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Kaitlin E. Case

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# LABOR AND IDENTITY: LATINA MIGRANT WOMEN AND THE SERVICE INDUSTRY OF ATLANTA

by

KAITLIN E. CASE

Under the Direction of Jennifer Patico

## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the work experiences and life histories of a group of Latina migrant women who work in specific sectors of the service industry in Atlanta, Georgia. I focus on janitorial/custodial as well as domestic labor in order to confront the social issue of the continued devaluation and exploitation of feminized wage work. This ethnography reveals how education and English proficiency tie into how migrant labor is viewed in the United States specifically, and asks how Latina migrant women might be able to achieve labor legitimacy in the future. My findings are based on in-depth interviews that I collected from ten Latina migrant women who live and work in the Atlanta metro-area.

INDEX WORDS: Feminist theory, Hegemonic forces, Gender, Class, Immigration,

Globalization studies

LABOR AND IDENTITY: LATINA MIGRANT WOMEN AND THE SERVICE INDUSTRY OF ATLANTA

by

KAITLIN E. CASE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2011

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2011

LABOR AND IDENTITY: LATINA MIGRANT WOMEN AND THE SERVICE INDUSTRY OF ATLANTA

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May 2011

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated first and foremost to all the immigrants in this country who are striving to make a better life for themselves and their families. Secondly, this thesis is dedicated to my close friend, Marta, without whom this work would not have been possible. Finally, this thesis is dedicated to my parents who have always been my greatest source of inspiration as well as my biggest cheerleaders in the stands.

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## INTRODUCTION

“Immigration is the sincerest form of flattery” —Jack Paar

Three years ago I began my summer, like most college kids, trying to find some sort of job that would be willing to hire me for three months. This was no easy task especially in this economic climate, but eventually I was able to secure a job with a commercial landscaping company in the metro Atlanta area. This was new territory for me, and I was hesitant to go through with this employment because of the intense physical labor involved as well as a group of co-workers whose cultural affiliation was much different from my own. However, the need for a steady stream of paychecks overcame my uncertainty. My first day on the job was overwhelming, to put it mildly, because as I walked up to meet and greet my new crew I realized I was the token white girl in a crowd of twelve Latino men.

I was right about the sheer physical labor that goes into a landscaping job, and the perks were that water never tasted so good, multiple ant bites hurt really bad and I was the only one bothering to use sunscreen. Regardless of the harsh realities of landscaping, I had a crew who welcomed me with open arms and never hesitated to help me, especially when I was trying to manhandle equipment twice my size. Three months later, after several workplace barbeques, Mexican style, and some crazy adventures, I was saying goodbye to the best coworkers a girl could have in this world.

I realized I had a unique experience, and I walked away with a new appreciation for landscapers, especially immigrant landscapers. My entire crew consisted of immigrants, primarily from Mexico, but there was a lone El Salvadorian in the crew as well. I used to speak to him at length because he was a former lawyer in El Salvador until dire circumstances made

him flee with his family. After spending so much time with these men, I realized all of them had made an arduous journey to the United States in order to make better lives for themselves and provide family back home with needed resources. They were thankful to have a job, regardless of how labor intensive it was.

Since then immigrant labor has been a focal point of my on-going research, specifically with migrant women. Migrant women have captured my interest because their stories are often not told, or are clumped in with migrant men. Also I find this subject worthwhile as an applied anthropologist as a result of the emergence of feminized labor sectors within the burgeoning service industry here in the United States, specifically Atlanta, Georgia. This service industry that caters toward migrant women can be often problematic in its use of exploitation and reaffirming gender ideologies. With this research, I find an intersection that crosses gender, class, and migrant identities. Latina migrant women continue to fill janitorial, housekeeping, and the stereotypical domestic positions within the vast arena of the service industry. Latina women are still overwhelmingly working in restaurants, hotels, commercial buildings, and even landscaping positions in order to provide financial stability for their families or for themselves.

The jobs they take are usually associated with cleaning or domestic work. These are the jobs no one else wants because the pay is low, the security is slim, and the labor is intensive. Latina migrants perform their jobs in all types of environments, but, in most cases, they are almost invisible at the same time. No one takes notice of the Latina women pushing around cleaning carts full of antiseptics, garbage bags and mops. No one gives a second look at the Latina woman who will be cleaning your hotel room in a few hours time. What about the

woman who cleans the bathrooms in your office building, especially after you realized a coworker just was violently sick in there? It has become the norm in our society for these women to live in our shadows.

This research seeks to shed light on who these women really are by making them more visible, by bringing their voices to the forefront, to the mainstream. I set out to accomplish this by delving into their lives with the use of in-depth interviews that allowed me to collect their life histories. This thesis utilizes several theoretical positions in relation to the global trend of the feminization of labor, immigration and its ties to cheap labor, as well as identity and how it might be constructed through labor. I wanted to better grasp how these women identified themselves through their labor practices that mainly focus on various forms of cleaning and domestic work and how this would affect the way they perceive themselves. However, what resulted from this research was much more than I bargained for initially.

## **CHAPTER 1: A Discourse of Globalization, Immigration, and the Feminization of Specific Service Industries**

### **1.1 The Face of the World: Migrant Women**

“Everyday I thank God that I have a job and that I like my job.” Maria, a migrant from Colombia who is a single mom, tells me this during one of our many conversations during her breaks from work. She tells me, from experience, that it “could always be worse,” and I realize that it very well could be for her. Currently, Maria is working for a privately held janitorial service provider. Her job consists of walking around the building, all twenty floors, emptying trash, refilling restroom supplies, and any number of tasks that involve cleaning up after the building’s tenants. Maria’s story is just one out of millions of immigrant women who work in the service industries of First World countries around the globe and who are searching for something better. Due to mass global economic inequities, as well as a global social restructuring of First World countries, we are seeing more and more women migrate in search of work (Pedraza 1991, Mahler 2000, Freeman 2001). Analyses of the current process of feminizing the service sector have come a long way, slowly incorporating gender not just as a variable (in migration in relation to work), but also as a central theoretical principle (Pedraza 1991, Mahler 2000, Hondagneu-Sotelo 2000 Freeman 2001).

The critical question I focused on during my research was why migrant women are taking specific jobs that have become feminized? And to a lesser degree I was also interested in understanding why these women were migrating more than in the past. In pursuing answers to these questions, it sometimes feels there is an elephant in the room; that in some ways, the answers are simple. The only simple answer, of course, is there are significant economic forces creating a global co-dependency on the migrant women who perform these jobs (domestic

work, childcare, sex work, and custodial work) and the people or corporations that consume them.

Discourses pertaining to globalization usually refer to the upper circuits of capital, as well as the hypermobility of capital, rather than capital bound to one place such as a migrant woman living in a First World city (Sassen 2002). I believe, after reading the literature, that globalization is intricately linked to women's migration, their migratory flows, and the specific contexts that have arisen such as the feminization of labor. Using Sassen's idea of the global city, there are two dynamics working, one of which is the global city that thrives on highly skilled professionals who in their pursuit of happiness demand low-paid service workers. The other dynamic is the Third World networks that are set up by women migrants in order to sustain themselves in this economy.

By focusing on the global city, we can "study how global processes become localized in specific arrangements," such as the stratification between the gentrified elite and the foreign maids or nannies they employ for their children and the upkeep of their homes (Sassen 1988: 257). These types of discourses have helped shape how global inequality has forced women to migrate, sometimes away from their children and families, to seek more economic security abroad (Sassen 1998, Freeman 2000). These women are migrating from poorer, less economically stable countries to those commonly considered the First World. These flows include: women from South Asia migrating to the Middle East including Saudi Arabia and Kuwait; women from the Philippines migrating to Italy, Greece, Cyprus, and Spain; women from North Africa migrating to the Mediterranean including Spain and Italy; and women from Latin America migrate to the United States and Canada (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002).

## **1.2 Neoliberal Politics and the Ramifications: Employment versus Poverty**

Much of this economic inequality stems from the 1980's and 1990's structural adjustment programs, created by the IMF and World Bank, that were specifically intended to lift countries, usually Third World countries, out of debt within agreed upon time frames. However, rather than becoming competitive, these countries have sunken further into debt and have become almost completely reliant on such First World charity. There is strong reason to believe these structural adjustment programs have created a new economic framework in which these countries will never pay off their debt, and have caused an informal economic market to flourish, such as trafficking in people for labor and sex (Sassen 1988). Many of these governments who are so indebted to the IMF or World Bank are advocating migration, specifically encouraging women to work as nannies or domestics because women are more likely to send home remittances than their male counterparts (Constable 1999, Faier 2009, Gamburd 2000, Sassen 1988).

These same governments are also dealing with and supporting traffickers and other informal and illegal economies. Additionally, globalization has increased the demand for low-wage, deskilled service jobs that offer small hope of advancement, and due to this informalization, we see a growing feminization of the job supply. Oddly, even though there is a high demand for feminized work such as domestics or nannies in the First World, there is no corresponding increase in wages and benefits. If there was such a demand in any other market, wages would be up as well as benefits, but the fact of women taking these roles, usually women of color, enforces cultural legitimacy (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002, Sassen 1988).

## 1.2 “Women’s Work” and its Devaluation

Discouragingly, traditional women’s work such as cleaning and taking care of children are often devalued because of the association with traditional gender roles. Sadly, many jobs that are associated with women are often devalued because of this ideology. The fact that women of color perform these jobs devalues the work further due to the historical context around women of color are performing domestic labor (Hochschild 2002, Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001, Pedraza 1991, Mills 2003, Morrison 1994). This kind of cultural legitimacy allows women’s labor to be discriminated, devalued, and exploited to the fullest, and the global economic structures only endorse this type of behavior. Obviously, this is the biggest hurdle for the hoped for future valuation of feminized labor. Much of the literature has directly or indirectly pointed out this elephant in the room. Economics coupled with a cultural standing of women’s labor being devalued based upon women’s “natural” gender roles, only allows for a vicious cycle that consistently threatens women’s empowerment in labor (Hochschild 2002).

Hochschild refers to the devaluation of women’s work in a larger context that includes First World women as well as men. From this standpoint, the lifestyles of the First World, especially the United States, are really made possible by immigrant women. Immigrant women provide everything a traditional housewife would provide including childcare, cleaning, meals, as well as sex (this includes the frequent cases of sexual assault on domestics or sex workers). First World women have entered the labor force at increasing rates, and as in the case of the United States, women comprise over 50 percent of the current labor force. In avoidance of the blame game, we must look at the complex situations that arise out of First World families that necessitate immigrant women (Colen 2006, Hochschild 2002, Ehrenreich 2002).



For example, the United States' policies on family planning and childcare have not caught up with women's participation in the labor force. The U.S does not ensure paid maternity/family leave, especially for lower income families, and childcare is not subsidized, so families could pay a small fortune to keep their children (usually more than one) in childcare for the majority of the day. This lack of social services allows for the wealthy or financially stable households to pay for nannies or domestics to take care of chores that would be relegated to the stay-at-home mother. First World women are also in a bind when society expects them to "do it all." These women who can afford nannies do so because they live in a country that makes it difficult to have both a career and to be seen as a good mother (Hochschild 2002).

Businesses are still set up in a way that forces women to choose a rewarding career or motherhood; mommy tracks in law and business are notorious. Many women and families overcome these hurdles, many make compromises, and many more hire domestics. But excluding men from this equation only hurts both First World women as well as immigrant women. Immigrant women seem to be able to have jobs because many First World men do "have it all." The second shift still falls primarily on women's shoulders, and there is still a culture that frowns upon men who perform household chores or other "domestic" responsibilities. This is slowly changing, but not at a fast enough rate, as evidenced by the high demand for domestics in the United States as well as other First World countries.

However, these men are also responsible for the increased demand in the sex trade and sex tourism overall. The demand for "imported" sexual partners is an interesting and complex question and the answers are not as simple as they would seem such as First World men finding immigrant women "exotic" or embodying "traditional femininity" (Hochschild 2002). However,

sex slaves can turn a high profit, and depending on where the women are from (popular favorites would be Brazilian, Ukrainian and Russian women), one woman can service up to fifteen men a day on average and make about \$215,000 per month for the criminal gang that trafficked her. Countries that are major trafficking areas, such as Eastern Europe and Asia, also tend to have high rates of unemployment and poverty (Sassen 1988). All of these structural problems tend to hit women the hardest, and migration (not coercive) can be the easiest way out of such systemic disadvantages.

There tends to be an “invisibility” associated with the feminization of service labor, specifically with domestic labor and janitorial service as well as sex workers whose job is illegal in many places. Maria had mentioned this to me at one point during our conversations about working in the United States. She could not understand why people failed to treat her with respect, not looking her in the eye and disregarding her presence. Whether they are cleaning up after strangers in a building or employers in their home, these immigrant women are faced with being invisible to employers and the general public. Is there a public denial of the work these women perform? Is it gender-based? It is clear these women are deemed invisible to greater society due to their work, but why is a murky question that has yet to be fully answered. I find it odd that women who are domestic workers in a home feel invisible to their employers, as if the employers deny this fact. This common attitude toward domestic workers was demonstrated with recent candidate Meg Whitman and the surrounding media attention to her having employed an undocumented domestic worker.

This also leads to some of the prevailing problems surrounding domestic work, including childcare, live-in nannies, and housecleaners. Employers of domestics tend to feel these

women are disposable or can live off less than minimum wage for their labor. There are no state or federal policies concerning domestic workers that are regularly enforced so most employers tend to pay their domestic workers under the table and much less than they should be making (Anderson 2000, Chang 2000, Ehrenreich 2002, Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001, 2002, Romero 2002). Many domestics take care of and form relationships with the children under their charge. Added to the fact that many of these women work extremely long hours, are always on call and have limited days off, they form relationships with these children while their own children are left with maternal kin or babysitters. This is the issue of “global care chains,” or “labors of love,” that affect the children of domestic workers who are either working abroad or just down the block (Hochschild 2000). These women are again placed in roles as caregivers, but this time they are sacrificing their own family to take care of another. Many of these women end up substituting their feelings for their own children to those they take care of in order to get through the day (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1997).

