

Preface

This is a story about people whose lives are on the line. They work in a meatpacking plant, on double-digit shifts, day after never-ending day. Bodies ache. Lives and limbs are in peril. Hours of repetitive, dangerous, grueling labor pounds their spirits. Their dignity is beaten down as a matter of business.

This is a story of how working-class immigrants from Latin America and native-born African American workers, who spend most of their waking lives working on the line, negotiate social boundaries and construct identities as they labor alongside one another. This is also a story of how I, as a sociologist, situated myself on the line to understand firsthand the nature of changing race and ethnic relations in the New South.

In the summer of 2009, when I was deciding on my dissertation topic, the American South was in the midst of a demographic and social transformation—one that brought several million Latino/a¹ migrants to work in a variety of industries and live in rural and urban communities with little or no collective memory of immigration. I wanted to know who these newcomers were and how they were becoming a part of the New South. I also wanted to better understand their incorporation experience in the context of a South that is historically defined by black-white relations, and more specifically by the structuring principles of white supremacy. I realized that Latinas/os' introduction to the South was playing a constitutive role in the spectacular transformation of the region's ethnoracial² panorama and systems of intergroup relations.

From earlier research on intergroup relations, I knew that these questions depended on the social relations and economic circumstances in which migrants were embedded. I realized that in order to really understand if and how Latinas/os were gaining a sense of belonging within the American racial and class stratification systems, I needed to go where working-class migrants and native-born Americans spend most of their waking hours: the workplace. Because the food processing industry, with its insatiable appetite for labor, has been such an important draw for Latino/a migrants and remains a significant employer for working-class African Americans, I decided to situate my research in this work environment. Finally, I wanted to understand at the ground level whether this New South was being shaped by rising tensions between Latino/a newcomers and African Americans, as some scholars have argued, and if so, how this related to Latinas/os' emergent sense of their place within the American stratified system of belonging.

To this end, I decided to get a job at a meatpacking plant in North Carolina. In July 2009, I packed up my belongings and moved to a rural community of around ten thousand people surrounded by hog and poultry farms and corn and tobacco fields. At the end of July 2009, after waiting in line overnight outside the factory gates with several dozen other people eager to apply for a job at Swine Inc., I was hired as a regular production worker.³ I began my job as a meatpacker in the Marination Department in August 2009, where I worked for seven months before transferring to the Loin Boning and Packing Department, where I worked another nine months until December 2010. Marination was a small, majority-African American department with a white-dominated authority structure, while Loin Boning and Packing was a large, majority-Latina/o department with an African American-dominated authority structure. Although my initiation in the Marination Department was accidental—this was simply the department I was assigned to work in when I was first hired—my transfer to Loin Boning and Packing was intentional. I requested the transfer so that I could observe intergroup relations in a context that differed greatly in composition and working conditions. While I spent the preponderance of my time toiling in these two departments, I also had a chance to work in and become acquainted with other major plant departments, including the Kill Floor, Cut Floor, Hamboning, Bacon Slice, Pork Chop, Dry Salt, and Belly Conversion. Altogether, the data I gathered for this project comes from more than sixteen months of participant observation represented in five hundred single-spaced pages of field notes, as well as

twenty-three in-depth interviews with Latina/o and African American workers collected from December 2010, when I quit the job, to April 2012.

Sitting on a beach in Wilmington with my girlfriend, just days before I was to start my job, we talked excitedly about this unexpected adventure—unexpected because I had not anticipated it would be so easy for me to get hired, and an adventure because it would be a foray into a world normally hidden from scientific observation. While I was deeply concerned that I would not make it beyond a few days, I was hoping I could last at the plant for a few months, enough time to observe inter-group relations and perhaps even develop casual friendships with coworkers. In the end, over my sixteen months, I developed intimate friendships with many people with whom I spent thousands of hours laboring on the line and eating, drinking, and dancing off the line. It was not easy. At times I was overwhelmed with loneliness, confusion, isolation, and frustration. At times my body experienced injury and pain to a degree I had never felt before and in ways I had not known were possible. The ruthless regimen of work and subjugation literally crushed my spirit, producing feelings of desperation, hopelessness, and anger, although these ultimately gave way to a kind of alienated self-discipline.

