

THE HANDS THAT FEED US: ENDEMIC PRECARITY AND PANDEMIC
RESISTANCE AMONG MIGRANT FOOD PROCESSING WORKERS

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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This dissertation research examines how precarity was experienced and resisted by migrant food processing workers in the Pacific Northwest, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Challenging the exceptionalizing narratives of precarity that emerged during the global health crisis the research brings to the front what I called *endemic precarity*: the usually uneventful and unrecognized bodily and emotional harm and maiming that is endemic to the industry and that was constantly present in the workers' own words and formal complaints, even at the height of the pandemic. Drawing upon interviews with 60 migrant and second generation workers employed in 20 food processing companies in Oregon and Washington, the content analysis of all the complaints filed with LNI from March 1st to December 31st 2020 regarding these companies, and interviews with 15 managers, labor and community organizers and others stakeholders, this research 1) reconstructs workers' migratory and employment trajectories to the Pacific Northwest; 2) exposes the organized disregard for their bodies inside and outside the packing plants before COVID-19; and 3) discusses the particular shape that this previous *endemic precarity* took in the midst of the pandemic, and the ways in which migrant and now "essential" food processing workers organized collectively to resist their *disposability* and to be able to build forms of collective care.

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Picture 1: 'La Última Cosecha' by Analee Fuentes (2020). Art given by the artist for this project.

1. BODIES THAT (DON'T) MATTER

*A white man, probably around 40 years old, smiles to the camera. He is standing on an elevated rail, in the middle of an apple packing house. He explains to the interviewer that this facility is one of the most advanced in the United States. A close-up shows the name of a new machine that has been incorporated into the processing line. For the next 30 seconds, apples are submerged in water and chemicals, and move through conveyor belts while a box carousel hangs off the ceiling. We are then invited into a room with computers, where two other white men stare at two screens. Black-and-white images of apples move through the displays as the men discuss highlights of the new technology. Apples continue to move through different rails. Minutes pass while the men discuss the images on the computer screen. Until this point, as a viewer, one would assume the labor process is fully automated. The only workers we have seen so far are these two white men, looking at the screens. Then, near the end of the video, a close-up of the apples reveals hands. **Hands moving fast, picking, sorting, packing, bagging.***

Rita¹, Felicia, Claribel, Angie, Felicia's 13-year-old daughter Lorena, and I are making packages with hand sanitizer, masks, gift cards for the local Latinx grocery store, water, and information pamphlets about the union and about COVID-19 safety. Felicia quickly organizes us into a 'production line.' There is no time to waste: we have two hours before the vaccination clinic they are hosting opens to the public, but folks are already lining up outside of the union hall. As we pack, we chat. I ask them about 'la huelga.' Why do they think people walked out of the packing plants? Rita answers without taking her eyes off the task: "Fear, fear of getting sick, of getting their families sick. In any case, how much worse could they treat us? What was the worst that could happen to us at this point? They treat us so badly, like animals...when the machines break, they come running to get them fixed, but us? If we were tired and hurt, they would make the lines go faster, if we would get injured you can imagine how they treated us... in the packing plants the machines are more important than human beings. Isn't that sad?"

I begin this dissertation with these two images because they encapsulate, in different ways, the primary themes that motivate this research—precarity, embodiment, collective action—and serve to juxtapose a recurrent narrative of what manufacturing allegedly looks like in the U.S. against the lived experiences of people like Rita, who work on the lines of the *forgotten factories* that produce the food that feeds us. Contrary to the fiction of a labor process without workers, as portrayed in the packing plant's promotional video, Rita's words point to what is symptomatically left out of the frame:

¹ All the names used in this dissertation are pseudonyms to preserve the confidentiality of the research participants.

the bodily and emotional harm precarious migrant workers endure daily in American food processing plants. As she says, on these shop floors machines get fixed but the pain inflicted on workers' bodies is ignored, their injuries disregarded. In this dissertation, I discuss labor precarity as it emerges from workers own narratives, who foregrounded the embodied, temporal, and emotional dimensions of their working and living conditions. In this way, how labor precarity is inscribed and felt in migrant workers' bodies becomes the guiding question of this project. This implies recentring the body at work—the migrant laboring body—as a central site from which to contribute to ongoing discussions about precarity and precariousness in the workplace and beyond it.

The initial images also allow me to introduce an unexpected but key protagonist of this work: COVID-19. As much as this is a dissertation about precarious migrant workers and their experiences of bodily and emotional harm, it is also a dissertation about the COVID-19 pandemic and the ways in which, amid this global health crisis, workers publicly exposed and acted against the *endemic precarity* they already faced (Azmanova et al. 2021; Schaap et al. 2022). In many ways, the pandemic inverted “capitalism’s normal visibilities” (Salzinger 2021:492). Through the discourse of ‘essential work,’ gendered and racialized work that had remained on the margins of our field of vision reappeared in the scene. For some weeks of 2020, food processing workers—who are mostly migrants, women, and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC)—made headlines: they were getting sick and dying at a disproportionate rate (Carrillo and Ipsen 2021; Stuesse 2021a). Despite the claims that we were “all in this together,” a profoundly uneven distribution of risk, vulnerability, and harm was made evident in the daily statistics. The numbers of confirmed cases of infection and the death toll mapped our

social landscape along class, gender, and race lines, charting the inequalities that differentiate certain bodies and lives from others (Laster Pirtle and Wright 2021; Wolfe et al. 2022).

However, the pandemic crisis made food processing workers' precarity seem, more than ever, "a matter of astonishing events" (Apostolidis 2019: 4), simultaneously obscuring the built-in and ongoing disregard for migrant workers' bodily integrity that is at the heart of the organization of work in the food processing industry. Workers then struggled to redirect the sudden (and fleeting) public attention they received as essential workers toward the systemic harm they had long endured.

In this research I interrupt the exceptionalizing narratives of precarity that emerged during the COVID-19 crisis. Through workers' *testimonios*, I bring to the forefront the usually uneventful and unrecognized bodily and emotional harm that is endemic to the industry—an *endemic precarity* that was constantly present in food processing migrant workers' own words, actions, protest signs, and formal complaints, before, during the height of the pandemic, and that continues today.

If, in the face of a health crisis, bodily experiences become a central site from which to think about precarity, then we have to ask how migrant workers' bodies *do not matter*—in the sense that their well-being and integrity are systematically disregarded by both employers and social institutions; how the specific marks of those bodies *do matter*—in order to construct them as disposable (Rocco 2016; Wright 2006) and as available for maiming (Puar 2017); and, finally, how workers struggle to *make their bodies matter*. To do this, in the following chapters I reconstruct and analyze workers' migratory and employment trajectories in the U.S., the organized disregard for their

bodies inside and outside the packing plants before COVID-19, the shape that this previous *endemic precarity* took in the midst of the pandemic, and the ways in which workers organized collectively to resist their *disposability* and to be able to care for themselves and others.

Bridging Precarity at Work and in Life

The expansion of precarious conditions for life in a world in crisis have inspired a rich research agenda on the changing conditions of work. In this sense, precarity has been understood as the ongoing expansion of unprotected, insecure, and unstable work (Alberti et al. 2018; Kalleberg 2009; Vosko, MacDonald, and Campbell 2009) and broader conversations about the uneven distribution of vulnerability and risk and about what it means to live precariously at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression, exploitation, dispossession, and violence (Butler 2006; Millar 2018; Puar et al. 2012).

In its more narrow use, precarity has meant precarious employment, usually characterized as having contingent employment relationships, and/or unpredictable schedules and unstable hours, low wages, increased workplace hazards, and as lacking benefits and union representation (Arnold and Bongiovi 2013; Ikeler 2019; Mccrate 2012; Vallas and Kalleberg 2017; Vosko 2002). The term was constructed comparatively, as a way to trace how more stable forms of employment that were once available for some workers in the Global North have been eroded by neoliberal reforms.² Precarity in

² Work precarity as used by these authors has been constructed in comparison to the Standard Employment Relation (SER), which is usually understood as “full-time continuous employment relationship where the worker has one employer, works on the employer’s premises under his or her direct supervision, normally in a unionized sector, and has access to social benefits and entitlements that complete the social wage” (Vosko 2006:6). This comparative use of the term has been criticized because it erases that the SER was only enjoyed by a small percentage of the global working class, primarily white men in the Global North (Armano, Bove, and Murgia 2017; Arnold and Bongiovi 2013; Bonacich, Alimahomed, and Wilson 2008; Mezzadra 2011).

this sense has been connected to negative impacts on worker well-being, job satisfaction, and family life (Clawson 2014; Golden, Henly, and Lambert 2013; Henly and Lambert 2014; Kalleberg 2018; Schneider and Harknett 2019), and to growing labor market inequality (Adamson and Roper 2019; Andersson, Holzer, and Lane 2005; Burchell et al. 2014; Kalleberg 2011; Vosko et al. 2009; Waldinger 2003).

In the background of many of these discussions, there is a broader shift in societal arrangements that have created even more unstable and insecure conditions for life in late capitalism. On top of growing income inequality, the active dismantling of social protections, the financial deregulation and growth of debt, and the intensification of the effects of the environmental crisis caused by uncontrolled production and the depletion of vital natural resources have produced a precarity of life that exceeds mere working conditions. In particular, the crisis of work has been linked to a concomitant *crisis of care* or of *social reproduction*, also resulting from neoliberal reforms. Productive work has always been sustained by social reproduction: the set of practices and institutions for the nurturing and regeneration of the workforce that has been historically done by the unpaid, underpaid, or unrecognized labor of women, particularly women of color (Bhattacharya 2017; Fraser 2014; Hester and Srnicek 2017; Mezzadri and Majumder 2020; Rai, Hoskyns, and Thomas 2014). This crisis manifests in the “pressures from several directions that are currently squeezing a key set of social capacities” (Fraser 2016a:99) that are central to life-making—caring for children and the elderly, educating youth, healing ill bodies, maintaining households and broader communities, etc.—and speaks directly to the possibility of engaging in productive activities. In this way, the precarity

produced by the crisis of social reproduction and the precarity produced at work exacerbate one another.

At the same time, precarity has been more broadly theorized in its relation to precariousness, understood as an ontological condition of vulnerability common to all life (Butler 2006, 2009). For Judith Butler, precariousness emerges with life itself and is a shared condition, a condition that relates not only to the fragility of life but also to our interdependence. Precarity here names the uneven distribution of that vulnerability, the fact that not all of us experience the same exposure to risk, injury, and death, underscoring that some populations marked by intersecting histories of oppression experience precariousness disproportionately. Butler considers this uneven distribution through the frames that justify war and violence, which make certain lives grievable and make others less so. In her questioning of what makes a life grievable, and which lives we grieve, she argues that what is at issue are the conditions under which life takes place, understanding life as “something that requires conditions in order to become livable life and, indeed, in order to become grievable” (2009:23). Discussing the treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, Butler shows how certain lives bear a disproportionate burden of economic inequality, political exclusion, and “differential exposure to violence and death” (2009:25). Instead of leading to mutual recognition, she argues, our shared condition of precariousness has led to the specific exploitation of targeted populations whose lives are not considered lives, who are cast as destructible, ungrievable, and, one could add, disposable. The deaths that result from this uneven exposure to violence are then justified as necessary—as essential—to protect or support the lives of others who do in fact have ‘grievable lives.’

In the past years, a group of scholars have bridged these two discussions—precarity as a labor condition and precariousness as an ontological experience—producing insightful and potent analyses of the relation between precarity at work and precarity in life (Allison 2013; Millar 2018; Muehlebach 2012; Povinelli 2011; Rossiter and Neilson 2005; Tsing 2015). These theorizations have been able to expand discussions of precarity at work beyond a focus on its objective conditions (Vosko et al. 2009) to unpack how material conditions translate into lived experiences, affective dispositions, and subjectivities (Millar 2017). These studies suggest that there is something that exceeds work, although intrinsically connected to it, in the precarity we experience. In her work on unemployed youth in Japan, Anne Allison explores “how precarity gets lived,” (2013:17) by connecting changes in Japan’s economy to the disintegration of affective structures that provided connection and support to low-wage workers, and by reflecting on the affective and temporal aspects of precarity. Precarity for her, as is the case for labor sociologists, marks the loss of certain conditions of life that although never enjoyed by most of the workers around the world, did exist concretely for some and functioned as a normative aspiration for many. In these theorizations, precarity at work is compounded by precarity of life, of place, and of family relations, in more comprehensive ways than those usually captured by precarious work research (Allison 2013; Millar 2018; Pratt 2012; Stewart 2012). For Anna Tsing, studying precarity means exploring the indeterminacy and the conditions of life without the promise of stability; importantly, precarity allows us to consider our vulnerability in a shared world beyond human life (Tsing 2015). As Tayyab Mahmud explains, “precarity is not simply a problem of political economy with a focus on labor markets and their neoliberal

restructuring, but rather a biopolitical question of capital's differential modes of capture and colonization of life within the wage-relation and beyond it" (Mahmud 2014:725).

It is within this conversation that I place my analysis of the experiences of precarious migrant food processing workers, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although food processing is a more traditional industry than those that have been the main focus of the previously mentioned authors, I build from insights of these discussions to address precarity in its multiple dimensions. In this dissertation I not only analyze precarity as degraded working conditions, but also as eroded capacities to life-making activities, as an uneven distribution of risk and harm, and as a lived *embodied* experience. Thus, I discuss precarious working conditions of migrant food processing workers and their effects of bodily harm, the disregard ingrained in social institutions beyond the shopfloor, the deepening of the social reproduction crisis during the pandemic (Mezzadri 2022; Salzinger 2021), and the emotional impacts and affective dispositions that emerge from these dimensions. I mobilize these theoretical insights to capture how precarity is inscribed in the body and *lived* by migrant food processing workers. Moreover, I draw on Butler's theorization to frame my analysis of the uneven distribution of injury and harm during the COVID-19 crisis, which was particularly articulated in the warmongering language of the battle against the virus.

Precarity as Uneven Debilitation and Disposability

The uneven distribution of precariousness is embodied in a double sense. First, it is distributed along gendered, raced, and classed lines, marks resulting from histories and current systems of oppression, dispossession, and exploitation that force bodies into different but intertwined forms of subjection (Flores Garrido 2020; Millar 2017; Neilson

and Rossiter 2008; Yuval-Davis 2015). Second, it is embodied as its effects are translated into differential exposure of these populations to bodily harm and death.

Butler's assertion that our shared precariousness is not evenly recognized, and that precarity then means having a life that is ungrievable, appears in the *organized abandonment* of racialized populations that are subjected to processes of harm, impairment, premature disability, and premature death as the result of workplace arrangements (Freshour 2016; Gilmore 2009; Puar 2017; Tyner 2019). Precarity then means that certain populations are made available for injury and consigned to having an accident or to being maimed, and in this availability, they are also exposed to the more mundane and unrecognized forms of harm that make up what Jasbir Puar calls 'debilitation.' Debilitation connects the existence of instances of violence, accidents, and deaths with a more diffuse wearing down of bodies that does not take the form of an event, that is "endemic rather than epidemic or exceptional," but, at the same time, not less violent. In other words, experiencing debilitating forms of precarity means living a 'slow death' that fails to register as such, that is only attributed to 'natural causes,' or 'the cost of doing business' (Allison 2013; Berlant 2007; Puar 2017).

Puar further argues that these uneven processes of bodily harm are obscured by current forms of understanding disability. The main legal and social frames that recognize disability tend to either conceive it as a strictly individual medical condition that forgoes social causes or to exceptionalize it as a minoritarian identity. Feminist disability studies scholars (Garland-Thomson 1994, 2011) have put into question this exceptionalization of disability by temporalizing it as an unavoidable condition for

everyone that results for our common ontological vulnerability to contingency (in the form of inescapable albeit variable illness or simple aging).

However, it has been noted that discussions of disability have not properly addressed the interplay of disability and race and the fact that impairment or disability do not contingently happen to certain bodies independent of power relations (Schalk and Kim 2020). In a similar way, Puar (2017) argues that the *debilitation* of certain populations is not a matter of fortune or the simple by-product of social injustices, but a necessary fact within systems of oppression and exploitation. Further, the debilitation of racialized populations, she argues, “is constitutive of the very mechanisms that enable [...] to imagine disability as something that one acquires inevitably rather than something that is unevenly endemic to the quotidian realities of poverty, permanent war, racism, imperialism, and colonialism” (Puar 2017:67). For example, racialized populations are subjected to debilitating and short lives that precisely because they are cut short, they do not participate in this alleged universal experience of the vulnerability and dependence of old age. In the case of this research, I argue that migrant workers' debilitation, premature disability, and premature death as a result of their working conditions needs to be understood in this way. Puar thus insists that the binary able/disabled needs not to be universalized by temporalizing it as unavoidable but modulated by the notion of *debility*, which allows us to capture how capacity or incapacity are not fixed or definite attributes but shifting conditions unevenly distributed in terms of race, gender, migratory status, and class. While some scholars working within disability studies have pointed out that the production of disability and debilitation is connected to current conditions of globalized austerity, precarity, and class inequalities (Erevelles 2016; Kafer 2013; McRuer 2018),

their analyses tend to skip in-depth studies of concrete workplaces or labor processes of the kind proposed by this dissertation.

Understanding debility and disability as a continuum, as Puar argues, is particularly relevant for analyzing the effect of precarity on migrant workers' bodies. Their presence already made precarious by the technology of the border (De Genova 2005; De Genova and Peutz 2010; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), migrant workers become singularly *disposable*: their labor demanded, but their lives discarded (Chang 2000; Ribas 2016; Rocco 2016). They are employed in especially dangerous industries, face neglect by the social institutions that are allegedly there to offer care and support, and have their lives cut short by the risk and harm they face daily (Apostolidis 2019). Migrant workers' disposability does not just imply 'deportability' (Clark 2016; Golash-Boza 2015), or forceful removal, but also appears in forms of daily bodily harm which are denied by and embedded in a broader structural vulnerability (Holmes 2011; Quesada, Hart, and Bourgois 2011).

The food processing industry in the U.S. has historically relied on vulnerable populations, especially women of color and migrant workers, to carry out a fast-paced and dangerous production process. It is not surprising that researchers looking into the experiences of migrant workers in the food industry have recently turned to discussions of bodily harm and disability (Holmes 2020; Saxton 2021; Unterberger 2018), examining the ways in which the system of workers' compensation denies them the ability to recover, and functions, on the contrary, as a continuation of the harm they have already experienced (Castillo 2018; Hall and Greenman 2015; Saxton and Stuesse 2018; Stuesse 2018). What is missing from most of this research is an understanding of the ways in

which debilitation and disposability are intimately linked, the ways in which insurance and health systems created to deal with accidents are unwilling and unable to respond to the impacts of processes of ongoing harm that are more diffuse, and that, as I show in my research, particularly impact migrant women.

Migrant workers' debilitation and disposability are predicated on a systematic disregard for their bodily integrity and are connected to specific forms of organization and control of the labor process in the industry. The border as a technology not only multiplies labor by creating categories of workers who are particularly dispossessed, but also allows and legitimizes forms of bodily harm within the shopfloor that translate into debilitation, premature disability, and—particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic—premature death.

Revisiting the Laboring Body

In the previous sections, I pointed toward a broad interest in the *embodied* aspects of *precarity*, understood, as Butler argues, in terms of an uneven distribution of *precariousness* that is particularly inscribed on bodies: in terms of gender, race, class, and nationality. Following Puar, I then focused on some of the effects precarity has on certain bodies from which forms of disability or impairment emerge, but which also imply a more ubiquitous and endemic gradual wearing down of bodies. While those theorizing disability and debilitation have only tangentially addressed these issues in relation to the workplace and its laboring bodies, their insights are indispensable to think through the conditions that migrant food processing workers encounter on the shopfloor. In this section, I consider how we can think about the embodied aspects of precarity by returning to the body at work, to draw both from classic insights of Marxist theory to newer

theorizations within labor sociology regarding embodied work and emotional labor.

While these later scholars have been primarily interested in service sector workers— they have re-centered the body at work in ways that, I argue, must be incorporated into analysis of manufacturing work.

The peculiar commodity labor power

To think about the laboring body and its corporal sufferings on the shopfloor, I first turn to Marx's critique of the modern capitalist factory system and the "tanning" (1977: 280) to which workers' bodies are subjected within it. Particularly in *Capital* (1977), in the chapters "On the Working Day" and "Machinery and Large-Scale Industry," Marx documents the debilitating harm the factory organization of nineteenth-century England, and employers' hunger for always longer working days, inflicted on the flesh of workers, producing tired, diseased, maimed, and injured bodies as much as it produced commodities.

Less discussed, however, is the *bodily dimension* of Marx's concept of "labor power" itself (Fracchia 2008; McNally 2003; Rioux 2015; Scarry 1985; Tyner 2019). This "special commodity" is precisely defined by Marx as "the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being, capabilities which he [sic] sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind" (Marx, 1976: 270). The fact that human corporal capacities are sold and bought as "labor power" is a fundamental fact of capitalist relations of production. But, as Marx points out, unlike other commodities that are necessary for production, labor power only exists in the workers' living bodies, it cannot be separated from them. While the capitalist purchases the abstract capacity to work, what it gets is a worker, a living being with

language, emotions, a body that needs rest and care. In other words, the whole being of the worker is enmeshed in the production process; labor power and its ‘bearer’ are one. The peculiarity of this ‘fictitious commodity’ (Polanyi 1957), translates into an ongoing antagonism within the production process, between the tendency and desire of capital to treat labor power as any other disembodied commodity, and the insurmountable fact of its *living* character that makes this impossible. Capital’s fantasy to produce without workers –to be able to create value from living labor without engaging with the living being that possesses this capacity– has important implications for the organization of the labor process and for this dissertation.

First, because the capacity to work is effectively sold as it was any other commodity, this means that workers’ bodies are available during the agreed workday to be put to *use* as any other commodity would: in the buyers’ own terms and for their exclusive goal. The aim for valorization, the never-ending search for profit, is thus fundamentally imposed upon working bodies with no regard for anything but their capacity to produce. Moreover, it implies the subsumption of the complex temporalities, the social and individual rhythms and cycles, of the laboring body and its activity to the abstract and homogenous time of production (Postone 1993; Thompson 1967; Tomba 2013; Tombazos 2014). In this sense, capitalist production is *indifferent* to laboring bodies’ concreteness and temporalities; it must disregard any other non-productive corporeal temporality or bodily process (Andueza et al. 2021; Arruzza 2015b). “Capital asks no questions about the length of life of labor power. What interests it is purely and simply the maximum of labor power that can be set in motion in a working day” (Marx 1977:376). This means, continues Marx, that:

By extending the working day, therefore, capitalist production (...) not only produces a deterioration of human labor-power by robbing it of its normal moral and physical conditions of development and activity, but also produces the premature exhaustion and death of this labor power as well (1977:376).

The degradation, wearing down, and maiming of workers' bodies in production that is a focus of this dissertation, its premature disability and even premature death, needs to be understood not merely as a historical fact related to the development of capitalism, a relic from more brutal early stages of manufacturing, but also as a structural and chronic consequence of capital's own logic.

Furthermore, the *embodiment* of labor power has implications regarding how this particular commodity is made available for purchase. For this commodity to be in the market it needs to be produced and constantly reproduced as a *living* being, differing profoundly from the manufacturing of all other commodities. In this sense, Marx argues that labor power is not naturally available but historically produced. The fact that certain people are “compelled to offer for sale [...] that very labour-power which exists only in his *living body*” (Marx, 1977: 272) is related to historical processes of *dispossession* that Marx names as *primitive accumulation*. However, recently scholars have argued that these processes are never fully finalized and have to be permanently reproduced by constantly separating workers from their means of subsistence in order to compel them to sell their bodily capacities as labor power (Boutang 2018; Federici 2014; Sassen 2010).

More importantly, an “extended scholarly rethinking of capitalism” argues that these processes are “always already embedded in gendered and racialized relations of extraction and expropriation” (Salzinger 2021:494). On the one hand, the concept of *racial capitalism* highlights how the historical production of ‘free’ labor power and the

development of capitalist production have always been intertwined with racialized and embodied forms of unfree labor such as slavery (Chakravartty and da Silva 2012; Dawson 2016; Fraser 2016b; Gilmore 2002; Glenn 2015; Melamed 2015; Robinson 2000). On the other hand, Marxist Feminist scholars have brought attention to another central but absent dimension of Marx's analysis of the production of living labor as a commodity: the sexed and gendered reproductive work required for sustaining the life of workers (Dalla Costa and Dalla Costa 1999; Federici 2012, 2021; Mies 1998). The treatment of labor power as disembodied by capital's logic implies the *unrecognition* of this fundamental work and the multiple relations with others that nurture workers' lives. Further, the erasure of social reproductive activities translates into the negation of workers' care responsibilities outside of work, and the persistence of gendered unpaid labor that many women are required to complete after they are done with their formal employment (Barrett 1980; Gimenez 2005; Hochschild 1989) .

Finally, the fact that *labor power* is inseparable from the worker's living body makes it indeed a "special commodity" as well as a strange purchase that grounds the need for its control in the labor process. Because, although employers have rightfully bought it for a certain amount of time every day, the effort in the production process—the intensity with which mental and bodily capacities are put to work—is not fixed in advance. When purchasing labor power, employers do not buy a known, fixed, quantity of labor but instead an indeterminate capacity to perform labor activities, which, additionally, they cannot make use of fully at their will as they do with other commodities. Not, at least, without encountering active or passive resistances from this particularly *embodied, living* commodity. The very corporeality of labor power appears then as a potential limit to

capital accumulation. Moreover, the continuous use of this commodity throughout the production process depends on it effectively showing up to work every day. Labor power is not a commodity that can be simply and safely stored in the warehouse, as are other inputs of the production process. Its presence in the labor process is not necessarily assured: labor power is a mobile commodity.

The embodied *double indeterminacy* of labor power (Smith 2006), thus, grounds both labor and capital's antagonism in production and the need for management's control in the labor process (Braverman 1975; Edwards 1979; Friedman 1977). Within capitalist production human life and activity needs to be subsumed to the logic of accumulation, which requires management to exercise control over workers to ensure profits, leading to the systematic disregard for workers' bodily and emotional integrity. In the next section, I discuss in more detail the role of labor control and its impacts on workers' bodies.

Putting embodied commodities to use: organization and control of the labor process

In order to realize and expand profits, the employer must engage in a process in which they can ensure the worker produces commodities in the most efficient and productive way, what is called the capitalist labor process. Here, *labor control* emerges as a key concept to understand the ways in which employers deal with labor power's double indeterminacy, in other words, the strategies, mechanisms, and techniques that are needed to translate labor power into work (Smith 2015; Thompson 2010a).

In his text '*Labor and Monopoly Capital*' (1975), Harry Braverman, who started the tradition known as *labor process analysis*, provided a detailed discussion of Frederick Taylor's transformation of the production process in the early years of the 20th century,

highlighting the impacts of the dissociation of the labor process from the skills of the workers, the separation of conception from execution and the monopoly of knowledge of the labor process in the hands of management. Following him, Richard Edwards (1979) conceptualized different forms of control over the labor process based, for example, on direct relations between managers and workers (simple control), through the introduction of technology on the lines (technical control), through formal rules and relations (bureaucratic control). Anthony Friedman (1977) showed how certain flexible forms of organization of the labor process could lead to workers self-controlling and exercising more effort, and Michael Burawoy unpacked how employers could create consent from workers through shop floor ‘games’ (1979).

Burawoy (1985) also coined the notion of factory regimes, which can vary from more *despotic* forms—which resort to direct violence and force—to more *hegemonic* ones—which rely on the manufacturing of consent on the shop floor—or a composite of these two types. For him, this difference depends on the historical contexts and the forms of the institutions that shape the conditions of work (such as the existence or non-existence of a welfare state), which he calls politics *of* production.

The notion of factory regimes has retained its analytical value for its ability to connect relations in production to relations of production. However, Burawoy was unable to account for inequalities not directly determined by the structure of the labor process, primarily concerning race, gender, and migratory status, and how the labor process was not organized in ways that were ‘indifferent’ to them. On the contrary, differential forms of control are linked to workers’ specific bodies (Bair 2010; Orzeck 2007). In this sense, the fantasy of disembodied labor power coexists with the appropriation, incorporation,

and reproduction of structures of oppression that mark workers' bodies differentially. 'Labor power' effectively comes embodied in different bodies, which are differently incorporated into the labor process, and controlled in distinct ways (Wolkowitz 2006, 2012). Scholars like Ching Kwan Lee (1998), Ngai Pun (2005), Leslie Salzinger (2003), Melissa Wright (2006), and Elena Baglioni (2021) effectively showed how gender operates as means of control, as an organizing principle of relations at the point of production, and how the workplace is at the same time a site for gender construction, formation, and reproduction.

Migratory status has important implications for labor control. Thinking about the incorporation of workers into different labor processes, Robert Thomas (1982) showed how in the lettuce industry, social restrictions associated with gender and migration status were transformed into the means for increasing workforce stability in a labor-intensive process that would not be profitable if the employees weren't as powerless. Carolina Bank Muñoz (2008) showed in turn how race, gender, and migratory status shape different labor control regimes in the tortilla industry on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border. In all these authors' work, it becomes clear not only that the labor process is anything but indifferent to the specific markers of oppression that are corporealized in workers' bodies, but also that the workplace is a space for the (re)production of these differences as such.

At the same time, feminist scholars have re-centered the body within the shopfloor. Miriam Glucksmann (2009) paid particular attention to workers' bodies in her ethnography at a manufacturing plant in England, recounting the physical exhaustion, emotional stress, and constant pain that working on the lines brought to the majority

female workforce. More recently, the labor process analysis has moved outside of the classic manufacturing environment as scholars have analyzed how the body becomes a focus of diverse labor processes, providing detailed accounts of managerial interventions with respect to workers' corporeality and emotions (Wolkowitz 2006, 2012). Notions such as *body work* (Kang 2010; Sharma et al. 2018) and *aesthetic labor* (Harvey, Vachhani, and Williams 2014; Williams and Connell 2010; Otis 2016), have attended to the ways in which workers act over other bodies as part of their work, or are required to act on their own bodies, modifying their voices, appearance, etc., as part of their employment. These lines of research, while focused on the service sector, have renewed the theorization over the body at work in ways that can be productively used within more traditional manufacturing settings as the one with which this dissertation is concerned. In the next section, I briefly discuss how scholars have analyzed emotions in its relation to work and argue that in order to have an embodied account of precarity we must incorporate emotions and affective dispositions into our analysis.

Embodied emotions

Theorizing the embodied character of labor power requires to attend not only to its physical dimension but also to its affective and emotional dimension. Emotions have received increased attention from sociologists as part of the 'affective turn' in academic literature (Clough and Halley 2007; Thoits 1989; Turner 2009). Most of the literature on emotional experiences while working has particularly come from research on emotional management in service and professional work (Ashkanasy, Zerbe, and Härtel 2015; Bolton 2005; Hochschild 2012). This expansive and rich research agenda has explored how people actively shape and direct their feelings when they are working to respond to

organizational demands, noting how performing certain emotions became a key job requirement and a commodity in certain occupations (Hochschild 2003). Research on emotional management has shown how features of jobs and workplaces (Lively 2000; Wharton 1993), workers' social locations (Evans 2013; Taylor and Risman 2006; Wingfield 2010), and contexts shape emotional experiences, display and regulation (Cottingham 2016; Kang 2010). Still, little attention has been paid to workplaces where emotions are not being commodified as part of the job, namely, where no emotional labor is being performed.

The literature on precarity has in different ways included emotions and affective dispositions in its analysis. Returning to my initial differentiation between precarity as a labor condition and precarity as a lived experience, it is possible to observe two different engagements with emotions and affects within these literatures.

On the one hand, scholars studying precarity as labor condition have addressed emotions primarily as they pertain to the connections between job quality and job satisfaction (Brief and Weiss 2002; Fisher 2000; Hebson, Rubery, and Grimshaw 2015; Judge et al. 2017a; Léné 2019), understood as the overall affective response of individuals to work, based on objective job rewards and subjective assessments (Kalleberg 2012). This approach, however, is limited (Weiss 2002). Emotions tend to be considered solely as the subjective component of 'job quality,' and authors fail to address the emotional dimension of precarious working conditions as constitutive of those conditions. Further, emotions are rarely framed as central to workers' understanding of their labor (Judge et al. 2017b).

On the other hand, scholars building from Butler's theorization have more broadly attended not only to emotions at work, but to affective dispositions in their relation beyond specific working conditions, especially conditions of life in late capitalism. Authors have theorized how it is possible to *sense precarity*, as an affective turn to desociality that feels painfully bad (Allison 2013) or how late capitalism creates affective dispositions such as cruel optimism (Berlant 2011).

In my research I draw from both lines of research and strive to pay attention to how emotions are connected to the organization and control of the labor process and job quality, and how they are part of broader affective dispositions that impact how workers act. By including emotions and affective dispositions within an analysis of precarious work, it is possible to unpack how the disregard for workers' bodies within the labor process has specific emotional impacts. As it is with research that centers the body in the labor process, the emotions conveyed by workers when describing their working conditions remind us of the specificity of the commodity labor power – the fact that it is inseparable from the worker– and of the processes that need to take place to ensure that labor is extracted.

Emotions do “not only affect how we act and react, within [certain] contexts but in important ways tell us, and others around us, what those contexts, in fact, are” (Weyher 2012:345). Emotions are more than a subjective tone of experience but are constitutive aspects of social life and can serve to link structure and agency (Barbalet 1998). People sharing common structural circumstances might experience common emotions, and these sets of collective emotions can form emotional climates (Barbalet 2002). The notion of emotional climates illuminates how emotions that are repeatedly felt

during work can form an emotional background that becomes part of the conditions of the work itself. As Sarah Ahmed notes, emotions are relational and involve “affective forms of reorientation” (2004:8), action towards and away from others. We need to consider how emotions operate to 'make' and 'shape' bodies as forms of action, which also involve orientations towards others.

Emotions are woven into the organizational fabric of the workplace and shape practices of supervision and decision-making. In many ways, they underpin the very essence of labor control. John Hassard and Jonathan Morris’s (2018) research shows how certain managerial strategies made individuals feel more precarious in their work and increasingly disposable, and hint at the disciplinary power of these widespread feelings among workers. Throughout my research it is clear that management not only disregard workers’ bodily integrity but that different strategies of labor control directly produce emotional distress in the workers: from anxiety due to the pace of the line, to fear due to the direct violence exercised by managers.

Precarious migrant workers in food processing: this research

In this dissertation I build from these productive and ongoing discussions about vulnerability, debilitation, work, embodiment, and emotions to examine how precarity was experienced and resisted by migrant food processing workers in the Pacific Northwest, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. While unexpected, the pandemic crisis created a unique opportunity from which to account for the already existing disregard for workers bodies and emotions, and the ways in which this health emergency created new forms of neglect and disposability.

Examining migrant experiences can help us better understand precarity (Paret and Gleeson 2016), as migrant workers are subjected to particularly precarious working conditions (Gordon 2005; Lewis et al. 2015; Milkman 2020; Ness 2005; Waldinger 2003). Throughout this dissertation, I use the term *migrant*, following Nicholas de Genova's insight about the importance of retaining “a sense of the movement, intrinsic incompleteness, and consequent irresolution of social processes of migration” (2005:3). However, the category is not meant to function as an essentialist identity but as a framework through which to unpack the ways in which a specific form of labor power is constructed, “a device to name processes of racialization, exploitation, and subjection” (Tazzioli 2020:7) that shape the lives of the protagonists of this research. I further draw on the concept of *permanent liminality* (Sangaramoorthy 2019) to address the variety of precarious migratory statuses under which these workers live and the expansive and long-lasting impacts these statuses have. The border multiplies labor, creating different unstable and precarious categories, and functions as a form of labor control, for both authorized and unauthorized migrant workers. The disregard workers endure at the food processing plants is thus made possible by the border, which follows workers as they attempt to navigate different social institutions to access care and restitution.

While recent debates about the world of work in the United States have highlighted processes of deindustrialization and automation, food processing factories appear as a reminder that not all manufacturing work has left the country or been replaced by AI. Given that the food industry is harder to relocate abroad, and that it has created a business model based on the recruitment and exploitation of particularly vulnerable populations, these factories present unique conditions from which to analyze

precarious working conditions. A prevalent interest in workers' experiences in 'heavy' industrial sectors – where the workforce has been for the most part, white, American and male- has resulted in scholarly neglect of workers in resource-processing industries, particularly food processing (Grunert, James, and Moss 2010). While the importance of these experiences has been overlooked, the food processing sector has historically been “a laboratory for the spectrum of worker-management practices from slavery to unionized wage work” (Patel and Moore 2017:113). Today 11 percent of manufacturing workers in the U.S. are employed in food processing. Oregon and Washington have some of the highest concentration of food processing jobs in the U.S. (Compton et al. 2018).

This research also continues the work done by scholars who have addressed the working conditions in the food processing sector. Namely, it builds on Patricia Zavella's (1987) research on the working and family lives, as well as workplace struggles, of cannery workers in California, Alicia Muszyńska's (1996) research about fish processing workers in the Pacific Northwest, Joan Qazi's (1998) work on apple processing workers in Washington, Carolina Bank Munoz's (2008) analysis of the factory regimes in the tortilla industry on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border, Vanessa Ribas's (2016) discussion of the racial dynamics between Latinx and Black workers at a meatpacking plant in North Carolina, Angela Stuesse's (2016) detailed account of the working conditions of migrant workers in the poultry industry in Mississippi, as well LaGuana Gray (2014) and Carrie Freshour's (2016) analyses of Black women's experiences in the same industry, and Kathleen Sexsmith (2022) examination of workers' in the dairy industry and the impacts of their conditions in their bodies. I further build on recent work on migrant workers in the food processing and agricultural sector that underscores the

bodily harm produced by the industry and the overall structural violence migrant workers face (Holmes 2013, 2020; Horton 2016; Quesada et al. 2011; Ramos et al. 2021; Saxton 2021).

If the pandemic highlighted the essential character of the food processing industry, and reminded us of these forgotten factories, it also made it even more urgent to publicly discuss the endemic precarity and disposability faced by the migrant workers that clean, sort, chop, cut, pack, and box the food we all eat. This dissertation critically intervenes in this discussion by examining the bodily harm and the organized disregard for workers' safety and wellbeing that plagues the production of food in the U.S.

