

Smells like money: Mexican employee endurance in a southwest Kansas meatpacking plant

by

Zaira Nohely Ruiz Ruiz

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Major Professor
Dr. Alisa Garni

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Abstract

It is no secret to say working in a meatpacking plant can be very difficult. In the words of one employee, “it is not an animal slaughterhouse, but a human one”. National Beef Packing (NBP) opened a branch in Liberal, Kansas in the 1980s. Since then, the plant has recruited immigrant labor from all over the world. Presently in 2019, Mexican immigrants and their U.S. born children and grandchildren—who primarily identify as Mexican—make up the majority of employees at NBP. Many U.S. born self-identifying Mexican employees have parents and grandparents who work, or have worked, at the plant. All three generations claim conditions are terrible and advise people not to work there. Yet, they persist. How do Mexican employees endure work in the plant over time, across generations, and while employees from other parts of the world come and go? To answer my question, I conducted in-depth interviews with 23 of first-through third-generation Mexican immigrant employees. I analyzed patterns and variations in their strategies for enduring difficult working conditions, including inter-ethnic competition or solidarity, over time. I found that Liberal’s status as a rural, ethnic enclave provides Mexican employees with a sense of certainty that makes enduring the plant conditions possible, and sometimes desirable. Liberal serves as an ethnic enclave that provides social and economic networks and motivate ethnic retention, sometimes protecting employees from insecurity and discrimination, and sometimes limiting their willingness to seek opportunities beyond Liberal and the plant. I claim endurance strategies are aimed at sustaining membership in this Mexican ethnic enclave, in order to increase the likelihood of higher social mobility for oneself and family. In the process, people—sometimes multiple generations of local families, must tolerate some of the most intolerable working conditions in the country.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

It is no secret to say working in a meatpacking plant can be very difficult. In the words of one employee, “it is not an animal slaughterhouse, but a human one.” National Beef Packing (NBP) opened a branch in Liberal, Kansas in the 1980s. Since then, the plant has recruited immigrant labor from all over the world. Presently in 2019, Mexican immigrants and their U.S. born children and grandchildren — who primarily identify as Mexican — make up the majority of employees at NBP. Many U.S. born self-identifying Mexican employees have parents and grandparents who work, or have worked, at the plant. All three generations claim conditions are terrible and advise people not to work there. Yet, they persist. How do Mexican employees endure work in the plant over time, across generations, and while employees from other parts of the world come and go?

To answer my question, I conducted in-depth interviews with 23 first- through third-generation Mexican immigrant employees. I analyzed patterns and variations in their strategies for enduring difficult working conditions, including inter-ethnic competition or solidarity, over time. I found that Liberal’s status as a rural, ethnic enclave provides Mexican employees with a sense of certainty that makes enduring the plant conditions possible, and sometimes desirable. Mexican immigrant employees’ resulting job tenure has created a sense of job security, reducing their sense of competition with immigrant employees from other parts of the world. Interestingly, this pattern holds across immigration statuses. Mexican employees with and without authorization feel they have job security, even in the face of on-going immigration of people from Somalia, Guatemala, Cuba, and more. Their sense of security is so great that many of them gloat that no one can tolerate the increasingly dangerous, rushed, and downright violent

conditions as well as they do, even as they simultaneously resent how underappreciated and mistreated they are. In the eyes of many Mexican employees, new recruits never last long in the plant, while Mexicans persevere.

My interviews yielded unusually rich descriptions of Mexican employees' experiences in and around the plants, including employees' view of job functions and hierarchical statuses (essentially, "who gets which jobs"), as well as what impact these experiences have on employees and their relationships with co-workers. I analyze employees' stories about how English and Spanish bear on mobility within the plant and compare how experiences diverge primarily across two generations within the plant: those born before 1990 and those born after 1991. The relevant differences in these two generations is language and tenure. I find that each generation faces different challenges and opportunities, and not always in the ways that the literature predicts. I also find that people's connections to Liberal are significant in the plant. Liberal serves as an ethnic enclave that provides social and economic networks that motivate ethnic retention, sometimes protecting employees from insecurity and discrimination, and sometimes limiting their willingness to seek opportunities beyond Liberal and the plant.

Both Liberal and NBP can provide significance to Mexican employees. NBP provides the financing that allows people to afford luxury items in addition to making a living, which produces the feeling of being significant to an extent that people feel is impossible elsewhere in the United States. The town provides relative comfort, if not excitement, outside the plant. Maybe it is the feeling of being among "your own people," as some employees mentioned, or the overt presence of Mexican culture in town eateries, events, and businesses. On the other hand, I also perceived both pre and post 90s generations to have normalized violence in the process of trying to tolerate it and build their lives in Liberal. Liberal encourages ethnic solidarity that

provides social mobility, with employment at NBP proving to be the most viable (but not the exclusive) occupational option. I claim endurance strategies are aimed at sustaining membership in this Mexican ethnic enclave, in order to increase the likelihood of higher social mobility for oneself and family. In the process, people — sometimes multiple generations of local families — must tolerate some of the most intolerable working conditions in the country.

In the section that follows, I explore literatures that provide context and insight on my research question. After presenting my methods for collecting and analyzing data, I present my analysis and discuss how my work contributes to the literature. I conclude with a discussion of the strengths and limitations of my work in Liberal, and suggest additional questions that emerge from it and deserve more attention in future work.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

The construction of major U.S. railroads induced Mexican immigration to southwest Kansas — specifically Garden City and Dodge City — between the latter half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century (Aguilar 2008). Southwest Kansas then experienced depopulation of white residents before the meat packing industry generated another rise of Mexican immigration in Garden City, Dodge City, and Liberal around the 1980s and 1990s. More than 95 percent of the state’s population was white up until the 1960s. However, the white population declined throughout the 1990s to 86 percent by 2000, while the foreign-born population of Kansas increased, from 1 percent in 1970 to 5 percent in 2000 (Kulcsár 2007). The Mexican immigrant population has continued growing to present day (Stull and Ng 2016). As of 2019, Liberal has a population of about 20,709 people with Hispanics making up 60 percent, whites 30.6 percent, Blacks 4.51 percent and Asians 3.26 percent. The median household income is \$46,910, however, there is a 20.6 percent poverty rate—compared to 11.9 percent in Kansas and 12.3 percent at the national level (Data USA, 2019).

Meat packing plants require massive amounts of people who are forced to sell their labor power cheaply, and the potential for jobs has incited immigration from Latin America with Mexicans making up the majority (Zong and Batalova 2016; Sanderson and Painter 2011; Stull and Ng 2016; Broadway 2007, 1994). Since then, the Hispanic communities have settled and become an integral part of the area, to the point of creating minority-majority towns. Hispanics make up 60 percent of the total population in Liberal, KS (up from 43.3 percent Hispanic in 2000) with 50.9 percent exclusively Mexican (US Census Bureau 2010). Since the initial wave of Mexican immigrants from the 1980s and 1990s, the first generation has produced second and third generations.

Telles and Ortiz (2008) followed the intergenerational experience of Mexican-origin adults in California in 1965 and their children as adults in 2000. They found that assimilation for Mexican Americans has not been the same as for immigrants of European descent: boundaries for “third- and fourth-generation Mexican Americans...are much more than merely symbolic, as they are for later generation European Americans” (Telles and Ortiz 2008). They argue that Mexican Americans experience slow acculturation and a persistently low social status even in more extended generations. What appears to be the defining factor for this “slow acculturation” is language. Why Telles and Ortiz (2008) define this as slow acculturation, and how do they think it affects upward social mobility in the United States? By the fourth generation, 94 percent of Mexican Americans in the study would speak mostly or only English to their children. Despite this, “many live in majority Hispanic neighborhoods, most marry other Hispanics, most frequently think of themselves as Mexican, and most agree that the United States should allow Mexicans to immigrate to the United States if they want to” (Telles and Ortiz 2008). These processes “replenish” Mexican ethnicity, keeping it vibrant but also creating tensions for Mexican Americans (Jimenez 2009). Jimenez (2009: 139-142) argues that on the one hand, bilingualism and multiculturalism convey greater job and earnings prospects, while on the other hand they may make people vulnerable to discrimination by nativists. This study relates strongly to my project given the trend of persisting ethnic identities in southwest Kansas and the role it plays in multigenerational employment in the same difficult working conditions, despite U.S. born generations having opportunities denied to their migrant predecessors. As other scholars have argued (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Jimenez 2009), I challenge the implication that assimilation is gradual, inevitable, and zero-sum for all immigrant generations.

In my research, I wanted to know more about the relationship between social mobility (including employees' endurance of violent conditions) and language within the plant. In *Immigrant America: A Portrait*, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) find that the majority of first-generation childhood arrivals from Mexico speak English well and bilingualism is most common in second-generation children. They agree with Telles and Ortiz (2008) that English is the predominant language by the third generation; however, they add that "what third-generation bilingualism exists is found especially in border communities" due to proximity to Mexico. Portes and Rumbaut (2014) also assert that third generation bilingualism is more common in areas of "high ethnic densities, such as that found among Dominicans in New York and Cubans in Miami" and that "away from the border, Mexican-American children of the third generation are unlikely to be bilingual" (Portes and Rumbaut 2014). Jimenez (2009) reminds us that bilingualism is an asset that may be highly sought after and rewarded by employers, just as it may serve as a source of discrimination. I examine how language trends compare in Liberal, which has a high Hispanic ethnic density (as in more than half of the population being Hispanic) comparable to that of an ethnic enclave. Albeit in a nonmetropolitan location far from the border, I found many ways in which English fluency (or lack thereof) and the persistence of Spanish affects Mexican immigrant employee's job options and promotions in the meatpacking plant. I thus build on Jimenez's work to further specify the relationship between replenished ethnicity and social mobility.

In *Any Way You Cut It: Meat Processing and Small-Town America*, Stull et al. (2016) investigated the causes behind high personnel turnover rates in southwestern Kansas in the 1990s, but not the strategies used by immigrant employees to *stay* in the plant, despite high rates of local poverty and increasing interethnic competition. In her book, *On the Line: Immigration,*

Race, and Exploitation in the New South, Vanesa Ribas gained access to meatpacking plants in the southern United States, and her ethnographic work sheds light on ethnic succession (see also Schwartzman 2013 on poultry plants in the south) (Ribas 2016). Ribas's language and research skills enabled her to do ethnographic work in the plants, but she was new to the plants she studied and did not have rapport and access to employees previous to her employment or outside of the plant context. However, her study focuses more on race relations and not on the reasons why Latino/a employees choose to stay. I find my research can contribute by elaborating the reasons for enduring plant conditions and the strategies that enable them to do so.

By contrast, I have lived and worked in Liberal for 23 years and have frequently interacted with plant employees most of my life. I have a lifelong network of people and resources that allowed me to gain unique insight into the town and residents. I am uniquely situated because of my relationship with the subjects for more than 20 years. In addition, social media tools (Snapchat, Facebook, and Twitter) have allowed me to keep updated on trends and experiences of people in Liberal and residents who have left. This grants me access to unfiltered conversations and discussions on people working in the plant, the experience of living in Liberal, and the experience of living out of Liberal, as well as to see who leaves and comes back, and why. I am privy to the posts warning fellow residents of ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) patrols in town, just as much as the posts of current and former residents celebrating Pancake Day (a Liberal exclusive holiday) regardless of where in the world they may be. However, the fact that I have been away at college for the past 6 years, along with my lack of employment at the plant, offers me the advantage of just enough distance from the subjects and academic credibility. My in-depth and personal knowledge of the plant's influence on Liberal (and of Liberal itself) informed much of the basis for this study; there is a conundrum that

stretches beyond the need for employment as the rationale behind the Mexican employees' persistence in working in dangerous meatpacking jobs. My work may be uniquely situated to help tie some of this research together.

Many of the conditions that employees in the meatpacking plants have to endure are violent. They are violent in several respects, and often chronically so. This became very apparent in my interviews across generations and compelled me to turn to literature on how structural violence becomes normalized and routinized, such that people must develop strategies to constantly cope with it. In some instances, people almost forget they are coping with violence; employees seemed to have normalized abuse as simply being part of the job, or just the way things are. According to Menjivar (2011:39), this type of violence is legitimized through the ideology "that domination, dependency, and inequality are not only tolerated but accepted." Harsh working conditions in meatpacking plants promote the creation of a "culture of terror," normalizing violence from the plant and provoking employees to direct their "brutality against themselves rather than against the structures that oppress them" (Menjivar 2011: 39). In order to cope against hostile labor environments and natives, Zhou (1992: 150) claims ethnic enclaves "[shield] ethnic workers, particularly immigrants, from their interethnic competition and from discrimination on account of their ethnic background." I explore how these factors intersect in Mexican plant employees' work and community experiences.

Chapter 3 - Methods

I chose oral work history interviews as the method for collecting my data because, as Anderson and Jack (1991: 116) explain, “the interviewer needs to shift from 'information gathering to interaction', moving beyond facts to subjective feelings, by listening more carefully not only to what is said but what is meant.” Since I am unable to enter the plants to pair my own observations with interview data, I used the methods of oral history interviewing to learn more deeply about the relationships, conditions, and actions that inform Mexican immigrant strategies for hanging on and moving up in (and beyond) Liberal.

I also applied an interpretative analysis for collecting and analyzing interviews (Pugh 2013). Pugh (2013) shows that through interpretative analysis, the following categories of information can be found in interviews: the honorable, the schematic, the visceral and the meta-feelings. Collectively, these provide access to “an emotional landscape that brings a broader, social dimension to individual motivation” (Pugh 2013: 42). This enables researchers to overcome the “disjuncture between the cultural ideas or beliefs that people can actually talk about... and what people actually do” (Pugh 2013: 43). By paying close attention both to what people say and how they say it, I was able to learn deeply about the frames that people use to make sense of their actions and interactions, as well as some of the tensions and conflicts that arise in the process. “Contradictions and paradoxes are powerful tools for highlighting the emotionally charged – what is emotionally difficult to claim, where anxiety lies, and what sort of cultural problems people face for which they need to reach for such contradictory explanations” (Pugh 2013: 48).

Pugh’s (2013) work was particularly significant in my analysis because her framework allowed me to see and take apart the “institutionalized cultural scaffolding” in interviewees’

responses that seemed to “silence, disallow, or shun” what employees felt or thought (65). Examples included employees thinking they “*can't* complain” about their jobs and or treatment by supervisors and other employees, and the guilt younger employees expressed as they admitted to shaming their own employment at NBP. There is stigma against the younger generations working at the plant; as one employee commented, “we said we wouldn't end up at the plant because we were *better than that*.”

As I collected and analyzed data, I was cognizant of the role my positionality plays on what I was able to learn (and what I missed) (McCorkel and Myers 2003; Timmermans and Tavory 2012; Emerson et al. 2001). I am aware that despite claiming to identify with the employees in the community, I have a unique positionality that may make me different from some participants. There is privilege inherent in the fact I am a graduate student with prospects of upward mobility. I am U.S.-born, affording me citizenship rights that some of my interviewees may be denied. I grew up with considerable financial resources *relative* to the rest of the community and have never worked at the plant myself. However, I can relate to participants through shared race, culture, language, membership in an immigrant family, and in some cases, lifelong shared community experience. I was aware of how my setting influenced which aspects of my identity were “in play” during interviews and I took note of how informants reacted to me and my questions, and I asked what questions they think I should be asking to ensure that I got at what was most important to them. Weiss (1994) argues that by getting detailed, concrete stories in interviews, paying careful attention to markers, asking about internal states, creating a non-exploitative partnership with participants, and using the kind of interpretive analysis that Pugh (2013) advocates, researchers can do a better job of overcoming the limitations imposed by positionality. I adhered to these methods as closely as I could throughout

my project.

