

Notes and Documents

Inside a Poultry Processing Plant: An Ethnographic Portrait

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I arrive at Tyson's Northwest Arkansas Job Center in Springdale at 10 in the morning. At the center of the most productive poultry-producing region in the world, Springdale is an unremarkable working-class city that is home to the corporate headquarters of Tyson Foods. The Tyson Job Center itself is a small, unimpressive building with a sparse interior that resembles a government office. Signs surrounding the secretary's desk suggest a certain seriousness. In Spanish one says "Do not leave children unattended" and another warns: "Thank you for your interest in our company, Tyson Foods, but please bring your own interpreter."

The receptionist, who begins the process of turning applicants into employees, seems genuinely surprised by my presence. "Sorry, hun, there are no openings for a mechanic. Fill out the application and we'll call you." Somewhat puzzled, I assure her that I am amazingly unqualified to be a mechanic. "I'm hoping," I tell her, "to get a job on the production line at one of the processing plants in the area." With a confused look she hands me a thick packet of forms and asks, "*You* want to work on the line?"

As I turn to take a seat, I begin to understand her confusion. The secretary and I are the only Americans, the only white folk, and the only English speakers in the room. Spanish predominates, but is not the only foreign language. Lao is heard from a couple in the corner, and a threesome from the Marshall Islands are speaking a Polynesian language. Within less than two decades, the poultry industry has become a key site for "workers of the world" to come together in a region of the U.S.—the South—that received few foreign immigrants during the 20th century. Attracted by employment opportunities in the poultry industry, Latin Americans first began to enter northwest Arkansas in the late 1980s. Today, about three-quarters of plant labor forces are Latin American, with Southeast Asians and Marshallese accounting for a large percentage of the remaining workers. U.S.-born workers are few and far between.

Tyson processes job applicants like it processes poultry. The emphasis is on quantity not quality. No one at the Job Center spends more than a minute looking at my application, and no single person takes the time to review the whole thing. There are few pleasantries, but there is also no bullshit. We are spared questions like: What are your career plans? Why do you want to work in poultry? How long do you plan on working here? Efficiency rules. Bob begins and ends my "interview" with: "What can I do for ya?" I tell him I want a job at a processing plant, he makes a quick call, and in less than five minutes I have a job on the line. My references, which someone has already called, check out, and I pass both the drug test and the physical. I am Tyson material.

I arrive at the plant the following Tuesday ready for work. It is massive and its exterior is put together much like the Job Center—quickly, cheaply, and piece by piece. At 3 p.m. sharp, Javier, my orientation leader, gathers up the new recruits and escorts us into a small classroom that contains a prominently displayed sign. “Democracies depend on the political participation of its citizens, but not in the workplace.” Written in both English and Spanish, the message is clear in any language.

The nine (other) people in my orientation class are representative of the plant’s second shift. Eight are Latin Americans, with six coming from Mexico and two from El Salvador. Six men, two women. As younger men frequently lament, women in the plant tend to be slightly older than the men. In this respect, the two in our group, Maria (early 40s) and Carmen (early 50s), are quite typical. The six men vary considerably in age. Juan, from El Salvador, is only 23, but Don Pablo is well into his 60s. Jorge, in his mid-30s, has lived in California for the past 13 years, the vast majority of it working in a textile factory. Although he has only been in Arkansas for a few days, he already appreciates the region for many of the same reasons that draw other Latin Americans. Like Jorge, most of the Mexican workers come from rural areas in the state of Guanajuato, pass through California, where they work in factories or pick fruit, and then find their way to the promised land of Arkansas. Not only is everything in Arkansas much cheaper, but Tyson Foods pays around eight dollars an hour, offers insurance, and consistently provides 40 hours of work a week. Poultry processing is a tough way to achieve upward mobility, but that is precisely what these jobs represent for most immigrants.

