented workers, as their beliefs about Mexican immigrants' preferences, talents, and economic needs map onto their perceptions of what a good busboy is, reinforcing and justifying the employment segregation of the immigrant staff. Segregation and homogenization of Mexican employees also perpetuate stereotypes of Mexican workers, as managers fit the busboys into their preconceptions of what Mexican workers should be like. The implications of racial stereotyping of the Mexican busboys become apparent when the usual order of things is shaken up. The story of "Frank" is worth telling at length, because it demonstrates how racialization works at Il Vino, and how work behaviors are interpreted in ways that reinforce management's assumptions.

To date, Frank has been Il Vino's only long-term "white" busboy, a young working-class man who was initially hired to clean during the day. Frank worked for many months alongside Rene, who was bussing lunch shifts, and the two men formed a friendship. Eventually, Frank asked for Rene's help to become a busboy. Rene spoke to the general manager and he reluctantly agreed, though he said that he doubted that Frank would be able to "keep up with the Pacos." But Frank did become a busboy, and he says that the all-Mexican bus staff "took me right in, I jumped in, I did what they asked me to do, and I worked hard, and they appreciate that a lot." Not only was being a busboy more "exciting," but Frank says that he felt a sense of belonging and pride as he earned his co-workers' esteem as a busboy: "Everybody was giving you praise, like, 'Oh, you guys bust your ass,' you know, 'I've never seen people work as hard as you guys.' And, you know, it felt good. It was like, you felt like you were appreciated." Even so,

Frank had to contend with stereotypes that, as a white man, he wouldn't be able to "keep up with the Pacos." He says, "For a white kid to come on and work just as hard as these Mexican guys, I mean it's kind of shocking. Because it's hard to keep up with those guys, you know, they don't stop. They're like zoom, zoom. You know, I'm happy though, I kind of showed them, I guess, and proved myself. There's self-respect there." Unlike other "white guys" who have worked briefly as busboys at Il Vino, Frank did well in the job and worked as a nighttime busboy for nearly three years.

One day, after some server complaints about the bus staff, management decided to appoint a formal busboy manager. This position would be different from the de facto head busboy that had characterized the informal leadership of the busboys' work group intermittently for several years. This position involved a formal appointment, with a pay raise and recognition as a manager, including participation in management meetings. The general manager offered Frank the job, even though Rene, Roberto, Alberto, Chuy, and Leonardo all had more seniority than he did. The racist dimension of promoting the only white busboy to manager was not lost on anyone, and to make matters worse, the same week that Frank's promotion was decided, Chuy was fired for getting into a fight with a kitchen worker, and Rene quit. Although Rene says that his reason for leaving was a higher-paying construction job, those closest to him, including his wife, Molly, and brother Chuy, suspect that Rene was hurt that he was suddenly made subordinate to his less-experienced friend. Angry at Chuy for fighting and Rene for leaving, the owners and the general manager then decided to systematically replace the Mexican busboys with "neighborhood kids," which is code for "white workers." Within two months, only Roberto and Leonardo remained of the original group; the rest of the busboys were young white workers.

The new arrangement was roundly considered a disaster. The bus service rapidly declined, as busboys with many years of experience were replaced by teenage workers who were new to the restaurant business. The general manager described the white busboy staff as "horrible" and "clueless," and servers and managers alike voiced their displeasure with the decision. Less than eight months after the decision to replace the Mexican workers with "neighborhood kids" was made, the general manager called Rene. Per Tony's wishes, he asked Rene to come back to Il Vino and even told him he could name his own terms. Rene negotiated for health insurance and a small raise in his hourly rate, and management agreed. The general manager then asked Chuy to come back too, and the re-replacement began. Within two weeks, the busboy staff was once again all-Mexican-immigrant, as Alberto returned from Mexico and the surviving white

busboys were fired. Frank was removed as busboy manager and offered a daytime bartending position earning less in tips than he had as a nighttime busboy. For his part, Frank never liked being manager and is nostalgic for the days when he worked as a busboy "with the guys." The busboy staff continues today to be all-Mexican-immigrant, with the core group intact, and without a permanent, formal manager.