I am cognizant that my positionality as an outsider to the plant but insider to the community affects what I observe and what I miss. For one, I believe my positionality places me in favor to conduct this research. By being part of the community, I establish rapport and 20 plus years of familiarity and observation within Liberal. However, I do understand that also could make it harder for me to see nuanced patterns because I myself have been acclimated to the environment throughout my life. My positionality as an outsider to the plant allows me more objectivity as I write about employees and experiences within. Having never even been inside the plant, I must rely on interviewee descriptions of what is within without incorporating my personal biases. I asked participants for as much detail as possible, so they could show me the plant through their eyes and experiences in a way I, and my readers, could visualize.

In my interviews, I asked participants to start at the beginning and walk me carefully through every step, in order to construct a detailed narrative of their experiences. Detailed interviews enabled me to detect subtle changes, variations, and feelings about things that were most important to people. The interviews informed me about employees' experiences of conditions and changes in the plant and the broader community, and their strategies for responding to them over time.

I conducted in-depth interviews with Mexican and Mexican American Liberal residents who have worked at the plant at least six months in two years, or two summers. This specific criterion is owed to the fact that high school and college students can work summers at the plant. Both citizens and undocumented students work at the plant to make money for school in the fall, especially when federal financial aid is not available to them. Being a student was not a requirement for summer help, however I wanted to have as diverse a collection of experiences as

possible from all shifts, tenures, and employment statuses (full-time, continuous and intermittent). The reason I included documented and undocumented statuses is because I wanted to see if people who had legal status — and relatively more opportunities to work elsewhere — were just as likely to endure work at the plant. Having no status implies employment opportunities are limited, which might lead to enduring harsh conditions due to lack of viable alternatives. This also allows younger participants who might have recently started working to be eligible for interviews. However, I also targeted residents who have lived and worked in Liberal during the early 1980s. Again, I developed my criteria to most fully cover a wide span of generational, temporal, and occupational experiences; from when the plant opened to present day, older generational experiences as well as contemporary ones, women and men, I draw from positions across the plant in order to produce a rich, detailed and expansive body of work.

All participants were at least 18 years of age, given that is the minimum age requirement to work at the NBP. I recruited participants by word of mouth and referrals. Given the nature of rapport and privacy required to conduct these interviews, I thought it best to recruit interviewees via word of mouth through sources with whom I already had rapport to encourage participation and build trust. I conducted and recorded (using an audio recorder) all of the interviews either in my home office or the employee's home. This provided a quiet and private environment for both interviewees and myself to talk freely without being overheard or disturbed. I believe audio recording was the best choice for recording this data because I conducted interviews averaging an hour. Audio recording allowed me to be more present during the interview, without the distraction of having to virtually write an extensive transcript simultaneously. I also wanted to make sure I accurately quoted participants and had the ability to play back interviews during analysis; this offered me the ability to pick up on missed details and subtle tone changes —

nervous laughter, jokes, and sarcasm — that reveal visceral emotions and access a more revealing subterranean level of consciousness (Pugh 2013). I did take handwritten notes to highlight key points, themes, and quotes. I followed a general interview guide but asked questions spontaneously as they arose, especially if I sensed the interviewee was hesitant about elaborating, enabling me to pick up on body language and “listen in stereo” to what informants tell me (Anderson and Jack 1991; Pugh 2013). I predicted that some interviewees would be more hesitant and refrain from “over-sharing,” given the nature of the topic (personal histories, ethnic relations, race, NBP’s strict efforts at privacy) so it was vital that I be aware of participants’ attempts to filter responses according to “culture and external pressures” willing them to “think or feel a certain way” (Pugh 2013). I also made an effort to establish my role as researcher to participants—despite any previous familiarity with participants—in order to assure participants that their interviews are confidential.

I interviewed participants in either Spanish or English, depending on the participant’s preferred language. The interviews were conducted during summer 2018, late May through August, and December 2018. I stayed in Liberal during the aforementioned time span to allow the opportunity for as many interviews as possible.

I believe my research was facilitated by the fact that I knew most of the interviewees, or a member of their family, personally and have established rapport in Liberal (my hometown). My first language is Spanish and I could therefore communicate with non-English speaking employees. I have done previous research for the Developing Scholars Program in Liberal, Kansas. During the academic year of 2015-2016, I conducted a project titled, “El Immigrante” in which I explored the socioeconomic conditions among Mexican immigrants and emphasize the factors that have contributed to the rise of immigrant entrepreneurship despite the political and

economic systems being against their favor. I did so via interviews and photographs. All 20 of the participants were eager to help and offer as much insight as they could. Most mentioned how they were honored to be a part of the project and expressed the gratitude to have their stories told. There was not a single participant who communicated feeling at risk or endangered at having their real identities and photographs displayed—even after I explained who was to see it and where it was to be displayed (which was at a Developing Scholars Program symposium). Many also indicated how necessary it was to have their stories survive, lest their struggle and perseverance be forgotten by the following generation. One of my projects, “Exploring the Conditions That Have Led to a Rise in Mexican Immigration and Entrepreneurship in Liberal, KS,” was published by the Chapman Center for Rural Studies at Kansas State University, under Kansas History and Life. This is evidence of my familiarity with rural Kansas communities and their Hispanic populations.

I conducted 23 interviews in total with 11 women and 12 men. In my original proposal, I had aimed to conduct 10 interviews with women and men from each generation (1.0, 1.5, 2.0). However, I found the need to redirect my focus due to the fact it was difficult and inefficient to divide and find people who fit this model. Therefore, I split it into two generations, and of the 23 interviews I conducted 8 were the pre 90s generation (which I labeled the “earlier generation,” whose birth years ranged between 1956 and 1978) and 15 were post 90s (“recent generation,” (birth years between 1991 and 1999)). I had three reasons for shifting by interviewee selection: access, availability, and depth. Being born in the 90s myself, I had better rapport with and access to the recent generation. Being connected on social media helped in contacting, determining interest, and setting up interviews. In contrast, I had much more trouble accessing the earlier generation. Despite recruiting participants through word-of-mouth and referrals, I did not always

have the ability to contact them myself. I lacked rapport with some of the older generation. The most efficient way to recruit participants from the earlier generation was through their children. Also, the earlier generation was much more hesitant about being interviewed with regards to the plant. One participant explicitly asked me if I could be interviewing with the pretext of a school project but really be collecting information for the plant. Although she did participate (at the reassurance of her daughter), she was selective about what she said and very reserved. Many people in the earlier generation did not understand the concept of a qualitative thesis and why I would need *their* opinions. The hesitancy was not always out of fear of plant backlash, however, some seemed tentative about the formality of the interview (having to be interviewed and recorded by a stranger for example). And some simply worked long hours and would sleep very early, with little extra time.

My participants represented a wide range of positions and duties at the plant: people on the floor, management support, and management (see Table 1 below). I sampled people from all throughout the plant from packaging, knives, kill floor, maintenance, load out, laboratory, and security in order to get as diverse experience set as possible and see if experiences were significantly different across work areas. Current employment was preferred but not required as a precaution against excluding those who worked in the 1990s but are of retirement age, or the later generation who has seasonal employment, because I wanted to know how *multigenerational* Mexican immigrants endure difficult working conditions in meatpacking plants *over time*. I interviewed people with long-term experiences and compared the experiences of those who worked shorter term at different points in the plant's (and town's) history. I therefore interviewed sixteen people with short tenures (between 0.5-7 years) and seven with long tenures (at least 21 years). Within each of these two groups I looked for variation in experience based on position

within the plant, gender, languages spoken, age, mobility, and legal status. I intentionally looked for “negative cases” to give distinctive shape to my perspective of the people I am studying (Katz 2015). By negative cases I refer to identifying the exceptions, or occasions where interviewees did not fit the trends or were significant outliers based on mainstream experiences of the group majority.

ID	Gender	Generation	Birth Year	Birth Place	Years in Liberal	Total Tenure in Years/ SUM	Continuous or Intermittent	Position	Upward job mobility	Languages used at Work
Silvino	M	Pre-90s	1956	GJTO MEX	28	28	Continuous	FT Union Rep, trainer, Knives	Yes	SPAN
Rogelio	M	Pre-90s	1958	CHIH MEX	34	34	Intermittent	FT Air Knife, Saw, Trainer	No	SPAN
Ignacia	F	Pre-90s	1960	DGO MEX	24	23	Continuous	FT Knives, Packing	No	SPAN
Gerardo	M	Pre-90s	1963	DGO MEX	24	24	Continuous	Steward: Cleaning	No	SPAN
Martha	F	Pre-90s	1967	CHIH MEX	30	30	Intermittent	FT knives, Packaging, Running Chain, Boxing	No	SPAN
Paloma	F	Pre-90s	1972	GDL, MEX	22	7	Continuous	FT Packaging, Kill Floor	No	SPAN
Rodrigo	M	Pre-90s	1975	CHIH MEX	21	21	Intermittent	FT Hamburger	No	SPAN
Juana	F	Pre-90s	1978	CHIH MEX	21	21	Continuous	FT Knives, QA	Yes	SPAN
Josue	M	Post-90s	1991	LBL USA	28	4	Intermittent	FT Fork Lift Driver, Packaging, Kill Floor	No	SPAN/ENGL
Tatiana	F	Post-90s	1992	LBL USA	27	1.5/ 5 SUM	Intermittent	SH Packaging, various	No	SPAN/ENGL
Fabian	M	Post-90s	1993	LBL USA	25	0.5	Continuous	SH Kill Floor, Various	No	SPAN/ENGL
Azul	M	Post-90s	1993	LBL USA	25	4.25/ 1SUM	Intermittent	FT/PT: Security, Kill Floor	Yes	SPAN/ENGL
Roberto	M	Post-90s	1993	LBL USA	25	3	Continuous	SH/FT/PT: Box room, Load Out	Yes	SPAN/ENGL
Sergio	M	Post-90s	1993	CHIH MEX	25	3	Continuous	FT Load Out	No	SPAN/ENGL
Mateo	M	Post-90s	1993	LBL USA	25	7/1-2 SUM	Intermittent	SH /FT Packaging/QA, Cell Cooler Supervisor	Yes	SPAN/ENGL
Ana	F	Post-90s	1994	LBL USA	24	0.5/2 SUM	Intermittent	SH Packaging	No	SPAN/ENGL
Liliana	F	Post-90s	1994	CHIH MEX	24	0.5/ 2 SUM	Intermittent	SH Packaging/Fabrication	No	SPAN/ENGL
Osvaldo	M	Post-90s	1994	LBL USA	24	2	Continuous	FT QA (Supervisor)	Yes	SPAN/ENGL
Carmelita	F	Post-90s	1995	CHIH USA	23	1/ 1 SUM	Intermittent	SH/FT: Lab	Yes	SPAN/ENGL
Nicolas	M	Post-90s	1995	LBL USA	23	2-3/ 2 SUM	Intermittent	SH/FT: Mgmt. Personnel, Packaging	Yes	SPAN/ENGL
Rosalia	F	Post-90s	1998	CHIH MEX	21	2/ 1 SUM	Intermittent	FT/SH: CO2 Gun, Fabrication	No	SPAN/ENGL
Alejandra	F	Post-90s	1999	ALBQ USA	20	0.5/ 2 SUM	Intermittent	FT Knives	No	SPAN/ENGL
Diana	F	Post-90s	1999	CHIH MEX	20	0.5/ 2 SUM	Intermittent	SH Kill Floor, Various	No	SPAN/ENGL
	Key:					SUM=Summer help		FT=Full-time PT=Part-time SH=Summer Help Most recent position displayed first Past positions displayed after		

Figure 3.1 Overview of Participants.

The most significant common factor amongst the post-90s generation was the richness in detail, unshackled emotion, and relative transparency, especially once the recorder was turned off. While I will never quote anything that was not “on the record,” they gave me an even richer picture of what they thought and felt by having released the pressure of being recorded. After the recorder was off, I would usually chat informally with interviewees and they would act significantly more laid back and talk to me about their personal lives outside the plant. Hence, when interviewees tended to hold back information, it was not necessarily their hesitance

towards me, but of the formality of the interview structure. I realized this right away when participants spoke much more formally and chose their words carefully as soon as I let them know I was recording. Some would even ask me to stop the record to ask, “can I cuss in this?” or “sorry, can I say things like that?” lest the academic listening on the other end of the recording be offended. Some participants would prefer to make facial gestures or mouth inaudible words when referencing topics they deemed might be inappropriate for academia, like employees having sex inside the plant with someone other than their spouse. Thankfully, I acknowledged this issue early on in the process of conducting interviews and made sure to navigate around it. I did so by speaking informally myself and assuring participants it was okay to talk to me as if it was just a regular conversation.

I also was able to fill in some of the above-mentioned generational gaps through the recent generation’s stories of interactions with earlier generations, though this admittedly privileges the post-90s generation’s views. Those of the pre-90s generation who I did go on and interview were the participants most eager and willing to participate: therefore, able to provide rich information. On one occasion, I interviewed a couple with extensive experience and knowledge who was very eager to participate. Despite not having talked to them for the past 9 years, they were excited to help and talked frankly and extensively about their experiences, aspirations, and disillusion: so much they pulled out old photographs, ate, even started singing and forgot I was recording. What is more, they had work in 7 hours the next day but were unperturbed.

Most participants preferred to be interviewed in my office; some said it was best in order for them to leave directly to work afterwards. One woman came in with half her gear on—thick boots and pants, sweaters, and hair pulled back—and her one-year-old daughter on her hip. She only had 45 minutes because she had to drop the baby off at the babysitter’s house and get to

work earlier than usual. Overwhelmingly, people were willing and eager to help. Many in both generational groups expressed, “I don't care if you use my real name,” with one participant even saying, “Hell, I want them to know it was me!” I let that particular participant know that although I appreciated the enthusiasm, I could not reveal any real names for confidentiality reasons. That, coupled with the frequency of participants commenting on the need for “something to be done,” led to me to understand why many were so vocal about their experiences of working in the plant.

In asking how multigenerational Mexican immigrants endure difficult working conditions and navigate inter-ethnic conflict, I learned that not a single interviewee directly expressed feeling their job was threatened by new immigrant workers. On the contrary, they expressed the inability of other ethnic groups to compete with Mexicans’ “superior” work ethic and “predominance” in the plant. Despite participants saying they had worked with very diverse coworkers—whites, Blacks, Somalis, Chinese, Vietnamese, Cubans, Guatemalans—when asked what percent of the plant workforce was Mexican, the responses ranged from 90-95 percent. At first I was tempted to change my research question, and then I realized that although participants may not have felt that “rival ethnic groups” challenged their relatively elevated positions within the plant, ethnicity was still at work in many of their interactions and relationships with fellow employees across the plant. Thus, ethnicity operated differently than I expected at the outset of my project, and I learned about this through the question I posed.