After putting on our smocks, aprons, earplugs, hairnets, beard nets (men), and boots, we begin the tour of the plant. No one is unaccustomed to hard work, and most have killed chickens on farms in Latin America, but nobody is prepared for the overwhelming combination of sounds, sights, and smells that await us. It does not help that the tour begins in “live hanging” (*pollo vivo*). Carmen says what we all are thinking: “My God! [Dios Mio!] How can one work here?” The answer, it turns out, is quite simple. Live hanging pays a bit more and there is actually a waiting list to spend the day attaching live chickens to the production line. Chickens are flooding into a completely dark and uncomfortably warm room at about 200 a minute. The smell is indescribable, suffocating, and absolutely unforgettable. Five or six workers grab the flailing chickens, hooking them upside down by their feet to an overhead rail system that transports the birds throughout the plant. Blood, shit, and feathers are flying everywhere.

Fortunately, I land a job on Saw Lines 1 and 2. It’s not exactly pleasant, but it’s a long way from live hanging. These *further* processing lines are at the heart of the revolution that has transformed the poultry industry and American diets over the past 25 years. A quarter of a century ago, most Americans bought chicken in one form: the whole bird. Today, Tyson alone produces thousands of “further processed/value-added” poultry products, including nuggets, patties, franks, pet food, and a range of parts that come in a multiplicity of shapes, sizes, textures, and flavors. Where I work, the process is relatively simple. There are two identical processing lines. Each takes a whole chicken, cuts it, marinates it, and then breads it. With about 20 to 25 workers, Lines 1 and 2 each process about 80 birds a minute or 40,000 pounds of chicken a day. The lines are effectively divided into four sections, or sets of machinery: cut up, marinade, breading, and rebreading. Each section, in turn, is connected by a series of conveyor belts that move the chicken along the entire production line. The birds are hung on the line by workers, cut by rotating saws, injected with a marinade (whose flavor changes depending on the day), and escorted through a series of contraptions

that coat the parts with a light breading. From there, the chicken continues on the conveyor belt into another section of the plant where it is cooked, packaged, and placed on tractor-trailers. Live birds enter the plant at one end; patties and nuggets depart from the other.

My co-workers on Saw Lines 1 and 2 are an interesting and diverse bunch. Of the 20 or so workers who keep the lines running, two (excluding myself) are white Americans. Most white workers left area poultry plants during the region's economic boom of the 1990s, and those who remain tend to fall into two categories. An older group has been working at Tyson for more than 20 years; they have found a niche and hang on to the benefits that seniority bestows. The few white workers who started at Tyson more recently did so because poultry is one of their few options. Jane, for example, is well into her 60s and worked at the plant during the 1960s before Tyson bought it. She subsequently moved out of the area and spent most of her life working in a factory that produced surgical equipment. After her husband died, she returned to northwest Arkansas, walking to the plant every day from her small apartment. Factory work is all she knows. Jane cannot speak to or understand most of her co-workers, but she is the author of a peculiar practice that endears her to nearly everyone. When the line stops, she often dances with an unsuspecting young man, causing momentary embarrassment for the victim and a much-needed laugh for everyone else.

Most of those who work directly on the line are women, often "older" women in their 40s and 50s. Jane usually sorts chicken on Line 2 along with Alma, Gabriela, and Blanca. Alma and Gabriela are Mexican sisters, in their 40s. Blanca, also from Mexico, has a husband and four children working at Tyson, including Maria, who checks the marinade. Their counterparts on Line 1, Li and Lem, are both from Laos, in their 50s, and couldn't be more different. Lem is friendly, always willing to help out co-workers. Li has two personalities. On the plant floor, she barks out orders like a drill sergeant, seemingly oblivious to the fact that no one can understand her. In the break room, she is one of the sweetest people, sharing her culinary delights with Laotians, Mexicans, Salvadorans, and hungry anthropologists alike.

The fact that most "on-line" workers are women is neither coincidence nor insignificant in a plant where about two-thirds of the workers are male. On-line jobs are the worst in the plant. They are not only monotonously repetitive; they are dangerously so. When the line is working properly, on-line workers can hang chickens at a pace of 40 birds a minute for much of the day. They stand in the same place and make the exact same set of motions for an entire shift. In contrast, although auxiliary workers tend to do the same tasks all day long, they are not doing the exact same set of movements with nearly the intensity as on-line workers. Women are concentrated in on-line jobs because they are effectively excluded from all jobs that involve heavy lifting or the operation of machinery. Mario, Alejandro, Roberto, Juan, Jeff, Carlo, and myself come from all over the world, but in the plant we are "young" men who clean up waste, bring supplies, lift heavy objects, and operate hand carts and fork lifts. As auxiliary workers, we do on-line work, but only intermittently.