Methods

Details on the data collection

This dissertation relies on qualitative methods. It is primarily based on in-depth interviews with 60 migrant and second-generation workers employed in the food processing industry in Oregon and Washington, and interviews with 15 supervisors, managers, human resource personnel, industry representatives, community and labor organizers, lawyers, and advocates. The workers were employed in over twenty different food processing companies. I purposely decided to include a multiplicity of worksites and subsectors within the industry to paint a broader picture of the working conditions in food processing. Field work began in April 2020 and was ongoing until February 2022. During this time, I interviewed some of these workers and organizers several times and remained in touch with many, often serving as a translator they could call when dealing with medical professionals or state agencies, or as a sounding board as they navigated workplace and community organizing processes. The interviews covered workers'

migratory and employment trajectories, current working conditions, experiences navigating injuries, the conditions at the plants during the pandemic (both retrospectively and when we spoke), and knowledge of or participation in processes of collective organizing.

I used purposeful sampling, identifying, and relying on information-rich cases in order to be more effective in the midst of a global health crisis. However, despite this method, my sample overall is comparable with the overall industry demographics according to the available data (Palinkas et al. 2015). I provide details on the sample and industry and geographic case selection in Chapter II.

Additionally, I did participant observation at rallies, community forums, testing and vaccination clinics, and other events organized by the workers, as well as helped coordinate workshops and facilitated meetings for some of their organizations. During this time, I also attended industry conferences online such as the ‘Food Safety Summit’ in May 2021, and multiple online rule-making commentary sessions of Oregon OSHA and Washington’s Department of Labor and Industries (LNI). Through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests I compiled and analyzed almost two hundred complaints filed with LNI and internal emails discussing the complaints from March 1-December 31, 2020, regarding the companies where the interviewees were employed. I complemented this information with the publicly available LNI inspection records for all the companies.

Research participants were recruited by sharing flyers at public events such as rallies, protests, vigils, community forums, testing clinics, vaccine clinics. I also recruited through organizations, such as the Northwest Workers Justice Project, a legal

organization that provides help to migrant workers. While volunteering there as a paralegal, I met migrant food processing workers and invited them to do interviews. Finally, I relied on snowball sampling, which allowed me, for example, to interview parents and their adult children, if they were all employed in the industry.

Because part of the recruitment was driven by connection with workers' organizations and by attending events, the sample and the stories that are part of this research reflect this. At the same time, by relying on different recruitment tools, I was able to have a varied sample. Many of the research participants were not involved in any direct action; they worked at different plants, in different subsectors, and lived in different areas of Oregon and Washington. By complementing this information with the FOIA requests, I was able to get a broader view of the situations at the plants even beyond those shared by the research participants. My arguments in this dissertation are based on patterns that emerged from their stories despite this variance, and which match the findings of other scholars producing research on the food processing industry (Freshour 2020; Sexsmith 2022; Stuesse 2021a). The majority of the interviews were conducted over the phone, lasted between 75-180 minutes, and were done in Spanish, English, Spanglish, and Karen. For interviews conducted in Karen³ I relied on a translator. A total of ten interviews were conducted in person at the workers' homes. All the Karen speakers were interviewed in person given the complexity of interviewing remotely using a translator. Participants were compensated with \$50 for their time.

Doing activist research in a pandemic

³ Karen are languages spoken in lower Myanmar (Burma) and on the borders of Thailand (Britannica 2015).

The week I was supposed to start fieldwork for this project, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, the University closed, and all research was halted. Soon, food processing plants became sites of some of the biggest virus outbreaks. As much as I was anticipating a certain level of difficulty recruiting workers for this research, I had not foreseen a pandemic that would make the plants dangerous ‘hotspots,’ and any possibility of in-person contact with the workers impossible. For several weeks I was paralyzed. I was unsure about whether my project could be done, I did not know what it could mean to try to continue under these new conditions. While the pandemic introduced a new imperative to this research, to pursue the project I, too, had to navigate the pandemic context, studying workers who were suffering its impacts disproportionately. As the situation of the workers changed, so did my work, the research questions, the data collection methods, and my goals as an activist-scholar.

Then, in the last days of April 2020 I learned about a group of workers’ efforts to shut down a meatpacking plant in the region. While the pandemic had made it impossible for me to go ahead with my original research plan, I was able to reach out to workers in ways that would not have been possible before the pandemic. By walking outside of the plants where they worked –which are physically inaccessible to outsiders, fenced off with barbed wire and located in remote areas without any options to reach them via public transit or to park outside of the private lots– food processing workers called for public support and in so doing, opened an opportunity for me to get involved in their efforts.

Through the Rural Organizing Project –an Oregon-based organization I had been in contact with– I was able to get in touch with a few community organizers and workers

that were part of the newly formed meatpacking workers organization. We met on Zoom, and I made myself available to support them in their efforts. Per their request, I wrote different grants to get support for the actions they were doing, especially in relation to preparing materials about the virus and public benefits in different languages and for folks without written literacy skills. This collaboration became the new beginning of my project, which changed to include remote and online methods of data collection, and to incorporate the global health emergency as a revealing context through which to understand the endemic precarity migrant workers face in the industry.

Workers' own collective organizing became a driver of the fieldwork and this research. Besides meeting with the organizers to write grants and help with simultaneous translation in some online meetings, I kept trying to figure out what my role should be, and how I could support their struggle from miles away. There was a sense of urgency in all the organizing that was taking place and I struggled with my privileged position of being able to work from home while researching essential workers who were literally in the frontlines of the pandemic. I was afraid of traveling and felt guilty for limiting my collaboration to online actions.

While I could not participate in in-person actions with the workers until October 2020, by the time I was able to travel to the sites where most of the organizing was happening, I had established close relations with some workers and organizations and had conducted some phone interviews. The trips however, proved to be crucial. I was able not only to solidify the connections I had built remotely, but also to get a better sense of all the simultaneous struggles that were taking place among migrant food processing workers. I participated in rallies, community forums, went to workers' homes and met

their families, and volunteered at different events they organized, such as vaccination clinics. In the months that followed I collaborated with two other food processing workers' organizations that were part of the wave of labor unrest that took place in 2020 and 2021.

The fact that some of my initial interviewees came through organizations meant that creating rapport was not complicated, since that context provided workers with some clues about my position in the field and goals with the research. Being a native Spanish speaker also helped create connections, even if my prominent Argentinian accent (which is distinctively different from other Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America) and the fact that I am part of a higher education institution, created some distance. Due to the lack of visual clues, as most of the interviews were conducted by phone, I relied solely on my voice to reassure workers and establish trust. This meant 'acting' with my voice as other 'voice' workers are known to do, for example those employment in call centers as customer service representatives (Hazlett, Duffy, and Moorhead 2009; Van Jaarsveld and Poster 2012). However, rapport was not automatic. With some of the workers, the fact that I continued to show up to their actions and events was central to gain their trust, and to convince them to make time to speak to me.

It was certainly harder to establish rapport with the Karen speakers. Even though most of those interviewed were secured through a community organizer, at times the language barriers proved difficult to surmount. Moreover, in none of those cases was I able to be alone with the worker, usually with other members of their family present, which probably impacted their ability to share more candidly. However, many times

present family members with more English knowledge would participate in the conversation, translating as well as adding to what workers were sharing.

My approach to sociological research is deeply informed by feminist scholars' call for engaged sociology that produces knowledge that can inform public discussions and public policy, and that builds from and with the subjects of study (Romero 2020). Throughout the fieldwork I prioritized supporting workers and their organizations, and was explicit with them that, while interested in doing research and documenting their working conditions and struggles, I was also there as a political commitment. I mobilized the resources I had available –my experience as a labor organizer, my knowledge of the industry, my translation skills, the research funds I was able to secure, and the public recognition of being part of an institution like the University of Oregon– to support workers' struggles in whatever capacity I could. Understanding workers' stories as *testimonios* of an ongoing crisis, I positioned myself as an interlocutor whose role was to document their experience and provide a platform for workers to share their voices and experiences (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, and Flores Carmona 2012; Espino et al. 2012; Latina Feminist Group 2001). *Testimonios* as a methodology and pedagogy have been part of Latin American human rights struggles, social movements and community organizing. It was workers' request, in the urgency of the crisis, to share their story, it was their own positioning as *testigos*, that shaped my methodological approach.

The first manuscript I put together with the data was a public policy-oriented report in both English and Spanish, done under the explicit request of the workers' organizations, and meant to be an advocacy tool to support their policy and organizing efforts. This report became the basis of my own *testimonio* at the Washington state

legislature when the food industry's pandemic response was discussed in February 2021, and which I later presented alongside many of the workers over Zoom in April 2021 to researchers, organizers, and elected officials.

While I haven't conducted any official interviews since the end of February 2022 and consider that the moment I 'exited' the field, I have continued to collaborate with workers until today. I built relations with individuals and with organizations that exceed the scope of this research and these pages, and to which I remain committed to support even if the urgency of the first months of the pandemic has disappeared, and some of the organizing efforts have taken a less active shape.

Documenting a crisis

The analysis and arguments of this dissertation emerge from an unfolding and complex social process, which due to its character cannot be fully captured through a data collection that is limited in time and resources, or properly reflected in a written narrative. The processes and experiences that are the heart of this work started before I went into the field and continued changing after I left it. While these might be challenges common to research in general, the fact that this was done during an event like the COVID-19 pandemic made this even more arduous. Although throughout the dissertation I speak about the pandemic as 'an event', the reality is that it stretched over time, and did not have a clear and uniform end. Who you are, what you do for work, where you are in the world, and what your beliefs are, impact your experience of the pandemic timeline: when it started, when it's more dangerous and grueling moments were, and whether it continues today or has 'ended.' This further implies that the almost two years I was involved in fieldwork were very different and encompassed various waves and variants of

the virus spread; it included times without almost any regulations, times with temporary policies, and times when those policies were phased out. It covers months before vaccines were available and months after they were. Producing a narrative from these changing times becomes particularly difficult. There is an ongoing tension in these pages between a diffuse chronology that speaks to these different moments, and the attempt to produce an analysis that captures the situation as a whole.

Doing fieldwork during a global health crisis proved difficult. This difficulty was not only due to the risk of contagion, but also because I constantly felt a tension between the potential of supporting workers with my work, and the reality that to do so I needed to ask them to share their experiences with me, which many times included traumatic experiences. The months during which I was doing the majority of the interviews were emotionally draining. In many cases workers would have emotional reactions over the phone, which would usually lead to similar reactions on my part. Given the lack of visual clues, which can be so important when doing a qualitative interview, I had to rely on silences, changes of tone, pace of breathing to understand how the interviewees were feeling and be able to navigate the interview. I heard their sadness and their *angustia* and felt frustrated to not be able to even be physically present to hold them, to be able to see each other as they shared with me very painful moments of their lives. Only able to cry with them on the other side of the phone, trying to validate their feelings and experience, I felt impotent for not being able to do more, and guilty for asking a question that triggered such an emotional response. Eventually, I realized it was not necessarily about the questions –my protocol was very standard, and I was careful to not explicitly ask questions that could be particularly painful given the context—it was the pandemic. It was

the pain we were all experiencing, the dread, the exhaustion, the heightened vulnerability, which appeared on both sides of the line, in the workers and certainly in myself as well.

In order to process the emotions that were coming out of the interviews, I started a daily journal during my fieldwork. This journal not only served for me to document how I felt but became a space to record ‘fieldnotes’ after conducting a phone interview. The journal also functioned as a first moment of reflection and analysis, one that I relied on when I started working with the data and writing my manuscript. Many of the themes and concerns that were already present in my journal made their way into this final version.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using Dedoose, an online qualitative data management program. I transcribed most of the interviews manually but relied on transcription software for those interviews conducted in English (mostly with organizers and stakeholders). I began to code and analyze my data while I was still in the field and engaged in a close reading –line by line coding– looking for themes that could become in vivo analytic codes, understanding that this form of coding prompts me to “remain open to the data and see nuances in them” and attempting to “gain a close look at what participants say and, likely, struggle with” (Charmaz 2014:125). As I transcribed, and later coded the interviews I wrote memos to capture the emergent themes.

At the same time, my analysis is the result of collaborating closely with the workers, pursuing the topic and themes they pointed out as relevant for themselves and their organizations. The final questions and themes of this dissertation are then the combination not only of a grounded theory approach, and an iterative process with the data and the literature, but of the active engagement with the subjects of the research.

An important challenge I faced in my analysis and writing was in connection to the confidentiality and anonymity of workers. In some cases, workers wanted their names to be known, their organizations to be featured in the research, as they saw it as a possible way of getting their story out. In others, it was very important for them to ensure their identities remained unknown. This situation impacted the stories and the framework used for part of this dissertation. Since this is multi-sited research, workers are protected, in some ways, by this fact. At the same time, some employers are more easily discernible than others. Given this, I decided to provide limited information on some of the organizing stories of the workers to reduce the possibility of identifying them and of retaliation. In the case of the fruit packing workers, since they belonged to several different companies, and they were especially interested in their story being heard, I share their image and their story with more details.

Throughout the dissertation I include images, most of which I took during fieldwork, of the workers, and of actions they were involved in. I asked for consent to include these images and erased identifiable information when necessary. I also include some pictures taken by organizers and activists, who kindly shared their work with me. The pictures are part of the documentation of the crisis, capturing actions, events, slogans, struggles, that would be otherwise lost, their details forgotten. Finally, I decided to include screenshots of some of the LNI complaints. The complaints, so many written by hand, are in many ways, the most formal and institutionalized recording of what workers were going through during the first months of the pandemic and part of their *testimonios*. Filed away in a bureaucratic institution, they remain hidden. By including them here, I seek to reverse the secrecy and individualization that is part of the

institutional treatment of a situation like the crisis the workers were facing. Workers' complaints should not remain stored in a cabinet in an office somewhere, forgotten. Instead, they must be shared, exposed, read by others as they were written, without translation or mediation, in the workers' own handwriting and in their own words.

Finally, during my analysis and as I worked with the exposition of the stories, I wrestled with the implications of circulating emotional stories of racialized migrant workers, particularly women, and the implications of potentially reproducing stories and scripts of victimhood, as Geraldine Pratt and others have signaled (2012). I worry that to convey the urgency and violence of the working conditions in the industry I would be mobilizing workers' emotional injuries in ways that would make their struggles a spectacle. I hope to have been able to avoid this, but I still believe that as we circulate these stories, again and again, they start losing their ability to *affect* others, and mobilize them to action.

Moreover, I became afraid that by reiterating stories of violence and neglect I would be contributing to their normalization. I wondered, and still do in some ways, of the contradictory effects of showing the pervasiveness and ubiquity of the conditions these workers face. On the one hand, I strived to show how these conditions are not the result of 'bad apple' employers –as one of the elected officials at the Washington legislature implied when he questioned me during my testimony–and to do that I opted to include as many versions of the same situations, as many voices as possible repeating the experience of similar conditions. But on the other hand, I feared that by showing how expansive and widespread these experiences are, I would add to a feeling of inevitability, of being too big and prevalent of an issue to be possible to do something about it. In this

final manuscript I strived to avoid some of the pitfalls of this tension by both presenting the modal emerging themes from the research and collaborating with workers—being attentive to the experiences they were putting at the forefront of their narratives, making space for workers’ own storytelling—in the hope that readers will still be able to be affected by these workers’ stories and be moved to action.

A Spanglish dissertation

Lola Loustaunau: Is there any language you feel more comfortable in?

Melisa: No, any is fine

Lola Loustaunau: Okay

Melisa: Quizás Spanglish, si está bien? [Maybe Spanglish, if that is okay?]

Lola Loustaunau: Perfecto, that works for me

While I was starting to analyze the data I asked my sister, who lives in Argentina, to help me transcribe a particularly long interview that I thought had been conducted in Spanish. A sociologist herself, she has significant training doing this type of work. She spent about a week working on it. When she sent me the transcription, she apologized and said that she had only been able to do so much because there were many words that were not clear for her. I opened the file only to realize that the interview was actually not in Spanish, but in Spanglish. Enough words from English had made their way into the interview to throw my sister off: what was ‘el fil’?, or ‘el lonche’?, or ‘tener un ‘raite’? - she asked me. The terms, Spanishized versions of ‘the fields’, ‘the lunch’ and ‘getting a ride’, were common enough for me now, but made little sense to her. A good number of interviewees switched back and forth between English and Spanish, and the majority spoke in a mix of both languages. That mix many times took the form I just described, with English words making their way into the conversation without meaning that there is a clear transition to English. In fact, the same workers that included all these English

words in their conversation assured me they did not really speak English. Others, like Melisa, said that Spanglish was the most comfortable option.

This dissertation is a Spanglish dissertation, because that is the language most of the workers spoke and is what has become more comfortable for me as well. After seven years living in the U.S. I find myself switching back and forth between the languages to be able to express myself fully, now needing words from both English and Spanish to say what I am thinking.

Finally, I want to address the issue of translation in itself. I understand that meaning is of central importance in qualitative research, and that preserving the subjects' words in their original language is particularly important when studying migrant workers. In the pages that followed I translated most of the quotes from the workers but kept words in Spanish when I felt it was important to retain them, usually because a literal translation did not capture the meaning, and a 'meaning based' translation meant completely changing the metaphor or the word that was being used. However, this felt like an incomplete gesture, thus, I decided to include the quotes in Spanish as an Appendix. I am aware that this strategy is not perfect, however, I believe that resisting the erasure of subjects' language and words is central to a critical approach to migrant labor.

Chapter outlines

In "Chapter 2: Becoming Precarious," I explore the migratory and employment trajectories that had led the workers to the food processing industry in the Pacific Northwest (PNW) region. At the macro level, I discuss structural circumstances that shape migration, the personal expectations and ensuing realities of these migrant workers, and the complex composite of shifting legal statuses *-permanent liminality-* in which they

live and work. Then, at the meso level I discuss workers' specific intergenerational migratory paths to the PNW and describe the conditions in the different subsectors of the food processing industries in which they work. Finally, at the micro level, I describe how these workers enter the processing plants aware of the degraded working conditions but lacking employment alternatives in a segmented and racially segregated labor market. Ultimately, this chapter shows how compounding precarity gets built by the intersections of migratory status and degraded working conditions in a sector that relies on hyper-exploitation of gendered and racialized workers to secure profits.

In "Chapter 3: Endemic Precarity," I discuss these workers' experiences in the food processing industry as *endemic precarity*. Following workers' *testimonios* I show how pre-pandemic working conditions had always *endemicallly* relied on bodily and emotional harm and how this is compounded by the employment, migratory, and welfare policies that restrict or flat-out deny these workers' access to protections and care, severely restrain their labor market mobility, and ultimately turn migrant and racialized workers into the twenty-first century paradigmatic form of disposable labor. First, I analyze the organization and control over the labor process and how it disregards the workers' bodily integrity by design, emphasizing the uneventful and quotidian unfolding of workers' debilitation. I then discuss how the despotic control of the labor process in food processing relies on disregarding, negating, or subsuming embodied temporalities—such as physiological needs, illness, emotions, and abilities to care for themselves and others— that do not conform to the production process. From here, I move to discuss the expansive character of endemic precarity by analyzing the continuation of the disregard for workers' bodies by social institutions. In the last two sections of the chapter I to

discuss how, despite the organized disregard for workers' bodies, labor power's concrete embodied characteristics resurface in two different ways: through 1) the incorporation and reproduction of bodily difference based on race, migration, gender, and capacity to the labor process, and 2) the workers' own practices and narratives that attempt both to care for their own bodies in the face of harm, debilitation, and injuries or frame this debilitating work as a *sacrifice* made for the future wellbeing of their families.

In "Chapter 4: Pandemic Precarity, Resistance, and Collective Care," I turn to the COVID-19 pandemic, to analyze the experience and emotions of migrant food processing workers' resistance in the face of the global health crisis. To unpack this, I begin by discussing how framing the pandemic as a war, and framing food processing work as essential to war efforts against the virus, helped employers and government officials justify the continuation of 'business as usual' and treat workers' as *essentially disposable*. Next, I focus on how the disregard for workers' bodily integrity existing *endemically* both inside and outside the shop floor perpetuates and morphs as new risks and bodily needs emerge in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. To conclude, I explore workers' responses and the ways they sought to protect themselves and their families by engaging in direct action, creating spaces of collective care and grief, and forming new organizations to improve their working conditions.

Finally, in "Chapter 5: Reflecting on Embodied Struggles after the COVID-19 pandemic," I offer a summary of the dissertation and point to the limitations of this research. I discuss challenges and outcomes of the collective organizing processes that took place during 2020 and 2021. I offer a critique of the policy discussions regarding workplace safety, paid sick leave, and migratory reform that have been taking place

since. Finally, I share some reflections on the interplay between endemic precarity, the frame of essential work and the struggle for recognition of migrant workers.

2. BECOMING PRECARIOUS

In this chapter, I introduce my study sample and explore why and how individual workers and their intergenerational families migrate to the U.S., and to the PNW region specifically, to work in the food processing industry. I argue that workers' mobility stories include a web of interrelated personal and structural circumstances that must be framed in the ongoing consequences of current and historical processes of uneven development, displacement, and globalization. The permanent liminality they face, and the molding of precarious migrant workers through an array of shifting categories and inclusion in the labor market, make them particularly vulnerable to bodily and emotional harm in the workplace. Reducing labor costs, with total disregard for the bodies and emotions of the labor force, is central to the food processing business model. In a prevailing logic of disposability, workers' lives are made irrelevant, their heterogeneous and complex histories made indifferent.

In the following pages I counter this logic by introducing the workers' and their stories in their own words. At the macro level, I discuss the expectations and ensuing realities of many workers, and the complex composite of legal statuses in which they live and work. Instead of focusing on the overall factors that contribute to workers' mobility across this multiplicity of borders, about which plenty has been said (Abreu 2012; Kandel and Massey 2002; Massey 1999, 2005, 2008), I share some of their specific paths to build a robust understanding of who the actors at the center of this story are. Here I discuss the shortcomings of conceiving the migrant experience in a monolithic and essentialized way, failing to capture the ongoing movement of peoples across national and state borders or recognize the enduring transnational bonds that represent a vital feature of the migrant

experience. While mainstream narratives about migration and migratory policies speak in terms of a simple dichotomy between following and not following ‘the law,’ workers’ stories point to the importance of apprehending migratory regulations as a complex composite of control mechanisms, laws, administrative rules, and regulations that often shift with changes in the political context and have long-lasting impacts (Goldring and Landolt 2011).⁴ I emphasize the ways in which migration controls operate fundamentally as technologies shaping a specific type of labor (Anderson 2010; De Genova 2004; Mahmud 2014; Sassen 1988; Walia 2013, 2021), one that is sought out by the food processing industry.

Next, I move to the meso level to discuss workers’ specific migratory paths to the PNW. Discussions about costs of living, access to housing, and proximity to family are some of the themes explored here. I then present a brief discussion of the food processing industry, particularly the transformations that have taken place in the past five decades as food supply chains become increasingly global (Böhm, Spierenburg, and Lang 2019; Forson and Counihan 2013; Goodman 1997; Wolf 2014). Given that most of the workers I interviewed were employed in different industry subsectors—fruit and vegetable processing, meatpacking, fish canneries/seafood processing, and industrial bakeries—I describe specific conditions in each of these industries.

Finally, at the micro level of the processing plants, I share the layered conditions that brought the workers to the plants from their perspectives. Entering a segmented and racially segregated labor market, many of the interviewed workers found themselves

⁴ To give an idea of the constant changes being made to migratory regulations in the U.S., during the 4 years of Donald Trump’s presidency, his administration passed 472 executive actions affecting U.S. immigration policy (Bolter, Israel, and Pierce 2022).

employed in the food processing industry by following their families and friends, by responding to intentional employment recruitment, or after being placed by temporary work agencies and refugee settlement agencies. In many cases living in rural areas of Oregon and Washington with a high proportion of agricultural-related employment (farm work and food processing), workers enter the industry aware of the degraded working conditions but lacking employment alternatives. Ultimately, this chapter begins to show how compounding precarity gets built by the intersections of migratory status and degraded working conditions in a sector that relies on hyper-exploitation of gendered and racialized workers to secure profits.

The next section introduces Claribel and Jessica, whose narratives serve to contextualize my study sample and to introduce concepts of my analysis at the national level. As the chapter proceeds, other narratives of individuals and their families will similarly be used to ground my discussion at the regional and industrial levels.

Precarious migrations

Claribel and Jessica: a story of intergenerational precarity

I first met Claribel on an unexpectedly warm Friday in the first days of October 2020. That day I was in Pasco, Washington, participating in a union rally at a vegetable processing plant. Since June, the workers had been organizing for improved safety, but the company had made few changes to the working conditions. Instead, they had fired two of the main organizers and refused to voluntarily recognize the union the workers had formed. As I walked the picket line, I saw a group of women across the road, holding

a banner that read ‘*Trabajadores Unidos por la Justicia: Unase a la Unión.*’⁵ I walked toward them, and we started chatting. They introduced themselves, and I quickly learned that they were fruit packing workers who had been on a month-long wildcat strike after the death of two co-workers due to COVID-19 and were now trying to form an independent union. Claribel was there with her 18-year-old daughter, Jessica, who had started working in the packing houses that past summer.

Claribel is 39; she was born in Jalisco, Mexico, and was 13 years old when she migrated to the U.S. with her parents. When I asked her about the decision to migrate, Claribel shared: “They had been coming and going for years and decided that it was best for all of us—meaning my siblings and me—to join them. I was a teenager, and it was hard for me to say goodbye to my friends, but I had no option but to come.” Her parents brought her directly to Washington state, where they had worked as seasonal farmworkers before: “I had all these pictures in my head about the U.S., the big cities, big malls, like in the movies. But Yakima was small; it was cold, nothing like what I had imagined. I was used to having a lot of autonomy, moving around Puerto Vallarta, and here it was different. It was really hard getting used to it.” Her family moved around different towns for many years, following work and cheaper living costs. She completed three years of high school before dropping out to join her mom and aunt at a packing plant. After working there for five years and amid a struggle to win union representation in the packing house, she was suddenly fired.

⁵ “Workers United for Justice: Join the Union”

Claribel's employment was unstable in the following years, as she moved between the packing houses and *el fil*⁶ and took time off to have her children. Like her parents, she moved to different towns searching for work: Sunnyside, Quincy, Moses Lake. When she separated from her husband, she returned to Yakima, where her parents still lived, so that they could help her with her three daughters. In 2012, she was right on the age cut-off and was able to get Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). However, her work prospects did not radically transform once she secured a work authorization. She had almost 15 years of experience working in packing houses by then, so she continued doing that. Last summer, her eldest daughter, Jessica, graduated from high school. She had planned to go to Yakima Community College, but the pandemic took a hit on the family's finances, and she decided to join her mom at the company where she had been working. Jessica shared, "I just went with my mom; I wanted to have some money and use the summer to save for school. But then I decided to defer; I am not a good online learner, so I kept working."

⁶ The field, meaning agricultural work.



Picture 2: Claribel, with her daughters Jessica and Sofia, and Angie, another co-worker. Pasco, WA. October 2020. Photo by the author.

I start with Claribel and Jessica’s story because, in many ways, it briefly describes some of the paths many of the workers I interviewed have followed in their journey to the U.S. Pacific Northwest and the food processing industry. Claribel, the daughter of seasonal migrant workers, permanently moved to the U.S. with her family when the increasing militarization of the border made it more and more dangerous to move back and forth, as is the case for many others of her generation (Fernández-Kelly and Massey 2007; Leerkes, Bachmeier, and Leach 2013; Massey, Durand, and Pren 2016). A DACA recipient, she is now in her 40s and still tied to a temporary permit that is constantly under threat of ceasing to exist. Jessica, a U.S.-born daughter whose life has been shaped in many ways by her mom’s permanent liminality, is now working alongside her. Her experience reflects the insights of a growing body of research that has shown how

parents' statuses affect their U.S.-born children across their life course despite their citizen status (Bean et al. 2011; Catron 2019; Yoshikawa, Suárez-Orozco, and Gonzales 2017). Claribel entered the packing houses while still undocumented, following her mom's footsteps, as many others—including her daughter—continue to do. Claribel's circular movement between working in the fields and the packing houses is similar to what several other workers who rotate in and out of food processing have described: a movement in search of better earnings, to protect themselves from inclement weather, and find year-round employment. Finally, her care responsibilities—and her exclusion from any form of social welfare that could aid her—partially explain why she has remained in an area of the country where most of the work available is farm work or food processing. As a single mom having to work long hours to make ends meet and unable to afford childcare, she needed to rely on her extended family to be able to keep working and take care of her daughters (Carrillo et al. 2017). These are among other reasons that led many of those I interviewed to become food processing workers and to remain in or return to the industry, which I explore in detail in the following sections.

Study Sample: The Workers

A third of the research sample are workers who, like Claribel, crossed international territorial borders when they were minors—the youngest being six months old when she crossed in her mom's arms. Like Jessica, 14 workers of the sample are 'second generation,'⁷ folks born in the U.S. to migrant parents. Four of these workers

⁷ While the term 'second-generation' is prevalent in the migration literature (Luthra, Soehl, and Waldinger 2018; Urban 2012), it reifies the processes that continue to make 'foreigners' of those who were born in the U.S. but are not white. Thus, while I make note of it here, I avoid the term in the following pages of this dissertation.

were born in the U.S. but raised in Mexico, Spanish was their native language, and only returned to the U.S. as adults. The rest of the U.S. born workers were directly related to another worker in the sample—I have interviewed their mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, or older siblings. I decided to include all of them in this research because their experiences are important to understand how processes of racialized and gender exclusion that impact their families expand in such a way that they continue intergenerationally, despite their formal condition as citizens.

[TABLE 1 WORKERS DEMOGRAPHICS—Please see tables at end of this chapter]

The majority of the workers on the factory lines and in my sample are women. While it was my original intention to interview only women, once in the field, I decided not to limit my recruitment in relation to gender. The final composition of the sample (70 percent women) partially reflects the increased overrepresentation of women in the food processing industry in intensive packing and sorting jobs on the factory line, the fact that it was women who were leading many of the organizing efforts that became a central space to recruit participants, and my use of snowball sampling, with women recommending their friends to participate in the study. It is also important to note that overall industry percentages hide the gender division of occupations within the processing plants. Specific production occupations are now overwhelmingly female, particularly in subsectors such as vegetable and fruit processing. While recent data reveals that the industry is 41 percent women overall nationally, women make up 57

percent of the more labor-intensive occupations within the industry (ACS 2019).⁸ Even more traditionally masculine subsectors such as meatpacking have increased the number of women on the lines, particularly in lower-paying positions.

Workers in the sample are between 18 and 64 years old, with a median age of 37. In comparison, the American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates 2015-2019 give 42 as the mean age and 41 as the median age for the industry. As I explore later, some workers enter the food processing plants after working in the fields for many years, a decision based on the comparatively less physically taxing nature of the packing plants versus farm work, and the protection that working in the plants offers from extreme heat and smoke during summers, which has become a more common issue in the past years as global temperatures rise.

Over 60 percent of the sample made their final movement into the U.S. after 1996, when the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) was passed, significantly increasing border controls and expediting deportation processes (Massey et al. 2016; Morawetz 2000). Most of the sample are workers from Mexico or born to Mexican parents, except one worker from Guatemala and nine workers born either in Burma or Thailand (15 percent of the sample). This last subset of workers, most of them employed in meatpacking, are part of a refugee community that settled in eastern

⁸ Analysis of American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates 2015–2019 data, using North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) codes for food manufacturing industries (1070-1290) and for agricultural support activities (290) combined with occupation-specific analysis, U.S. Census occupation codes, including those for “graders and sorters, agricultural products” (6040) 70 percent women, “packagers and filling machine operators and tenders” (8800) 54 percent women, “machine feeders and offbearers” (9630) 64 percent women, and “packers, and packagers, hand” (9640) 57 percent women.

WA between 2010–2016, before changes to the refugee admission policies severely limited their entry to the U.S. (Bolter, Israel, and Pierce 2022).⁹

Eighty-two percent of the sample has dependents, including children and adults in need of care. In our conversations, workers' care responsibilities appeared prominently, impacting their movement and employment choices. As I explore in more detail in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, these responsibilities play a significant role in shaping both the way workers cope with the endemic precarity and the bodily and emotional harm they face in the industry as well as their collective organizing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and employers' disregard for their (and their families') safety.

While the workers' life stories are complex and heterogeneous and certainly not all like Claribel's, many share some of the characteristics I just described. In the following section, I provide more details regarding their mobility stories.

Motivating Factors, Expectations, and Realities for Migrating Workers

Workers' mobility stories include a web of interrelated personal and structural circumstances that must be framed in the ongoing consequences of current and historical colonial and imperialist projects, processes of uneven development, displacement, and globalization (Castles 2010; Munck 2002; Sassen 1991). While familiar narratives regarding migration highlight 'dreams of improvement,' several of the workers I interviewed shared difficult situations where migration emerged as a survival tool. When asked why she decided to come to the U.S., Luisa, who is 55 years old and arrived in 1993

⁹ The acceptance of Karen refugees in the U.S. needs to be contextualized in U.S. foreign imperialist interventions. Starting in the 1950s, the U.S. intervened in the civil war in Burma as part of anticommunist efforts in Southeast Asia. Attempting to weaken the pro-Soviet government, the U.S. aided Karen insurgent groups, in what is now one of the longest ongoing civil wars (Kipgen 2013).

with her two young daughters, said bluntly, “Well, poverty, not having enough to survive.” From a small town in Nayarit, Vicky, 36 years old, explains that she is the oldest of her siblings and had first moved to Tijuana to try to find a job that allowed her to help her family, but her wages were too low, prompting her to cross the border.

For Rita, 44 years old, coming to the U.S. meant running away from increased violence in her hometown, which had resulted in the assassination of her brother. Paz, 27 years old, shared a similar situation in which she came with her family to ask for asylum after her brother was kidnapped: “well I came here asking for asylum, running from the violence in my hometown, in Guerrero.” For James, the ongoing civil war in his home country, Burma, forced him to flee when he was 17.

Family reunification is also an important motive of movement across borders (Schmalzbauer 2014; Tienda 2017; Vesely, Goodman, and Scurlock 2014). Carla, 33 years old, moved to the U.S. with her mom to reunite with her dad, who had been living there since she was born. She explains, “It was joyous because I really wanted to live with my dad, I wanted to see him, to have a close relationship with him, I wanted my parents to be together.” Felicia, who is 37 years old and came from Colima, Mexico, when she was 15, has a similar story: “My dad had been in the U.S. for five years, and we hadn’t seen him since then, so you can imagine, we missed him so much, and that is why we came.”

Many women migrated not so much pushed by personal desire but following the mandates of their husbands or families. Mirta, 51 years old from Michoacan, Mexico, went through the border several times following her husband, who made decisions for the whole family. Similarly, Greta, 37 years old from Quintana Roo, Mexico, shares, “I

didn't really want to come, I never had that aspiration/desire of coming to the U.S. You could say I was forced to come, because he was my husband and I had to go where he went." Patricia, 43, who was born in Morelos and came to Newport in 1994 when she was 17, explains:

I had never really considered coming to the U.S. You see other young people saying, "Oh, I wish I could go to the U.S." Well that was never me; I was the only one from my family who didn't want to come. But one day my brother who was already in the U.S. called me and said that my older brother was going to cross the border and asked me if I wanted to go too. I said no, but he insisted. He said it was to help our mom and gave me 15 days to make up my mind. I felt like I had to come, so I followed my older brother here.

This is not to say that their decisions were not also imbued with desire or expectations of a better life or even of experiencing the 'American dream.'

Understanding mobility as also part of life projects and desires is as relevant as identifying the structural reasons people might have to migrate (Mezzadra 2012; Rodriguez 1996). However, expectations and reality prove different for many of these migrant workers. Fantasies of "sweeping the money from the streets" are debunked quickly by the low-wage jobs and high living costs the workers find. Vicky shares, "You imagine you will have a beautiful life with all this comfort, but the reality is that you are a prisoner of your job, working from sunrise to sunset. You only live to work, to work is the only thing you live for." Alfonsa is 48 years old. She was born in Veracruz, Mexico, and came to the U.S. when she was 28. "I thought, 'well United States, the first world, must be beautiful,' and then I got here and was like, 'here I'm worse than back home.'"

Issues that workers face are not just about not making enough money to make ends meet but also about facing discrimination and poor treatment at work and in society. While scholars have pointed out the relevance of workers' material expectations and

ideas about the ‘American dream’ (Mahler 1995; Stoll 2009), I find that these insights need to be complemented with expectations of safety, general well-being, progress, and living in a law-ordered society. Workers expect fair treatment that does not materialize. Julia (55 years old, whom I mentioned earlier) explains: “When you get to the U.S., you realize that you have to work so much, that it is exhausting, and that you have to put up with poor treatment in order not to lose your job.”

For migrating youth, challenges are multiple as their lives change entirely very abruptly. Carla shares:

When you are a kid you hear about the U.S., about how big it is, how different, and you come here thinking about that, it was an adventure for me. But it was very different from what we had heard, there were many sad days, sadness more than anything because your life completely changes, a new country, new people, everything is unknown, the language is different, and you have to start school, and you do not know the language and people laugh at you, and when you start learning English you do not speak it right, and it’s hard, it’s very difficult. And my mom, who in Mexico was a ‘ama de casa,’ had to start working, which meant I was in charge of my younger sister, of taking her to school, picking her up, preparing food, cleaning the house.

Felicia, who came from Colima at 15 as mentioned above, shared a similar story:

Coming to this country with so much discrimination was very hard because you start school and first, you do not know the language, and your skin color is like screaming to everyone where you are from, and they pick on you, to discriminate you, to not let you sit down with them, to look down on you. And then my parents were farmworkers, and they were working all day long, and then my brother had to leave school to go work with them to help out with the bills, with the rent, and it was hard, very hard. I had to take care of my little sister ... like they say, “the American Dream” (she laughs).

In both cases, challenges around language and discrimination in the educational system are coupled with transformations in their family structure. Needing to rely on at least two incomes, former stay-at-home mothers joined the workforce, leaving their children, particularly their daughters, in charge of the homes (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Mendez

and Natalia 2020; Parreñas 2005; Pratt 2012). For kids like Carla and Felicia, this meant also being in charge of their siblings.

Migrant workers' expectations also relate to gaining social mobility—for their children, if not for themselves (Covington-Ward 2017). As I explore further in the next chapter, many workers discuss sacrificing themselves by working at the plants -enduring injuries, violence, and emotional distress- to ensure a better future for their families. However, this expected intergenerational mobility proved elusive, as many workers worked alongside their children at the plants (Tran and Valdez 2017). Felicia shared: “My son dreamed of being a rapper, a viral influencer, and I would take him to these competitions and everything. But when he turned 16, he started working at the packing houses. I told him to not do it, to not do that work, but now he is 18, and it’s his decision.” Having her son employed at the same industry as her takes a toll on Felicia, as she hoped that her sacrifice at the plants translated into a different future for her children, which, at least for now, does not seem to have materialized.