Although whites had the highest positions at a corporate level, Mexican employees actually working on the floor and in the plant did not express concern about the unequal ethnic distribution of the corporate positions; they did not elaborate or spend much time talking about whites occupying most of the jobs in corporate offices. In fact, some mentioned Mexican

representation was improving in the higher echelon. As a current supervisor said; “Caucasians have more top-level jobs but that’s slowly changing... the current VP is Mexican, he’s from California.” This comment strikes me as interesting. No one elaborated on whether he was born in Mexico and migrated to California, identified as Mexican but was born in California, identified as Mexican and was born in California, or was treated as American but identified as Mexican. This also hints at the fluidity with which the “Mexican” identifier is used to refer to someone of Mexican descent, regardless of nationality, and it may hint at the complicated ways that ethnicity and race bear on mobility in the plant.

There does seem to be mobility amongst Mexican employees at NBP. However, mobility is biased towards English speakers, who are primarily employees from the younger generation (post-90s). And although all agreed the plant was a competitive and difficult work environment, and many had felt their employment threatened at times, none expressed feeling their jobs were threatened by any other ethnic group. On the contrary, Mexican employees seemed confident in their majority status at the plant. The only other ethnic group that would be able to compete with their perceived work ethic, Guatemalans, were still perceived to be at a disadvantage because of their lack of both Spanish and English, as well as their tenuous legal status. I analyze all of these patterns, and more, in the section that follows.

After collecting all of the data, I began to organize a system for analyzing interviews and field notes. I transcribed all interviews and sorted them by participants’ age: oldest to youngest. I then went through each transcript and its respective field notes, taking note and highlighting the outstanding themes within each interview, letting them emerge from transcripts and notes. I reviewed all transcripts multiple times in order to build a general framework of themes throughout all interviews for deeper analysis. After considering all the recurring themes amongst

interviews, I considered language, generational experience, mobility, ethnicity, and social class to be the underlying themes that would best help me explore the various experiences of Mexican employees working in a meatpacking plant and understand the complexities of why and how they endure difficult working conditions.

I used “analytic induction,” or “abductive analysis,” to systematically develop causal explanations for my observations (Katz 2006; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). Each time I generated a theory to explain a pattern, I looked for exceptions. When I found an exception, I modified my theory to account for the exception. This enabled me to develop an argument that accounts for variations within my case study, making it more rigorous and enabling me, or other scholars, to examine my argument in subsequent cases. Small (2009) notes qualitative research does not try to generalize a population: “Representative does not mean average—representative means a detailed explanation of a mechanism that can only be achieved through abduction”.

Chapter 4 - National Beef: An Animal and Human Slaughterhouse

The first thing that hits you is the smell. You know you are but a few miles out of Liberal when you can smell fumes: the stench of cow feces and rotting bloody carcass. Driving by, there is not much to see. A giant gray, square factory sitting at the edge of town. The only hint at what goes on inside the meatpacking plant is an illustrated cow head and the words “National Beef” underneath. That, and the sprawling parking lot littered with cars parked wherever they can fit: stacked three deep and in ditches grazing the highway. A never-ending line-up of semi-trucks is parked outside the opposite side of the building, protected by high chain link fences. The physical structure and parched landscape do little to reflect the emotional turmoil—ecstasy, pain, triumphs, and hostilities—present inside its walls.

One thing I noted almost immediately is that employees refer to the plant and anyone who represents NBP (e.g., managers, shareholders) as “they.” For example: “They have the chain [going] really fast,” “they only care about the money,” or “they put you where they want”. Using that distancing language insinuates employees do not feel as if they are part of NBP. Available positions are full-time, part-time and summer help, and run throughout shifts A, B, and C. The guiding authority within the plant is the “chain.” You start when the chain starts, and you don’t stop until it does.

All plant functions are directed around the set speed - of the chain: the chain that brings in live cows on one end and sends them out in boxes on the other end. Once I realized the chain was the connecting thread between distinct narratives, I began inquiring who controlled this chain. I got vague answers and guesses at best, including “I’m not sure, probably the higher ups.” Someone even said you can’t control the chain. Finally, a supervisor let me know they were orders from Kansas City: orders from people in corporate offices far outside the plant.

For long-tenured employees (pre 90s), the chain speed is at the root of many negative changes that have developed since the plant's opening in the 1970s:

[Hay cambios] malos. Cuando llegamos nosotros, la cadena corría a 250 vacas... se mataba como 1,800 vacas... y se fueron más y más recio. Ahora están corriendo a 450 vacas. Ahorita están matando 3,500 vacas por turno... hay dos turnos/ There are bad changes. When we first arrived, the chain was running at 250 cows... around 1,800 cows would be killed... they went faster and faster [the chain]. Now they are running at 450 cows. Now there are 3,500 cows per shift killed... there are two shifts (Gerardo).

According to some people, the chain acceleration is the reason for high turnover rates: “*Sale mucha gente... la cadena la tienen muy fuerte y no aguantan/ a lot of people leave... they have the chain [running] too strong and they can't stand it*” (Juana). At this point, I quickly began to get a sense of employees' overwhelming attitude towards the plant and each other: “We're all mad at each other. Some make the best of it. Some are singing and whistling. I was so angry all the time” (Carmelita). Anna adds, “I feel like a minion”. A woman who has a 23-year tenure laughed as she said, “*todos nos conocemos. Y todos andamos con la misma cara... puras caras feas/ We all know each other. And we all go about with the same look... all ugly looks on our faces*” (Ignacia). I did not expect the depreciative comments like, “*este trabajo es de locos/ this job is for crazy people,*” “a special breed of people works at National,” and “you either have to be crazy to work at the plant, or you will become crazy working there.” Multiple employees, primarily of the pre 90s generation, claimed, “*No es matadero de animales, si no de gente/ It is not an animal slaughterhouse, but a human one*” (Ignacia) or “*en NBP matan gente y matan animales igual/ at NBP they kill people and they kill animals alike*” (Paloma).

The root of the human slaughterhouse seems to stem from a few different factors. Some say it's the job, that it simply gets to be too much — “they change them [Guatemalan employees] to like 2-3 jobs a day and that *kills* you” — while others said it was not the job but that “*No hay gente. Hay muchas mesas y muchas libras de carne/* There are no people. We have a lot of tables and a lot of pounds of meat,” meaning that there is just too much work that goes too fast and with too few people to get it done. NBP extorts employees for their labor all the more for the labor shortage.

When I asked what it is like working at NBP, there were some dark descriptions, all of which extended the “human slaughterhouse” analogy, but in interestingly conflicting ways:

It's like prison. You're there all day and you don't even get a full 15 minutes... you have to pick one, use the restroom or eat? I always avoid eye contact. The first day you're on the floor... they are cat calling and howling and hitting their area with their hook. Guys are volados/flirts and the girls are mean mugging you. Girls get jealous and mad dog us. Then they do the same thing to the next group... it's like 'fresh meat!' (Tatiana).

No one talked to me. No one seemed happy. Very gloomy. No one walked with their head up. You walk from the parking lot and you can smell the cows and burning leather. You have this dread that you and thousands of people are going to hate their jobs that day (Fabian).

It is a city within a city... what happens inside the plant stays inside the plant. Security operates like cops and personnel judges. It is private property...so cops can't do anything

unless it's an emergency. But even if cops did come, they wouldn't even know where to go.

The plant is so big unless you're there 20 years, you won't know" (Azul).

Several participants made it clear that “what happens in the plant stays in the plant” applied outside of work relations: “people can have different lives within the plant and live a different life outside of it.” One employee explained that although it was “chaotic” and “inefficient,” it had been like that for a long time. He pointed out that in the plant, “There is 1,000-2,000 people per shift. It's hard to change a city. Higher management has been at the top so long, they can't relate or they forget what goes on. They are just trying not to lose overseas contracts to places like Japan.”

To get a sense of what the plant was like inside, I asked employees for a virtual tour, or to talk me through their first tour. A 26-year-old woman who has been working for six non-consecutive years took me along her most recent tour:

They'll take you to fab and the box room and then kill floor. Kill floor is super-hot. Then it comes [the cow] and that's when they start tearing it apart. Everyone there is drenched in blood... you'll see the cow's head...the eyeball missing. They broke the jaw off... you see the heart and them pulling the esophagus. You keep walking—and this time was different cause they showed you where they just killed the cow. Point on the head where they killed the cow. Just hanging and people start tearing the skin off and cutting the nose off. There's ears on the floor... why are they showing us this? I'm just a regular person but I didn't think it was right how they just dragging the cow around. They use everything... they don't show you where they actually kill the cow. I asked one of the guys who works for the union. He said they are just in pens and they can't go anywhere. They just shoot them in the head. I hadn't seen that in past years.

Another topic that arose was the fact that the plant does not waste anything: “*Ni la mierda tiran/* Not even the shit is thrown away.” Everything is being used in the plant; even the billowing black smoke coming out of the exhausts are used. Some employees are surprised to find out semi-trucks full of blood tanks are shipped off and used in different products: cosmetics for example.

One employee commented that NBP makes a lot of money. And for all that money and how much they push and treat workers, she expected them to have a good cafeteria, parking lot, and restroom:

The worst is the bathroom. There's gum on the floor, once the soap dispenser wasn't working so they had a bucket of soap inside a sink for everyone to put their hands in. I saw people not wash their hands. National is so worried about other stuff like fingernail polish but no one is in the restroom checking if you are washing your hands. During break time, the toilets don't work or don't flush. There is toilet paper overflowing and you can see the poop on it. Most people don't even want to use restroom but you have no choice”

But as another employee noted, those resources are going elsewhere. According to a few interviewees, they feel NBP strives to make it look like they care about their employees. The plant recently bought and rebuilt the community soccer fields and softball complex right across the highway. They sponsor Pancake Day and Cinco de Mayo festivals. They frequently donate burgers to school lunches and buy out sporting events to allow the community to enter free. Many expressed the need for better and safer facilities for their employees instead. Gerardo has been at the plant since 1994 and says, “*esa planta está echada a perder/* that plant is spoiled [rotting away].” Josue, who has a four-year tenure, paints a picture of why it's important to update the plant:

...there was a pipe above the floor that busted. At first air came rushing out. Then it was followed by this brown water... it smelled like sewer water. I thought, USDA is going to come in here, they're gonna shut it down... but they just had people stop working for like 30 min to an hour. They taped off the area that it happened, they a got a hose, literally just hot water and started spraying all the brown whatever it was because some of it had landed on the tables and stuff... and they just said let's keep moving. If that had happened on A shift [instead of B] ... I feel they would have shut us down for a week. Its contaminated meat... I feel a lot of those things happen on B shift. Like, sometimes I'm hearing, 'oh yeah the power went out on B shift for like four hours'...

The faulty pipes and power failure Josue mentions is one of the many complaints employees had about NBP's disregard for the plant's infrastructure and employee safety. However, some employees seemed skeptical of any changes: "*a ellos no les importa la gente. No les importa nada. A ellos nomas les importa el dinero/* they don't care about the people. They don't care about anything. They only care about the money."

I began research having heard mixed reviews about the Union. I had heard primarily negative perceptions of the Union, how it robs you of 10 dollars every paycheck and will ultimately side with the plant if you ever need them. However, I realized that the Union truly did help many employees and had a strong presence in the plant. I claim the discord lies not in the Union itself, but the way in which it approaches, and at times manipulates, employees. This usually happens at orientation as new employees go over benefits and paperwork. Some employees think it should be a choice to sign up and pay for optional benefits, however, many employees feel forced to sign and claim they are robbed.

According to employees, the Union is valuable for employees with families and who need the benefits. It is not as beneficial for single, young employees, and is completely useless for summer help employees. Summer help employees leave at the end of the summer, months before they can qualify for union benefits. Yet, they are forced to pay union fees (a total of 120 dollars by the end of the summer). In addition, some immigrant employees who are not fluent in English or Spanish (most frequently Guatemalans) may not completely understand what they are signing up for and end up paying for benefits they will not use. Younger, 90s generation employees reported the Union tricks people into signing:

I told her I don't want to join the Union, she said that's fine. Just put your initials somewhere on the paper so I can prove I gave you the information. I even asked her, this won't mean I'm joining right? And she said no. So I put my initials really tiny in the corner of the page. It turns out that counted as my signature.

Multiple employees reported when they refused to sign, or advised someone not to sign, they were kicked out of the presentation and made to pick up trash in the parking lot. To add insult to injury, as three management support employees informed me—even if you don't sign, the Union still has to help you. However, throughout interviews there were positive experiences with the Union. I also interviewed a Union representative who exuded genuine care for all plant employees; he wanted me to ask future interviewees how they were treated, he commented on all that we can learn from working with such diverse cultures, and emphasized the need to treat everyone with respect. Yet, the overwhelming majority of employees expressed feelings of indifference, neglect, and downright abuse on behalf of the plant and plant employees and still had the spirit to say, “I’m grateful for the experience” and “I can’t complain” or even “I love my job.”

Chapter 5 - No Easy Jobs

First things first: there are no easy jobs at NBP, and placement is all about who you know. Regardless of the light load or simple duties, any repetitive motion combined with standing for 8-12 hours is exhausting and painful. The difficulty of the job goes up with the pay grade. The starting wage for a new hire is \$14.75 per hour and the highest pay grade is 9 (reserved for heavy duty and mind work) which caps at \$21.00 per hour. However, when asked what the hardest job at the plant was, the overwhelming majority responded “knives,” despite it being on the lower end of the pay grade range. One woman who works knives cuts thin pieces of rib meat off moving cow carcasses. The people who struggle the most with knives are the ones who never learned how to sharpen their knives well; if they don’t, they end up cutting for hours with a dull knife, taking a toll on the hands and wrists. In addition, employees must be careful not to be cut by other employees next to them. Not only that, but the weight of the equipment alone is enough to wear you down: “If you're doing knives, you have a steel apron under the rubber one...like 25 pounds. If there's people next to you doing knives, you have to have a metal glove ... then you have equipment hanging on the side [honing steel] so you're full of armor.”

Hat color denotes status: tan (training), white (certified), black (trainer), and blue (supervisor). While there are more hats, they are not immediately relevant to this study. There are various management roles: management assistance, QA (quality assurance), supervisor, manager, general foreman, and superintendent. Most employees did not know who exactly was at the “top” or who the owners were. While the vast majority of employees on the line had complaints about their supervisors — they either mistreated employees or employees did not feel they were deserving of their job or leadership — there was one QA who elaborated on employee and supervisor tensions:

I think they [supervisors] know what they're doing... just some people shouldn't be supervisors, they're just dogs they're just so disrespectful...they'll treat you like shit, they [supervisors] get talked bad about but they work their assess off.

However, something he believed accounted for supervisors acting so aggressively towards their employees was the fact that:

...you're messing with their money, when you eff up...you're taking money from me. That's why they're constantly nagging on their employees... they work on salary but they're working for their bonuses...one superintendent told me he made 140K in bonus checks. There was a big fight between the union and NBP, because employees used to get bonuses too. But it was too much, they rather just give them to the blue hats.