I am to be the *harinero*, breading operator, or, as my 22-year-old supervisor Michael likes to call me, the little flour boy. Michael cannot really do the job himself and his instructions are simple: "Do what Roberto does." Roberto provides little formal training, a fact that makes learning my new job a bit tricky. With five years on the job, everything is natural to him. Roberto is an experienced worker and can do every job on the line, fix the machines, and carry on a conversation all at the same time. He is neither friendly nor cool when we first meet; and unlike virtually everyone else in the

plant Roberto is thoroughly unimpressed by the fact that I speak Spanish. We would eventually talk about everything, including his wife's struggles at a nearby turkey plant, his kids' achievements in local schools, and our own problems at the plant. I would even visit his parents in Mexico. In the beginning, however, I just watch, hoping to gain his respect and pick up anything that will allow me to survive the first week.

I learn quickly that "unskilled" labor requires an immense amount of skill. The job of *harinero* is extremely complicated. In a simple sense, the *harinero* empties 50-pound bags of flour all day long. The work is backbreaking, but it requires less physical dexterity than many of the jobs on the line. At the same time, the job is multifaceted and cannot be learned in a single day. Controls on the breader and rebreader need to be continually checked and adjusted, the marinade needs to be monitored, the power needs to be shut on and off, and old flour needs to be replaced with fresh flour (etc.). All of this would be relatively manageable if the lines functioned properly. They never do.

The rebreader is the source of over 75% of all the lines' problems, particularly ones that force a shutdown. It is here, with Roberto, that my education as both *harinero* and worker begins. One of the first things I learn is that I will be doing the job of two people. There have always been two *harineros*, one for each line. However, our supervisor, Michael, recently decided to operate both lines with only one *harinero*. He is essentially doing what he has done, or will do, with virtually all of the jobs on the Saw Line. Where there used to be three workers hanging chicken, there are now two; where there used to be three or even four workers arranging parts, there are now two; where two people used to check the level of marinade, there is only one. Nor is this limited to our section of the plant. About six months prior to my arrival, an older generation of supervisors, most of whom had come up through the production lines, were essentially forced from their jobs when a new set of plant managers took over. The new managers made the older supervisors push the workers harder and harder. The supervisors, who knew what it was like to work on the line, eventually refused by simply leaving the plant. As a result, a younger generation of college-educated supervisors was brought in, personified by Michael.

Michael is a working-class kid clawing his way into the middle class. One of the first in his family to attend college, he just graduated from the University of Arkansas with a degree in poultry science. Although he "never imagined" earning as much as he was in his first year out of college, the trade-off was considerable. He had no life outside the plant. Supervisors start at under \$30,000 a year. Michael arrived every day at 12:30 in the afternoon and never left the plant before 3:30 in the morning. Unlike workers, of course, he enjoyed a job with some variety, almost never got his hands dirty, and could hope to move up the corporate ladder. At least in the short term, however, he was consumed by the plant just like the rest of us.

Nevertheless, it was Michael who was the focus of our anger, and Michael (guided by his bosses) who was implementing the latest round of Taylorization. Part of the reason why all this was possible—besides the fact that there was no labor union or binding job descriptions—was that reducing the number of *on-line* workers does not necessarily prevent the line from running. The reduced number of workers simply have to work faster to keep pace with the line. As Roberto was quick to point out, the position of the breading operator is somewhat different. When the breading operator does not keep up, the entire line comes to a standstill. And Michael was replacing two experienced *harineros*, Roberto and Alejandro, with a single trainee—me. As Roberto explains:

When Michael told us he was going to only have one *harinero* we were not totally surprised. I told him I was quitting as *harinero* and would work on the line. Alejandro left [as *harinero*] in less than a week. Michael couldn't find anyone to take the job. He posted the job announcement but everyone in the plant quickly learned what was going on and wouldn't do it. It was too much work. So he had to get a new guy who couldn't say no—someone like you. Alejandro and I have seniority so it is easy for us to switch jobs.