At Il Vino, busboy is a racialized job category, and the busboys are racialized workers. This is demonstrated in the strict racial segregation of Mexican workers in busboy and kitchen jobs, in the manager's comment about Frank working with "the Pacos," in management's decision to promote the only white busboy to manager and replace the Mexican workers with white workers, and in the subsequent decision to replace the white workers with Mexican workers again. In this case, we see two different stereotypes of Mexican immigrants at play. The first, "Mexican men as immature and temperamental," came to the fore after Chuy fought another worker and Rene quit, and it was used to justify the replacement of Mexican workers with white workers. The second stereotype, "Mexicans as really hard workers," won out when the white workers did not do well and was used to justify replacing white workers with Mexican immigrants. At Il Vino, the busboys' strengths and weaknesses—of Mexican and white workers alike—were more associated with their putative ethno-racial characteristics than with their experience, training, or motivation to do the job.

It is in this context of racialization and stigmatization that undocumented people like the Lions make sense of who they are and what they are doing. But, as Heyman (2001) points out, "identifications are not the same as identities" (135), and workers develop complex and contradictory perceptions of themselves as they face subordination, respond to stereotyping, and construct social identities in the United States. The remainder of this chapter considers how the Lions cultivate dignity and self-esteem as they consider themselves in relation to other groups of workers in the context of broader narratives about illegal immigration and America as a land of opportunity.[11]

The Dignity of Hard Work

Working hard provides several immediate benefits for workers—it promotes their job security, augments their income, and makes their workday go by faster—but it is also a critical source of workers' self-esteem and an integral component of their identities as working-class men. The Lions emphasize the integrity of hard work, and they argue that working hard is an honorable approach to upward mobility that requires bravery

and stamina. As they call attention to the economic contributions that they make to U.S. society as low-wage workers, the Lions also address and rebut anti-immigrant arguments that undocumented workers drain the U.S. economy and take jobs from U.S. citizens.

In the following quote, Lalo expresses a widely held view that highlights his identity as a worker as it counters stereotypes of undocumented immigrants as criminal:

> Jumping the border—yes, it's a crime. But is it criminal? One thing is to kill, or steal something. Okay, I'm stealing something in the sense that I am on your land without permission, but I didn't come to kill, I didn't come to steal, I didn't come to hurt anyone. But they don't want to see it that way. So, yes, jumping the border, I know that I'm committing a crime, but it's not the same as if I work for you and you don't pay me. That is stealing. And we are human beings and we should help each other. And you should pay me because I'm doing work for you. But you take advantage and don't pay me because I'm undocumented, and I can't do anything about it. You just call immigration, or the police, and it's over. That's a robbery, anyway you want to look at it. That's stealing, that's a crime.

In this comment, Lalo not only reaffirms the image of the "hard-working Mexican," he makes a moral argument against the abuse of undocumented labor. As the threat of immigration enforcement is ever-present in the labor relations of undocumented workers, many workers like Lalo perceive such laws as tools in their exploitation. Alejandro remarks that "the bosses know you don't have papers, and they use it. That's why they pay you what they pay you, because you cannot ask for more money." In contrast to exploitative employers, the Lions emphasize that they have an ethical approach to getting ahead: good, old-fashioned hard work.

The Lions emphasize the respectability of hard work, and they draw very strong boundaries against suck-ups [*barberos*] and American workers, who they say will try to win the boss at any cost. The idea that undocumented Mexican workers have an ethical approach to self-improvement [*superándose*] at work is also emphasized in this quote from Lalo: "What I say is that if I want to win the boss, it's going to be with work, not by gossiping with him." The Lions' boundaries against "suck-ups" are so strong that workers who cause friction by gossiping or backstabbing are alienated from the social group. This happened to Rodolfo, a childhood friend of Rene and Chuy, who was effectively cut off from the resources of the group after being widely suspected of gossiping with the managers at Il Vino. Notably, his exclusion from the work group ultimately resulted in

Rodolfo's dismissal as an Il Vino busboy, as managers puzzled over why he was apparently unable to get along with the other workers. As the Lions express contempt for workers who backstab other workers to get ahead and emphasize their own ethical approach to work, they render hard work a moral activity that is worthy of dignity and respect.

The Lions also associate difficult labor with bravery and stamina and dismiss those whom disdain physical labor as "dirty." For example, while Lalo admits that he does not enjoy cleaning bathrooms, he also says, "It doesn't scare me. Because there are white guys who see vomit and say, 'No, no way.' Yes, it smells bad and it looks gross, but you're going to clean it, you're going to take a shower, [and] you're going to wash your hands. So it's not that dirty." As an undocumented immigrant, it may be far easier for Lalo to dismiss those who snub "dirty work" than to avoid that work himself. By equating willingness to work with integrity and bravery, these workers convert socially degraded work into a source of self-esteem.

