

Ethnography

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The everyday civil war Migrant working men, within and against capital

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ABSTRACT ■ In an industrial workplace distinguished by flagrant health and safety violations and a fairly explicit antagonism between the virtually all-male workforce and the plant management, many of the male Mexican/migrant workers' postures of fearlessness and stoic perseverance evinced a sometimes deadly complicity between the compulsions of their masculinity with their own exploitation. While these male workers participated in their own effective subordination to the mandates of their employers, as labor *for* capital, this article contends that the constitutive role of antagonism and struggle between labor and capital nonetheless defines some of the decisive parameters of everyday life, and thus ought to be central to all critical social inquiry. It becomes crucial then for ethnography in particular to account for the ethnographer's own institutionally mediated social situation and practice. The article therefore examines some of the material and practical conditions of possibility of its own research endeavor, in order to critically and self-reflexively consider the often-agonistic relationship of the ethnographer to the wider politics of workplace 'training', managerial surveillance, labor discipline and subordination.

KEY WORDS ■ capital-labor relation, struggle, Mexican migrants, workplace literacy, masculinity, discipline, surveillance, complicity, politics of ethnography

The establishment of a normal working day is . . . the product of a protracted and more or less concealed civil war . . . (Marx, 1976 [1867]: 412)

Much as labor itself has always and everywhere been the truly integral and indispensable motive force driving the processes of capitalist production – in effect, the veritable subject of its own exploitation and alienation, or indeed, its objectification as capital – so also have laboring people, always and everywhere, been situated as historical subjects in an intrinsically antagonistic relation to their subordination to the dictates of capital, and hence an always volatile and potentially insubordinate force. Indeed, perhaps the single most significant theoretical innovation that distinguishes the Marxian social critique is ‘the claim to dissolve all externality’ (Holloway, 1995: 159). Labor *within* capitalist social relations is, in this sense, always – simultaneously – labor *for* and *against* capital, leaving both inextricably ensnared in a contradictory and conflict-ridden condition (Holloway, 1995: 163–4; cf. Bonefeld, 1995). Precisely because of this unpredictable subjectivity of all working people (that is, their constitutive but contradictory agency as historical subjects), the tempo of *struggle* between these opposed classes of capitalists and laborers is necessarily uneven and locally specific. But struggle never exists as some kind of sheer subjectivity in an *external* relation to an ‘objective’ order of things called ‘society’. Rather, the apparently objective conditions of capitalist society are themselves no more nor less than the objectification of the constituting subjectivity of human creative capacities and productive powers in an agonistic and necessarily also antagonistic process of active and open-ended self-realization through un-predetermined social relations of struggle. Capital accumulation can never truly circumvent the legacies and enduring ramifications of the uneven rhythms of social struggle and labor’s *insubordination*, nor consequently the divergences of productivity, rates of profit, and so forth that embody capital’s diverse accommodations to and convulsive attempts to transcend its own inescapable dependency upon labor (Holloway, 1995: 160–1). Indeed, every tentative ‘solution’ only exacerbates existing contradictions and generates new prospects for crisis.

The constitutive role of antagonism and struggle between labor and capital, therefore, defines many of the decisive parameters of everyday life, and thus, I would contend, ought to be central to all critical social inquiry, especially ethnographic work, the ostensible goal and arguably most singular distinction of which is precisely to elucidate the otherwise opaque textures of the everyday and excavate from the apparently mundane an immanent critical knowledge. Such an immanent critique, however, must attend to the simultaneity and mutual constitution of both subordination and insubordination, in an unresolved (and decidedly non-teleological) dialectical relation by which the thing-like character of social relations

emerges precisely as the product and consequence of the ongoing and continuous processes of subjectivity and its objectification, and so also diverse formations of subjection that are always nonetheless conflicted and incomplete. In the spirit of these propositions, this article draws from my ethnographic research in Chicago during the mid-1990s, in an industrial workplace that I call Caustic Scrub where I was employed as an instructor of English as a Second Language (ESL).¹

'Dirty work' at Caustic Scrub

Caustic Scrub was a kind of industrial service station, devoted to cleaning chemical products out of tanker trucks that had delivered their cargos and now had to be prepared for subsequent loads; in addition to truck tank cleaning, Caustic Scrub was also engaged with cleaning chemicals out of other types of industrial transport containers, and of course, chemical waste disposal, as well as subsidiary operations involving tank demolition and disposal. Although this was not a large workplace, Caustic Scrub was a corporation with operations across the United States, and the Chicago plant was one of the company's largest installations; furthermore, it was certainly one of the busiest, owing to Chicago's geographical centrality on the national scale as a transportation hub. The plant maintained three regular shifts, and operated 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There was considerable variability among the chemical materials that workers had to handle and the processes required for each job, as well as variability across shifts, and likewise, extensive variability in the sizes of the jobs, the corresponding durations of the cleaning processes, and the content and proportions of often 'caustic' cleaning agents required for each tank to be serviced. All told, this was a fairly complicated business, and a potentially deadly one. It was also largely presumed to be a remarkable exemplar of 'dirty work'. However, much like the largely unexamined vagaries of the notion of 'cheap labor', critiqued by Michael Burawoy (1976: 1056–7) – whereby the necessary question, '*Cheap with respect to what?*' must inevitably be transposed into: '*Cheap for whom with respect to what under what conditions?*' – so the notion of 'dirty work' itself tends to entail a panoply of unexamined and uncritical presuppositions that exceed the literal sense of inordinate exposure to one or another kind of 'dirt' or 'dirtiness' and imply a diffuse economy of moral distinctions involving humiliation, degradation, and abjection. What finally counts as menial or demeaning 'dirty' work, much like which workers are ultimately counted as 'cheap' labor, has to do fundamentally with the everyday struggles of working people over the terms and conditions of their exploitation (Salzinger, 1991). The degrading and dangerous aspects of the labor process at Caustic Scrub were inseparable

from the extent to which management could routinely undermine the workers' diverse efforts to counteract or subvert their own effective subordination. Whereas some of Caustic Scrub's competitors were unionized, notably, the Caustic management was fiercely anti-union; their competitiveness and profitability apparently depended upon it. Furthermore, there were far more severe 'quality' standards and specifications now (in 1995) than had been in place only 10 years prior, imposed both by federal regulations as well as transnational corporate customers.