Roberto's understanding of the situation was absolutely correct, but he was being less than honest. It *did* matter to him. On this, Alejandro was more forthcoming: "I had eight years as *harinero*. I like the job. It's like family here. It doesn't mean anything to Michael. For him it's just a job and we're just Mexicans. He doesn't know anything anyway. I wanted to stay, but why? Fuck that! Twice as much work for the same salary. I did my job well. I have nothing to be ashamed of."

During my first weeks on the job, the line is continually shut down for one reason or another. Few of the problems have anything to do with me, but the entire process is slowed by the fact that there is only one real *harinero*—Roberto. The *harinero* has to fix just about everything, but the central problem is that the rebreader simply does not have sufficient power to circulate the flour through the apparatus while pushing the chicken along the conveyor belt. In short, when one opens the valves and allows enough flour to flow through the machine in order to bread the chicken, the machine bogs down, the chicken piles up, and the parts begin to fall on the floor. This results in loud shrieks from just about everyone on the line. The breading operator, in this case Roberto, has to then shut down the entire line and figure out exactly which part of the rebreader is malfunctioning.

There are several solutions to the general problem, the exact nature of which provides the contours for an ongoing struggle between Michael, Roberto, and (now) me. First, and most obviously, the mechanics could feed more power to the machine, thus giving it the capacity to handle the weight of the chicken and flour. This is clearly what Michael wants. Second, we could run less chicken, which, by reducing the weight on the conveyor belts, would allow the rebreader to operate properly with the existing amount of power. From Michael's perspective this is simply unthinkable. Our guiding principle is to keep the line running at all times, at maximum speed, and at full capacity.

Consequently, Roberto and I adopt two strategies in order to keep the rebreader working properly and the lines running smoothly. First, we change the flour frequently. Fresh flour that has not yet clumped together and been weighed down from the wetness of the chicken is necessarily lighter and therefore circulates more smoothly through the entire apparatus. Michael, however, does not like this option because it is more expensive. Second, we use only as much flour as the rebreader can support. But, here again Michael insists both that the rebreader can handle more (old) flour and that the levels we run it at are inadequate to bread the chicken sufficiently.

The difficulty for Roberto and me is that Michael is simply wrong. He passes by every hour, sees there is not enough flour on the conveyor belt, and tells us to increase the flow. Confident that he has set us straight, he then leaves, and with remarkable precision the machine bogs down. Roberto and I have to stop the production line, clean up the mess, and readjust the flow of the flour so the machine can run without stopping. Michael then returns, wonders why there is not more flour on the conveyor belt, and the whole process begins again.

This uneasy and somewhat absurd tension characterizes the workday from beginning to end. Only occasionally would Michael be present when the rebreader bogged down as a result of his own miscalculations. These were the moments Roberto and I relished. Roberto would suddenly forget how to fix the machine. He would simply watch Michael try to correct the impending disaster by frantically calling a mechanic on his walkie-talkie. The mechanic would eventually arrive, talk to Michael, stare at the machine for 10 minutes, and then swallow his pride and ask Roberto what the problem was. Roberto would then look at Michael, smile at me, and fix it in a matter of seconds.

Looking back, it's hard to explain why this petty struggle seemed so damn important at the time. The irony, of course, was that in a very real sense it was in our interests to follow Michael's (uninformed) directions and let the rebreader bog down and the production line stop. It was a pain to continually fix the machine, but we got paid the same amount regardless of whether we were emptying bags of flour, fixing the rebreader, or standing around talking. Moreover, a shutdown generally proved that Michael was wrong—something that Roberto and I took great satisfaction in even as we were simultaneously annoyed that the lines weren't running. Finally, it was obviously in the "interests" of *every other* worker to have the Saw Lines shut down—it gave them a break.