Furthermore, employees have very little control of what job they are assigned once hired, unless they know other employees with influence who can accommodate. Some employees experienced hiring bias straight from the hiring office: “If office ladies don’t like you, they don’t hire you.” A 19-year-old woman said she was place in arguably the hardest job, knives, because “the hiring lady didn't like me because my sister slept with her husband” (Alejandra). Professionalism seems to be generally disregarded and the vast majority of employees emphasized the importance of having contacts in the plant for desired placement or mobility, with 47.8 percent explicitly saying the phrase “it’s who you know.” Interviewees gave various examples ranging to simple familial ties, like a young man who got his QA position by getting “interviewed” by a supervisor as they ate at his family barbeque, to illegal exchanging of favors and services: “a guy got a QA job by selling cheap coke to a sup[ervisor]...no one is ashamed to admit how they got the job.” The desire to gain favor went both ways, however: “Appearance and age matters. Management would make job easier for attractive women. It’s

inappropriate...but I didn't call it out” (Roberto). Money, drugs, and sexual favors were all reported to have been means to win favor. Whatever the means, favoritism was a constantly present theme amongst all interviewees:

“[Mayordomos] saludan a las muchachas y a las señoras no...no es un secreto. Hace unos años habia mayordomos que tomaban dinero de los chinos para darles los puestos que querían pero los agarraron y los metieron a la cárcel. También, reciente, agarraron a otra mayordoma/ Supervisors greet young ladies but not the older women...it is not a secret. A few years ago there was a supervisor who took money from the Chinese to give them the positions they wanted, but they caught him and put him in jail. They also caught a female supervisor recently (Gerardo).

Gender is a presumed factor in who gets what jobs; men reported they were expected to work much harder than women, who got “lighter” jobs. Some women, like 19-year-old summer help employee, Diana, agree women get “easier” jobs like hers. She has been working on kill floor for the past two summers: “What I’m doing is, the lady in front of me cuts the ears off the cow and she puts them on a table in front of me. Then I put a number on the ears and put them in a baggie... the ear number has to match the cow number.”

However, the following example is a 20-year-old woman, just around 5 feet tall who has been working full-time at the plant since she was 18. She shoots CO₂ gas into cow corpses:

...the equipment is like an extra 30 pounds...like your chaira (honing steel), glove (it's metal too), it takes 10-15 minutes to put all that on... Since I'm one of the persons that starts at the chain... I have to be there before 6:40 am. Where I work I have to make sure I get there even earlier because I have to put the needle on my gun... we have to put a lock on our station... If we don't lock our station you get a warning, or depending how they feel

that day, they can fire you. [Because] If someone messes with it... our life is in danger. There's been an accident where I work... the guy that was there before me, he actually burned his face with the water—it's like 200 degrees... the pressure was 160... [when the accident happened] they just called another general foreman...they carried him out and right away, 'Rosalia get to your job you're next' ... and I was just there and I was really scared. My black hat [trainer] said "you can't be scared you don't have an option" and I was like okay. And I went to do my job. I didn't have an option. I have to turn the whole cow [for 8 hours a day], it's like a thousand pounds each cow. I have to turn Every. Single. Cow. And that's why my shoulder and back hurt. I used to come home and cry about it. But after a while, I get used to it. I feel the pain. But I just get used to it... They left me on my own to learn that job. I had to suck it up. That's why I learned fast.

While some would argue who gets what is based on gender, some argue it's age. Four female interviewees of the post 90s generation commented on “older ladies” being jealous of the attention they receive and making work harder for them: “older ladies would get upset and say they we [younger women] got it easier.” Liliana explains, “if we were struggling, sups would help right away... if they are willing to help me I'll talk to them.”

Regardless of age or gender, on the floor or management, all are thrown into the job too quickly. The following is a 90s generation male on his first day at the plant and on the job as QA:

The work was harder than I thought. More than numbers on an iPad. The guy that was supposed to train me had called in. Then another trainer came but he was there for five minutes and then leaves. It's the first day I don't even know who speaks Spanish or English. You're kind of just thrown in there. You have to learn really quick... I check measurements

all day, 8.5-9 hours. If you have to return a cut, you have to use a sharpened ruler instead of a knife because they don't give us knives (Osvaldo).

However, according to a couple working at NBP since 1985, training time has dramatically decreased. In the 1980s, two months of training were required before starting a job alone (Martha). That protocol seems to be long but forgotten as NBP has passed through three different ownerships, each demanding faster and faster training time. A woman who began working in the late 1990s can attest to the shift as she says you are trained *mas o menos* (so-so), you are mostly self-taught on the job.

Another aspect all interviewees could attest to was the role of ethnicity in job distribution. According to employees, whites, Blacks and Asians (Koreans, Vietnamese, and Chinese all mentioned) had some of the “easiest” jobs at the plant. While the morning shift (A) had “everyone mixed,” B shift was primarily Asians — at their request. In contrast, Guatemalans had the most undesirable jobs overall and graveyard C shift was almost exclusively for them — not at their request. Several employees voiced their concern after claiming, “Guatemalan kids were cleaning during the night shift...they had to be in high school,” “definitely teenagers working graveyard shifts, cleaning equipment” and “the Guatemalans were picking up *sebo*/fat on the floor using a *pala*/shovel and bucket... but they were doing something with their feet to scoop stuff up into the bucket.” These reports were consistent with original rumors I had heard before beginning my project, which prompted me investigate further.

Chapter 6 - Language and Im/mobility

The factors of language and age are intertwined given the majority of employees in the pre 90s generation were not fluent in English, while all post 90s generation employees were fluent in English even if they were born in Mexico. This factor was consistent with employees' choice of which language they preferred to be interviewed in; interviews with pre 90s generation employees were all in Spanish, while all but one of the post 90s employees were interviewed in English. The exception was one 25-year-old-employee who had migrated from Mexico as a child, who was fluent in English but more comfortable speaking Spanish. Language and age become all the more significant due to their correlation with opportunities of upward mobility (which I elaborate in the Mobility section). I soon realized that even some of the 90s generation employees, whom I had never heard speak a full sentence in Spanish, claimed to be fluent in Spanish. Employees who had parents raised in the U.S. were more unlikely to speak Spanish regularly than those with immigrant parents raised in Mexico. For most post-90s employees, Spanish was their first language and spoken fluently and frequently. For some, language was used more for cultural identity than everyday practice. Regardless of proficiency level, I found Spanish to be an essential a tool that allowed intergenerational communication and collaboration—it is the key to facilitating ethnic cohesion in the plant.

It was apparent in the day-to-day completion of tasks. In the following quote, 20-year-old Rosalia talks about Don Jose, an older coworker who was “like a dad” (but who was old enough to be her grandfather) and makes her job easier:

He's really friendly and always brings me candy from Mexico. It's so loud and hard to talk so we have to lift up our masks. Sometimes fat splatters on my face... but I still want

to talk to make time go faster. We get in trouble... you can actually get written up for talking (Rosalia).

The presence of Mexican immigrants provides “abundant and more frequent opportunities” for Mexican American employees to practice or develop their Spanish, both inside and out of the plant (Jimenez 2011). While Spanish can facilitate cross-generation bonds and communication between fellow employees, it is also vital for management and employee relations. Jimenez (2009) notes “the large immigrant population creates a demand in the labor market for bilingual workers” in order to communicate with a primarily Spanish speaking workforce (107).

I perceived miscommunication, or lack of communication, to be at the core of managerial and non-English speaking employee tensions. While there are many supervisors who speak Spanish, the “higher ups” and “the majority” in personnel do not. Martha and Rogelio, a couple who has worked intermittently at NBP since 1985, believe there should be more supervisors who speak Spanish—and there shouldn’t be supervisors who don’t speak Spanish. They claim it only makes sense that in a plant that employs a 95 percent Hispanic workforce, all supervisors should be able to communicate with their employees. The couple says there are some supervisors “*que no entienden una gota de español/ who don’t understand a drop of Spanish*” and cannot address their needs and concerns and do not communicate those concerns further up the chain of command. In effect, they feel that “*Le ponen más atención a la gente que sabe inglés... los respetan más/ They give more attention to people who speak English... they respect them more*” and they [non-English speakers] are not heard.

Aquí no tienen que tener a animales contentos pero tienen que tener a la gente contenta y tranquila... Recibirían más ellos, porque la gente les ayudaría, más contentos. Si el supervisor se enoja, también la gente se enoja, y hacen mal trabajo... y menos

producción/ They don't have to keep animals happy here [at NBP] but they do have to keep people happy... calm... They [supervisors] would receive a lot more, because people would help them, more happily. If the supervisor gets angry, the people get mad too, and they do a bad job... and there is less production (Rogelio).

However, spoken language was not always necessary to communicate. According to employees across generations and positions, employees throughout the plant were able to communicate through gestures and noises. Given how loud it is inside the plant, it is almost impossible to hear sometimes. In addition, there is a myriad of languages spoken, from English to varying indigenous Guatemalan dialects. Hence, employees create symbols and noises to communicate with coworkers. The meanings of the gestures within the plant are learned.

Rodrigo, says “*nomás nos vemos, y hablamos a señas/* we only stare at each other, and we talk in signs.” He mentioned gestures could at sometimes be miscommunicated and offensive, but they just laughed about it later. Other employees corroborate by explaining; “no one speaks English. It’s all hand signs” and “they whoop or make noises to get your attention [he vocally demonstrated] ... it’s like its own world in there.” However, nearly all interviewees agreed that English is still key for upward mobility.

Chapter 7 - Generational Differences in Experience and Perception of the Slaughterhouse

Pre 90s

There was little variation in the pre 90s generation in terms of technical experience (positions, mobility, and tenure), however, it did vary somewhat in terms of attitude and sentiments about NBP Beef. With one exception, everyone I interviewed perceived the plant to play a role in their loss of dignity or disrespect inflicted onto their employees: particularly those of long tenure. Collectively, workers of long tenure claimed they would “work better and be happier if treated with more respect.” In fact, 37.5 percent of employees experienced downward mobility. All of the pre 90s generation were native Spanish speakers and if they knew any English, it had been learned as adults and was tenuous.

Opinions of seniority’s impact on job satisfaction and upward mobility were on both extremes of the spectrum. Some adamantly insisted that seniority should matter but didn’t, while some said it did matter and they had in fact benefitted from it. I found it significant that 62 percent of employees’ children worked or had worked at NBP, while 100 percent of employees had spouses who worked or had worked at NBP. This provides further insight to the extent of familial networks present at NBP and the continuation of NBP employment of the following generations. All of the pre 90s generation were born in Mexico and had been brought or invited to Liberal by family members (many of whom worked at the plant themselves). Seventy-five percent originated in rural, northern Mexico from the border state of Chihuahua and Durango. It is important to note that the similarity in landscape might provide immigrants from rural, northern Mexico an easier transition to the U.S. Midwest relative to immigrants from Central

America. With one exception, none of the interviewees migrated directly to Liberal. Most migrated and lived throughout California and Texas before arriving and settling in Liberal, KS.

It seems most employees did not expect to stay at NBP as long as they have. Ignacia, a 59-year-old woman has been working at NBP 24 years. She answered my questions quietly, made little eye contact, sighed and rubbed her face often—as if she was very tired. Ignacia told me about her first few days at NBP:

“les preguntaba a las personas cuánto tiempo llevaban ahí, decían un año, y un año se me hacía mucho. Y mira, hasta ahorita estoy ahí/ I would ask people how long they had been here, and they would say one year, and one year seemed like a lot. And look, I am still there today”

She laughs sadly, then apologetically adds:

...a veces corremos a los nuevos. En lugar de ayudar, hacemos el trabajo más duro para ellos. Es injusto... a veces se desmayan por la presión/ sometimes we run off the new people. Instead of helping, we make the work harder for them. It's unjust... sometimes people faint from the pressure.

Ignacia admitted long-tenured employees sometimes make work harder for new people: a practice noted by the younger generation. New people are slower or don't do their job as efficiently as their long-tenured counterparts. Based on what Martha told me about supervisors letting long-tenured employees carry most of the weight (because they know what they are capable of) while letting the new people off easier, I perceive there to be some bitterness as well as indignation. According to Martha, the new people do not work as hard because they know once they do, supervisors will expect more of them.

Silvino, a 63-year-old man, initially was against ever working in a factory. He said, “*Antes decia que no iba estar encerrado*/ I used to say I would never be locked up [inside a factory].” He has now been there for 28 years. Silvino is used to explaining how things work in the plant and Liberal to friends and family. He recounted a story in which he told family in Mexico he worked for a slaughterhouse, to which his family replied, “*¿y que todos se agarran la vaca a cuchillazos, o qué?* / so does everyone just start hacking at the cow with knives, or what?” Silvino said he laughed and asked how many cows they thought were killed a day. An uncle guessed up to three, but Silvino corrected: “*Matamos 3,000 vacas por turno* / we kill 3,000 cows per shift.”

Silvino says the plant has pushed for more automatization. He mentioned employees used to use actual guns to kill the cows, however “*un muchacho se mató*/ a young man killed himself,” so now they use an electric shock gun. In the past, cows’ jaws were broken by hand. The plant was also much dirtier (a comment which surprised me given the disgust many post 90s employees have expressed on current sanitary conditions). According to Silvino, the plant invested millions in 20 robots that replaced many employees. Those are a few of the changes Silvino has experienced since the plant’s opening, most being done for the sake of higher efficiency. Given the nature of such high costs and investments, NBP knows “*todo tiene que salir a la perfección*/everything has to be done to perfection,” in other words, production must increase fast and accurately.

Martha experienced the effects of this ambitious goal of perfection. She says within her 30-year tenure there have been a lot of changes worse for employees, but better for *ellos*/ them [NBP]. She says NBP is much stricter and it is easier to get points docked (according to her, four write ups and you’re out). Her husband, Rogelio, clarifies the rules have always been there, the

difference now is there is much more emphasis on safety, which means if you make an “unsafe” mistake there are no more opportunities. However, Rogelio emphasizes it’s not fair because employees are not trained well and are pushed to pull count (do their job on their own) too soon. Supervisors are too quick to push people out of training and too quick to let them go if they see they are not as productive, due to the lack of preparation. His wife, Martha adds:

“deberían dar más oportunidad porque si la persona comete un error no es porque quería. Había una señora que metió las manos al agua hirviendo y se quemó, entonces, dicen que no lo deben hacer, pos sí, deles otra oportunidad/ they [supervisors] should give more opportunities, because if a person makes a mistake, it is not because they want to. There was this woman who [accidentally] put her hands in boiling water and was burned, and they say she shouldn’t have done that, well yeah, give her another opportunity.”

Martha indicates here that there is no room for errors, despite the fact that “no te enseñan bien/ they don’t train you well.” Martha was actually in danger of losing her job recently due to a mistake she made but claims could have been avoided if her supervisor had listened and helped her. Her job was to take inventory of what cows were going to be “run on the chain” that day. Martha says she made a mistake on which kind of cow was supposed to be taken out. She had made that mistake before and had asked her supervisor multiple times to place someone to assist her, however, the supervisor said she could do it on her own. Yet, when she made the same mistake again, they wanted to fire her. She was but on leave for two months but thankfully, the Union was able to intervene and she kept her job — plus the two months’ pay.

Among the pre-90s generation, there was the reoccurring theme of lateral mobility, by which I mean being moved from job to job, but not of higher positions or pay. Ignacia says “[on being forced to move jobs] *es lo que el supervisor quiere... si no, ahí están las puertas para que se*

vaya a su casa/ it's what the supervisor wants... if not, there are the doors so you can go home."

According to Ignacia the plant wants older employees out because they are a liability and cost the plant money in compounded vacation time (five weeks of vacation for 25 years of tenure).

Martha, who has spent 30 of her 52 years of life working at NBP, elaborates:

No conviene ser buen trabajador...porque no te mueven. Se cargan con los que trabajan más, hasta te llevan a la oficina. Por eso lo nuevos no trabajan tan duro porque les conviene/ It does not benefit one to be a good worker. They take advantage of those who work hardest, they even take you to the office [if you refuse]. That's why new people don't try as hard, because it benefits them.

The supervisors know what the older workers are capable of, though, so they are better able to pressure them than younger workers with whom they have less familiarity.