The contradictions of workplace literacy that arise from the place of 'training' in labor discipline had diverse ramifications for my own institutionally mediated social situation and practice, both as a workplace-based ESL instructor and as an ethnographer.² While I was teaching three ESL courses at Caustic Scrub during the autumn of 1995, the institutionally embedded contradictions between these disciplinary aspects of workplace 'training' and my own critical pedagogical and also ethnographic aspirations became quite pronounced. During this period, of course, I spent a great deal of time at this workplace each week, and came to know a large number of people who comprised the relatively small, predominantly Mexican/migrant and virtually all-male workforce.³ Indeed, I probably was teaching all of the more than two-thirds of the workers who were officially designated as 'limited English proficient', all of whom had migrated from Mexico. The ESL courses that I taught at Caustic Scrub, however, were different from others I had taught elsewhere. In general, I was paid by a workplace literacy program that employed instructors and sent us to teach at the workplace sites of the program's corporate clients. I was never employed (or paid) directly by any of the companies involved, and the courses were largely funded by grant money that had been applied for by the consortiums of my employer and the manufacturing companies that were its clients. In the case of Caustic Scrub, in contrast, my services as an ESL instructor had been hired by a private consultancy that had been contracted by Caustic, minimally to regularize its procedures, but also prospectively, however implausibly, to try to straighten out some of the Chicago plant's most glaring health and safety violations. Thus, the particularities of the institutional setting in which I was working were especially salient.

My supervisor at this consulting firm, Harold, informed me that Caustic Scrub had literally no official, documented procedures for its labor processes whatsoever. The firm had therefore been contracted to produce step-by-step job descriptions that would comprise a practical procedures manual, as well as related job-training materials. The company's existing safety policy manual had been devised purely and singularly for federal regulators in the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). The manual had never been distributed, nor read at all by any of the

personnel in the Chicago plant (neither the production workers nor even the management), and would not have been comprehensible to most, even if it had. On the one occasion when the company pretended to comply with OSHA's requirement of safety training, some 50 people were corralled into one small room for a day and a half. At that time, workers were paid 'incentives' for attendance in the training sessions, and promised 'bonuses – pending performance', but they were never informed of any clear or definitive criteria by which to earn those safety bonuses. In the opinion of my supervisor at the consultancy, Caustic Scrub's existing labor process was fairly anarchic. From the standpoints of health and safety, the procedures that were actually in practice were, in Harold's words, sometimes 'excessive', other times 'insufficient'; as he put it, there was 'total variability'. Likewise, the recycling requirements of the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) had served to encourage the company to intensify its circumvention of health-and-safety regulations in the interests of reducing production costs. As a result of over-recycling, there was a perennial depletion of the efficacy of the plant's 'caustic soda'. By over-using the caustic cleaning agent, the company routinely ran the risk of releasing contaminated containers as 'clean'.

The manly mediation of life and death

The handling of industrial chemicals generally entailed the requisite legalism of extensive written materials (typically, in English only) that were highly specific and technical, and generated in print so small that it was barely legible. If the Mexican/migrant workers at Caustic had indubitably been employed in this dangerous work because the management had identified them as a workforce whose legal vulnerability was presumed to ensure a disinclination to challenge the terms of their exploitation, an additional benefit to the management's larger goals of reckless profit-making was precisely that these migrant workers could not read the precautionary materials about health-and-safety hazards. Given the exceptionally high risks to the workers' physical well-being, coupled with the company's concerted efforts to evade health-and-safety regulations in the interests of productivity and the realization of high profits, it was hardly surprising that despite a predominantly Spanish-speaking workforce in the Chicago plant, the company had consistently resisted any written communication in Spanish. The company left the Mexican/migrant workers to discover these lethal risks the old-fashioned way.

During my first class sessions at Caustic, I became quickly aware of just how lethal these risks truly were. Using an occupational safety warning poster that was ubiquitous in the workplace (due to an OSHA regulation),

but which existed only in English and the content of which had never been presented to them in any comprehensible manner, I asked workers in my classes to identify the risk index numbers that they were accustomed to encounter in their typical everyday work situations. Although the index they commonly encountered for reactivity tended to be low, they were nevertheless occasionally handling 'materials that can become unstable at high temperatures and pressures . . . and may react with water'. For flammability, the workers identified the number 3 as the index with which they were most familiar, registering a 'serious hazard' as they were handling 'materials capable of ignition under almost all normal temperature conditions'. In the category of health, the number 4 was an index that they repeatedly encountered on a daily basis; it indicated a 'severe hazard', the maximum hazard in this category. I explained that, according to the warning poster, this meant 'major or permanent damage may result from single or repeated exposures', and furthermore, that materials carrying that rating could be 'life-threatening if exposed even one time only'. The workers merely laughed cynically. Edmundo, a 25-year-old migrant from a small rural town in Guanajuato who had been in the US for five years and had been working at Caustic for four of them, concluded, 'Well, we're already dead.'

Concerning this quite elementary and essential matter of life and death, the course participants went on to relate to me how a year and a half earlier, a worker had died after only one week on the job; he had fallen into a tank filled with 'stripper' at a temperature of 150 degrees and was burnt to death. Likewise, only two months prior to this discussion, a worker had not been wearing a security harness while standing atop a tank that he was cleaning, and he slipped and fell to the concrete floor. As the hard hat he was wearing had no strap to secure it, he cracked his skull. In light of these men's intimate acquaintance with such grisly tragedies, the palpable threat of injury and death nevertheless implicitly affirmed precisely the contrary of Edmundo's wry pronouncement: whereas others had indeed been killed at Caustic, they were able, amidst countless daily hazards and risks, to take comfort in the visceral fact that they were still very much alive. Indeed, many of these men had even come to exude a definite inclination to endure the severities of their work without abiding by various safety precautions. In light of such a potentially disastrous masculinist ethos of audacious disregard for certain safety concerns, Edmundo's boldly fatalistic remark, and his implicit stance of effectively laughing in the face of death, can be understood as the expression of a will to transpose these men's extraordinary vulnerability into a kind of defiant but empty bravado.

The masculinist recklessness of many of the workers notwithstanding, however, the overwhelming inattention to safety training and protections was only possible, ultimately, due to flagrant managerial negligence and a

deliberate mandate for high productivity at the expense of any serious consideration of the workers' safety. Leslie Salzinger has suggested:

Understanding that capital makes rather than finds ... workers, and that gender is implicated in that process ... gives us new tools for thinking about how we might challenge the terms under which global production takes place. Thus, starting from the feminist injunction that the personal is political, we add the economic, making visible the connections between the production of subjects and the production of commodities. (2003: 2)

Understanding furthermore that capital is nothing more than the objectified and alienated form of labor itself, and that workers are ultimately the ones who truly make the very material preconditions for their own continued domination, it becomes still more vital to inquire into the active *participation* and ultimate collusion of working men and women in their own exploitation (Burawoy, 1979a), as well as their still more elementary reproduction as (gendered) members of a working class (Willis, 1977).