Why, then, did Roberto and I, as well as the on-line workers, become profoundly irritated when one or both of the Saw Lines shut down? Several factors seem to be at work. To begin, there was the general context of Michael's attempt to reduce not only the number of *harineros*, but the number of workers in general. This Taylorization angered everyone and confirmed our collective perception: Michael's lack of experience led to decisions that made our lives intolerable and were economically unsound. We believed we could run the lines better than Michael. Second, and perhaps most important, by concentrating decision making in his own hands, Michael was degrading the work of the *harinero*. He was removing the very thing—control over the labor process—that gave the job meaning to Roberto, Alejandro, and myself. Finally, the fact was that virtually all of the workers took great pride in jobs that had, for the most part, been thoroughly degraded. To be sure, there were times when we enjoyed a shutdown. The more frantic Michael got, the more we celebrated. Most of the time, however, it was quite possible for workers to relish in the agony that a stoppage would inevitably cause the supervisor while simultaneously being frustrated by the fact that we were having a "bad" day. We took great pride in our jobs.

Despite our protests, Michael forges ahead with his plan and on the Monday of my fourth week I begin running both lines by myself. What he does not tell us, however, is that he has finally gotten the mechanics to boost the power going into the production lines. On that fateful Monday, when Roberto and I arrive, we know Michael has won. With increased power, the rebreader runs smoothly and almost never bogs down. This has the effect of deskilling the job of the *harinero*. Running the lines no longer requires the expertise of someone like Roberto. There are almost no problems to correct. Now, the lines not only run with fewer problems; they run faster and can handle more chicken. From my perspective, it means that the job involves less skill, but much more work. I not only fill the flour for two lines, but for two lines running more consistently and at a faster pace. With the sometimes entertaining struggle between Michael, Roberto, and myself now resolved, I become the *harinero*, and the intensity and monotony of the job are almost unbearable. For the rest of the workers, particularly those on-line, it is devastating. The lines shut down less, there are fewer breaks, and the pace is quicker. By the end of the week, Blanca, a Mexican woman in her 50s, is simply

overwhelmed. She has been hanging chickens for too many years, and her body simply cannot withstand the faster pace of the production line. Hoping to stay at Tyson until she retires, Blanca is forced to quit within the week.

PART II: TO PROCESS YOUR CHICKEN AND EAT IT TOO

Forms of worker expression are necessarily muted on the plant floor by the intensity of the work, the noise, and the supervision. Knowing glances, practical jokes, cooperation, and shared pain bind workers in ways that require little acknowledgment or expression. In the cafeteria or break room, however, the situation is quite different. What the plant floor suppresses, the break room embraces. Twice a shift, for 30 minutes, workers watch Spanish-language television, eat and exchange food, complain about supervisors, and relax their bodies. More often than not I was the only American in the main break room. The few American workers on the second shift were almost always congregated in a smaller break room where smoking is permitted and the television is in English. Supervisors almost never enter the break room, and when they do they are noticeably uncomfortable. At least here, the inmates are in charge.

The following conversation took place while on break. Although I would eventually tell everyone at the table that I was an anthropologist, I had only been working at the plant for three weeks when the following conversation occurred. However else I was seen by my new friends—as a strange gringo who spoke Spanish, as a *blanco* who was too stupid to get a good job, or as an inept breading operator, etc.—I was not seen as an anthropologist or professor at this time.

One other thing is important. On this particular day, Michael had pushed us hard, and brought free boxes of fried chicken in order to thank us. It was a gesture that he would do half a dozen more times while I was working in the plant. It always produced roughly the same reaction from the workers. We would look at the chicken, stare at each other, and someone would say some version of the following in Spanish: “Pure asshole. I am not going to eat this shit.” Then, there would be an awkward moment when we would quickly look at each other, look away, and pretend to not know what was going on. Then someone would say: “We can’t throw away good food and we’re all hungry. Let’s eat this shit.” And we would, more pissed off than when we came on break, grab the chicken, eating most of it or carefully packing it away to take home to family.

Michael’s gesture was insulting for many reasons. First, he wasn’t just giving us food; he was giving us chicken. Second, the gesture didn’t come close to making up for what the workers had just left on the plant floor. As paternalism, it was so pathetic and transparent that it was nothing less than insulting. (Why Michael didn’t see this is a different question.) Finally, it was insulting because we knew, even as we hesitated, that we were going to eat the chicken. We would process our chicken and eat it too.