There is such high turnover at the plant that it seems counter-intuitive to hang onto long-tenured employees, especially when taking into consideration that the group is small: "*no somos muchos los que tenemos mucho tiempo. Los nuevos entran y salen/* there are not many of us who have worked there very long. The new ones come in and leave." Another woman, Martha, says "*Ponen el que si puede, para que no tengan que entrenar a una nueva persona/* They place whoever can [do the job], so they don't have to train a new person." Not only does NBP make little effort to retain employees, some employees feel NBP is pushing them out: "*cada rato digo, voy a perder el trabajo/* I say it all the time, I'm going to lose the job" (Ignacia).

From what I perceived, it was not the lack of upward mobility or issues with lateral mobility that frustrated long term employees — it was more so the lack of *control* over mobility that upset employees. For clarification: lateral mobility can be both good and bad. If a person likes the job they are doing and does it well, they want to stay in that job. If the job is very

difficult and demanding, they want to move somewhere else. In theory, all new job listings are posted on a board in the plant. Employees bid for jobs by putting their name next to the job listing. From there, employees with seniority are supposed to be given first priority.

This is all in theory of course and does not seem to play out in reality. Don Gerardo, a 56-year-old man with a 24-year tenure (he tells me he's spent more time in the plant than out of it) tells me of his experience with the new management from California. He says no one has moved him like the new bosses that came from California, which is not a good thing. Gerardo was recruited by a friend who was custodian manager in 1994, eventually moving on to be custodian manager himself. However, custodial duties were recently outsourced to a third-party cleaning company. So, he was demoted and was placed in a new area. He was just getting used to his new job when the managers from California came in. Gerardo told me he had a meeting with three supervisors in which he requested a lighter duty job, looking out for defective boxes in a better ventilated room. He says that despite having the most seniority from his department, his request was denied. One of the three supervisors told him he would be picking up meat that fell on the floor. So, he did. However, soon thereafter he was called back in with a reassignment. He now had to go to a different side of the plant he did not know:

¡Toda la vida me la he pasado allí conozco a todo mundo. En el otro lado... ando como extraño allí. No me impongo... ¡Yo le digo que no me gusta, no me gusta, estoy harto! Ya le dije a un general que anda por ahí... dijo que iba poner alguien nuevo y nada.../I have spent my whole life there [in the previous department] I know everyone there. On the other side [his new assigned area] ... I'm like a stranger there. I can't get used to it... I tell them [supervisors from California] that I don't like it, I don't like it, I'm fed up! I already told a

general [manager/foreman] that's around... he said he would put someone new but nothing...

He consistently emphasized his dislike for the California managers and claimed no one else like them either, but some were gone now. When I asked him whether seniority would help him choose a different job, he explained to me the bidding process “*no es cierto/ is not true*”. Gerardo explained he had bid and asked for different jobs and they [supervisors] never fulfilled his requests. He went from being custodian manager to picking up meat from the floor and has been there since.

I grew up hearing anecdotes of dangerous machinery that could easily injure or maim people, and the baffling toll that work took on the body, which is why I was surprised to hear a resounding “*no*” when asked I asked post 90s generation employees if they had been injured at any point during their tenure. On one hand—that is great to hear, but I decided that I needed to ask the pre-90s generation as well. No one reported a major injury, even within a 30-year tenure. This further surprised me because I had spoken to the children of some of the older interviewees and they would voice how much their parents had gone through and claimed they had been injured or suffered from chronic pain as the result of a work injury. Sometimes I would ask differently, ‘what is the closest you have gotten to being injured at work?’—even then the only injuries people would mention would be minor. For example, Rodrigo suddenly recalled an incident where he was shocked by machinery but he quickly turned it around and hastily added it was his fault—“*era un toque... pero mis manos estaban poco mojadas o algo no estaban enchufado bien/ It was an electric shock... but my hands were a bit wet or it wasn't plugged in right*”. He went on to say it was nothing compared to people who had lost fingers, people who were *actually* injured. Ignacia also mentioned, “*Me caí pero no fue muy feo... me caí tres veces*

pero nada grave/ I fell but not too bad... I fell three times but nothing grave". Even the union representative, Silvino who worked in knives for 15 years, saw a positive side to his arm injury (on which he did not elaborate nor seemed to give too much importance to), that because of it he was moved up to union representative. One former employee did have more to say about the way injuries are handled in the plant;

... te mandan a la enfermería, ni son enfermeras, solo empleadas que te dan un curita o una pastilla... Sigues con tu malestar. Y les parece mal si les dices que estas lastimada. Vaya al doctor. Si el doctor te dice que no puedes trabajar, NBP solo te manda a light duty. Pero si no te recuperas, estas despedido. Porque las seguridad no te quiere cubrir. Con o sin documento. Por eso hay más gente k ocupar! ...they send you to the infirmary, and they're not really nurses. They are just employees that give you a Band-Aid or a pill... but you still feel unwell. And they don't like it if you tell them you're hurt. Go to the doctor. If the doctor tells you can't work, NBP only sends you to light duty. But if you don't recover, you're fired. Because their insurances don't want to cover you. With or without documentation. That's why there are always new people to hire (Paloma).

Rogelio, a 61-year-old man who has worked intermittently at NBP for the past 34 years, has held very difficult positions—sawing whole cow carcasses in half, skinning cows with an air knife, and disembowelment to name a few—agrees there is favoritism, feels elders are not treated with respect, and NBP abuses its employees. Yet, he says despite his age and how hard he is worked, *“hay gente que a mi edad ya está más acabada... y no puede trabajar. A cambio, para mi edad, creo que estoy bien/* There are a lot of people my age who are more worn down and can't work. I, on the other hand, I think I am doing good for my age”.

Despite the years of abuse employees have either witnessed or experienced, when prompted on what they would recommend for future employees, they overwhelmingly answer; “*que no se dejen/* don’t let them take advantage of you” and “*que exijan sus derechos/* demand your rights”—as if it was too late for them to do the same.

Post 90s

The overwhelming majority of post 90s employees explicitly said they worked at NBP for the money and experience. Over half of employees started as teenagers and 86 percent had family working at the plant. Only 20 percent were DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and the remaining 80 percent were U.S. citizens or permanent residents. I will elaborate on why this matters specifically for the post 90s generation further below. Most believed seniority does matter in promotions and opportunities for upward mobility and all claimed to be fluent in Spanish and English (and would occasionally switch back and forth during the interview). One-third of interviewees found themselves having to manage or enforce rules on their older counterparts—people who had been working at the plant before they, young management, were even born. Three out of the five management or management support employees were transparent in saying they got their position because of “who they knew” (among other factors). They insisted NBP hires anyone—for better and for worse. Overall, this was the guiding theme for the post 90s generation; “You’re either at NBP because you didn’t go to school or you’re going to school so you have to work at NBP”.

There were a few collective expectations employees expressed having; that the money will be good and, by contrast, that it’s going to “suck”. More than a few people admitted, almost apologetically, that they always said they “would not end up working at NBP” or they “never thought they would be applying to NBP”. One 27-year-old employee looked uncomfortable in

his chair as he said, "I wouldn't say shame.... But we always said we wouldn't [work at NBP] ... because we were better than that". But according to Nicolas, "once you start making good money, you want to stay there"—he added wage is \$14.50 at orientation and goes up to \$15 after two weeks once you qualify. Another employee, Osvaldo, put it more bluntly;

Nobody wakes up and says, I want to work at NBP. You're there 'cause you need to. You can't speak up. If you speak up, you get fired. You're replaceable. Your whole day is gone for what?... Is your youth really worth 13\$ an hour?

Many employees were allegedly warned by orientation leaders and fellow coworkers to, "not tell people your business" because "if Maria likes Juan and Juan doesn't like Maria, Maria is going to tell everyone Juan is not Juan's real name and he's not from the U.S."—in other words "don't make friends". Not only were they forewarned of the very real dangers of gossip (possibly getting fired or deported), they were also warned of the issue of infidelity within the plant; "NBP has a bad rep because of that. It's a big deal".

According to Roberto, "people had different lives within the plant and live a different life outside of it", one can be married outside the plant but be single inside the plant—even while both spouses work at the same plant. Rosalia was subject of a scandal when she was 19 years-old, in which a 30 year-old married employee spread rumors he was sleeping with her. Rosalia says, "you can only take so much. I wouldn't talk to anyone." As if in disbelief, she shakes her head, looks at me and says, "it's like your own kind!" When I asked her why she did not report it, she gave me an example of an occasion when she did. Rosalia was stalked by a 58-year-old employee who she says, "would wait for me every morning [in the parking lot]" after dropping his wife at the front door. He would then proceed to try and force open her car door. She said she confronted him multiple times but he would laugh and blame her for "taking it the wrong way".

Until one day I saw him pass by and I thought, oh I'm going to pretend like I'm looking for my ID or something... I was leaning over my car like this so I had my butt outwards [demonstrates facing driver door and leaning down into her car] ... I had seen him pass by already so I thought, oh 'ya se fue/ he's gone', and no, I turn around because I felt something behind me and it was him—he was just staring at me like this [demonstrates man looking down at her behind] ... I felt so uncomfortable and I went off on him that time. And he was laughing about it... so I went to my supervisor...then she went and told her superintendent and now he [stalker] doesn't talk to me anymore.

She then explained the report did not actually get to personnel because, “At this point I wasn't just thinking about him and what he was doing, I was thinking about his wife, his kids—like he's been there for so many years and he's going to be fired... so I was like, no just talk to him and if he keeps going then we'll go to personnel”.

Without exception, all 15 post-90s employees commented on how hard it was to see “the older people” or *la gente mayor*, “*trabajando con los cuchillos y los serruchos/ working with knives and saws*” (Sergio). For many employees, NBP has been where their parents or grandparents have worked for many years. They expressed that to see how hard the older people were working—doing dangerous and arduous work for many years on end—made them appreciate their work so much more. Many employees commented positively on their interactions with older Mexican employees, and the deafening cry of elders’ warnings echoed throughout just about every interview. The advice, which sounded more like a demand, urged younger employees to leave the plant, lest they end up like them:

He really cared, he was an older Mexico guy. He was a manager and gave good advice. Last day I worked there—he knew my dad for 20 years—told me "go out there and do

*good in the world, go to school, and don't ever come back. If you **do** come back, I don't want you out here in front of me. I want you to be better than me, above me— somewhere in management or in an office" (Fabian).*

He told me "You don't want to be doing this for the rest of your life, I have been working here since before you were born... around 30 years" (Liliana).

I would see my grandpa [in the plant] and he would tell me every single day "Get out of here. You got to leave" (Osvaldo).

Based on what younger employees told me, most *did* plan to follow their elders' advice. In fact, 53 percent of the post 90s employees I interviewed have left NBP and do not plan to return. Thirteen percent plan to leave after they graduate from college. And another thirteen percent have promising careers in corporate offices.

Duties varied across post 90s employees. They ranged from a teen girl with blood up to her ankles on kill floor to a young male supervisor heading for corporate. I will attempt to illustrate the diversity in experiences as well as the underlying core structural similarities that explain why young, legal, self-identifying Mexicans choose to work in an industry with a primarily immigrant workforce with harsh working conditions.

Diana has a very good reason. She is a 20-year-old DACA student attending community college during the school year, and returning to work at NBP during the summer. As "summer help," Diana has worked on kill floor since she was 18. The following describes her experience on kill floor:

... [kill floor] It's like a really big heater. It's like a giant snake [the chain conveyor belt], and the cows just come [hanging] and everyone has their own job they do... I had a wizard knife and the cows would pass freshly skinned and I would just take the extra hair they had if they had a little bit of poop I'd take it off... what I thought was cool about that job was that, behind me, the cows were barely coming—with the skin—and in front of me they were freshly skinned, and they went around further in front of me and they were already cut in half. It's a giant snake its really cool... the cow keeps changing every time it goes. But it's really nasty because there is blood everywhere... there is pools of blood everywhere... when I spray the cow with the chemical—there's a machine that takes off the skin—right when it takes off the skin, blood comes out of the mouth and the throat... sometimes the blood is like this thick on the ground [indicates around her ankles]. Imagine, we wake up at 5 we have to be there on floor at 5:45 am, its 5:39 am, you open the door and the smell and the heat hits you. I always gag. When you just get out of lunch, you're all happy cause your stomach is full, and then it hits you and it's disgusting.... I never get used to it. But when you're there for so long they stop looking like cows. You just see them as a big piece of meat.

After she clocks out at NBP, she heads over to Braum's Ice Cream and Dairy where she clocks into her other job. She giggles and smiles with a set of colorful braces (which she is paying for as well) as she tells "at NBP I'm wiping blood off my arms... when I go to Braum's I'm wiping off ice cream"—not to mention the contrasting pay, \$10.40 at Braum's and \$15.40 at NBP Beef. By the end of the week Diana has clocked 40 hours at NBP and 20-30 hours at Braum's. When I ask her how she feels about her job at NBP, she responds with, "I love my job". She insists on seeing work as fun because that is how she is paying for college.

Furthermore, her DACA status affords her the privilege of working—a privilege she made sure to emphasize. “Not everyone can work, so instead of saying I *have* to go to work, I say I *get* to go to work”.

Mateo, a 25-year-old cell cooler supervisor has a 7-year tenure and shows genuine appreciation for the opportunities NBP has afforded him. He seemed very invested in his work and proved himself very knowledgeable—he detailed the process of how he distinguishes choice cuts as well as when a cow should be killed to produce the best meat. When I asked about a recent Brazilian company buying part of NBP, he clarified they only owned part of the plant and "it's good for us because it opens us up to new markets... it helps keep production going and making more money". He said he is a quick learner, memorizing the handbook and guides in a few months—that along with being a good worker, having great training and working hard— is what helped him achieve a supervisor position so quickly. Mateo started in packaging his first summer at NBP, then went back to college, came back the next summer as a QA, and became a full time supervisor within a year. He mentions his attitude had to change and he developed better leadership qualities when he realized people looked to him for guidance and people "won't respect you if you don't respect them" especially when there are older people "who didn't like the idea of a youngster telling them what to do". Mateo claims superiors at NBP have encouraged and supported him as he attends school 8 am to noon, then works 8-9 hour night shifts—promising him a good career in the Kansas City corporate offices.

Not all experiences were as positive, however. Fabian, now a former employee, looks back at one of his experiences in the plant that I believe encapsulates a common trend throughout interviews and a hint at ethnic solidarity:

I really had to go to the bathroom. The guy next to me just gave me a thumbs up. I went to the bathroom and when I got back they all just gave me a thumbs up, and it was a tiny gesture but it made me feel like they had my back... it was a small little thing I took for granted outside, but it was a privilege there [inside the plant] ... you're stuck standing there 2 hours at a time. You can't go to the bathroom, take a drink, get air... when you get it, it makes you feel great. They never did, but if they brought us water bottles I would've said, that's great, NBP's really taking care of us!

I saw just how accurate that last statement was when I later interviewed Diana and she tells me about a good day at NBP:

There's a jug of water so when you get tired or the chain breaks, or when supervisors are nice you know, they will fill up a baggie of water, agua fresca/fresh fruit water... like horchata and lemon water, and they just give it to you. You just bite a hole in the corner and you drink some. And as the line keeps going you just keep doing your work. And I think it's so cool. I think it's only kill floor 'cause it's so hot in there. Sometimes they turn the air on so it won't be so hot.

