Bridging the Service Divide: Dual Labor Niches and Embedded Opportunities in Restaurant Work

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Restaurants and other interactive service workplaces in the United States serve as labor niches for two very different kinds of workers doing different tasks. Immigrant Latinos primarily work "back-of-the-house" jobs doing manual tasks, while class-privileged whites work "front-of-the-house" jobs performing customer-facing tasks. How do these social and structural cleavages between dual labor niches affect the workplace dynamic? Drawing on ethnographic research in upscale Los Angeles restaurants, I describe the closed boundaries between these distinct labor niches and the valuable bridging between them performed by certain workers who are able to ease social tensions and buffer the service labor process. I discuss the implications of these findings for the study of contemporary immigrant labor niches and the nature of the opportunities within them and between them.

Keywords: immigrant niches, second generation, restaurants, labor markets, Latinos

In many global U.S. cities, a growing number of restaurants, hotels, and other "interactive" service workplaces serve as employment niches for two distinct types of individuals doing two distinct and unequal types of labor. On the one hand, unskilled Latino immigrants work the majority of the "back-of-the-house" jobs, with tasks like cleaning, stocking, and cooking. On the other hand, class-privileged whites fill "front-of-the-house" jobs whose primary tasks involve customer service. Although often stationed just feet apart in the workplace, these two different worker cohorts have little in common: most would not only be unable to perform the other's job but could not even communicate in the same language.

How does the presence of *dual* employment niches affect the labor dynamic within contemporary interactive service workplaces? How are these niches maintained, and with what consequences for workers? Traditional scholarship on labor relations focuses primarily on the tension between workers and management (Burawoy 1979) or, more recently, between workers and customers (see Leidner 1993; Lopez 2010). Yet these perspectives, with a few notable exceptions (for example, Kanter 1977), tend to neglect or downplay *intra*-worker relations in the

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workplace. Similarly, existing literature on immigrant and ethnic labor niches provides us with valuable insight into the high concentration of particular immigrant groups in certain lines of work (Filipinas in nursing, Vietnamese women in nail salons, Mexican men in agriculture, and so on), but the analytical toolkits that scholars usually deploy are geared toward capturing either descriptive employment trends of immigrant groups or the process of niche formation itself (Eckstein and Peri, this issue; Waldinger and Lichter 2003). This leaves us with an incomplete understanding of the worlds of work within which immigrant niches are embedded. As a consequence, we remain unclear on how immigrant niches in particular industries today are affecting the labor process, shop-floor social relations between members and nonmembers (who themselves may be members of other niches), and the nature of opportunity in these workplaces.

Restaurants in immigrant gateway cities like Los Angeles provide excellent settings in which to examine contemporary labor niches up close. The food and beverage industry has grown into one of the largest sectors of the U.S. economy, generating billions of dollars in annual revenue and employing 14.4 million Americans nationwide.[1] With 276,000 food and drink establishments in the city alone, Los Angeles is the nation's largest regional restaurant industry (Restaurants Opportunities Center of Los Angeles 2011). It also employs an extremely diverse group of workers: nearly two-thirds of all Los Angeles restaurant workers are Hispanic, and over half (55.2 percent) are foreign-born, mostly from Mexico, Central America, and Asia (ROC-LA 2011). Many of these nonwhite immigrant workers are concentrated in low-wage, manual-labor positions such as cooking, dishwashing, and bussing tables. By contrast, white men and women are concentrated in customer-facing restaurant jobs such as serving, bartending, and management (Restaurants Opportunities Centers United 2014). In effect, the strong patterning found in Los Angeles restaurants by race, class, and gender reflects two distinct labor niches in these workplaces: a white front of the house and an immigrant Latino back of the house.

This study draws on over two years of ethnographic fieldwork within upscale, full-service Los Angeles restaurants in which I examined how the two unequal labor niches in restaurant work are maintained and kept closed against one another. On this divided shop floor, I show that some workers, as a function of their particular skills and attributes, are able to function as crucial agents helping to bridge social and structural inequalities between workers and facilitate the flow of food service. I close by discussing how this research advances the study of contemporary immigrant labor niches, particularly those located in expanding interactive service industries.

METHODS AND FIELD SITES

The research discussed in this article is part of a larger project examining labor, immigration, and inequality in the Los Angeles restaurant industry. I derive the data from participant observation within two upscale Los Angeles restaurants in which I was employed as a waiter ("server"). My fieldwork within the first restaurant described here lasted fourteen months between 2012 and 2013, and my fieldwork within the second restaurant lasted five months, from the fall of 2015 to the spring of 2016. At each field site, as I worked two to five shifts per week (totaling twelve to thirty-five hours), I recorded observations on a wide variety of work-related events such as hiring interviews, employee training sessions, daily service on "the floor," and post-shift parties. I compiled notes immediately following fieldwork each day, storing them on dated, password-protected files on a personal computer. All of the individuals I interacted with regularly, including management, were made aware of my research intention.