While in this section I explored workers' expectations before migrating and provide some details of their experiences of mobility, in the following section, I explore how precarious migratory statuses impact workers' employment trajectories and provide more details on how they are incorporated into low-wage, dangerous, and dead-end jobs in the food processing industry.

Permanent Liminality

In this section, I share the stories of some of the workers to capture the heterogeneity and the commonalities of their migratory and labor experiences. These experiences are not anomalies but exemplify some of the main discernable patterns and

variabilities that mark the life courses of many migrant workers I interviewed. The narratives reveal workers moving continually across international and domestic borders, searching for employment, being near family, making ends meet, and surviving.

Sabrina is 19 and was born in Tijuana, Mexico. She was six months old when she crossed the border in her mom's arms. Since then, she has primarily lived in Yakima, WA, except for a short period she spent in California, where her parents had gone following work. She has never been back to Mexico. She is bilingual but feels more comfortable speaking in English, as her whole schooling has been in the U.S. She turned 15—the legal minimum to file for DACA—when Trump became president. She shares: “I've been waiting [to apply]. My mom tried to apply sooner, but Donald Trump put it on pause or hold and nothing was able to happen, so we just gave up for a bit.”¹⁰ When we spoke, she still had no employment authorization and had not been able to start working as a nurse assistant even though she passed her NAC (Nurse Assistant Certification) tests. She shares: “The problem with me is that I am undocumented. I passed my skills. But when I applied for my certification, I could not proceed. I needed Social Security. And I don't have that. So my teacher told me just to wait till I have one.” That is why she had continued working alongside her parents in a packing house, where she started when she was 15. “My mom actually told me, ‘if you are not doing anything after school you can come work with me.’ They don't do background checks. So a lot of people there, anyone can work. That's why I started working there because they let anyone work there.”

¹⁰ Between September 2017, the moment when the administration stopped accepting new applicants and July 2020, 500,000 young migrants who met eligibility criteria for DACA were unable to apply. Although the courts stopped the administration's attempt to end DACA, only those who already had entered the program were able to renew their papers. The 66,000 young migrants that became eligible during those years were unable to start their applications (Bolter et al. 2022).

Tina is 41 years old and was born in Anaheim, California, the daughter of migrant workers. When she was nine months old, her dad took her and her brother to live in Mexico with her grandparents. She resided in Jalisco until she was 17 years old. Then, newlywed, she moved back to California with her husband and her husband's family. Having lived all her life in a small town of fewer than 300 people, Tina felt lost in Los Angeles. Soon after, she gave birth to her oldest son and decided to go back to Mexico on her own: "I wanted to stay in Mexico with my *abuelita*. I didn't want to come back here, but I was forming a family, and my husband was in California, so I came back two years later." Tina lived in California for many years, working in the food processing industry, the fields, and the service sector. When her partner was sent to jail, she found herself unable to cope on her own and take care of her five kids. She had family in Washington who could help her, and the cost of living in Pasco made it easier to make ends meet on her sole income. Her dad was still a temporary migrant worker in a vegetable processing plant and helped her secure employment. She now works in the same company as he does.

Rolando is 23 years old and was born in Michoacan, Mexico. When he was four, he came to the U.S. with his parents. When he was 15, his grandmother, back in Mexico, got seriously ill, and the whole family returned to help her. But once they were there, they could not come back to the U.S.; the trip was too dangerous and too expensive, so they stayed. Rolando enrolled in high school in Mexico but struggled in school, not knowing how to read or write in Spanish, as he was not allowed to speak that language while at school in the U.S.:

Here schools don't let you, well I do not know now, but back then they wouldn't let you speak Spanish inside the school, so when I was in Mexico I failed in my classes because I did not know how to read or write in Spanish, so I started working, but I felt out of place, and last year I decided to come back to the U.S. As soon as I got here, my father-in-law got me a job in a vegetable processing plant where he works as well.

Through these stories, it is possible to understand how strict categories such as immigrant—to designate someone who crosses an international border of a recognized sovereign state—and migrant—to designate someone who moves within those borders—not only center the receiving state, as Nicholas De Genova (2002, 2004) has noted, but fail to grasp stories like Tina's fully. While she might be a citizen of the U.S., the mark of her legal status as 'not immigrant' tells us little about her experience, which includes a movement across borders that impacted her English proficiency, her spaces of belonging, and the transferability of her educational attainment, etc. Others, like Sabrina, fall under the immigrant category. Still, this formal definition reifies a foreignness that does not fully map onto her experience, as she has lived most of her life in Yakima, Washington.

The workers in this research showcase the multiplication of categories under which the United States government classifies migrant workers through a patchwork of administrative rules and different policies: U Visa holders, T Visa holders, Employment Authorization Card holders for asylum seekers and people with refugee status, green card holders, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals recipients, among others.¹¹ These statuses are part of what scholars have referred to as 'precarious and conditional legal migratory statuses' (Goldring and Landolt 2011), 'liminal legality' (Menjvar 2006), 'limbo' or 'in between' (Gonzales 2016; Mountz et al. 2002), 'legal non-existence'

¹¹ See Appendix A for definitions.

(Coutin 2011), 'immanent outsiders' (McNevin 2006), and 'permanent liminality' (Sangaramoorthy 2019), in an effort to capture the complexity and fluidity of migration policies and categories, and to reflect migrants' nonlinear trajectories through them. This precarity became even more extensive during the presidency of Donald Trump, as its administration centered enforcement efforts on 'authorized' migration, for example, by extending the public-charge grounds on which migrants pursuing residency or another authorized status would be considered inadmissible¹² (Bolter et al. 2022; USCIS 2020). Instead of reproducing categories that do not long align with migrants' lived experiences, it is central to recognize and incorporate how these workers have built their lives—that is, between and across multiple borders and boundaries: territorial, political, juridical, economic, social (Nail 2016, Saxton 2021). By sharing these stories, I hope to highlight how their lives entail a movement between countries and from urban to rural areas, from one language to another, settling and moving again, constructing “space, time and social

¹² The public charge ground of inadmissibility has been a part of the U.S. immigration law since 1882 and was strengthened with IIRIRA. The public charge provision mainly indicates that someone seeking to become a resident or change their nonimmigrant status (a student visa for example) to an immigrant status (a visa that allows to work for example or has a path to residency) cannot be 'likely to become a public charge for more than 12 months within any 36-month period'. To assess whether someone will be a public charge in the future (yes, this is a guess about future actions, not based on actual use) United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) agents must take into consideration several factors (age, health, family status education, etc.) and whether the prospective immigrant has received public benefits in the past for any given time. The final rule implemented during the Trump administration made two important changes to this already violent provision, 1) made it that receiving more than one benefit (or been likely to receive more than one benefit) in a month counted individually as a month for the 12-month total (for example receiving food stamps and housing assistance for 3 months, counts as 6 months of assistance). It also extended the public benefits that were considered for the assessment and thus had to be reported to include: Supplemental Security Income; Temporary Assistance for Needy Families; Any federal, state, local, or tribal cash benefit programs for income maintenance (often called general assistance in the state context, but which may exist under other names); Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly called food stamps); Section 8 Housing Assistance under the Housing Choice Voucher Program; Section 8 Project-Based Rental Assistance (including Moderate Rehabilitation); Public Housing (under the Housing Act of 1937, 42 U.S.C. 1437 et seq.); and Federally funded Medicaid (USCIS 2021).

relations in more than one simultaneously” (Stephen 2007:5)—in other words, how they have built transborder lives.

The permanent liminality migrant workers face, despite their specific status, serves directly to shape a labor force that is constantly constrained in its ability to secure employment, ensuring its incorporation into the labor market as particularly vulnerable workers. Borders “cannot be properly understood in terms of inclusion and exclusion” (Nail 2016:7) but work as productive technologies generating ‘differential inclusion’ (De Genova 2002; Espiritu 2003; Mezzadra and Neilson 2012) or ‘adverse incorporation’ (Phillips 2013). Thinking through dialectics of inclusion and exclusion allows understanding the present conditions many migrant workers face in relation to their exclusion as subjects of rights and their inclusion as ‘laboring arms,’ as a specific form of pliable labor embedded in turn in internal hierarchization through racialization (Glenn 2002; Ngai 2004). As Bridget Anderson notes, “through the creation of categories of entrant, the imposition of employment relations and the construction of institutionalized uncertainty, immigration controls work to form types of labor with particular relations to employers and to labor markets” (2010:301). The border ‘multiplies’ labor (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) by creating seemingly endless categories of workers who are not citizens, manufacturing vulnerability, and increasingly segmenting the workforce (De Genova 2005; Schierup et al. 2015; Walia 2010).

Moreover, having a work authorization does not immediately change migrant workers' labor market options, as Claribel’s story shows, precarity is ‘sticky’ (Goldring and Landolt 2011, 2013). In many cases, workers with ‘legal’ but precarious migratory

statuses find that the temporary nature of their permission to work limits their ability to find employment and can be used as a disciplinary tool.

For those with different employment authorization cards, mundane occurrences like misplacing your card while moving can mean the inability to prove your eligibility to work while your replacement is being processed, which can take time. That is what happened to Carla, who misplaced her DACA papers when moving from California to Oregon with her two children, searching for a more affordable place to live. But when she tried to get a replacement, she found that processing times were long, and while she had hoped to avoid it, found herself employed in the food processing industry:¹³

My cousin said that where she worked—a small food processing plant—they did not ask for anything, only to give your social security number “by heart”, so I went with her. I couldn’t afford to wait for the papers. I have two small kids; it is not ideal, but I am thankful to God for the job.

In Carla’s case, as in Sabrina’s, political and administrative changes that have made it harder for migrants to access employment authorizations they are legally entitled to, directly impacted their employment trajectories.

Alejandra is 47, and she is from Veracruz, Mexico. Alejandra first came to the U.S. with her brother when she was 22 years old to help her mom. She stayed for three years, but she went back when her mom got sick. Alejandra used the money she had saved to buy an acre of sugarcane and a few cows. She got married and had three kids. But the situation in Veracruz worsened: violence increased, money was tight, and as her family struggled to keep their land, her husband decided to come to the U.S. She did not want to come back but also did not want to stay behind alone, so she came along, this

¹³ Current average processing times of EAD replacements are 120 days (<https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/renew-your-daca>).

time, with her children. Six years ago, she was approved for a U Visa (after a situation of domestic violence that included her and her youngest daughter) and given an Employment Authorization Card. The temporary employment authorization had to be renewed regularly but allowed her to ‘work legally.’ After six years, she was able to apply for a permanent residency. However, the pandemic delayed the processing of all applications, including hers, and overnight she lost her authorization to work. When this happened, Alejandra was recovering from an accident she suffered while on the line at a vegetable processing plant. In the past, when she had lost status while waiting for a visa renewal, the company had had no problem keeping her employed. This time around, Alejandra was immediately fired –in a situation that leaves little doubt to its connection to her ongoing workers’ compensation claim– and she lost not only her job but also her health insurance and the ability to access any public benefits.

In the case of Alejandra and many others, as I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, her employer benefited from her precarious status to dispose of her after she suffered a workplace injury (Gravel et al. 2010; Stuesse 2018). Despite the specific status that workers might have at a given moment, the fact that they are a migrant gives employers additional means of control over them. It is then not just the absence of ‘legal’ status that creates increased vulnerability and employer power of the workers but the molding of precarious migrant workers through an array of shifting categories and inclusion in the labor market as a particularly exploitable and disposable workforce (Leerkes et al. 2013; Martinez-Aranda 2020; Menjivar and Lakhani 2016). Workers with precarious ‘legal’ statuses are under intense state scrutiny. In many cases, they depend on their employers to be able to retain authorization to physically remain in the country and have very little

legal recognition. As the demographic composition of migrant workforces continues to change, scholars have observed the increased reliance of employers in sectors such as meatpacking on workers with tenuous statuses or limited employment opportunities due to their transborder life stories (Champlin and Hake 2006; Izcará Palacios 2010; Rodríguez 2004). A careful understanding of these complex conditions is critical to understanding their experiences in the workplace.

Workers' stories underscore how migratory statuses are complex and shifting, and static categories that center the receiving state erase the actual movement of workers and their experiences. It also becomes clear how the law operates as a fragmented and changing composite of rules, regulations, and decisions at different bureaucratic levels and that while workers might change status throughout their lives, their liminality—as precarious migrant workers—is ostensibly permanent. In the next section I transition to the meso level, shifting my focus to how workers' come to the PNW and the characteristics of the food processing industry in the region.

Coming to the Pacific Northwest

Although outside of the 'gateway' states, the Northwest has been growing as an initial destination for new migrants, as well as a destination for those who come here after spending time in other parts of the U.S. (García 2014; García and García 2005; McGlade 2002; Murray 2012). Many of the workers had family members already employed in these areas or had a family history of employment in the region as seasonal migrant workers. Others came lured by lower costs of living and promises of work. But the reality of moving here was very different from their expectations.

Some, like Teresa, Alejandra, and Mai, shared the shock they felt when moving to some of these smaller and rural towns. Alejandra (47 years old and from Veracruz, as discussed above) describes:

In the beginning it was really depressing because I came in December and there's nothing really. I remember I got here December 1st, and the next day it snowed. Everything was covered in snow, and we were basically locked in. During the afternoons I would cry and think, "what am I doing here?" Yes, that was my first time seeing snow, but I didn't have a job. I didn't have any money. Those days my brothers had to go through other people's trash to survive, and it was just terrible for me. It was just really, really bad.

Teresa is 48 years old and was born in Nayarit, Mexico, she shared her first impression of rural Washington:

The first time, we came to this little town called Warden ... and we were on a bus and it stops, and I said to my husband, "we are probably stopping here to rest and we will continue the trip after that" and the driver said "no, here is Warden, this is your stop." ... no hombre ... there were no big stores, no McDonalds, no Burger King, nothing. It was just a tiny town.

Initially migrating from Nayarit to California, Vicky moved to Washington displaced by increasing costs of living: "in California I made too little, paid too much rent, and couldn't make ends meet so I would come up to Washington during the cherry season and eventually decided to stay here for good."

Mexican migrants have had a long presence in the Pacific Northwest, even if they have been "largely ignored on the official record" (Sifuentes 2016:6). This 'erasure' is not accidental. Both Washington and Oregon have a history of racial exclusion and the artificial creation of primarily white, homogenous populations, or 'whitetopias' (Bussel and Tichenor 2017; Shuford 2011).¹⁴

¹⁴ Oregon, for example, barred Black people both free and enslaved from entering the state in 1849, and continued its exclusionary policies in the 20th century, with, for example, the passing of the 'Alien Land

Migration to the area has been historically and presently connected to its agricultural industries. The emergence of Eastern Washington and Oregon and the Yakima and Willamette valleys as agricultural hubs producing a wide range of fruit, vegetables, nuts, berries, grapes, hops, etc. increased the need for manual labor.¹⁵ Eventually, Mexican migrants replaced other ethnic groups as a source of “dependable cheap labor” for the fields and the processing houses that opened in these areas (Darian 2006; Gamboa 1987; Slone 2006). After a period of slow-down in migration, the Latinx population has grown exponentially in both Oregon and Washington in the past three decades, with more families settling year-round in small rural communities (Bussel and Tichenor 2017; Villa, Shin, and Nagata 2014).¹⁶ Still, today, the Latinx population in Washington and Oregon is only 13 percent and 13.4 percent respectively, compared to the average 18.5 percent for the U.S. as a whole. But you also can find some majority of Latinxs towns in the areas where agricultural and food processing work concentrates, such as Yakima (50 percent Latinx), Pasco¹⁷ (56 percent), Hermiston (52 percent), and Woodburn (57 percent) (U.S. Census 2020), where many of the workers I interviewed live and work. Nationally, 63 percent of food processing workers speak English as their primary language and 27 percent speak Spanish as their primary language. In the Tri-Cities, Washington area of Richmond, Pasco and Kennewick, 51 percent speak English

Law’ in 1923, which forbade foreign-born populations from owning any land in the state (Bussel and Tichenor 2017).

¹⁵ Big irrigation projects like the Columbia Basin Irrigation Project considerably increased the productive land in the area. These same projects had terrible environmental and social consequences, particularly for Native Americans who had depend on the salmon, which was severely impacted by the construction of dams (Darian 2006).

¹⁶ The 2020 Census shows a growth of 40.1 percent for the Latinx population in Washington and 30.8 percent growth in Oregon from 2010. Counties with agricultural processing plants and distribution near the I-84 corridor saw their Latinx populations grow the most (US Census Bureau 2022b, 2022a).

¹⁷ Franklin County, where Pasco is located, became the first majority Latinx county in the Pacific Northwest in 2006.

and 37 percent speak Spanish as their primary language (ACS 2019). These Latinx enclaves within the “white utopia” of the Pacific Northwest are evidence of the spatial and occupational segregation Latinx face in both Oregon and Washington and how much of their territorial mobility has been shaped by employers and industry’s labor needs (Gamboa 2000; Mercier 2001; Sifuentez 2016). In addition to the strong Latinx enclaves, my sample also reflects the Karen refugee settlement in the area and employment in the industry (Hardwick and Meacham 2005; Krogstad 2019).¹⁸ In the following section, I present details of the food processing industry in general, specifically regarding the geographical areas and subsectors of the industry where the workers I interviewed are employed.

The ‘Forgotten Factories’

The food processing industry includes all the companies that transform livestock and agricultural products for consumption. The North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) distinguishes industry groups based on the raw materials, for example, meat, fish, vegetables, fruit, grains, etc. These companies manufacture food products to

¹⁸ I include primary language spoken here as one way of understanding ethnic communities, as the American Community Survey race categories are insufficient to understand the ethnic makeup of different communities concentrated in this region and industry. Here, we see that Latinx migrant workers are concentrated in both the industry and the region, with larger concentrations in the tri-city area and within food processing, as compared to national figures and as compared to the overall population within the region. Nationally, 63 percent of food processing workers speak English (as compared to 74 percent of all workers), with Spanish being the second most spoken language. Nationally, 27 percent of food processing workers and 12.47 percent of all other workers speak Spanish as their primary language. In the Tri-Cities area specifically, 51 percent of food processing workers few speak English (vs. 67 percent of all other workers in the region), and 37 percent of food processing workers in the region speak Spanish as their primary language (vs. 19 percent of all other workers). Note this is primary language: only 5 percent of food processing workers report they do not speak English at all (vs. 1 percent of all other workers) and 11 percent of food processing workers are 'linguistically isolated' (vs. 4.37 percent of all other workers) meaning that no household member over 14 years old speaks English very well. The figures for refugee workers are smaller and less reliable at this level of granularity but are similarly concentrated and larger for this region and industry (around 1 percent for refugees from Burma) than nationally and in other industries (ACS 2019).

sell to wholesalers or retailers, not directly to customers. Products are prepared in a variety of ways, canning, freezing, cooking, cutting, and cleaning.

Food processing is a low-profit margin sector that overall has been difficult to fully automate or relocate abroad because of the perishable nature of the products and the historical and geographical cultural embeddedness of some products (Champlin and Hake 2006; Grunert et al. 2010; Stull and Broadway 2004; Stull, Broadway, and Griffith 1995). In many ways, this has meant that while other manufacturing industries left the United States to produce their products abroad, offshoring was less of an option for food processors.¹⁹ However, this does not mean that companies have not moved geographically in the past decades. On the contrary, while in the mid-20th century, most food processing companies were located in big urban areas, today, most plants can be found in smaller rural or semi-rural communities, in many cases, moving closer to the sites where raw materials are being produced (Andreas 1994; Brueggemann and Brown 2003; Fink 1998; Horowitz 2006). Importantly, this movement allowed companies to benefit from lower labor and living costs and tax incentives and subsidies offered by localities severely impacted by diminishing population, unemployment, and fiscal crisis (Gisolfi 2017; Kandel and Parrado 2005; Lahdesmaki and Suutari 2020; Schwartzman 2013; Thu and Durrenberger 1998).

Changes in working and consumption patterns increase the demand for processed food. As workweeks extended and more women entered the workforce, consumption of

¹⁹ Certainly, some subsectors of the food processing industry are easier to relocate abroad. Companies like Pepsico and Nabisco moved the production of many of their products to Mexico in the past decades, in part due to the less perishable nature of both the raw materials and the final products these companies specialize in (dry foods that do not require refrigeration).

‘time-saving’ products also grew (Bernstein 1990; Forson and Counihan 2013; Goodman 1997; Wolf 2014). Today, even ‘fresh’ products like vegetables arrive at the retail stores with higher amounts of human labor: cut, pre-cooked, mixed, etc. (Böhm et al. 2019; Burch and Lawrence 2009; Freidberg 2009). In 2017, 15 percent of food expenditures went to food processing products.

The food processing industry plays a vital role in the Pacific Northwest. It is Washington’s second-largest manufacturing industry, producing 14.4 billion dollars annually, and produces 9 billion in Oregon (Bechtoldt 2019; Lehner 2018). The region is a leading producer of fresh fruit and related products and is four times more concentrated than the rest of the U.S. (Fountain 2019; Lehner 2018; Morrow 2020; United States Department of Agriculture- Northwest Regional Field Office 2021; Washington Apple Commission 2020).

Donald Stull and Michael Broadway (2004) explain how processes of intensification in production, concentration in fewer and larger units, and increased specialization reshaped food industries in the past decades as companies seek to keep up with the increased competition in global markets. The increased concentration and consolidation of the food processing industry has meant that bigger firms control large market shares and that fewer businesses have increased control over products along the food supply chain. While concentration and consolidation have not happened to the same extent in all subsectors, this trend is true for the industry overall (Azzam 1996; Gschwandtner and Hirsch 2018; Howard 2016). The ‘retailer revolution’ has partially driven these changes, with large retailers preferring ‘one-stop’ sourcing from larger processors. The industry relies on fewer—and bigger—buyers for most sales.

Deregulation and diminished enforcement of antitrust legislation starting in the 1980s, combined with trade agreements that provided access to an increasingly globalized market, further impacted the food processing industry (Cox and Foster 1985; Hamilton, Senauer, and Petrovic 2011; Horowitz 2006).

At the same time, specific characteristics of the food sector such as the variable (but relatively short) shelf time of the products, the existence of compulsory cleaning times and other food quality measures, and increased just-in-time demand on the part of retailers also constrain the food processing sector's ability to increase planning or introduce lean production methods (Dora, Kumar, and Gellynck 2016). In turn, the food processing industry continued to rely on large amounts of manual labor in ways that other sectors have not (Muszyńska 1996; Qazi 1998; Stull et al. 1995; Weiler 2021). This has meant that reducing labor costs has then been central to the food processing business model (Kandel and Parrado 2005; Schwartzman 2013). Employers have accomplished this in recent decades through the aforementioned relocation to rural areas, union-busting, frequent violation of safety regulations, increased productivity through speed-up of the lines and mandatory overtime, and the overall reduction of workers' wages and compensation. Today there are 795,640 food processing workers in the U.S., making a \$14.66/hr. median hourly wage, a \$16.27/hr. mean hourly wage, and a \$33,830/yr. annual mean wage (ACS 2019). U.S. 'food sweatshops' (Compa 2004) have consistently relied on vulnerable populations for their labor needs. Food processing workers nationally are disproportionately migrant workers (31 percent of food processing workers are migrant workers, compared to 15 percent of workers in all other industries) (ACS 2019). In the Tri-Cities area in Washington state, and Marion and Lincoln counties in Oregon, where

many interviewees work and live, this is even more pronounced, with 44 percent of food processing workers being migrant workers compared to 21 percent in all other industries in the region.

The intentional recruitment of vulnerable populations to work in the industry has been extensively documented (Bartolotta 2022; Gray et al. 2017; Grunert et al. 2010; Sanderson 2014; Schwartzman 2013; Stuesse 2016). Once inside the plants, work is highly segregated by gender and race. Women and migrant workers make up much of the workforce in the lower-pay positions across the sector (Catanzarite 2000; Food Chain Workers Alliance and Solidarity Research Cooperative 2016; Horowitz 1997). The industry also has the highest accident rate in all manufacturing (BLS 2022), which I will discuss further in Chapter 3.

Meatpacking

Meatpacking work has historically been a dirty, dangerous, and difficult job. Upton Sinclair's classic novel (1905), *The Jungle*, showed the terrible conditions found in the stacking yards in Chicago at the start of the twentieth century. However, after long struggles, there was a brief period between the 1940s and the 1970s when workers won union representation in most meatpacking plants, and wages went up, becoming higher than those for average manufacturing jobs. Even if the job continued to be dangerous, agreements regarding line speeds and increased safety had somewhat reduced the rate of injury among the workers. That was true until Iowa Beef Processors (IBP) came along;

with the ‘boxed beef’ revolution²⁰ came changes that set back the clock so much in terms of working conditions that most recent reports about the industry start with a reference to Sinclair’s novel to describe what is happening today.

More general trends in food processing can be illustrated by changes that have taken place in meatpacking (Stanley 1994). Starting in the 1960s, meatpacking went through important transformations. IBP’s business model relied on relocating the plants from urban centers and rural areas to benefit both from rural wages and avoid strong unions. IBP’s intransigent anti-unionism relied on closing unionized plants and moving them, particularly to ‘right to work states’ in the South. The speed of the lines increased, going from 175 cattle per hour in the 1980s to 400 per hour in the present (Broadway and Stull 2008; McConnell 2019a). By 1991 meatpacking was, once more, the most dangerous job. Wages started falling, and today, wages are 44 percent below the national average for manufacturing work (McConnell 2019b; Milkman 2020).

While automation has increased for the sector, most jobs in the processing departments of meatpacking are manual and involve hand-held knives (McConnell 2019). The killing, cutting, deboning, and packing are still done primarily by workers in the disassembly line. This, coupled with a high turnover due to the degraded working conditions, results in a steady demand for new workers. Champlin and Hake (2006) highlight how the employment of migrant workers, particularly those with precarious legal status, is part of the meatpacking corporate strategy. Both Stuesse (2016) and Schwartzman (2013) argue that after the industry faced a labor and a profit crisis in the

²⁰ Until the 1960s most meatpacking plants sent out big carcasses that were then turned into smaller cuts locally by butchers. The boxed beef revolution meant that now meatpacking plants were sending out smaller cuts already packed for sale, reducing retailers’ need for butchers.

mid-1990s, they were able to solve both issues by actively recruiting undocumented migrant workers as part of a conscious strategy to lower the costs of production and to prevent from possible new instances of labor unrest. There has also been an explicit effort to recruit women, particularly for the lower-paying positions (Horowitz 1997). While American Community Survey data reveals that overall, 37 percent of the workforce in the Animal Slaughtering and Processing Industry were women (ACS 2019), this number is somewhat misleading as it includes many occupations outside of production proper (transportation, engineering, sales), which men disproportionately occupy while women are largely concentrated in occupations on the line. For example, if we look specifically at manual labor-intensive occupations working on the line in Animal Slaughtering and Processing, 70 percent of graders and sorters are women, as are 54 percent of packaging and machine filling operators and tenders, 50 percent of machine feeders and offbearers, and 57 percent of hand packers and packagers (ACS 2019). These figures are similar to those for the gendered division of occupations in food processing overall, where 57 percent of graders and sorters are women, as are 54 percent of packaging and machine filling operators and tenders, and 61 percent of hand packers and packagers (ACS 2019).

Additionally, the industry has become more and more concentrated, with only a handful of companies controlling a vast share of the market. The top four beef producers—Tyson Foods, Cargill Meat Solutions, JBS USA, and National Beef—slaughter and package 85 percent of the beef in the U.S., a number significantly larger than what led the government to initiate anti-trust regulations in the 20th century against

‘the big five’²¹(Azzam 1996; McConnell 2019).²² Ninety eight percent of the U.S. production is done in only 50 plants. Workers now concentrate on fewer facilities that are notably bigger than those that existed 50 years ago.

Fruit and Vegetable Processing

Many times, when we buy produce at a grocery store, we assume that little or no processing has taken place between the fields and the shelves. But even the ‘freshest’ apples have gone through a process of cleaning, waxing, sorting, and packing; most of the time, they have also been stored in controlled-atmosphere rooms to be shipped out when needed by retailers during the off-season. We are more likely to recognize the processing labor in other products such as pre-cut salads, ready-made guacamole, and different assortments of clean and cut veggies or fruits that have been canned or frozen or turned into juice. While specific consumer trends have somewhat shifted—there is now more demand for ‘time-saving’ products, such as bagged salads, along with decreased consumption of canned goods —overall, the demand for added labor to the processing and/or packing of vegetables and fruits has increased (Freidberg 2009).

²¹ The big five were Armour, Cudahy, Morris, Swift, and Wilson (Azzam 1996; Stromquist and Bergman 1997).

²² A study conducted by the U.S. Congress in the early 1980s referred to IBP’s entry into the Pacific Northwest meatpacking market as a textbook example of complete market domination by one company. Until the mid-1970s the region was isolated from the rest of the U.S. meat industry. In 1976 a former member of the board of directors of IBP, along with the owner of one of the largest feedlots in the state, purchased a closed packing plant in Pasco. A year later, IBP purchased the plant, while under a U.S. Justice Department order restricting them from acquiring any other business engaged in the slaughtering or processing of fed cattle in the states of Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota or South Dakota. IBP went from having 0 percent of the region’s slaughter in 1976 to 60 percent by 1980. This concentration only grew larger in the following decades. Unlike other IBP plants, this one was unionized for many years. Tyson purchased IBP in the 2000s and expanded the production. The plant was later decertified as non-union (Apostolidis 2010; Committee on Small Business 1980).

Research on vegetable and fruit processing is more limited than in other subsectors of food processing, such as meatpacking. Vicki Ruiz (1987) and Patricia Zavella (1987) produced two central studies on canneries workers in California, specifically looking at the experiences of Mexican migrant women and Chicanas. In Oregon and Washington, the industrial production of vegetables and fruits is a multi-billion-dollar industry. Forty percent of the interviewed workers worked in apple, pear, and cherry processing and packing plants. Washington State is the leading producer of apples in the U.S., accounting for 70 percent of the U.S. production in 2021, reaching 7.4 billion pounds (United States Department of Agriculture- Northwest Regional Field Office 2021). Yakima Valley is the largest apple-producing region in the state, producing 134 million 40-pound boxes in 2020 (Hoang 2020). Today over 12,000 people work in the warehouses, sorting and packing fresh apples for shipping in the state. The state is additionally a leading producer of grapes (primarily for wine and juice), pears, and sweet cherries. Oregon also leads nationally in the number of fruit orchards and potato production.

Most domestic fruit and vegetable production in the United States is seasonal, with the largest harvests occurring in summer and fall. Fresh produce is highly perishable and requires constant cooling during storage and transportation. While employment in the packing houses is available year-round, labor needs increase seasonally, and the industry has consistently relied on migrant workers. Additionally, in the past decades, increased global competition has pushed U.S. producers to continuously seek to reduce labor costs, in many cases through the degradation of the overall working conditions.

Today, the packing and processing of fruit and vegetables are overwhelmingly done by migrant workers in the U.S. Among the graders and sorters, 59 percent of the workforce was born outside of the U.S., and among the hand packers and packagers, 49 percent. Both numbers exceed the proportion of foreign-born workers found in agricultural field work, although research on migrant workers has concentrated on the latter instead of the former occupations (ACS 2019). At the same time, from the end of the nineteenth century, when fruit and vegetable canneries first appeared in the Pacific Northwest, until the present, women have been a majority of the workforce (Hall 2008; Jarosz and Qazi 2000; Qazi 1998).

Seafood processing

Seafood processing is a highly seasonal subsector and more varied than other types of processing due to the wider variety of materials processed and less control over the quantity and quality of the raw materials processors have. For example, shrimp and herring fisheries process seafood for very short time periods (1 to 10 weeks, once or twice a year) (Franklin and Lennon 2004). Workers clean, cut, and process different types of seafood, which is sometimes cooked, canned, frozen, or turned into a paste for sale.

In this subsector, many workers are still paid by piece rate rather than hourly, and processing facilities tend to be smaller than in other sectors. Historically and still today, women have done much of the processing work, especially in crab, oyster, and shrimp facilities (Muszyńska 1996).

Fish processing has a really high incidence rate of accidents (6.8 recordable cases vs 2.9 for all workers²³) (BLS 2022), and the work is repetitive, physically tiring, and unpleasant, especially the odor. As with all other food processing work, seafood processing is characterized by low wages and few benefits, particularly for workers on the factory line. On average, seafood processing workers on the line make \$20,224 per year (ACS 2019).

Unlike in the meatpacking and vegetable and fruit processing subsectors, today a high percentage of seafood consumed in the U.S. is imported (65 percent) (Gephart, Froehlich, and Branch 2019). While the industry has reduced in size due to global competition, numerous canneries and processing facilities remain on the Washington and Oregon coasts. Forty percent of the seafood processing plants that still operate in the U.S. can be found in the Pacific region (Franklin and Lennon 2004). Canneries and seafood processing plants opened along the Columbia River and the coast of Oregon and Washington in the last decades of the nineteenth century. From the start, these canneries were dependent on native workers and migrants—the majority being Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinx workers. By the 1920s, women were doing much of the cannery line work (Ferreira 2015; Nag et al. 2012). Seafood processing has relied on Latinx workers in the past decades, many of whom are hired with temporary guest worker (H2B) visas (Ferreira 2015; Rathod and Lockie 2010).

Industrial Bakeries

²³ The incidence rates calculated by the Bureau of Labor Statistics represent the number of injuries and illnesses per 100 full-time workers and were calculated as: $(N/EH) \times 200,000$, where N = number of injuries and illnesses, EH = total hours worked by all employees during the calendar year, 200,000 = base for 100 equivalent full-time workers (working 40 hours per week, 50 weeks per year) (BLS 2022).

I also include a small subsample (n=4) of industrial bakery food processing workers who experience similar working conditions and physical and emotional hazards. While the products they produce have ostensibly longer shelf lives as compared to fresh fruits and vegetables and animal products, as I discuss in Chapter 3, workers on the line experience many similar hazards and the labor process similarly denies their full, embodied, and temporal personhood.

In this section I provided an overview of the food processing industry and included details of the subsectors where the workers from the sample are employed. In the following section I discuss some of the reasons why these workers take up employment in the industry.

Entering the Processing Plants

As already noted in the stories I have shared so far, there are compounding reasons that led workers to enter the processing plants. In this section I discuss the ways in which workers rotate between the fields and the packing houses, the reasons for this movement, the general working conditions found in the plants, recruitment of workers into the plants, and the reasons why workers take these jobs.

As mentioned in the previous section, the industry has historically and presently relied on very active recruitment of vulnerable workforces through different means, including relying on ethnic and familiar networks of migrant workers, creating transnational programs to ‘stimulate’ migration, coordinate with refugee resettlement agencies to encourage new arrivals to work in the sector, actively recruit from houseless shelters, among other strategies (Muszyńska 1996; Qazi 1998; Stuesse 2016).

[INSERT TABLE TWO WITH WORK RELATED DETAILS-Please see tables
at end of this chapter]

Workers' employment decisions are significantly shaped by them entering highly segregated and shallow labor markets (Ashiagbor 2021; Browne and Misra 2003; Moore 2010; Saucedo 2006, 2015). For workers directly settling in rural areas in the PNW, employment opportunities are limited. Language and educational barriers, inability to transfer skills, and their precarious statuses reduce the employment options available (Chun 2008; Durand, Massey, and Pren 2016; Flores 2010). In some areas, like the Yakima Valley, the industry is the main employer, and there are few other opportunities for workers (Gonzales and Ruiz 2014; Goodman and Watts 1994; Lahdesmaki and Suutari 2020). Moreover, existing ethnic and familiar networks contribute to shaping workers' employment decisions as it is often the case that migrant workers find employment through these networks, and in many of these areas migrant workers are employed in the industry (Buren 2017; Drever and Hoffmeister 2008; Hardwick and Meacham 2005).

From the fields to the packing houses, and back again

A high share of the interviewees had previous experience as farmworkers. But many had left the work in the fields in search of year-round employment, to be more protected from inclement weather, because they felt they could not keep up physically with the farm work due to their age, or because they were expecting to find better working conditions in the packing houses.

Claribel explained, "I live here all the time, not just in the summer, and need to pay rent, gas, electricity, Wi-Fi for my daughters that are now doing online schooling,

and I thought that the packing houses offered more of that, of year-round employment.” However, processing and packing houses, while offering employment year-round, also have varying needs for workers. Changes in the number of hours available severely impact workers’ incomes in the lower seasons, driving many to try to supplement their income through informal employment or to use whatever savings they were able to secure during the busier seasons, when they were working over 70 hours a week, 7 days a week.

Regarding the inclement weather, Marianne, who is 34 and has been working at a fruit processing plant for a year, shared, “the last seasons the temperatures were just too high, and I felt I couldn’t do it anymore, so I wouldn’t be in the sun,” and also talked about the growing use of pesticides. “I started in the fields, ‘pizcando’ pears, apples, but I became very allergic to the pesticides and decided to try the packing plants.”

After many years in the fields, Julia, 55 years old, felt she was too old to continue doing that work and sought employment in a processing plant: “At forty-something years old I was too tired. I became too tired because farmwork means walking a lot, carrying a bag for the fruit, and the ladder, and the terrain is uneven, and I said, ‘I am getting too old for this, I would rather be in a packing plant where I am not required to be in the open air.’” Others felt that working in the packing houses was a step up from the work in the fields. Roberto, 42 years old, explains:

When I started in the plant it was because I thought there would be benefits. You know, in farm work there are no benefits. So they give you health insurance and you think, ‘oh, this is a great benefit,’ but then you realize it’s not, because one has to pay for it and it’s really expensive but you do not know that when you start, and you think having that is good.

Similarly, Paz (who I mentioned earlier) shared: “well the truth is that I did not want to continue working in the fields. The fields are too intense and difficult, and more so for women, and I wanted to improve, find a job in a factory, in production.”

However, entry into the processing industry was not a one-way trajectory for some. Mainly those employed in fruit processing companies shared that they continue to move between working in the fields during the ‘pizca’ and working in the warehouses in the winter. Workers shared that they disliked the work in the processing plants and went back to the fields when possible. Dolores L., who is 38 and works in fruit packing, said: “The packing plant is more frustrating for me, so when the summer season comes, I leave the packing house and go back to the fields, and then when winter comes, I go back to the warehouses.” Vicky, shared similarly: “I leave the packing houses during the season and go to the fields because I can make a little bit more money, but the work is harder, dirtier, and I finish the season really exhausted.” In the fruit packing industry, many employers also own farmland and allow workers to fluctuate between the fields and the packing houses depending on the season, however workers lose seniority and benefits every time they leave the packing house, even if they continue working for the same company but in the fields.