When I asked Liliana about her 2-year experience as summer help, she says she remembers her first day at NBP—she drove into the parking lot and cried before her shift. She then packaged meat for eight hours in 32 degree freezers. After her shift, she would arrive home around 1 am where her mom was waiting to massage her blistered feet. But she had to be ready for her second job at Walmart by 9 am the next morning. Liliana would work a Walmart from 9 am to 2 pm, go home, eat and get ready for her shift at NBP from 3:30 pm to 12 am. At the time she found herself needing to work two jobs to pay for school but also to support her family of 5 because her father had recently been deported. Since then, she has graduated from a four-year

university and moved back to Liberal to be a school social worker. When I ask her what was the biggest difference between her current job and working at NBP, she immediately said, “I can get up and go to the bathroom”. These are the subtle ways in which working at the plant denies employees of their most basic human rights—and the way employees begin to perceive them as privileges—regardless of status or education.

Why does status—DACA, resident, or U.S. citizenship—matter? It is significant because status can either close or open opportunities for work outside the plant. If employees have legal status, that should be a positive motivator to seek work outside the plant. Given they might not *need* to work at the plant for lack of status, like many of their immigrant counterparts.

Out of the 15 post-90s employees I interviewed, 10 worked at the plant because they needed money for school. Half of those employees had gone on to complete a bachelor’s degree at a university. The other half were working at NBP and working on their degrees simultaneously. There were employees who said they would have wanted to include college in their plans but for various reasons, had not been able to.

Sergio, for example, was a star high school running back with a promising future career in college football. Sergio told me of how four coaches tried to recruit him to both division I and II colleges—that is until they would find out he was undocumented. Despite Sergio trying to explain his documents were in process, no coach reached out again. He then started working at a fast food restaurant, and then applied at NBP at a friend’s invitation. He then told me he received his permanent resident card a year later, but his college football opportunity had gone. Regardless, he says he enjoys working at NBP— “*pagan bien y me gusta/* they pay well and I like it”—has worked there ever since. In fact, my YouTube videos have been interrupted more

than once or twice with a NBP Beef recruitment ad— and a smiling Sergio standing front and center.

Nicolas also aspired to play college sports and earned a soccer scholarship at 2-year private college. However, he found himself back in Liberal and back at the plant a few years later. His parents are undocumented and were facing precarious job situations, which required him to come back to work and help them out. He earned his Associates degree and was placed in an office job for personnel. Painfully ironic, he says one of the most difficult parts of his job is firing people because they do not have proper documentation.

There is one topic that stood out to me in stark contrast against my experience with pre 90s employees—injuries. As I began my research, I expected the pre 90s generation to have more experience on the topic of injuries, given they were older and had been there much longer. To my surprise, it was the post 90s generational employees who had a lot to say in regards to injuries and pains. Employees were quick to describe to me all of their injuries and chronic pains—I will emphasize the average tenure for the 90s generation was 2 years. By far the most common ailment reported was “trigger finger”, when your hands are kept in the same position for an extended amount of time and sporadically cramp up thereafter.

I still feel it now [3 years after leaving the plant]. In my hands and lower back. I got a cat scan and it showed I had a partially torn disc from lifting heavy, I couldn't walk. In the past year I still feel it when I do certain exercises... I get a tingling in arms and hands (Roberto).

My friend, he's Mexican and our age, he started losing all his fingernails from the pressure he used to pick up the frozen pieces of meat... his fingernails would just peel off... (Tatiana).

I didn't wear eye protection. I was in the box room and as I was cutting the plastic straps that hold the boxes, one of them snapped back and the sharp edge hit my eye. My vision got blurry and I went to the nurses. I had to play it off, I just asked for eye drops. When they asked for what, I just lied and told them I had dry eyes. But I didn't see right the whole night (Roberto).

A hanging cow hit me right in the shoulder, it was so heavy it made me dizzy... I kept seeing faces in the blood. It was very scary but I didn't tell anyone (Fabian).

When I asked both these men why they did not report their injuries, they both said they would have had points docked and the injury would have been “their fault”. I caught a glimpse of what they were talking about when I spoke to Nicolas, the young personnel employee. He tells me the most common claim personnel deals with are injury claims. He goes on, “If they [employees] are not careful doing their job they can get hurt... I’ve had people cut off their fingers”.

Alejandra, a 20-year-old mother of 2, works knives and walks me through her experience of reporting an injury on the job. It was near the end of her shift when a big cow pulled up on the line. As she reached to tear off a piece of meat, she jerked and the cow hit her shoulder. She immediately went to the nurse’s office and she was told to ice it and was given “a lot of ibuprofen”. She says she went to one of the doctors her NBP insurance covers. She did not like that doctor and thought she needed a specialist. But according to her, she can’t go to a specialist because the insurance doesn't cover it. She still had to “pull count” (be responsible for her job in keeping up her quota of meat) at work in the meantime. Alejandra stresses the “speed of the chain is very fast” and given her coworker doesn’t like her she knows she let extra pieces of meat pile up on purposes—to burden her even more. She reported it to her supervisor (whose sexual

advances she had rejected in the past) and he laughed and threatened to write her up instead. She says, “I’m in pain right now. It still hurts but they said we can’t do anything”. I ask Alejandra, what is a common way people are injured working knives? She explains that those who have it worse are, “*La gente que nunca aprendió a sacar filo. Que tienen las manos hinchadotas... este dedo se me trava!* The people who never learned how to sharpen their knives. That have their hands super swollen... [she shows me her own hands and points to her cramping finger] this finger locks up”.

A former QA (Quality Assurance, part of management support) tells me the story of how seeing his peers experience different injuries and pains led him to the moment when he finally realized “I got to get out of here.”

I was in the cafeteria eating with some of my friends when I saw one of them look so tired, he was hurt and had been working so hard his fingers would lock up, he got trigger finger. And I felt sad because he [his friend] had been a basketball star. He could have gone and played for any college... but he didn't have papers. So here he was... it was seeing people that are so young, seeing their body go through that... I realized “I got to get out of here.”

Oswaldo did leave the plant shortly thereafter. He (along with many other student employees) said it was too much and he could not do community college and full-time at NBP. He quit NBP and transferred to and graduated from an in-state university.

Something worth noting is the evidence of Liberal’s familial networks and ethnic solidarity working beyond the city. Mexican students who leave liberal to attend university tend to leave to the same universities, live together, and sustain relationships with other Mexican students from Liberal—facilitating travel in-between cities. These ethnic ties

provide ethnic solidarity and easier transition into new environments that may be more hostile towards minority ethnic groups.

Chapter 8 - Language, Respect, and Mobility

Interviewees felt that the most significant contributors to upward mobility—earning a promotion, having your placement request granted, or achieving positions within management—were language, age and connections to influential plant employees (who you know).

Interviewees' perception of the role of language and the ability to communicate with both employees and upper management was unanimous; employees needed to know English to have access to better jobs, defend oneself from superiors, as well as be granted greater responsibilities. The theory of “who you know” was almost unanimous, but for a few cases, which I will explain further down. The pre 90s generation vocalized the disparity in respect given to older, non-English speaking employees—compared to the younger, English speaking employees. Of the pre 90s generation, 62.5 percent was adamant about seniority not mattering or carrying weight. In contrast, the majority of the 90s generation expressed that seniority does matter—at least somewhat.

Of the earlier generation, only two employees experienced significant upward mobility—a 48-year-old woman who is currently a QA manager and a 63-year-old man who is currently Union representative, with 21 and 28 year tenures, respectively. Although the Union representative claims his seniority helped him achieve his status (which was true), the catalyst for his reassignment was an injury—*requiring* reassignment. In comparison, the *QA* manager was *offered* the job without prior experience as she was working in knives—despite the shorter tenure. Out of the earlier generation sample, 25 percent experienced significant upward mobility, and 37.5 percent of employees actually experienced downward mobility despite seniority.

In contrast, 40 percent of the 90s generation experienced upward mobility, with six employees attaining management or management support positions—all with tenures between

zero and eight years. The highest ranking position among the people I interviewed is 25-year-old bilingual Mateo who achieved management support with a three-month tenure and supervisor within a one-year tenure. He superseded his own father (who has been working at the plant since before Mateo was born) in rank within one year of employment—as a teenager. Furthermore, NBP offered to help him go back to school and is supporting him (financially and in flexibility) getting a BS or MS in business. It is important to note Mateo has extensive family and friend networks in the plant, as it serves as evidence to support prior claims that networks within the plant significantly influence employee mobility.

Another case of NBP reaching out to a 90s generation employee is 23-year-old Nicolas. Nicolas says he “got lucky” because he applied for QA and got a call inviting him to work in personnel instead. He claims it did help that he had an Associate’s degree, spoke English and had worked two summers. Carmelita is yet another example of 90s born employees skipping the traditional mobility ladder (sustaining long tenure and being promoted one rank at a time). Twenty-three year-old Carmelita interned in the plant laboratory for one summer, with no prior tenure, before being offered a full-time position as a lab tech and management support. She had been attending university at the time of her offer and decided to drop-out of school to accept the position. While her sister did work at the same lab several years prior, she says it had nothing to do with her offer. Carmelita claims it was years ago and her sister did not hold that position long enough for her to be an influential reference—not to mention her sister was not supportive and actively discouraged her from working there.

Roberto was offered a supervisor position because he was bilingual (Jimenez 2009). According to him, there was a lot of interaction between supervisors and different departments,

paperwork, and keeping track of inventory. Not everyone could communicate with upper management— “If you don't know English, you don't have a lot of opportunities” (Roberto).

Yet another example of the variety in tasks and responsibilities falling on young shoulders is Azul. Azul started his four-year tenure with NBP as a teen straight out of high school and was placed in security, thanks to his contacts with the assistant director's son. He held an overnight shift, 11pm-7 am, while still attending community college during the day. He soon moved up to supervisor—holding up to three different positions at a given time. Being charged with security and various positions, he was exposed to serious employee conflicts and issues. When I asked him to walk me through some of his most memorable or shocking experiences, he blew air out of his mouth and recounted the following:

My first night...there was a fist fight on kill floor. A guy punched the other with a knife still in his hands, the other blocked the punch but got slit open from wrist to elbow... there was another fight... a guy hit his head on the concrete and he passed away... There was reports of someone having a gun in the parking lot one time—never able to find anything because it was during shift change so it's really chaotic with half the town switching parking spots... there was reports of a guy prostituting his daughter on the parking lot... I went out but I never found them. There was reports of people having sex in the parking lot, I went out to find them but I wasn't able to so I guess they must have finished pretty quick. I heard rumors that Somalis have tribes just like their home country, so tribes were fighting over parking spots because they said it was their parking spot—I think that's where the guy drew a gun. One time... there was a guy who picked up a rock and smashed it in the back of another guy's head... there was also a truck driver who was threatening to kill people because his load wasn't ready... There wasn't a lot of Chinese people... or Asians... that got in trouble.

Somalis like to drink a lot so there was quite a few of them... they got in trouble but I guess there were just a lot of cultural differences...

Azul recalled a few more memorable moments later in the interview. He recounted one of his best memories as the day he saved three million dollars' worth of meat from spoiling. He also told me of the time he had to escort a Somali woman out of the locker room as she screamed: "Mexicans are gonna take over the world and kill us all!". According to Azul, the worst experience was when he drove a coworker to her home out in the country after a night shift, "when we got to her house we found her girlfriend dead outside... They ended up declaring her death as an overdose... she was lying outside naked on the ground".

I use Azul as an example that highlights policy, ethnic, and mobility issues within the plant. He was also a prime example of a young, teenage male being charged with disciplining employees many times his senior. In addition, the quality of his position—the implied responsibility, excitement, challenges, depth, and variety—at the speed of his promotion was rare if not non-existent within pre 90s generation employees.

These examples show that there is upward mobility for Mexicans working at NBP beef. I argue that the "competition" for mobility is not inter-ethnic, but rather generational. I say competition hesitantly because of my lack of concrete evidence that earlier generations feel the need to compete for these jobs—they simply requested the same respect and attention given to the recent generation. In fact, as noted above, one employee notes an older counterpart told him to leave and not come back, unless he was returning to work in management "above him" not "in front of him".

Chapter 9 - Endurance: Ethnic Enclaves and the Normalization of Violence

The question of why people stay at NBP is complicated by the fact that the plant and Liberal are inextricably intertwined, which is why employees may find it hard to vocalize or justify their residence in the plant and Liberal both. When asked why live in Liberal, the older generation simply said it was quiet or they just like it. But when I asked the younger generation, many expressed shame at living in Liberal—a “boring” town where there is “nothing to do”. However, I do believe there is something unique about Liberal.

Liberal resembles an ethnic enclave; the people I interviewed stay because their family and social networks are in Liberal. They stay because they feel significant in Liberal, immersed in the Mexican culture. Liberal is otherwise a small and "boring" town with not much going on. The plant is what has facilitated, stabilized, and allowed the ethnic enclave to flourish. Hence, without the plant there are no Mexicans. Without Mexicans, there is no Liberal.

I allude to prime example of an ethnic enclave, Chinatown, and the ways in which it affects migrants and their ensuing generations. An ethnic enclave develops into a structure of opportunities for immigrants, investors, and entrepreneurs to “make their way up the socioeconomic ladder; it helps them adjust to their new country socioeconomically” (Zhou 1992: pg. 150). However, Zhou warns there is a downside to an enclave economy. Zhou claims while it is true that an enclave “shields ethnic workers, particularly immigrants, from their interethnic competition and from discrimination on account of their ethnic background,” it also facilitates a “conglomeration of small businesses and low-wage jobs”. According to Zhou (1992: pg.150-151), “the survival and success of many small enterprises in Chinatown [or ethnic enclaves] depend on the availability of cheap labor”, furthermore, “immigrant workers who have access to

the enclave labor market through ethnic solidarity may become entangled in a web of ethnic obligations that interferes with their rational pursuit of economic opportunities”.

I believe similar patterns are evident in Liberal, KS. Something I found especially resonating with Liberal’s Mexican ethnic enclave was the presence of “material and symbolic compensations... that cannot be calculated exclusively from wages or by mainstream standards” and which allow the enclave to work “on the basis of ethnic solidarity and social relations... to achieve a more successful transition into the American society” (Zhou 1992: pg. 151). Family and money were the most voiced justifications for living and working in Liberal. I establish Liberal’s place as an ethnic enclave to provide a guide for the following pages as I navigate through employees’ experience working at the plant and living in Liberal.

Juana narrates the trek she and her husband traversed to end up in Liberal. They worked in five different meatpacking plants in five different states, but chose to settle in Liberal for the past 21 years. What made Liberal and its plant any different than the rest? Rodrigo says it was simply the fact que “*habia mucha de mi gente aqui... me sentí agusto. Me gusto. / there were a lot of my people here... I felt comfortable. I liked it*”.

No other immigrant group has withstood the test of time and endured the plant to the extent that the Mexican employees have. Recent immigrant groups do not have the numbers to equal or rival the Mexican ethnic presence, and the majority leaving within a several years. In addition, the Mexican population has established up to the 4th generation from the original wave of Mexican migration in the 1990s—further deepening familial ties. The only recent immigrant group that is exponentially growing, and is predicted to endure, is the Guatemalan population. However, I argue the dominant presence of the Mexican population facilitated the Guatemalan migration and retention—thanks to the established migrant networks for Latinos. Hence, while

the majority of plant employees have a negative perception and experience with NBP, it is acknowledged and respected as Liberal's primary source of income and relative job security. I claim NBP and Liberal take part in a relationship comparable to obligate symbiosis, in which both need each other to survive.