Many struggle with how to be a good mother when their hands seem to be tied. They must work these jobs in order to take care of their children, and many of these women either have a spouse working as well or are single mothers. This is due to the unregulated policies regarding domestic work both abroad and here in the United States. Many of these women do not have any recourse in seeking action against employers who underpay them for their work, abuse them, or fire them for no specific reason. For those women who are undocumented, their situations can be even more uncertain, and they are more likely to be exploited. For migrant women working in the United States, their vulnerability is reinforced by U.S

immigration policies designed to recruit them as contract laborers or temporary workers who are ineligible for the protections and rights afforded to its citizens (Chang 2000).

Furthermore, domestic work in all its forms is still not regarded as real work because it embodies traditional female roles and as such, employers and policy makers are not apt to give these women real employment protections. This does not even cover the many women who serve as slaves for their employers. Many officials who work for the IMF and World Bank, as well others in the United Nations, have slaves in their own homes using the G-5 visa for workers; they confiscate these women's passports once they reach their destination and these women have no options due to being enslaved by government officials and literally without identification (Chang 2000).

#### **1.4 The Evolution of the Cleaning Industry**

For migrant women working in the janitorial/custodial industry, social relationships between employers and employees can be equally as exploitive. Since the janitorial industry in the United States was de-unionized towards the middle of the 1980's, employers have hired contracted janitors for cheaper pay. African Americans, who made up a large majority of janitors since WWII, left the job due to the minimum pay and benefits. Many more American men left these jobs when the prestige went away, which coincided with the labor being de-unionized. Latino men filled the jobs left open for cheaper pay, but Latina women, especially from Mexico, El Salvador and Guatemala, entered at surprising rates. Women now make up a large majority of the janitorial workers across the United States (Cranford 2005). However, as with domestics, many employers find Latinas a controllable, docile workforce who will accept minimum pay. According to Cranford, many employers violate labor laws either by not paying

them for hours worked, or by expecting unrealistic time management from the workers. Many of these workers Cranford mentions are undocumented, so many felt they had little recourse to address abusive treatment or low pay (Cranford 1999). However, many of these women working for janitorial industries, especially in California, have been organizing amongst themselves to re-unionize the industry. Many of these women have been successful in protesting for unionizing and better pay (Cranford 1999). Also, many groups representing domestic workers in the United States have been organizing as well in order to pass legislation to ensure their rights as workers (Chang 2000).

It's significant to remember these migrant women are not necessarily all victims, even of global economic forces, and that they can and are using their agency to promote change within their lives and communities. For instance there are many women in the Caribbean, specifically Barbados, who work for the growing industry of offshore informatics centers. These transnational firms employ women for clerical work at a low salary, yet these women find themselves intimately linked to globalization. The fact that they work in an office, are expected to wear nice, conservative clothes, and have weekends off, allows these women to pursue the art form of "higglering" to supplement their income as well as demonstrate their class status through the consumption of global goods. This pink-collar identity is fused with the production of femininity through these goods either symbolically or materially. These women capitalize on their often exploited status by turning their productivity incentives into profit-making ventures. Here we have to reconsider the roles of the local and global, and these women further demonstrate that local actors are not invisible but reinterpreting what globalization means (Freeman 2001).

The feminization of labor represents a complex web of factors that allow this kind of work to become so popular as well as exploited among the informal sector. Women are the face of global inequality in many ways because they are the ones who soak up the repercussions of Third World debt. By migrating, or entering pink-collar work, or being trafficked against their will, women are filling necessary jobs across the globe, and the demand for such work is only gaining more momentum. The only means by which women's work, in all its various forms, will ever gain legitimacy and thus value, is through another economic restructuring or a global consciousness. We must also realize that gender, class, and race all intersect on the global market and that these intersections influence the outcomes of feminized labor.

### **1. 5 Methods Used For This Research**

For the purpose of this study, I have focused on Latina migrant women and the current service labor jobs they hold as well as the type of occupation they held before leaving their home country. My purpose was to understand how their current job position might differ from their previous professional training, if they had any, what the challenges of their jobs in the U.S. are, and how performing those jobs impacts their sense of identity in the context of U.S. society. I have accomplished this by looking at the gender aspect of feminized labor in order to understand how their current job position shapes their worldview, their identity, as well as how they see themselves within U.S. society.

In order to contribute to the larger body of literature on the feminization of labor and its ties to globalization, I wanted to understand why these women leave their countries to come work in the service industry in the U.S., how they actually go about finding these service jobs,

and the effects of such manual labor on their lives, families, and their communities both here in the U.S. and their home countries. I anticipated that interviewees would be working for janitorial services located in both commercial buildings and hotels, which often employ primarily women for such work, so this study provides more insight as to why cleaning is seen as feminized labor, and how this affects the people who perform it. How does it shape their social experiences in the U.S.? What kinds of interactions do they experience with other Americans at their workplaces? How do these affect their own self worth and place in U.S. society as they perceive themselves through the eyes of others?

As an ethnographer, I was aware that I was going into a community in which I am not familiar and that by being the “outsider,” I would most likely face hesitation and suspicion from my participants. On the contrary, I was embraced fully and allowed into my participants’ homes and lives and they asked nothing in return. They have been more than helpful and accommodating during the course of this research. Many were willing to help me find more women to interview during this research process. I have relied heavily on my key informant, María, as a gatekeeper to this community and to establish legitimacy. She has been a godsend for me and must be acknowledged for her insight and integrity in helping me locate participants. She also informed me of pointers and tips on how approach this cultural system so that I did not waste my time or my participants.

This included how to prepare in advance for interviews by having preliminary questions in Spanish on hand for my participants to use if needed. María also advised me to use as much time as possible during my hour sessions because many of these women would not be capable

of meeting with me twice. Many of my participants were co-workers of hers at some point in time, and she served as a liaison between them and me by putting in good words for me.

For the recruitment process, I used two methods: snowball sampling and workplace advertisement. For the snowball sampling, I used my key informant who distributed my advertisements to her personal acquaintances as well as fellow co-workers who fit the criteria for this research. These women had to be from Mexico, Central or South America, and they had to perform some sort of service labor, most likely janitorial/custodial work or domestic/housekeeping. As part of the criteria, I chose women over the age of eighteen, and who were conversationally fluent in English in order to make the most out of limited interview sessions.

The other method I employed, workplace advertisement, incorporated the help of a manager of a janitorial company who is a fellow acquaintance. I asked him to distribute advertisements in a specific location, such as the break room, for each of the buildings in which he has staff employed. This was the manager's only involvement in this research due to his position of authority, and I wanted to avoid the potential conflict of interest that could arise if he participated in any further recruitment. By utilizing these two methods, I recruited ten women to participate in this study for its duration.

The ethnographic methods that I employed to accomplish this research involved the use of in-depth interviews including life histories of the Latina women. I conducted an initial interview lasting at least an hour, ideally. Many of these fell short of an hour, averaging around forty-five minutes under some circumstances. Due to time constraints and my participants' schedules, I tried to get at least an initial interview as well as maybe one more follow up



interview for those who were willing to keep in contact. I had many women who were perfectly fine with a phone call or an email with follow up questions.

I relied heavily upon interviews because I realized ahead of time that any participant observation, unobtrusive or not, will hinder these women from completing their busy schedules between work and home. Most of these women held two or more jobs, plus kids or grandchildren they were responsible for, and it is just not feasible to observe these women at their employment without complications. My aim for the interviews was to help accommodate these women's busy schedules managing both work and family life. For the sake of time, I incorporated semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions in order to guide the interviewees along over a period of time. I also had the initial interview questions translated into Spanish for any clarification purposes, realizing that the English skills of some of the participants might be less than perfect. This worked out well acting as a guidepost for interview sessions as well as benefiting the women as well.

The set up of the interviews centered on flexibility, and I made it clear to these women that my aim was to be accommodating, such as driving to their house. Their free time was precious, especially time for themselves or their families, so my interviews revolved around that fact. For that reason, I interviewed them at a place of their choice, most of the time being their home, for up to an hour at a time. This worked out well and enabled them to feel more relaxed as well as to supervise their children while carrying on a conversation with me.

Interviews were set up ahead of time, yet overall I had multiple cancellations and a rescheduling. My three cancellations usually involved a prior conversation in which they stated they would be willing to do an interview, and when I would call again to confirm they would

never return my phone calls. I understood their hesitancy in going through with an interview, or they might just not want to be bothered. It was, however, frustrating in order to regroup my efforts to find other women to interview.

Most of these women were in their mid-30s to late-40s with older children. Interview sessions were noteworthy because I would be referred to a woman who was interested, call her to make arrangements to drive to her residence, and then do an interview session without meeting her ahead of time. Some of these interview sessions were off the cuff, and I was surprised at how many of these women were completely fine with having me in their homes without having met them before. However, close friends or coworkers referred me to them so there was some basis of trust.

I conducted life histories of the women in order to gain a wider perspective of how they identify themselves and how their life experiences fit into their current work identity. Questions included background information such as education, past employment in their home country, marriage status, children, as well as catalysts to come to the United States. Questions also covered their current experiences, both with employment as well as life in general in the United States. I wanted to get to know these women as people, not just participants in a study, because by knowing them on a deeper level I can be a more insightful researcher. By using in depth interviews and life histories, I gained valuable insight into these women's lives in their respective home countries, as well as the networks that were used in their immigration process and the jobs that they are able to secure. I believe these methods were most appropriate in answering my research question; they enabled me to gain a more holistic view of their lives pre and post-immigration to the United States.

A significant impediment to my research was the language barrier. Since my research focus is on Latina women who are immigrants to this country, their English skills tended to be no more than conversational at most. I have tried to overcome this specific obstacle by translating vital documents including the consent form, initial interview questions and advertisements to Spanish in order for these women to have a clearer understanding of what this research entails and expects from them. This has worked out well for interview sessions, and I was able to gain enough information by ensuring that the women chosen spoke adequate or conversational English. Nonetheless, I did walk into a few situations where I was fully expecting the woman to speak English, but this ended up not being the case. In these specific cases, the woman would have one of her adult children translate our interview session. This was not planned, and I still felt an obligation to go through with the interview despite the fact I was told ahead of time this particular woman spoke conversational English.

My other obstacle with language had to do with the many phone calls I made to these women to set up times and dates for the interviews. It was a given that I would have a difficult time with interview sessions, but I did not have the foresight to see the problem with understanding these women on the phone, which in my mind, is ten times worse than being in person. I had one incident where the woman gave me her address, and I would try to plug it into my GPS only to have nothing register with that address. I made three different phone calls to this woman in order to figure out the name of her street. She even spelled her street phonetically, which made me feel quite ridiculous. In the end, there were no hard feelings between this woman and me, just lots of amusement.

By excluding women whose English might be below adequate levels suggested by the requirement, I realized that I alienated a large pool of women in this specific industry. As an ethnographer, I feel inadequate since I cannot speak Spanish and that I was not able to open a dialogue with my participants in their native language. Furthermore, I understand that this can be a setback to my research since these women may be able to express and convey much more emotionally in their native Spanish than they might convey in English. I have worked with these logistical problems and I feel that I have tried to give these women their voices throughout this research.

The principal ethical challenge posed by this research was confidentiality. Since I worked with an immigrant population, I was aware that many of my potential participants could be undocumented. Even though their immigration status is not a focal point of my research, I strived to be cognizant of the potential risks that are involved if they are undocumented, especially in relation to their employers. This issue, as well as the current general frenzy in United States politics over illegal immigration and harsher legislation being passed against immigrants must be taken into account. As an anthropologist, my first and foremost goal is to minimize any potential harm to my participants, and since I worked with such a vulnerable group, I made absolutely sure that all information was kept confidential to ensure my participants' safety. For this purpose I took steps to make sure that all the women gave oral consent so that there are no signatures to reveal their identities and no paper trail. Also, for the sake of confidentiality as well as ethical research, I ensured that the real names of my participants were not used in any notes or in my actual research. This also goes for the places of employment for my participants. Furthermore, once my research ended, I erased my

audio recordings, and any facts that could identify my participants, such as hometown, current address and workplace, were destroyed after transcriptions were completed. There is no verifiable record of their names and other facts that could point to their identity.

As far as informed consent goes, all of my participants were knowledgeable of what was expected from them pertaining to setting up interview sessions, actual interview questions, as well as their ability to forgo any of this and drop out of my research at any time. This was not a binding contract, but an act of volunteerism. To me this was very important; I wanted to project the belief that they and their needs come first in my research, not the other way around. I realized that many women might feel nervous about the subject of immigration status, and for that reason, all my documents, including advertisements, emphasize the confidential nature of my research. I did not inquire about these women's immigration status, but many of them felt comfortable in telling me, mostly the ones who came here with visas. However, for the purpose of ethical research, all my information was kept in secure areas.

I made great efforts to ensure my informant's had the utmost confidentiality. Furthermore, I took these steps because the lives of these women should not go unnoticed because they speak volumes about what it means to be a migrant Latina woman living and working in the United States, more specifically Atlanta, Georgia. Their life histories are an important factor in eventually finding a solution to the devaluation of feminized work, or pink-collar work. By garnering this kind of information perhaps we can find a way to enable migrant women to ascend from their current positions into a career or job path more of their choosing that provides greater security and self-expression. One of my main objectives of this research was to provide first hand accounts of these women as individuals with hopes and dreams while

living in real world situations. These women do not fit the stereotypical image of being rural, ignorant and/or unskilled that permeates U.S society (Gill 2010, Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). I hope this research will convey this vital aspect because the current sentiment groups these migrant women together and labels them all as socially marginal beings instead of individuals who come from vastly different backgrounds with varying degrees of educational attainment.

## CHAPTER 2: Immigration to the Heart of Dixie, the South

“Remember, remember always, that all of us, and you and I especially, are descended from immigrants and revolutionists”

—Franklin D. Roosevelt

### 2.1 A Brief History

For the purpose of this ethnographic section, I will be referring to immigrants from Mexico, Central and South America as Latinos. This is because Latinos refers to those who hail from these specific countries. The other term widely used, “Hispanic,” is usually applied to those hailing from Spanish speaking countries including Spain.