The specifically gendered character of capitalist exploitation has been admirably but predictably foregrounded in feminist studies of female workers (e.g. Ong, 1987; Peña, 1997; Salzinger, 2003), but there remains a great deal of critical work to be done to truly de-sediment and subvert the pervasive and normative figuration of the generic category *worker* as a decidedly masculine, albeit unmarked, individual. In this regard, as Carole Pateman (1988) has argued persuasively, the very premises of the male worker's participation in the wage-labor contract are themselves derived from, and a manifestation of, a more defining political fiction of modern patriarchy whereby the public is constituted as a realm of male intercourse necessarily predicated on a sexual contract and the subjugation of women. Indeed, in his classic account of automation and the ascendancy of large-scale industry, Marx (1976 [1867]: 492–639) had already identified how the wage contract between a capitalist and an adult male worker (the presumed head of a patriarchal family) was 'quite fundamentally' revolutionized in a manner that perverted the formally 'free' disposition of that workingman over his own labor-power into a despotic power over the capacities of his wife and children to likewise work for wages: 'He has become a slave-dealer' (Marx, 1976 [1867]: 519). Yet, as Marx's archive demonstrates, inasmuch as this very process by which capital (that notorious leveler) historically supplanted (masculine) muscular labor-power with machinery, it both introduced newly configured gendered divisions of labor that reaffirmed the essentialized inequality between male and female labor, and also commonly recomposed class struggles as *gendered* disputes between men (capitalists and male workers), over the proper disposition of women's and children's labor. In his reflections on the particular 'paradox of doxa' that is masculine domination, Pierre Bourdieu (2001 [1998]: 1)

addresses the ‘permanent tension and contention, sometimes verging on the absurd, imposed on every man by the duty to assert his manliness in all circumstances’ as a kind of ‘trap’ of male privilege (2001 [1998]: 50). Citing precisely the ‘forms of “courage” ... [that] encourage or force [working]men to flout safety measures and to deny or defy danger with reckless behavior’, Bourdieu goes on to argue that such masculine behaviors are generated paradoxically by ‘the “manly” fear of being excluded from the world of men’, whereby ‘manliness ... is an eminently *relational* notion, constructed in front of and for other men and against femininity, in a kind of *fear* of the female, firstly in oneself’ (2001 [1998]: 52–3; emphases in original). Bearing in mind that the very meanings attributed to the (naturalized) distinction between ‘the male’ and ‘the female’ are themselves the expression of historically specific and eminently mutable formulations of hierarchical social ordering, however, men’s fear of the proverbial ‘female’ in themselves becomes still better apprehensible and largely inextricable from the loathsome figure of the (dominated) ‘female’ coercively foisted upon them by the dynamic socio-political processes of *feminization* always at least implicit in their subordination to the wills of other men (Trexler, 1995). At the intersection of these diverse but interrelated vantage points, it becomes more acutely clear that the male workers’ postures of fearlessness and stoic perseverance at Caustic Scrub serve as evidence of a sometimes deadly complicity between the compulsions of their masculinity with their own exploitation, and the laborious affinity between their subjection precisely as working *men* and their subordination to the mandates of their employers.

The ‘productivity problem’ and the production of language

Caustic Scrub’s major operation in the Chicago plant was considered to be ‘a productivity problem’. ‘Productivity’, in this context, was measured in tanks-cleaned-per-worker, as well as tanks-cleaned-per-shift. The overwhelmingly Spanish-speaking Mexican/migrant workforce in the Chicago plant had to regularly interact with an overwhelmingly English-speaking population of truck drivers who delivered their tanks to Caustic for a scrubbing. The tank truck drivers were frequently impatient, in part because they were not ordinarily paid for delays that might occur at the ‘tank wash’; they were paid per load, and the necessary intermittent processing of the tanks was treated as incidental. It is quite plausible to presume, moreover, that many of these truck drivers were also frequently impatient if not outwardly hostile toward the Mexican/migrant workers in the Chicago plant – because many of them may in fact have been racist whites. Several contacts in the company’s management as well as the consulting firm, for

instance, reported to me that the predominantly white truck drivers were commonly inclined to blame delays in delivery on ‘the dumb Mexicans’ at Caustic Scrub. Furthermore, such remarks were often accompanied by characterizations of the truck drivers as commonly speaking with ‘a heavy Southern drawl’, which was considered by Caustic management to be a further impediment to ‘efficient communication’. This standard managerial conceit of placing partial blame for the ‘communication problem’ onto the stereotypical figure of the truck drivers as ‘racist Southern rednecks’, or ‘dumb white trash’, however, by implication, served to deflect critical attention from the more systemic racism of the company’s employment strategies.

The ‘Chicago problem’ at Caustic Scrub, from the vantage point of corporate management, was entirely a ‘productivity problem’ that was largely accounted for in terms of delays attributed to a ‘communication problem’. The ‘communication problem’, moreover, was identifiable as a ‘worker problem’. Above all, for corporate management on both ends of the transaction, the ‘communication problem’ to be remedied, finally, was identified to be – a ‘Mexican problem’. As for the managements of various other industrial workplaces where I had been employed as an ESL instructor, the Caustic Scrub bosses were not impelled by any particularly idealistic motives for reshaping the language competencies of their workers. They simply imagined that a more English-proficient workforce automatically translated into a more efficient production process, and thus heightened competitiveness in their efforts to service the much larger corporations who were their principal clients. At Caustic Scrub, more than any of the other workplaces where I was employed over the preceding two years, however, workplace ESL – the production of language – was plainly and directly equated with the ‘remediation’ of a ‘problem’ of ‘productivity’. This had already become strikingly clear in an early ‘consultation’ session with William, a Caustic vice president who periodically visited the Chicago plant from corporate headquarters. William was a polished corporate executive who was accomplished at speaking in euphemisms. He explained that Caustic Scrub was concerned about ‘untapped resources in Chicago [that were] restricted by the people’s inability to communicate’; he confirmed that Caustic’s customers regularly reported, ‘We *do* have problems communicating with the Chicago plant.’ ‘Untapped resources’, in William’s distinctly managerial idiom, signified not merely missed opportunities but also productivity that was deemed to be systematically ‘too low’. Indeed, I was made aware that the funding for ESL courses at Caustic was going to be productivity-monitored; if the productivity statistics did not improve markedly with the presumed increase in ‘English proficiency’ among the Mexican/migrant workers (presumably, to be produced by workplace ESL ‘training’), then corporate headquarters would discontinue funding.