Familial, network, and agency recruitment

Many workers who started in the industry were recruited by family members already employed. Felicia, who first started in the industry at 17 when she dropped out of

high school, shares, “my mom, my dad, and my brother worked there as regular workers, and I first went during the cherry season, and you know, in the cherry season they hire anyone who wants to work.” Processing plants have historically relied on the familiar and social networks of the workers for recruitment (Horowitz 1997; Qazi 1998; Schlosser 2001), including offering bonuses for both the recruiter and the new worker if they make it past a certain amount of time, as Pedro, 39 years old, explained. When I interviewed him, his cousin had started three months back, and he was hoping he would make it past the benchmark time on the job required to claim the \$500 incentive.

Several of the interviewed workers started working in the industry very young, incentivized by programs sponsored by their high schools. This is the case for Karen, Valerie, and Paw. Paw is 19. He was born in a refugee camp in Burma and came to the U.S. with his parents when he was 11. They were sent directly to the Tri-Cities area. Once they were there, a refugee settlement organization helped them secure housing and employment. He had been in the U.S. for about a month when his parents started working at the meatpacking house. When he was 17, he was told in his high school about a ‘summer internship’ at a big orchard and packing company in town. It seemed like a good way of making money and gaining employment experience. Being bilingual, he assumed he would get an administrative position. However, he quickly found out his options were to pick apples for hours under the sun or to work in the packing house. After that disappointing experience, he returned to school the following August. Still, when the school went online in April 2020, he and several of his friends applied to work at a meatpacking plant where his parents worked. At least the packing plant paid better than

the apple fields. He would rather not work in the same place as them, but there aren't many options (Nelson and Marston 2020).

Processing plants have also relied on local employment agencies, federally supported job-placement programs, and refugee settlement programs for recruitment, particularly in meatpacking (Birgier et al. 2018; Mpofu et al. 2012; Wachter et al. 2015). While the sample of refugee workers is small, it is important to note that all of the older workers who went to the eastern area of Washington state as their first destination after migrating were placed in the meatpacking plant by the settlement agency. They shared that they started working there usually after having been in the U.S. for about a month, and in all cases before three months had passed. Migrants admitted into the U.S. as refugees are immediately authorized for employment, and they are “encouraged to become employed as soon as possible” (Hutchins 2022). The ‘Reception and Placement assistance’ provided by non-profit resettlement agencies is limited to the first three months after arrival, thus creating a clear incentive for both the agencies and the refugees to become employed before this time ends. Whereas some other forms of support are available after these initial months, funding does not generally last more than six months (Kreisberg, de Graauw, and Gleeson 2022). Given these restrictions, nonprofits in charge of settlement proudly announce to wannabe employer partners that refugees: “arrive with their legal status intact and are ready to work” (World Relief 2022). Meatpackers and other food processing companies have become important partners of settlement agencies, willing to employ workers who often have limited educational backgrounds and speak little to no English (Mpofu et al. 2012).

Having just arrived in the U.S., these workers find themselves funneled into food processing jobs with highly unpredictable schedules and long hours, impacting their ability to learn English and pursue an education that could broaden their labor market opportunities (Henly and Lambert 2014; Johansson and Śliwa 2014; Luthra, Soehl, and Waldinger 2018). A former volunteer in one of the agencies shared: “We're so thankful that the meatpacking plant will take them, and they always have positions, and we just need to get someone a job as quickly as we can.” Refugee workers, on the other hand, expressed a desire to have been given more time to learn English and pursue education to be able to have more employment opportunities.

Employment of last resort

Packing and processing houses ‘are always hiring,’ most of the workers said, and in some cases after searching for employment in other places, entering the packing houses was the only option to avoid unemployment. This relates to the high percentage of jobs in the industry in areas like Yakima, as Sabrina (age 19, discussed above) says:

“Here in Yakima it’s like the main, la manzana, la fruta, aqui es donde hay trabajo²⁴.”

Some younger folks shared that after starting to work at the plants, older workers would encourage them to find employment elsewhere, ‘while they still could.’ Karely, who is 25 and came to the U.S. when she was seven, shared:

Then everybody just kept telling me, they’re like, don’t do it. Go to school, you’re so young. You know, you got papers, you know, you still have time, even the managers. It was really bad, because I would see workers and they genuinely don’t have an option, they don’t get to decide whether they want to be there or not. Some people would even be like, do it for us, like, you know, we’re stuck in here. We can’t do anything.

²⁴ “Here, the fruit is where the work is.”

However, Karely found that even as a citizen her employment options in the area were limited. When studying apple packers in Yakima, Karen Snyder (2004) found similar attitudes to the ones described by Karely. She explains that women are vocal about their dislike for the work, and aware of the health and safety risks involved, but they also recognize the barriers to find alternative employment and make choices based on these conditions.

Workers described deciding to go to the plants in moments of higher unemployment –as in the first months of the pandemic– or when experiencing higher financial duress and needing to work as many hours as possible. The turnover rate in the industry contributes to a semi-permanent need for new workers. When discussing recruitment and staffing levels with managers and human personnel, they stressed the difficulty in finding workers that would remain employed for long. A human resource director of a vegetable processing plant shared that they run new worker orientations every week for an average of 40 workers, many don't stay past it:

We have a lot of turnover, we do our very best to kind of inform everyone who's coming in, during orientation of what the plant life is all about, it's very different (...) and so we have a lot of people that come through here that we try and explain that to them and show them pictures and, and videos and whatnot. But until they actually get out there, take a small tour. They don't really understand it. And we've had several that will say, 'oh, gosh, no, I can't do this.'

Certainly, working conditions make it so many workers do not remain employed in the industry long, and many of my interviewees described seeing new workers come in at the beginning of the shift, and never return to the lines after their first break. Workers shared that it is those with the fewest employment options, and many times with the highest care responsibilities –such as single moms–who put up with the work the longest. Younger workers, particularly men, are the ones who abandoned the plant sooner and more

abruptly, according to many of the interviewees. However, turnover is not only determined by employee mobility. As I explore in the next chapter, punitive forms of control over workers' absences, sickness, and family obligations, create obstacles for workers to be able to remain employed. Importantly, the bodily harm they experience at the plants many times reduces workers' ability to continue working in the industry. The industry tacitly encourages turnover as it helps keep wages and workers' compensation costs down and mitigates against collective organizing (Broadway and Stull 2008). The high turnover at individual plants contrasts with workers' long tenures in the industry overall. Workers many times leave the industry for a season, or while they recuperate from an injury. But their absence, as noted before, is never permanent as the packing houses go through workers quickly and are always hiring, and workers find themselves returning to them again and again.

In this chapter I have introduced numerous workers' stories of migration—between countries and regions—and of their experiences with employment to illustrate their multiple, layered experiences of precarity. I discussed the centrality of food processing work to these regions in the Pacific Northwest and how it relies on degraded working conditions and the hyper-exploitation of precarious racialized and gendered migrant workers in a region where they have particularly few employment opportunities. This industry reveals how differential ex/inclusion, migratory policies, employer recruitment and labor control, and constrained employment opportunities serve to compound the structural violence and precarity workers face.

My case thereby illustrates how precarity is co-constructed at multiple levels. This chapter has connected the macro-level of structural violence of migratory policies,

racialization processes, gendered processes, and the meso-level regional industries, labor markets, and state and organizational practices, while centering the micro-level workers' experiences and agency in the face of these forms of violence and constraints. Notably, if not surprisingly, workers facing such constrained employment prospects continue to return to this often hazardous and degrading work particularly when they have precarious migratory status and sole caregiving and breadwinner responsibilities.

In the next chapter I expand on how workers experience the labor process and how the precarity discussed above, constructed through migratory policies that are part of racializing and gendered processes marks certain populations as already available for injury, for accidents, for premature disability and premature death.

Table 1. Sample Demographics: Workers (N=60)

<u>Gender</u>	
Women	70%
Men	30%
<u>Median Age</u>	37 years old
<u>Marital Status</u>	
Married	43%
Single	23%
Divorced	18%
Partnered	10%
Separated	5%
<u>Respondents w/Dependents in Home</u>	75%
<u>Race</u>	
Latinx	85%
Asian	15%
<u>Birthplace Nation-State</u>	
Mexico	60%
United States	23%
Burma	12%
Thailand	3%
Guatemala	2%
<u>Median Year of Migration for Those Born Outside U.S.</u>	1999
<u>Median Age of Migration for Those Born Outside U.S.</u>	19 years old
<u>Return Migrant</u>	
Not Return Migrant	82%
Return Migrant, Foreign-Born	12%
Return Migrant, U.S.-Born	7%

Table 1. Sample Demographics (Continued)

<u>Migratory Status</u>	
Undocumented	22%
U.S.-Born Citizen	20%
Naturalized Citizen	5%
Resident	17%
DACA Recipient	15%
Refugee	15%
T-Visa	2%
U-Visa	2%
Asylum-Seeker	3%

Table 2. Sample Work Experiences: Workers (N=60)

<u>Job Tenure in Current Job</u>	
Minimum	2 months
Median	3 years
Maximum	31 years
<u>Median Hourly Wage</u>	
	\$14.75
<u>Injury or Chronic Pain Due to Work</u>	
Yes	53%
No	47%
<u>Industry Subsector</u>	
Fruit Packing	40%
Vegetable Processing	22%
Meatpacking	22%
Seafood Processing	7%
Bakery	7%
Juice Production	3%
<u>Occupation</u>	
Line Worker	53%
Stacker	18%
Supervisor	10%
Machine Operator	8%
Quality Control	7%
Forklift Operator	2%
Sanitation	2%

3. ENDEMIC PRECARITY

“Another story pulsates without making headlines, a story older and more complex (...): the destruction of bodies by capitalism in spaces of production.” (Berlant 2007: 764)

At the end of the last chapter, we left the workers as they entered the processing plants after analyzing the structural conditions that impact their migratory and employment trajectories. Now, we follow these migrant workers into the ‘hidden abode of production’ to analyze their lived experience in the industry. In their *testimonios*—the in-depth interviews and the written complaints they sent to the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries (LNI)²⁵—what emerged are narratives of cumulative bodily and emotional harm, corporeal risk, and vulnerability that existed long before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The impact of COVID-19 inside food processing plants temporarily brought public attention to the industry’s disregard for workers’ health. However, the first time I interviewed Angie, who is 48 years old and started working in fruit processing when she was 17, she shared how frustrated she was by the fact that no one seemed to care about what was happening to the workers before the pandemic:

²⁵ In this dissertation I use federal OSHA or OSHA to refer to the Occupational Safety and Health agency at the federal government level and OSHA Oregon, to refer to the state level agency in Oregon. The Division of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH) is the state level agency within Washington State Department of Labor and Industries (LNI). The complaints compiled for this research were presented to LNI and are referred to as such.

I was tired of the journalists asking the same questions over and over again and I told a reporter, “Enough with COVID, here we were all ill before this, taking painkillers to be able to work while being in pain, dealing with anxiety because of the speed of the line, depression because of how the supervisors treat us ... people are too focused on COVID (...) we just can’t keep going like this.”

This chapter is an effort to follow Angie’s request to seriously understand the *endemic precarity* the workers faced before the pandemic crisis that started in March 2020. I demonstrate how working at food processing facilities means migrant workers’ daily subjection to a form of precarious employment that is more than a ‘bad job’; it goes beyond low wages, unpredictable schedules, or lack of benefits. It means working in and through bodily pain and emotional distress, struggling to get employers to recognize the very concrete corporeal limits to their pursuit of profits. It means not having enough time to rest or recuperate from injuries and facing retaliation for reporting an accident, being ill, or even giving birth. It means navigating fragmented regulatory systems—from company doctors to health insurance companies, human resource departments, occupational and health agencies, or cumbersome workers’ compensation systems—which ultimately do little to help workers when not actively contributing to harming them.

I discuss these workers’ experiences as *endemic precarity* precisely to address the non-exceptional character of employment practices where temporary or long-term impairment is expected as a normal consequence of working. Bringing together conceptualizations of precarious work in terms of concrete workplace conditions (Carré 2000; Juravich 2009; Kalleberg 2009, 2011; Milkman and Ott 2014; Vallas and Kalleberg 2017; Vosko 2006) with an understanding of precarity as a political notion that names the differential exposure to injury, violence, and death that certain populations suffer (Berlant 2011; Butler 2006, 2009; Millar 2017; Povinelli 2011), I re-center the

workplace to understand the material workings of this uneven distribution of harm. These workers' bodies, already marked differentially by the border as shown in the previous chapter, are disposed of in the production process in ways that create systematic debilitation and bodily pain. These conditions must be understood as part of what Jasbir Puar has called 'biopolitics of debilitation,' the wearing down of racialized bodies that are "expected to endure pain, suffering and injury"(2017:xiv) as part of an 'economy of injury' within racial capitalism that "maintains the precarity of certain bodies and populations precisely through making them available for maiming" (2017:xvii).

Attending to workers' narratives, what emerge as central are both the *embodied* and *temporal* dimensions of this endemic precarity. As Angie and most of the workers I interviewed pointed out, the daily bodily harm they endure takes place in an ordinary way, experienced as an inevitable aspect of work in the industry. This harm is not just about the risk of a severe accident, although this happens routinely; it is about an ongoing debilitation, one that occurs quotidianly over the course of workers' employment tenures and that, while it has important consequences for workers' lives, does not constitute a critical event. Instead, this harm *is made mundane*, obscuring the *organized abandonment* (Cacho 2012; Freshour 2016; Gilmore 2002, 2009; Povinelli 2011) of migrant workers who have been stripped of political and social rights. Workers' *testimonios* relating pre-pandemic working conditions to their current realities in the pandemic bring into sharp relief how certain productive processes had always *endemically* relied on bodily harm and how this is compounded by the employment, migratory, and welfare policies that restrict or flat-out deny these workers' access to protections and care, severely restrain

their labor market mobility, and ultimately turn migrant and racialized workers into the twenty-first century paradigmatic form of disposable labor.

Importantly, focusing on the embodied precarity these workers face implies considering not only corporeal dimensions but also the emotions those bodies experienced. In the past decades, labor scholars have developed powerful conceptualizations to think about emotions in the workplace, discussing particularly the commodification of emotions as part of jobs that sell a specific emotional or aesthetic experience (Bolton 2009; Brook 2013; Evans 2013; Hochschild 2012; Otis 2016; Wharton 2014). The factory has mostly remained excluded from these conversations because no emotions are necessarily being produced or sold. However, what these workers' stories show is that considering the interconnections between material conditions of work, bodily harm, and emotional harm in the workplace can allow us to see how workers' bodies are affected by debilitating emotions as part of endemic precarity: anxiety, depression, fear, *coraje*.

The temporal dimension of this embodied endemic precarity goes beyond a discussion of the impacts of varying and unstable work hours and schedules (Golden 2014; Lambert et al. 2019; Schneider and Harknett 2019), features that are typically highlighted in scholarship on precarity in the workplace. In this chapter, I expand this discussion to focus on the contradiction between the time of production already built into the infrastructure, organization, and control over the labor process, and the distinct temporalities of bodily processes that take place within and beyond the shop floor (Arruzza 2015a). This contradiction refers not only to the pace under which a body can perform the tasks required on the shop floor but also to the need to organize work as if it

were a disembodied abstract capacity. This fiction—of workers’ bodies as mere bearers of labor power—must disregard and negate all other non-productive, concrete, and variable corporeal needs and rhythms implied in its organic reproduction.

I start by analyzing the organization and control over the labor process and how it disregards the workers’ bodily integrity by design, producing bodily and emotional harm. This first section of the chapter underscores how endemic precarity is centrally about not the more serious accidents that occur but rather the accumulation of instances of bodily and emotional harm that create a condition of debility. Paying attention to workers’ discussions of physiological needs, illness, emotions, and abilities to care for themselves and others, I discuss the ways in which the organization and control over of the labor process in food processing rely on disregarding, negating, or subsuming embodied temporalities that do not conform to the production process. I then discuss the expansive character of endemic precarity by analyzing the continuous disregard of workers’ bodily needs beyond the factory by social institutions. Finally, in the last two sections, I move to discuss how, despite the organized disregard for workers’ bodies, labor power’s concrete embodied characteristics resurface in two different ways: through 1) the incorporation and reproduction of bodily difference based on race, migration, gender, and capacity to the labor process and the uneven distribution of harm and debilitation, and 2) the workers’ own practices and narratives that attempt to care for their own bodies in the face of harm, debilitation, and injuries at work.

Producing Bodily Harm

Built-in disregard for workers' bodies

Patricia has spent over 20 years working in fish plants. We are chatting on the phone, but she puts the video on when I ask questions about the work process. She shows me her hands as we speak: her swollen fingers, her dislocated phalanges, her missing nails, the marks on her hands of the places where she cut herself while working on the herring, shrimp, and crab lines. She tells me about how much her back hurts, how she needs a knee surgery she cannot afford, her recurrent skin infections due to constant contact with biological hazards, her carpal tunnel, her ongoing eyesight issues from working in the ‘dark rooms’ where they clean the crab under special lights that resulted in her needing a cornea transplant, the time she dislocated her wrist when she stapled her hand with one of the machines. At 43 years of age, her body can no longer keep up with the physical demands of the processing plant. She has issues doing simple tasks at home and lives with chronic pain. “It’s not just me,” she says. “I can give you the phone numbers of my coworkers. You should see how everyone is, *que mal quedaron*.”

As Patricia points out, it’s not just her or her coworkers. At the food processing plants, the organization of the labor process produces not only commodities but damage to workers’ bodily integrity. This disregard for workers’ bodies goes beyond the will of individual employers; the logic of accumulation crystallizes in the very layout of the plants, the design of tools and machines, the organization of the lines, and the imposition of production time over bodily times. Although there are differences in the concrete processes and the type of work required in the different subsectors of the industry, the conditions I describe next were, for the most, shared by workers across the different companies and subsectors, and are in line with what other scholars have found (El-

Ahmed and Nabris 2019; Keller, Gray, and Harrison 2017; Liu and Apollon 2011; Qazi 1998; Rathod and Lockie 2010; Ribas 2016; Sexsmith 2017; Stuesse 2021b).²⁶

Workers' exposure to bodily harm starts as soon as they enter the plants, when they encounter an infrastructure built in a way that disregards the damage it can cause to workers' bodies. Workers discussed at length how the workplace infrastructure and environment were harmful and dangerous and how much of it did not seem to have been built keeping workers' bodies in mind. When I spoke to a human resources manager at a vegetable processing plant, she candidly described the space: "if you've never worked in a manufacturing food processing plant before, it's very loud, it's very hot, it can be very cold, slippery. You know, just a lot of people, and it can be very intimidating, with all the machines running, forklifts going around ..." Karely, a fruit packing worker I mentioned at the end of the previous chapter, shared with me that the first time she went into a plant, she was taken aback by how the place looked and felt, the artificial lights, the smells, and the noise. She said: "I don't know how to explain it but when you walk into the plant there is this atmosphere you can feel; it just doesn't feel safe."

This more general impression of the environment translates concretely into discomfort, pain, cumulative debilitation, and injuries when workers are on the line doing the many tasks included in their jobs: sorting, packing, lifting, cutting, and cleaning. Faitha, a 19-year-old vegetable processing worker, explained, "we are standing on concrete 10 hours a day, moving back and forth, and our feet feel the shock of standing on that hard surface all day." Many of the workers perform tasks on assembly lines. They

²⁶ In some cases, such as in fish and meat processing, the use of knives on the lines added sources of risk and harm; in others, the presence of chemicals was more prevalent, and in those cases I make sure to point out the differences.

are expected to work at the same height, regardless of their physical stature, resulting in awkward postures, extended reaches, twisting, and working overly hard. “After working on the cherry line for a couple of months, I would feel a constant sharp pain in my back. I am 5’ 10” and had to be constantly hunching over the line, and eventually, it became excruciating,” shared 20-year-old Stacey. Eddie, 29 years old, worked as a stocker at a vegetable processing plant for several years but had recently quit when we spoke. He said, “I was lifting pallets over and over again. At some point, going to work was just too much pain. And they never really cared. I left the warehouse with back pain and have never been able to fix my back pain since.”

Workers continually experience microtraumas from everyday situations like standing on the line for long periods, bumping into hard edges when extending over a conveyor belt, or repeated falls on slippery floors, leading to conditions such as sciatica, joint compression, varicose veins, and muscle fatigue, among others. Unlike with serious accidents that need immediate care, employers do not register these forms of slow, chronic harm that take place over more extended periods. Despite the limited data, we know that musculoskeletal disorders resulting from ergonomic issues directly related to the environment and organization of the work are one of the primary sources of bodily harm for workers in the industry (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020; Jackson et al. 2018; Nag et al. 2012; Simcox et al. 2001; Sormunen et al. 2006).

Workers are expected to work at extreme temperatures: below-freezing temperatures in ‘cold rooms’ for their entire shifts, or in hot summer temperatures in warehouses with no air conditioning. These extreme temperatures create damage and pain, impact how fast workers feel fatigued, and can decrease blood flow and manual

dexterity, increasing susceptibility to muscle strain (Sormunen et al. 2006; Zlatař et al. 2021). Mirta, a meatpacking worker who is 51 years old, explained that when she worked pulling meat apart, “they would make us grab the product at 400 °F with these thin gloves that kept falling apart, and my nails became all black from how hot it was.” At the same time, Sabrina, who is 19 years old, shared that “when you are working on the waterfall—the sector of the fruit packing line where apples are cleaned—your hands are constantly in freezing water. After a while you can’t even feel them. Workers also described narrow spaces to move, intense chemical use with reduced ventilation, extreme temperatures, lack of natural light, working underneath moving boxes that constantly fall, failing machinery, and insufficient protective equipment.

Moreover, employers fail to ensure workers have access to drinkable water while on the job. Workers reported that despite the work in extreme temperatures, they had no drinkable water available in the workplace. A fruit packing worker detailed in a complaint sent to LNI: “the water we have to drink is not good, it tastes rotten and gives us stomachache.” Not even the most basic need and essential nutrient of the human body, water, is deemed by employers to be of importance for the organization of the workplace.

A critical aspect of the workers’ ongoing bodily debilitation and injury was the presence of chemical hazards in the workplace, that workers were not properly trained to handle. “We use a lot of chemicals,” Karen, a 20-year-old fruit processing worker, explained. “After a while, I realized that my constant headaches and burning sensation in my eyes were due to this. I have seen many co-workers fainting on the lines or having nose bleeds because of the chemicals. I never received any training about the substances we use, and I’m not even really sure which ones they are.” When analyzing the LNI

complaints filed during 2020 against the 20 companies that are part of this research, I find that most workers mention headaches, burning eyes, skin problems, fainting, and other allergic reactions, which they connect directly with the chemicals being used in the plants, as well as repeating their lack of knowledge about what these chemicals are and training on how to use them. For example, one of the complaints states:

They changed the lines and now fruits fall in the water which has chemicals and burns your eyes, nose, throat, and lungs. The water splashes in your eyes and you cannot breathe, it feels like you have asthma, and you start getting dizzy. The packing machines make loud noises. We feel like our ears will burst but do not get earplugs. I brought this up to the supervisor and was told it was just bad design.

In this excerpt it is possible to observe not only the confirmation of what many workers shared but the fact that when innovations are introduced to the line, there is no consideration of how they will affect workers. When the workers point it out, managers are willing to recognize the poor design but not to modify it.

Moreover, as the previous complaint shows, equipment that could mitigate or prevent harm is not made available to workers, or it is only available on a limited basis. José, who is 39 years old and has been a meat packer for over 20 years, explained how a few years ago, the company changed the knives deboners²⁷ use to ones that ‘didn’t need to be sharpened’ to reduce the time workers ‘lost’ sharpening their tools. “It made the work so much harder, and I quickly started feeling pain in my elbow, so I asked permission to keep using my old knives and the sharpening tool, but new workers don’t have that choice since the only available tools now are the new ones and they start feeling a strain in their elbows and arms fast,” explained José. Mirta, who I mentioned before, shared how she was only given one pair of safety boots in the sixteen years she worked at

²⁷ Deboners work in a processing plant performing such duties as pulling and separating meat from bones using hands, knives, or scissors on production line.

the meatpacking plant. “They were very flat, and I had told my supervisor, I think I need a new pair because these boots are not doing their job anymore, but she said it was only one per worker. It was only after I slipped on the wet floor and broke my arm that I got a new pair of boots, but even these ones were several sizes bigger than my feet.”

Mirta’s fall is not an isolated case. According to workers, plant floors are constantly filled with grease, water, ice, or produce, making walking on them one of the most dangerous aspects of the job. Sebastián, a 27-year-old vegetable processing worker with eight years of tenure, explained: “to be honest, most of the accidents I have seen happen were due to the slippery floors. It’s just really flat concrete, and the product is always falling because of how fast the line is, and there is not enough staff to keep it clean. As it defrosts, it becomes hazardous.” As Sebastián points out, infrastructural hazards such as slippery floors are intimately connected with other aspects of the organization of the work, such as training, staffing, and pace of the line. The same is true of the frequent accidents involving machines crushing workers’ hands and pulling their muscles, among other serious injuries. Fifty-five percent of the workers I interviewed had suffered a severe injury in the workplace, and 30 percent had sustained injuries more than once. These numbers are not surprising, as the industry overall has one of the highest injuries in manufacturing—one and a half the total manufacturing incident rate, and almost double the overall rate for workers in the U.S. in 2021 (BLS 2021).

Attention to workplace hazards in precarious workplaces usually emphasizes the constant violation of workplace regulations and accident rates, as this is the more readily available data (Bernhardt, Milkman, and Theodore 2009; Bernhardt, Spiller, and Polson 2013; Koranyi et al. 2018). The stories shared by the workers confirm these trends.

However, and importantly, what also emerges from the workers’ narratives—but cannot be fully captured by statistics—are all the instances of cumulative disregard for their bodily integrity. In other words, the debilitation that results from a work environment and from the organization of the labor process wears them down, sometimes more slowly, sometimes faster. A focus on violation of labor regulations misses the fact that many rules are vague or difficult to enforce, such as the expectation that employers eliminate slippery conditions ‘if possible’ (Occupational Safety and Health Administration 2001) . Moreover, after years of struggle and several failed attempts to pass regulations, the federal Occupational Safety and Health Agency (OSHA) still does not have any ergonomic requirements for manufacturing, making most of the conditions that cause these forms of bodily harm perfectly lawful (Delp et al. 2014; Occupational Safety and Health Administration 2018).

Disregard for workers’ bodily integrity occurs in a continuum from serious, recordable injuries to other more subtle forms of cumulative damage that are central to understanding workers’ endemic precarity. In addition to facing accidents that could lead to temporary or permanent impairment, the labor process creates an ongoing debilitation that happens in invisibilized and unrecognized ways. As Claribel said: “There are days you are so tired you can’t even breathe, because of the back pain, of how swollen your arms are, *no puedes con tu alma*, but I guess that is what this work is like.” Here Claribel explicitly connects the physical pain with an affective dimension that goes beyond it, and that is part of the debility workers feel when they leave the packing plants every day.

In the following sections, I continue exploring the conditions in the factory by focusing on how the disregard for workers’ bodies already embedded in the workplace

infrastructure and organization intensifies and assumes new forms of carelessness, unrecognition, and harm through various managerial practices of labor control.

Despotic control over the laboring body

Labor control is one of the central notions of labor process analysis (Knights and Willmott 1989; Smith 1995; Thompson 2010a). Acknowledging the particularity of the commodity labor power—namely, that unlike other commodities of the production process such as raw materials or machines, it is embodied in a worker that only sells the capacity to labor but not a specific amount of work—employers are confronted with what scholars have called the ‘double indeterminacy’ of labor power: effort and mobility (Smith 2006; Thompson 2010b). Labor control thus names the combination of strategies, norms, and techniques regarding the organization of work that seek to ensure that employers are able to extract as much labor as possible from workers (Braverman 1974, Friedman 1977). The notion of factory regimes connects forms of labor control inside the shop floor with distinctive political and ideological notions and historically contextual institutions that regulate production relations and create different forms of labor control. Despotic factory regimes rely on direct control, surveillance, restriction of autonomy, and deskilling to secure workers’ efforts (Burawoy 1985).

In the following sections, I do not intend to thoroughly assess the elements that allow for a specific form of labor control to be imposed on the shop floor. The fact that the workers I interviewed were employed in several different sub-sectors of the food processing industry in different plants across different geographical locations presents methodological challenges to conducting a traditional labor process analysis of the factory regimes. However, it is possible in all the workers’ narratives to identify

characteristics of despotic forms of control, a form of control over the labor process that results in bodily and emotional harm. In the following pages, my main goal is to show how the workers reencounter the disregard for their bodies discussed in the previous section in the concrete practices and responses of management. If uncaring for workers' bodies seemed to be crystallized in the very layout of the plants and in the objects that make up the productive process (machines, tools, etc.), now it is experienced as personalized in management's direct engagement with the workers. The labor control regimes in the food processing plants imply a set of disciplinary practices and managerial strategies, and norms that confirm and enhance the neglect of workers' bodily needs, emotions, and overall well-being. Managers utilize both formal and informal methods of labor control: from direct coercion through verbal and physical violence to more standardized 'points' or 'warnings' systems that formally punish workers' absences, lateness, and even accidents on the line.²⁸ These practices can be understood in management's more general refusal to acknowledge workers' pain, injuries, or distress while on the lines.

On the shop floor, the logic and time of production are constantly pushing workers' bodies beyond their corporeal limits. The speed of the production line is a core source of control over workers' effort, and it is controlled by both management and the machinery, programmed at a pace that does not allow worker autonomy over the speed of production. The ongoing speed-up of the line in the industry²⁹ (Cook 2017; Cook et al.

²⁸ While many of these systems are codified in some way by employers, workers share that they are not aware of exactly how they work and that they are enforced unevenly.

²⁹ Speed lines are regulated by subsector, and in many cases the regulation comes from USDA, not federal OSHA. For example, in the 1990s the U.S. poultry industry successfully lobbied to weaken federal line speed regulation, almost tripling line speeds (Freshour 2019).

2015; Hendrix and Dollar 2018; National Employment Law Project 2020) has meant that workers are expected to make repetitive motions at faster speeds, not only increasing the number of serious accidents but also exacerbating many of the daily issues mentioned in the previous section. “The lines run fast. You have 100 apples coming your way per minute,” explained Mariana, 34 years old. James, who will be introduced in depth in a later section, shared that he is expected to debone a meat carcass in 60 seconds. Ricardo, who works in vegetable processing, explained the pace of shop floor dynamics: “Supervisors get bonuses depending on how much we produce, and that really screws us over. We end up feeling really beat up; I usually leave the plant feeling I can’t even walk.” Supervisors I interviewed, in turn, explained that they are under constant pressure to increase the speed of the lines. Roberto, a supervisor, related that they are always being asked to speed up the pace: “If the machine is running at 60 bags a minute, I am required to go and ask the machine operator if they can go faster, and if they manage to do that, I need to go back again and asked them to speed it up even more.”

Workers are expected to keep up with the velocity of the machines, but the breaking points this produces on their bodies are not as easily recognized as technical malfunctions and mechanical breakdowns are. As a meatpacking worker clearly expressed in an LNI complaint: “They see you as a machine doing repetitive movement over and over again. Machines and equipment break every day due to excessive work—now imagine a *being*, how exhausted and tired they feel working.”



Picture 3: A sign that reads 'Somos personas no máquinas' [we are people not machines], used at a rally in Pasco, WA. October 2020. Photo by the author.

High speeds not only result in added muscle strain but also are connected to the high levels of anxiety and stress shared by the workers and found in the industry overall (Baran, Rogelberg, and Clausen 2016; Ramos et al. 2021). In an alarming number of the LNI complaints compiled for this research, workers linked the accelerated line speeds and their work-induced stress: “my work has become very stressful, my area works too much, my lines go too fast ...,” read a complaint by a vegetable processing worker.

As workers experience bodily harm and get injured on the job, they often have to miss workdays. In an industry with high turnover, having workers missing from the lines due to their injuries impacts the risk of accidents in turn. This adds to another strategy pursued by the sector to reduce production costs: reducing staff by merging job tasks, cross-training, and introducing new machinery. These strategies illustrate the ongoing disregard for workers' bodily integrity. "The work is hard, and they want one person doing a two-person job, and well, people get hurt because of that," shared Fernando, a 49-year-old fruit packing worker who also worked in meatpacking for many years. The combination of faster lines with lower staffing levels is one of the main reasons behind the high rate of serious—and thus recordable—injuries in food processing (Cook et al. 2015; McConnell 2019b; Saxton and Stuesse 2018; Stuesse 2021a), but it is also connected to uneventful forms of strain and cumulative damage that create serious bodily harm in the long run.

Workers shared stories of being in such intense pain on the lines that they would be crying, yet management would ignore these very visible demonstrations of harm. Sabrina shared: "I hadn't been working long at the plant and since it was the cherry season we were working frenetically, and I kept watching women sob on the lines because their hands were cramped, or they were going numb due to the cold water, but the supervisor would act as if nothing was happening." Delaying, or refusing to file, a report is another form of this unwillingness to acknowledge workers' embodied experiences and suffering on the lines. Melisa, 28 years, shared that she felt an intense pain in her hip when she had to lift a box full of bags with processed corn. She told the supervisor, who simply replied that she did not have time to file a report, and that Melisa

should keep working. Still in pain, Melisa reminded the supervisor about the report at the end of the day and was told, “tomorrow I will do it.” Melisa woke up in even more pain the next day but showed up to work to demand a report be made, fearing they would retaliate if she missed a day. She was not able to get a report for a week, and when she finally did and asked for a less intense work task due to her pain, she was told, “well, you have been doing this task all week already, you are probably fine to continue.” Management used its own neglect of safety protocols to justify subjecting workers to persistent hazards. Vicky disclosed that boxes moving in a carousel above the lines fell so frequently on top of workers at a fruit packing plant that when it happened to her and she got a concussion, she was told to “wash her face and keep working,” as if nothing had happened.

In cases when accidents do occur, workers can expect a disciplinary write-up instead of, and not necessarily in addition to, medical aid. “The manager in our plant would walk around the lines yelling that we better not get hurt cause they didn’t carry any insurance,” shared Ana. She then added:

One time I was cleaning the machine like I always do, but something happened, and it activated and grabbed one of my fingers. I yelled for help but there was no one around. When I went to my break I went and asked for some band-aids. The nurse gave me some but did not do anything else. As I kept working, the glove I was using was filling with blood. When I told the manager what had happened so I could go to the doctor, the first thing she did was give me a written warning. But it wasn’t my fault that the machine lock did not work.

In the best scenarios, workers would be sent to an onsite nurse—when available—and either be given or sold an over-the-counter pain relief medicine. “They just sell us Advil, which does nothing for me since I have a pinched nerve in my spine that requires much stronger pain killers to be bearable,” shared José.

In sum, the despotic control over labor has severe bodily impacts for workers in the form of an increased exposure to injuries and an overall wearing down of workers' bodies. Employers direct shop floor supervisors to continuously push workers beyond productive capacities, and to deny the hazards they persistently face in the labor process and their clear effects on workers.

Bodies with no time for anything but work

In addition to driving down the costs of production through setting the pace of work and pushing effort at the expense of worker safety, employers also exert despotic control over workers' time in and beyond the shop floor in other various forms: unpredictable scheduling, mandatory overtime, policing of breaks, and an unwillingness to accommodate for workers' sickness, injuries or other bodily conditions (such as pregnancy) that force workers to return to work before they have fully recovered or to work in conditions that cannot account for differential rhythms and needs of their bodies. These practices imply an active disregard for bodily processes, rhythms, and needs that do not conform to the imperatives and speeds of production, resulting in new forms of harm, a shortage of time for social reproductive activities, and emotional distress.

As is increasingly the case for large portions of the U.S. and global workforce, food processing workers can expect to have variable and unstable hours. Several plants operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In many plants, workers' shifts, and days off are constantly changing and with little advance notice. Most subsectors have some seasonality—a moment in the year in which there is a production spike—but many processing facilities work with different products with different 'peak' moments. This means that some workers end the asparagus season only to start the corn one or finish the

cherry season to start working the apple one. During the peak season, workers are usually expected to work seven days a week without any days off for months at a time. Rita, who is 48 years old and who I introduced in the previous chapter, told me how disorienting it is to work intensively for that long:

During the cherry season, for example, you work every day from it begins until it ends. There are no Sundays, no nothing. You lose track of time. You don't even know what day it is because you work every day for about ten weeks. Last summer, I was a line lead, which meant I had to come in one hour before and leave one hour later, and the regular shifts were already twelve hours long, so I worked fourteen hours every day. By the end, I felt like I was tired, and I could never work again. But the following Monday, I was there at the apple line.

But high seasons are not the only time when workers have extra-long days. Shifts in some sectors of the plants, such as 're-pack'—where products rejected by retailers are repackaged to be sold again—have starting times but no end times throughout the year. Workers are expected to stay until production is complete, whether that be 9, 10, or 15 hours.

Workers shared that on top of 'regular' schedules that were already long, management relied on mandatory overtime to ensure meeting production goals and forced workers into staying for even longer shifts. In 2018, 62 percent of food processing workers reported that they had to work mandatory overtime, as compared to 27 percent in all other industries (General Social Survey 2018)³⁰. Indeed, 78 percent of the workers in my sample reported irregular and unstable work schedules, with most required to work mandatory overtime, mandatory double shifts, not knowing the end times for their shifts, and/or not having any days off in their weeks. Karen, a 20-year-old fruit packing worker, said, "regular work is from 6 am until 4 pm ... but it is mandatory to stay if they require

³⁰ Analysis of General Social Survey (GSS) 2018 data, accessed at GSS NORC at the University of Chicago.

you to, sometimes until very late at night, and you still need to come early the next day. You feel the exhaustion in your body and want to give in, but you cannot say no.” Carmela, who is 52 years old, explained: “They made us stay. The supervisor would say, ‘I need volunteers to stay longer, but if you do not do it willingly, I will have to use force.’ We would tell him that it wasn’t fair, that we were tired after our regular shift, that we didn’t want to stay, and he would reply, ‘this is an order.’”

Long work days and weeks increase the bodily harm workers are subject to by exacerbating the consequences of repetitive motions, forceful extensions, and static positions and by increasing the likelihood of serious accidents and other negative health outcomes (Bannai and Tamakoshi 2014; Brockwood et al. 2021; Dembe 2009; Worthington 2001). Similarly to ergonomic issues, there are currently no regulations regarding mandatory overtime in manufacturing that would apply to these workers, either at the Federal level or in Oregon or Washington state.³¹ Workers are not protected from dismissal if they are fired for refusing to stay overtime at work, even if there is ample evidence of the bodily impacts of working for such long periods (Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries 2022).