Participant observation is a unique methodological tool for understanding shop-floor dynamics since it allows the researcher to examine the unfolding of micro-relationships in

1. National Restaurant Association, "News and Research: Facts at a Glance," November 18, 2016, available at: http://www.restaurant.org/News-Research/Research/Facts-at-a-Glance (accessed November 20, 2016).

a particular context. My initial approach to this fieldwork followed the tenets of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), according to which a researcher enters the field without formal hypotheses or theoretical assumptions and allows the ensuing analysis to emerge inductively. After initial data collection, I began to focus on refining my working theories by actively seeking out "deviant cases" in the field (see Timmermans and Tavory 2012). Following this logic, I decided to enter a second field site with slightly different characteristics so as to expand, contrast, and cross-check my overall body of data.[2] Additionally, I supplemented my data with a series of in-depth, nonrandom interviews with workers from both restaurants. Each interview lasted between thirty and ninety minutes on average and centered on three broad discussion topics: personal work history, workplace social relations, and long-term goals and career aspirations.

Field Site 1: Match Restaurant

Match (pseudonym) is a popular, casual-upscale restaurant located in an affluent area of west Los Angeles near the posh neighborhoods of Santa Monica, Venice, and Brentwood. As an exclusive site for upper-middle-class consumption, Match has a primary clientele of white young professionals, in their twenties and thirties, who are local residents, nearby office workers, and foreign tourists. Dining at Match is expensive, though not unusually so for the area. For example, lunch averages $25 per person, and dinner is $40 before tip, tax, and alcohol.

As of 2013, Match had roughly half a dozen managers and eighty workers split evenly between the front and back of the house. The demographic breakdown of these employees closely resembled patterns found in many other higher-end U.S. restaurants: servers, bartenders, hosts, and baristas were primarily young, white, and college-educated, whereas cooks, dishwashers, bussers, and food runners were almost exclusively first- or second-generation Latino men of working-class backgrounds.

Field Site 2: Terroir Restaurant

Terroir is an upscale restaurant on the west side of Los Angeles. Formally opened in the fall of 2015 after several years as a "pop-up" (temporary) restaurant, Terroir offers chef-driven, pan-Asian cuisine. The average cost of a meal per person is $30 at lunch and $50 to $80 at dinner, excluding tax, alcohol, and tip. In contrast to Match's yuppie clientele, Terroir's regulars tend to be middle-aged and monied; most are either white or Asian American.

Terroir is a modest-sized operation compared to Match; it has a smaller seating capacity (80 compared to 120), and a full staff of three managers and forty employees. Like Match, Terroir has mostly white front-of-the-house workers in lead positions, while the kitchen and support workers are primarily Latino immigrant men. At both restaurants, the compensation structure for employees is roughly in line with industry standards nationwide: front-of-the-house workers rely heavily on tips to supplement their minimum-wage earnings, whereas kitchen-based employees do not earn tips but instead make slightly higher hourly wages (approximately $9 to $15). At Match, servers and bartenders get to keep what they make after "tipping out" their support staff (host, busser, runner, and so on). By slight contrast, tips are "pooled" at Terroir: tips are combined at the end of the night and distributed based on a fixed percentage to all customer-facing workers. (Back-of-the-house workers are excluded.) The effect is that tip-based earnings are more volatile at Match than at Terroir, where a slow night can mean no tips for the staff.

INSIDE RESTAURANT WORK

Like other interactive service workplaces (Sherman 2007), restaurant work requires coordinating, producing, and distributing a service that is to be consumed on-site and under time con-

2. I do not treat my two field sites as formally comparative cases. Rather, I appraise them as having a family resemblance—both are upscale, full-service Los Angeles restaurants—but with variations in their social and organizational characteristics.

straints (Whyte 1948). This demands a close coordination between different employees: a server must relay specific customer orders to the kitchen (and drink orders to the bar), where the correct dishes (and drinks) are assembled. The dish is handed off to a food runner who must successfully relay it to the correct table. At the conclusion of the meal, a busser clears the table, and the host is notified that the table may be reseated.