Implicitly, my own 'productivity' as an ESL instructor was to be manifested in the students' increased 'productivity' in the production of language, and the latter was expected to manifest itself in higher productivity statistics for the plant as a whole.

The ESL courses that I would be teaching at Caustic Scrub had been preceded by an earlier course that had been prematurely discontinued when local (Chicago) management felt compelled to repeatedly cancel the classes due to the exigencies of 'production demands'. Nevertheless, William assured me that corporate management (in headquarters) were eager to begin 'training' and were encouraged by what they perceived to be greater 'openness' among the workers who had participated in the previous class.⁴ Meanwhile, he went on to explain, the company had instituted a new policy of no longer hiring people 'who can't speak and read English'. Whereas this general characteristic of virtually all of the Mexican/migrant workers who had previously been targeted as the labor pool of choice had not been perceived in the past as presenting any particularly obstreperous linguistic obstacles to the effective operation of the enterprise, a new regime was being gradually implemented in which the status of the Mexican workers as the favored candidates for otherwise thankless employment at Caustic Scrub was now plainly imperiled. A policy that formerly deployed the effectively racialized criterion of giving preference to the Mexican workers – as disproportionately undocumented (and therefore, presumably tractable) migrants – was being replaced by one that would disadvantage and increasingly exclude them, on no less racialized grounds, on the basis of their supposed linguistic 'deficiencies'. Applicants were going to be screened in 'pre-application' by the receptionist, and then their English would be verified again in a post-application 'interview'. Furthermore, William was confident that the company was beginning to get past this 'communication problem' because, as he went on to explain, 'We have been getting a higher quality applicant pool, because we've started offering better wages ... We proactively applied a union-wage scale in order to prevent any kind of organized labor activity.' Shortly thereafter, I happened to be in the office when the acting Plant Manager of the Chicago operation, a relatively young US-born Mexican woman named Bárbara, was hiring two young Latinos – one Mexican, one Puerto Rican, both very probably US-born – who were both fluent in English. 'On pay day, people like to ask how much you made,' Bárbara explained, and then explicitly warned the new employees never to discuss their pay with the other workers. These newly hired English-speaking workers, William's 'higher quality applicant pool', were indeed starting the job at higher wages than the company was paying its Mexican/migrant workforce, many of whom had already been working at Caustic for several years. Two months later, Mario, a worker in one of my classes, referred to this practice of management:

Well, I don't know, maybe it's discrimination – but you can be working here for years, and then some white guy [*güero*] will bring along a brother or cousin or whatever, and that person immediately goes into some cleaner job, while the rest of us are all doing the shittiest work.

To this, the following week, Mario added:

My uncle has been here seven years; I'm here four years – we have more seniority, but still make less money than others on their first day of work, just because they speak English. We know they [the bosses] pay them more, even when they don't know anything about the job.

'Knowing how to work'

Indeed, even during the first week of instruction, the workers who participated in my classes had already begun discussing the evidence of this new hiring policy. 'The company is only hiring people who speak English now,' Mateo explained, noting that job applicants who did not speak English fluently were being turned away, even if they had previously worked in the plant and already knew the job well. Manuel added, 'They're hiring whites [*güeros*], or Blacks [*prietos*], or little gang-bangers [*gangueritos*] – and they all quit the job after three days because they don't want to get their hands dirty!'⁵ The resentment of the Mexican/migrant workers for the company's discrimination against people like themselves (including their own former co-workers), who did not speak English fluently, articulated a sense of vulnerability that frequently manifested itself in terms of contempt for other workers whose English language could potentially be used to discipline and even displace them from their jobs. The Mexican/migrant workers frequently articulated a poignant critique of the company's intentions to render them redundant, on the basis of a stubborn rejection of the workers' Spanish language as a 'lack' of English.⁶ The workers had been remarkably resilient in their accommodation to the lethal severities of the work, and readily denounced this frankly discriminatory and seemingly racist affront to their valiant perseverance and self-sacrifice. For precisely these reasons, however, what revealed itself to be a rather persistent inclination to disparage other workers' incapacity to endure, or refusal to tolerate, the particularly dangerous and potentially brutal character of labor subordination at Caustic Scrub, entailed an excessively masculinist (yet always ambivalent) compromise that these male workers sustained with their own exploitation. Likewise, their critique often emerged already entangled in its own racialized contradictions as well (De Genova, 2005: 147–209).

A few weeks later, a related discussion ensued in another class after one of the course participants had been abruptly removed from class for a

disciplinary matter. In their exasperation with management, the rest of the course participants commenced to address a variety of issues. ‘They think that if you don’t speak English, then you don’t think,’ declared Leonardo, who had been working at Caustic for six years. Then, as if he was incredulously reckoning with his own realization, marveling just at that moment at this racist absurdity, and wanting to impress upon me the preposterousness of it, he said again, emphatically, ‘Really, they believe we can’t think!’ Benedicto, who had been working five years at Caustic and was the shift leader among the tank cleaners, elaborated the critique further:

The bosses themselves don’t know how to do the work – they have to ask us. There was one guy, a Tejano [a Texas Mexican], and he spoke perfect English, and Spanish – well, he didn’t know Spanish so well, but he knew English – but all he knew of the job was blasting [a simple demolition job] – after four years here! If you told him to clean a tank, he’d have no idea, and he always used to ask *us* how to do things!

Leonardo responded with a knowing chuckle, and pointed out the obvious – ‘Speaking English doesn’t keep you from being a damned fool [*pendejo*]!’

‘They can get people who know how to speak English, who even know how to read and write English! – that doesn’t make them intelligent,’ Mario resumed the critique with renewed indignation:

And it doesn’t make them intelligent for the job. And it doesn’t mean they know how to work . . . Anyway, some of the bosses themselves don’t even know how to read, like Mike – you could bring him this piece of paper, he’d look at it and he doesn’t know!