However, the coercion to work more hours or at a faster pace is not only externally imposed directly by management. Low wages or pay schemes that attach wages to productivity also serve to induce workers to push their bodies to work more hours, more days, and faster. Felicia, a 37-year-old fruit packing worker, stated very clearly,

³¹ In 2022, after years of organizing by factory bakery workers, the Oregon state legislature passed SB 1513, which aims to ensure that workers are not penalized for refusing overtime unless they receive at least five days advance notice of mandatory overtime schedules. However, the law only applies to food manufacturing workers in large bakeries and tortillerias (Goldberg 2022).

You work 12 hours a day, every day, and you feel so tired, your body hurts so much, but we are also so poor that we get mad if we don't get the overtime because when you make so little, overtime is the only thing that helps you make ends meet. If they paid us fair wages, we would not be fighting over extra time, but they keep our wages low to keep us as their slaves for life, so people are willing to work from 6 am to 10 pm every day.

Low wages are not just an indicator of a 'bad job,' but core to despotic labor control over workers' time and bodies. "Back then I was younger," explains Patricia:

We were cutting fish heads and gutting them, our trays needing to be at least 21 pounds, or we would not be paid for them so we were going as fast as we could, putting extra pounds on each tray to make sure they would count, doing 50 or more trays between each break and barely stopping to breathe. It was the only way of making good money.

These forms of indirect coercion serve to obscure management's responsibility for the bodily harm that results from working at an extremely fast pace for extended hours.

Workers are assumed to freely choose, and at times to actively seek, to put their bodies through extra hours of work, and thus any harm that results from these aspects of the labor process is individualized as a personal responsibility.

On top of working at high speeds with limited staffing and for extended shifts, workers are deprived of proper breaks. Many workers explained that while they are entitled to certain formal breaks, they do not always take place when they are supposed to and often get cut short, as they are required to be back on the line as fast as possible. Limited breaks mean workers are on the lines for long periods without being able to give their bodies a proper respite from the effort of production.

Moreover, managers exercise significant control over workers' physiological needs by policing bathroom use. The systematic denial of bathroom breaks appears in both the workers' interviews and LNI complaints, as well as in a large part of the research on the sector (Berkowitz, Monforton, and Sokol 2016; Gray 2014; Linder 2003).

Ignoring the “normal” functioning of workers’ bodies, the metabolic need for excretion, supervisors demand that they do not leave the line under any circumstance and that the line never stops. “I have seen several of my co-workers pee themselves on the line because they were not allowed to leave,” explained Vicky, who is 36 years old and has worked in both fruit and meatpacking. Alfonsa, a 48-year-old meatpacking worker, added, “they started measuring how long I took in the bathroom. I have chronic constipation, meaning it takes me a bit longer to go to the bathroom. I was forced to bring a doctor’s note explaining my condition, but they kept saying I couldn’t use the restroom when I needed to.” Attempting to prevent situations like the one described by Vicky, workers like Jacinta, a 60-year-old vegetable processing worker, decided to stop drinking water while on the job, to avoid having to go to the bathroom. Dehydration leads to more dangerous working conditions, as workers might lose awareness and might be more likely to have an accident (Liska et al. 2019). “I know so many people with bladder issues, using diapers. I tell my coworkers: ‘we only have one bladder, so we need to take care of it,’ because no one wants to be using Pampers” added Angie. The inability to go to the toilet impacts workers’ health on multiple levels, but as in the case of ergonomic issues, its daily occurrence is seldom understood in its immediate severity, nor is it openly connected to longer-term medical issues that workers suffer consequently.

Management’s disregard for bodily needs extends as well to less ordinary situations. Time and time again, workers shared stories of being forced to come to work while sick, suffering disciplinary punishments for missing work due to illness or injuries, and many times altogether losing their employment. Most employers in the industry require proof of the worker’s illness, to reduce the disciplinary penalty for a missing day.

But many food processing workers either lack health insurance or are not able to afford a doctor's visit. This common policy, which relies on workers' precarious status, forces workers to come in while sick. "I was feeling terribly sick and called the lead supervisor to explain I could not work in that state. She said that if I didn't want a warning, I had to produce a doctor's note, but I could not afford it, so I went to work. I had a runny nose, it was just unbearable, and I begged her to let me go home, but she said no," explained Julia, a vegetable processing worker.

The production's demand for the constant availability of labor power has no room for bodies that are unexpectedly absent from the line because they are sick and need time to heal. Isabel, a 37-year-old worker with ample experience in different subsectors of the industry, had been working at a meatpacking plant for a year and a half when she got sick and had to spend a week at the hospital. Unable to call in while hospitalized, and despite presenting her medical records, she was laid off. She recounts:

I explained to them, "I am so sorry, this is what happened to me," but they said I was irresponsible. I was like, "Irresponsible? How? I was in the hospital," and they said someone in my family should have called, but my eight-year-old daughter was the only family I had. I didn't have anyone else here.

The cases of both Julia and Isabel show how the inflexible pace of the line, and management's despotic control, can turn a common cold into a reason for disciplinary measures and turn the need for temporary hospitalization into outright termination.

When workers have chronic or serious illnesses that extend over long periods of time and require sustained treatment, management refuses to accommodate not only the workers' need for time off work but also their need for slower-paced or less intense tasks. Teresa, a vegetable processing worker whom I introduced in the previous chapter, was persistently invited to quit by her supervisor because she would miss "too many" working

days as she battled kidney cancer. She was also called out for leaving the line while at the plant, as she would usually feel dizzy and throw up due to her disease and its treatment. She explains, “the supervisor just wanted to get rid of me. I feel like that is the case with sick people in general—they don’t want sick people.”

Maria, a 55-year-old vegetable processing worker, suffers from diabetes (and hypertension), and her employer would constantly question her need to rest or do light work after episodes of hypoglycemia, a common side effect of insulin treatment, that would regularly keep her sleepless at night. She explains: “I know that if I go to work [after a sugar drop] I need to do whatever job they ask me to do, clean floors or stack pallets, and if I would ask to not be put on the line because I hadn’t been feeling well, they would say, ‘Do you come here to work, or what do you come here for?’”

As Gustavo, who has worked for 31 years at a vegetable processing plant, summarizes: “Here they don’t have [light duty], they don’t care if one is a little sick or unwell. There are people that you can see are not apt for the job, but they make them do it anyways, and they don’t care.” Employers not only refuse to accommodate light duty requests, but many times even retaliate against workers who demand this. Isabel shared: “Once you have had an accident, they don’t want to pay you if you can’t be doing the same work you were doing before. If you get light duty they will treat you so poorly, psychologically they will try to break you, until you can’t take it anymore and you quit.” In fact, 40 percent of the workers I interviewed disclosed employer retaliation post injury.

This recurring non-accommodation, dismissal, or outright denial of sickness, illness, or impairment by management speaks, once more, of an organized indifference towards the temporalities, needs, and health of workers’ bodies and of the *endemic*

precarity workers faced before the pandemic. While the labor process is structured to force people to work through pain and illness, at the same time its ideal worker seems to be a body that should never be injured or ill.

Employers' treatment of pregnant women paradigmatically encapsulates the extent to which the labor process cannot acknowledge workers embodied and temporal processes and needs more broadly. Most of the women I interviewed had been pregnant at least once during their tenure in the industry. With few exceptions, most of them had worked until the very last moment possible, due to the lack of maternity leave. Employers did not change the work demands during this time. Patricia, who I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, shared:

When I got pregnant, the manager assigned me the worst positions on the line. He not only wanted me to keep doing the same work but one that was even harder, and he knew I needed to be careful, so I told him, 'You know I am pregnant. I need you to have some compassion now. I won't be pregnant forever; please be patient. I have been a hard worker, but I can't do this now.' He just replied that if I didn't like the work I could go home.

Nadia had a similar experience:

I was working in the herring line when I got pregnant, and the supervisor treated me very poorly. I was seven months pregnant, and she wanted me to carry 22-pound boxes. I had to squat to grab them, and it was really hard. I normally would be able to do it, but I thought it didn't make sense that they would ask a pregnant person to do things as if they were not pregnant.

Others, like Mariela, a 37-year-old vegetable processing worker, lost their jobs because the company refused to acknowledge they had been pregnant to begin with. She shared:

When I became pregnant with my son, I had been working at a mushroom packing company for five years. I asked them to be able to take unpaid leave for two weeks before the due date, and two weeks after. When it was my turn to come back, I came in, and they told me they didn't have a job for me anymore. According to them, they had no idea where I had been those weeks, and they said they hadn't received the doctor's note I had submitted. I thought it was absurd

they would say they didn't know where I had been those weeks, given that I worked there almost until the moment I had to drive to the hospital to give birth. I felt really bad, but there was nothing I could do.

As Mariela points out, the employer's response comes close to absurdity, as it needs to take the fiction of disembodiment so far as to deny the very visible corporeal process of being nine months pregnant and giving birth. One could even say that current employment policies in the U.S. mirror this disregard, as the country remains one of the only ones without maternity leave benefits. In this way, Mariela's story further clarifies the extent to which the production process needs to violently subsume or outright negate any bodily process other than laboring. It has to consider the worker as nothing but hands, moving in the line and performing the commanded tasks.

Controlling workers' time beyond the shop floor

The inability of the labor process to account for bodily needs also includes denying the necessary time for workers to take care of themselves and others. Long working hours and non-standard shifts, combined with the social reproductive activities that many working mothers are required to perform, severely impact workers' sleep and increase the chance of accidents both within and outside the workplace. When Mariela was driving back to her home to take care of her kids after a twelve-hour night shift, she fell asleep at the wheel and lost control of her car. When she told her employer she had to take time off to have surgery and recuperate, she was immediately fired.

Sleeping only a few hours a day like Mariela is very common for workers, given the extent of their working days and given that many work night shifts. Alex, a fruit packing worker who will be discussed at length in a later section, shares: "I mean, you're not sleeping normally. It's hard to sleep when there is light out, so you only sleep for a couple of hours, and then you have very little time to do everything you might need

before going off to work. During the season, when there are no days off, life is just work.” In sum, scheduling is organized in complete disregard of the worker’s physiological need to sleep.

Workers also struggled to find time to go grocery shopping and cook meals. In charge of cooking for themselves and their families, women would have to wake up in the middle of the night to prepare meals for themselves and their kids. It also meant relying more extensively on fast food. Several of the phone interviews I conducted were done while workers were in their cars, with their kids, eating fast food. Other times, they were grocery shopping, waiting for their kids outside of a doctor’s office, or making a long drive back home from the plant. They were constantly attempting to create more time out of a day that was always slipping by.³² Precarious migrant workers find that they have no time to do much else than work, and are always running out of time (Apostolidis 2019; Freshour 2016).

Needing time for social reproductive responsibilities, such as having to care for an ill parent or children, is also beyond what employers are willing to recognize. Melisa was working at a fruit packing plant when her mom got sick, and soon after her husband attempted to commit suicide. She had already accrued ‘bad points’ because of the time she had used to help her mom, so when she failed to give the two-hour notice for her absence the day her husband was hospitalized, she was fired.

Mariana explained that her daughter has asthma and that she got sick very often as a baby, despite Mariana’s many attempts to keep her warm. When she would notify her

³² Particularly in the Yakima Valley, where there is a growing housing shortage particularly during the summer months, workers would commute to work at plants located almost one hour away from their homes.

supervisor about needing to stay with her daughter, her manager thought she was making excuses to not work. “It’s like that in every packing house,” she shared. “You call and say, ‘my kid is sick,’ and they reply, ‘oh I see you don’t want to work.’ Managers don’t care if you are sick, if your kid is sick. They just want you to be there to get the work done.”

Such unpredictable, unexpected, but also common bodily events in a worker’s life (being sick, having to care for a sick relative, dealing with the illness or death of someone close) are also inexorably punished by management. Mirta, explained to me how the disciplinary point system is ruthlessly enforced, even in the face of events such as having to pick up your kid from school because he or she is sick or has had an accident. She also comments on the stress caused by needing no accidents to occur, and even needing no mundane unexpected changes to happen outside of work, to avoid further disciplinary measures:

You only got eight points per year. If you were late, it was one minute, if you had an emergency with your kid, they don’t care [...] When you have 8 points you start a process in which for 90 days you can’t miss a day, be late, leave early, nothing. If you have an emergency during those 90 days, you get fired. And it’s asphyxiating, because if your babysitter cancels or if your kids get sick at night, there is nothing you can do.

The threat of this punishment would often make workers fail to be present and care for their children or relatives as they would have wanted to, producing further emotional distress and pain. As Valerie, a 24-year-old fruit processing worker who I introduced in Chapter 2, tells me: “It would hurt me to leave my daughter sick, but I knew I had to go into work, or they were going to lay me off. But then there was this time when my daughter had a really high fever and I couldn’t go in, and they laid me off because of that.”

Direct violence and emotional harm on the line

On top of the bodily harm and debilitation produced by the labor process, and the systematic non-accommodation and punishment for bodily non-productive needs and temporalities, workers described the use of verbal and physical violence as a common practice in the plants. The organized disregard for workers' bodies described so far is confirmed and intensified by way of this recurrent resort to direct harm (or the threat of it) and emotional abuse.

This despotic management style, which uses force and violence as a form of labor control, seemed to be prevalent in the industry and was even acknowledged by the supervisors I interviewed. Isabel, who worked as a supervisor in both fruit and vegetable processing plants, said,

To be a supervisor in the packing plants, you have to be really mean, have a cold heart, or don't have a heart at all, you know? Because the managers on top are constantly demanding more, and you are stressed, and you have to demand more of the workers on the line, and you know they can't do it, you know it will hurt them, but you have to. To be honest, they don't respect people, and they tell you workers should be afraid of you. I didn't like it. I might have a mean stare, but that is not who I am. I couldn't do it.

Oscar, another supervisor, explained, "You have to be mean, that's their motto. You are expected to yell to the line workers. If the worker is an older person, and they are tired and they can't do it, they expect you to say, 'We don't want lazy people here. If you can't do the work, go home.'"

According to workers, supervisors would engage in name-calling, use profanities, and constantly threaten them with dismissal. "The manager will be yelling at people, 'You are too slow, are you an idiot?'" Blanca and many others expressed that the constant mistreatment had serious impacts on their mental well-being: "The supervisor would yell at me and I would feel really bad. I have seen my coworkers crying because of

how badly they are yelled at, because they feel ashamed that someone talks to them like that.” The ubiquity of this violence makes workers feel sick and makes them dread going into work. Angie said:

You are thinking, ‘Ay, Dios mío, I don’t even want to go back to work because of how they are treating me, I barely walk in and get a nervous stomach,’ I’m thinking, ‘What will happen to me today?’ I think that’s where depression comes from. Because we are already going through so much, and on top of that, they treat us so badly.

Complaints of mistreatment were also present in several LNI claims, where a fruit packing worker stated: “My job is very stressful. The company does not respect its employees. They yell at us, there is job abuse and lack of respect. I feel depressed and have had to go to the doctor because I have depression now, anxiety attacks, and can’t sleep. I have nightmares about work.” Another complaint read: “For me it is very stressful to work because all day there is a lot of screaming ...there are times that I don’t want to get up to go to work. Just the thought of knowing that the same thing is waiting for me is something very stressful.”

The emotions that result from management’s treatment create new forms of bodily harm. Many complaints mentioned stress and depression due to working conditions at the plants. Unsurprisingly, LNI cannot do anything about these claims, as the emotional harm produced in the workplace is not codified in any way in its statutes.

Workers also shared that managers even use physical force to discipline workers. Rolando explained, “I was on the line and next to an older lady who was packing apples. She was getting behind with the work, but nothing too serious, and all of the sudden I see the supervisor grab her trays and hit her in the face.”

Managerial violence against workers’ bodies includes sexually harassing workers on the lines. Scholars have analyzed in detail the role of sexual violence as a component

of labor control, mainly between male supervisors and female line workers (Bank Muñoz 2008; Salzinger 2003; Wright 2006). In both the interviews and the LNI complaints, it was possible to trace the repeated occurrence of this form of bodily and emotional harm across multiple companies and subsectors of the industry. Greta, a fish processing worker, explained:

Working on the line, the supervisor would constantly touch me, grab me. I have never talked about this before, but there is a lot of sexual harassment in the processing plant. I know it wasn't just me, that he and others did the same things to many of my co-workers. And you feel so powerless, so much *coraje*, but have to keep working like nothing is going on.

Women workers shared having to cope with unwanted contact, and explicit remarks about their bodies and appearance, as another dimension of the working conditions. In many cases, this meant a daily subjection to a form of violence that made them feel shame, sadness, and discomfort while working on the lines. Nilda shared, "It was pretty stressful, being sexually harassed was pretty depressing because it makes you feel less of yourself, because, you think, 'okay, I will cover up.' They can't see anything, they can't see my body, but they still make comments about your body. It's mentally exhausting."

Workers also must witness co-workers being harassed and abused.

A supervisor asked one of the line workers out and she refused him. We were on the line and he came and hit her with a piece of cardboard, so hard she started bleeding. No one said anything; we were paralyzed. The next day she came back and asked to be put on a different line, but they said no. He came towards her and she asked him to please let her work. He then hit her so hard I thought he had broken her leg. I was right there. She stayed her whole shift, was shaking with fear, and did not come back. I can't say that is uncommon, unfortunately.

Witnessing abuse adds to workers' affective distress, in an oppressive climate where they daily endure violence directed not only toward themselves but also toward everyone around them.

As the above examples show, the embodied experience of endemic precarity entails both corporeal and emotional vulnerability and harm. This emotional dimension has serious implications not only for workers' mental health; it is also felt in the body. Beyond the emotions connected directly to mistreatment, workers expressed feeling anxiety about the speed of the lines, and depression due to the general conditions of work. These emotions are materially connected to the organization and control over the labor process and become part of the emotional climate (Barbalet 1998) that underpins the control over labor and bodies.

The notion of emotional climates illuminates how emotions that are repeatedly felt during work can form an emotional background that becomes part of the conditions of the work itself. Emotions are woven into the organizational fabric of the workplace and shape practices of supervision and decision-making. Managerial strategies make individuals feel increasingly disposable and hint at the disciplinary power of these widespread feelings among workers (Hassard and Morris 2018).

Workers' ongoing debilitation is physical and emotional. The violence of the abstraction of disembodied labor power appears then in the bodily and emotional harm of the workers, whose lives are subsumed to relations of production organized through the logic of capital accumulation. Workers naming, sharing, and including their emotions as part of the workplace hazards they endure interrupts the fiction of disembodiment and brings to the fore the reality that labor power is embodied in human beings who have consciousness, language, and feelings.

The social neglect of (migrant) working bodies

James: a story of chronic abandonment

I am sitting in the living room with James, a meatpacking worker, and his wife Mai. Their three small daughters, ages seven, four, and two, are running around us. James was born in Thailand and came to the U.S. when he was 19. James has been working at a meatpacking plant as a grade 9 deboner for eight years. When I ask for details about his job, he shows me a video: someone is cutting a big piece of meat until there is nothing left but the bone. “See their hands? Black and blue? That happens during your first 6 months on the job,” he shares. It is common that meatpacking plants classify different jobs in grades of difficulty, which correlate with different pay scales as well. Grade 9 is the hardest position at James’s plant. He explains, “When I started, we didn’t have enough money to pay for the food at that time, and I was not getting any help from the system. Our apartment’s rent kept rising, and then we worried that we’re not going to make enough. So, I went for it.” In 2015, after working at the plant for three years, he had his first serious accident, in which he dislocated a disc while cutting the meat.

Like many of his co-workers, the first response he got from management when he mentioned the pain, he was feeling in his back was that he could buy some Tylenol from the nurse. So many workers need medicine to get through the workday, due to the pain, that the company sells the pills at \$1 a pop. But the pain did not recede, and he asked to see a doctor. He was sent to a ‘company doctor.’ “I feel like those doctors don’t care about me. I told them it’s worse, and what they report it’s that everything is fine, that it is not getting worse. They are company doctors.” Mai adds, “The worst is, they don’t consider me a qualified interpreter for him, and they don’t call me one. He understands and can speak a little English, but not fully. And it is so important that a patient can communicate. So, I don’t know why they don’t get an interpreter.”

James was told that he had dislocated a disc but that a surgery would leave him paralyzed, and that the only thing to do was to have physical therapy. He wasn't awarded time off the job, and the time he spent in therapy was deducted from his wages. After each session, he had to return to the job that had caused the injury in the first place. Instead of respecting the light duty he had been prescribed, his employer cut his hours, alleging that it was a liability to have him work more time, which directly impacted his earnings.

He eventually decided to close his workers' compensation case because he felt the therapy wasn't working and because he was losing too much money; he needed to close it to get his hours back. But the pain did not go away, and he could not keep doing his job. He formally applied for a different position at the plant—it was one with less pay, but he thought it was going to be easy on his back. He got the job but was never transferred. “No one lasts in my job,” he explains, and “they don't want to train someone new when they know I know how to do it, so they keep me there.” Mai says that the main issue is that he needs to be able to work for many more years, not just two or three, and that if he stays at his current position, he won't be able to. “Now almost five years have passed from the accident, and he is still in pain all the time, and there are many things he can't do anymore, and there aren't many other job opportunities here anyway.” “I just want the pain to go away,” he adds, resigned.

As James's story shows, the disregard for workers' bodily integrity that is embedded in the production process needs to be understood within a specific historical, geographical, and regulatory context that shapes these working conditions and, at the same time, operates as a continuation of the shop floor violence beyond it—from the

ways in which lack of access to a safety net informs his decision of taking one of the most dangerous jobs at the meatpacking plant, to the employer-directed process of providing insufficient and constrained medical care. James explains that the workers' compensation system limited his choice of physician, that doctors provided few options for treatment, that he was then systematically denied a lighter duty job, and finally that, five years after his accident, he is still in pain and has no avenues of action left to get restitution or care. At 28 years old he has chronic pain, cannot pick up or play with his daughters, and also knows he needs to be able to continue working at the meatpacking plant for many years to provide for his family.

Unpacking many of the elements present in James's story, in the next section I begin by analyzing the 'politics of production' that directly impact the 'factory regimes' that produce bodily harm, then move on to discuss the institutional violence workers endure when attempting to get care for the harm they have endured. Finally, I discuss institutions' uneven recognition of disability and debilitation, and the impacts this has for migrant workers.

The politics of (bodily harm) production

The *endemic precarity* migrant workers face is shaped by the intersection of employment, migration, and welfare regulations and policies. In other words, we can understand workers' endemic precarity as a result of both relations in production (the organization and control over the labor process covered in the previous sections) and relations of production (social institutions, regulations, that shape factory regimes) (Burawoy 1985), which co-produce conditions under which the violence inside the labor process extends beyond it to create ongoing debilitation for workers.

When thinking about the relations of production in the current context of the U.S., it cannot be ignored that employment law in the United States offers workers little protection from harm, and limited rights in general in comparison with other countries around the world (Andrias 2016; Andrias and Sachs 2020; Bernhardt 2012). Federal OSHA, which is in charge of setting and enforcing workplace safety standards, has been consistently reduced in scope and ability of enforcement³³ (McGarity et al. 2010). In fact, the U.S. has consistently ranked last in the level of workers' protections among the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (OECD 2019). It is also one of the countries with the lowest collective representation agreements, with a unionization rate of just 7 percent for private sector workers in 2021 (Shierholz et al. 2022).

The U.S. also lacks a universal healthcare program (Ferranti and Frenk 2012), has one of the most expensive medical systems (Tikkanen 2019), and is one of the countries in the world without paid medical or parental leave (Livingston and Thomas 2019; Miller 2021). Given the federal character of the country's organization, both welfare and employment regulations vary greatly between states, but a series of reforms to the federal welfare provisions in the past three decades have basically gutted the already limited social safety net in the country (Bitler, Gelbach, and Hoynes 2005; Hooks and McQueen 2010; Peck 2002). The passing of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996 ended public benefits as an

³³ Beyond the budgetary cuts at federal and state levels (both Oregon and Washington have their own OSH plans and dedicated agencies (Occupational Safety and Health Administration 2022), during Trump's presidency, Executive Order 13771 'Reducing Regulation and Controlling Regulatory Costs' required agencies that "for every one new regulation issued, at least two prior regulations be identified for elimination" (Executive Office of the President 2017).

entitlement and specifically excluded migrants, regardless of authorization status, from eligibility for any federal means-tested entitlements, including federal cash assistance, food stamps, and Medicaid.

Additionally, migration reforms not only increased the criminalization of migration, but effectively allowed employers to operate as extensions of migration officials, while at the same time excluding migrant workers from the majority of public benefits (Cacho 2012; Gleeson 2010; Park 2011). The passing of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) further restricted immigrant access to public services (Park 2011). The expansion of the notion of public charge, used to exclude or deport immigrants who might become a burden to the state, works to effectively exclude migrants even from the little benefits they could still be eligible for (Park 2011; USCIS 2021). Even ‘progressive’ reforms, such as the Affordable Care Act of 2010, continued the exclusions present in the 1996 reform, excluding many migrants with precarious statuses, such as DACA recipients.³⁴ Overall, these reforms have had the net result of excluding migrants from healthcare coverage and from access to any form of social aid (Marrow and Joseph 2015, Casteñeda et al. 2011, Getrich et al. 2019). These impacts can be understood as ‘medical legal violence,’ a notion meant to specifically name the ways in which health and migration policies interact to undermine the health and physical integrity of migrants (Van Natta 2019).

These policy exclusions interact with other characteristics of the U.S. healthcare and employment system to create particularly vulnerable situations for workers. First the

³⁴ According to Castañeda et al. (2015:385), “lawful permanent residents are excluded from accessing Medicaid because of a five-year residency requirement. Undocumented immigrants are excluded entirely from the ACA’s various individual insurance provisions, as are some individuals with temporary status (e.g., TPS or DACA).”

fact that one of the main forms of access to healthcare insurance in the U.S. is through employment, and second, that many low-wage employers either do not offer this benefit (or only do so after meeting high requirements and usually at costs too onerous for the workers), serves to partially explain why so many of the workers I interviewed lacked health insurance. Only four (7 percent) frontline workers in my sample had employer-provided health insurance, ten (17 percent) had state-provided Medicaid, and the rest (n=46, 77 percent) did not have any consistent health insurance coverage. In one company, for example, workers had to work continuously for 1900 hours (equivalent to almost a year of working 40 hours a week) to qualify for their employer's insurance, a considerable feat given the high turnover of the industry.

As I illustrate next, this regulatory framework both shapes and reproduces the disregard for migrant workers' bodies that takes place on the shop floor. Excluded from the social safety net and facing increased barriers to accessing healthcare, migrant workers find themselves having to choose between destitution and their health (Grabell 2015; Saxton and Stuesse 2018; Spieler 2017).

Institutional barriers for the care of workers' bodies

When workers attempt to do something about the bodily harm they have endured, whether this be the result of a specific event like an accident or of cumulative practices of disregard for their bodily integrity, they find they must navigate a cumbersome, opaque, and fragmented institutional system. Lacking information, resources, and many times interacting in a language they are not proficient in, they must interact with an array of agencies, programs, and providers that add a new layer of harm as workers battle to get

acceptance of their claims, proper treatment, coverage of their financial costs, enough time off work to recuperate, accommodations in the workplace, etc.

The first barrier workers face, as was discussed in the previous sections, is getting the immediate supervisors or managers to acknowledge the harm. This interaction can present extra challenges for migrant workers, as employers mobilize their lack of knowledge about workplace rights or their precarious status to prevent them from filing reports about workplace injuries.³⁵ If they are able to file a report and try to seek care—usually only when the harm is egregious enough that it cannot be ignored—workers need to convince their supervisor to let them see a doctor or go to the hospital. Many times, they are sent to the company nurse or clinic. When I met Felicia, a 37-year-old fruit packing worker, she was using crutches. She had recently had surgery on her ankle.

When I asked about it, she said:

Well look, you are always hitting things, getting scratches, you slip, you fall. You are not going to be filing a report each time. But this time I felt like I couldn't walk, so I told the manager and filed a report. He told me to go to the company's clinic, and this was Friday, I remember, and the clinic only opens Wednesdays and Fridays. When I got there the doctor said there were no appointments. I went back to the shop floor and told my manager I needed to go to the E.R. because it was really hurting and I was afraid I had broken something—which I had—and they told me that, unfortunately, if I went to the doctor, I would have to pay for it. Can you imagine? Pay for the doctor's visit with what I make? That's when I realized the company clinic was a sham, just there to tell workers, "It's all good—go back to work."

Here Felicia is referring not only to the ubiquity of injuries she suffered in the workplace, but also to how she was sent to a company clinic that was not really there to provide care, and revealing that if she wanted to see a real doctor she would have had to

³⁵ Additionally, many injured migrant workers underreport or work through their injuries, due to more general fears of interacting with public agencies (Abrego 2011), or due to the stigmas connected to being unable to support their families when injured (Saxton and Stuesse 2018; Unterberger 2018).

pay for it out of pocket, something she could not afford given her low wages and her lack of health insurance. As a DACA recipient, Felicia is not eligible for programs that could subsidize these expenses.

If they are able to get external care, workers find that the main institution in charge of dealing with workplace illness and injuries, the workers' compensation system³⁶—or, better yet, 'workers' decompensation' (Saxton and Stuesse 2018)—is hardly able to provide adequate treatment and compensation. Administered at the state level, the system has no federal oversight or minimum standards requirements.³⁷ The implications of recent reforms are vast. Even in Washington state, which has one of the most progressive workers' compensation statutes, recent reforms have, among other changes, limited workers' choice of attending physician (Qiu and Grabell 2015). Similarly, in Oregon, the use of managed care organizations—a fancier name for company clinics—means that employers can force workers to pick a provider from a list vetted by the employer (Department of Consumer and Business Services 2022).

This is a central issue because the attending physician plays a fundamental role in workers' compensation claims. The physician's assessment will determine the type of care a worker gets as well as the length of care, and will also establish when the recovery is over, holding substantive power over the type and extent of care workers will receive. Of those who suffered a more serious injury, over 60 percent reported having issues with

³⁶ Born out of the capital and labor accord of the first decades of the twentieth century, the workers' comp system sought to reduce litigation between workers and employers by compelling employers to pay for the damages caused to the workers in exchange for protection from lawsuits from workers, who gave up this right as part of what was dubbed the 'grand bargain.' Already exclusionary and flawed from its inception, the system has historically failed workers. Agricultural and domestic workers are still exempt from coverage in many states today (Spieler 2017, Saxton and Stuesse 2018).

³⁷ In 2004, amidst budget cuts, the U.S. Department of Labor stopped tracking compliance with federally recommended standards (Grabell and Berkes 2015).

their doctors or the medical system. Like James, workers shared experiences of racism, mistreatment, not being given enough treatment options, not being able to communicate properly due to lack of translation services and being pressured back to work by physicians.

Jimeno, a fruit packing worker, was trying to unstick a cardboard box when his hand was caught by the machine, injuring him greatly. He waited for weeks to be able to see a specialist. He shared:

When I finally was able to go, he treated me terribly. He was so racist. He said that five weeks had passed since the accident, so I had to be okay. He said my finger had stretched from its base but that was not due to my accident, that it was an old unrelated wound. I told him, "It really hurts, I can't move it, I can't use my hand." He said that was not his problem. He was so rude. Doctors are supposed to be there to help you, but they ended up insulting you. All of them are like that.

Julia, who fell and hurt her knees, explained,

To be honest, the doctors didn't help. They gave me some medicine for the pain, but it wouldn't go away. The doctor insisted I was good to work without any restrictions. He only spoke English and there was no translation. I eventually gave up my case because it felt like a waste of time and money. All I know is that I had to keep working, and the pain never really went away.

Like James, Jimeno, and Julia, many workers discussed encountering structural and interpersonal racism within the medical system. Ethnocentric ideas about migrant workers permeate decisions made by doctors and insurance companies, who make decisions about if and how to treat workers (Holmes 2012; Horton 2016). They are also expected to navigate a medical system not built for non-English speakers. As Mai noted when discussing James's situation, translators are many times not available. I had interviewed Carmela a couple of weeks before, when she called me out of the blue. She was at the hospital and there was no translation available. She could not understand what the doctor was saying about her arm, so she called me and put him on the phone.

Situations like this happened several times with different workers. While hospitals attempt to have translation services for non-English-speaking patients, the reality is that many times they seem not to be available. Workers who already mistrusted institutions, and who thought that doctors favored the employer’s interests, would feel particularly helpless when they had no way of properly communicating with them.

On top of this, bigger employers—among them many food processing companies—can ‘self-insure,’ meaning that they administer their own claims.³⁸ This reduces workers’ ability to get an external agency to advocate for them. Teresa, a vegetable processing worker I have already introduced, explained:

They have their own company—you can’t go to Labor & Industries³⁹ because they sort of have their own. So if you call Labor & Industries they can’t help you. I was having issues because they sent me to a doctor that was not treating me well, so I called this insurance company and said what was happening and that they hadn’t paid me for lost wages. I told them the doctor’s note said I had to rest and have light duty, but they were putting me to work normally. The company never replied.

Pedro works at a meatpacking plant that used to be unionized but was decertified in 2017. He explained how common it is for workers to get lost trying to understand who is responsible for their claim, and how when they had a union, the representative would play important roles in explaining workers their rights and helping them through their claims:

First there is the nurse, then the private insurance company. They have to open a case with LNI anyway, but folks don’t know the process, or their rights, and at least when the union was here someone would come and talk to you, tell you, “these are the steps you need to follow.” Now everyone is on their own.

³⁸ As an example of the impact of self-insurance or privately insured policies, we know that, in the two decades between 1997 and 2017, workers’ compensation claims accepted by privately insured employers declined by 57.3 percent (Murphy et al. 2021).

³⁹ Labor & Industries is another name for LNI, Washington’s state agency that regulates and enforces many working conditions issues.

Through many of the recent reforms, employers and insurance companies have gained significant power in decisions regarding workers' medical treatment. They can limit the duration of a treatment, or ask for second opinions, audits, or reviews that can override recommendations made by workers' doctors (Grabell 2015). Lina, a vegetable processing worker, explained her experience:

I was holding a box with one hand and opening a door with the other, and I slipped and couldn't use my hands to catch my fall. My foot twisted and made a terrible noise. They took me to the E.R. immediately, and that's when the whole ordeal started. I have had two surgeries and I am waiting for the third one. I am so frustrated with the insurance companies. Every time I have needed to get approval for a surgery, they kept delaying it, asking me to see more specialists. This last one it's been over four months, getting second, third opinions. Everyone agrees I need to have the surgery and still, I keep waiting. It's been two years since my accident and I can't do the minimum, I can't walk, I had to sell my car to pay for my bills, so I am basically immobilized, my life is paralyzed. I just want this to be over. I try to remain positive, but I feel so frustrated.

Navigating systems that do not necessarily interact seamlessly with each other, workers find layered barriers to care. For example, opening a workers' compensation case might result in your healthcare provider not covering your expenses, even if your claim has not yet been approved. This means that either the worker must cover the costs or delay treatment. This is added to the reality that workers are only partially compensated for lost wages if they are compensated at all (Gravel et al. 2010; Spieler 2017). For those counting on overtime to make ends meet, this creates desperate financial situations that might force workers to prematurely close their claims—like James had to do—to be able to keep paying their bills.

Workers continue dealing with the harm caused in the workplace as institutional violence adds new forms of debilitation that many times mean further bodily harm due to inability to get proper and timely treatments, and emotional harm as their conditions extend in time and they battle multiple gatekeepers throughout the system. As we kept

talking, Lina started crying. She explained that the last specialist she went to had noticed something was wrong with her and asked her if she was okay. “No,” she replied.

That is when I realized no one had asked how I was emotionally. So, the doctor did a report and said he considered I needed psychological help. But it was more of the same: I had to do several interviews, fill up very long questionnaires, the insurance wanted to prove I really needed the help. Finally, they agreed to it, and I have been seeing a therapist. Before talking to the therapist, I felt like I didn’t have the right to express how I felt emotionally, how this had affected me beyond my leg.

While Lina was able to get additional mental health help for her work-related injury, this is not always the case. In Oregon, changes in the past 20 years have limited mental stress claims and placed the burden of proving the claim on the workers (Oregon OSHA 2022). Just as the labor process causes bodily and emotional harm, navigating systems in place to help workers through injuries and accidents in the workplace creates new moments of emotional distress (Imershein, Hill, and Reynolds 1994). These emotions are not just the outcome of a serious injury, although this is an important aspect which has been researched at length (Gorsche et al. 1999; Hsieh et al. 2016; Ohrnberger, Fichera, and Sutton 2017), but also have to do with the institutional violence migrant workers endure while trying to get treatment and help (Christa et al. 2020).

Uneven recognition of disability and debilitation

In a system designed around serious accidents, accessing help for occupational diseases or cumulative damage is strikingly difficult. Occupational disease claims are less likely to be filed, partially due to the longer temporality of illnesses, which in turn can reduce the possibility of medical providers linking workers’ conditions to their employment (Spieler 2017; Spieler and Burton Jr. 2012).

Additionally, workers’ compensation requires workers to prove cause, and due to changes in the system, it has become increasingly challenging to get coverage for

conditions arising from multiple exposures over time or from aggravation of a worker’s preexisting health conditions. Artificial distinctions between work-related and non-work-related exposures, injuries, and illnesses are mobilized by the system to deny or reduce aid to workers (Flynn 2018). Oregon’s plan, for example, contains a “major contributing cause” clause, meaning that the worker must demonstrate that a workplace event was the main cause behind a condition.⁴⁰ This can be hard due to many disabilities arising from multiple causes, or workers having pre-existing conditions. This type of clause disproportionately impacts older workers—aging can be considered as equally causing the condition and allow insurance companies to reject the claim—and workers in industries such as food processing. If you cannot meet this standard you are excluded from benefits, even if a workplace injury is what (in the present) caused your inability to work. Not only are you not covered by workers’ compensation, but you are also barred from filing a lawsuit against your employer (Wahl, Gunkel, and Sanchez 2000).⁴¹

Greta, whose experiences with sexual harassment on the job I discussed before this, is 49 years old and worked at the same fish processing plant for sixteen years. Over time she developed a hernia that started giving her problems and required her to get surgery. Neither her employer nor the doctors agreed this was a workplace-related

⁴⁰ A string of reforms to the Oregon system significantly reduced the premium paid by employers (from \$3.16/ per \$100 in 1990 to \$0.97 in 2022), alongside reducing workers’ benefits. Different laws have limited mental stress claims and placed the burden of proving the claim on the workers. Alongside these changes the state limited governmental oversight, reduced Oregon OSHA’s budget and capacity to inspect workplaces, reduced the number of health and safety inspectors, and eliminated the agency’s ability to examine the claims or establish any treatment standards (Oregon Department of Consumer and Business Services 2022).