Here, then, is the conversation that followed at the table where I sat as we chewed the chicken. It is interesting to note that no one ever directly talked about Michael’s gesture, or our acceptance of it. There seemed to be a collective agreement not to relive the humiliation.

Roberto welcomes me into the group: “Ai, Steve, you are almost Mexican. All you need is a Mexican wife to cook you some decent lunch and you would be Mexican.”

Alejandro, also from Mexico, chimes in: “Yes, Steve is a Mexican. He speaks Spanish,

eats with Mexicans, and he works like a Mexican. It's pure Mexicans here. We all eat chicken."

Elisa, three years on the job, kindly protests: "Ai ... I'm not Mexican. I'm Salvadoran."

Alejandro, gently explaining: "Look, we're all Mexicans here [in the plant]. Screwed-over Mexicans. [Pointing to Li, an older woman on our line who is from Laos, he continues] Look, even she is a Mexican. Pure."

We laugh as Li, who can't hear us, quietly devours a chicken wing.

Ana, catching on to what *Alejandro* is suggesting, finally agrees: "Yes, it's the truth. We are Mexicans here in the plant, especially inside [on the floor] when we are working."

I ask, somewhat interested: "And outside the plant, in Fayetteville, Springdale, and Rogers [local towns]? Are we all Mexicans outside?"

Roberto quickly responds: "Outside, we are all fucked. We're in Arkansas."

Everyone laughs.

Alejandro, more seriously, says: "Outside, you're a gringo [talking to me]. You are from here. Outside, we are Mexicans, but it is different. We're still screwed, but in a different way. We are foreigners. We don't belong. At least here in the plant we belong even if we are exploited. Outside, we live better than in Mexico, but we do not belong, we are not from here and keep to ourselves."

I then ask: "And in Mexico? Who are we in Mexico?"

Roberto says: "In Mexico, you [referring to me] are a gringo. You are a foreigner, but not like we are here in Arkansas. You are more like a tourist; treated well. We are not tourists here. We are treated more like outsiders. In Mexico, we are normal people, just like everyone else. Because it's all Mexicans. But in Mexico there is no future. My children were all born here, they are Americans. They have a future. Now, when I return to Mexico I feel like a tourist. I have money, travel, visit people. Our future is here now."

Alejandro ends on a light note: "At least in Mexico the chicken has some fucking taste."

When *Alejandro* looks around a cafeteria filled with people from Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, Vietnam, Laos, and the Marshall Islands, and says that we are all Mexicans, he is making a statement about class. He is not confused by the bright lights of the postmodern world, or unclear where he is located, socially, racially, and geographically. Rather, he is consciously playing with the word Mexican, using it almost as a synonym for worker. "Yes, we are all Mexicans here" is almost the same as saying "Yes, we are all workers here." It is not exactly the same, of course. Mexican does not simply mean worker—any kind of worker—but one who is doing what is socially defined as the worst kind of work. Shit work. In this respect, Li, who comes from Laos, is not singled out by accident. She is Mexican, one of us, because she does the same crap as everyone in the room; because she eats Michael's chicken; and because she is Mexican to Tyson's all-white management.

This conversation suggests that we should at least consider the possibility that transnational migration and the resulting experiences may make people question the very categories that borders support. Both immigrants and the native born may develop notions of affiliation, identity, and loyalty that run counter to established ideologies of citizenship and national allegiance—and some of these identities may, however vaguely, be grounded in class. We must consider, or pose as a problem, that globalization can

lead not only to the internationalization of capital, but also to the internationalization of workers. Poultry plants are, after all, one of the places where workers of the world come together. This does not mean that such sites will be similarly experienced or understood; or that they will automatically unite this diverse working class any more than factories did in 19th-century England. What it does mean is that if we are going to understand “transnationalism” in a more profound way, then we need to see culture not just in terms of cultural difference (where culture is seen as a set of ethnic-national primordial rituals and customs) but also in terms of class formation. The Mexicans, Salvadorans, Vietnamese, and Americans I worked with experienced cultural difference every day in the form of exchanging tortillas, tacos, rice, beans, and turkey sandwiches while on break. But they also shared—in different ways—the cultured class experience of eating chicken that is as painful to swallow as it is to process.