This sequence of service tasks is divided into "front-of-the-house" and "back-of-the-house" labor. Each has its own logic, norms, and internal job ladders. Those in lead front-of-the-house positions, such as servers, cashiers, and bartenders, are primarily responsible for guest relations and must ensure that diners leave satisfied ("the customer is always right"). Particularly in higher-end establishments, this labor requires that front-of-the-house workers monitor their emotional and physical displays, which scholars refer to as "emotional" or "aesthetic" labor (Hochschild 1983; Warhurst and Nickson 2009). Food runners, barbacks, bussers, and hosts interact less frequently with guests and are commonly referred to as the "support" staff at the front of the house. Functionally, however, their role is no less important to the overall operation. Support staff often must provide assistance to multiple groups of actors in the workplace, such as customers, managers, cooks, and servers. For example, a host greets guests at the door but also must stay in frequent contact with servers and managers in order to know when new tables are ready to be seated. Similarly, a food runner communicates—often using thick industry slang—with kitchen workers to help shuttle food out to the dining room. Once there, he or she must formally introduce each dish to diners.

Back-of-the-house workers prep, stock, clean, and assemble food items in the restaurant, often behind the scenes. They labor on goods and materials instead of with people. Back-of-the-house labor thus demands different capabilities and skills from front-of-the-house labor: physical strength, dexterity (for example, knife skills), and stamina (an ability to endure, for instance, ten- to twelve-hour shifts), not to mention hot, loud, and often dangerous job conditions. Playing out largely outside customers' view, the norms of the back-of-the-house shop-floor culture often contrast with the hospitality focus of the front of the house to include cursing, shouting, sexual jokes, and even physical violence (see Bourdain 2000; Fine 1996; Whyte 1948). With the exception of management, many back-of-the-house workers acquire their skills informally and on the job (Hagan, Hernández-León, and Demonsant 2015), relying on informal training systems to first learn the work by shadowing incumbent workers (Bailey and Waldinger 1991; Fine 1996) and then later demonstrating the proficiency necessary for kitchen-based promotions (see Lowe, Hagan, and Iskander 2010).

Relations between front- and back-of-the-house restaurant workers periodically swell into conflict. The sociologist William F. Whyte (1948) noted more than half a century ago that waitresses and male cooks in restaurants were frequently at odds. Cooks, attempting to achieve an efficient work rhythm in the kitchen, would view any special requests (or errors) coming from the front of the house as a nuisance at best, a disruption meriting retaliation at worst. Waitresses, focused on maximizing their tips from customers, were primarily interested in bending rules to please diners—regardless of the headaches this created for the kitchen.

In the United States, the divides between front- and back-of-the-house workers are accentuated by the earnings inequality between the two kinds of labor. Cooks, dishwashers, and other pantry workers earn low hourly wages and average scarcely more than minimum wage. With limited job benefits, little employment security, and usually no advancement opportunities, most back-of-the-house restaurant work is seen as dead-end labor—as quintessentially "bad" jobs in the service industry (Kalleberg 2011). In California, front-of-the-house workers earn a minimum wage of $9 an hour plus tips (as of 2015). Tip earnings, however, can be quite substantial at many full-service restaurants, particularly in fine-dining establishments where check averages are higher. For example, a recent multi-city study found that restaurant servers averaged roughly $22 an hour in gross earnings—and sometimes

much more (Haley-Lock and Ewert 2011).[3] Food runners, bussers, and those in other support positions earn slightly less. In most restaurants, they are each apportioned a smaller share of tips each night ("tipped out"); recent ethnographic accounts suggest that food runners and bussers typically earn around half the tips that servers and bartenders make (see Gomberg-Muñoz 2011).

MAINTAINING UNEQUAL LABOR NICHES

Today front-of-the-house restaurant workers often do not share the same social characteristics as those scrubbing pots and sweating over a hot grill behind kitchen doors. Particularly in diverse metropolitan centers such as Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago, high-earning serving and bartending jobs function as an employment niche for middle-class white men and women, while back-of-the-house jobs serve as employment niches for Latinos, especially the foreign-born (Gomberg-Muñoz 2011; Jayaraman 2014; ROC-LA 2011; Sherman 2007; Waldinger and Lichter 2003).[4]

A series of overlapping processes channel different restaurant workers into one of the two employment niches. Hiring biases are a powerful way in which management niches employment from the outset. For example, research shows that hiring managers often favor Latino immigrants for the more labor-intensive, low-paying back-of-the-house jobs. As the anthropologist Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz (2011) observes, restaurant managers often see immigrant Latino men as a source of reliable hard workers who are relatively complacent about low wages and difficult working conditions. Such racialized and stereotyped hiring preferences for these positions are found throughout the industry. In many immigrant-heavy areas of the country, cooking, bussing, and janitorial restaurant jobs are now paradigmatic of the "brown-collar" work (Cantazarite 2000) into which Latino immigrants are channeled (Barret 2006).