Indeed, in a meeting with management, I had heard Mike, a white supervisor, admit quite candidly and in the presence of William (the executive from corporate headquarters), that Juan Carlos, one of the Mexican workers who migrated at a young age and had attended high school in the US, could probably do better on an English test than he could himself. Although the company now appeared to be determined to hire only English-speaking workers, there was in fact a consensus across the divide between workers and management in which all recognized that working at Caustic Scrub was not really about literacy. Indeed, it was precisely this that made allegations of Mike’s ‘illiteracy’, as well as his own admissions of deficient literacy, quite beside the point.

The distinctions that Mario made are crucially meaningful: one could be ‘intelligent’; one could be ‘intelligent for the job’; and one could ‘know how to work’ – none of which was reducible to either of the others. Clearly, the practical value of being specifically ‘intelligent for the job’ was considered infinitely more pertinent than some abstract measure of ‘intelligence’ in general. More important still, ‘knowing how to work’ – which was very

much related to ‘wanting to work’, or being willing to ‘get your hands dirty’ – were all masculinist qualifications that the Mexican/migrant workers who persevered at Caustic invoked to distinguish themselves as a group (and the specific commodity that was their racialized labor-power) from others whom they admonished as too soft (or simply too ‘lazy’) to withstand the labor requirements in this workplace.

‘You see, Nicolás’, continued Benedicto, who had been in the US for 15 years, addressing himself directly to me now:

this is what we need English for – because every boss in this company is a stupid motherfucker, and they’re all full of shit! ... We’re not really going to learn English when we’re all Mexican here and speak only Spanish, much less the older guys [some of whom were already nearing retirement age, and had never had any formal education whatsoever, even as children in Mexico] – but we could use English to defend ourselves with these fuckers!⁷

To this, Mario, who had been working at Caustic for four of his 10 years in the US, added, ‘... and we could use it to go somewhere else and get a *better* job.’ Leonardo was quick to agree with this sentiment:

Yes, that’s true. This is dirty work, but there’s a lot of dirty work, and some is much dirtier. You go to any one of those places, and you’ll see the one who doesn’t speak English doing all the dirtiest jobs. And if you have two guys start the same day in the same place, and one speaks English and the other doesn’t, the one who speaks English will always get the cleaner job, and the one who can’t speak English gets sent to the dirtier one. And we know this work is better paid in other places – the drivers tell us, it just comes up in talking. We know they’re taking advantage of us here.

It is particularly revealing here to consider the shift from a competitive valorization of the masculine willingness to ‘get your hands dirty’, presumably exuded as a kind of communal distinction by the Mexican/migrant workers and bombastically celebrated in their agonistic self-defense, to the express desire to both mitigate the stigma of the ‘dirtiness’ of their work at Caustic and to seek avenues for some kind of redemption from the distinctly more unassuming and less heroic defensive predicament of knowingly being ‘taken advantage of’. Inasmuch as their Spanish language was systematically produced as a fundamental *lack* of English and likewise racialized as a defining feature of their irreducible non-‘American’-ness/non-whiteness, moreover, Mexican migrants in Chicago ubiquitously associated their modest efforts at English language acquisition as a matter-of-fact problem of ‘self-defense’ (De Genova, 2005: 45–52; De Genova and Ramos-Zayas, 2003: 146–51).⁸

Mario now refocused the discussion on the educational credentials of the management in Caustic’s Chicago plant: ‘Hey, do these people [the bosses]

even have diplomas?’ Benedicto provided one example: ‘Jo Ellen has her papers to be a nurse; she used to be a nurse!’ Mario demanded, ‘So what’s she doing in *this* place if she can get a nurse’s job?!’ Now, having masterfully piqued our curiosity, Benedicto supplied the answer, first with a simple gesture – mimicking someone smoking marijuana: ‘Because they don’t check up on you much here, and if you don’t look right, they let you get away with it – she gets high a lot.’ The incompetence, lack of education, and plain stupidity of the local management – all favorite themes among the workers at Caustic Scrub – could also be supplemented, apparently, in such a relatively small workplace with a rather shallow managerial bureaucracy, by a fairly intimate knowledge of their bosses’ illicit secrets. This kind of knowledge at close quarters, a contemptuous familiarity indeed, contributed to a more or less permanent sense of insecurity and jeopardy among the managers of the Chicago plant themselves – especially given redoubled vigilance and heightened pressures put upon them from corporate headquarters to resolve ‘the productivity problem’.

‘Production comes first’

These circumstances quickly became rather volatile as they pertained to my relations with Bárbara, the acting Plant Manager. Even before the first week of instruction, Bárbara seemed to be excessively concerned about what the workers might reveal to me. ‘You’re probably gonna hear a lot of their complaints, as if you’re some kind of savior who can do everything,’ she remarked preemptively and disdainfully, ‘So you’ll hear their bitchin’ – you know, the regular stuff about how “unjust” everything is.’ After the first week’s classes, Bárbara inquired pointedly, ‘So how’s class? Did they do what I said they would?’ I feigned not knowing what exactly she was referring to, and then, after she posed the question more explicitly, I disingenuously assured her that there had been no discussion of any ‘injustice’ – it was strictly about learning English. Bárbara was not officially the Plant Manager but rather had merely been designated to take up the responsibilities of that position on an indefinite but temporary basis; she did not enjoy the full status or material advantages that could otherwise have been expected to come with the job. The less visible but ultimate authority over Caustic Scrub’s Chicago plant rested with a white man named Doug. Nevertheless, in such a relatively small workplace where the managerial hierarchy was not very extensive, Bárbara, a young Mexican woman born in the US, largely because of her bilingual capabilities, effectively operated as the ultimate authority over the everyday organization of labor subordination and discipline for the predominantly Spanish-speaking (Mexican/migrant) male workforce.