⁴¹ Notably, in both Oregon and Washington, workers contribute to their state workers’ compensation programs through payroll deductions. In 2019, 22.3 percent of the cost of workers’ compensation in Washington was paid directly by workers. This means that they are being denied benefits they actively pay for.

condition, and both stated that it was only related to aging. Not only was her surgery not covered by workers' compensation, but when she returned needing light duty for a few months, she was told she could no longer work there, as her body was not able to do all the tasks that could be required of her.

I felt like they wanted to get rid of me. First, because I am old, and second, because they felt I was useless. They were searching for a way to get rid of me because I am too old. Instead of seeing my experience, saying, "This lady is old, but she really gives it her all." Instead of thinking, "If she is coming to work, it must be because she really needs the job" and giving me a spot that is not so arduous, letting me work. If I had been slacking off, I would understand, but I have been working as hard as I can, cleaning crabs nonstop. Just because I could no longer lift boxes, I lost my job without any notice, after so many years.

In Greta's story, the system, and her employer—and even she herself—erase the workplace connection to what is certainly a physical manifestation of the accelerated wearing down of the body that is part of these workers' endemic precarity. Her condition is 'naturalized,' framed as part of a common life cycle process, as aging, when what is happening is the premature actualization of a process of debilitation that would normally happen at a much slower pace. This condition then does not need to be covered by the system, and it can be used as a cause to fire her.

The recognition of the most serious accidents is thus accompanied by the denial of the impacts of cumulative harm.⁴² The existing frameworks individualize bodily harm in two ways: by admitting its existence as only resulting from a specific event, and by characterizing it as happening to only one worker. This erases the collective damage that the labor process creates, most of the times comprising 'uneventful' microtrauma injuries, and further invisibilizes workers' debilitation. Workers are expected to

⁴² As Flynn (2018) notes, this focus on injury events can also be found in the occupational health and safety literature, which in its dealing with workplace harm has failed to analyze the lives of injured workers beyond these events.

understand their pain as resulting from their own individual actions, and not from an overall production process that creates bodily harm at the same rate that it makes food products. The workers' compensation and insurance claim systems reproduce this logic by treating each case as unique instead of addressing the collective damage suffered by the workers in each workplace. This is reflected in biomedicine in general, as its culture and structure many times lead clinicians to blame migrant workers' behavior and/or biology for their suffering (Holmes 2012).

Because so many injuries and disabilities caused within the workplace are not covered by the workers' compensation system, people turn to other social services to cover their treatments or to replace lost wages. This is another example of the cost transfer that many low-wage employers have been doing in the past decades, and that is ultimately subsidized by publicly funded programs (Reedy et al. 2014). Researchers have found that many turn to Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) (Spieler 2017).⁴³

As Emily Spieler (2017) notes, employers instrumentalized the ADA to promote and intensify return-to-work efforts for workers receiving workers' compensation benefits. This has led to the early termination of benefits for workers who, as many of the stories shared show, are forced to return to work before they have recovered. Patricia, a fish processing worker whose story I shared before in this chapter, spoke to the lack of proper treatment and the pressure to go back to work:

I had insurance through the company, and you know, they don't care about you, they just want you to quickly go back to work. It's really unfair. I saw many of my co-workers get hurt and then forced to go back to work although they were

⁴³Moreover, a 2015 federal OSHA report suggested that employers' ability to rely on other social programs to subsidize workplace accidents and injuries reduces financial incentives to improve hazardous working conditions (Occupational Safety and Health Administration 2015).

hurting, refusing to let them have surgery, telling them to just get injections to reduce the pain and back to the lines.

A faster return to work not only can undo the improvements of the treatment and time off that workers might have had, but also forces them once more to work through the pain and the knowledge that their bodies are being further damaged and they cannot avoid it. While many workers eventually turn to SSDI to supplement or provide their income, this is not a possibility for migrant workers who are excluded from accessing SSDI.

Ironically, when the American Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed in 1990, many employers pushed to reduce or eliminate workers' compensation funds that were directed towards longer-term impairments, as they were argued to be no longer necessary (Spieler 2017). The border reappears as a legal technology, a form of 'legal violence' (Menjívar and Abrego 2012) that excludes migrant workers from accessing some of the already limited avenues for restitution, reinforcing their disposable character by making them illegible as people worthy of care.

As Jasbir Puar notes, "disability is not a fixed state or attribute but exists in relation to assemblages of capacity and debility, modulated across historical time, geopolitical space, institutional mandates and discursive regimes" (2017: XIV). The expansive bodily harm workers endure leaves them in a continuum of debilitation and disability, which encompasses an overall debilitation and wearing down of workers bodies and different forms of 'premature disability' (Freshour 2016, 2020) produced by different combinations of cumulative violence exercised on the bodies, serious accidents, and lack of access to proper care. The stories of the workers show how this modulation of capacity/disability/debility creates conditions under which migrant workers' ongoing debilitation is erased, and their premature disability denied both by employers and social

institutions, erasing connections to their working conditions. Migrant workers find themselves excluded from legibility as bearers of disability in ways that could lead to their support or care—in a process that becomes in itself debilitating—and at the same time made solely responsible for any impairment or pain that undoubtedly is a deliberate product of exploitative labor conditions. The border is then a technology that not only multiplies labor (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) but also multiplies harm, disability, and debilitation.

Precarious bodies that matter

Not just any-body

While so far I have highlighted the ways in which capital's fantasy of disembodied labor power translates into a continuous disregard for workers' embodied integrity, here I emphasize how this disregard for the body within and beyond the workplace is always differentiated and differentiating. In other words, the negation of the embodied character of labor power does not mean indifference towards the bodily marks of difference, which are co-produced in the shop floor and mobilized to secure workers' effort (Acker 1990).

Production can only take place within and through historical, definite social relations. The politics of production that shape and make the politics in production possible include processes of dispossession, colonialism, and racialization that have made certain populations available for injury/ premature disability/ premature death (Chakravartty and da Silva 2012; Federici 2014; Gilmore 2009; Goldberg 2002; Melamed 2015). Despite the fantasy of an abstract disembodied labor power, production needs concrete bodies that have histories, singular characteristics, and bodily needs, and

that are marked by social and historical systems and norms (Arruzza 2015b; Fracchia 2008; McNally 2006). The particularities of workers' embodiment matter to employers (Bair 2010; O'Connell Davidson 2014; Roediger 2012); they do not seek to obtain just any labor (Sassen 1988), but labor that is made disposable both by and through the labor process and structural vulnerabilities tied to their gender, race, migratory status, ability, etc. (Anderson 2010; De Genova 2005; Golash-Boza 2015; Rocco 2016; Walia 2021; Wright 2006).

The labor process is not constructed independently of the specific bodies who are part of it (Baglioni 2018; Bank Muñoz 2008; Mezzadri 2016; Salzinger 2003; Thomas 1982), even if at the same time it disregards the very corporeality of those bodies. Employers use tropes of 'natural dispositions' for manual labor, servility, deference, strength, or speed to recruit and sort workers in the labor process, in ways that not only are discursive but also imply concrete expectations over the performance of those racialized and gendered bodies. As I have shown, food processing relies on labor-intensive processes that produce bodily harm on bodies already marked, and at the same time marked by the labor process itself, as available for injury. Within these workplaces the uneven distribution of vulnerability, risk, and harm is made concrete.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the sorting of bodies happens already in food processing through employers' explicit recruitment of vulnerable workers. The state aids employers to "to maintain despotic regimes in an age of globalization" (Bank-Muñoz 2004:23) through migratory regimes that create a workforce with limited options, and limited recourse for their experiences at work. In many industries, employers seek out migrant workers precisely because of their vulnerability to secure a cheap and disposable

labor force. Migrant workers are “indispensable but disposable”: indispensable as a collective supply of cheap and docile labor needed to carry out particular processes of production, but considered replaceable as racialized and legally precarious individual workers (Rocco 2016). We can observe this further in food processing industry lobbyists’ recurrent calls for the expansion of H2B programs⁴⁴ (Coyne 2022; Shilling 2019) in order to get the type of workforce they require: already vulnerable and made disposable.

The intersection of gendering and migratory regimes makes migrant women especially disposable. They are constructed as expendable, cheap, and docile (Mezzadri and Majumder 2020; Mies 1982; Wright 2006) by larger systems of oppression but also through “management hiring practices and ideologies that create gendered subjectivities on the shop floor” (Salzinger 2003:23). Once inside the shop floor, managers organize and control the labor process through further sorting of bodies according to conceptions of gender, race, and ability that translate into job segregation and differentiating forms of despotic control that in many ways both assume and produce workers’ vulnerability and disposability. The forms of despotic control in the plants that I’ve discussed throughout this chapter are also not gender- or race-neutral. The use of verbal, sexual, and physical violence, and the ongoing threats of dismissal, or in some cases calling ICE, as forms of control—and the bodily and emotional harm this control implies—are made possible by and reproduce workers’ vulnerability and disposability. The bodily violence against these precarious workers, within and beyond the shop floor, is not only both ubiquitous and

⁴⁴ The H-2 category allows U.S. employers to bring noncitizens into the U.S. on temporary agricultural (H-2A) and non-agricultural (H-2B) visas. H2B visas are often used in food processing. H2B employees are tied to the employer who sponsors them and can be brought to the U.S. for up to three years but commonly are brought for up to six months during peak seasons. ‘Temporary guest workers’ (as they are called) have been the focus of extensive research due to the particularly terrible working conditions they face and their lack of rights (Bauer 2007; Fudge and Strauss 2014; Ismael 2020; Ness 2007).

made invisible but also racializing and racist, gendering and sexist, disabling and ableist.⁴⁵

Alex: a story about an 'unfit' body

Workers reported gendered job segregation throughout this research: most line workers at the plants are women, with most men occupying positions in stacking, operating machinery, and driving forklifts, a form of gendered job segregation within the plant. Alex, a worker who told me as soon as we began talking that he has worked in many fruit packing plants, offers a key example of how bodies are sorted, particularly based on raced, gendered, and sexist assumptions that intersect with disability. Alex explains why he continually moves from plant to plant: “They only let me stay for so long,” he says.

I have muscular dystrophy, a bone and muscle condition that means I don't have the same strength as a normal person. The first time, I applied at a warehouse, and I was honest in that application. And they didn't call me at all. I went with a group of like six people, and I was the only one they did not call back.

In order to find employment, Alex decided not to disclose his disability.

The next time, I lied. Because you know, I've been discriminated against in that sense everywhere ... but at a warehouse, especially the, you know, they just see me and they say, “Oh, he's a young man, he should be able to do a lot of work. And if he doesn't want to do it, he's just lazy.” You know, “He's just making excuses.”

Alex explains further that being ‘able to do a lot of work’ does not imply any work in the plant, but specifically work that is deemed appropriate for men. He tells me,

It is always the same, they put me stacking, lifting pallets, but I can't really do that. I would have to explain my condition again and again. I could probably stack

⁴⁵ While the mark of migratory status and to some extent of being Latinx impacted workers' recruitment into the packing plants, this is not to say that the racialization of the workforce was homogeneous. Karen workers shared feeling discrimination from Latinxs who made up majorities at certain plants, some workers shared they witnessed racism against Black and Asian temporary migrant workers on the lines, and migrant Latinxs with more precarious statuses discussed discrimination from U.S.-born Latinxs.

maybe like half of a pallet. But once I have to start lifting the boxes above my shoulders, I don't have the strength for it whatsoever. It could have been pretty easy for them to just put me on the line, but they would say, "That's for girls." And since I was a guy, I couldn't be there. Every time it was the same: the jobs that I could do I was not allowed to do because they were women, or the elderly. They wanted me to do what every other guy my age was doing, which was lifting, and they wouldn't understand I can't do that. At the last job I had, I broke my back in a way I haven't been able to fix again because I tried to do the 'man job' they had me doing. They basically told me, "Hey, well, we're not telling you to quit, but you know, maybe you should think about working somewhere else." They told me that it's not a job for me.

Alex's experience allows us to think about not only gendered and racialized expectations of work performance but also their connection to notions of capacity and disability. Cynically, a labor process that produces debilitation and disability is at the same time overtly ableist, rejecting bodies that cannot adapt or perform to management's expectations of capacity despite rendering those bodies unable to work through endemic embodied precarity, as I have discussed throughout the chapter. Unsurprisingly, employers who systematically act as if workers' bodies do not have physiological needs—cannot get sick or pregnant, do not need time for recovery or sleep, do not need time to care for themselves or their dependents—and who pretend the injuries, sufferings, and impairments workers suffer have nothing to do with the production process, reject a body like Alex's. If, as it has been shown, intermittent conditions such as a cold that prevented workers from performing as demanded were not tolerated and were even punished by management, the more permanent, structural condition of his body makes him permanently unfit. In fact, to get the job he had to pretend his body was different from how it is, leaving him even more vulnerable to the organized disregard for workers' bodies in the plants. Alex finds himself first having to hide his condition to get hired, and then convincing management that his body—despite, as he says, not appearing to have any problems—cannot safely do the job expected 'for a man his age.' As a young Latinx

man, Alex needs to embody the racialized tropes of hard work and strength of the ‘good migrant’—meaning he must be willing and able to lift palettes all day regardless of the pain and harm that might cause—or if not, he becomes a ‘bad migrant,’ a lazy man not willing to do the work that is being offered to him.

There is no room at the packing plant for a body like Alex’s. Even if Alex wanted to comply with management’s demands of performing at a certain capacity, despite his disability, and be willing to endure enhanced pain or further harm, there are certain tasks his body simply cannot do, like lifting a box over his shoulders. His condition makes his body less amenable to being subsumed to the demands and temporality of the labor process, and thus appears as a less surmountable limit to the logic of disposability that organizes the labor process and, thus, cannot be tolerated. Further, his body cannot be forced into the gendered division of labor at the plant: he cannot perform the strength expected of a young man, but he is also believed to be unfit for the lines, as these devalued positions are for women, for bodies that are construed as ideal to perform the dexterity and docility needed to keep up with the fast pace and put up with the gendered forms of labor control used on them. Management explicitly mobilizes the gendered division of labor within the plants to artificially limit the options of work he can do and to justify the idea that packing plants ‘were not a place for him.’ In Alex’s case, ableist, racist, and sexist notions of labor forced him to perform work in conditions that further debilitated him and imposed further barriers for the protection his body needed.

Job segregation in the plant

However, it is not only managers who reproduce gendered notions of who is appropriate to perform particular jobs in the plant; workers do as well. When I asked

Roberto, a machine operator, about how many women had that position at the plant, he replied, “None.” He then proceeded to add that “women don’t want to be doing this job, they think it’s too hard.” When, due to short staffing, women at a vegetable processing plant started getting assigned to stacking palettes, Sebastián, along with several co-workers, went to the manager to put a stop to it: “That is the hardest job in the plant, is very intense, it’s a men’s job, women shouldn’t be asked to do it.” Jobs on the plants are not gender neutral; on the contrary, they are already codified so that certain jobs, usually the lowest paid, are filled with women.

Patricia, a fish processing worker I mentioned before, shared that she did a ‘men’s job’ cutting fish heads on the line. Other women, she shared, thought she was being masculinized, but she didn’t care; she was able to keep up with the pace, and she made more money. Women’s work in the packing and processing plants is devalued, effectively constructed as less skilled and cheaper. At the meatpacking plant, women usually are assigned jobs with the lowest grade and the lowest pay. But this assignment is anything but neutral or indifferent. José explains how certain jobs, such as moving heavy pieces, are very hard—they are graded two or four, but they would be graded higher if men were doing them. When there was a reassessment of grades recently, many of the lines operated by men got a ‘bump’ in grade and pay. But the positions where women are majorities were not readjusted. Effectively, this meant lowering women’s wages even further.

If it’s a job that is being done by a woman, even if it’s really hard, and she is getting hurt, they don’t recognize the skill to give the job a better grade and pay. Women have been fighting to get the work and effort they do recognized. I see them and you say, “Wow, that woman is certainly doing a man’s job,” they are dealing with heavy pieces of meat, I know several of them who even had to get

elbow surgery. But if a woman is doing the job, that becomes reason enough for them to keep the grade low.

Even if “women’s jobs” are devalued in such a manner in the plants, the organized production of bodily harm and overall disregard for workers’ bodies impacts them in acute and specific ways. As Pedro explains, even if women are doing labor that is strenuous, a job that causes serious injuries enough to necessitate a surgery, the difficulty of their job and its connected bodily harm is not acknowledged.

Increasing the uneven physical impacts of work

When thinking about the specificity of the violence certain bodies face on the lines, we can think about how a worker’s positionality impacts their vulnerability. We have already seen how notions of masculinity and ability intersect to render Alex unfit for men’s work in the factory, putting him at higher risk for injury. Moreover, those with birthing bodies are forced to do strenuous work almost until their time of delivery, with no consideration for the impacts this might have on them or the fetus; they also must return quickly after a major surgery and remain on the line for hours, with little chance to use the bathrooms to, for example, pump their breast if needed. At the same time, many workers shared how it was single mothers—who rely solely on their own income to support their dependents—who usually worked the largest number of days and hours, asking for extra time even beyond the mandatory overtime. Thus, this group suffered the increased bodily impacts of these overly extended workdays and work weeks.

Further, the uneven burdens of social reproductive labor translate in many women having less time to rest and take care of themselves after work, reinforcing the process of ongoing debilitation. For example, when I discussed with Tina the times she had accidents at work and the reasons she did not seek medical attention, she told me: “Well,

the truth is I had no time, I have no time between my kids, and their school, and the work, and I would come home so so tired of working so much, all I wanted to do is just get home.” This was a common answer among women, particularly during the months I interviewed them, when school was still online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The long hours of work combined with care responsibilities at home left them with no time to take care of themselves and their bodies. These disparate responsibilities also result in mostly women being disciplined for missing work to take care of others. Ultimately, the uneven distribution of bodily harm is reinforced by despotic control regimes that are saturated in gendered and racialized logics.

Systemic racism, sexism, and ableism outside the shop floor

More broadly, processes of both gendering and racialization also appear in workers’ navigation of the fragmented and exclusionary systems of workers’ compensation, healthcare companies, insurance companies, etc. (Feagin and Bennefield 2014; Messing et al. 2003). Migrant workers not only faced direct barriers to care in terms of exclusion, but also experienced institutional racism, misogyny, and ableism (Holmes 2012).

As other scholars have noted, medical racist bias has serious impacts on the immediate reduction of workers’ pain and their long-term recovery (Argentieri 2018; Ohrnberger et al. 2017). In their interaction with medical providers, the workers I interviewed were often not offered any palliative treatments or painkillers, even when they had suffered injuries for which they would normally be prescribed (Boyd 2019; Hoffman et al. 2016; Hossain 2021). Moreover, the low reporting, increased scrutiny, and common denial by the workers’ compensation system of claims related to

musculoskeletal disorders and mental health issues is also gendered, as both are more prevalent in women, due to both the type of jobs they do at the processing plants and the gendered forms of labor control that usually include more direct forms of verbal and sexual violence (Lee et al. 2019; Lipscomb et al. 2015). Workers' compensation as a system was not conceived in a gender-neutral way (Spieler 2017), and still today is more prepared to deal with impairments that are the results of accidents, which are still more common for men due to the gendered division of labor within the plants (Curtis Breslin et al. 2007; Gravel and Dubé 2016; Lippel 2003). The erasure of debility by employers and the system, then, is also gendered, impacting women more than men.

Workers' endemic precarity is not indifferent to the concrete ways in which the bodies on the shop floor are marked by intersecting axes of oppression that make them the ideal labor force, that bring them closer to the fantasy of disembodied labor power precisely due to the production of their disposability, making the marking of their bodies even more available to maiming.

Making one's body matter

To end this chapter, I want to turn the attention to the different ways workers cope with the bodily pain and emotional distress produced in the plants, which are both confirmed and enhanced by oppressive social systems.

Along with their stories of disregard and violence against their bodies, workers discuss the things they did to tolerate the imminence of bodily harm, cope with the daily wearing down and debilitation of their bodies in the labor process, or alleviate some of its effects, thus creating small acts of self-care on the line. Many shared providing themselves with the gear they needed to mitigate some of the workplace risks: from

buying jackets, to layering, to investing in gloves, boots, mats for the floor, or benches to reach the lines better. To try to diminish the pain that results from standing all day on hard surfaces, workers try different methods. “I bring two pairs of shoes and change them during my lunch—sometimes that helps,” shared Nilda.

They also discussed relying on self-medication. As other scholars have found, many workers relied on the daily ingestion of pain medicine to be able to endure working in pain (Hendrix and Dollar 2018). Amanda discussed this practice: “Most of us bring our medicine. I bring some to put up with the pain, we all do, it is hard to work without it and the company doesn’t give you anything.” Workers also used creams and different homemade treatments to address issues in their skin and nails, and even muscle pain. “I get home so tired, and my body hurts so much. But every night before I go to bed, I put this cream on, rub my feet and my arms, and try to be ready for the next day,” shared Nadia.

In addition to individualized practices to cope with chronic physical pain, workers also engage in reciprocal emotional management (Lois 2003), helping each other navigate the emotions that result from their subjection to a work that destroys their bodies and erases them as subjects. Rita shared:

I can’t speak for everyone, but many of us, we are trying to cheer each other up. Whenever we notice someone is sad, we give them a hug, when we notice someone crying on the line, we ask: What happened? How are you? Because, as I told a *vieja* one day ‘I am not there to make friends, but if I make them, that would be a thousand times better.’ Because if not, inside the packing plant for so long, doing that job, is unbearable.

By asking each other how they are, workers acknowledge each other’s emotions on the line, and also their pain, in ways that can make enduring it more bearable. As Angie said:

Believe me, in this job we need to cheer each other up. If not, it's too hard to be there for ten hours. There are days I'm looking at the apples and thinking, "What the fuck I am doing here? Why am I doing something I dislike so much?" *Por necesidad*. That is the case for most of us. And since we don't have a choice, we try to help each other, instead of making it worse.

Management might ignore workers crying in pain on the lines, or the anxiety caused by the speed, or the harm caused by their despotic control, but workers recognize each other's pain. They make it visible by saying an encouraging word, by giving each other a shoulder to cry on.

Alongside these practices of care, what emerged from the interviews are also narratives that allow workers to make sense of and endure going to the plants day after day. I find that workers assume the risk of serious injuries at work by shortening their temporal horizon—"I just need to get through today unharmed"—and displacing the promise of the better life they expected for themselves to the next generation, framing the cumulative pain they experience at the plants as a worthy *sacrifice* for the future of their families. In Chapter 2 many workers shared the difference between their pre-migratory expectations and the reality of working and living in the U.S. The experience of daily violence in the workplace leaves little room for the American Dream. However, many of the workers, particularly women, would justify their self-sacrifice through the expectation that their families, especially their children, would achieve social mobility and avoid the endemic precarity they have experienced. "*Una tiene que sacrificarse*, it's a lot of work, you have to sacrifice yourself for your family," said Amanda.

In some ways, we could think about the workers' undying hope for social mobility, their unrelenting hope for the fulfillment of the American Dream, as a form of cruel optimism (Berlant 2011). Cruel optimism is conceptualized as an affective disposition that ensues "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your

flourishing” (Berlant 2011:1). As Berlant explains, optimism becomes cruel “when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially.” (Berlant 2011: 2). Workers sacrifice themselves in the hope they will secure a better life, but the violence they endure in the workplace precisely prevents them from enjoying it, as it creates ongoing debilitation and chronic pain and leaves them without any time except to work. As Apostolidis argues, this cruel optimism “augments this misery, furthermore, through the peculiar malice of encouraging fantasy in the pose of resignation to these cruel circumstances of self-incapacitation as less bad than completely going under” (2019: 138). We can think of how depression and anxiety intertwine with cruel optimism, creating an affective disposition tensioned by the necessary hope that the sacrifice is worth it, and the daily evidence that it might not be. As I discuss in the next chapter, the conditions that allow for cruel optimism to operate as an affective disposition became even more fragile during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. PANDEMIC PRECARITY, RESISTANCE, AND COLLECTIVE CARE

“They will write their names on your leash and call you necessary, call you urgent.”(Vuong 2019:185)

On March 11th, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the unfolding situation regarding the worldwide spread of a novel coronavirus—COVID-19—as a pandemic. On March 24th, the day after the governors of both Washington and Oregon issued stay-at-home orders for those states in response to the growing public health crisis (Brown 2020; Inslee 2020), food processing workers woke up and went to work, as if nothing had changed. While most of the people in these states were being asked to stay home, these workers were required to show up to work, without any personal protective equipment, in poorly ventilated facilities, to work shifts of over 10 hours, shoulder-to-shoulder with hundreds of other workers (Baker 2020b, 2020a; Do and Frank 2021; Stuesse and Dollar 2020). The built-in and organized disregard they were used to finding every day suddenly had another layer: the closeness of their coworkers meant more than the possibility of getting accidentally injured, and the long hours translated into more than just the expected pain in their arms and legs. While during those first weeks information was limited on how to be safe from the threat of the virus, it was clear to workers that if their workplace had not been safe before, it definitely was not safe now.

As early as March 28th, a worker at one meatpacking plant filed an anonymous complaint with the LNI:

With COVID-19 everywhere I feel they are not doing enough to keep us safe from the virus. They deemed us essential so we need to work, but I feel that it is a big risk and I can't get sick, I have a 5 year old and a 4 month old baby at home. The processing plant has us working elbow to elbow and that goes against the

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggestion of working 6 feet from one another.

Soon after this complaint, food processing plants became centers of significant outbreaks (Corkery, Yaffe-Bellany, and Kravitz 2020; Lakhani 2020; Rosenberg, Cooke, and Walljasper 2020; Taylor, Boulos, and Almond 2020). In the following months, the majority of the plants analyzed in this research experienced massive cases of coronavirus disease among their workers, and several deaths.

Claribel, who had been working in fruit packing for twenty years, sounded both angry and tired. We had been chatting over the phone for more than two hours, and I asked her to describe the situation at the plant when the COVID-19 outbreaks started. She stated:

COVID in our plant was *la gota que derramó el vaso*. That's it, because we were already talking about going out on strike. Me and some *compañeros* went and talked to the production area manager, *el mero patrón* of all of us, and we told him, "When COVID started you said you would close the company for fourteen days to disinfect and clean, and there's a lot of sick people and you haven't close one day, why are you not following up on your word?" And he replied that closing wasn't an option because the government was telling them to produce. So then we asked, "OK, can we at least get hazard pay then, a \$2 raise, like other companies have done, because of the risk?" But he replied that as long as he was paying us the legal minimum, he wasn't obligated to pay anything on top of that. We pressed him further, asking, "Why aren't you following the six-foot distance rule? How come we don't have any sanitizer, any masks?" We told him that if they didn't do something we would keep getting sick, that they should close and let us stay home. He said that was not an option, and that if we didn't get COVID at the plant we would get it at the grocery store. He asked a *compañera*: "How often do you go grocery shopping?" and she replied, "Once a week." He looked at us satisfied and said, "Well, I only go every three weeks to avoid the virus. I keep my fridge full." We all felt so insulted because obviously we would like to be able to fill our fridge and go to the store less often, but with our wages that is impossible. After paying the rent, insurance, and all the bills, there's little left for food. I felt that what he said was so offensive, bragging that his fridge was always full and telling us that since we couldn't keep it full we should be okay with continuing to work without any protections ...

In her story, Claribel lays out how the endemic precarity workers face at the food processing plants reached a breaking point with the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter is an examination of this breaking point, one that was not merely caused by an external element beyond people's control—a virus—but that cannot be understood without considering the chronic bodily and emotional harm workers already had to endure before this crisis. What happened to workers when the virus entered the factories?

As Claribel explains, employers and government officials mobilized notions of essentiality to keep plants open despite the risks, while at the same time attempting once more to erase the connection between workers' increased exposure and illness and the working conditions.⁴⁶ But the virus interrupted the employers' fantasy of disembodied labor power as the workers became sick en masse. The unraveling of the crisis also made it harder for workers to temporarily displace the evidence of their own disposability, altering the narratives that had served as coping mechanisms to help them endure the daily and endemic violence at the plants. The *cruel optimism* that had relied on both the short temporal horizon of 'making it unharmed through the day' and the justification of the present self-sacrifice for a future better life for other loved ones became unsustainable.

⁴⁶ Discussing outbreaks in food processing facilities in late April 2020, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar claimed that "the bigger issue was employees' home environments" and offered to send more police to the communities instead of closing the plants to avoid the spread of the disease (Cancryn and Barrón-López 2020). He would later also blame '5 de mayo celebrations.' After a late September outbreak in a seafood processing plant on the Oregon coast, owners blamed 'Labor Day celebrations' (Stein and Murphy 2020). In this last case, the affected shift was the night shift, composed mostly of H2B workers, who were left in cramped, unsanitary conditions in hotel rooms provided by the company (White 2020). According to community organizers, a county public health director in Eastern Washington explained that workers at local food processing plants, who were migrants, were "incapable of social distancing." When asked to elaborate, she said, "it's cultural."

As the virus spread through the plants, and the workers were confronted with imminent and indiscriminate risk of illness and death, their anxiety grew. They became aware that by staying on their jobs, they could be precisely harming those they were sacrificing themselves for. The slower temporal framework of their ongoing debilitation suddenly accelerated, as workers became seriously ill in a matter of days. Experiences of premature disability turned into premature death, with the incidence of fatal cases among food processing workers growing higher and faster than in many other industries (Soucheray 2020). The harm and debilitation that the industry had previously been able to construct as resulting from individual choices or unfortunate accidents, or to make invisible due to its mundane, ‘uneventful’ character, reappeared now in this unprecedented event, in all its systemic and collective character. The worker’s body reappeared in all its corporeal vulnerability, but also in its autonomous agency, as workers walked out of their jobs. As the weeks went by, different processes of collective advocacy and organization sprouted through food processing plants across the Pacific Northwest.

To unpack this unexpected process, in this chapter I begin by discussing how framing the pandemic as a war, and framing food processing work as essential to that war, helped employers and government officials justify the continuation of ‘business as usual’ inside the food processing plants, regardless of the global crisis. At a heightened level of danger, the workers’ bodies were treated even more violently, reifying the “essential disposability” of food processing workers. Next, I focus on how the disregard for workers’ bodily integrity existing both inside and outside the shop floor perpetuates and morphs as new risks and bodily needs emerge in the face of the COVID-19

pandemic. Finally, I explore the actions workers took to protect themselves and their families by engaging in direct action, creating spaces of care and grief, and forming new organizations to improve their working conditions.

Essentially Disposable

“We have to fight that invisible enemy,” proclaimed Donald Trump in reference to the virus, as he called himself a ‘wartime president,’ ready to ‘win fast’ (Cathey 2020). In the months that followed, the rhetoric of war permeated mainstream discourse beyond Trump’s rants, with everyone referring to essential workers as being on the front lines, engaging in a heroic battle, and becoming the ultimate patriots. Language of battlefields and war-like metaphors are common in crisis management, part of a usually militaristic response that serves to frame state violence as part of a rational and unavoidable path to ‘victory’ (Branicki 2020).

A key feature of this crisis was a narrative of scarcity: a notion that people would suddenly go without essential products, especially food. To be sure, their narrative wasn’t palatable to those actually producing food. James, a meatpacking worker whose story I have shared in detail, told me: “They said that we had to keep working, otherwise people would be starving. I was like, who? really? Do people really just survive on meat? I do not.” As food processing workers literally risked their lives in order to ensure the continuance of food production, food processing plants exported a significant proportion of their production and experienced record profits (House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis 2022; Stephens 2022). For example, a meatpacking giant doubled its

billions of dollars in profits from 2019 to 2020 (Oxfam 2022).⁴⁷ Still, the nationally elevated concern over the protection of the food industry led to a transformation of formerly invisible workers to essential, frontline soldiers combating so-called scarcity in the broader battle against the attack of a “foreign” virus.

The new division of the workforce between essential and non-essential workers mostly meant the exacerbation of the uneven distribution of harm and grievability that is always implied in *frames of war* (Butler 2009). Julia, a vegetable processing worker, shared: “Ay (sighs), they say we are essential as if that is supposed to be helpful, but what they are really saying is that we haven’t got a choice, we have to do it even if we are scared.” Julia’s statement was repeated by many others who highlighted the coercion to work during the pandemic, their unwilling appointment as soldiers in a war they never agreed to fight, and the unfreedom of their condition (Klein 2021). Unable to shelter during this ‘war,’ migrant food processing workers were drafted and sent to the front lines without protection, as both government officials and the industry ensured that they had to remain in their positions even if they were scared, getting sick, and dying.

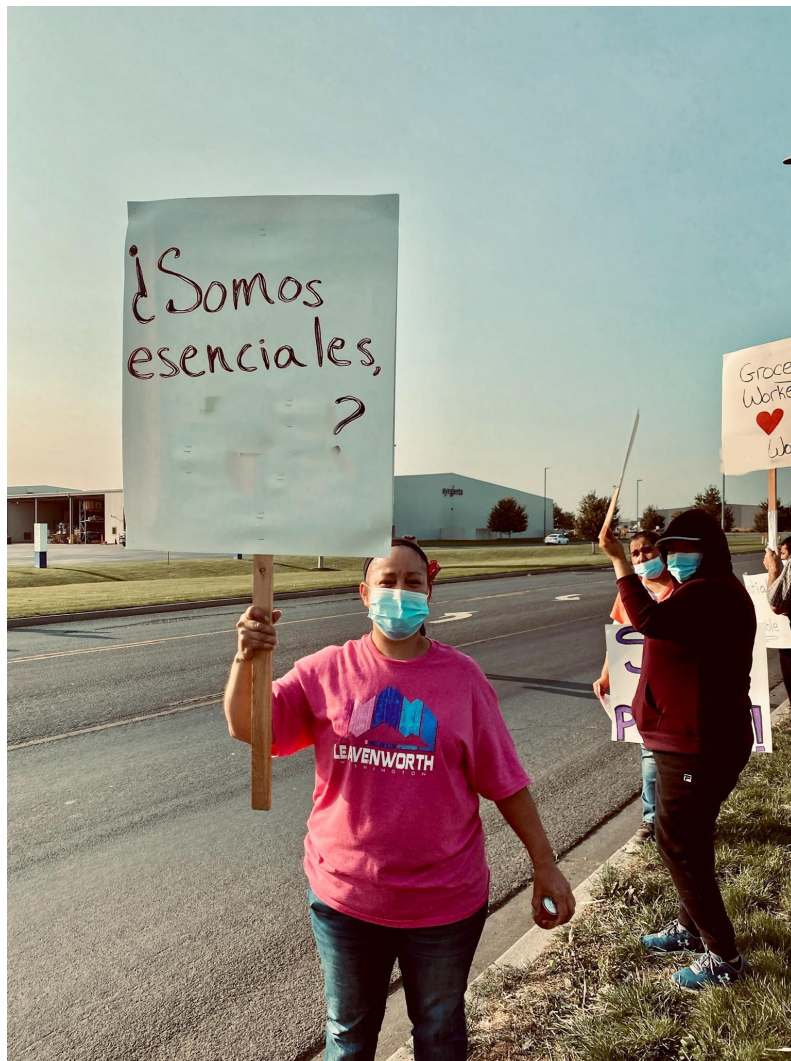
The case of food processing workers highlights the tension already implied in the warlike ‘essential work’ frame. While this frame reflected a certain shift in the social consideration for traditionally devalued, low-waged jobs—a recognition of the fundamental role these jobs have in making society work—it also legitimized their

⁴⁷ In another example, a Human Resources director at a vegetable processing plant shared: “I am proud that we had one of the best years in terms of production—the numbers were higher than they had been in years before. Despite the fact that we had people ill and quarantined all the time, we were able to have full crews every day, throughout the whole pandemic. They all just pulled through, doing a lot of overtime. So it was just amazing to me.” When after this perplexing statement I asked her whether or not they had used those extraordinary profits to pay the workers extra, she replied that while they had considered it, the company had ultimately decided against it.

unavoidable exposure to infection and potential death, in the midst of the ‘battle.’ Yet migrant food processing workers found that even at this time of temporary recognition for other low-wage workers, they remained excluded even from some of these insufficient forms of appreciation for essential workers. Forced to work nonetheless, usually in even more unprotected conditions than other workers also deemed essential, the majority did not get hazard pay, as many retail workers did. Nobody cheered or clapped for them, as was common to do for the overworked and underpaid healthcare workers during the first months of the pandemic. Their “contribution” to the “battle” remained mostly invisible: they were symptomatically absent in society’s discourses of revalorization of essential work. They were made essential but, once more, utterly disposable.

The fact that these workers were at the center of a battle was reflected in spiking cases in counties with food processing plants as a primary driver of their economies (Albrecht 2022; Carlsten et al. 2021). Yakima Valley in Washington, for example, where a large portion of fruit and vegetable packers and processing facilities are located, quickly had the highest per capita rate of COVID-19 cases on the West Coast. By the end of June 2020, Yakima County had an infection rate 28 times higher than that of the most densely populated county in the state (King County). Similarly, areas with a high concentration of food processing work in Oregon, such as Woodburn, had the highest infection rates in the first months of the pandemic (Abrams 2020; Conger 2020; Xiuhtecutli and Shattuck 2021). These dire consequences were made possible by a legal infrastructure, justified through the narrative of war, that was built with evident disregard for workers’ bodily integrity. The frame of war translated materially into the mobilization of an already

existing legal apparatus and a series of executive, legislative, and legal decisions that sealed workers' fates while protecting corporate profits. Without attempting to chronologically and exhaustively consider all the pieces of the legal infrastructure built during the pandemic—one that not only was in constant flux but also, due to its overall temporary character, has become significantly hard to reconstruct a posteriori—I want to point out to some key moments that directly impacted food processing workers.



Picture 4: A vegetable processing worker holds a sign in Spanish that reads, 'Are we essential?' at a rally in Washington. October 2020. Photo by the author.

Unsurprisingly, despite being the key federal regulator for health and safety in the workplace, federal OSHA never enacted emergency temporary standards, only nonmandatory guidance that included very explicit language about its lack of legal enforceability. In other words, they openly announced that employers were free to disregard their guidance. Despite the clear spike in claims during 2020, federal OSHA conducted 44 percent fewer inspections in 2020 than in the year before (Modesitt 2021).