Immigration has been a hot button issue for the past fifteen to twenty years, and the knee jerk reaction of the American public when the topic of immigration is brought up mostly depicts a picture of Mexicans hopping over an imaginary border into the United States. Currently, U.S. politicians have immigration, rather “illegal immigration,” in their scopes once again as we approach another year of the recession. In Georgia, particularly since Nathan Deal was elected governor, there is speculation about creating an immigration law similar to Arizona’s hotly contested law. Arizona’s immigration law is in Appeals Court at the moment and has been described as racist in its foundation and motivated by prison economics (Sullivan 2010). Further evidence of this unrest would be Georgia’s own Board of Regents recent ruling in favor of banning undocumented students from higher education within the Georgia university system which oversees 35 different universities (Lal 2010). Just these two instances alone indicate that maybe the iconic southern hospitality has run out on the Deep South’s immigrant residents, undocumented or not.

Immigration to the Southern states has been a growing phenomenon over the past twenty years. From the late 1980's and with the beginning of the early 1990's, southern residents began to notice a change in their communities ... a change that was dissolving the White/Black paradigm that was such a characteristic of the Deep South. This change involved Brown, and this brownness was spurred on by many different factors including an overall change in the global economy, which spurred on de-industrialization, economic investment, NAFTA, as well as the restructuring of regional and national economies, particularly in the South. Production in agriculture, steel, textiles and food processing boomed as cheap labor, primarily by Latino immigrants, poured into the region. There was also a significant population growth in general, which flooded the service sector, creating numerous jobs (Massey et al 2003, Borjas 2007, Mohl 2003). The southern region's economy outperformed all other regions between 1977 and 1992 (Duchon 2001). States that were seeking the cheap, reliable non-union labor of Latino immigrants included Georgia, North Carolina, Alabama, Virginia, Kentucky, Arkansas, and Mississippi. Four of the major poultry producers during this time became Georgia, North Carolina, Alabama, and Arkansas; many of these poultry plants began to employ undocumented immigrants to keep costs down and chicken cheap (Mohl 2003, Kandel and Parrado 2005).

Immigration policy, along with large American corporations recruiting workers directly from Mexico, changed the landscape of the South including southern cities such as Atlanta, Nashville, Charlotte, Birmingham, and Raleigh-Durham. Hector Figueroa, a labor researcher, noted back in 1996, "Latino labor in the United States is a product of the complex forces that have integrated Latin America into the orbit of U.S capitalism." In this way, jobs and economic



opportunity drew thousands of immigrants to the South. Earlier on many of these immigrants came to the South from large U.S. cities on the West Coast, and the rest would eventually come directly from rural towns and states in Mexico due to the ongoing economic crisis there throughout the 1980's and 1990's (Massey et al. 2003, Murphy et al. 2001).

Most of the prevalent research on Latino immigration to the South has been conducted specifically on Mexican immigration and the consequent jobs and communities that have arisen in these areas. As Borjas demonstrates with statistical analysis, Mexicans are the largest single group of immigrants in the United States, representing about one-third of all immigrants and more than four percent of the country's working-age population (Borjas 2007). Before the 1990's, most Mexican immigrants were clustered in small cities, mostly in California or Texas. Now that figure has changed since the 1990s with cities such as Atlanta, Denver, Portland, and Raleigh-Durham having sizable Latino/Mexican populations (Borjas 2007). Yet, there is not much research on the diversity of Latino immigration, such as Central and South American immigrants to the Southern states, except for the results of the 2000 U.S. census.

We know there are communities since I, myself, have run into many Peruvians, Colombians, El Salvadorians, as well as Hondurans here in the metro-Atlanta area. There is one study by Leon Fink who conducted a small ethnography on a group of Maya immigrants laborers in Morganton, North Carolina who organized for union rights at the plant they were working (Fink 2003). Since Mexicans constitute the largest immigrant population, not much is left for the smaller demographics of Central and South American immigrants and their stories of immigration. The 2000 U.S census has confirmed there are these diverse pockets of non-

Mexican Latino immigrants in Southern states and cities, but on the whole Mexican immigration takes priority in immigration analysis to the heart of Dixie.

## **2.2 Georgia's Latino Population & Industries Built on the Backs of Immigrant Labor**

For Georgia specifically, Latino immigration had a 300 percent decennial growth rate in 2000 from that of the early 1990s. This is a very significant jump in numbers, explaining the high rate of immigration to Georgia over the past ten years or so. The census also saw an increase in the metro Atlanta area which currently houses 62 percent of all Hispanics in Georgia (Mohl 2003). Census analysts suggest that these numbers do not accurately represent Latino immigration to Southern states, and a closer estimate would be almost double the current numbers. The census, of course, only gives us picture to work with, not accurate numbers. Furthermore, the census cannot confirm all of the undocumented or the recent immigrants to Georgia specifically.

However, by crunching numbers we can see that southeastern farm labor has been changed by Latino migrant workers, especially in Georgia where Latino migrants consist of over 80 percent of the states 90,000 migrant and seasonal farm laborers. Latino immigrants in the rural and urban South have become an important component in the region's low-wage, low-skill economy, especially in manufacturing, construction, agriculture and food processing (Dameron 1997, Murphy et al. 1997, Mohl 2003). These workers often perform arduous and sometimes dangerous jobs for minimal pay, and depending on their legal status, can be exploited to the fullest by corporate America. Whether it is food processing which can produce early arthritis pain in the laborer's hands, construction hazards, or exposure to harmful chemicals or pesticides as a farm worker, many of these immigrants do not have access to

adequate healthcare. Meatpacking, for instance, has been proclaimed to be the most dangerous job in America by *Fast Food Nation* (Schlosser 2001); this sector of the economy is mostly located in the Midwest and Southeast and employs large numbers of Latino immigrants for its low-skilled labor. The meatpacking industry's reliance on migrant workers is the result of four main factors. First, there has been an overall change in the consumption of meat over the past twenty years in the U.S. with a higher demand for convenience, thus effectively de-skilling work that was previously skilled and expanding the need for an unskilled, cheap labor force. Second, meat production has been consolidated into a handful of integrated firms, which in turn, has weakened job security and facilitated the recruitment of immigrants. Third, these meat-processing firms have relocated to rural areas in order to cut down on transportation costs as well as hinder union organization. Fourth, because of the sheer physical demands of this work coupled with low wages, there are high employee turnover rates, which have necessitated the demand for migrant or immigrant labor. This has been exacerbated by the idea that immigrant labor is a seemingly endless pool of workers (Kandel and Parrado 2005). By doing all this, these meat processing firms have reduced any incentives for native born Americans to actually work for them.

Poultry plants are also primarily located in the South and share similar characteristics with the meatpacking plants. In North Georgia, specifically Gainesville, poultry plants employ a large majority of Latino workers, both documented and undocumented, and they have changed the demographics of North Georgia communities in the process. North Americans consume copious amounts of chicken (just think about any fast food chain) because of its relative cheapness compared to red meat; in effect, this consumption makes the poultry industries

thrive. In order to keep up with the demand, poultry plants have taken the same route as other food processing industries. They have increased production by hiring more employees and lowering wages. In this business, despite some technological innovations to help production, the majority of the labor is still performed by workers on the disassembly lines. These workers must process between 90 to 180 birds per minute and, according to USDA policy, there is little done to ensure the workers can keep pace. Another reason why poultry labor is so cheap is because these industries are located in right-to-work states, which basically means unions are non-existent and union membership is not a condition of employment (Guthey 2001). Employers usually seek out workers along immigration networks; many Latinos who end up working for a poultry plant, such as the one in Gainesville, end up recruiting their family and friends to work there as well.

Also, many of these big time food-processing plants are advertised in rural areas of Mexico, in the hopes of gaining a never-ending supply of workers (Guthey 2001). Another Latino immigrant destination in North Georgia would be Dalton, a small manufacturing city that produces more than half of all the carpet in the United States (Engstrom 2001). With such an increase of immigration to North Georgia and the chicken processing plants, many of the earlier immigrants during the late 1980's found their way to Dalton to work in the carpet mills that were in much need of labor. Before this, Dalton's carpet industry had a chronic labor shortage that was eventually steadily replaced by immigrant labor. There are over 120 carpet establishments alone in Whitfield County that employ over 15,000 workers (Engstrom 2001). Many of these carpet capitalists sing the praises of such immigrant labor to their Appalachia city, and perceive their workers as highly dedicated, good natured, and most importantly,

willing to work for lower wages. Similar to other towns that have had an influx in Latino immigrants to their communities, such as Gainesville, Dalton has effectively embraced its newfound multiculturalism. Much of this embracing is a direct response to this city's flourishing economy that is synonymous with immigrant labor. Many people in this North Georgia community are setting aside any misgivings, and political leaders are avoiding any punitive policies that would hinder and punish immigrants, especially those who are undocumented.

### **2.3 A Shift Towards Embracing Ethnic Plurality and the Awakening of New Ethnic Conflicts**

The social implications of this surge in immigration to Georgia and to the surrounding Southern states in general have had a more positive effect overall from the research provided. Immigration means an economic upturn for small towns whose native workers no longer can or want to perform the unskilled labor available. Culturally, immigration has made a significant impact on these communities. The New South's ethnic plurality by adding brown to the color scheme has shaken the traditional order of Southern life.

Currently, Spanish culture has infiltrated all aspects of both rural and urban life, especially in metro Atlanta. Many shopping centers have at least one Mexican restaurant; taquerias and carnicerías speckle the urban landscape right beside McDonalds, gas stations and chain grocery stores. We live in a nation where salsa is bought more than ketchup (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2000). On Sundays anyone can go to a park and find Latino soccer teams playing against each other, or turn on the radio to hear any one of the many Spanish stations including La Raza. There are countless Latin nightclubs, Spanish newspapers, and traditional holidays that allow

Latino immigrants to sustain their language and culture, as well as giving U.S born Americans the opportunity to experience a whole new cultural landscape. For a region where change always comes slowly, or violently, it has been somewhat receptive to this new group of immigrants and what they bring with them. However, with such change always comes conflict, and some of the major concerns over immigration to the land of Dixie come from a more economic perspective infused with racism and nativist attitudes. The key word in immigration debates would be “jobs,” and the next key word would usually be “wages.” The leading social conflict against immigration sets up the agenda that “illegal” immigrants (because much of this kind of talk is alarmist) are taking jobs from hard working Americans.

Such sentiments are tenuously founded on facts. The trend that keeps showing up in the literature is that many of these industries that currently employ vast amounts of Latino immigrants used to be skilled, blue collared labor. However, once the prestige associated with such skilled labor, job security and satisfactory wages dwindled with the new global economic restructuring, many of the American workers left for good. The opposing sentiment argues that immigrants are only taking the jobs no one wants. Which one is more valid? There could be some validity to the idea that many Americans just do not want to do the most grueling kind of work for the most minimal amount of pay. These sentiments have arisen out of an economic restructuring that flourishes on cheap, reliable, low skilled labor; many Americans do not feel these jobs coincide with the “American Dream.” It’s the vast mega structure of the economy and capitalism that makes these “wage wars” possible, not undocumented immigrants who are simply looking for any kind of work available. Economists and policy experts have been

debating these sentiments for over a decade. Does immigration benefit society overall or are the economic costs in the form of job losses and wage cuts too much for American citizens?

## **2.4 Mistrust and Americanism**

These “wage wars,” as I will refer to them, bring about another social conflict between two minority groups. There has been the prevalent argument of Latino immigrants taking jobs that African Americans had previously filled. Much of this hostility comes from blue-collar African American workers who are threatened by the new cheap labor and by the employers who prefer to hire more Latinos and fewer African Americans. This has created significant tensions in many areas of the South where black and “brown” overlap. Also, to add to the tension, many Latino communities have been moving into traditionally urban African American neighborhoods (Mohl 2003). From my previous research experience with black and Latino conflict in a small town in North Carolina, the two main trends that keep arising are competitive cheap labor and mistrust.

There is a general idea that Latinos are just fulfilling their role as the new cheap labor force, especially in the South, just as African Americans provided cheap labor for very long time. In this way, many find that this “circle of life” will allow blacks to move up on the social ladder, and years from now, so too will Latinos move up when another source of cheap labor becomes available (Massey 2003, Mohl 2003). However, many African Americans in rural areas feel they are losing a competitive race for the same jobs Latinos are filling at a faster rate. Mistrust remains a pertinent issue because two very different groups are working and living in the same spaces and there are usually limited ways in which these two groups can engage each other in

neighborly dialogue. Many Latinos have their own stereotypes and misgivings about African Americans, either from their home country or from what they encounter when they come to the United States (Case 2005, McClain et al. 2006). This can also be said of African Americans who internalize different stereotypes about Latinos and use them as a tool for discrimination and violence. However, there is limited research to actually claim that Latinos and African Americans across the board have these tensions towards each other. In the case of McClain, the study found that African Americans in the South had more positive feelings towards their Spanish counterparts than Latinos held of them (McClain et al. 2006). Many employers are also guilty of pitting their Latino and African American employees against each other, as in the case of Smithfield packing plant (Mohl 2003). In the past ten years there have been many instances of African American on Latino violence as well as the reverse, and many local community organizations representing both African Americans and Latinos have been prioritizing building better relationships between the two (Mohl 2003).

Another social conflict that is more of a depiction of the South would be the current KKK demonstrations in more rural communities. Many of these have happened in Alabama and North Carolina calling attention to the “Mexican Invasion,” but a KKK demonstration closer to home occurred in Gainesville, Georgia. A rally organizer, who is part of a group called National Alliance based in Virginia, came to Gainesville to tell locals that they will “take our borders back.” Another white anti-immigrant group in Georgia, Georgians for Immigration Reduction, has lobbied state lawmakers to take greater action against illegal immigration. Many of these groups advocate nativist attitudes that use the same alarmist discourses to incite the crowds, such as claiming immigrants make the crime rate go up and create a drain on the economy.