On one occasion while Bárbara was speaking to one of the ESL classes, Patrick, one of the white supervisors, was present and chided her, teasingly, ‘This is English class – so speak English to ‘em!’ One of the course participants, Manuel, turned to Patrick with a sarcastic and slightly threatening smile, and sternly told him in English to leave them alone. ‘If two Mexican people want to speak Spanish, that’s their business,’ Manuel asserted, ‘and anyway, you should learn some Spanish.’ Then, shifting to Spanish in order to demonstrate his point by openly humiliating the unwitting Patrick as a representative of both management and an embodiment of the more general hostility of white ‘American’ society, Manuel muttered disdainfully, ‘... ¡pinche maricón! [fucking faggot!]’. The rest of the class openly laughed at Patrick in affirmation of Manuel’s intervention, the flagrant affront of which of course achieved an intensified aura of audacity and fearlessness exactly because it was posited in virulently masculinist terms that answered Anglo hegemony by denigrating and demoting the manhood of its would-be defender. As a supervisor, Patrick of course had recourse to other means for settling accounts with workers with whom he had grievances. Not more than a week or so thereafter, I happened to be present on one occasion when Patrick casually but meaningfully inquired of Bárbara, ‘So if you’re in charge now, can I fire four or five of ‘em?’ She replied without any hesitation, ‘Yep! We’re cleaning house!’ Three hours later that same afternoon, it was Manuel himself who was summoned into the office – not to be fired (at least, not on this occasion), but to make a telephone call informing one of his co-workers of his dismissal. As the other worker was not home when he called, Manuel simply and with no undue delicacy left the message that the company did not want him anymore, and that he would be expected to return his work uniform.

During the first week of classes, as if to reaffirm that participation in the English classes was indeed ‘work’, and as such, subject to the management’s scrutiny and surveillance, Bárbara announced at the beginning of each of the three classes that an employee time clock was going to be installed in the conference room for the workers who were attending ESL class. She explained that if they should fail to punch the clock, they would not get paid – condescendingly repeating three times during the course of her announcement, ‘You’re not kids anymore! [*¡Ya no son niños!*]’ Bárbara assured the workers, moreover, that if they neglected to punch in, she would show them no mercy; she warned, ‘And don’t come cryin’ to me with “I’m sorry” or anything else!’ The workers who participated in the ESL course were already perfectly accustomed to punching time-cards in the company clock; they simply denounced the new requirement to punch yet another time clock in the office as ‘just a lot of bullshit [*puro pedo*]’. Still, they never considered it particularly extraordinary or terribly intrusive. Nonetheless, the installation of a special time clock to accompany the workplace ESL

courses was yet another technique by which management could, in effect, communicate to the workers: ‘We, the management, control this English class. You, the workers, are here on company time. We pay for it, we pay you, and if you don’t punch the clock, we’ll cheat you out of your pay for class time. Even in the classroom, you’re working for us, and under our control.’ Thus, from the very beginning of my time teaching at Caustic Scrub, there developed a contest over space between the local management and the workers’ ESL classes. Notably, with recourse to trivializing the workers’ grievances as little more than plaintive ‘bitchin’, imploring them to not “come cryin’” with excuses or apologies, and infantilizing them with the chastisement that they were “not kids anymore”, Bárbara brusquely assumed the double-breasted mantle of managerial paternalism and contemptuous suspicion, articulated in the familiar idiom of a pronouncedly masculinist disdain for the working men whom she depicted variously as women or children.

Predictably, the struggle over control of the space of the classroom quickly manifested itself as the basis for an increasingly bitter antagonism between Bárbara and myself. Bárbara later made her position quite plain: ‘You need to understand – this is a business. This is not a classroom.’ I complained about repeated interruptions of my classes and management’s continuous practice of sporadically keeping workers out of class for production and at times, spontaneously removing them from the classroom to meet the needs of an unanticipated job, after class had already begun. ‘If we need to, I can cancel class completely!’ Bárbara declared confidently and definitively, ‘Production comes first before anything else – before any of *this*!’

The conundrums of ‘human nature’

Soon thereafter, William, the vice president from Caustic headquarters, visited the plant and initiated a meeting that involved the three of us, as well as Mike, the white supervisor. William had already been briefed by my supervisor, and had already consulted with Bárbara in advance of the meeting. From the very first question that William posed to me, it became still more manifest what the crux of the issue was for Bárbara:

Have you heard any talk in the classes about how it is for them [the workers] out there [on the job] – any bitchin’? We know that, a lot of times, they like to start talkin’ about how terrible they have it . . . and you know, we don’t do anything to put anybody at risk. Those are dangerous chemicals out there and we do everything we can to make it safe for them. Even when I come – and they know I’m corporate and I’ve come from headquarters – they come

runnin' to me to tell me all their problems. Nobody comes to say, 'Hey, we really appreciate that you give us a job and pay us,' or anything like that . . .

At the heart of Bárbara's hostility to the ESL courses was her suspicion, communicated to me from the very beginning of the courses and reiterated in William's remarks, that the workers might be using the classes to discuss their grievances against management and the conditions of their exploitation. Disingenuously, I assured William simply, 'No, there wasn't any of that. These are just English classes, after all.' That William himself directly addressed these concerns to me, however, seemed to convey that I myself may have been under suspicion. In effect, I had apparently failed to fulfill my own ascribed 'surveillance' function. William continued:

Well, if you do happen to hear anything that just doesn't sound right, like 'I had to hang upside-down by my shoestrings to clean a tank' – ya know, anything that just doesn't sound right – *just let us know what they're tellin' you*, because that kind of thing shouldn't happen. But I don't think they should be using class time to have a bitch session – so that stuff shouldn't ever take up more than five minutes of class, because this isn't the place for that . . . But ya know, we have a new parent company, a new owner, and they've told us safety is the top priority, so we have to pay a lot of attention to these things and be very careful.

William seemed intent to uphold Bárbara's 'legitimate' managerial concern that the workers' discussion of their grievances in class was inherently subversive, and to affirm that I ought to be answerable to the requirement of safeguarding management's interests.

In explicit relation to the new corporate agenda, William performed for me his obligatory interest in workplace safety. In order to maintain a semblance of compliance, I mentioned that my job, as a workplace English teacher, did of course include discussing safety warnings and equipment. 'It did come up that on the night shift, when there's less supervision, there tends to be less precaution,' I added, 'but that seemed pretty normal to me, I didn't think much of it.' In saying this, I had inadvertently provided William with an occasion to blame safety violations on the workers:

Well, I just don't understand why they wouldn't use the protective equipment. It's for their own good, it's in their own interests to do it. Even I had my arms swell up yesterday by going out there cleaning tanks with them – and that's through the shirt sleeves, mind you! So I can't see why they wouldn't use it, but I guess that's just human nature, I don't understand it, but that's how it is.

Staging for me his own brief foray into the labor process and his intimate knowledge of the swollen arms and inflamed flesh that came with cleaning

dangerous chemicals out of industrial tanks, William's recourse to an invocation of 'human nature' (that tell-tale article of faith of all bourgeois ideology) now confirmed that his principal purpose was to absolve the company of responsibility for the workers' stubborn and unthinking indiscretions.