The Lions frequently contrast their labor with that of American workers, who they typically conflate with "white" workers.[12] Because of the intense racial segregation of African Americans in the Chicago area, the Mexican workers at Il Vino rarely cross paths with African Americans and do not tend to see them as competitors in the labor market. Perhaps because they are largely based on inexperience, the Lions' attitudes toward African Americans run the gamut from reproducing disparaging stereotypes about African Americans' supposed unwillingness to work, to empathy with African Americans based on common experiences of racism in the United States, to bald curiosity. More than once, a Lion has asked me why poor African Americans do not want to work, believing that, since they (the Lions) have been able to obtain a job without papers, it must be easy for American citizens to get jobs if they want them. When African Americans do come up in conversation, they are usually the subject of some kind of observation—"Oh, there are a lot of blacks [*morenos* or *negros*] here today."—that is not overtly positive or negative.

The Lions are far more concerned with drawing boundaries against white workers [*gabachos*], whom they largely view as "lazy" and "privileged." They emphasize that Mexican workers, in contrast to whites, are more likely to be hard working and appreciative of opportunity. This comment from Alejandro highlights the distinction he perceives between Mexican workers' and white workers' approaches to work: "I think [white workers] score more points by doing other things than work, and we do the opposite, we do more work than other things, like sucking up to the boss." This racial distinction between Mexican and white workers is also illustrated in the following comment by Luis, in which he expresses a

sentiment that is widely shared by the other Lions: "A Mexican works at a certain level, a certain rhythm, boom, boom, boom. And a white guy, no. A white guy is used to working slow, so when he gets tired of doing something, he stops and rests, you know? And then the wetbacks start to complain that he doesn't work well and stuff. It's what I'm telling you: an American is not worth as much as a Mexican."

The Lions believe that white workers are not held to the same standards of work that they are—that managers expect less from white workers and tolerate their laziness. In the following comment, Lalo reacts to Tony's complaint that he "looks tired:" "Yeah, I'm not saying that I'm not, because I am tired, but tell [Tony] to take a good look, okay, take a good look at the whites, how they walk around and they don't even do a good job.... How come he only says stuff to the wetbacks?" The Lions most frequently expressed the opinion that white workers are not hard workers when they compared themselves with white busboys who, they felt, were not contributing their share. Only Frank has been able to dispel the Lions' stereotypes about lazy white busboys and win long-term respect and camaraderie as a fellow busboy.

While the busboys reproduce racialized stereotypes of their labor, they are also aware that those stereotypes can justify unfair treatment, inequality, and exploitation. They acknowledge that there is nothing primordial about being a hard worker, and they frequently point out that race is not a good determinant of a person's work ethic. Roberto explains that for him, a person's capacity for work, not their race, is what makes them a good or bad co-worker: "There is no difference, none at all. If someone doesn't want to work, if they are black, or Latino, or African, or American, or Asian, if they don't want to work hard, they're not going to last. It doesn't matter what kind of person they are, what matters is if they work hard [*si le echan ganas*]." In interviews, the Lions often followed up stereotypical comments about Mexican workers' superior work ethic with a comment on variation among groups of workers. The following remark by Rene illustrates his ambivalence about race as a good indicator of work ethic: "Probably if you're waiting on help from a fellow Hispanic, somebody that you already know, he probably won't help you like you need;... the white guy [*el gabacho*], if you talk to him right, he will help you a lot." The Lions also say that not all undocumented Mexican workers are hard workers and readily recognize that many white workers do indeed work very hard.

In spite of their status as undocumented immigrants, the Lions have gained a high degree of social esteem from their co-workers at Il Vino. As I mentioned in the first chapter, the busboys regularly interact socially with their nonimmigrant co-workers, and several are involved romantically

with white female co-workers. As this comment from the server manager illustrates, there are social norms at Il Vino that encourage respectful treatment of the busboys: "These [busboys] have been here for a long, long time, and if you come to a place and you see people treating them good, you're going to too, or you're an idiot. For one, because you don't want to be that asshole looking down on people who basically opened this place up and had a massive part in how successful it is." While the primary source of this esteem is the notion that the busboys are "the best workers," the Lions are also known as friendly, funny, and considerate young men.