As a regular worker, first in Marination and later in Loin Boning and Packing, I directly observed and experienced the life of a meatpacking worker. As far as I know, management was unaware of my ulterior motives for working at the plant, so my status as a PhD student did not afford me preferential treatment. The Human Resources recruiter who interviewed me barely glanced at the education and work experience I listed on my application, and didn't inquire about the sociology professor listed as my reference, Jacqueline Hagan. I was seemingly just another warm body. But because I was identified by others as white, "from here," and possessing bilingual skills, I received preferential treatment relative to other Latina/o newcomers. Supervisors shielded me from the toughest jobs, personally warning me that work on the straight knife or whizard knife would "ruin" me. Apparently, they were less concerned about the hundreds of other women and men, mostly Central American and Mexican, who worked knife jobs. Those were perhaps not fully persons, and their bodies perfectly suitable for ruining.

Because I am a native Spanish speaker from Puerto Rico, I was frequently called on to translate supervisor speeches and reprimands, and sometimes to gather signatures from Spanish speakers for weekly

“safety training” forms. Usually I did these tasks with displeasure because I didn’t want to be seen by workers as management’s favorite, and supervisors wondered out loud why I would not be ecstatic to get a moment’s break from real work. And when I sought medical treatment for my hands—I acquired occupationally induced carpal tunnel syndrome in a matter of weeks following my transfer to the brutal Loin Boning and Packing Department, and six of my fingers were numb for several months from bagging those loins—I insisted (without much resistance) that I be moved to a different job. Nobody in Human Resources challenged the medical leave I got from an outside doctor. In stark contrast, many foreign-born workers were afraid to seek care even from the company nurses, who generally provided no medically significant assistance anyway (hot-wax hand baths being their universal therapy) and probably unlawfully impeded actual treatment. They were convinced that seeking medical attention would get them fired, especially if they were unauthorized workers. Indeed, Human Resources staff told them as much.

At around twenty-one hours and \$250 per person per year, the company pockets nearly \$300,000 a year in but one routine practice of wage theft. To that sum must be added the hundreds of thousands of dollars in *value* that 1,200 workers produce for the company in those five minutes of lunch break that they are usually robbed of, being expected back on the lines in thirty minutes, not the thirty-five they are supposedly due. And just like that, in one fell swoop the vulture seizes scraps of profit from the workers’ tenuous grip; what at first glance seems a petty complaint turns out to be a million-dollar pilfering. But the real injury is not felt in lost wages. Those precious few minutes of rest and respite that daily are taken through threats and intimidation exact a psychological, emotional, and physical toll that has no dollar value.

How does one put into words the rage that workers feel when supervisors threaten to replace them with workers who will not go to the bathroom in the course of a fourteen-hour day of hard labor, even if it means wetting themselves on the line? Or the despair a worker feels as she realizes at the twelfth hour of unremitting labor that there is a lot of work still to do, and then she has to pick up her children from the babysitter, prepare a meal for her family, and be ready in a handful of hours to do it all over again? Or the pain a worker goes through in submitting her hands to the brutal repetitive trauma of cutting or packing meat, helpless as her nails turn purple and fall out from sheer effort, or the muscles in her hands contract and spasm uncontrollably, or protu-

berant knots develop along the joints in her fingers and wrists that are visible to the naked eye? Then there is the throbbing discomfort of damp, freezing hands and feet that workers endure while laboring in wet, below-40-degree temperatures. The recurring sinus infections. The stabbing back pain. The scorching fury that swells inside from the incessant assaults to workers' dignity as supervisors subordinate their humanity to the value of hogs so that consumers can have fresh pork on their tables.