Following the cue that it was now time to decry the capriciousness of 'human nature', and with specific reference to my mention of the night shift, Mike (the supervisor) changed the subject to what he called 'shift animosity', or 'jealousy' between the different shifts. In his experience, such invidious selfishness and petty competitiveness was true of all tank-cleaning operations, because it had also been true in one other place where he had worked. Mike confessed that he himself had felt the same way. 'One shift always thinks they have it the worst, and the other two shifts don't do anything,' he reflected, 'Then, if you change shifts, you realize it ain't true ... but you can't get around it – one shift will always hate the other one!' Implicitly, Mike was making a more general claim. He contended that differences, in and of themselves, automatically generated divisions and conflict, and that such animosity was simply a natural and immutable fact of life. Bárbara returned our discussion to the topic of workplace safety, however, intent to confirm indeed that the workers brought hazard upon themselves. 'If they could get away with doin' it in their underwear,' she declared, 'they would!' Mike and Bárbara both supplied a variety of colorful examples of occasions when each had shown up at Caustic by surprise, during their off-hours, and purportedly found workers without any shirts on, or only t-shirts, or saying 'I don't have anymore work pants, so I need to wear jeans,' or coming to work in denim cut-off shorts with their work boots, announcing, 'I'm ready for work.' William shook his head with condescension at the pitiful thought of it: 'I just can't see why they wouldn't want to be fully covered – no matter how hot it is! – because those chemicals can really burn you!' Clearly, according to the management, these people truly were their own greatest safety hazard.

William had expressed an interest in 'observing' one of my classes, and so he stayed and we had a few moments to chat. As Bárbara and Mike left the room, William suggested he could make a list for me of terms he thought would be helpful for my ESL curriculum, terms that had occurred to him during his tank-cleaning foray the day before. In addition, as if to confirm for me that he was genuinely sympathetic to the Mexican/migrant workers' plight, he shared with me that he had 'picked up some little bits of tank-cleaning Spanish' when he had previously worked in the management of another company in Houston. 'Everyone working there was Mexican,' he explained, 'You know, they were almost all family, lots of cousins and everything. It was real nice, everybody got along really well there.' Through his emphasis on workplace harmony, however, William inadvertently

acknowledged that hiring many members of extended family networks was a strategy that had proven to have its benefits for management. As the time neared for the class to arrive, I tried to dissuade William from sitting in on the class. Although he was ‘of course’ welcome, and there was ‘no problem’, I expressed my concern that his presence would most likely be intimidating for the course participants, and that it might be counter-productive, that his presence might cause the workers in the class to freeze up and keep quiet, fearful they were being scrutinized. William acknowledged that this could be an issue:

Yeah, you know, yesterday, I was having a really nice time working with one of these guys out there, and he could express himself in English pretty good. But he knew I was in from corporate headquarters, so at one point they needed him to move a truck, and from that moment on, I didn’t see him again for the rest of the day.

When the class came in and saw William in the room, indeed, their faces fell immediately and William could see that my concerns had been warranted so obviously that he decided to leave. As soon as he left, one of the course participants, Javier, said, ‘That’s the big boss from the company. He’s here to check up on us – make sure we’re doing everything right.’

Civil war as usual

The continued dispute over the space of the conference room, however, was now going to be ‘resolved’ by relocating the classes to another room, beginning the following week. As it turned out, this new and purportedly ‘better’ location was a dingy supply room, situated directly above the production area. Among the countless deficiencies of the new location (from an educational standpoint), the incredible clamor of the adjacent tank-wash was plainly insupportable. When I informed Bárbara that it was unsatisfactory because of the unbearable noise and insisted that we could not stay there, she told me, ‘You’re bein’ just a little too *particular*.’ Bárbara’s arching inflection and emphatic and exaggeratedly articulate pronunciation of the word ‘particular’ seemed plainly to insinuate that my concern for a reasonably comfortable and clean setting for the classes revealed a kind of idiosyncratic and irrationally fastidious – and by implication, *queer* – preoccupation on my part, and to suggest in other words that my persistent complaints were not only irritating but shamefully unmanly. She continued, now more brusquely, ‘You know, you’re here to do us a service – not the other way around!’ As far as the noise was concerned, she said dismissively, ‘They should be used to the noise more than anybody, they work right underneath it all day ... You ain’t tellin’ me nothin’ new, we used to run

the whole office outta there. You just gotta get used to it.' The mandate that I would simply have to get acclimatized to the blunt and grueling everyday realities of this industrial workplace – the dirt and clutter, and above all the intractable noise – again operated to imply that my professional credentials and university training had evidently left me ill-prepared for the worldly rigors of a place like Caustic Scrub, and to insinuate a presumably disgraceful delicacy in my temperament that might well reveal a more fundamental deficiency of my masculinity. At the commencement of the next class session, later that same afternoon, Bárbara asked me to leave the room. She closed the door, and then returned to announce, 'They said it's not a problem, they'll just stay here because they're happy to have class no matter where we put it.' Incensed, I replied, 'You can't just march in there and intimidate people and think the problem's gonna be settled!' Our feud resumed, and this time, I felt compelled to directly call upon William to stop Bárbara's obstructions. After I contacted William at corporate headquarters, the classes were relocated with no further ado, back to the conference room in the office.

Returned to our original location, we appreciated anew some of the 'luxuries' of the conference room – including a coffee maker, and occasionally some leftover lunch spreads from catered managerial meetings. On our first day back, there were cookies on the counter that probably belonged to someone who worked in the office. Manuel helped himself, and others teased him that he might get caught in the act of this transgression. Manuel replied, defiantly but matter-of-factly, and also pedagogically, 'It's the product of our labor – all of this is the product of our labor.' Somewhat startled, I seized the opportunity to teach Manuel's critical insight in English, and wrote it on the chalkboard. 'Watch out, Nicolás', Mateo said, now in a more conspiratorial tone, 'Doug will come in here and say we're all a bunch of communists!' I agreed, and we all laughed as I erased it. 'We'd better be careful what we say in here,' Manuel then remarked, only half-jokingly, 'because maybe they have a tape recorder hidden somewhere under the table!' Inasmuch as the management had repeatedly suggested that my designated role would be to serve in the dubious capacity of intermediary between the workers and their bosses, in the service of the company's monitoring of the workers' discontent, the prospect of management's surveillance hardly seemed preposterous. The workers' light-hearted jokes, however, served more fundamentally to underscore the sheer absurdity of the company's compulsion to control every aspect of their working lives in the plant. Nevertheless, in this sporadic and fragmentary manner, we intermittently managed to cultivate this fragile and beleaguered space for the ends of a critical dialogue about the workers' everyday struggles in relation to the company's over-arching imperative to subordinate their labor for the purpose of maximizing productivity and profits.