In fact, the busboys' reputation as valuable workers who are worthy of respect is so strong that many of the servers are concerned about making a good impression on them! When I once casually mentioned to a new waitress that I had heard good things about her from the busboys, she expressed relief, saying how important it was to her that the busboys like her. On another occasion, a waitress who was displeased with Rene, who was her busboy that night, said that she would never complain about him to management since "Rene is untouchable." The busboys are considered an integral part of the restaurant staff, and when Il Vino customers do or say things that may be considered disrespectful to the busboys, other employees are likely to defend them. Once, a couple of rather drunk customers had knocked their bread crumbs onto the floor and then laughed when Alberto came to sweep them up. Their waitress angrily told the customers to stop, saying, "You don't make extra work for our guys like that!" On another occasion, a customer accused Chuy of stealing or clearing (it wasn't clear which) his pack of cigarettes off of the table. The waiter defended Chuy, explaining to the customer that Chuy had worked there for a long time, was completely trustworthy, and certainly knew better than to throw away a full pack of cigarettes.

For their part, the busboys mostly like their white co-workers, particularly the service staff, and they socialize with them frequently. At closing time, it is quite common for the servers and busboys to sit around and have a drink (or several) together. Although the busboys tend to sit at one table and the servers at another, there is quite a bit of social interaction between the two groups. Busboys are regularly invited to social outings, including birthday parties and baseball games.

The busboys' relationship with the management staff is more ambivalent. While managers at Il Vino celebrate the busboys' "work ethic," they also express paternalistic and racist attitudes toward the busboys, calling them on occasion "my little guys" or "the Pacos." Leonardo says that he thinks the bosses at Il Vino see him as "just another poor wetback working for us." The busboys also resent what they see as some managers' reluctance

to do actual work and their propensity to call the busboys for every little thing. In fact, some of the busboys have said that the worst thing about working at Il Vino is the constant haranguing by management staff on the walkie-talkie radios.

On the Margins of the "American Dream"

Valorizing hard work is not only an immediate panacea to compensate for doing degraded jobs, it is an integral part of the Lions' broader worldviews. Perhaps the most unexpected aspect of the Lions' lives is the degree to which they are integrated economically and socially into the broader U.S. society as workers. Unlike many inner-city young men in the United States (those featured in Philippe Bourgois' "In Search of Respect" [1996/2003] and Jay MacLeod's "Ain't No Makin' It" [1995] come to mind), the racialization of undocumented Mexican workers has not excluded them from the job market—in fact, the stereotyping of Mexican immigrants as superior low-wage workers has resulted in their *preferential* hiring in many low-wage industries. This immersion in an active working-class culture makes it possible for workers like the Lions to identify with larger working-class values and to aspire to middle-class status. In this context, developing a social identity as hard workers is not only in harmony with the Lions' value systems, it is consistent with their active participation in the U.S. labor force.

The Lions believe that winning over the boss by working hard has provided them with a degree of financial security, as well as respect, in spite of their status as illegal immigrants. This conceptual connection allows them to take personal credit for their good fortunes and feel like they have some control over their economic outcomes. Consequently, they gear their workplace strategies toward winning the boss [*ganándose al patron*] by doing extra work and always appearing "willing to work hard." The belief that hard work brings reward is affirmed by the structure of income distribution in restaurants like Il Vino. Busboys receive immediate, material feedback on their work in the form of tips, which draws a direct connection between effort and talent, on the one hand, and income, on the other. The busboys at Il Vino are also relatively highly paid, further enhancing a sense of personal reward and repressing a sense of collective subordination. The Lions' beliefs about work must also be considered in the context of their exclusion from workers' unions and compensation programs like unemployment benefits. The Lions and other undocumented workers live without the parachutes that provide citizen workers with a modicum of protection against unemployment and poverty. Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that

they have learned to rely only on themselves and their most trusted friends for their economic well-being.