These are the jobs that don't go away. This is the kind of work that hasn't changed all that much despite a century of astonishing technological innovation. Many of these jobs would be immediately recognizable to Upton Sinclair, for their reliance on sheer effort and physical resilience makes this modern packing plant a hostile jungle to cut through. The workers say these are the good jobs, the ones that pay *mucho dinero*, but they sacrifice a lot to make that money. This is the most onerous work a long-slogging migrant has ever had. This work is for people who just got here and still owe their coyote, I am told. These are the good jobs, but not for anyone's kids, my coworkers clarify. This work is for people who don't have papers, the people without papers say with resignation. This money is costly to earn. On a particularly bad day, the workers say, the devil might as well whisk you away like that old Ramón Ayala *corrido* laments. Good luck to the departed, and *bienvenido* to the ones who just arrived! Tomorrow no one will remember you were here, but for a few moments you felt indispensable to the mission of production. These jobs can be more like a strange supermarket gig or more like slavery, but you probably won't get to choose. These jobs are depressing. After this, there's nothing left to do but go back to the country you came from because not even the animal farms will hire you these days. After this job, that door will be closed forever, so you better save it for when you are sure it's the best shot you've got in life. I know these are the jobs that people with PhDs designate as "unskilled," but most of those skillful geniuses wouldn't even be capable of *learning* how to do the work properly if they were given a month to train and a manual filled with diagrams to study (and they would never be afforded such luxuries). These are the jobs one cannot believe haven't been mechanized. These are the good jobs, the ones that command workers respect in their communities, but never respect on the job.

I could not truly have understood before how the experience of oppressive exploitation profoundly shapes how Latina/o migrants view their position within a stratified system of belonging, and how it all is inextricably tied to their perceptions about the positions occupied by

other groups with whom they are meaningfully engaged, such as African Americans. The abusive treatment, the routine indignities, the incessant surveillance by supervisors steeled my determination to be a witness. The constant jibes from fellow workers about those who couldn't hack it and quit made it difficult to give up, if only out of a sense of shame and personal failure. Whenever a new worker started, my coworkers sized him or her up—in terms of work ability, effort, and ethic—and most often they decided the worker was going to quit very soon, maybe even that same day. Sympathy was necessarily in short supply, rationed out in small doses and reserved for the gloomiest of situations, such as death or deportation or natural disasters. As much as my coworkers understood how tough the work was, slackers and quitters drew their ridicule and scorn. Being able to withstand the hiding of a workday at Swine's was a badge of honor, its perverse reward the distressing certainty of another hiding to come. Every so often, a worker would tell me how surprised she or he was that I was still working there. When I came back to work after my one-week medical leave, many said they were sure I had quit, and when I was still there months later, they would say "*Ya te acostumbraste a este abuso ah!*" (You've gotten used to this abuse, huh!).

I felt an unceasing commitment to my project, a sense that I was experiencing something that few social scientists ever had or would. At times I felt sudden surges of sheer euphoria, emerging from a work-induced automaton mode to regain my sociological senses and see all around me the nearly synchronized movements of hundreds of bodies, hear the rhythmic clanking of machinery, feel the shock of cold air on my face and the nearly frozen wet meat turning my fingers into popsicles under damp gloves. There was a mesmerizing quality to the everyday shop-floor performance: the loin boners leaning in sequentially to make their cuts as sixteen thousand loins made their way down the lines like a choppy succession of waves; saw operators towering over the boning lines where the leftover ribs were separated from backbones, like conductors at a meat symphony; packers with unseen strength stuffing and shaking huge anaconda-like loins into torturously small bags. At other times, anticipation of the verbal lashings that punctuated the entrancing choreography of ceaseless production was all that kept the mind from surrendering to a deep slumber.

Swine's was more than just a factory where 1,200 people disassembled hogs and assembled meat products on the line. Because the workday could be so eternal, social functions that might ordinarily take place out-

side the workplace—everything from dating to purchasing goods—took place inside the factory gates. On short breaks, a young couple might share a coffee or some fruit, squatting together under a line of lunch boxes that hung across the walls like the industrial version of mistletoe. On a daily basis, in the locker room shared by Loin Boning, Cut Floor, and Kill Floor workers, the last few minutes of lunch break took on the haggling air of a flea market. Women gathered around workers who sold bras and thongs, perfume, shoes, Mary Kay products and other assorted cosmetics, and even magical potions advertised as far superior to the HerbaLife that others offered, promising rejuvenation and vitality. Several women sold numbers for an informal lottery the Hondurans had set up (*chica*), tempting would-be buyers with inside information about numbers thought to be especially lucky. Other women collected money from contributors to the *tanda*, a cooperative lending scheme many Honduran workers participated in. Doña Isadora had no trouble selling any *baleadas*, a typical Honduran breakfast dish, left over from her morning sale; these would be surreptitiously slipped into a locker to be eaten at third break.