All interviewees were unanimously in favor of new immigrants in the community. Whether they believed other immigrant groups were good plant employees is another question. Without fail, interviewees brought up the Somali population every time I inquired about ethnic relations within the plant— “lazy” was the most pronounced identifier, followed by “problematic” and “dirty”. The major grievance the Mexican employees had with the Somali employees had to do with their privileges at the plant. Mexican employees said Somalis took advantage of their religious privileges and refugee status; Somalis were allowed to pray four times a day, given their own prayer rooms, and were allegedly overprotected by supervisors. Despite the criticisms, many of those same respondents also expressed themselves as being more sympathetic when they elaborated on their experiences. Roberto said he had fun with his Somali coworker, but that he [Roberto] would laugh when the Somali coworker would say “I work hard” because according to Roberto “he really didn't”. Fabian said he didn’t mind working with a Somali because he was kind, up until the end of the summer when his Somali coworker “angrily demanded he leave him his [Fabian’s] boots and gear,” given he was no longer going to need them. Interviewees in the management positions also expressed themselves more sympathetic than those on the floor; the pre-90s generation union employee, Silvino, emphasized the importance of respecting cultural differences. He made clear he did not approve of employees who made fun of Somalis for eating with their hands, or any other norm violation. Nicolas, the

personnel employee, also expressed that everyone was different and compared the ethnic diversity in the plant to college—being exposed to different cultures and practices.

Hence, the conflict was not a competition for jobs (interviewees were not worried about losing their jobs) but more based on resentment of the privileges given to Somalis by NBP. I perceived bitterness and indignation by the long-tenured Mexican employees, given that NBP appeared to be favoring employees (who they deemed unworthy of such favor) over themselves—loyal, hard working employees.

Without exception, all interviewees claimed the Guatemalan employees had it most difficult out of all ethnic groups at the plant. I will use an extensive example by one employee who recounts her experience with a Guatemalan coworker because I believe it is a case example of what many Mexican employees expressed throughout the interviews:

Guatemalans have it harder than we do, as Hispanics, because the supervisors know they need, need, need the job and most of them go in working with 'other names' [false documents]. I feel they are treated way worse than what we get treated... they don't complain, they change them to like 2-3 jobs a day and that kills you—working 2-3 different type of jobs get you hurt. They hardly ever miss work... for them it's like the worst thing that can happen. They'll stay in and work a double, 2-3 days a week. That's why sometimes when I talk to them, I'm like, my life isn't as bad as they have it. Some of them live in Guymon [Oklahoma], they struggle to even get here. They pay people to get them here, their family is much bigger... 5-7 kids and they live in homes with other families. Sometimes the supervisors abuse them... or take advantage. There is a Guatemalan that works in my area and she tells me, 'please don't leave, you're a really good person' because even Hispanics [referring to Mexicans] treat them bad... they [Guatemalans] just don't talk

back. They don't know how to read, write, and some even to speak. Like that lady that works in my area, she struggles to speak and I struggle to understand her. Sometimes it breaks my heart... and sometimes they put her in my job and she can't do it at all. It's too hard for her... Man! There's actually people that could do it and my supervisor decides to put her. There's been times where I want to take the day off... and I actually decide not to because I know they're going to put her. One time I did leave and they made her work my spot Saturday for five hours—she can only do 30 minutes, and they put her five hours by herself in my spot. When I came back on Monday her hands were swollen and she said, 'please don't leave again'. And I said I won't. Since then, I can't... because then they're gonna put her [in my spot] ... But then there's these other two Guatemalans, and you know how you always see them all together and you would think they stick together... well they treat her less and they're way younger than her—she has 7 kids. One of them used to give her a ride to work and she [other Guatemalan] stopped just 'cause she didn't want to anymore. She [her coworker] had asked somebody from kill floor to give her a ride—kill floor starts at 5:30 am—and she had to come with them to Liberal at 4 am... she's here for at least an hour and a half.... That's when I think, I have it better than what they have it. That's why I think, 'I can't complain... there's people who get it worse'.

Despite these clear tensions, there was actually much less inter-ethnic conflict than I had anticipated. This may be due to the fact that there is relative self-imposed segregation amongst ethnic groups in the plant. However, that does not limit or damage positive relationships with multi-ethnic coworkers. There was not much talk of whites working alongside Mexicans, primarily because there were very few whites. The earliest arrivals in Liberal could attest to the white flight that began after President Reagan's Amnesty—the Immigrant Reform and Control

Act of 1986—as more Hispanics began to arrive in Liberal; “*salian y salían... hubo tiempo donde todos se fueron/* they left and left... there was a time when they all left”. However, they claim most Hispanics arrived around 1995. Some in the recent generation still remember witnessing some form of white flight—as Osvaldo recalls his friend telling him the reason for their move to Oklahoma was because "my mom said we have to move because there is too many Mexicans now" circa 2004. Osvaldo also noted the neighborhood down the road from NBP, it was formerly known as “*el parque de los negros/* Black park” by the Hispanic community and now it was called “*el parque de los Guatemala/* Guatemalan park” because the African American community has been displaced by the Guatemalan immigrants.

Interviewees generally commented on Mexicans’ superior work ethic to all other ethnic groups at the plant (excluding Guatemalans). Employees, however, express more empathy towards Guatemalan employees (versus Somalis and other ethnic groups) because they were deemed truly hard workers and were abused the most. Employees claimed, “Chinese people speak for themselves and Somalis will walk out if they have to” and Cubans “*no se dejan/* don't let themselves be taken advantage of”. One employee said the reason was because “*no estan como nosotros de burritos/* they [whites, Blacks, and Cubans] are not like us, [working like] donkeys”. This is in stark comparison to Guatemalans who “don’t have a voice” and “never say no”. One interviewee made an interesting comment that hinted at Mexicans’ subtle ethnic solidarity, “Guatemalans are not Mexicans, *but* you do feel some pain for them if they take advantage of them... “*te da lastima/* you feel pity”—as if the fact that they were not Mexicans should hinder you from feeling sympathetic towards them.

Chapter 10 - Local Amenities and Endurance

The most remarkable thing about Liberal in comparison to other rural Kansan towns is the presence of Hispanic businesses everywhere. Liberal's demographic is reflected in the town's services and businesses targeted towards Hispanics. I decided to conduct a rough appraisal of the presence of Mexican local businesses relative to non-Hispanic. Driving across the two major streets—highway 56 and Main Street, I immediately noted the prominence of *local* Hispanic businesses over non-Hispanic owned businesses—advertising their name and services in Spanish.

What especially struck me was how lively the Hispanic businesses looked with bright new signs and posters. There were flashy food trucks selling tacos, *neverías*/ice cream shops, a Mexican supermarket, smaller groceries, Mexican restaurants at every corner, along with a string of specialty stores; for example, a special events boutique providing dresses and décor for Quinceañeras and weddings. By contrast, the older, more subdued exterior appearance of some older businesses seemed to pale in comparison—some to an extent that it was hard to tell if they were still in business or abandoned. There were more than a few businesses offering money transfers—which are booming thanks to the many migrants sending remittances back to their origin countries. Something unique to Liberal and the southwest area, is the availability of both traditional medical services—serviced predominantly by Hispanic employees and doctors—as well as homeopathic services, or alternative medical care.

While there may not be much to do in Liberal for entertainment, there are large scale events that occur often. Some of these events are simply called *bailes*/ dances. A classic Mexican music duo from the 70s, Los Temerarios, performed in Liberal while I was in town. The opening band was a regional Mexican group, also very popular, albeit much newer. People from all over

Kansas—Dodge, Garden, Wichita—and around the tristate area gathered at the Liberal Activity Center (which holds 2,400 people) to attend this *baile*. This event, like most *bailes*, are multigenerational functions that appeal to all generations as long as they like Mexican music. It is not limited to Mexicans. It also appeals to the other Latino populations in town, as well. Social media was chock full of people posting photos with their parents—even grandparents—drinking and dancing or standing in a sing-a-long concert. While this particular *baile* was structurally cross-generational by including a 70s music duo and a contemporary *grupo*, *bailes* are inherently non-discriminatory on the basis of age.

Growing up in this cultural environment, many children of Mexican immigrants are unaware that they are a minority outside of this “ethnic enclave”. Five out of the nine post-90s employees who attended college outside of Liberal mentioned experiencing a culture shock—despite attending college within Kansas. Experiences ranged from micro aggressions to physically violent encounters. Two employees explicitly mentioned preferring to work in Liberal versus other places because of the *relative* lack of racism— “I like working at this Braum’s better... there’s too many racist white people in Great Bend [college town]”. I believe it is this relative protection from white hegemony, along with the feeling of being around “your own people” (and the services that come with it) that makes people comfortable settling in Liberal—and providing NBP with a steady stock of labor in effect.

Chapter 11 - Social Class: Debt and Fetishism

The effects of social class and employee values on endurance became vividly significant as I picked at a common thread. I discuss earlier the primary explanation for post 90s generation's employment was raising money for college. However, I found an equal, if not more significant motivator—the allure of a brand new car. Silvino tells me his brother noticed something interesting on a visit to Liberal from California; “Oye, carnal, ¿este pueblo está muy rico o qué? Hay puro caro nuevo, puro chavalillo/ Hey, brother, is this town really rich, or what? All there is new cars, all teenagers [drive new cars]”. Silvino then explained;

Todos trabajan en la planta o en el aceite. En California no traen casi carro nuevo, los chavalillos no... está muy caro y no hay trabajo... muy caro todo. Todos en la planta allí traen/ They [the teenagers] work at the plant or in the oil field. In California, teens don't drive around in new cars... it's too expensive and there is no work [to pay for it]. Everyone there at the plant has [new vehicles].

One employee said he worked at NBP primarily for the money and experience. Twenty-five-year old Roberto wanted to buy cars before he went to college. Within his four-year tenure he bought and sold; a new truck, sports car, motorcycle, motorbikes and more—then he went off to a four-year university. Fabian warns future young employees:

You can say I'll do it [work at NBP] until I get back on my feet... to pay off my car... but it's a slippery slope that you can stay there the rest of your life because you have no other option...you become too comfortable with the monotonous work and steady paycheck.

Fabian points at the real possibility of having to stay because you “have no other option” because you are grounded by debt. And of the relative “comfort” experienced when receiving a relatively good steady, weekly paycheck grants you living expenses—and additional income for luxuries

that portray upward mobility. In conjunction these factors can ensnare people to stay in Liberal, despite wishes to move or go to college.

Another 20-year-old woman mentions how difficult it is to raise money for college, even as she works full-time at NBP and attends the local community college. Rosalia assures me she will go to a four-year university—not like some of her peers. She expresses her outrage towards a coworker who used to go to high school with her; he went out and bought himself a “2017 GMC truck and is now 50 thousand dollars in debt,” which according to him, “doesn't matter cause I'm going to be here my whole life”. She sounds personally offended as she exclaims, “And he had the opportunity and support to go to school! And an opportunity I didn't have!”. She then sheepishly admitted the only reason she is still at NBP and not yet at a university, is because she got into debt with a new car herself—which she regrets. But her reasoning for getting a new car hints at something deeper, “I just thought...since I've been struggling for everything...you know what, at least I don't have to struggle [with] a car. My car is going to be new... that's why I got it”. Rosalia justified her purchase as self-compensation for her struggles relating to her DACA status, inability to pay for school, lack of financial support from her parents, and her struggles at work.

Sometimes, the money for a vehicle may come indirectly from NBP—as in the case of Anna. Anna worked at NBP for 2 summers in order to pay for her university education. After receiving her degree, she moved back to Liberal and lives rent-free with her parents (who both work at NBP). Given she owes no student loans (thanks to her summer help employment at NBP) and does not have housing costs, she had the money to buy herself a 2018 Chevy Silverado. In addition, she has recently begun a Master's program online. She mentioned she would like to live in another town—maybe Garden, Dodge or somewhere in Texas—but three

generations of family, cultural norms (like the norm for a Mexican woman to live with her parents until she marries), low cost of living, and new personal costs are enough reason to stay in Liberal.

This trend is not exclusive to the post 90s generation. As I was conducting my rough appraisal of Liberal businesses I was shocked at just how many car sales there were—I counted thirteen auto sales businesses. There is the running “joke” that there are people in Liberal who pay rent on a run-down trailer and have a “troca del año/ a brand new truck” parked outside. This “joke” (which in reality is not a joke and by no means an exaggeration) hints at materialistic values prevalent in the Mexican culture of Liberal. I will address the structural patterns that perpetuate these debt cycles, however, I will first give some insight and background on the more overt examples of conspicuous consumption in Liberal, Mexican culture.

It is visible in the signature style of southwest Kansas Hispanics. Buckle is a popular clothing store with “southwest” staples like Rock Revival brand jeans costing between \$100-220, shirts between \$50-100, and expensive leather cowboy boots. No matter your occupation it is not uncommon to see a \$1,000 phone in people’s hands. This style of flashy name brands, rhinestones, puffer vest and excessive logos imitates the narcoculture in northern Mexico. The drug trade provided unprecedented financial capital to many rural countrymen. Having little knowledge on how to “dress wealthy”, they acquired their own style exhibiting extravagant clothing and accessories with expensive name brands so they could advertise their wealth. The southwest Kansas style mimics rural, cowboy culture and narcoculture—cowboy boots, jeans, big trucks, and even puffer vests allude to bullet proof vest. However, this desire for materialistic displays of wealth is not new. The following lyrics come from an iconic regional Mexican song *El Centenario* released in 1993 by Los Tucanes del Norte:

Si eres pobre te humilla la gente/ If you're poor people humiliate you
Si eres rico te tratan muy bien/ If you're rich they treat you real well
...Ahora todos lo ven diferente/ everyone sees him different now
Se acabaron sus desprecios / All the contempt is now gone
Nomás porque trae carro del año / Just because he has a new car
Ya lo ven con el signo de pesos/ They now see him with dollar signs

These lyrics voice Mexican immigrant's subconscious, and conscious, desire of for social mobility. The reason I choose to elaborate on this topic further is because of the way NBP Beef (along with oil and trucking industries around Liberal) facilitate achieving this desire. These songs are part of a sub-genre of regional Mexican folk music called *narcocorridos* originating in rural, northern Mexico. Popularized in the 1980s, it is a genre that glorifies and pays tribute to drug lords and the extravagant lifestyle associated with them. One of the genre's founding fathers, Rosalino "Chalino" Sanchez, rose to fame in Los Angeles by composing self-glorifying *corridos* for Mexican immigrants—*corridos* that had previously been reserved for folk heroes. Immigrants would then send these *corridos* back to Mexico, as evidence of their economic and social mobility—occupation aside.

Narcocorridos are faced with much controversy, especially on behalf of the Mexican government. However, Jorge Castañeda, former foreign secretary of Mexico claims narcocorridos "are attempts by Mexican society to come to terms with the world around them, and drug violence is a big part of that world. The songs are born out of a traditional Mexican cynicism: This is our reality, we've gotten used to it" (Kun 2010). Furthermore, I argue the persona projected in such narcocorridos is a reaction to "the changing nature and organization of global capital, particularly the transnational utilization of labor" manifested in the meatpacking plant (versus the author's reference to the Mexican maquilas) in which financial disparities

between the money made *by* the plant, at the expense of those working *for* the plant (Edberg 1998 [2004]).