Not all the Lions express the same stance on work and power relations. In particular, Luis and Chuy are likely to snub behaviors that they feel are subservient, and they are sensitive to perceived exploitation and discrimination. This renders them more susceptible to charges that they have a "bad attitude" and has helped put both of these young men on the chopping block at Il Vino. Chuy, for example, is not good at always appearing eager to work and often fails to show the appropriate amount of enthusiasm for cleaning or doing extra tasks. This has led to rather amorphous server complaints about Chuy's "attitude" and to political arguments between Chuy and his more conservative brother, Rene. For his part, Luis asserts his dignity by refusing to "kiss the owner's ass" and "run around like an idiot." Even so, Chuy and Luis also agree that winning over the boss is important. Luis explains that he tries to win the boss so that… "if the boss knows that you work hard and he sees someone else who doesn't do it as well, then if there's a layoff one day and they're going to fire people, who do you think they're going to fire? The guy who works less. That's why, you could say, you win the boss." This is an unfortunately ironic comment from Luis, who was demoted and then later fired from Il Vino for failing to demonstrate an appropriate commitment to working hard.

In discussions about unauthorized immigration, the Lions articulate the argument that they are compelled to migrate because of circumstances beyond their control, but the ways in which they deal with those circumstances—by working hard, by being responsible, and by paying taxes, for example—are morally commendable. When I asked Roberto if he thought undocumented immigrants were criminals, he laughed, "If that's what they consider criminal, then we are criminals. But we come to work honorably, to live in peace. We don't bother anybody. I have never committed a crime in the U.S., and you have to behave yourself if you want to be a good citizen, as much here as in China or anywhere else. You have to be a good person." The Lions stress that they do not succumb to vices [*vicios*], such as spending money on luxuries and neglecting their families, or doing drugs, or cheating on their partners. They also emphasize the contributions that, as taxpayers, they make to the U.S. economy. Leonardo jokes that Mexicans have had a positive impact on the United States because "all the Mexicans are illegal [and] so they can't get their tax refunds, and all that money stays with the government. That's a lot of money from the Mexicans; they're probably using all that money to build that wall [on the border]."[13] By highlighting their moral fortitude and economic contributions to U.S. society, the Lions address and rebut the arguments, made

popular by anti-immigrant groups, that undocumented immigrants are threatening criminals or potential terrorists. By fulfilling American ideals and adopting American values, undocumented immigrants like the Lions make a normative appeal for citizenship rights.

More broadly, the Lions emphasize narratives of "America as a nation of immigrants" and "America as a land of opportunity" as they make sense of the opportunities they encounter and stake a claim for legitimacy as workers in the United States. Leonardo says, "I don't care if I'm illegal or whatever. Why not? Because this country gives you opportunities. If you take advantage of them, good for you, and if you don't, you're stupid. So I feel good that I have been able to take advantage of opportunities here." Ironically, the Lions' very exclusion from the polity as undocumented immigrants supports their belief in merit-based achievement, since the limitations they encounter are explained by their illegal status. That is, to the extent that these workers experience exclusion from opportunities in America, they believe that they are excluded because they are not actually American. Moreover, since they have been able to secure employment as undocumented workers, the Lions believe that anyone should be able to do it. For example, Lalo claims, "If I had papers, I would never be without work. But how many white guys do you see begging on the street corner who are strong, capable of working in a kitchen? Why don't they work? They're lazy." The illegalization of undocumented workers provides an easy justification for constraints on their opportunities that is *consistent* with the ideals of the American Dream. In spite of their resentment toward the ways in which undocumented status constrains their opportunities, these workers widely affirm a belief in "America as a land of opportunity," and they generally believe that they will be able to attain middle-class status if they can adjust their legal papers. As the prospect of comprehensive immigration reform draws near, the Lions are cautiously optimistic about their futures as U.S. workers.

Gendered Identity and the Honor of Family Men

The Lions' social identities as hard workers and good citizens are deeply intertwined with their social identities as family men. The idea that family is the most important thing in life is a recurring theme in the Lions' discourse. They stress their commitment to family, the importance of family in their lives, and their sense of familial responsibility over all other considerations. The Lions are, by all accounts, mostly faithful to their partners and tend to define their masculinity by a sense of familial responsibility satisfied by financial provisioning.