Discriminatory hiring also reinforces the class-privileged white labor niche in the front of the house. Research shows that employers consistently prefer applicants who they believe possess "soft skills" and other personality-based attributes, such as a "friendly demeanor" (Moss and Tilly 2001). As the sociologist Mary Gatta and her colleagues Heather Boushey and Eileen Appelbaum (2009) have noted, managers' reliance in their hiring decisions on an assemblage of looks, personality, and poise is often a smoke screen for a preference for hiring white, middle-class young adults (Warhurst and Nickson 2009; Williams and Connell 2010). Managers may also share sociocultural traits with those whom they offer the more desirable jobs, reinforcing networks of inequality in the workplace (Rivera 2012). Similarly, the nonwhite immigrants who do manage to obtain lead front-of-the-house jobs often are more European in appearance and have urbane, middle-class mannerisms (Zukin 1995, 154–73).

The boundaries between the two employment niches of restaurant work are further reinforced through social networks. As the sociologist Mark Granovetter (1974/1995) famously noted, workers often help those in their social circles connect to jobs by alerting them when jobs become available and vouching for their character and skills when talking with employers. These social ties are specific and highly directional: they help connect certain people to similar jobs already held by others in their social network (Granovetter 1985).

Because individuals within a network tend to have similar social traits—a principle known as homophily—social networks contribute to the uniformity of labor niches. This contribution has been well documented among immigrant laborers, who often lean heavily on network ties to gain employment in niche worksites (Hagan 1998; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002; Waldinger and Lichter 2003). In this way, back-of-the-house restaurant jobs (as well as some sup-

3. This earnings figure may be low, since tip earnings are notoriously underreported. However, yearly earnings figures are often lower for many front-of-the-house workers because they do not work forty-hour weeks (and do not accrue vacation time when they take time off).

4. Many fast-food (or "quick-serve") establishments, particularly in poorer urban areas, are staffed by minorities, immigrants, and those with little education—regardless of position (see Ehrenreich 2001; Newman 1999).

port jobs) can become "colonized" by networks of male, immigrant Mexicans and Central Americans (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002; Waldinger and Lichter 2003). Network dynamics pattern front-of-the-house jobs in similar ways, but within very different social circles. In step with managerial preferences for hiring the right "look" for customer-facing positions, white middle-class servers and bartenders are often able to "hook up" their friends with similar jobs. Employers may even reach out to workers who appear to exemplify the right traits for the job to see if they have any friends who want to "join the team" (Besen-Cassino 2014; Warhurst and Nickson 2007).

Thus, for the well-connected individuals who fit the right profile for the right restaurant positions, social networks lubricate their entrance into different labor niches in the workplace. These same forces also foreclose access to, or movement *between,* the two niches. Thick social networks threaded with race, class, and other social characteristics severely curtail the prospect of workers within different labor niches switching from back-of-the-house to front-of-the-house jobs, or vice versa. This goes beyond a mere mismatch of skill. Plainly, few employees fit into both social worlds of work. Being embedded in one labor niche (immigrant Latinos working in the back of the house) necessarily means not being a part of the other niche (middle-class whites working in the front of the house). The processes that encourage in-group membership in certain labor niches also close the niches off from one another.

BETWEEN NICHES: TENSION, DISTANCE, AND CONFLICT

At Match and Terroir, the social inequalities between white, middle-class workers and immigrant Latino workers are accentuated by their structural differences as front- and back-of-the-house employees, respectively. The tensions that often ripple along these fault lines manifest in a variety of ways. Most commonly, front- and back-of-the-house workers simply ignore each other at work, as I noted while working at Match:

> I take my lunch meal to the break area beyond the kitchen. It is prime break time—right before the lunch rush—and there are two tables already taken. Around one [sit] three white servers who alternate between furious texting on their cell phones and chatting loudly with one another. [Around] the other [sit] four immigrant Mexican cooks, three of [whom] are hastily shoving food into their mouths. The fourth is fast asleep. I hear Charlie, one of the servers seated at the first table, call out my name: "Eli, so glad you could make it to the party!"[5] He speaks loudly and directly over the heads of the cooks, including his sleeping coworker. "Crystal [a server] and I were just talking about where to head for a beer after work!" (October 7, 2012).

Charlie's actions here suggested that he registered only his young, white tablemates as colleagues and social peers. Similarly, often no one in the front of the house was aware when the Mexican immigrant dishwashers, prep cooks, and line cooks at Match clocked in and out. Even floor managers, for example, usually did not notice when the Mexican cook Xeno left for the day and José took over his job working on the kitchen line.