These groups seem to be few and far between thankfully, but they do demonstrate some of the deep seated concerns over the changes that have struck traditional parts of small-town Southern life (Mohl 2003).

Regardless of these attitudes, Latino immigrants are here to stay and many more will arrive to cities such as Atlanta through these established networks. Many migrant and seasonal workers end up staying due to the job security in the South, and many end up bringing their families along to settle permanently. As long as we need hotel maids, janitors, landscapers, construction workers, food processors, farm hands, waiters, dishwashers, and the countless other jobs that Latino immigrants perform in the Atlanta service industry, as well as the Southern region as a whole, Latinos will keep working for low wages, and minimal benefits and security until they too are able to climb up the social ladder.

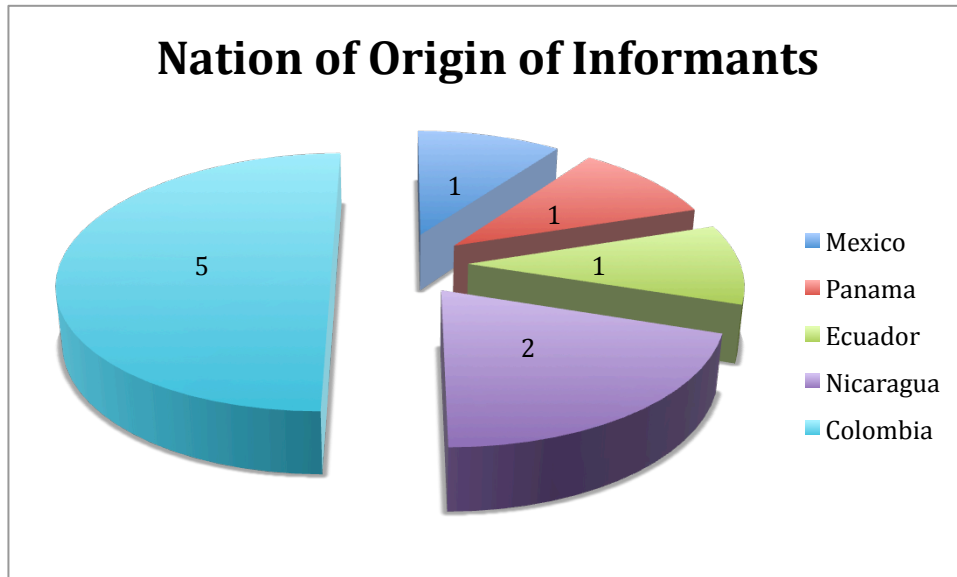
### **CHAPTER 3: From the Front Lines: Migrant Paths to Service Labor in Atlanta**

The service industry has become a hotbed for Latino immigration because as previously stated, as long as the United States needs service oriented jobs there will always be immigrants to fill them. Specific sectors of this gigantic industry seek out solely immigrant labor in order to keep costs down. The recent phenomenon of Latina women entering these industries has created a new spin on the stereotypical imagery of Latino men traveling far from home in order to gain employment. Latina women come from very different ethnic backgrounds, family situations and educational levels, and it needs to be stated that Latina migrant women have become entangled in the broader web of feminized labor in this country, however, they continue to participate as active agents who seek out control of their lives and financial situations.

It can be tentatively stated that the general assumption about Latino immigrants in this country is they are all Mexicans. The truth is that almost two thirds of Latino immigrants from this country are indeed from Mexico, however, that leaves much room for the many other nationalities from Latin America (Borjas 2007). Many Central and South Americans are here living in communities all across the nation, and there are many communities here in Atlanta as well. A large majority of the women I interviewed for this research were from Central and South America, and this was primarily due to my snowball sampling as a means of recruitment. They are from the countries of Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Panama and Mexico. I was initially surprised to find such a large community of Central and South American women who worked in housekeeping positions in the metro-Atlanta area. My surprised stemmed from the

same assumption as many that I would run into more Mexican women than Central and South American women.

Table 3.1 Nation of Origin of Informants



A substantial part of this research was aimed at gathering these women’s stories and understanding their life experiences both here in the United States and their home country. I wanted to give the world a small taste, a testament almost, of these Latina immigrant women who work hard every day in jobs most people would never even consider. My experiences listening to my informants speak about their lives seemed to fluctuate from becoming inspired to becoming despondent as they spoke about family members left behind, the struggles of work, financial security and moments of celebration.

As the interviews progressed I would find many women shrugging their shoulders as if acknowledging the fact they played the cards that life handed to them and there is no use dwelling over regrets, or spilled milk as the saying goes. All of my women confessed to having dreams and goals, some which might not ever be realized but a small treasure to be buried in

the back of one's mind. They would take it out, dust it off, and become inspired once again to keep moving, keep working, keep aspiring to the dream.

When I first started having musings about this research I went in search of María for her advice. I had met María a year before through a part time position I had in a commercial building. We had instantly hit it off, and despite some language barriers we formed a pseudo-mother-daughter friendship because she was much older than I was. It was during this time I asked her to help me with this research and finding participants. She became my key informant during the course of this research. I am indebted to her. María's story starts in Colombia where she is from and grew up. Her stories about Colombia include descriptions of beautiful national forests, ice-cold rivers, and the gentle pace of life she was used to before she came to the States.

María worked in Colombia for twelve years as a secretary for a branch of the government. After what she calls the Administrative Reform in the country, she lost her job along with one million others working for the government. This "Reform" started happening in the 1990s when the Colombian government started to adopt Neoliberal market ideologies which included trade liberalization, privatization, and deregulation, but the result of such reforms only ended up raising the rates of poverty within this already economically unstable country. Colombia did not have as much debt as other Latin American countries up until this point so they only adopted these programs in the late 1990s, yet within a few years of this, Colombia had to double its loans due to the subsequent economic crisis incited by the structural adjustment program. In 2002, governmental reforms began because of this economic crisis, which ended up with the privatizing one of the largest banks in Colombia, the

restructuring of the pension program, and reducing the number of public sector workers in order to cut budget deficits (Bennett 2009).

María explained to me that the government no longer wanted to pay for its employees' benefits, so she was fired and given a little severance pay that eventually dried up between her and her daughter. She had a hard time finding another job because she was in her mid-thirties at the time, and in Colombia it is hard to find work, especially for women, once you're over the age of thirty. Also, María was no longer able to afford her daughter's education on her own; public education through high school is free but is usually of poor quality. She sought refuge with her father who was living in New Jersey at the time, and he applied for a visa for her and her daughter. She was only able to get a visa five years later. She came to live with her father but had no help from Immigration such as agencies or applying for jobs. She was provided with an English learning class that took place within a school. However, between finding jobs that could support her and her daughter, she had to drop the English class due to not having more flexible hours.

For María, the best way to find out about jobs and other such necessities, as transportation was to use social networking. Her network revolved around acquaintances, usually other immigrants who had been in the same situation years before, or coworkers. Through this social networking she landed some odd jobs until the current job she was in offered her a chance to move to Atlanta in the hotel industry. This industry has a considerable need of migrants, especially women, to perform custodial and serving positions. So, María packed everything up once more, left her father's house, and moved to Atlanta to work in one of the big hotel chains. However, the same problems facing her in New Jersey followed her to

Atlanta. Her only consolation was the many already settled Latino communities in the metro-Atlanta area.

“Only God helped me,” María tells me many times; she depended upon her faith to get by most days. Her English skills were still limited and posed the biggest challenge to her everyday needs, primarily at her job. She worked as part of the hotel staff that worked parties or other major events. But this job was not consistent and she needed to pay bills, and she blames her lack of English proficiency as the main reason she did not get to work more parties or become part of the fulltime staff. Eventually she quit the position when her manager, a white man, told her “Fuck You.” This she understood, and she quit because regardless of how much she needed the money she still had her dignity and no one needs to be treated that way. This instance was one out of many that she realized Americans felt little respect towards their Latin brethren.

Since this time, she has been able to buy a house for her and her daughter. For María this was a huge accomplishment because she had saved up enough money for a house, a clear social marker, not to mention a stable place for her daughter. Up until this time she was living with friends for years. She was able to buy this house because she had landed a stable job through an Atlanta based janitorial contracting company. She had started out with this job working part time, and eventually she was given a full-time position as a day porter in a commercial real-estate business complex.

In the past year and half that she’s been working for this company, she has had a very good experience. María is on good relations with her manager, who she feels is very personable, genuine, as well as being Latino. She has felt respected by her manager, Human

Resources and the property manager of the building. María is aware of the stigma attached to her position, the ideology behind cleaning, but she feels she has no choice and must make the best of what has been given to her. Her major hopes are for her teenage daughter to have more opportunities in life through the means of education.

María is one of those special women who go through life with grace and tact, no matter what life throws at them. She has relied on her spiritual foundation to bring her out of the darkest moments, and she feels there is much more good in this world than bad, one just has to look for it. In many ways, she has taught me humility. After spending a few evenings with her in her home, eating the dinner she has served me, and generally feeling like a second daughter, I have come to admire and respect this woman.

María has proven to be resourceful and determined. Nothing about her labels her a “victim” whether that is of the broken immigration system, the prevalent racism accorded to women of color and to immigrants, or to her current socioeconomic status.

María’s story is not unlike the many others I recorded over the span of this research. Some are more positive than the others, but all seem to be well acquainted with struggle and perseverance. For example, Julina’s story spoke loudly to me over the course of our interviews together. Julina is from Ecuador where she received two college degrees in psychology and elementary education. She earned her second degree while raising her only child. After she completed her education, she opened up her own school where she was an equivalent of a principal of elementary school children. She did this for sixteen years before she moved to the United States following her husband. Once in the United States, Julina made it her priority to

learn English so she could take college classes that would allow her back into the school system, her passion.

However, life's hardships, her husband's decline in health, as well as a jolting move from New York to Atlanta made it very hard for Julina to keep pursuing ESL (English as a Second Language) classes. Julina, who is in her late forties, has ended up taking three jobs in order to support her family as well as her husband's mounting medical bills, even though she has health insurance. Julina hopes for the best even though her current position is a day maid in a commercial building. Her other two part time jobs are also housekeeping positions. Julina laughs at her situation and takes a positive spin. She uses her quick wit and humor to smooth those worry- lines that frame her face. Her story is not unique.

Nina, like Julina, also received higher education before coming to the United States. However, unlike Julina, Nina had to drop out after two years due to lack of financial support. Nina had a nice job working as a campaign assistant for the chief political candidate running for elections in Panama. He had promised to support her education fees once he was elected since she was attending a private university. Nina was studying international relations at the time and wanted to be able to do an internship in the United States.

But, once elected, the politician went back on his promise to fund her education. Nina had no other options but to follow her sisters' footsteps to the States. Nina currently works in housekeeping in a nursing home. Julina and Nina are just a few of the women who were able to gain some sort of higher education before they made the choice to immigrate. However, not all of the women I interviewed were able to pursue higher education or make their own choice to come to the United States.



Isidora has a compelling story in that she was forced to seek amnesty from the United States. Isidora had graduated from law school in and was a practicing attorney for some time when a group of rebel forces in Colombia took over her town. The guerrilla soldiers assassinated the mayor of the town and started threatening the attorneys in her office with death. Isidora lived in fear for her life and her family due to this and only sought amnesty after her fellow co-worker and friend was killed by the rebel troops. After that traumatic experience she applied for a visa to the United States, but she had to wait a full year before she was able to escape her country. However, because Isidora's son was over a certain age, she was not able to secure a visa for him and bring him to the United States.

Currently Isidora is trying to work her way back up to becoming a practicing attorney after she realized the United States did not recognize her law degree. She hopes to go into law again and fight for Human Rights. Isidora works as a personal caretaker for the elderly and handicapped. She felt she had no choice but to leave her country in order to secure her safety and that of her family. Many of these women's stories start the same way.

Ximena was not able to make choices for herself when she came to the States from Mexico at the tender age of thirteen. She was placed in the Californian public education system knowing no English. Ximena did not speak any English and her family had come to California following her father who had been working in agriculture for years until that point. In school she describes having to work extra hard in order to learn English as well as to keep her grades from failing. Ximena tells me her English dictionary was her best friend during this period. She spent the rest of her free time working in the fields alongside her family members picking watermelons, cantaloupes, tomatoes and, in the fall, walnuts.

Once she graduated from high school, she came to Atlanta where she signed up for ESL classes for 2.5 hours a day until she reached level six. Upon reaching the highest level that she could take, there were no other options for her, especially in reading or writing English. Subsequently, Ximena enrolled in a community college to pursue a degree in accounting. She was able to complete a year but had to drop out because of her work hours and impending marriage. Ximena, who works as a day maid, hopes to return to college to complete an accounting degree one day. A few other women have similar stories to Ximena, coming to the States at a young age and being thrown into an education system knowing no English.

Each woman has a unique story, a different version, but all have commonalities that had brought them to this point in their lives. Regardless of national origin, many of these women share similar experiences whether that is educational background, immigration processes, language barriers, or experiences working in a housekeeping position. None of them displayed any bitterness, none that they were willing to show me, towards their current situations. Their situations were far from the ideal they might have imagined for themselves, but they took refuge in the small blessings that graced their lives such as their children, their hobbies, and the bare necessities that didn't go unappreciated.

## CHAPTER 4: "It's Not Forever"

### 4.1 Identity Politics and Service Labor

When I first set out with this research I wanted to discover a connection between the labor migrant women performed and how this specific type of labor influenced how they identified themselves. How do these women perceive themselves when they are working in these specific jobs, jobs that, for the most part, are below their educational level? I was expecting my informants to somehow become self-reflexive when speaking about their work lives. Looking back I did not foresee how difficult it might be trying to find some clear-cut answer to this question of how their identities are linked with their labor. I also did not realize that maybe the women in my study identified themselves in different ways that might not have any connection to the work they perform, or at least it was not as central to their identity as I first assumed. Between this and a bumpy ride with language barriers, it became clearer to me that I might be looking for my answer in the wrong way. The idiom of not seeing the forest for the trees comes to mind in that I was looking for an immediate association between labor and identity. The forest in this case represents the pattern of educational attainment tied in with language abilities rather than just labor.