Just before lunch break would end, as the uproar from supervisors pacing the halls outside the locker room intensified and full-throated shouts of “Let’s go, Boning! Let’s go, ladies!” got louder and closer, the locker room took on the frenzied air of a theater backstage as women hurried to reapply their makeup, blow their runny noses, rinse tidbits of food from their teeth, refasten the colorful bandanas worn beneath their hair nets and hard hats, and perhaps grab a clean white butcher coat, dousing it with perfume. There was most definitely a meatpacker style, carried off with a proud swagger, and Latinas set the fashion trends, scrutinizing deviants with a contemptuous glare and pitying the sorry, disheveled appearances of the new hires with their lopsided hard hats, butcher coats drenched in blood, snot-encrusted nostrils, and wax-coated earplugs dangling freely.

Even in the harsh work environment of the meatpacking plant, workers found ways to make the day more bearable, chatting with whoever worked alongside them even if it meant inventing hybrid tongues (“You like *mucho chaca chaca?*”), posing exhibits of various cuts of meat arranged in obscene ways to get a laugh (pork tenderloin penis with meat scrap testicles was a crowd favorite), dropping double entendres like only a job packing meat allows (“*No me lo estás metiendo bien!*” [You’re not putting it in right!]). Crude humor, especially of a sexual nature, was commonplace, and an important avenue for communication

between Latinas/os and African Americans, perhaps because laughter and sex have universal appeal. Every so often, workers spontaneously disrupted the numbing monotony, howling plaintively into the frosty air like jungle beasts to elicit the echoing howls of other worker-wolves far out of sight, the melancholic lament of the forsaken fading into the humming background of moving parts (“AAAUUUUU!”). These were necessary diversions, the delirium of outrageous performances far more desirable than dreary hours of deafening silence. Comedic absurdity offered fleeting moments of cheer, and we celebrated the irreverent cries of the floor man, who serenaded us with his broom-cum-guitar and greeted his audience of workers with the surreal proclamation “¿Cómo están mis ovejitas?! Yo soy el buen pastor” (How are my little lambs?! I am the good shepherd). Candy, forbidden currency on the shop floor, was highly coveted by workers, a valued commodity that enhanced the popularity of frequent givers. Candy staved off hunger and kept drowsy workers alert. More importantly, I came to believe, candy disguised the wretched breath that could disgust workers laboring in close proximity to one another, and which no one wanted to be associated with lest they get a reputation for being a *chancho* (pig).

On Thursday mornings, a stream of new hires coursed through the plant, their wide-eyed ranks dwindling as the purple-hatted trainer assigned them to their respective stations. As they were paraded around the production floor like fresh jailbait, the lines erupted into raucous hooting and hollering, knives and meat hooks banging loudly on steel. If they made it, in the next month of their lives the work schedule would reset their bowel movements and make them uniquely aware of the precious value of time. The full-body throttling of packing enormous whole loins would literally shake the farts out of them. The unremarkable but recurring act of clenching their hands as they grabbed hold of a knife or loin or bag would reveal its true viciousness overnight, when the pulpy muscles of the palms became so tender that turning a doorknob was an excruciating feat. If they made it through that first month, they would have come to know what it feels like to wear away with work the very fibers of one’s being.

Over time, I developed close friendships with people I cared about, six of whom (Cristina, Thomas, Linda, Rosa, Vincent, and Claudia) will be featured prominently throughout this book. Workers gave me nicknames such as “Scrappy” (because of my squirrely fighting moves), “La Doctora” (because I was getting a doctorate degree), “Flaca” and “Skinny

Winny” (because people thought I was thin), “La Boricua” (because I am from Puerto Rico), and “Cuca” (because a Salvadoran woman called everyone “*cara de cuca*” [pussyface] and soon “Pussy” evolved into a term of endearment). As I developed relationships with workers who I felt could be key informants for my research, I explained my status as a sociology student and my purpose in working at Swine’s. This “coming out” process was repeated several dozen times throughout my fieldwork, and continued after I quit the job and proceeded to collect interviews with selected workers. Especially while working at Swine’s, I wrestled constantly with my multiple simultaneous roles as a researcher, worker, and friend, and the difficulties and dilemmas I faced come through in some of the data I present in the chapters to come.