The social distance between those in each labor niche was also clearly illustrated by who knew whose name in the workplace: many white servers did not know the names of their coworkers preparing the food, nor did the Latino cooks know who was serving it. José, a first-generation line cook at Match in his early forties, would occasionally flag me down to ask who "the one with glasses" was (Jerry) or to relay a message to "the blond girl" (Pamela) about the chicken sandwich ticket she had just entered into the point of sale (POS) system. Servers were just as oblivious toward their back-of-the-house coworkers. "There are so many of them," complained Pip, a white waitress in her midtwenties who had worked at Match for two years. "Besides, all I care about is that the food comes out quickly with no errors, you know?"

The smaller scale of operations at Terroir eased the estrangement between front- and

5. I have changed names to protect the privacy of those cited in this study.

back-of-the-house workers, but did not necessarily eliminate it. With about half as many workers compared to Match during even the busiest shifts, Terroir presented more intimate opportunities for them to interact across the front- and back-of-the-house labor divide. Bobby, a white server in his late thirties, quickly became well liked among the Mexican dishwashers for the deft sexual jokes he would direct at them when he dropped off dirty plates ("did I hear you say you wanted my culo, Papi? Absolutely, I'll give it to you. Can you wait until after work or should we head into the walk-in [fridge] right now?"). Few other white front-of-the-house workers went to such lengths to establish rapport with their Latino back-of-the-house coworkers. For example, after I witnessed Reggie, a white waiter in his early twenties, chatting with the head chef and two Mexican line cooks stationed in the kitchen, Reggie leaned over to me and whispered, "Hey, Eli, is our new line cook's name Ana?"

Tips also brightened the boundaries between the two labor niches. Despite the different tip distribution structures at Match and Terroir (individualized tips versus pooled tips), tips always flowed primarily to the white server staff, trickled down to the Latino support staff, and stopped short of the kitchen—an unequal reward for a busy day of labor at the restaurant that prompted tense interactions. I made the following field note at the end of a hectic Sunday brunch at Match:

> I was happy that all my tables went smoothly today. They also tipped well, averaging over 20 percent of each bill. Before leaving, I ducked into the kitchen to crack a joke with Xeno and Juan [cooks] and thank them for doing a good job on the line today: I had received no customer [complaints] and lots of compliments on the food. Xeno, looking weary after nine-plus hours of hard cooking, approached me and said, "[It] was really busy today, yeah? You guys must have made a lot of money in tips. Like, what, two hundred dollars maybe?"
>
> "Yeah, we did [okay]," I say, thrown by the line of inquiry. We both stare off towards the dining room. "But not two hundred . . ." I protested.
>
> "How much you made then?" he interrupted, staring at me and looking tired.
>
> "Uhhh, we don't make *that* much money here . . ." I stammered while Xeno turned and walked away without a word. (February 5, 2013)

As several Mexican cooks also suggested to me, they perceived their white coworkers in the front of the house as lazy gringos who did not work very hard for the money they earned. It is worth noting, however, that few complained to management or otherwise attempted to address the issue.

Managerial practices also affect the boundaries between labor niches. Though managers at both Match and Terroir preached collectivist sentiments such as "we are all one family" and "let's take care of each other out there," actual workplace practices suggested the opposite was true. For example, staff meetings for the whole staff were rarely held at Match; instead, meetings were announced as being for "servers and bartenders only," or as "mandatory for all kitchen personnel." At Terroir, during preopening training, the general manager, a white man in his forties named Jim, painstakingly welcomed new front-of-the-house staff to "the team." He spent the beginning hour of each day leading group icebreakers, encouraging us to be goofy and to share something unusual about ourselves. By striking contrast, I was never formally introduced to any of the cooks or dishwashers at the restaurant.

Other policies actually *inhibited* interaction between employees in the front and back of the house. For instance, Match servers were not allowed to communicate directly with line cooks during service, as I learned when I tried to correct an order:

> A guest flags me down to say she forgot to mention to put the cream sauce on the side instead of directly on top of her [omelet]. I hurry back to the kitchen to convey the message to the cooks. I go directly to Juan, who I know is manning the egg station today. I begin to explain the instruction to him when [executive] chef Eric screams over to me, "Hey! Don't talk directly to him, you give *me* the instruction, then *I'll* relay the message!"

> Humiliated, I repeat the special instructions to him while all the cooks look on. (October 5, 2012)

Match management argued that forcing servers to follow a formal chain of command and to not communicate directly with line cooks had a practical purpose: the person responsible for directing the flow of kitchen production expected to know what was happening in the kitchen at all times. Yet, in practice, following this protocol was sometimes had operationally clunky and socially alienating results. Servers and cooks separated by only a few feet were forced to speak to a third party—the chef—to convey even the simplest of information ("sauce on the side for the omelet on twenty-one!").