As my interviews progressed and I tried to fine tune my techniques, it became noticeable my informants were much more willing to speak about education as a means to change their lives than their current employment. All of the Latina migrant women I interviewed were willing to speak about their current and past work experiences to varying degrees. Yet many of my interlocutors seemed almost indifferent about their work. Without some probing they seemed to shrug it off as something that was necessary, not something they

had much to say about to me. This also surprised me because I had assumed they would be ready to grumble about their collective experiences working as hotel maids, janitors, day maids, or caretakers. Ironically, they were much more likely to speak about their past experiences with vigor, their educational attainments or goals, and their hardships learning to speak English.

I began to muse after each interview about what identity meant to my informants and how they might identify themselves in their current state. As we explored their world of work and many other different and colorful facets of their lives, I realized they saw themselves as many different things, a fluid identity that rolled with the times. I, though, was trying hard to look for a connection that had more weight between their work and personal lives. However, their work was just one aspect they associated with themselves; if they happened to dislike their current employment, they made sure to detach themselves from this negative association. A much more common occurrence throughout our interviews was the women tended to identify, or define themselves more specifically with their educational background rather than their current employment.

I did have one woman specifically, Carmela, who took pride in her work as a housekeeper for a hotel. Carmela was one of my older informants, having multiple children and grandchildren surrounding her in the small apartment. She showed me with pride her award certificates for “Best Employee,” or “Hardest Worker.” She told me with these awards the hotel gave her a free flat screen TV which was situated in the corner of the room as a centerpiece. I was thinking to myself “who ever wins a TV?” Carmela had worked her way up the ranks and now performed multiple responsibilities for the hotel, not just cleaning. I found this very intriguing, especially coming from a woman who had owned her own landscaping

company in Miami before losing it all after her divorce. She had gone from running a successful business, which she has fond memories of, to working her way through the hotel cleaning industry. Carmela was one of the few women who had a positive identification with her labor. She really enjoyed her job while taking a significant amount of pride in the rewards she had received. She did not shy around the fact that this job was step down from her previous employment as a business owner; instead, she smiled when she told me she had never missed a day of work. Carmela's confidence in her job had a direct effect on how she identified herself as person.

Not all of the women I interviewed had such positive things to say about their current employment. Ironically, it was the two women who were brought here as young teenagers who detached themselves the most from their labor. Ximena and Juana were both brought here at the age of thirteen. Both had been placed in public schools where they struggled to learn English and keep up with the other students. Ximena was able to graduate high school and pursue a year of community college due to her dedication to learning English. However, because of a combination of getting married and pulling the weight of a full-time job, she dropped out to continue full time employment as a day maid.

Ximena speaks about her employment in an apathetic way; when I ask her about any aspect of her job she shrugs her shoulders. When she eventually speaks about anything pertaining to her job as a day maid it seems all the energy has been zapped from her body. However, when Ximena talks about her future her energy returns. Ximena does reflect this job takes care of the bills, but it's not something that she'll do forever. She tells me she repeats this little mantra in her head while she cleans throughout the day; "it's not forever," she tells

me. She sees herself in limbo, waiting on all the chips to fall into place so she can leave this job and pursue school again.

Ximena appreciates the stability the job offers and the ideal hours that leave her with afternoons and weekends free. In spite of this, she always feels fatigued at the end of the day from cleaning, and her lower back aches due to an injury at her previous job. For awhile Ximena had very good health coverage that allowed her to see an orthopedic and a chiropractor for her lower back pain, but her company switched over to a much more basic plan with minimal coverage. She now does not have the ability to go to a chiropractor as much as she would like. Ximena also expressed that she hates cleaning but has become numb to it during the past eight years. She expresses frustration that she spends her whole work day cleaning and then has to come home and clean her own house.

Juana expressed the same types of frustrations with her job as a housekeeper for a hotel chain. Juana dropped out of high school at fourteen due to becoming pregnant. When she realized the baby's father was not going to support her, and later left, Juana began her journey from one low paying job to the next. Her job history includes working at a tomato factory, catering for the wealthy, and then housekeeping. Juana is fully aware that dropping out of high school in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade has cost her any chance at having a decent job. She almost spits out the word "housekeeping," as she gives me her insight into this specific labor. Juana tells me housekeeping was available because it was the easiest job to get into without any training. She also has minimal English skills because she has always relied on her Latino community in Miami and now here in Georgia. She tells me that a housekeeper for a hotel might have to clean eighteen rooms a day, plus do laundry and other duties in the lobby area.

Juana tells me this is a laborious job, and she feels trapped by it because it seems like her only option these days. Juana, who has four teenagers, has been a housekeeper for eleven years. She tells me of one incident shortly after she was fired from her current employment.

Juana was told to come in to see the managers in order to discuss her dismissal. She knew that she had been fired for calling in sick too many times because of her chronic ulcers. Juana told me her managers proceeded to crack jokes at her expense and told her to “get your husband to take care of you.” Juana had recently married the man she had been with for twenty years, but the managers did not know this and insinuated she had just married a man she barely knew. Juana bitterly tells me that housekeeping is “the worst job ever” because the pay is ridiculously low and the managers “look at you like you are nobody, that you deserve this job.”

Although they both came here as teenagers, Juana and Ximena have had different experiences, but one commonality is they both have detached themselves from their jobs. They would much rather be doing something else that requires higher education in order to satisfy their goals. Both of these women feel trapped at the moment by life’s responsibilities. Both would like to further their education with Juana finishing high school and Ximena completing her college degree.

Many more of my informants found themselves in similar situations, all trying to balance out their work experiences with their life experiences. These two experiences usually contrasted with each other as sand paper grates against something smooth because they are so very different. The majority of the women were over qualified for the type of work they were performing and only one had anything close to a managerial/supervisor position. What I mean

by being over qualified for these jobs refers to the fact I had many Latina women in my study who had maintained professional careers before coming to the U.S. These jobs included a practicing attorney, school principal, and a secretary for a local government. About half of the women worked at least a full time job with a part-time job to pick up the slack, and I was very aware that regardless of how the women identified with their current employment it did take an emotional toll on them.

I listened to the migrant women in my study speak about their jobs as something distinctly separate from who they are, or from their true calling in life that had been put on hold. Almost all of the women spoke about the low pay their jobs provided as well as only temporary security in relation to benefits and retirement. Josefa pointed out this lack of security with a factory job she had before working in the hotel industry here in Atlanta. Like many of the women I interviewed, Josefa had worked in multiple factory jobs including one that packaged various types of makeup including nail polish and mineral foundation.

However, there were minimal safety regulations at this factory, and she was inhaling nail polish and mineral makeup on a constant basis. Her other factory job focused on the packaging and shipping of frozen food meals for the U.S. military. Josefa told me she worked seven days a week with no benefits and no time off at this factory. I asked her if other immigrants worked there as well, and she confirmed saying there were many Mexicans who worked with her. This was also the case with Flora, who had worked in factory jobs between finding housekeeping and custodial employment. Flora worked in a fabrics factory where she was being paid minimum wage to work seven days a week with no benefits or time off. She was also denied overtime. This struck me as a flagrant violation of U.S labor laws; the managers



of this factory seemed to be exploiting immigrant labor for profit. Was I really surprised? To me this was just another reason this situation needs to change.

This whole situation involving Latina migrant women who do not enjoy their jobs and who might not identify themselves with their jobs, but who still bear some emotional toll because of their jobs, reminded me of Ra-Keum Huh (2008) who developed the theory behind *Politics of Meaning*. Huh created this theoretical complex around migrant Asian women and the care work they are expected to perform because of their gender. Huh takes much of this theory from Hochschild (2000) and the idea of the global care chain and labors of love. This idea of the politics of meaning can be applied to the situation with Latina immigrant women in the U.S. who perform jobs that revolve around a domestic ideology. All of my informants are employed in various housekeeping positions or care work. According to Huh, migrant women are represented by larger society as unskilled foreign workers. Since they are recognized as unskilled they are relegated to jobs that play up their gender such as cleaning and caretaking. Migrant women become socially marginal because society's discourses surrounding their work determines the intrinsic value of their work (Huh 2008). This value of course is very low and is associated with the feminization of specific sectors of the labor market.

This theory applies to Latina migrant women very well because much of their line of work, regardless of their educational attainments, is low paying, mostly contract only, and does not provide much room for mobility. Indeed, these jobs only provide them with a slight semblance of security, especially for the older women who are thinking about how they are going to ever retire. Huh (2008) observed the commodification of migrant women's work threatens their identity and self-esteem, especially if this line of work directly conflicts with

their educational attainment.

## **4.2 Resistances and Rage Against the Clean**

What I at first saw as an unwillingness to talk about work I came to understand as a form of resistance. Their work experiences might shape their lives indirectly, but they do not associate their self worth or take much pride in their jobs. For me this is revealing in itself. After speaking with the Latina women in my study, it was very clear their jobs were seen as something necessary, utilitarian, and not always a positive aspect of their lives. This was especially true for the women who had attained at least a year's worth of college or had degrees. Women such as Julina, Isidora or Nina understood the situation that they must work in these positions to stay afloat, but felt that these jobs should have no direct correlation with who they are as people.

Their reflections on these jobs were not just shaped by their previous educational attainments, but by how society views their labor. When I would be speaking to my informants about their labor they would make it clear to me that cleaning is not a prestigious job, no matter where you come from. Many of these women would associate this with negative attitudes from clients or managers, or further express this with body language. Notably, I tried to make the women in my study specify their thoughts on jobs involving cleaning in general in order to avoid making vast cultural assumptions about these service jobs. I was greeted with their negative opinions on these jobs. Whether they were in Panama or in the United States, cleaning jobs were low-paying and stratified.

However, it must be mentioned my informants never came out and blatantly denounced these types of jobs that involve cleaning or housekeeping. They all took a subtle

route in order to make it clear to me these jobs are necessary in society, but they did not ever strive to work in them nor do most people they know. Influence from U.S. society further emphasized their marginal positions within their jobs. This includes the many women who noticed their negative treatment by managers as well as clients. For them it was one thing to clean, but a whole different story when people started to treat them like the dirt they clean. The Latina women participating in my study were constantly being conflicted about who they are and how they fit into this society. As much as these jobs tried to inscribe a negative association on them, they were at the same time resisting this association by identifying with their prior accomplishments, most notably with education.

I found that the majority of the women in my study were able to find a balance for this type of pressure because many of them had strong educational foundations to fall back on; many of these women played the game in hopes they will eventually win and be able to break free of these types of service labor. Until that time, my informants all had at least one story about their work experiences to share with me. For Isidora, her story had a more positive spin than the others which I associate with her insanely positive attitude. Isidora's current job is that of a caretaker for the elderly and disabled. She notes that this job is one of the few she can get here in Georgia with her English skills. Although the job is full-time, it pays poorly and provides no benefits; she has been without healthcare for a long time. Isidora's only time off is when she finishes with her three charges whom she takes care of everyday. So her free time fluctuates with the needs of her charges. As much as Isidora misses practicing law, she tells me that working as a caretaker has brought a sense of humanness that she had missed in Colombia. Isidora feels this whole experience has humbled her because in Colombia she was

considered very successful, and now she takes care of those who can barely take care of themselves.

Nina also had a more positive spin as well, but did not hesitate to mention her difficulties with her current and past employment. Nina is considered a housekeeper who takes care of her elderly patients who live in a nursing home beside a hospital. Her job responsibilities include laying out clothes for them, bathing them, feeding them, and cleaning their rooms. She is also learning how to take her patients' blood pressure and temperature in an effort to develop more specialized skills. She has been working at this job for over a year now, and she feels somewhat secure because she has weekends off, a nice home, and spending money cushioned by her husband's job.

When Nina first took this job she said no one informed her of the mentally handicapped patients who had violent tendencies. She found out the hard way through two different incidents during which she was threatened with blunt force trauma by her charges. She evaded one threat but came out of the second with a nice bruise. What made her angry was not the actual patients, but rather management's lack of communication and concern for her personal safety. Since that time, Nina expresses that she likes her job to an extent, but it is hard on her emotionally because she cannot help but become attached to her charges. Unfortunately, her charges can die suddenly, and then she mourns their deaths because no one else does.

Nina tells me that she's "working with her heart." Already she's had two women she cared for die in a short period of time. Nina's main concern is that no one seems to care about the people they take care of, and she finds herself the only one who notices when they're gone. The families of her charges do not even care, she says, observing they only come to take care of

the deceased's body. For her this is not normal because of her own upbringing in Panama centers on familial respect and responsibility by taking care of one another regardless of the situation. Nina says that at the end of the day she feels sorry for the elderly who she takes care of and the lack of empathy she experiences with the other caretakers.

Julina had a different type of experience when she first started working as a day maid in a commercial building. Julina, who is a spry older woman, told me she's had managers who would find themselves on a witch-hunt to seek out Latino employees who were speaking Spanish to each other. Julina, even during a period with limited English skills, felt this was unnecessary because she was speaking Spanish to a fellow employee, not a client. She laughs at the absurdity that her managers would go through to make them speak English, even with other Latinos. However, this was something that could get them written up for so the power dynamics were not in her favor. To resolve this issue they continued to speak Spanish with each other out of earshot from the managers. Julina also notes that she's had clients scream at her for little things such as dust on their desks or some left over trash. She also laughs at this because she tells me she would ask them to calm down and tell her what is the problem without screaming. She relates this in a way one would calm a child who was in the midst of a tantrum. Julina realizes that some people "are not kind," but regardless "everyone is a person, no matter what they do."