Although the Lions lament long periods of time in which they were lonely for the company of women—usually just after arriving in the United States—all of the Lions are currently involved in serious relationships, except for Luis (who is involved in several nonserious relationships). As I mentioned earlier, six of the Lions—Alejandro, Chuy, Leonardo, Omar, Rene, and Roberto—are in serious romantic relationships with "white" American women. While there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of the emotional attachment between the Lions and their American partners, external factors may have also contributed to their pairing. First and foremost, there is a dearth of single Mexican women in the restaurant business; undocumented Mexican women who do come to the United States are often "hidden," working as nannies or maids in the private sector.[14] It is hard for the Lions, who work well over forty hours per week, to meet single female cohorts. Simply put, there may just be more white women available than Mexican women. Second, being with a white woman may offer status and financial security, since one enduring legacy of the Spanish conquest of Mexico is an association of lighter skin with wealth and power. Furthermore, the Lions' white girlfriends are all studying to be professionals whose incomes will make significant contributions to the Lions' middle-class aspirations. However, the Lions do not become involved with American women to "get papers." While the mistaken belief that marriage to an American citizen provides an easy path to legal status persists in wider society, the Lions are aware that this is no longer true. Under current immigration law, none of the Lions is eligible to "fix" his legal status within the United States, even with a citizen wife and children.

The Lions' fathering practices also provide a window into their beliefs about masculine gender roles. My ability to observe Lions with their children was limited by the geographical separation of father and children in the cases of Alberto, Luis, and Lalo and by the fact that Chuy, Leonardo, and Roberto do not have children yet. Any conclusions that I draw here are based only on observations of how the Lions interact with the children of Rene, Alejandro (who has partial custody of his son), and Manuel. Unlike the typical stereotype of the Mexican macho (see Gutmann 2007), Rene, Alejandro, and Manuel are active fathers who hold their infants, play with their toddlers, and "hang out" with their older children. For example, it is widely commented among the Lions that Rene and his two-year-old son Jacob Jose (J.J.) are attached at the hip [*siempre están pegados*] and that J.J. emulates his father in everything. Both Manuel and Alejandro are active fathers to their sons, and all of the Lions play with these children, who frequently accompany their fathers to social events and soccer games. (See Figure 6.1.) While I was in León, I noticed that Mexican men there interact

FIGURE **6.1 Wednesday soccer in the park: the backpacks make convenient goal posts, and Manuel's young sons are enthusiastic goalies.** (*Courtesy of the author*)

a great deal with their children; it was not uncommon to see fathers carrying their infants and toddlers, or holding their older children's hands, as they strolled down the streets.

Fathering practices also reveal the limits of the Lions' gender progressiveness. In particular, there are apparent differences with the level of engagement that the Lions have with male and female children. They play with girls less, particularly as the girls get older, and they do not invite girls to accompany them as much on outings. There also appears to be a gendered division of labor concerning infant care: Molly says that Rene has never changed a diaper in his life.

Of course, the physical separation of Alberto, Lalo, and Luis from their children necessarily means that the responsibility of caring for children falls on mothers in Mexico. This can be a source of marital conflict, as wives feel resentful at this physical abandonment and overwhelmed at having to manage their households alone for extended periods of time. Interestingly, many of the wives of immigrant men that I met in Mexico have created informal but robust female communities that provide emotional support and child-caring help. For example, Alberto's wife lives with her mother, her sister (whose husband works in the United States), and

her sister-in-law (whose husband also migrates back and forth between Mexico and the U.S.) in a single household in León. These women share household responsibilities and raise their children together. For their part, the men are emotionally conflicted about their familial responsibilities: they feel guilty, on the one hand, for being apart from their families and obligated on the other hand, to make dollars to secure their families' well-being (see also Pribilsky 2007).

This conflict is most apparent in Alberto. This is Alberto's third time in the United States—his last, he says. He and his wife reluctantly decided that he would return to Chicago to work when she became pregnant with their third child. He has yet to see his newest daughter, who will be nearly two years old by the time he expects to return to Mexico. He talks about his wife and daughters with great emotion—almost with awe. He says his wife is his best friend, the person that he admires and respects most in the world. Nevertheless, prolonged periods of separation are not easy on his marriage. Alberto feels torn between the need he always feels to stay a little longer and the need to be physically present in the life of his family. Alberto says he is trying to save up enough money so that when he returns to Mexico, he can open up a store of his own and be financially independent. But his savings are meager, and this goal has so far remained out of his reach.[15]

As undocumented Mexican workers in the United States, the Lions do not arrive freely able to position themselves as they choose in relation to the U.S. social structure. Instead, they contend with profound stereotypes, as well as racial, legal, economic, and social circumscription, and they negotiate their identity and self-worth within these subjective constraints. The Lions are not immune from either the stigma of being "illegal aliens" or the stigma of doing "dirty work." In fact, they develop multiple and various strategies for protecting themselves psychologically and defending their dignity and self-esteem.