At the state level, the public records request shows an alarming number of complaints made against food processing companies by workers, describing unsafe working conditions that failed to follow any of the recommendations, and a slow and limited response by DOSH at LNI. For example, workers in one company first filed complaints in early May, and many more were filed in the following weeks, until a partial inspection was conducted by LNI in late June; however, a worker had already died by then due to COVID-19. In another facility, workers started filing complaints in early April, and continued to do so for weeks, making over 20 complaints before a partial inspection was done in June. By then, workers at the plant had been striking for weeks. However, government officials continued to insist that workers use these channels, even though they were clearly unable to provide the timely response needed during the emergency. Tired of the limited enforcement of regulations, some workers started including comments about the agency's response in their complaints. A complaint filed on June 1st read: "When LNI was there to inspect they only spoke to the management team and not to the line workers. To know the truth, they need to speak to people that are working on the lines." Another complaint read, "Employer has coached all employees on what to say if LNI questions them."

At the same time that federal OSHA failed to create mandates that would protect these vulnerable workers,⁴⁸ the CDC also created guidance specifically targeting the meatpacking industry because of widespread outbreaks in the plants. However, the guidance issued on April 26, 2020, reinforced the violence that workers were already facing, using language that softened recommendations to meatpacking companies and stating that workers with a known exposure to the virus could continue to work, and that those who were asymptomatic could return to work after seven days (when the general recommendation at the time was 14 days). The high risk of contagion inside the plants was used by public agencies to suspend inspections, in order to protect public agency workers, clearly showing the prioritization of the safety of government officials over the safety of migrant workers on the front lines of the pandemic. Temporarily, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) not only stopped in-person inspections but also allowed employers to suspend compliance with many regulations including conducting trainings, renovating permits, and even protecting water sources from waste (Commissioner of Food and Drugs - 2020; Memorandum United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2020; Executive Order 13917 2020).

A recent report (House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis 2022) shows that alongside harmful federal OSHA and CDC actions, and as conditions in the

⁴⁸ Both the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries and Oregon OSHA passed emergency requirements for workplaces during COVID-19. The majority of these requirements applied to high risk settings, which were limited to healthcare. It is important to note that both of these states were some of the most responsive to the crisis, eventually passing mandatory mask requirements for all workplaces, and new requirements for farm housing for example. However, many of these regulations were not in place until after food processing workplaces became centers of outbreaks, and even after situations of labor unrest took place (Oxfam America 2020; Weiss 2020).

plants worsened, industry leaders used their relationships with officials in the U.S. executive branch to lobby for Executive Order 13917.⁴⁹ This order, made effective on April 28, 2020, allowed employers to bypass state and local authorities to keep plants working despite increasing numbers of infected workers. Moreover, while employers lobbied to ensure that workers continued to produce food, they simultaneously sought to ensure protections from potential lawsuits from workers. As the report from Congress highlights, the actions of the state constituted a form of legal violence, as they contributed directly to and reinforced the harm already taking place inside the plants by allowing employers to continue operating without protecting workers, and by shielding them from any repercussions of their wrongdoing (House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis 2022). Ultimately, these high-level decisions to protect the food processing industry led to an exacerbation of an already dangerous worksite, leading to an untenable working situation for workers, as I analyze in more detail throughout this chapter.

As workers expressed an urgent need for protection against a virus that was rapidly spreading, they were met with slow institutional responses on the one hand, and with the creation of harmful legal policies on the other. As one advocate and organizer within the Karen community said:

I tried to reach out to local- and state-level elected officials to try to do something about what was going on at the plants, and they kept telling me that workers had to file OSHA complaints. I told them, “This is a crisis, is an emergency, who cares if OSHA does an investigation six weeks from now, when six weeks from now how many more people could be dead,” you know? And they just insisted that folks try to navigate these broken bureaucratic systems instead of adjusting the system to the emergency we were in.

⁴⁹ Delegating Authority Under the Defense Production Act of 1950 with Respect to Food Supply Chain Resources During the National Emergency Caused by the Outbreak of COVID-19.

In sum, the warlike frame of “essential work,” and its deployment by both federal and state institutions, increased food processing workers’ vulnerability, further exposing them to the risks of the pandemic. It also allowed the organized disregard for their bodies already present in the industry to continue and intensify on the shop floor during the COVID-19 crisis. Food processing plants continued producing the endemic harm and ongoing debilitation of workers’ bodies that I have already analyzed in the previous chapter, but they now also became manufacturing hubs of contagion, illness, and coronavirus-related deaths.

Pandemic Factories

Built-in contagion

“They didn’t care, Lola—*les valió, como decimos nosotros, un cacahuete*,”⁵⁰ said Patricia bluntly, summarizing in a candid way what food processing workers repeated throughout all our conversations and what appears in the hundreds of LNI complaints filed during the first months of the pandemic. Patricia had been working in a fish cannery cutting and cleaning fish for twenty-one years when the pandemic hit. The built-in disregard for workers’ bodily integrity in the packing and processing plants not only remained unquestioned during the crisis, but also deepened its impacts.

After the initial outbreaks, the CDC released specific recommendations for food processing employers, most of which pointed to the harmful infrastructure—lack of ventilation, narrow spaces, lack of proper gear—and to key aspects of the organization of the labor process—speed of the lines, lack of breaks, lack of access to water—as

⁵⁰ This Spanish idiom means ‘they didn’t care at all’ but the literal translation of *cacahuete* is peanut.

elements that needed to be modified if further virus outbreaks were to be prevented.

Overall, employers avoided making any significant changes to the infrastructure, or to the spacing of the workers, forgoing any attempt to maintain six feet of distance between them as indicated by the CDC (Dyal 2020). Employers were advised to reduce the number of workers on the lines, and to reduce speeds accordingly, but they did neither. On the contrary, workers said that production lines were running as fast as always, if not faster. Indeed, many food processing plants used this opportunity to increase production output by requesting waivers to the line speed limits, which were granted in April by the USDA (Mayer 2020; Trentmann 2020). Of course, with the increase of line speeds came new spikes in COVID-19 case counts inside the plants (Kindy, Mellnik, and Hernández 2021).

Eventually, in lieu of any other protective measure to keep workers apart on the lines, some companies installed physical barriers, usually plexiglass.⁵¹ Workers, however, explained the limitations of this strategy. The plastic barriers were weak and broke often, they got moved around by workers as they tried to do their jobs, and overall, the barriers did not seem to properly safeguard workers. Rita, who had been working in fruit packing for three years, stated:

It's just a small plastic between people. From line to line the space is six feet, but two people need to stand there, so they said we were already protected by putting this tiny piece of plastic. But the reality is that we are moving at the same time in the same direction, and as soon as we start working, our backs are touching each

⁵¹ In some companies, they didn't even do that. A manager explained that he thought the dividers could become 'tripping hazards,' but that he also refused to close every other line to allow workers to maintain distance, choosing instead to just put 'some tape on the floors to appease LNI.' The same manager continued to share—very candidly—how when an inspector attempted to fine him due to his insufficient efforts, "I called his boss and made them understand this was all we would do, and his boss okayed my plan." This same manager later prevented LNI inspectors from entering the premises of his company and went on to fight every fine he was given.

other. It really doesn't do anything at all. I do wonder, who said this was enough? Who supervised them putting this in?

Mariana added, "We have the plastic divider now, but it is not uncommon for workers to try to push it around to have more space. They are also very weak and break often, and when they do, we usually continue working without them."

In line with this push for bigger output and profit at the cost of workers' safety, several companies even increased their mandatory overtime during the first months of the pandemic, meaning that workers were spending even more hours and more days at the crowded facilities. James, who had been working in meatpacking for eight years, shared: "We have been working overtime on the weekends, every Saturday since COVID started ... and you cannot really say no to doing it, but I would prefer not to, I really don't like it. I would like to have the day off to rest and be with my family."

Food processors not only were working faster and for longer shifts but also found themselves further unprotected by employers during the pandemic. Similarly to the companies' previous reluctance to provide proper gear for workers that could mitigate or prevent harm and injuries, they were slow to provide access to personal protective equipment (PPE), and in some cases only did so after serious outbreaks or instances of worker unrest (Dreher 2020). A worker clearly stated the worrying situation in an LNI complaint: "There were no masks, no hand sanitizer. Inside the packing plants we didn't have anything."

In several of the LNI complaints, workers report that when they asked for hand sanitizer to be available, they were told by management that "it was too expensive" or "not important." Workers also said they were not given masks, or only in limited quantities, and that some companies only had cloth masks, even as COVID-19 cases at

the plant increased. Rita explained that as late as early May 2020, the company not only did not provide face coverings but also did not allow workers to use their own face coverings because the shop floor rules required faces to be visible. Alejandra, a vegetable processing worker, shared: “I got COVID because they weren’t providing us with any masks, and when we tried to bring our own, just some cloth ones, they said, ‘No, there is no need for you to be wearing that,’ but we already knew that people were getting sick and we were just trying to protect ourselves.”

It was only after the workers organized collectively to ask management for masks that the company started providing disposable masks, but at the rate of only one mask per week. Gustavo, who had been employed at a vegetable processing plant for thirty-one years, explained:

When people started getting sick they eventually gave us one mask, and told us that we couldn’t throw it away because we were supposed to reuse it all week, and I told her, “I am sorry but this is a disposable mask, we are not supposed to wear it for more than eight hours, you have to give us new ones every day,” and she just replied, “I am just doing what I was told, this is all you get.”

Some companies even started selling masks to the workers that required them. As a food processing worker states in an LNI complaint, “During the COVID-19 process there was a lack of PPE and hygiene. Front office staff started selling face masks for three dollars each, instead of handing them out to the employees.”

Some workers also expressed being retaliated against for questioning the lack of PPE and the inconsistency of the safety practices. Oscar, who had been working in vegetable processing for three years, discussed how, while the company had shared guidelines from corporate stating that they would receive a mask a day, the local managers were only providing one every two days, and often more days would go by without workers getting a new mask. He started bringing his own cloth masks to be able

to wear a clean one every day, but his supervisor said he was not allowed to use them. He shared that when he pointed out the discrepancy with the stated corporate policy, the manager “just yelled at me, ‘I’m not afraid of you, you can call corporate, and they will tell you the same thing!’”

Safety recommendations also included increasing sanitation practices inside the plants, for example by cleaning surfaces more often, routinely cleaning common areas, etc. Companies complied with these recommendations inconsistently. In some plants, management kept asking workers to clock in using biometric fingerprint scanners that would not, workers said, be properly sanitized. Even if, in some cases, companies hired workers specifically for increased sanitation tasks, they would seldom provide these workers with proper PPE or training. Paw was hired at a meatpacking plant in June of 2020 and found that he was expected to do all the cleaning for a significant sector of the plant by himself. He said, “I was suddenly doing four or five different jobs, not just the one they had hired me for, and I kept telling my supervisor I needed someone else to come help me because I couldn’t simultaneously clean the indoor and the outdoor space, but they never sent anyone.”

The inconsistent and irresponsible ways in which companies complied with safety recommendations extended also to daily temperature checks. In the cases in which companies were implementing this measure, workers often had to wait in crowded spaces to be checked, preventing them from maintaining the recommended six feet of distance. This also continued to happen when workers went on breaks. Angie explained that “as soon as the break starts you can see a lot of people clustering together, like sheep, just

trying to pass through, or even when we are clocking in and out, it always gets clogged, and people don't have space to stay apart.”

According to workers, most of the companies started giving short talks to workers about safety procedures. However, many disclosed that the information provided was very limited and that safety talks did not happen as frequently as needed, in a time when new COVID-19 safety information was being released almost daily. Luisa explained, “We were told we would have weekly meetings to talk about safety and what procedures we needed to follow, but after the first two weeks the meetings became bi-weekly, and then monthly, and then stopped altogether, but we all felt we would have needed to meet more often.”

Despotic control over infected bodies

Management's widespread despotic control over workers' bodies only intensified during the pandemic. I have shown how despotic control over labor implies a systematic non-accommodation or outright refusal of workers' bodily needs and temporalities that does not adjust to the pace of production. When confronted with a viral pandemic, this turned into an active denial of infections and coronavirus-related illnesses on the shop floors. In a complaint filed with LNI in mid-April of 2020, a worker painted a desperate scene of the pandemic factories:

Several employees have tested positive for Covid-19. They are not keeping the 6' social distance. When employees talk to management about their concerns management dismisses employees and tells them they are the exception to the governor's rules. Employees that are in the meat cutting department are still working shoulder to shoulder. Some of the employees are sick while working and it has gotten to the point that they faint while working and get carried out but first responders have never been notified.

This situation needs to be understood both as a continuation of the employers' disregard for workers' bodily integrity and as the result of the companies' conscious

choice to profit from the global crisis. In the pursuit of bigger outcomes and profit, companies not only inconsistently and inadequately complied with safety recommendations, but also resisted adjusting the organization of the production process to pandemic times. Employers deployed existing strategies to ensure workers' continued presence and effort on the line, and crafted new strategies, which amounted to an active disregard for the time workers needed to recover from coronavirus infection or to isolate to prevent others from getting sick.

Management continued pushing workers to stay on the lines while sick, even though workers were dealing with an illness that there was little information about, that was very contagious, and that needed a long time for recovery. Numerous complaints made to LNI mentioned sick workers and managers continuing to come into work. One complaint filed in May 2020 read: "Safety regulations are disgusting; they have an employee going into work daily who is coughing everywhere, and he is telling everyone that his wife has tested positive. Employer is allowing all sick employees to continue to work. Employer is not following any of the state regulations." Another complaint, filed in June 2020, read: "Three people (two are managers) tested positive for COVID19 over the weekend, all three of those employees are still going to work daily. Employer is hiding that people are testing positive from authorities. Employees are worried that the virus will continue to spread if LNI doesn't take action against the employer."

During a pandemic, companies kept in place policies that directly penalized workers for missing days—even if having exposed or infected workers on the line meant putting others at risk of almost certain contagion.⁵² Because employers required workers

⁵² SARS-CoV-2 is extremely contagious. Because it was a novel virus, the population had no previous immunity to it. It is also airborne, which increases the possibility of easy and massive contagion and even

to call daily to report their absence in order to avoid these penalties, workers who had tested positive and had been told by health officials to stay home for two weeks felt forced to go back to work. Ma Tree, a 38-year-old meatpacking worker, thinking that each day she was home she was receiving disciplinary points, returned to work only five days after testing positive. Even if some companies briefly changed their policies, by June 2020, when cases in many counties were surging, they had reverted to pre-COVID stances and policies (Shanker and Skerritt 2020). Workers with limited knowledge of English (and of their own rights) felt particularly pressured to go back to work under the risk of losing their jobs and their income, and they had little recourse.

Companies were already unwilling to allocate time off the line for infected workers to quarantine and recover, and they lacked any policies for exposed or asymptomatic workers. In some cases, workers who did not feel sick were encouraged to come in even if they had been directly exposed to a person who had tested positive for the virus. The production process would not adjust to the temporality of an infection that has an incubation period and that is usually confirmed a few days post-exposure. Unequal access to testing meant that many workers could not confirm their status as fast as needed to be able to quarantine. Ultimately, food processing workers had no time off work to quarantine to protect their coworkers.

Employers' actions were enabled by governmental policies that adjusted to the needs of the companies and failed to acknowledge that preemptive isolation of workers after exposure was needed. The CDC never had policies for asymptomatic workers, and in mid-April 2020, it changed its guidelines to say that essential employees could keep

super-spreader events. All these characteristics made the virus's basic reproduction number (R_0) relatively high, meaning that an elevated average rate of new people would get infected as a result of each new case.

working after potential exposure to COVID-19 (Waldstein 2020). The importance of excluding those who had been exposed to the virus even if they were asymptomatic is highlighted by the fact that when one of the plants with outbreaks finally did large-scale testing, they found that over half of the workers who tested positive presented no symptoms (Cary 2020).

Most companies also did not modify their paid sick policies, or only did so temporarily.⁵³ Information about internal policy changes was either unclear or contradictory. For example, when Teresa fell ill in November 2020 while working at a vegetable processing company, she was initially told by human resources personnel that she would be receiving two weeks of paid leave. However, when she failed to receive her check, she called the company only to find out that they had phased out the policy starting on the very day she fell ill; therefore, she was not eligible for the payment. Though she was still feeling ill, she had no choice but to return, since she could not afford to stay home. In many cases workers had to use all their accrued paid leave, including vacation time, and use their savings to survive the remaining time in which they were too sick to work.

Many of the policies that were in place during the first months of the pandemic were no longer there by the last months of 2020, even though the highest peak of cases in the U.S. was during that time. Not only did workers continue to get sick after the initial months of 2020, but they were also getting sick more than once, in a context with no expanded benefits. For workers who got sick in 2021, the situation had become even

⁵³ For example, a vegetable processing company offered its workers the option to use paid sick time in the form of a 'loan' that would have to be repaid later, even when said company had received CARES Act funds to expand its offer of paid sick time off.

more dire, as they continued to get sick but found themselves without any paid time off left (Green 2022). Gustavo, a vegetable processing worker, explained: “I had to use my sick paid leave last year when I had to quarantine due to a COVID-19 exposure. I just found out last week I tested positive, but I have no PTO left, and I don’t know what to do.” The lack of financial support acted as an indirect mechanism to coerce workers to come into work while showing symptoms of a possible infection, since they could not afford to not work.

Employers not only continued disciplining workers for missing days, and avoided expanding their paid time off policies, but also kept in place—or even introduced—practices that financially incentivized employees to work while ill, such as presentism bonuses (Maynes 2020). Pedro, who has worked in meatpacking for twenty years, explains: “They said they were giving us COVID pay, but to get it we had to not miss any days, and this was when we were doing overtime so you had to be there six days a week to get it, and people wanted to get the bonus, so they would show up no matter how they felt.”

Among the measures taken to ensure that workers continued showing up to work as if nothing was happening, companies even resorted to actively withholding information about positive cases in the plants, both to authorities and to the workers themselves. In most cases, workers only learned about sick coworkers through other workers, on the news, or because those coworkers were suspiciously missing for two weeks. Jimeno, a fruit processing worker, shared: “The company wasn’t acknowledging anything, they weren’t saying anything, we only knew because people talk and because of the news ... they never said, ‘This is what is going on and this is what we are doing

about it.’ Nothing.” Amanda, a meatpacking worker, explained, “They just wanted to keep it a secret but then we saw it all over the news.” Rita added, “You would hear, this person is sick, or this other person is, and we were all there together, looking at each other without knowing what to do, and I felt like we were a bunch of chickens in a coop ... we wanted to run away from the plant, but we couldn’t.”

Once they fell ill, workers found that their employers also expected a quick return to work after the recommended two-week period. However, in many cases, the virus had lasting health consequences that required more recovery time than the two weeks touted by the CDC guidelines (Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2020). When workers needed more time, they found that employers insisted they return to work despite the state of their health and threatened them with termination. Mu, a meatpacking worker, explained, “After a month they wanted me to go back, and I was like I can’t ... I was really weak, so they sent me this letter saying that if I did not return by the end of the week I would be fired.” Rosa, a 62 year-old fruit packing worker, shared:

I felt like I was going to die, I lost 20 pounds, I was seriously ill, the virus went to my lungs and I got pneumonia, and I was so ill, had this cough that wouldn’t let me speak or talk and I tried, I didn’t want to go to the hospital because I was afraid that if I went there I would never be able to leave. I have high pressure; I need to be careful. I couldn’t even pick up a glass of water. It has been a really painful experience for me. I was supposed to go back to work but couldn’t. It has been over two months, but I just didn’t have the capacity to go back. I was too weak.

While it has been clear for a while that COVID-19 can impact people differently and that it can take several weeks for some to get well, companies operated under the standard assumption that workers had to be back after two weeks at the most and had trouble accommodating the long recovery period that some needed. Htoo, a meatpacking worker, said he started crying when he was told he needed to return to work as soon as

possible, or he would risk being fired. Once at his job, when he was having such a hard time that he requested permission to go home, he was told that he could leave since he was visibly still very ill, but that he would get a punitive point for leaving.

Regrettably, in the long run, health authorities would also change their recommendations, shortening the official quarantine period to one week and then to only five days. They adjusted their recommendations in order to accommodate employers' drive for profit, regardless of the ample evidence of the magnitude of the expansive effects of not letting workers stay home while ill (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2021).

Workers also discussed that once they tested negative, employers expected them to return to their jobs as if nothing had happened, without accommodating any of the longer-term effects of the disease. When James had to return to work at the meatpacking plant while still feeling the after-effects of the virus—experiencing shortness of breath and feeling very weak—he asked his supervisor to put him on light duty. His request was denied, and the company had no policy in place that could acknowledge the possible long-term impacts of the virus.

Workers also found not only that there was no time for them to recuperate from the illness, but also that they would not be able to stay home to care for others in their families who had gotten sick as well. The pandemic meant that in addition to facing increased risk and danger in their workplace, workers had to deal with new caregiving responsibilities and the exacerbation of the already-existing crisis of social reproduction. They found themselves struggling to find childcare as many providers temporarily shut down, as schools closed, and in some cases, as childcare providers that remained open

were opting to not accept children whose parents were employed in the food processing sector due to the outbreaks. If the despotic control of management had previously made it impossible for workers to carve out space to care for themselves or their families, this situation worsened during the pandemic.

Annie and her husband Henry both work in a vegetable processing plant, working opposing shifts to be able to take care of their two-year-old daughter Bella. When Henry became seriously ill with COVID-19, Annie told her employer she had been exposed, and asked if she could remain home to take care of Henry and Bella. Annie explained: “I told them my husband had tested positive, but I didn’t have any symptoms, and they weren’t testing people without symptoms then yet so I didn’t know if I had it, and that I didn’t have anyone to take care of Bella, but they told me I had to come in to work.” Ma Tree shared that she wanted to stay home and care for her adult son, who works in the same meatpacking plant as her, and who was very sick with COVID-19. But the company refused to acknowledge this was a valid need and threatened to fire her if she did not return to work.

This overall context—the inconsistent guidelines, the pressure to continue working in the midst of a confusing, changing, and disturbing health crisis, and the lack of proper protection, along with clear indications that the disease was spreading through the plants but that employers were actively denying it—created a climate of fear and anxiety inside the plants (Bernton 2020).⁵⁴ For these workers, showing up to work meant not only potentially being exposed, but also having to cope with the certainty that it was

⁵⁴ In fact, companies were not only failing to inform their employees. According to recent research, they were also misrepresenting and failing to accurately report cases to public officials, even when the cases implied COVID-19-related deaths (House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis 2022).

only a matter of time before they got sick or got others sick. If food processing plants were spaces saturated by negative emotions that were intertwined with the working conditions before the pandemic, their emotional climate was now intensified by the employers' response to the pandemic. Thus, during the pandemic, working in food processing meant not only dealing with the exacerbated risk and exposure to the virus, but also doing so while enduring growing anxiety and fear for yourself and others.

Passing the Buck: Institutional Neglect in Crisis

The disregard workers encountered from management was intensified by social institutions' inability, or refusal, to adequately protect migrant food processing workers during the pandemic. Workers attempted to get support for the illness they experienced, either through compensation, the ability to stay at home, or improvements to healthcare access.

Yet, just as workers described their attempts to obtain institutional support for experiencing bodily harm in the workplace in the previous chapter, the majority of the workers expressed that they struggled to access benefits or economic support during the pandemic. Workers and advocates, including professional organizers, non-professional volunteers, family members, and others, described facing contradictory or inaccurate information, a fragmented and overwhelmed bureaucratic system, and language and technology barriers. Many were not able to navigate these systems successfully and thus had the added burden of stress resulting from economic insecurity, with many workers failing to pay their rent or their mortgages and struggling to put food on their tables.

In most instances workers found that their employers, state agencies, and non-profits provided inaccurate or limited information, or none at all. As Angie explained:

“They ghosted me, *ándale*, they didn’t help me at all, no information on what benefits I could apply, no support, nothing. I had to be at work although it was risky, and when I got sick, they didn’t help me at all.” Certainly, continuing changes in federal, state, and county safety guidelines and regulations, and the addition of new benefits, presented challenges for employers and public agencies as well.⁵⁵

Workers and advocates described situations in which employers and different agencies and organizations were passing the buck to each other and not giving workers the critical information, they needed to access aid. As one advocate explained,

There were many routes workers could go, depending on their situation, but the employer was telling them to go to the insurance company first. The insurance company would tell us they didn’t know how to handle the claim, we would turn to the public agencies, and they would refer us to a non-profit who in turn would tell us to go back to the employer. Workers were exhausted, and we did not know how to help them navigate this situation.

Initial choices workers made, regarding which claim to present and to whom, could later foreclose their chances of accessing a different type of relief, but again, workers in most cases were not made aware of this. James, who was unable to work for almost two months due to COVID-19, explained that his employer “told me to try to get short-term disability, but I also had a previous workers’ comp case for an injury I had several years back, so that didn’t work. I tried to apply for unemployment, but because I had started the other claim I couldn’t.” The bodily harm James had already experienced, coupled with the inadequacy of the workers’ compensation system to attend to the ongoing debilitation that happens inside the packing plant, excluded him from COVID relief. Ultimately, James did not receive any financial aid; when his savings ran out, he had to return to

⁵⁵ Through the CARES Act and other state legislation, some public benefits were expanded, and new benefits were created, and as discussed above, some companies also temporarily changed their own benefits in an effort to adapt to the pandemic.

work, even though he was still too weak to perform his physically demanding job as a bone cutter.⁵⁶ Workers' inability to access workers' compensation was a systemic problem, which is not surprising given the consistent inability of workers to make successful claims described in Chapter 3. As one advocate shared:

There wasn't a single person that I helped with benefits where it was just like, okay, let's fill this out and you're gonna get your check. It was just that every situation was weird and different and required a different way of accessing, it was also just hard to make sense of it all, even for me, more so for the workers.

Ultimately, lack of clear information was the result of institutional choices reflecting a pattern of disregard for workers' bodily integrity.

Additionally, internet access and a computer were often necessary to start the claims, particularly while phone lines were extremely busy. Many workers had limited or no access to a personal computer, and many of them did not have a personal email. Community organizers and young relatives of workers found themselves having to aid workers, again with no support from either the public agencies or the employers. As I discuss later in the chapter, in opposition to the individual logic of claim-making, workers and their families created networks of support to help each other navigate these systems as well as they could.

Even in cases where workers were able to get in touch with resource providers, they shared that the aid that they were offered fundamentally did not match their needs, such as accessing healthcare services and communicating with employers, particularly for those with limited English proficiency. As one worker explained: "We need interpreters, interpreters when we are on the phone with unemployment, with our supervisor, when we

⁵⁶ As I explained in the section before, James then had to face the fact that his employer refused to accommodate the after-effects of the illness.

are trying to ask for an extension of our leave because two weeks have gone by but we are still sick.” Several community advocates addressed this issue well. One explained:

I started talking to public officials and explained what workers were telling me, what they needed (basically one-on-one help to apply for benefits, information in their language, access to testing and benefits), and officials would say that certain organizations had received funds to provide aid and that they were in charge. But when workers would reach out to these organizations they couldn't get the right information, and then I asked, “Well, who is ensuring that these organizations are doing their jobs properly? What accountability is in place?”

Her statements highlight both the mismatch between workers' need and available support, and the lack of enforcement and accountability in place to oversee the results and efficacy of the emergency regulatory framework. This situation led many migrant workers to continue working even if they were ill. As a community organizer and advocate who works closely with the Karen community explained: “During all this COVID they were going to work when they were sick because it's easier to go to work for them than it is to navigate all the sick leave and all that kind of stuff, and even making the phone call to their supervisor, it's hard because he doesn't speak their language. So they just work through it.”

The neglect of social institutions also acted as a mechanism that indirectly coerced workers to continue working even if they suspected they were ill. Many explained that they were expected to pay their medical bills and get more testing to be able to prove they were sick to the employer and to the state, all while receiving no benefits. In a context in which many workers did not have health insurance and were without income, these requirements proved too onerous, and many times forced people to stay on the lines or return to work after failing to secure the necessary paperwork to remain at home. Mai explained these pressures:

So the coronavirus test was like \$300, the doctor \$200, \$300 lab work, I don't know what else they need? And the company's insurance is so expensive, so it takes so much money, so even if you get any benefits there will be only 100 bucks left, so it was a waste of time, so what are you going to do? Go to work even though you are sick.

A 2020 large-scale survey of immigrant workers in Washington State (Health Equity for Immigrants Campaign 2020) highlights how the lack of eligibility for certain benefits, the high cost of medical care, and the increased exposure due to the nature of their employment and their lack of workplace protections all work together to exacerbate health and well-being disparities for these workers. As they navigate the burden of obscure institutional benefits, workers find themselves racking up high costs, an experience not unfamiliar to those without affordable or accessible health insurance in the United States.

Other benefits that seemed to appear in the pandemic, but that workers could never successfully access, targeted assisting parents. Workers believed that if their jobs increased the potential of getting their high-risk children sick, they would have access to expanded federal and state COVID-19 benefits. Mu, who has a son with asthma and was very fearful of getting him sick, was told by both the employer and an immigrant aid organization that such benefits did not exist and that she had to return to work or she would be fired. She was never able to receive any support and went back to work.

Amanda, too, quickly inquired in April of 2020 about expanded access to unemployment because of the difficulties she was experiencing finding childcare for her four school-aged children. Ultimately, she could not understand the system or get any assistance applying, so when she ran out of paid time off, she had to return to work. A lack of consistent federal and state regulations and guidelines, and the phasing out of the provisions that existed during 2020, have translated into an increase in the discretion

afforded to employers in accommodating workers' needs when they or their dependents get sick. In other words, employers can decide if and when to implement any additional support, and in this industry few, if any, have done so.

While workers reported struggles accessing benefits at the beginning of the pandemic, their experience with COVID-19 was not short-term. Institutional responses to the pandemic proved to be short-term and refused to attend to the fact that COVID-19 became a chronic condition for some, now called "long COVID." For example, workers' compensation policy does not clearly indicate whether workers who contracted COVID-19 because of being required or compelled to continue working, and who now face chronic negative conditions, are able to get long-term support. To be sure, the workers' compensation system has already tried to get rid of long-term conditions by offloading these cases to disability insurance, so it is not surprising that long COVID is now considered a disability. While it is true that long COVID is debilitating, workers have had difficulty proving that their symptoms are a result of long COVID and have had subsequent difficulty getting either workers' compensation or disability insurance benefits. Moreover, as explained in Chapter 3, migrant workers are excluded from accessing disability insurance. Thus, while migrant workers were disproportionately exposed to COVID-19, increasing their chances of having long COVID,⁵⁷ they are, once more, systematically excluded from any recognition of the bodily harm they endured.

Pandemic Resistance

⁵⁷ Recent research has shown that contracting COVID-19 repeatedly, as many of the workers I interviewed did, increases the chances of developing long COVID (Al-Aly, Bowe, and Xie 2022).

Up to this point, I have shown how the bodily harm migrant workers already experienced in the food processing plants acquired new forms when the COVID-19 pandemic started. I discussed how the response of both employers and social institutions reinforced and expanded workers' disposability. While others have considered this situation and argued that the COVID-19 pandemic turned food processing plants into sacrificial spaces (Carrillo and Ipsen 2021), I hope to have demonstrated in Chapter 3 that these plants were already sacrificial spaces well before this global health crisis ensued.

In this section, I precisely discuss how, during the pandemic, the disregard for workers' bodies necessary to constitute the food processing industry as an endemic zone of sacrifice found a limit: the workers' own actions. The virus disrupted the industry's fantasy of the disembodied labor power by making its corporeality and vulnerability impossible to deny, no matter how hard management tried to hide the ongoing infections and deaths. Labor power has always been embodied, and now its bearers were getting sick. But most importantly, they were walking out from the lines.

A viral undoing of disembodiment

As the crisis unfolded, the work and social arrangements that had shaped conditions on the shop floor and beyond suffered a dislocation. The pandemic, while exacerbating some of the more harmful features of the organization of work in the plants, also made them more visible, and in some ways unsustainable.

If the workers' ongoing debilitation had been obscured by its daily, uneventful occurrence before the pandemic, the harm produced by the virus took the shape of an event, not only making the harm hard to ignore, but drastically accelerating its temporal horizon. In a matter of days workers would get seriously ill, and some would die. If the

pervasive and collective character of the industry's disregard for workers' bodily integrity had been obscured by a systematic refusal to acknowledge harm and an individualization of responsibility, the response to the virus revealed the workings of these mechanisms and exposed the harm in its immediate collective effects.

The very nature of the pandemic, the fluxes of contagion and illness that coronavirus produced, also exposed the artificial distinction that tends to frame the effects of the labor process over workers' bodies as pertaining only to the shop floor itself (their productivity, their capacity to work, etc.). This distinction is engrained in the very idea of labor power—namely, that there is such a thing as an abstract capacity to work that can be sold on its own, separately from the rest of your material, corporeal, and social life; that the effects of putting this capacity to work can remain contained to the working day; and that the one who sells this laboring capacity only exists upon arrival at the gates of the factory, and only as an isolated and unencumbered individual. In other words, labor power's fantasy is that the productive body does not rely on any other life-making activities or on other people to be able to come to work, or to be able to live a life worth living.

To be sure, this distinction between what workers' bodily experience on the shop floor and what those same bodies experience outside the shop floor has always been artificial: the harm and debilitation of workers' bodies has always impacted their life outside of the processing plants and their ability to care for others. It was always the very same concrete body going in and out of the labor process, carrying the marks of violence and accidents, the scars of injuries, the debilitating pain, the stress, the anxiety, and the fear produced on the shop floor at the same rate as the commodities. But now, the

urgency of the pandemic unmade key aspects of this artificial distinction. The broad and rapid spread of a virus shortened the temporal and spatial distance between the factory and the home, between production and reproduction, between the abstract bearer of labor power and the concrete laboring body. The effects of the organized disregard for workers' bodies now implied an almost immediate impact on their family life, or rather, on the very lives of their families. The certainty that going to work could mean a very concrete and close risk for them, the fear of bringing the virus back to their homes and to their loved ones, acted as one of the main catalysts for the walkouts and *huelgas* workers started in the first months of 2020.

In this way, the pandemic also altered the mechanisms that allowed workers to endure their daily exposure to risk and harm. If workers had been able to cope with the ongoing disregard for their bodily and emotional integrity by framing their debilitating work as an act of self-sacrifice *for* their families before the pandemic, during the pandemic their going into work suddenly took on the contrary meaning of sacrificing their families. The pandemic undid workers' *cruel optimism* when it exposed that what they had to do (endure violence, injury, and harm in the plants) in order to achieve their goal (to give their families the possibility of a better life in the future) would directly undermine the very possibility of that goal becoming true. Going into the plants could now directly harm and even kill the same people workers had been sacrificing themselves for. As Deborah Gould argues—in her study of social movements that emerged from a different and previous pandemic, the HIV/AIDS crisis—the affective states of the body “can shake one out of deeply grooved patterns of thinking and feeling and allow for new imaginings” (2009:27). The way in which the COVID-19 pandemic affected workers

bodies produced, indeed, a new *affective state* that shook the emotional narratives of sacrifice which had previously sustained them through their endemic precarity.

The viral unraveling of previous emotional arrangements appears over and over in the interviews I conducted and in the written complaints made by the workers. In my conversation with Claribel, she returned again and again to the elements that appear in the quote that opened this chapter, each time providing another layer of the complex context that mobilized workers to action after many years of quiescence:

It happened when people started getting sick with COVID, and we were all saying “This can’t be, they are not giving us any protection, they are not letting us know if people are sick or if you have been exposed, they are not giving us any extra pay for the risk, this can’t be.” So we started organizing and decided to walk out on strike, and I was like, “Let’s do this!” Because I was very affected by it, I was really afraid of getting sick and bringing it home to my daughters, and I am diabetic, so the risk of becoming very ill was higher, and I am a single mom, I need to be able to support my family. We felt it was enough. I walked out with my *compañeros* and that very first day, 99 percent of the night shift walked out.

While employers continued to operate with the same disregard for workers’ bodily integrity that they had shown before, the pandemic altered the effects of their actions, resulting in responses by the workers that they did not anticipate. In the following section I explore in detail some of the direct acts of resistance the workers I interviewed engaged in.

The body walks out

Workers were afraid. Sure, they had been afraid before: fearing the always likely accident, the violent screams of the managers, and the unrequited comments of the supervisors, or fearing that the next time the babysitter had issues they would get the final ‘point’ that would translate into being terminated from their jobs. But this time, the fear was different. This time, when managers and supervisors approached them, workers were

not thinking about whether they would yell at them; they were thinking that the supervisor had been coughing close to them, and that they did not have anything with which to protect themselves. This time, instead of asking leads to slow down the pace of the line, workers were asking to organize the space differently so they could maintain distance from each other. This time, workers had asked management for protective gear not to avoid slipping on the wet floors, but to reduce their risk of contracting a highly contagious and dangerous virus. This time, workers were not just afraid for themselves and for their bodies; they were afraid for their families.

Yet even as the context changed with the spread of the virus, management replied to workers' requests in the same way they had done before, refusing to acknowledge the risk and harm workers were facing. This time around, however, the managerial disregard for workers' bodily integrity produced different results. It was precisely the employers' refusal to provide protective gear, added to their denial of—or their failure to take any responsibility for—the existence of COVID-19 cases among the workers, and their inability to recognize the additional risk that was present at the plants, that contributed to a breaking moment where workers in many companies decided to walk out from the lines.

Fearing contagion, and tired of management's disregard, Claribel and her coworkers walked out of their jobs at a fruit packing company in May 2020; soon after, workers from six other nearby plants joined them. The workers remained outside for almost a month, unwilling to continue putting themselves at risk, unwilling to sacrifice their families for profit. Claribel explained:

We were all saying the same, we were all suffering the same things, it's just a pattern that repeats in every packing plant, the exploitation, the misery wages, the lack of protection, the lack of respect for the required social distancing, the lack of recognition of our risk, the denial of hazard pay. We were all walking out demanding the same things.

Felicia, who was employed at a different plant than Claribel, shared her experience as a the only line lead⁵⁸ in her company who decided to walk out with the rest of the workers:

We have been living with fear for so long, accepting the mistreatment, the abuse, the humiliation, the pain, the poverty wages, and we were exhausted. And while we were afraid before, when people started testing positive for COVID and we didn't have any masks, and the company wasn't saying or doing anything, and we didn't know if we had been exposed, we started talking about walking out.

Most of the workers shared similar sentiments and reasons for walking out of the plants. These included the fear of the illness or of bringing the virus home, and anger at the continuation of employers' disregard for their safety or at their refusal to implement any policies that would help prevent the spread of the virus. But workers also mentioned conditions that were already part of their endemic precarity before the pandemic as reasons for the walkouts. The pandemic meant the confirmation of what they had been experiencing before, albeit in a different and more urgent way. Before the pandemic, workers experienced bodily debilitation throughout the years, in a diffuse way; when accidents happened, they were understood as individual, isolated cases. What the virus did was intensify the built-in risk and accelerate the production of harm, making the already-existing practices of neglect for workers' well-being impossible to ignore.