Over the course of my time in the field, as I got to know these worker-friends while working at Swine’s and even after leaving the job, I went to lakes, beaches, amusement parks, soccer fields, and county fairs with them. I went to malls, airports, laundromats, drug houses, strip clubs, and movie theaters with them. I went to obstetricians, pediatricians, orthopedists, and ophthalmologists with them. I went to hospitals, social service agencies, courts, and lawyers’ offices with them, and I went to jail to bail them out. I went to birthday parties, baby showers, Halloween trick-or-treats, and New Year’s festivities with them. I went to “Mexican” *discotecas* where I learned to dance *rancheras* and *corridos* and got used to the usual drunken brawling. I went to Latino/a nightclubs where I was continually shamed for not knowing how to dance *bachata*. I went to an after-hours dive run by a transgender runaway from Honduras where Latino men paid \$20 a drink for the company of a woman. I went to “Black” clubs where handfuls of cash were traded for bottles of Grey Goose and the smell of weed saturated the air. I went to pool halls in Mexican restaurants and “Black” restaurants. I was teased and hazed for being a *culera/tortillera* (dyke), “masculine,” hairy, flat-assed, a slacker, a slut, talking “white,” talking “Black,” talking unintelligible “Boricua” Spanish, possibly being unauthorized, and being naive. I cried, laughed, and got angry with my worker-friends, and they with me. I slept in my worker-friends’ beds and they in mine. And while much about these experiences didn’t make it into this book, the ass-slapping, dirty jokes, flirtations, banter, and small subversions on and off the line, in the locker rooms, in break rooms, and outside the factory infused each day with levity and added a whole other layer to the social side of laboring.

With time, I came to realize how extensively I had embedded myself in the social world of the factory, and I shuddered at the thought of

leaving it all behind. My graduate adviser, Jacqueline Hagan, and my family grew anxious about my reluctance to leave the field. I dreaded the end to what I knew would be a life-defining experience. Even now, it astounds me that over the course of nearly a year and a half working as a meatpacker I managed to avoid “pointing out,” as a majority of new hires do (this happens when you accumulate six points at any given time due to absences or leaving before your shift ends). And yet, what I went through physically, mentally, and emotionally pales in comparison to most workers’ experiences. Workers in some departments left a twelve- to fifteen-hour day of punishing physical labor and emotional duress, knowing that their best hopes for earning a living wage that could provide for their family depended on their ability to relive that day indefinitely. With only a handful of hours to sleep, who had the wherewithal to contemplate alternatives, anyway? Many women left work only to get home to children and a husband who had to be cooked for and taken care of, and a home that had to be tidied. The unluckiest, who were many, found themselves either currently or in the recent past locked into extremely unequal domestic arrangements with men who all too often were physically abusive. Some workers added to their already-endless workday an hour-long commute. Like many migrant workers in the New South, some dealt with the precarious condition of being an unauthorized worker.

Current research on the incorporation experiences of Latino/a migrants in the New South paints a mixed picture of the phenomenon. While most scholars would probably agree that Latinas/os have contributed immensely to economic growth in the region and constitute an important segment of the new Southern working class, some research suggests a far less optimistic outlook regarding relations between Latino/a migrants and native-born groups, especially African Americans. If this contentious, but rather superficial, portrayal accurately reflects the character of social relations between Latino/a migrants and native-born groups with whom they are meaningfully engaged, this would undoubtedly influence the ways in which Latinas/os in the New South develop an understanding of their position as a group within the American stratified system of belonging. In taking my place on the meatpacking lines, laboring alongside Latina/o and African American women and men, I hoped to gain a firsthand understanding of this phenomenon, situating it in the most crucial social domain of working-class lives: work. The stories that unfold throughout the book cast a harsh light on the very

palpable struggles to make it in which Latinas/os find themselves playing a starring role, far beyond an objectified view of them as mere cogs in a wheel. The reader will find neither saints nor villains in these narratives, but simply people who struggle, with whatever resources are available and under conditions not set by them, to survive inside the belly of the beast.

This page intentionally left blank