Cleavages between niched restaurant workers can also threaten the flow of the food service. White servers who were unable (or unwilling) to appreciate the occupational stresses that Latino kitchen workers regularly faced would inadvertently create more problems for them, and in turn create more problems for themselves as well. As I found out from Xeno only after months of working with him, servers at Match frequently ordered dishes during the heart of the lunch or dinner rush that had been out of stock ("eighty-sixed") for hours, or that required the most labor-intensive preparation. The resulting bottlenecks in kitchen production then caused delays in getting food to the tables. Oblivious to the kitchen issues they had created, servers, dealing with frustrated diners, saw only the cooks' collective ineptitude. A comment during one such delay from Jerry, a white, twenty-six-year-old waiter, is a case in point: "Jeez, it's like all of them [the Latino cooks] went out partying last night and are hungover this morning!"

Personal beefs on the shop floor can also spill over into food service problems. For example, a white Terroir waitress named Dorothy, who could not understand Spanish, complained that Carlos and Jorge, two Guatemalan prep cooks, were "talking shit" about her in Spanish. When management proved reluctant to get involved, Dorothy took matters into her own hands. She announced loudly that she refused to enter the area where Carlos and Jorge were working, which happened to be next to the dishwashing station. Her refusal left her front-of-the-house coworkers scrambling—and none too pleased about it—to help buss her tables and bring dirty dishes to the dish pit. This added duty in turn decreased the time they could spend attending to the needs of guests. Similarly, Antonio, a second-generation Mexican American food runner, told me that he was going to "slack off" with his job duties since he was frustrated about the paltry tips he was receiving. He made it clear that his diminished efforts would not be noticeable enough that management would call him out, but servers would nevertheless have to work harder to run food, clear plates, and reset tables in their sections (thus affecting their tips).

BRIDGING THE SERVICE DIVIDE

If the social and structural cleavages between the two labor niches can disrupt the food service process, the same forces also give value to skills, people, and technologies that can alleviate these disruptions. Electronic POS systems, for example, are an automated means by which restaurants like Match and Terroir can enable different restaurant workers to communicate customer orders using standardized language and procedures. POS systems reduce a restaurant's dependence on the traditional face-to-face communications between servers and kitchen workers—through verbal orders, handwritten ticket stubs, and so on.[6] No less importantly, technological restaurant systems also allow immigrant workers with poor English abilities to function adequately in the kitchen by learning how to interpret a few basic commands.

Yet the growing use of sophisticated POS systems and other smart restaurant technology has had the unintended consequence of rein-

6. Other restaurant technologies that have become commonplace have had similar deskilling effects in different areas of the labor process. The software Open Table, for instance, generates an electronic system for online guest reservations, and Hot Schedules is an online employee scheduling hub that centralizes (and digitizes) time-off requests and shift swaps for managerial approval.

forcing the *social* boundaries between immigrant Latino kitchen workers and white dining room workers. Although such technology further reduces the need for interpersonal dialogue between the two sets of coworkers, it cannot entirely eliminate it; restaurant guests frequently and inevitably voice questions, suggest menu revisions, and make special requests that servers need to convey directly to the kitchen. Here lies the distinct advantage of having on staff individuals with the skills to bridge social divides between the white niche and the Latino niche.

A number of Los Angeles restaurants advertise employment opportunities for workers who are bilingual in English and Spanish. Consider the following hiring ads posted to the Craigslist Los Angeles "Food and Beverage" job forum in April 2016:

> **HIRING NOW Bilingual Spanish/Eng Cashiers & Cooks**
>
> COME WORK AT A HAPPY, FUN & FAST PACE ENVIRONMENT
>
> Hiring Cashiers & Cooks with Great growth opportunity.
>
> Job Requirements:
>
> - Must be at least 18 years of age
> - Able to work varied shifts including holidays & weekends
> - Excellent customer service skills
> - Positive attitude
> - Attention to detail and quality
> - *Bilingual in English & Spanish Preferred*
> - May lift materials and/or product up to 50 pounds or more. (italics added)

> **Kitchen Manager for Popular Restaurant!**
>
> Long-standing restaurant group with concepts based on the westside and greater LA area with multiple locations is seeking a Kitchen Manager!
>
> Please have previous experience with managing a high-volume kitchens, maintaining consistency in menu execution, carrying out health and safety standards. Having full knowledge of administrative responsibilities is expected, as well as having an understanding of financials (food/labor costs, P&Ls).
>
> Must also have great communication skills as this person will be supervising, training, coaching, and motivating staff by giving constructive feedback. Looking for a true and honest leader in the kitchen! *Must be fluent in English and Spanish.* (italics added)

As both of these ads attest, being bilingual in Spanish and English has become an increasingly essential skill for restaurant work in Los Angeles. To be sure, some of this skill demand stems from growing ethnic consumer bases in the immigrant neighborhoods of East and South Los Angeles. Yet L.A. restaurants, I argue, also seek bilingual workers to buffer internal employee relations. This is evident in the fact that the positions in these Craigslist ads do *not* require customer engagement (cooks, kitchen manager) and may in fact be located in predominantly white, English-speaking neighborhoods of the city ("westside").