María experienced some hostility as well from a manager while she was working as a server in a hotel. This specific manager was notorious for showing preference for the male servers by giving them more hours and being more accommodating to them in general. With the female servers, including María, this was a different story because the manager became

aggressive with the female staff, which primarily consisted of immigrant women. María built up the courage one day to ask him for more hours, but once she tried to get the words out of her mouth he mocked her English skills. Because of her lack of English skills she felt she could not approach this specific manager's supervisor. The other women who were immigrants as well also felt the same way, so they continued to work in this intimidating environment until this manager was eventually transferred to a different location. María still beats herself up for not saying something sooner to his superiors.

On a different note, Carmela, who had the most positive experiences with her job, has some crazy tales of working as housekeeper in a hotel chain. One story involves getting a request to service a room while the guest was still in the room. When Carmela opened the door she saw a blur of naked run for the bathroom. Carmela, already experienced with the embarrassing aspects of the hotel industry, realized this woman had defecated all over her sheets during the night, brought on by severe inebriation as she saw liquor bottles everywhere and the scent of alcohol. Obviously, this is not something anyone wants to clean up or even admit to doing because the young woman locked herself in the bathroom until Carmela left. Carmela looks at me as if to indicate, "shit happens." Ideally, jobs involving human waste removal should have some more benefits, fiscally, but Carmela does not make extra cash after these types of cleaning. Carmela also has a regular guest who always requests her to either clean his room or other tasks at the front desk, but this man never addresses her or even looks her in the eye. She finds this amusing because he obviously likes something about her methods but he cannot even bring himself to address her to her face. He talks around her or at her, but never to her.

These are just some stories that stood out the most to these individual women. At first glance the stories might seem not so terrible, most likely because my informants have related them to me in a more positive light. What these stories do reveal with further analysis is these women experience various forms of discrimination or malcontent within their workplaces on a regular basis; sometimes it is more subtle, but the women use humor as a way to shrug off these types of pressure. My informants have revealed to me in their telling they have been able to take all of these experiences with a grain of salt.

### **4.3 The Price to Pay**

Nevertheless, a grain of salt is all they have at times to keep up with their daily challenges. The Latina migrant women in my study are running on empty because they continue to be overworked and underpaid and many face constant obstacles to bring themselves out of these positions. Despite all of this they hold fast to an identity that actively excludes their labor. My informants strive to keep their labor completely separate from how they view themselves and their self-worth. They gain validity through their life experiences, which centers on their educational attainments and future goals in the educational system.

In spite of this, these Latina women's previous education has no impact on the type of job they could get, and they are making the most of their situations bit by bit. Isidora told me during our conversation that it was very hard for Latinos to get jobs in this area so they all relied on one another for support. This kind of social networking allowed Isidora and most of my other informants to get the jobs they hold currently. She told me even in Miami it was whom you knew and not what you could bring to the table. Of course, most of these employment fields, such as housekeeping and janitorial, rely on word of mouth to produce

workers because of such high turnover.

Regardless, the Latina migrant women involved in my study never forgot to put a genuine smile on their faces after speaking about their predicaments. Optimism took on a whole new meaning after speaking to them about their lives. They all agreed that just living in the United States was an advantage and they acknowledged the benefits. But the obvious disadvantage that kept coming up in our conversations was their lack of English proficiency and ways to complete higher education. If I had to divide them into two groups, I would say about half had more than adequate English proficiency. Many of these informants also were graduates of the ESL classes that were provided for free once they came to this country. The other half struggled with learning and speaking English due to their age, lack of opportunities to attend ESL classes, and work environments that do not require them to speak English consistently.

Gill (2010: p.146) mentioned that human capital was much greater when coupled with education and language fluency. I believe this must be the case because these Latina migrant women have the educational means to hold better jobs, yet some of reasons they still struggle can be a toxic mixture of racism, sexism and their lack of English fluency. The general sentiment for all of my informants involved English proficiency as a major barrier to better jobs and treatment from Americans. As stated before, my informants relied heavily on their educational backgrounds as a means for validity in an environment where they labor was taken for granted, however, their educational achievements also hindered them because the United States does not recognize their degrees or history of higher education. This, along with English fluency, posed the greatest conflict.



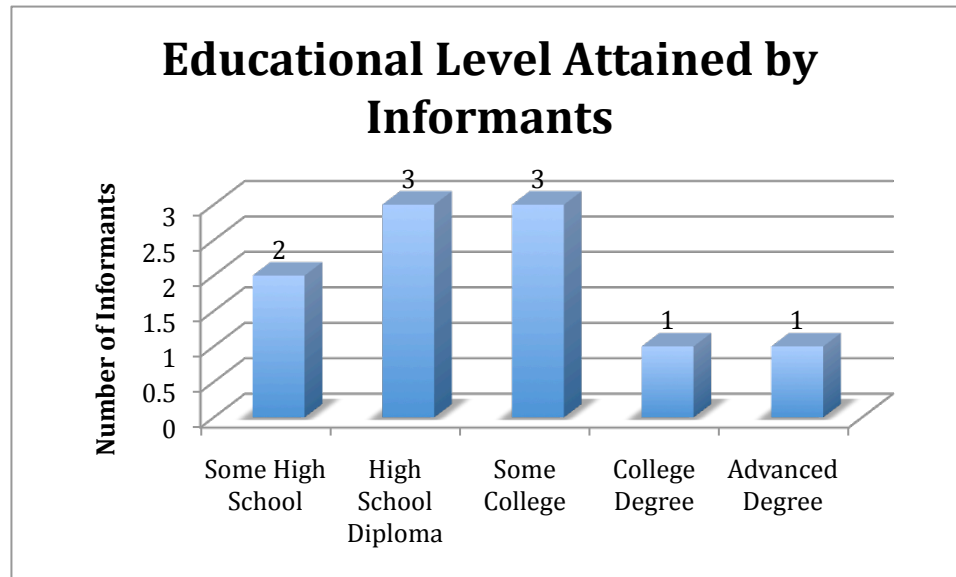
## **CHAPTER 5: “True Calling:” The Battle for Education and English Proficiency**

### **5.1 Education in Shaping Identity**

The majority of the women I interviewed were over qualified for the positions they held. I noticed very early on that educational attainment meant more for my informants than their current jobs. Education to them had more influence in shaping their identity or persona than did the jobs they performed. This, again, is mainly due to the fact of immigration and the political processes surrounding migrant women and the labor they can attain. This is especially true with the re-awakening of a hostile climate towards immigrants in the past few years. It is safe to assume the women in my study did not aspire to work in any of these industries that feed off Latina migrant women’s labor.

I learned that only two out of my ten informants did not complete an equivalent of a high school education. My informants regret not being able to do so, but circumstances forced them from completing school. Juana dropped out in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade shortly after emigrating from Nicaragua to the U.S. Carmela, also from Nicaragua, only finished up to the 11<sup>th</sup> grade before she had to drop out as well. What was unexpected about my informants was the rest of the women had, on average, at least one year’s worth of college. More than half of them had attended college in their home countries, and a few had taken some college courses once they arrived in the United States. For me this was a significant breakthrough because education up until this point was used as background information, yet I found myself focusing more and more on their educational background because I had a large majority of women who had achieved higher education. Plus, my interlocutors were eager to speak about their educational attainments and future goals more so than their employment.

Table 5.1 Educational Level Attained by Informants



All of this came as a shock to me, and I regret underestimating this kind of information I would receive from my informants. I had Latina migrant women who were sitting down with me and speaking about their scholastic achievements, many that were interrupted, and at the same time they were working in a service sector that relied upon cheap, unskilled labor. As we spoke about their education, it was consistent these women identified their own self-worth and value through this achievement. Because they were working in jobs that were deemed below their expertise, they made intentional efforts to distance themselves from these jobs and how they identified with them.

When they spoke about their educational achievements it made them smile. It was a satisfied grin in response to what they had accomplished it or at least attempted to do it for a while before financial issues arose. What is certain, education is hardly affordable anywhere you go these days. In this way they were reinforcing their sense of identity by tying it to their scholastic achievements and making a big knot. This knot is permanent no matter what type of

service labor they currently perform; nothing can loosen this knot. Because their education reflected so much in terms of their own sense of self-worth, especially what they were individually passionate about, they also spoke about their future goals in the same breath. I had at least two women who were passionate about math, specifically accounting. They want to eventually go back and be able to get a degree in accounting. For Julina, all she wants to do is be a part of the school system again since she was a principal in her country. Isidora wants to practice law again, but this time focusing on human rights.

I believe this was a critical point for me in this research because education and labor are closely linked, and I had migrant women who were more than happy to speak about their educational attainments and/or aspirations rather than focus entirely on their labor. The point here is the women in my study took great pride in their education. Furthermore, I was puzzled by their predicaments and the limited employment options open to them despite their higher education. In Hannah Gill's (2010) research with Latinos in North Carolina, Gill outlines a reasonable and justified approach to a broad immigration reform. Gill (2010) notes there are several important factors that shape the economic outcomes of immigrants as they adapt to a new society. One factor is of course human capital which refers to an immigrant's linguistic abilities, prior education, and job experience. Gill further notes that an immigrant's educational background and ability to communicate will have greater bearing on how he or she finds jobs (Gill 2010). Gill does go on to note that the host community and how it responds to newcomers also plays a role in how immigrants thrive in that specific community. Indeed, the reality of institutionalized racism can play a heavy hand in who is able to use their cultural capital and who is pushed to the sidelines.

By focusing on this approach then, the Latina migrant women who were part of my research should have much better jobs than other Latina women with less education. I mentioned most of the women had some sort of college background, but I will reiterate in more detail. First there is Julina who is from South America. Julina was able to graduate college with two degrees at two different points in her life. Her first degree was in psychology, but she did not know what type of job she could get with it so she went back to college. She decided to major in elementary education because she loved kids. She graduated and was able to start her own school in her town for children between the ages of five to seven years old. Julina was an equivalent of a principal for this school, and she did this for more than sixteen years before she decided to follow her husband and young son to the United States.

Julina made a sacrifice, one that she was okay with, but it took her away from her passion. Julina thought she would be able to use her college degree once she got to the U.S., but she was severely mistaken. Instead of working as a teacher in the school system, she is the one cleaning the school. One of her three jobs consists of being a janitor for a public school in her area. Julina hopes someday she might be able to become an assistant teacher or work at a daycare in order to be close to what she loves most. Until this time, Julina cleans commercial buildings and a school with her dual degrees.

Julina's story is not unique. Isidora graduated from law school in Colombia and was practicing law for many years at a local firm before she had to flee for her life. Because she was an attorney, she was a target for the rebel troops that were part of a wider political uprising in the country. She arrived in Miami where she made contacts and was able to secure a paralegal job that needed her for her Spanish skills, but not her legal ones. Once she arrived in the U.S.,

Isidora realized that the United States did not recognize her law degree. Isidora is frustrated but hopeful she can get back to where she was in time. She loves the law and wants to be able to practice again, but this time she will focus on Human Rights. Isidora has enrolled herself in a local community college here in Atlanta in order to legitimize herself as an attorney in the United States. She says she has been here for ten years already.

Like Isidora, Nina was attending a private university in Panama while working for a major political candidate as a campaign manager. Nina, who could not afford the private tuition on her own, was relying on a political candidate to fund her education once he was elected. She aspired to graduate with a degree in international relations and to do an internship in an English-speaking nation. She had her sights on either Europe or the United States. However, once elected, the political figure went back on his promise and she had no choice but to drop out of school once her funds ran out. She had completed two years and she only had two more to go. Frustrated, she came to the United States with her sister's urging. Hoping she can start anew, Nina has been here for five years and her current job consists of working at a nursing home that is part of a local hospital. She is taking classes that are offered through her employment that center on ESL as well as computer skills in the hopes of gaining more skills and eventually leaving her caretaker position. Nina would like to further her education once she reaches some security with her job.

Josefa had a similar situation to Nina in that she could only complete a year of college before she had to drop out due to financial problems. Josefa initially intended to go to college to complete an accounting degree. She says there are two things in her life she loves: numbers and cooking. Josefa, however, was not able to financially support herself after her first year of

college. After having her first child, she moved to France to accompany her husband who had been working there for some time. Once in France she found that she was not able to pursue any higher education, and the French government placed her in different jobs that involved cleaning in hospitals and a psychiatric ward. Josefa and her children learned to speak French fluently and eventually moved to the United States to be closer to extended family. After making the move to the U.S., Josefa held factory jobs and eventually housekeeping positions.

Her eldest daughter, Olivia, ended up dropping out of high school to work as a server for an agency that places servers in different hotels. Olivia explains that her family went through a tumultuous time after her biological father left them to go back to France. She stopped caring about school and wanted to help the family financially. Since this time, Olivia who is now 20 years old, is completing high school within the year and aspires to go to art school. Olivia, who has worked in many different hotels as a server for fancy parties, finds herself wanting to go to college, but at the same time she wants to keep working for a year or two before entering college.

Josefa, Olivia, and Olivia's younger sister, speak French and English as well as their native Spanish. Josefa works in the same hotel as her daughter but as a housekeeper and occasional cook for certain events. Josefa also has the honor of cleaning the kitchen once she's finished cooking because she has learned to clean so well from working in France. Olivia, still very young, hopes she will be able to attend college when she is ready.

## **5.2 The Disregard for Cultural Capital and Starting Over**

After hearing all these stories I kept asking myself "what is wrong with this situation?" The majority of my informants have at least a high school education or higher so they are

bringing definite human capital to the table once they immigrate to the United States. I also recognized the pervading stereotype that many of these women encountered from others ... that they are ignorant and therefore finely suited for the menial jobs they hold. How many people would be surprised at the educational attainments of these women who are performing service jobs? As I stated before, education and labor go hand in hand and education can heavily influence the latter.