A critical knowledge of everyday life

Beyond the space of the classroom – indeed, beyond my modest ethnographic endeavors altogether – the Mexican/migrant workers at Caustic Scrub were immanently involved in the continuous, albeit inevitably partial, elaboration of a critical knowledge of their laborious everyday life. Notably, such ‘a critical knowledge of everyday life ... not satisfied with merely uncovering and criticizing this real, practical life in the minutiae of social life [but rather] able to pass from the individual to the social ... and vice versa’ – these are precisely the terms in which Henri Lefebvre distinguished the very substance of Marxism (1991 [1947]: 148). Indeed, rather than presume to be an all-encompassing study of a discrete and identifiable ‘community’ or the authoritative representation of a ‘culture’, the aim of all of my ethnographic work has been to suggest some of the ways that Mexican/migrant experiences of racialization, illegalization, and labor subordination provide a crucial standpoint of critique from which to interrogate global capitalism, US imperial power, the US nation-state, and white supremacy (De Genova, 2005; De Genova and Ramos-Zayas, 2003).

This article began with a theoretical claim underscoring the extent to which all ethnographic research fundamentally demands a critical analysis of capitalist class relations and the dynamics of the capital-labor relation in the immediacy of everyday life. It is nonetheless only with recourse to the irreducible specificities and contingencies of history – history both as a coagulation of legacies from the past and as it is lived and made in the present – that we may come to understand the particular ways that the capital-labor relation has been imposed and maintained, and that the general terms and conditions of capital accumulation have been and continue to be fought out by real human actors in particular places and times. Arguably, ethnography’s immersion in the seemingly prosaic textures of the everyday is a methodological technique distinctly well-suited to the task of excavating such struggles as they are made in the ever-fleeting present, as lived historicity. By examining in close ethnographic detail some of the crucial fault lines that defined the predicament of Mexican/migrant workers in an industrial workplace in Chicago, this article has sought to demonstrate the significance of the constitutive role of labor within and against capital as a central concern for critical ethnographic social inquiry. For workers at Caustic Scrub (as well as other workplaces where I was employed and realized my ethnographic research), their most visceral sense of the meaningfulness of their experiences as specifically *Mexican* migrants – prominently including the discrimination and abuse they experienced on the basis of their (often undocumented) immigration status, their Spanish language, and their manifold racializations – were effectively inextricable

in practice from their exploitation as workers. Moreover, the workers' everyday struggles at Caustic Scrub (re)produced and also transformed the immanent conditions of possibility for both their subordination as labor *for* capital as well as their apparently mundane but nonetheless intractable insurgencies as labor *against* capital – as historical subjects *making* history; in other words, racialized migrant workers actively participating in the ongoing reconstitution of their social world. Ethnography, similarly, must cultivate and sustain its potential role as an insurgent intellectual and political project, forging its own distinctive labor both within and against the material and practical horizons of the global regime of capital accumulation.

Notes

- 1 This company name as well as all personal names in the ensuing text are fictive. Due to the fact that some of the people who were my interlocutors in the larger research project are vulnerable to the punitive legal recriminations that could be brought to bear upon their undocumented immigration status, I have chosen to protect the anonymity of the people depicted here. Likewise, in the interests of protecting myself legally against any possible charges of breach of contract or confidentiality on the part of this company, where I was indirectly employed, I have opted to exclude or alter any extraneous details that could serve to identify this particular workplace.
- 2 For a more extended discussion of the politics of workplace 'training' and second-language learning in a context of racialized migrant labor, see De Genova (2005: 13–55).
- 3 Throughout the ensuing text, the term *Mexican/migrant* refers to people who have migrated from Mexico to the United States. When the category *migrant* is deployed here, it should not be confused with the more precise term *migratory*; rather, the term *migrant* is intended to do a certain epistemological work – in other words, to serve as a category of analysis that disrupts the implicit teleology of the more conventional term *immigrant*, which is posited always from the standpoint of the (migrant-'receiving') US nation-state (De Genova, 2005). Regardless of their various legal statuses and heterogeneous migration histories, Mexican migrants in Chicago virtually never used the terms *Mexican American* or *Chicano/a* for self-identification; the pervasive categories were *mexicanola* in Spanish or *Mexican* in English, and this was likewise the case for Mexicans born or raised in the United States, hence the persistent *migrant* qualifier.
- 4 From the standpoint of management in this notoriously alienated and polarized workplace, this was a welcome instance of what is widely known

in industrial sociology as a ‘Hawthorne effect’. Based upon the ‘human relations’ research in the 1920s conducted by Elton Mayo and his associated researchers at Western Electric’s Hawthorne Works (previously located in Cicero, Illinois, a working-class suburb adjacent to Chicago’s western municipal limits), a ‘Hawthorne effect’ is understood to be a mitigation of workers’ discontent or sense of alienation that occurs simply because they have been made to feel as if management is actually interested in their well-being (Mayo, 1933; cf. Braverman, 1974). Although Burawoy (1979b: 236–7) has incisively critiqued this recourse to a virtually metaphysical ‘missing link’, he nevertheless marshals the reinterpretation of Mayo’s study to posit crucial questions about the historically specific managerial organization of coercion and consent and the consequences of these relations for productivity, as well as the conceivable impact of social or environmental factors beyond managerial control altogether.

- 5 ‘Gang-banger’ was the ubiquitous term used in English to refer to street gang members in Chicago, and is deployed here to convey the colloquial sense of the US-specific Spanish-language neologism, ‘*ganguero*’. For a related discussion of this remark in terms of its implications for the racialized and generational politics of pan-Latino identification, see De Genova and Ramos-Zayas (2003: 95–106).
- 6 Because my employment at Caustic ended shortly thereafter, I was never able to verify whether or not the company succeeded in the long run to actually transition to an English-dominant labor process, which would have likely translated into a distinctly less preponderantly Mexican/migrant workforce in the Chicago plant.
- 7 For a more extended discussion of Mexican migrants’ understandings of the necessity of learning English as a matter of self-defense, see De Genova (2005: 13–55).
- 8 For an extended analysis of Mexican/migrant equations of ‘American’ national identity with racial whiteness, see De Genova (2005: 167–209).

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