At both Terroir and Match, bilingual workers function as crucial social bridges, facilitating communication between the white and Latino labor niches. They fill what social network scholars refer to as a "structural hole"—a lack of ties between two or more social groups within a given network (Burt 2005). At Terroir, the chef-owner's self-proclaimed right-hand man for the past ten years has been a Mexican immigrant named Jon. Forty-one years old and originally from Veracruz, Mexico, Jon speaks English and Spanish fluently, though his English remains heavily accented. By most measures, Jon would make for an excellent kitchen hire in any restaurant: he is exceptionally hard-working, skilled in a variety of culinary techniques, and intensely loyal to the chef. That said, arguably Jon's greatest value to Terroir—which he demonstrates daily—is his ability to manage Spanish-speaking back-of-the-house workers and coordinate their work with the front of the house. He swiftly translates communication back and forth between cooks, servers, managers, and even the head chef, who does not speak Spanish. Jon conducts hiring interviews for new line cooks and dish-

washers, sets kitchen schedules, and mediates the occasional dispute between kitchen employees, all in Spanish. As a result, when Jon is around the restaurant—which is almost always, given his salaried sous chef position—the head chef seldom has to say a word to any of the Spanish-speaking Mexican and Central American back-of-the-house workers whom he employs. After years of working with Jon at his side, he simply trusts Jon to get the job done.

Jon's ability to fill structural holes in the workplace has undoubtedly played a part in helping him achieve his status as a salaried sous chef in an upscale restaurant like Terroir. He and other bilingual Spanish-English kitchen workers possess the skills necessary to orchestrate food service across the two socially distinct labor niches. However, as central as Jon is to Terroir's operation, his pride in his Veracruzano-born heritage makes him less relatable to his white and middle-class coworkers in the front of the house. Jon speaks lovingly of salsa dancing in Latin clubs on his days off and is outspoken in his belief that beer "should be ice-cold and light, like Modelo, not that bitter India Pale Ale shit that Americans want to drink these days!" Out of touch with the cultural milieu of his front-of-the-house coworkers (as well as of many of the restaurant's patrons), Jon remains socially embedded within the immigrant Latino niche. Like other immigrant Latino workers at Terroir, I never once witnessed Jon being invited to go out after work for a drink with his front-of-the-house colleagues.

Jon and other bilingual immigrants may lubricate work-based relations between the two niches of restaurant employment, but they do little to close the social and cultural cleavages between the niches. This is where second-generation Latino restaurant workers like Pedro have an edge. Pedro is a thirty-two-year-old Mexican American born in South-Central Los Angeles to Guadalajaran parents. Despite holding only a high school degree, Pedro has rapidly risen through Match's kitchen ranks in the sixteen months since he began working there. Having grown up speaking both Spanish and English, Pedro was first hired as a dishwasher at minimum wage ($9 at the time). Six months later, he was promoted to prep cook. He continued climbing the kitchen ladder until he was—in his words—"at the top of the heap": he became the lead line cook at Match, working just under the sous chef, with responsibility for the primary grill and pizza-baking stations. He now makes $15 an hour.

Like Jon, Pedro says that he benefited from his ability to translate between English and Spanish, both of which he speaks natively and without an accent. When I met him in late 2012, while he was still a prep cook, it was clear that Pedro was already the point person in Match's kitchen for front- and back-of-the-house workers alike. Pedro would hustle around the kitchen furiously chopping vegetables while talking just as fast in two languages. Unlike Jon, Pedro's bi-*cultural* fluency deepened his rapport with front-of-the-house workers and managers beyond his ability merely to deliver translation services. During meal breaks at Match, Pedro liked to joke around with young, white servers like Charlie and Amy. To Charlie, he would exclaim, "What's up, doggie! How was that bar you hit up last Friday? Meet any niiiiiccee chicas?" With Amy, Pedro would chat excitedly about developments in their mutual favorite TV show, *The Walking Dead*. Back on the kitchen line during busy meal rushes, Pedro would hum popular Mexican hits playing on the radio alongside the immigrant cooks. Mid-song, he could code-switch back to American youth slang when a white server stopped by to ask him a question or momentarily hang out. Before I left Match in the summer of 2013, Pedro had received yet another promotion—this time to kitchen manager and regional trainer of Match's newly opened second location near Hollywood. Having been with Match less than two years, Pedro had skills that had enabled him to make a remarkably fast ascent up the back-of-the-house hierarchy.