I was also perplexed at U.S policies that inhibit my informants from using their degrees from their respective countries. Many of the women were confused as to why their education was not recognized by the United States government and education systems. As stated before, many of my informants held professional jobs that are highly skilled, yet none of their cultural capital was recognized once they immigrated to the U.S. Why would this be? This research has shed light to an extent there is a large pool of Latina migrant women who can offer skilled work, something that can be cultivated with obtaining fluency in English. What's problematic is there is no cultivating going on. The Latina migrant women in my study had to start over once they immigrated here, and their options are limited; there is no ATM machine where they can "cash in" their cultural capital. This is a serious issue not just within the immigrant community as a whole, but among Latin American immigrants specifically. As of now, contemporary Latin American immigrants face an upward battle for rights just for higher education, and very soon this battle could be waged over access to public education.<sup>1</sup> Latin Americans often face harsher policies, policies that are more so in the past created by local and state leaders, not the federal

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<sup>1</sup> In March, 2011, students from eight Phoenix, Arizona high schools walked out of class and protested the controversial law SB 1070 in front of the capital. Part of this omnibus immigration bill would require public schools to report undocumented students, which would be a direct violation of the right children who live in the United States to attend public school. This also coincides with legislation that denies undocumented youth access to higher education, especially after the Dream Act failed in the Senate.

government. Because of this, many Latin American immigrants are vulnerable to unwelcoming communities and their policies. For the most part, these policies are directed at denying the Latin American immigrant community access to opportunities and resources which includes targeting Latina women and their children who depend upon social welfare and access to higher education. Higher education has been a proven avenue for more social mobility, but it has become increasingly difficult for immigrants, especially immigrant youth to achieve (Chang 2000, Gill 2010, Hondagneu-Sotelo 1997).

I happened to interview a young Latina woman, Esperanza, who was in this predicament. After interviewing a woman who lived with this young woman's family, I was asked to interview Esperanza as well because of her current situation. With her permission, we spoke about her future in this country. Esperanza is 22 years old and is unable to attend college even though she finished high school in the state with a high GPA. She was turned away from a top technical school with a scholarship because she was not a legal resident. This was the outcome of her mother finding it overly complicated to renew their visas. I asked Esperanza if there were any other routes for her and she said no, or none that she knew. I asked her how she felt about her situation and she said she felt frustrated and angry. She was angry because she wanted a college education to become a nurse, to do something with her life, and now she feels stuck. She told me she cannot even get a decent job since she does not have residency. Those close to her told me she had been in a depressed state for some time and did not leave her room very often. Esperanza currently maintains a social network through social media and hopes for the best when it comes to Georgia state legislation pertaining to undocumented immigrant youth.



The Latina women in my study who had the means to go to community college here in the U.S. had the advantage of residency. Even then, it was hard for them to juggle jobs and family responsibilities while dedicating themselves to their studies. Out of the ten women, only one is currently enrolled in college courses. Two had attempted to do so but dropped out because of being in these stressful situations. Here, access to higher education is limited to my informants and only a few are able to overcome these obstacles. By not being able to complete their education in this country further allows Latina migrant women to be trapped working in service labor.

I see this as another example of Huh's theory of the commodification of migrant women's labor. By continuing to label these migrant women as unskilled, service laborers regardless of their educational achievements, they are relegated to perform low-skilled jobs with no means of upward mobility. As a result of this, Gill (2010) exposes the troubling trend of the stagnation of the socioeconomic level of third generation Latin American immigrants. This means the third generation of Latin American immigrants might have more fluency in English, but they are still at the same socioeconomic level as when their grandparents arrived. This also directly affects the children of Latina migrant women because their children are less likely to pursue education as a means to break the cycle (Rumbaut 1997). Furthermore, depending on their immigration status, higher education might be inaccessible for these children.

### **5.3 Education For the Next Generation**

When speaking about their own educational experiences, many of the Latina women also noted how essential education was in their children's lives. When I asked them about any future goals they had, they were quick to explain how they had high hopes for their children to

ascend the ivory towers. My informants were aware they might not be able to complete any type of higher education in this country due to constraints, including not having their own educational accomplishments recognized by the United States; however, their children's education and potential opportunities were something they looked forward to and fully supported. By understanding that education had critically shaped their lives in so many ways, the women in my study wanted to pass this on to their children who already have the advantage of speaking English and being in the public education system. Flora put it succinctly when she said essentially: "I stay here for my kids" even though she's faced so many hardships since coming to the U.S. Flora believed in the "American Dream" when she came to the U.S. but has been disillusioned with her own dream and now lives through her children.

María also strongly feels that despite her hardships, she keeps going for the sake of her teenage daughter who is in high school. Both María and her daughter struggle with learning English because her daughter was already a teenager when she came to the U.S. It has consequently affected her studies, but her mother has high hopes of her graduating and going on to college. Whenever I speak to María she mentions her daughter's progress and she is sometimes overwhelmed when her daughter struggles with grades, all due to her trying to learn to read English at the same time. María wants her daughter to understand that college is necessary, especially in this country, and that education is the key to success.

She does not want her daughter to end up in a job similar to hers and has threatened her with this when she becomes apathetic about school. What is evident is that the younger these children are when they come to the U.S., the faster they pick up English which allows them to thrive in school more so than the children brought here during their teens. Also, the

children born here also have the advantage of learning English faster and becoming more fluent than those who arrive here later in their childhoods. English skills do have an impact on the quality of education they receive. For these children, their mothers represent a strong support system that's advocating for their future success. Education and English fluency are both vital to the overall success of migrant Latina women as well as their children. For the women in my study, their previous educational accomplishments mean nothing in the context of their jobs, but it does play a significant factor in shaping their identity as well as being a wellspring of pride for them when times are rough.

“To find jobs is not easy, they say you must speak good English and you have an accent...” Isidora recounts this to me as we chat about the topic of speaking English and at the same time interacting in a primary Spanish community. Isidora explains to me that everyone in this community helps the others find jobs because it is just so hard with everyone at different levels of English proficiency. She herself recounts that she has had potential job employers tell her she has too much of a Spanish accent. This seems an extreme requirement because her English is more than adequate, yet these employers want any obvious signs of her native language erased for the purpose of this specific work. My informant's frustrations with speaking English were apparent to me, especially when trying to convey specific emotions or common idioms in their own language that they could not translate into English. For the women in my study it was hard enough to speak conversationally, but it was a whole different ball game when trying to convey specific emotions and sentiments through this new language.

Isidora, the once practicing attorney who is now enrolled in community college, proudly states to me she graduated from the ESL class that was provided to her after coming to the

United States. However, her English still needs improvement, and she laments that it's very hard to keep studying English while being involved in so many different outlets such as work, family, and school. To become fluent in English is a definite goal for Isidora because she constantly needs to improve in order to excel in her college classes. It also affects her opportunities for future employment that does not involve being a caretaker. Isidora, like many of the women I spoke to, reiterated that being so involved in and dependent on their respective Latin communities facilitates them with jobs, but also hinders them from gaining English proficiency. Why speak English to your Latino neighbor or your sister/ brother? Even while I was speaking with Isidora, her roommate came in and they exchanged greetings in Spanish.

#### **5.4 ESL Classes: The Pros and Cons**

The Latina women in my study who were more comfortable speaking English were the ones who had taken ESL classes for a significant amount of time. The ones who did not feel so confident in their English abilities were not able to take any kind of ESL classes since coming to the United States. They also worked in jobs where there was minimal contact with Americans so they did not have any opportunities to exercise their English. Out of the ten women I interviewed, only five were able to attend ESL classes in some sort of capacity. Of those five women, only three were able to fulfill the entire course and graduate.

María spoke to me about attending ESL classes when she first arrived here with her daughter. She told me she found out about the classes by word of mouth because immigration had not provided her with that information. This was also the case for many of the migrant women who either found out by social networks, rather than INS (Immigration Services), or

were here for a few years before learning about these classes. For the most part, the classes are free and are held at specific times and places in most communities. Many times they are offered in local schools, community colleges or libraries. Nonetheless, María was not able to finish the ESL class she attended because of the inflexible hours that eventually conflicted with her two jobs. She felt she had to make a decision, a decision she was fine with, to either learn to speak English or ensure she and her daughter were taken care of with a stable source of paychecks. English, for her, would come later after she had settled herself in and started saving money.

However, time has passed and it has only become harder for her to consistently work on her English. As an alternative, she has tried to attend church groups where they speak English. This was also the case with Julina who attended ESL classes as often as she could when she lived in New York. There, she relied on public transportation to take her to the classes. She said she was making big strides in her English, especially since she did not speak any English when she came here from Ecuador. But once her husband had a heart attack, they eventually made the move to Atlanta where Julina was no longer able to continue classes. She attempted to attend some here in Atlanta, but she was unprepared for the lack of mass public transportation and driving was a scary ordeal to her back then. She also had to take on another job to help out with her husband's medical bills. Coupled with this and having a young son, Julina felt she had to devote herself to her job and family and try her best to keep learning on her own.

Learning a language on your own is especially difficult. Most of the Latina women I interviewed were middle-aged making it even more difficult to learn a new language. The only

consistent English they hear is on television at times. Regardless of educational background, many of these women felt learning English did not come naturally to them. This made them work twice as hard to learn English as perhaps school children. I am in no position to say that learning a language can be achieved simply with time and effort. I myself have a great deal of difficulty in grasping languages other than my native English. Some people are naturally inclined when learning languages, and this makes it all the more difficult for Latina migrant women who are unable to easily pick up English within a short period of time.

This seems especially true for most of the women I interviewed. Regardless of what level they were at in their English abilities, they felt frustrated this was the only obstacle in their way when applying to community college or searching for a better paying job. This was the case for those who had accomplished varying degrees of higher education, such as Judith, Isidora and Nina. My informants felt their English proficiency was holding them back from accessing jobs they were more suited for with their educational training. For Nina, learning English is vital, not just for a potential job but for her own personal achievement. Nina was one of the women who graduated from an ESL course. She was very excited to practice her English with me during the course of our interview. She also told me she still feels very shy when speaking English, but she does have the benefit of having a husband who speaks English as his first language and who does not speak any Spanish. Nina's employer offers ESL classes that she attends as well.

Nina speaks softly when she tells me she thinks English is a beautiful language despite its complications. In the future, she would like to become an interpreter within the healthcare system. She told me of a specific incident that led her to this decision. There was a situation in

the emergency room where a young Mexican woman arrived with a very sick baby. She did not speak any English so the nurses were having a problem trying to understand what had happened. Nina stepped in and translated for the woman and the baby was able to receive the proper care. Obviously Nina's ESL classes helped her with this situation, but she says they do not go far enough. When she graduated she felt she only knew basic English, and this only pertains to speaking English because reading and writing were not covered thoroughly.

Like many others, including Ximena who also graduated, Nina felt the ESL programs were helpful but did not allow for further advancement into more complex conversational skills, reading or writing. Ximena was disappointed when she could no longer keep moving up the levels, and even after graduating she felt her English still needed much improvement. The ESL classes in many ways are problematic. Between the inflexible hours that conflict with the women's jobs and the limited program levels that leave these women eager for more, the ESL classes need some sort of restructuring. The goal should be to ensure a better percentage of migrant women have access to a more comprehensive program.

The ESL classes that are provided to immigrant women when they first arrive are far from consistent. Many of these women were unaware such classes are provided for them for free. Others who did attend felt they had to compromise either their work schedule or learning English because to do both was overwhelming for them. Many of the women in my study feel they are only taught enough English to get by and to pursue more would end up costing money. My informants as well as other Latina migrant women face a conundrum; they are pressured to learn English but in reality do not have the means or time to take ESL classes on a regular basis. The reality is most are working two jobs with minimal personal time, some do not have a car to

travel to these classes without relying on someone or public transportation, and most have no means to practice their English at home.

### **5.5 English Fluency and Wage Work**

It comes as no surprise that U.S. culture has little tolerance for linguistic diversity. Assimilation policies have historically sent this message quite explicitly as well as conveyed the message that racial and cultural diversity are unwelcome. Most immigrant groups have experienced these attitudes over the past century, including our own indigenous population of American Indians with their historical mandated assimilation by multiple methods. One episode that stands out as a clear parallel is the forcing of American Indian children to attend reservation schools where they were forbidden to speak their native language. Language is a powerful aspect of human integrity as well as identity. For this to be taken away or shunned can cause discord within a person or group.

Latina migrant women are constantly negotiating their integrity and identity by attempting to learn the dominant language where they live and reside, the United States. Their dilemma of finding ways to learn English through ESL classes or other routes has caused significant amounts of stress for these women. This stress is heightened when they must look for employment. Many women have been turned away from different types of promising employment because their English is not up to the standard of the company. Although this seems legitimate to the women, they find it frustrating because no one gives them an opportunity to improve themselves or their current status. Even the most fluent of my group of women were working in dead end jobs that provided them little security. As I spoke with these women about their English abilities, many of them recounted to me that the jobs they hold or



previously held were a direct consequence of not being able to speak English.

Flora, who worked in two different factories, told me she was there because no one else would hire her. Her job did not require her to speak English because she worked with paper machinery all day long. Nonetheless, the other employees took full advantage of this fact and continually made sure she was blamed for accidents or missed important messages. Flora looked at me and shrugged as if to say “what more could she do?” She has two teenage children attending high school and there just is not enough time in the day to attend any type of ESL class to get a head start on learning English. Flora is complacent about her lack of English and accepted this was the type of job she would be able to find.

Olivia and her mother, Josefa, also ran into the same problems with employment. Since Olivia was young when she came to the U.S. after living in France for several years, she was able to learn English quickly. Olivia was a unique case because she already had a knack for picking up languages since she grew up speaking French and Spanish. Her mother, Josefa, however had a more complicated time learning English because it was hard enough for her to learn French. Josefa’s English proficiency is still improving while her daughter is fluent. This has affected Josefa’s ability to maintain stable jobs for her family, and Olivia felt compelled to work at a young age. The irony is that Olivia, being young and fluent in three languages, was working as a server for a hotel chain making minimum wage without benefits. I informed her she had a one up on every American adolescent because she was fluent in three major languages. She only laughed, not seeming to realize this was truly a useful tool in eventually planning her career. Olivia still works at the same hotel as her mother.