The Lions utilize the racial and legal circumscription of their labor to help promote a reputation for themselves as hard workers. This strategy is fraught with contradiction: the Lions simultaneously reject the idea that race is a good indicator of work ethic and agree that Mexican workers are superior workers. While promoting racial stereotypes of themselves as hard workers may provide some short-term advantages, in the long run racial categorization constrains the Lions' life chances and reproduces the social inequalities that subordinate their labor.

The Lions' social and political circumscription from wider society also increases their reliance on one another for both material and emotional resources. In response, the Lions have created a social community with

norms of mutuality and helpfulness; within these communities, they buffer themselves from disdain and promote values that uphold their sense of self-worth. In particular, work and relationships provide social space in which the Lions emphasize some normative beliefs—such as "hard work is a virtue" and "real men take care of their families"—and reinterpret others. This selective process allows the Lions to attain a sense of dignity in spite of being some of the most marginalized and vilified members of U.S. society. In fact, as I struggled with a title for this chapter, it was Chuy who suggested that it be called "*Los Número Uno,*" or "The Number Ones."

Notes

1. Lalo is repeating a common misconception that undocumented workers don't pay taxes. In fact, between 70 and 80 percent of undocumented workers are estimated to pay taxes on their wages (Lalo is one of them), and all undocumented people pay sales and excise taxes (see Chapter 7).
2. Omi and Winant 1994; Portes and Rumbaut 1996.
3. De Genova 2005; De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003.
4. Portes and Rumbaut 1996:136; Romero 2002.
5. De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003.
6. De Genova 2005; De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003.
7. De Genova 2005; Ngai 2004.
8. Coutin and Chock 1997; De Genova 2005; Massey et al. 2002; Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 1995; Vila 2000.
9. Pew Hispanic Center 2007; Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 1995; Urbina 2009.
10. Coutin and Chock 1997. The work ethic of Latin American immigrants is often celebrated in contrast to African American workers, reinforcing racist stereotypes and economic marginalization of both, but to the particular detriment of the latter (see Waldinger and Lichter 2003; Steinberg 2005).
11. The concept of hegemony, first developed by Antonio Gramsci, has been particularly productive in studies of migration and transnationalism in linking the sociopolitical order with individual and group subjectivities. Hegemony refers to a system of ideas and practices, pervasive in all aspects of life, which reproduce the social order by making it seem natural and inevitable (Gramsci 1994). Living in a hegemonic society means that subjective constructions of identity are never free from the social positions of actors but are embedded in relations of power and position (see also Appadurai 1996; Basch et al. 1994; De Genova 2005; De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003; Portes and Walton 1981). Individuals and groups struggle to enhance their positions in relation to the dominant sociopolitical order by defining themselves in certain ways and drawing boundaries against others. Group identity and solidarity tend to be particularly significant among people who are discriminated against by mainstream society.

    Hegemonic concepts of race, ethnicity, nationality, class, and citizenship are reproduced, changed, and challenged as people construct identities and attempt to explain their status. When low-status groups draw boundaries against those "below" them, for example, they tend to repeat racial and status-based stereotypes and thereby subjectively reproduce hegemonic explanations for social inequality (what P. Gomberg, 2007, calls "the rationalization principle"). When comparing themselves to "those above," workers are more likely to reject or reinterpret mainstream explanations of inequality that justify their low status ("the ego-defense principle"). Instead, norms, values, and moral codes tend to emerge within low-status groups that provide alternative explanations for social inequality and may also supply sources of self-esteem (P. Gomberg 2007; Lamont 2000; MacLeod 1995 [1987]). For example, by promoting themselves as hard-workers and disparaging other groups who may be in competition with them for low-wage work as "lazy," the Lions can enhance their competitiveness in the labor market and boost their self-esteem. As they do so, they reproduce hegemonic concepts of individual meritocracy and the value of hard work.
12. See also De Genova 2005:8.
13. Leonardo is joking, but Chacon and Davis (2006) report that in early 2006, "the Arizona House Appropriations Committee approved a resolution that would attach an 8 percent state tax on electronic money transfers to Mexico. The tax, which will generate $80 million every year, will be used to pay for a double and triple-walled border fence between Arizona and Mexico" (164).
14. See Chang 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Romero 2002.
15. See the Epilogue.