Pedro's central position within multiple employee networks at Match made him an indispensable figure in a workplace spliced into divergent occupational communities. Other second-generation Latino workers were also able to carve out similarly advantageous positions for themselves. Twenty-year-old Victor, a second-generation Mexican American, began at Match as a busser—the lowest position in

the dining room hierarchy. Within six months, management promoted Victor to food runner, a position that allowed Victor to leverage his bilingual skills from outside the kitchen. As a food runner, Victor conversed with kitchen workers in Spanish about the dishes he received, then turned around and described the food to English-speaking diners. Within a year, Victor had his eye on what he viewed as "the next step" for him: becoming a "flex" employee at the restaurant, working part-time as a cook and part-time as a waiter. He was convinced that he could do it. Victor told me one day, gesturing toward a group of white servers, "It's pretty simple what they do. I mean, I can do that *for sure:* just bullshit with customers, get them what they want, then make a bunch of tips." He envisioned a kitchen role as also coming easily for him: he had always helped his mother cook for the family and had past work experience assembling sandwiches at a local Subway.

When I left Match in 2013, it remained to be seen whether Victor would be given the unprecedented opportunity to work in both front- and back-of-the-house capacities—straddling the divided labor niches. Management had seemed favorable to the idea. In Victor, personal ambition was coupled with an attractive mixture of social and cultural competencies that the restaurant could have used. Able to schmooze with Match's white customers in English while double-checking the accuracy of the food coming out of the kitchen in Spanish, Victor, like Pedro, bridged the service divide in the workplace.

CONCLUSION

The growth of the service economy alongside continued migration from Latin America is reshaping not only local labor markets but also shop-floor dynamics in the workplaces in which immigrants are concentrated. Drawing from ethnographic data on full-service Los Angeles restaurants, my research examined a workplace characterized by dual labor niches: immigrant Latinos employed in back-of-the-house capacities and middle-class whites employed in front-of-the-house capacities. I have shown that the social (race, class, gender, immigration status) and structural asymmetries of these labor niches, reinforced by employer hiring preferences and unequal social networks, effectively close them off to each other. As a result, the bright boundary between the class-privileged white niche and the immigrant Latino niche can produce everyday shop-floor tensions, food service snafus, and lingering inequalities in the workplace.

I argue that dual-niched workplaces hold situational opportunities for those able to bridge the divide. Bilingual English-Spanish workers at both restaurants studied here put their linguistic skills to use by brokering communication between an English-speaking front of the house (and management) and a Spanish-speaking back of the house. They smoothed the food service process while simultaneously acting as a social bridge on the shop floor between otherwise profoundly divided employees.

Individuals with dual social and cultural competencies may be of even greater utility in such workplaces. Because many of the bilingual, second-generation workers in this study not only linguistically code-switched when interacting with different worker cohorts (see Hernández-León and Lakhani 2013; Morando 2013) but also deployed appropriate sociocultural scripts as needed, they could serve affluent white guests in line with managerial expectations and socialize with both white coworkers and immigrant Latino coworkers. For many second-generation Latino workers, this ability to partially transcend the boundary between the two labor niches proved valuable, helping them secure promotions, raises, and greater job responsibilities at the restaurants (see also Wilson 2017). As other recent scholarship also indicates, individuals' ability to showcase their "cross-cultural" capital is likely to be valuable in increasingly diverse institutional settings (Agius Vallejo 2012; Da Cruz, this issue; Lee 1998).

In sum, this research contributes to our understanding of contemporary immigrant labor markets in two primary ways. First, it showcases the complicated interaction of race, class, and immigration on "global" shop floors. As the case of restaurants illustrates, a given immigrant labor niche may be only one slice of a firm's larger social organization in which

other types of individuals are concentrated in different aspects of the work (see, for example, Peri and Sparber 2009). Drawing attention to the broader organizational contexts within which immigrant labor niches are embedded is crucial to understanding the worlds of work—their labor relations, opportunity structures, inequalities, and shop-floor experiences—that immigrants and their offspring are encountering today. Second, this study provides a valuable supplement to macro-level data suggesting the intergenerational "stagnation" of Latinos on the lower rungs of the U.S. labor market (Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Telles and Ortiz 2008; Waldinger, Lim, and Cort 2007). Although the Latino workers in this study remain in the marginalized service sector—few stood to make giant leaps in socioeconomic mobility—other workers, as this study demonstrates, are encountering nuanced mobility pathways at the intersection of personal skills and competencies with the social organization of work. Against a backdrop of the larger structural barriers facing Latino immigrants and their offspring, it remains to be seen how far these intangible and contextualized "skills" can take workers as they continue building work careers.

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