However, I see deeper structural Marxian forces of debt and fetishism at play. Credit and loans create “fictitious capital” that allows the proletariat to live beyond their means and expedites accumulation. The interest generated from credit debt is according to Marx, a “secondary form of exploitation” because the proletariat is drawn into capitalist values of accumulation and fuels the capitalist through interest. This cycle of debt benefits the bourgeoisie [or NBP] in this case, because the proletariat [employee] must sell their labor to pay for their debt—creating a reliable source of exploitable labor; “This is secondary exploitation, which runs parallel to the primary exploitation taking place in the production process itself” (Marx 1894 [1991]: 745).

Hence, I argue the meatpacking industry in Liberal provides the labor opportunities, and in effect, the capital with which to foster materialistic values of the Mexican immigrant experience—and with it attain respect and dignity. Furthermore, persistent Mexican migration into Liberal is likely to continue to foster these ideologies and pass them on to following generations. After all, it isn’t cow excrement you smell in southwest meatpacking towns, it’s “the smell of money”.

While there are other job opportunities in Liberal, they are limited. Limited in income security or availability. Furthermore, those jobs may require additional skills or documentation that migrants lack, which explains why employees leave the plant and/or Liberal, but soon find themselves back in both (according to interviewees, an estimated 90 percent)—drawn to income security and the established migrant networks.

La mayoría de la gente no tiene papeles. Pero los mismos Americanos que tienen documentos, ellos te los ofrecen—con que puedan agarrar los impuestos. Los indocumentados, no tenemos acceso a los beneficios. Venimos a trabajar. Si no tienes seguro social no tienes nada / The majority of people [in Liberal] doesn't have documents. Americans who do have documentation offer them to you—as long as they get to collect tax returns. [We] undocumented don't have access to the benefits. We came to work. If you do not have a social security [number] you do not have anything (Paloma).

A few employees echoed the claim that, “if you are not working at NBP, you’re not making a living anywhere else” (Osvaldo). He elaborates, “I know they can’t leave. It’s either NBP or Seaboard [pork processing plant and hog farm] ...also, you can’t make a living working at Walmart... If it’s not the oil field it’s that place. And indeed, many interviewees from both generations tried these other options before ending back at NBP. Most claimed Seaboard treats its employees better, especially if you work in the farm because the pace is much slower, and the jobs are much less monotonous—hence the allure of Seaboard. Rodrigo told me how he absolutely loved his job at Seaboard; his job included extracting material from pig intestines to be used in medicine. Paloma illustrated the pace at the farms by telling me she would arrive to work in the mornings and still have time to drink a coffee and chat with coworkers. However, many come to realize Seaboard is much smaller, does not offer stable pay, and commuting out of town can be a problem. Much like the allure of *el aceite/* the oil [field].

The oil industry has booms and dramatic crashes and is not stable enough to provide for an entire town, in conjunction with a recent severity on providing valid documentation. There is also trucking, but that requires documentation as well as training courses. Some try their luck at opening their own business. In fact, in a previous study I interviewed Mexican immigrant

entrepreneurs, of which a vast majority had worked at NBP Beef. As indicated in the Ethnicity section, there is a strong presence of Mexican-owned businesses in Liberal. However, some attempts are not always sustainable.

Rogelio started a used car sales and mechanic shop in 2000. Sales declined and he started exclusively selling tires. He officially closed in 2014. He then found himself working at Seaboard then as a bus driver, following an injury. Finally, he ended up at NBP beef again, like many of his compatriots, for lack of finding a job with better pay. Frustrated, 27-year-old U.S. born Josue experienced similar grievances after struggling to find stable work in Liberal and the surrounding tristate area, before finally ending back at NBP; “I don't want this job, I don't want to feel like I'm stuck here, I want to get a job and like being there and *still be able to make a living.*”

Then, I had to ask myself, if employment opportunities were so limited and restricted—hindering people with and without legal status—was working at NBP Beef even a *choice*? Despite the apparent emphasis on materialism, not one interviewee expressed the belief that they (the employee) should be paid more, in either generation. On the contrary, they simply asked for more microwaves, clean bathrooms, and respect.

One post-90s employee explained there were “like 500” lunchboxes and 30 microwaves. She told me she witnessed as an older employee steal her food as he opened the microwave, took her lunch, and ate it quickly standing up—all without noticing because he was in that much of a rush. To my surprise, towards the end of our interview, Rodrigo expressed the following:

...si fuéramos más buenos hermanos... no creo que funcionaría. La presión, la necesidad de trabajar, de comer es lo que hace funcionar al mundo—pero con mejor respeto sí/ if we were better brothers and sisters... I don't think it [life] would work. The pressure, the

necessity to work, to eat, is what makes the world function—but more respect would be good (Rodrigo).

These are the traces of a culture bred in the wake of neoliberalism and capitalist ideology.

Therefore, it is important to recognize some of the preconceptions inherent in the culture that allows the normalization of violence to flourish.

Chapter 12 - Enduring Violence

I perceived both pre and post 90s generations to have normalized violence at the plant as part of the mechanism for enduring plant working conditions and navigating inter-ethnic conflict. Underlying all my observations was the way in which both pre and post 90s employees seemed to have normalized abuse as simply being part of the job, or just the way things are— “of all the forms of ‘hidden persuasion,’ the most implacable is the one exerted, quite simply, by the order of things” (Menjivar 2011: 172). Menjivar (2011: 30) describes the normalization of violence as the “conceptualization of ‘normalized’ as ‘legitimized ideologically such that domination, dependency, and inequality are not only tolerated but accepted””.

Neoliberal market reforms foster “political violence and structural violence, in the form of unemployment and underemployment and increased economic inequality”, which has disrupted the Mexican economy and made it impossible for people to make ends meet. There is evidence in the increased levels of delinquency (narcotics and cartel violence) which “represent the counterpart to the deterioration of labor market opportunities and sustained high levels of inequality” (Menjivar 2011: 49). These political and economic factors force people to move abroad to support their families, and work in the most precarious and degrading jobs. Work in the U.S. is becoming more precarious, dangerous, and degrading, and migrants are ensnared in these processes to a great extent—unwittingly leading them ideologically legitimize domination, dependency, and inequality within the workplace and community.

Employees may seek variety in their monotonous, routine work lives through counter-intuitive ways—for example raging rumors, drama, and inciting conflict. However, it is a strategy for endurance nonetheless; ““from a sociological standpoint, the reaction of some of society's most vulnerable members in the form of unorthodox means to escape absolute and

relative deprivation is predictable.’ From this angle one can trace the violence of common crime to structural and political violence, as well as to the creation of a “culture of terror” that normalizes violence in the private and public spheres, and can begin to understand how those who experience it end up directing their brutality against themselves rather than against the structures that oppress them” (Menjivar 2011; 39).

I argue that NBP Beef and Liberal combined provide employees a sense of certainty and significance that make enduring the plant conditions possible. Certainty can be found in extensive family networks, established migrating networks, in the financial stability the plant offers, and in the quiet nature of the town. Both the town and plant can provide significance in different ways. NBP provides the financing that allows people to afford luxury items, in addition to making a living—which encourages them to feel significant in its consequence. The town provides relative comfort outside the plant. Maybe it is the feeling of being among “your own people” as some employees mentioned. Or maybe it is the ability to go just about anywhere in town and find someone who can understand you. Most of the interviewees in the pre 90s generation emphasized the importance of language, and the respect in being able to be understood and “speak for oneself” as well as “defend oneself”—feeling significant.

The overwhelming response to, “why are you here?”, tended to be family and money. Not, “because I am forced to”. I think it was necessary to look beyond and acknowledge that violence does not always, “present itself in the form of visible wounds, bullets, and bodies. It is the thread that connects the suffering of the ...[people] who suffer and endure—in the form of physical or psychological assaults, low pay, belittling, and gossip— often in silence” (Menjivar 2011: 175).

Chapter 13 - Conclusion

National Beef is a different experience at night. As I drive on the overpass past the plant, the polluting fumes being pumped into the air look like fluffy, gray clouds. The lampposts scattered across the complex give it a warm glow, and machinery's blinking lights make the plant look alive. After conducting my research, I have a newfound awe for the plant and the curious way in which the plant has acquired an identity and become an entity all of its own—a city within a city. Not to be mistaken with admiration for the company itself, I am in awe of all that is sacrificed by its employees to keep it standing. Of all the literal blood, sweat and tears being shed inside of the plant in that very moment.

Liberal and its status as an ethnic enclave is what keeps people in town, and in effect, they turn to NBP as the most viable job option. I claim endurance strategies are aimed at sustaining membership in this Mexican ethnic enclave, in order to increase the likelihood of higher social mobility for oneself and family. I argue NBP Beef and Liberal combined provide employees a sense of certainty and significance that make enduring the plant conditions possible. They find certainty in extensive family networks, established migrating networks, in the financial stability and social mobility the plant offers—NBP also provides the steady financing that affords people to relatively live beyond their means. The town offers a low cost of living and relative comfort, if not excitement, outside the plant. All these factors intersect to create a very unique lifestyle not common elsewhere within the United States. I also perceived both pre and post 90s generations to have normalized violence at the plant as part of the mechanism for enduring plant working conditions and navigating inter-ethnic conflict. The social and economic networks that Liberal provides motivate ethnic retention, protects employees from insecurity and

discrimination, while simultaneously limiting their willingness to seek opportunities beyond Liberal and the plant.

Something that surprised me was Liberal's vital role in retaining the Mexican population—for both generations. I was aware the older generations liked Liberal because it was “safe” and “tranquil”. However, the younger generation has always been much less generous with Liberal calling it “boring”, full of “drama”. Everyone claims the town stinks and they “can't wait to get out of here”—after all, it literally smells like cow poop. Yet, at the end of the day it's home. People's ‘knee-jerk’ response to why they worked at National and lived in Liberal was “money”. However, something was just not adding up. After all, the average household income in Liberal was lower than both the state and national average. And while I had to dig through a lot of hometown shaming, people eventually recognized it was home—and that was the reason they had stayed or kept coming back.

I would have liked to go beyond the scope of this project and conducted interviews in the other two major meatpacking towns in southwest Kansas, Garden City and Dodge City. Liberal is only one of the three major meatpacking towns in southwest Kansas, however, all three towns share a similar cultural structure based on a Hispanic majority, meatpacking, and immigrant labor. I specifically focused on Liberal because it is my hometown and allowed me the most access and rapport. I would like to see other scholars conduct similar research in other Kansas meatpacking towns and see if the presence of an ethnic enclave (or lack thereof) has as significant effect on labor force retention. It is my hope that in highlighting the importance of an ethnic enclave environment in one meatpacking town, this research can be used to understand the role of ethnic networks and the power of labor security in other rural, new destinations. As rural

Kansan towns depopulate, it is worth noting how vital these meatpacking towns have become not only to the local economy—but to meat-eaters in the U.S. and across the globe.

This past winter, I visited a small *Pueblo Mágico* or “Magic Town” in the Mexican coastal state of Jalisco. I sat on a bench to eat street corn from a cup after a long day of exploring Chapala—a unique, culture-rich, traditional “Magic Town”. After conducting such extensive research on NBP, knowing the breadth of their global markets, as well as the excruciating lengths that employees went to meet the insatiable demands of those global markets—I should not have been surprised. I was *not* surprised to see a scroungy alley-dog get kicked out of a butcher’s shop, and head over to chew on blood-stained cardboard boxes. I shooed away the dog, flipped the box right-side up and read “National Beef” in sky-blue letters, next to an illustrated cow head. I should not have been surprised—but I was. It seems there really is no escaping “the Beef”.

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Appendix A - Interview Guide

In what year were you born?

Where were you born? If not in Liberal, could you tell me the story of how you got to Liberal?

What are your first memories of Liberal?

What did you do for fun (either when you were a child or when you first arrived in Liberal)?

What do you do for fun now?

How many generations of your family live in Liberal? How long have they lived here? What do they do for a living? How often do you see them?

When did you get your first job at the plant? How did you hear about the job? What did you first think/how did you first feel about the prospect of the job at the plant? What made you pursue the job? What was going on in your life? What did you expect from the job?

What did you know about the plant before you applied for a job there? Examples?

How did you get a job at the plant? Could you walk me through the process, from the very first step? (Then what happened? Then what happened?)

Could you walk me through your very first day on the job? Get ample detail, step by step, all feelings, thoughts, observations, events.

How does your job relate to other work you've done in the past?

How many jobs have you had at the plant? Could you walk me through each one, and tell me how long you held each position? What did you do? Who did you work with? What was a

typical day like? How did you hear about the next job? How much competition was there for each job? Examples? How did you get the job? (Repeat for each position.)

What are your responsibilities at work? What are the requirements for your position? What happens if you or a co-worker doesn't meet them? What happens? Could you give me an example? What does it take to meet the requirements of the job?

How often do you get breaks at work? What do you do on your break? Who do you see? Could you tell me about a recent break?

Who are your bosses or managers? When do you see them? What do you talk about? What do they do? How often do you see them outside of work? Examples?

Has your job ever been threatened? What happened? How many times has it been threatened? What did you think you would do? How did you manage to keep your job?

How does your job relate to your aspirations?

Can you think of a recent day at work that is fairly typical of most work days for you? Could you tell me what happened that day, from the very beginning?

Who do you see during the day at the plant? What are they doing, and what are you doing, when you see them? What do you talk about? Who starts the conversations? Where do you talk? Do you spend time together outside of work? What are your co-workers like? What is your relationship with your coworkers like?

What advice do you give to new employees/co-workers? Examples?

Have you helped other people get jobs at the plant? Who? Could you tell me about that? Did they get the job? How are they doing?

Could you tell me a story of one of the best days you've had at work? The worst? What happened? Who was there? What did you do about the worst day?

Could you give me a virtual tour of the plant?

What do you do when you get off of work? Where do you go? Who do you see? What do you do? Could you give me an example of a recent day? What do you do before work?

What do you do on your days off? Who do you see? Where do you go?

If you grew up in Liberal, could you describe your earliest memories of the town? What did your house look like? What did your neighborhood look like? What did your school look like?

What does your house now look like? What does your neighborhood look like?

How long have you known your neighbors? How do you know them? How long have you been neighbors? What do they do for a living?

Could you give me a virtual tour of the town? Could you describe it to me in detail—as if I were someone who had never been to Kansas, or even the United States?

How has Liberal changed (since you were a child/since you moved here)? How does Liberal compare with Dodge and Garden?

Could you tell me about a day in the life of your significant others?

How many family members do you have in Liberal? Extended family?

What is the future of this town? What does it need? Where is it going?

Do you feel part of the Liberal community? why or why not? Examples?

Can you tell me a day where you felt proud to be part of the community? What about a time you felt angry at the community?

Could you tell me about the school? The churches? How many denominations are in town? Restaurants? Stores? If you want to eat out or go shopping where do you go?

Could you tell me about the day you first saw an immigrant in Liberal from Central America? From Somalia? From Asia? Where and how did you encounter this person? How often do you encounter immigrants from other countries? Where and how do you encounter them?

Do you spend time with immigrants from other countries? Could you tell me some stories?

How do you feel about new immigrants (from all countries) coming into the community?

What happens around (town) for the holidays? What are some highlights of the summer/winter season?

Tell me about some of your kid's friends? Who do they hang out with?

What has been your favorite place to work? What did you love about it?

What are the top reasons you live in Liberal?

Have you recommended any friends or family to live in Liberal?

Can you give me examples of people who stay versus people who leave?

If the plant were to shut down, what would you do?