These types of stories were continuous throughout my interview process. Juana also

noted she had the job she had because she chose not to learn English when she came here from Nicaragua. Juana came here as a teenager but dropped out of high school because of a pregnancy. Since having her four children, she has not had the time or means to attend formal English classes in her area. Juana also spoke about being contained in her Latin community so she never really has a need to speak English outside of her job. Her only interactions speaking English is with her employers. She realizes this is her safety blanket to a degree; she can always retreat back into her Latin community. Juana would like to improve her English skills so she can eventually find a better job that would benefit her and her teenage children who spend most of their time by themselves because of her long hours.

One of the main issues with not being able to communicate effectively is that these migrant women cannot really negotiate with their employers. Many employers are aware that if they hire a person, in this case a woman with limited English skills, they have a certain amount of power over that individual. This becomes a vicious cycle of exploitation that allows employers to manipulate situations that might not happen with an employee who is a native English speaker. María gave me an example of this when she was working in the hotel industry as a server. She was a part-time employee and her English during this period was less than adequate. María told me her manager would yell at her and the other women and would blatantly give the male servers more hours than the female servers. This really irritated her so she tried to ask her manager on many occasions for more hours. This manager knew her English was poor so he would use intimidation to drown out her requests. She told me he would make fun of her English which would cause her to become very self-conscious.

Only a few of the Latina women spoke of having to face blatant discrimination such as

María's story. However, the fact remains many of the women did not know how to negotiate with their supervisors without feeling they might lose their job. Their English skills really play a vital role in how they navigate both their labor and social spaces. Women who are more confident speaking English are more confident in their job experiences and set goals for themselves.

This describes Nina's story and her goal to become a translator. Isidora has also had positive employment experiences. She is currently working as a caretaker and was previously a legal assistant responsible for translating documents, as well as an insurance and real estate agent. Isidora is also more active in her community and volunteers at a local organization that helps unemployed Latino families. Her advantage of speaking English more fluently has allowed her more flexibility job wise and allowed her to volunteer in her spare time. It is obvious English skills play a role in how these women identify themselves while living in the United States.

### **5.6 English as a Key to Success?**

These women are capable intelligent women who have sacrificed in order to lead better lives here in the U.S. Learning English has not been a walk in the park for the majority of these women; at times this task seems daunting for them, especially to hope they will become fluent in English one day. Just as their native language is an inscription of who they are, battling with this new language has challenged how they see themselves in relation to U.S. society. English is a constant reminder of what they have not accomplished, of how they are different; it is the last hurdle for them to overcome.

All of the women in my study reflected upon their English skills as one of the reasons

they were working in these specific service jobs. They accepted this with a calmness that saddened me immensely. A majority of my informants were seeking ways to improve their English but just did not know how to do so with everything else they were responsible for in their lives. Again, learning a language takes time. Isidora and Nina both felt energetic about learning English but realized they had many more Spanish-speaking friends than English ones; so practicing their English is relegated to their work. According to them, learning English in a classroom is vastly different from speaking English outside of that classroom; the only way to keep improving is to be surrounded by it, and this seems to be a key problem.

The fact remains learning English is critical for new immigrants since it dictates the quality of jobs they can apply for and provides access to protection if they find themselves in exploitive situations. Until there comes a time in dominant U.S. culture where the Spanish language is fully embraced by all of its citizens, English is the only recourse for recent Latin immigrants. The Latina migrant women find themselves between a rock and hard place when it comes to speaking English and finding stable employment. Many who speak limited conversational English still feel it deters potential employers, while the rest have little confidence in their English abilities. The key issue here is access to ESL programs and an environment where they can speak English without feeling intimidated or self-conscious. Most of my interlocutor's social spaces are centered on speaking their native Spanish so there is little room for practicing. Also, their children who are fluent in English find it hard to facilitate in their mother's English learning. Although their children speak fluent English by attending school and having friends who speak English, their mothers' English skills become stagnant since they do not have these types of social spaces in order to exercise their English.

Latina migrant women have to make crucial choices when it comes to labor or securing cultural capital, a.k.a. English, which would be more beneficial. The significance is they cannot seem to do both under these circumstances. For these women who value education over everything else, not being able to learn English on their own terms conflicts with their sense of self. They are forced to perform these service jobs because livelihood for themselves and their children comes first. Learning English is recognized among all of the women as a means to upward mobility, yet the reality is most of them do not have this simple luxury.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

What is missing in this research is a solution. Some solutions can be found in the cracks where migrant women who are working in service jobs are negotiating and re-negotiating their gender hierarchy within the home, work, and on a global transnational scale. The migrant women in my study are continually re-negotiating their labor by actively resisting being defined by it. Past studies suggest that many migrant women feel empowered just by working whereas if they were in their native countries they would be isolated to the home and completely dependent upon their husbands (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001, Chang 2000, Zavella 1987, Mahler 1999, Freeman 2001). Even though all of my informants held jobs before immigrating, they do feel a sense of accomplishment while working here in the U.S. Many of my informants have no choice but to work which also poses to be problematic; many of their situations are desperate. Generally, by bringing a paycheck home, these migrant women are contributing to their households in new ways, and they have the power to move out of the strict gender roles usually associated with them.

However, none of this solves the problem of the continual devaluation of feminized labor, specifically in service jobs such as housekeeping, janitorial/ custodial and domestic labor. While my informants and many other migrant women in similar situations perhaps move out of strict gender roles associated with their home country, many are stepping into more complex roles when they arrive on U.S. soil. These roles include being classified as an unskilled laborer, a provider for a family and a potential student, all while learning to speak English and striving for more social mobility for themselves and their families. My informants face an insidious problem that still has no tangible solutions. This social issue does not just begin and end with

the service industry that is fed fat on the exploitation of migrant women and other immigrants, but crosses paths with U.S. labor laws, immigration policies, and gender ideology.

My research was only able to shed light on a microcosm of migrant women working in the U.S. The women in my study presented me with a troubling representation of how migrant women are received and viewed in this country. One of my primary concerns stemming from this research would be the lack of recognition the U.S provides my informants pertaining to their educational degrees and history. Their cultural capital is hard earned, and they should be able to exercise their professional abilities. However, the cultural climate in the U.S. towards education for Latin American immigrants has been dismal at best and continues to be discriminatory towards Latino immigrants in current legislation. The all inclusiveness of higher education, which caters towards bona-fide citizens, forces undocumented children of immigrants to bear the biggest burden.

Immigrant access to higher education has been a controversial topic for the last few years and especially in Southern states such as Georgia and North Carolina (Gill 2010). Currently, Georgia has passed HB-59 which would prohibit all 35 public universities and colleges in Georgia from admitting undocumented immigrant students, regardless of their academic qualifications. This goes into effect in fall 2011 (ACLU). Previously, undocumented students would have to pay out-of-state tuition even though they might have lived in that state for the majority of their lives. The difference in price is overwhelming; in-state tuition can range anywhere from \$1,500 to \$3,700, but out-of-state students have to pay anywhere from \$10,000 to \$20,000. Now double or quadruple that amount for a two or four year education. For these undocumented students who have to pay out-of-state tuition, it also means they are

ineligible for any kind of public assistance such as Pell Grants or educational loans (Gill 2010).

Esperanza, who was willing to tell me about her own battle to enter higher education without formal documentation, is just one victim of this system. When speaking to her mother, she confessed to me that she did not have the foresight of this happening when she gave up on renewing her visa status. Her mother also confessed to me the only reason she did not apply for citizenship was because it was too confusing to wade through, and she did not have the assistance to make sense of all the red tape. For me this represented some major flaws within immigration laws. To make the journey of immigrating here only to be disheartened as to how to gain citizenship and having your children pay those consequences is a travesty that needs to be remedied. The women in my study recognized how vital education was in their lives and in shaping their sense of self and pride.

Educational qualifications are key to social mobility, both for children of undocumented immigrants who have settled long term here in the U.S., as well as migrant women such as my informants who had already accomplished this task but are denied the benefits regarding the fruits of their labor. Another key to social mobility taken from my research would be English proficiency, which my informants struggled with the most. Access to English or ESL classes, specifically in correlation to wage work, is problematic because my informants had to make significant choices when it came to pursuing ESL classes or working. For many of the women in my study to do both would be too time consuming.

ESL programs should, ideally, structure their classes around the needs of their clients and the many responsibilities these women already face as new immigrants. It is short sighted to force these women to make the choice to either work and provide for their families or



pursue necessary cultural capital to achieve long-term stability. Latina immigrant women to the U.S. should be provided with more options to ease their transition into a new country. As Isidora told me, “learning a new language takes time,” and time is not something that is afforded to many of these women. Time constraints highlight the lives of these Latina migrant women. Generally speaking, these women come to this country with the intent to learn English because they are fully aware this would benefit them and their families. However, after experiencing so many obstacles while trying to learn English, many of these women pull back and start to rely more on their Spanish speaking communities as a means of support.

When seeking solutions, ESL accessibility should be front and center because English fluency in the U.S determines the type of employment many immigrants can secure. This would entail providing more information about the pre-existing ESL class locations to new immigrants. For my informants, many were frustrated at not being able to speak English fluently, even after being here for a number of years. Despite their achievements in education and professional careers in their home country, they feel a disconnect with English. Many of the women in my study would complain of feeling inadequate or being treated as intellectually inferior, as if their command of English had a direct correlation to their intelligence. This had negative effects on their own integrity because this conflicted with their self-esteem being defined by their educational experiences.

Solutions to ESL access are not just about finding more locations, but more importantly about the time constraints that regulate migrant women’s lives, such as my informants. These classes are definitely available, but the hours of operation are not conducive to my informants. The biggest challenge posed to ESL accessibility is more involved with migrant women’s lives in

general. My informants had to choose many times between pursuing ESL classes and equivalents or finding/working another job, or having enough family time. In order to improve migrant women's access to ESL programs, and thus help alleviate some of their pressure, there must be improvements across the board for migrant women and their labor opportunities. In order for them to escape this problem, they also would have to escape the confines of their labor which pits them in this race against time.

With some effort and future research, many of these problems can be solved through more equitable immigration policies and legislation. Future research should be solution centered and praxis oriented. Having this focus will ensure that the applied aspect of anthropological research provides more sustainable results for Latina migrant women and their current predicaments and for the future of feminized labor. Due to the time constraints of this study and outcomes of this research, I was not able to pursue a greater analysis of how my informants tie into the greater issue of feminized labor. This would continue to be the focus in future research.

Future research would also allow me to flesh out the class aspect pertaining to Latina migrant women, specifically with the participants in this study, and eventually extending to a larger informant base. For several reasons I was not able to really delve into how my informants negotiate their class status, and how it intersects with ethnicity and gender. Language is also an important indicator of class, yet since I was not a fluent Spanish speaker I felt I was ill equipped to gain a sense of their class during our conversations due to the language barrier. My informants were still grappling with becoming fluent in English and as such, speaking English to me would not reflect an accurate account of how they 'speak' their class. I

was, however, able to skim the surface of class just by analyzing my informants' educational achievements which are significant indicators of achieved class status. What is certain is the Latina migrant women in my study have experienced downward mobility since coming to the U.S. Class status can also be tied into community and collective identity which was briefly mentioned in this research.

Again, future research would ideally look at Latina migrant women and how they interact within their communities such as the idea of Spanish communities reinforcing ethnic identity and solidarity. In my own research I found Spanish-speaking communities providing both lifelines for jobs and other resources but at the same time deterring assimilation into U.S. culture and English fluency. In addition, future research would take further steps into analyzing migrant labor domestic and abroad, encompass a larger informant base including those who do not necessarily speak English, as well as engaging more directly in critique of immigration policy here in the United States.

The paths to citizenship should not be littered with red tape, and immigrants with college degrees or college experiences should be provided with more means to ascend out of the service sector and into something more expressive of their talents. However, these basic solutions are still idealistic at best, and until we as nation make the decision to go through with comprehensive immigration reform and view Latin American immigrants, specifically, with more benign eyes, solutions will be just out of reach. Solutions to the devaluation of feminized labor, such as my informants perform on a daily basis, will take further research in order to find ways to integrate more sustainable forms of labor in the world market. Feminized labor represents a complex web of factors such as race, class, and gender that has allowed these

specific service sectors to become popularized and consequently, exploited.

Capitalistic ideology combined with the exploitation of migrant workers sets up the women in my study to become stuck between a rock and hard place. This whole industry of feminized labor is built upon different components (economic, social, cultural) that allow migrant women to be caught in a sticky web that preys on their weakest links. For instance, these industries, such as janitorial work, cater to migrant women because they are viewed as a controllable, docile workforce who will not ask a lot of questions. This assumption reflects most service industries that employ primarily migrant women in wage work positions. Added to this, service industries, such as janitorial, custodial and domestic are not unionized and are mostly contract only, which provides little long-term stability or adequate benefits. My research has confirmed this tactic has proven to be useful here within the U.S service industry.

My informants' lack of English comprehension provides their employers with an unequal power relationship over them and limits the types of employment they can secure. If the women in my study feel they cannot stand up to management or ask for better wages or benefits, then they are the ones who suffer, usually in silence. Also, my informants were placed at a disadvantage as soon as they entered the country when the U.S. government refused to recognize their educational achievements. In essence, this allows the U.S. to classify migrant women, even with higher education, as unskilled workers, further emphasizing their second-class status and thus devaluing them further. All of this, coupled with their lack of English proficiency and access to it, provides the service sector with plenty of potential employees for harvesting. Feminized labor proves to be a vicious cycle.

There is also the pivotal problem of the constant need for cheap labor. Cheap labor will

always be pursued in the global market, especially during this economic climate where part-time work and contract labor is preferred. It would seem that for feminized labor to change, it would take another economic restructuring as well as a global consciousness that would essentially promote better solutions towards Third World debt and more progressive solutions towards global labor rights. Solutions should focus on accountability; and this must be with corporations, nations and everyone in between.

Again, we are still in the ideal bracket of solutions. As an ethnographer I realize my informants are part of a vast, complex web that binds economics with race and gender all to provide maximum services for a minimal price. I also realize that in order to achieve the greatest results with this social issue, we must start small. This can involve basic solutions in immigration or even better access to ESL classes for new immigrants. The women in my study realized that in order to achieve more they must take baby steps, not strides, towards their ultimate goal.

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