Sabrina, who works at another fruit processing company where workers walked out, also shared her reasons for participating:

⁵⁸ Line leads are usually workers with some supervisory roles.

I was really scared. The managers were not coming in anymore. They didn't let us know anything about the people that were starting to disappear. Because that is how it felt, people were just missing from the lines and we didn't know what had happened to them. They didn't want to stop the line, not even for one day, they didn't change any of their production spaces because the apples were really expensive at that time and that's all they care about. It made us feel like we didn't matter. It was just the money. We didn't matter as humans, it didn't matter what happened to us. They didn't want to even speak about it. And for that, we decided to go on strike.

Now, workers were all being simultaneously and visibly impacted by management's disregard, and many were mysteriously missing from the lines. The remaining workers could not get management to tell them what was going on, and they were expected to continue working as if nothing had happened, without ever stopping the lines. Gustavo, who works at a vegetable processing plant, highlighted the lack of recognition by the managers of the danger and risk the workers were facing:

We were all thinking we could make our families sick, and we were all coming to work afraid, feeling the danger, you know? And I think that coupled with the lack of recognition for the danger we were in, the risk we were assuming, that we were suffering too, I think that made people walk out.

Sebastián, who helped organize the walkout at the vegetable processing plant where

Gustavo also worked, further explained:

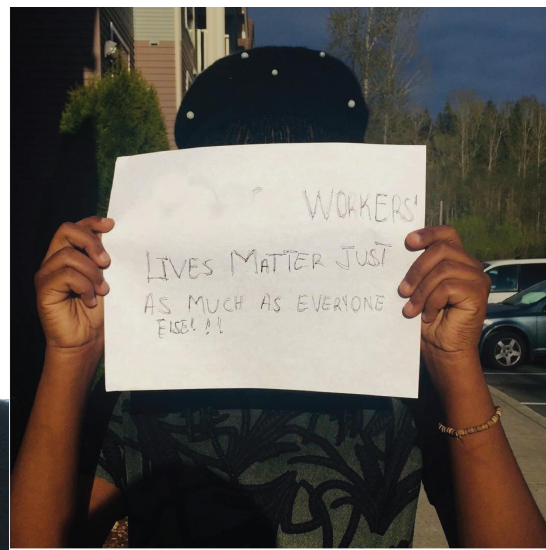
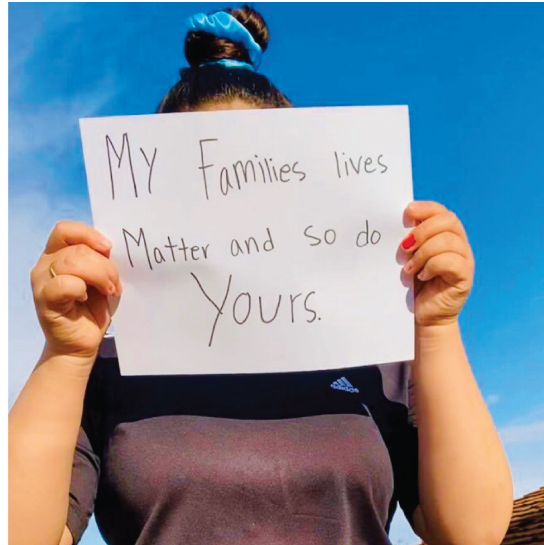
People had been saying for days they were afraid, there were outbreaks on other plants of the same company, and a lot of people were sick, and the company wasn't doing anything to stop the spread. People realized then that the company wasn't going to do anything to prevent an outbreak. The managers wouldn't hear us, so we had to find another way of making ourselves heard, to force them to notice us, to listen to us. When the pandemic started they wouldn't give us any protection, wouldn't follow any of the CDC recommendations, no masks, no distance, nothing. We told them we were afraid because we have families at home and we didn't want to go back and infect our children, our grandparents, our family members who are high risk or disabled. We asked the manager to help us, and he did nothing. So we thought we needed to do something, and decided to walk out, to stop the production. The whole production shift walked out, 100 of us.

When managers refused to stop the lines to protect them, workers decided to do it themselves. By walking out, by going on a *huelga*, they took necessary safety measures

to stop the virus in their own hands. A worker in an LNI complaint explains the protective logic behind the actions: “I thought it was necessary to raise my voice and protect my coworkers and my family from this virus.”

In another case, it was the workers’ families themselves that took action to protect their relatives. Very early in the pandemic, it became clear to many family members of meatpacking workers that the virus was quickly spreading at the plant where they worked. In a plant with a complicated labor history, a powerful employer, and a very diverse workforce, relatives felt their family members had an uphill battle to gain any protections, and that at that point, just adding safety measures would not be enough.⁵⁹ After observing the outbreaks at other, similar plants, they felt that what was needed was to shut down the plant and conduct massive testing. Family members then reached out to unions, faith organizations, and community organizers and started a public campaign to bring attention to the situation and to shut down the plant. Writing a petition that received over 6,000 signatures in a matter of days, calling elected officials, and writing op-eds for the local newspapers, this group consisting of ‘friends and family’ of the workers was able to shut down the plant.

⁵⁹ This plant was unionized until 2006, when it was decertified. It became unionized again in 2013, only to lose representation again in 2017 (Apostolidis 2010). According to workers and organizers, over 11 languages are spoken at the plant.

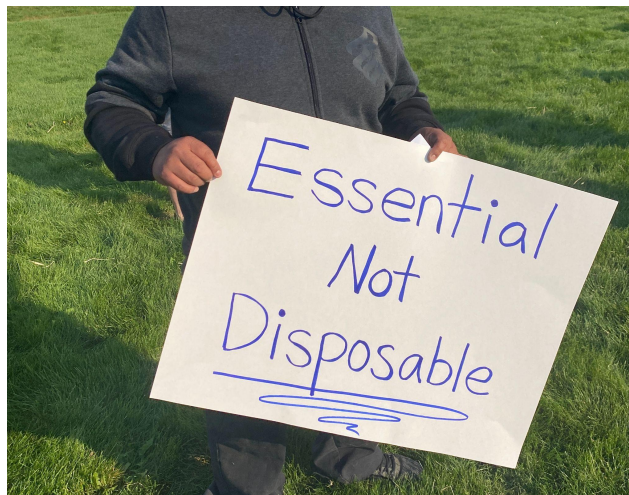


Picture 5,6,and 7: Karen youth display signs created as part of the campaign to shut down the meatpacking plant. April 2020. Pictures by Angel Tinnin.

If, before the pandemic, workers’ caregiving responsibilities had many times compelled workers—particularly single moms—to show up to work day after day regardless of pain, injuries, or sickness, those same responsibilities now urged them to walk out of the plants. Or, as in the case of the meatpacking plant, it was the workers’ dependents who intervened on their behalf to put unsafe work to a halt. An LNI complaint clearly outlines the need to protect others as the reason behind the walkouts: “I’m scared to get home and

take the virus to my children. That is why I went out to protest.” Another complaint states: “Due to Covid 19 I feel insecure because I have two children with special needs. I have one with a respirator, his health is poor, and I am afraid of getting them from Covid 19, since at work I do not have enough protection. So, I am participating in the strike.” The strikers demanded protection because without it they could not only get sick themselves but also make their children, their partners, or their parents ill.

Fear for their families’ lives and overall well-being was also a key aspect of the way in which workers both challenged and mobilized in their favor the name that was written, to use Vuong’s word, in their leash: “essential.” Workers juxtaposed the discourse on essentiality, suddenly marking them socially necessary, with their lived experience of disposability. Highlighting their daily experience of harm at the plants, workers inverted the social burden put on their shoulders by claiming that if anywhere, it was in their homes and with their families that they were essential. This appears very clearly in Angie’s words: “I kept telling people, in our houses, we are essential. Here [at the plants] we are replaceable.”



Picture 8: Worker holds sign that reads 'Essential not disposable.' Rally in Pasco, WA. October 2020. Photo by the author.

While the framing of ‘essential work’ justified the uneven distribution of risk during the Covid-19 pandemic—and in many ways left migrant food processing workers excluded from public recognition—through their own actions they reclaimed this notion to legitimize their struggles. When employers and government mobilized notions of essentiality to force these workers to stay on the job, in a continuation of their disregard for the workers’ bodily integrity, they also exposed the contradiction between the system’s dependence on the labor of racialized migrant populations and their disposability in the form of ongoing debilitation and harm both in and beyond the workplace. Workers were able to protest precisely because they had been forced to bear the costs of the crisis in a disproportionate way. Raoul, who also participated in the same walkout as Sebastián, shared at a community meeting how the discourse of essentiality contrasted with the experience they were having at the plants, and how it contributed to mobilizing him and his coworkers:

We all didn’t like how we were being treated, we were called essential workers but didn’t feel like it ... during this whole pandemic, COVID hit us pretty hard ... especially my family. My cousin passed away from COVID, and now my mom is very sick. People in my department were getting sick left and right, and the managers, instead of saying they were sick, just said people were on vacation. That is when I realized the company is all about their bottom line, not about the workers. They treated us like crap. They didn’t care.

The discourse of essentiality served, then, to more openly display the disposability workers were facing. This was exposed even further by the companies’ treatment of workers who got ill at the plants and died. Workers found out through rumors, friends, family, or the news. This lack of acknowledgement was felt as an affirmation that the workers’ lives did not matter. Through these actions, their lives were treated as *ungrievable* (Allison 2013; Butler 2009; Millar 2018). The workers’ premature death

from COVID-19, a new consequence of management's treatment of workers as disposable, produced a strong reaction in the workers.

Angie told me:

The company, they don't care. Mister David Cruz died. They never said, "Fellows, those of you who would like to go to the wake can do so and we won't penalize you," or at least say "this day will be the wake of mister David Cruz." Nothing, zero. I mean, they acted as nothing had happened. Did a glass break? It's nothing.

In the midst of the health crisis, management's inability to recognize the embodied character of labor power—its refusal to understand that workers are people with bodies that get sick, that feel fear, that have families they care for, that have lives worth grieving—did not succeed in controlling workers but in fact proved to have the opposite effect. Instead, it spurred a wave of labor unrest that had not been seen in the area or the sector in many years. As Ramon, a lead organizer of a farmworker independent union that came down to support the Yakima workers, shared with me: "We hadn't seen something like this in so long, and in a way it even brought back together many former organizers, old activists, that were still here but dormant ... it brought back excitement and possibility of change like we hadn't seen in a long time." And workers were walking out not only in these plants, but all over the country. In March 2020, 50 workers walked out of a poultry plant in Georgia and went on wildcat strike. In April, workers in another poultry plant in Minnesota did the same, as well as workers at a pork plant in Nebraska. In May, poultry workers in North Carolina walked out. These walkouts continued during 2020 in different plants across the U.S.

Neoliberal and white supremacist discourses continued to blame workers' individual choices or 'culture' for outbreaks in the industry, or to cast the seriousness of infections as the result of conditions specific to certain bodies—'co-morbidities' were to

blame for the death counts among Latinx and Black workers, not their working and living conditions (McClure et al. 2020; Saitone, Aleks Schaefer, and Scheitrum 2021). If anything, it was workers' autonomous and collective actions of resistance that served to slow down the spread of the virus, and that helped to minimize the damage caused by the continuation of employers' and government's disregard for migrant workers' bodily integrity. The fact that their own actions had protected them, and their families was not lost on the workers, who shared how being able to walk out of the plants had important impacts on their physical and emotional well-being. Walking out of the plants not only meant protecting their bodies, but also implied the construction of an affective environment completely different from the one they experienced daily at the plants.

Workers discussed going from feeling disposable to feeling strong, beautiful, energized, and excited. Felicia shared:

It was like night and day. I think you don't know anything about courage if you have never gone on strike. When we went out I was so anxious, so afraid, and there was so much going on here in Yakima with all the other strikes, and we all stood together and supported each other. It was something beautiful.

Similarly, Stacey, a 22-year-old fruit packing worker, told me:

It felt so good to do it. It felt so good to know people were supporting each other and had the same goals. We make money for the managers and company owners all the time and they do nothing for us, to help us, and we did it, for ourselves. It felt so good.

Workers' emotional disposition was radically transformed by their ability to move away from the lines, to exercise their collective power. Rita said:

I felt so much dread before, felt so depressed, but now I feel strong, and I have never felt this strong, I want you to know. I mean, it's something beautiful truly because you believe in what you are doing and why you are doing it, and that makes you feel strong.

In the next section I discuss how, when workers went on strike, it was not only to protect themselves and improve their working conditions. These were also initial moments of community building that would lead to the creation of spaces of collective care—spaces for helping each other mourn, learn, cook, provide PPE, and help each other navigate the fragmented benefit system to try to access direct support.

Building Collective Care

As the pandemic unfolded, the disregard for workers' bodies found a limit in the workers' and their families' own actions, as they walked out or organized to shut down the plants. Once outside the plants, workers moved beyond just rejecting the crude disposability they were facing and engaged in more expansive forms of political action. In this section I discuss the different ways in which workers countered the harm and violence they experienced inside the plants with the construction of spaces of collective care.

One of the actions that was repeated by workers in many companies was the erection of *altares de muertos*. These were spaces to grieve and mourn their coworkers, friends, and family members who had died due to COVID-19. This action directly addressed the way in which companies had erased the deaths of workers. Instead of sitting with the silence that had come from management, instead of allowing them to affirm the uneventful nature of these workers' deaths, the *ungrievability* of their lives, workers took it upon themselves to turn these deaths not only into political events, but also into spaces in which they could process the grief they were feeling as a community.

Workers reclaimed spaces outside the plants, put up pictures of their coworkers, brought candles and flowers, and spent time together making the deaths of their peers visible and grievable. They invited their families, and talked about those who were gone, usually opening the space for workers to share about anyone they had lost to the virus, not only their coworkers.

Similar to the acts of self-care workers had in place to cope with their bodily pain, these acts of collective grief and mourning allowed them to cope and with process the emotional pain they were experiencing. But in this case, their actions went further than just being a coping mechanism or an individual way of saying that their bodies did matter. By building altars and gathering in front of them, by making the lives of their lost coworkers deserving of grief, workers were publicly and collectively saying that they mattered.

Workers also pulled together resources to pay for funeral and burial expenses, and prepared meals for the families of those who had lost someone. These initial actions allowed workers to extend the same logic of collective care to other needs they were facing. Angie explained: “We realized we could help each other when someone was sick, or if they had suffered an injury, that we could bring each other food, help each other with childcare, and collect money to help each other buy medicine.”



*Picture 9: An altar outside of a fruit processing plant in Yakima, WA. November 2020.
Photo by Edgar Franks.*

But workers did not gather just to mourn. While they were outside of the plants, many of the fruit packing workers spent their days talking to each other, learning about the area, the packing plants, and other struggles that had happened before. Outside of the plants, without the rush of production, the noise of the machines, and the controlling gaze of the managers, workers were able to make time for telling each other their stories, for sharing what they knew about the ongoing situation, and for piecing together the fragments of broader histories in the plants.

Stacey explained that by talking to her more senior coworkers and workers in other companies on strike, she learned about how there had been a big push to unionize the fruit packing houses in the 1990s.⁶⁰ Claribel had been there. She was young and did not have authorization to work in the U.S. When she was fired soon after the unionization drive, her manager said it was because the union had won and did not allow workers like her. She spent 23 years thinking the union had gotten her fired, until the 2020 *huelgas*, when she met other folks who had been involved in the union campaign. Claribel says that when she started chatting with one of them:

I told her what had happened to me and she said, “The manager lied to you, the union lost by two votes.” She explained that precisely because of that, management had fired the majority of the workers, to avoid another close election. Suddenly it all made so much more sense.

When I was talking to Felicia, she got emotional while sharing that during the strikes she was able to learn about the Bracero program, and the connections her family had to it:

While we were out on the *huelga* I started reading things about migrant workers, about our history, and I started reading about the Bracero program. And growing up I knew my grandfather had done it, but I didn’t know what it meant. I started reading and realized it wasn’t what I thought [she starts crying]. It gave me so much *coraje*, so much frustration, impotence, and I called my dad and asked him “Pa, why didn’t you tell me what it meant to be a bracero?” and he said, “I didn’t want you to feel bad.” That is how I learned what my grandfather, and my dad as well, had gone through, and it really hurts. I might not be able to do anything for them, but I don’t want my son to live through anything like that.

Gathering outside of the shop floor, workers were able to discuss their current conditions while reflecting on how their actions were part of a longer history of migrant

⁶⁰ Starting in 1996, UFW attempted to organize fruit packing workers in the Yakima Valley. The drives were met with intense union-busting and ultimately were not successful. The industry remains majority non-union in the region (Mapes 2001; NW Labor Press 1997).

workers' struggles for better working and living conditions. The *huelgas* became spaces for learning and for rebuilding these histories of struggle.

Further, outside of the plants, the workers who walked out in 2020 were no longer as invisible to other political actors in their towns. They were making themselves heard, and their actions elicited a growing solidarity. Representatives from community and labor organizations, lawyers, activists, academic researchers, and journalists joined the workers and contributed to the ongoing conversation ignited by their decision to go on strike. As a result of this convergence, the *huelgas* also became spaces to learn about and discuss workers' rights, or a place to gain an impromptu grassroots labor education. Referring to this process, Angie says: "Thanks to the strike I'm not the same *mensa* as before (laughs). I'm not the same fool, so they are screwed. Now that I got some education, I know more. Before I would let them have their way, I was more afraid. Not anymore."

At the same time, workers continued trying to reach out to organizations like OSHA to try to get employers to improve the safety inside the plants. Many of the complaints filed with Washington LNI during 2020 were written collectively, while the workers were out on strike. Workers knew that the risk they were experiencing was tied to a systematic disregard for their bodies. They knew that it was not an individual problem, that it was not the responsibility of one worker. They wanted to talk to the representatives of the agencies directly, and to show them what it was like to work at the plants. But the institutions had no mechanisms to talk to them collectively. A complaint filed in early May reads: "70 workers are on strike and are picketing from 4:00 am – 8:00 pm, employees want someone from LNI to go talk to them to hear the truth about how they are being treated."

According to the workers, the agency did not show up. So they decided to sit down and write, with pen and paper, individual complaints about their working conditions. This collective writing of individual complaints inundated state officials, prompting inspections in some of the plants.

The written complaints make it clear that the pandemic provided an opportunity for workers to re-articulate the disregard, the violence, and the harm they had been experiencing long before the virus. While most of the complaints mention the fear of COVID-19 infection, the lack of PPE, and the need for pandemic-related safety measures, most of them also provide a long list of ongoing issues in the plants: the poor working conditions, the hazards and risks on the lines, the stories of work-related injuries and accidents, and the incidents of violence and mistreatment by the employers. In sum, these complaints describe what I called in the previous chapter the built-in and organized production of bodily and emotional harm that predated the pandemic.

While I have analytically separated the conditions that exceeded the pandemic context into two different chapters, it is important to note that in their complaints, and in the interviews, workers made a conscious effort to highlight the continuities between what they were experiencing in the pandemic and the endemic precarity they had already faced before the pandemic. From Angie telling the journalist “Enough with Covid!”—as I discussed in the previous chapter—to the majority of the workers I interviewed insisting on discussing the daily violence they always faced in the plants, workers detailed the ways in which their bodies were systematically disregarded. Workers took the narrative of the pandemic in their own hands and used the attention it had generated to illuminate

what they had been experiencing for years. Neither the previous chapter of this dissertation nor this one can be understood outside of this purposeful effort.

Me preocupa mi salud porque me preocupa enfermarme y enfermar a mi familia

Me estresa venir a trabajar, porque se nos amenaza con que si no te gusta lo que te digo ahí esta la puerta te puedes ir.

me siento insegura por el virus
A veces me siento intimidada
No puedo dormir bien de tantos gritos
Cuando me contrataron nunca me informaron de los químicos

NO HAY IAPETES

Y mi salud mental esta en riesgo debido al estrés laboral he sido discriminada por el tono de voz por los supervisores y yo me sali a la huelga por temor a contagiarme del covid-19 por que soy hipertensa y no se nos estaba informando a (Alta presión) cerca de eso

9. Ubicación del riesgo. Especifique el edificio o el lugar de trabajo y los turnos donde está ocurriendo el supuesto riesgo.

- 5.- No nos dan equipo de protección y si no lo dan no lo cobran.
- 6.- En el tiempo del covid-19 no nos proporcionan equipo de protección personal. PPE
- 7.- Tengo estrés laboral, no tengo ganas de entrar a trabajar, tengo miedo a mi supervisora.
- 8.- Yo me sali a huelga porque tenia temor de infectarme de covid-19, porque no nos proporcionan equipo de protección personal.

tengo estrés para trabajar
tengo estrés para dormir
tengo estre para todo

Debido al covid 19 si me siento inseguro
Por que tengo 2 hijos especiales
a uno lo tengo con un respirador tiene
su salud debil y tengo miedo de conta-
gialos de covid 19 ya que en el trabajo
No tengo suficiente proteccion
Por eso estoy participando en la huelga

Pictures 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15: Claims filed to LNI, DOSH WA by workers at different companies from March to December 2020. The complaints have been translated and incorporated into Chapters 3 and 4.

In the plants that did not have walkouts, forms of collective care also emerged, particularly in relation to navigating social institutions, regulations, and relief benefits. As more and more workers became sick, Whatsapp and Facebook groups were created for workers and their families to share information and help each other. Workers were trying to collectively figure out how to keep each other safe, how to get PPE, how to access benefits that would allow them to stay home from work, and what to do if they found out they were ill.

José shared that he and other workers created a Facebook group because the company wasn't telling them anything, and people were afraid of talking about it while at work. During the first months of the pandemic, this and other groups were central organizing spaces where workers were able to speak about how they felt, share their fears and anxieties, and comfort each other. Sharing information also helped workers navigate the complex and fragmented institutional system that was meant to provide support—a system that, as I discussed earlier in this chapter, failed to help workers before and during

the crisis. But if they were to have any chance at succeeding in getting a workers' compensation claim through, or in getting temporary disability, workers needed each other. They realized they could not navigate the system individually.

For the workers who did not speak English or Spanish, the situation was even more dire given the limited information in their language and given the lack of translators available. To address this problem, it was the younger, bilingual workers who started to host 'benefits clinics' with the help of other community organizers. They would get on Zoom and try to help several workers at once communicate with their supervisor or help them write a letter to H.R. or file a claim for a public benefit.

Mai, James's wife, explains how those who were bilingual worked together to help the workers who were sick and who were having issues communicating with their employer. Paw, who is 19 and works in sanitation at the meatpacking plant, also participated with his friends. Along with community organizers, they drafted pamphlets to inform workers about safety precautions in their own language and created materials that were accessible to workers with literacy limitations. They would drive around the town and drop them off at the houses of Karen workers they knew. While these workers were not able to walk out of their jobs, the spaces they created served to help each other through an unprecedented crisis and, for the first time in several years, brought hopes of collective organizing in a company known for its violent union-busting.

This kind of effort to ensure accessibility for all workers extended also to technological barriers. Younger workers opened email accounts for the older workers who did not have them, and took turns following up on the workers' cases, since many of them were not in the practice of checking their emails frequently.

Workers' actions did not end with the *huelgas* and the efforts of collective care built around them. In the months that followed, workers continued organizing in different ways. In some cases, they reached out to already-existing unions to start campaigns to win representation in their workplace. This was the case for the striking workers at the vegetable plant, like Sebastián, Gustavo, and Tina. They organized for months until they were able to unanimously vote to have a union.

The fruit packing workers continued organizing as an independent organization and continued strengthening the communities of care that had formed during the strikes. Many of the walkouts and actions during the *huelgas* had been led by women. It was the women who sustained the strikes, and then made efforts to build organizations and spaces that would outlive those initial moments of more spontaneous and urgent collective action. To them, the COVID-19 crisis was just another layer, a crisis that only made sense in relation to pre-existing and co-existing crises: the crisis of care, the crisis of time, and the endemic precarity they faced (Branicki 2022). In order to effectively act on those crises, they needed to create spaces that were theirs, and that remained after the virus had passed. The workers decided to rent a small room in a building in central Yakima to be able to host meetings, labor workshops, and events like vaccine clinics.

In the winter of 2021, I went to Yakima a few times to help in some of the vaccine clinics these workers organized. Unsurprisingly, the companies had not attempted to host any vaccination events, nor were they informing workers about vaccines. Once more, workers acted together to protect their bodies, their families, and their community. They reached out to the local health office and to other organizations and used the parking lot of the building where they had rented the office to hold vaccine clinics specifically

geared toward packing workers. But these clinics were more than just a place to get a COVID-19 vaccine. These were spaces of broader political action and collective care. Workers had contacted different organizations to provide other needed resources, from grocery store gift cards to masks, sanitizer, face shields, and any other form of PPE they could find.

These clinics were community events; they offered free food, and local DJs played music in the back, where people waited after getting their shot. Workers offered information about labor rights and unionization. They brought their families along with them, and they all worked together to create packets with PPE to give out to community members, making sure the event ran smoothly. The women who had led the strikes worked alongside their daughters, preparing materials, and talking to people who joined the event.

The communities workers built did not just include other packing workers, but expanded to include migrant workers in other sectors and their families. Importantly, no documents were required to access anything that was offered, and everyone spoke Spanish. In this way, these organizers are evoking what precarious organizers in Spain have dubbed '*cuidadania*,' or building forms of belonging based on care (*cuidado*) and not citizenship (*ciudadanía*) (Sargsyan 2019).

Workers' collective action moved beyond the factory to show a network of affective experiences that shaped the actions of the worker, moving us to think about new ways in which community building and workplace organizing re-appear during a global crisis. To conclude this dissertation in the next chapter, I discuss some of the main insights emerging from the food processing workers' responses to COVID-19, while also

thinking through the challenges they faced as the eventful and urgent character of the pandemic waned down and its inherent risks and dangers became normalized.

5. REFLECTING ON EMBODIED STRUGGLES AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

“Epidemics put pressure on the societies they strike. This strain makes visible latent structures that might not otherwise be evident. As a result, epidemics provide a sampling device for social analysis. They reveal what really matters to a population and whom they truly value.”(Jones 2020)

I began this dissertation by posing three questions in relation to how precarity is inscribed and felt in workers’ bodies, I wondered about the ways in which migrant workers’ bodies *are made to not matter*, how certain marks of their bodies *do matter* to construct them as disposable and, how workers have struggled to *make their bodies matter*. Throughout the chapters I answered these questions by following workers’ call to redirect our attention from the conditions in the pandemic, back to their previous and ongoing experiences in the industry.

In Chapter III I showed how food processing migrant workers' bodies *do not matter* as a defining aspect of what I called *endemic precarity*. How, already made vulnerable by the border, as discussed in Chapter II, their bodies were injured by design in the plants, harmed by the organization of the labor process, damaged and disregarded by management’s despotic control and neglected by social institutions long before the COVID-19 pandemic. In Chapter IV, I specifically dealt with government and employers’ actions during the global health crisis and how this deepened the already existing organized disregard for migrant food processing workers’ bodies.

Discussing the effects of this endemic precarity on worker’s bodies, In Chapter III I underscored how the harm produced in the industry at the same rate as food products, is not only constituted by serious injuries resulting from work-related accidents but also by

everyday strenuous and repetitive tasks done at a fast pace and which result in chronic conditions or illnesses; by an active denial of bodily needs, processes and special conditions -from basic physiological needs and common illnesses to pregnancies; by emotional violence and stress; and by the broader unrecognition of the time worker's need to take care of themselves and of others outside of work. The sum of this constitutes what I called, following Puar, an ongoing debilitation of workers' bodies that does not always take the form of an event and appears in the repetitive instances of daily disregard from both employers and society at large.

I further argued that the chronic nature of workplace harm and cumulative injuries enables employers to transfer blame from the workplace to individual workers' actions, invisibilizing workers' ongoing debilitation. I underlined how this is reproduced by the opaque and fragmented social institutions that can only register workers' harm as long as it takes the form of an individual, isolated serious injury –and even then, only in limited ways– and that during the pandemic utterly failed to protect workers from contagion, illness and death in any way. As shown in Chapter IV, the COVID-19 pandemic both exacerbated the hazards inherent in endemic precarity and created a crisis event that unsettled employers' ability to deny chronic harms and injuries. Still, employers and the state continued to attempt to deny culpability or direct connections between hazardous working conditions and illness.

I also discussed how workers' *bodies do matter* for the industry in a different but related sense: how this endemic disregard for worker's bodies is not indifferent to their positionality and how this became mobilized in the warmongering language of essential work during the pandemic.

In Chapter II, I described how the food processing industry relies on this particularly vulnerable workforce for their business model and profits. It is migrant workers' permanent liminality and their marking by systems of racialized and gendered oppression, dispossession, and exploitation, what constructs them as *disposable*: an available workforce constrained to endure precarious and dangerous employment in highly racialized and segregated job markets. In this sense, in Chapter III, I analyzed how the gendered job segregation in the shopfloor and how managements' control over the labor process (re)produces gendered and racialized ideas of capacity inside the shopfloors.

The industry, far from being indifferent to migrant workers' race and gender, relies on these differences to make certain bodies available for injury and maiming in the workplace. How these racialized and gendered differences *do matter* underpins the indifference towards workers' bodies and lives that is endemic to the industry. In Chapter IV, I show how during the pandemic, this meant bigger risks of infection and even premature death for migrant workers in the industry. At the same time, the framing of the health crisis as a war against the coronavirus served to justify the maiming and killing of these racialized vulnerable workers, constructing them as *essentially disposable*.

Finally, I analyzed how workers themselves *make their own bodies matter* as objects of care. In Chapter III, I described how workers engage in individual activities of bodily care and attempt to help each other manage the emotional impacts of the violence they endure in the plants daily. Despite these forms of self-care and care for others, I discussed how, facing systematic harm, many workers set aside the worry for their bodily integrity and wellbeing by framing it as a *sacrifice* for their families. These narratives -

that can be thought, following Berlant, as forms of cruel optimism- displace the promise of a better life towards others and the future as a way of coping with present and quotidian pain and harm. However, in Chapter IV, I argued that the pandemic disrupted workers' coping narratives, and unraveled the emotional arrangements that sustained this form of cruel optimism. In the face of a very contagious and deadly virus, enduring dangerous work became not a sacrifice *for* their loved ones but the very possibility of sacrificing *them*. This unraveling opened the space for workers' active resistance, producing a series of walk-outs and strikes in the food processing industry, efforts to organize forms of collective grief and care during the pandemic, and unionizing drives in some of the plants.

In the following pages I discuss the limitations of this work, future directions of inquiry, and offer reflections and criticisms that have emerged from my experience alongside migrant workers fighting back against precarity during a pandemic.

Limitations

A number of limitations need to be noted regarding the present study.

First, while the methodological approach taken to conduct this research allowed me to get an overview of the working conditions migrant workers face in the food industry in the Pacific Northwest, it also meant that I was unable to have a detailed observation and analysis of one worksite. This lack of specific case studies reduced my ability to make more concrete claims about the modes of labor control at play in the workplace. The food industry is made up of very different sub sectors, with distinct labor processes, and that rely on a wide variety of raw materials. This implies that in some cases, workers interact with dead animals, and in others with fruit and vegetables. It also

means that in some cases they operate sharp tools and in others they do not. Moreover, these subsectors have different characteristics in terms of sector concentration, size of the companies, and overall profits. For example, meatpacking in the U.S. is highly concentrated, with few large corporations producing the majority of the meat in the country. Fruit processing and packing, while the leading sector in some of the geographical areas I studied, is less concentrated, and companies overall are smaller in size. Levels of automation are also different across companies, depending on the size and investment of the company in question. Since I had no restrictions on the size of the companies, some of the workers were employed in very large factories, and others in significantly smaller ones (ranging from 100 to 1500 workers). Workers' experiences are undoubtedly impacted by these differences but given the small number of workers in each subsector, it proved difficult to make systematic comparisons between them, or between employers. While none of the companies where interviewees were employed was unionized—one became unionized as I was doing the research—the plants had different histories of labor struggle which were also indirectly impacting workers' experiences and actions.

Second, unlike other workplace analyses, I was not able to do a classic ethnography by being employed at a plant due to my own visa status. I had expected to be able to visit facilities to gather firsthand data, but the pandemic made this impossible. I then resorted to watching institutional and promotional videos of the companies in which they show their production process, the facilities, and speak to the products they make. While watching these videos proved to be very instructional, this research is nonetheless limited by my inability to work or be inside the plants.

Third, while my original methodological design included in-depth interviews and ‘emotions diaries’ to capture both retrospective and daily data, this was not possible. In the emotionally taxing context of the pandemic, I decided to not pursue the emotions diaries in an effort to minimize the burden of participating in the research for the interviewees. This meant that the in-depth interviews included both retrospective accounts of workers' migratory and employment histories, and their present working conditions. Furthermore, many of the interviews were conducted after July 2020, which meant that the accounts of what happened during those first months were also retrospective. Retrospective data can carry certain biases and inconsistencies and scholars have pointed out the extra challenges of this type of inquiry during the pandemic, particularly due to the fast fluctuating situation during the first months (Hipp et al. 2020). Yet, scholars have also found a high level of consistency at the aggregate level, which I believe to be true of my sample as well.

Fourth, when conducting this research, I made the conscious choice of recruiting workers who were part of collective organizing actions and struggles in their workplace. While I believe this to be a particular strength of the data and the overall project, I am also aware that the information collected and reflected in this work is directly impacted by this choice.

Finally, it is unfortunate that I was unable to include more workers from other ethnic and racial backgrounds in the sample. While Latinx and Spanish speaking workers constitute most of the workforce in the industry in the Pacific northwest, it is important to remember that the food processing industry is particularly multi-ethnic, with a workforce coming from different parts of the world and speaking different languages. I had

difficulty reaching workers who were not Latinx, and this is reflected in my final sample. Even as I was able to interview a small subsample of Karen speaking workers, language barriers contributed here to limit my ability to create rapport during the interview process. What is more, the small n size of this sample also limited my ability to significantly explore racial dynamics on the shopfloor. The lack of representation of the multi-ethnic workforce composition is a common issue to much of the recent scholarship on the industry, which has also focused on the experiences of Latinx workers. Further research should strive to recruit multi-ethnic samples, and more directly engage with the populations that have been less studied.

Further research: migrant workers, embodied disability

Given the unpredictable nature of the pandemic, and with it, of the unfolding of this project, while on the field it became challenging to know what to ask workers, and with what level of detail. I chose a broader, more open approach that asked many questions about their experiences, but this meant a trade off with the level of detail I had on some of the aspects of their working and living experiences. Moreover, the fact I rely on a grounded theory approach meant that I ended up pursuing emerging themes that were not necessarily the main focus of my questions. For example, while I included questions on accidents and injuries in the workplace –since that had been an emerging theme in my previous research– and included questions on public benefits, I failed to ask workers more systematically about their access to disability insurance and also their notions of capacity, incapacity, disability, etc. As the interplay between bodily harm, access to workers compensation, health and disability insurance became more prominent in my analysis, I realized a more substantive analysis of this issue would require

returning to the field to conduct more detailed interviews on these issues. In future research, I would be interested in more systematically connecting capacity and ableism to discussions of precarity in the workplace, labor control, and the permanent liminality of migrant workers. I would like to explore the gendered aspects of this, particularly expanding on Mia Mingus' claim that women of color are less likely to identify as disabled due to the heightened vulnerability this could imply for them (Mingus 2011). I also wonder about the ways in which losing the capacity to 'sacrifice oneself' on the job impacts not only migrant workers' ability to survive in the U.S. but also the ways in which they make sense of their presence in this country.

Another important line of research that emerges from this dissertation implies further inquiring about the gendered implication of employers' refusal to acknowledge bodily temporalities and needs to care for oneself and for others.

Finally, the pandemic presented the opportunity to witness forms of labor organizing that, while including traditional workplace demands, expanded its scope and actions to discuss and act on public health issues, food safety, access to childcare, and built knowledge sharing tools and collective spaces to navigate legal and social institutions. Further research should continue to document, and think through, the new forms of migrant workers organizing that emerged from the pandemic. Specifically, I want to pay attention to the leading role played by migrant women, to ask about the connections between these forms of activism and organizing and their social reproductive responsibilities.

Implications and critiques

In this section I reflect on workplace and migratory policy in the (post) pandemic by considering the issues workers are still facing today, as the spread of COVID-19 continues and calls for a path to citizenship for essential migrant workers. To end, I make a call for engaging in new forms of organizing from precarity towards collective care.

Thinking about labor regulations after COVID-19

In many ways the pandemic could have been a moment of reckoning with the fact that the existing social arrangement produces premature, avoidable, harm and death in particularly uneven ways. It could have been a moment in which as a society, we reassessed the conditions under which we work and live. It could have been the moment to acknowledge that the outcomes of this unexpected crisis were the direct result of the violence that already existed and that we have normalized. It could have been a moment in which we acknowledge the ways in which work under capitalism disregards bodily integrity; how the temporalities of accumulation subsume the temporalities of life. Instead, as the pandemic progressed, we moved beyond the initial shock of the deaths, and normalized once more, the endemic violence many workers, particularly BIPOC workers, face daily.

In the few states in which expanded protections were enacted, where paid sick leave was temporarily put in place, or where use of time off to recuperate from illness was allowed without immediate retaliation, these changes were quickly phased out. So quickly, in some instances, that workers barely benefited from them. Today, COVID-19 continues to spread across food processing plants, and workplaces in general, and workers find that they have not been able to accrue any sick time off since the last time they were sick, that there is no financial aid available, and that they are expected to return

to the workplace quickly, if not to keep working even while sick and contagious. It is unsettling to acknowledge that a health crisis of this magnitude failed to compel elected officials to create universal free healthcare access. As I write, conditions in food processing plants continue to be as terrible as two years ago, but, unlike two years ago, when at least there was some public attention to how the pandemic was impacting these workers, today no one speaks of these workers, these factories, once more, forgotten.

Amid the pandemic crisis, policy responses proved to be inadequate, even in states such as Washington and Oregon, which have more robust protections for workers. Certainly, some of the issues are connected to the combination of budget cuts for labor regulations enforcement, and the growth of the workforce in both states. Yet, I want to suggest there is more at play here than a budget or an agency staffing problem.

First, I am suspicious of the efficacy of relying primarily on regulatory solutions to labor exploitation problems. While I have no doubt that having certain laws and regulations in place can improve working conditions overall, without worker power within and outside the shopfloor, regulations usually become unenforceable laws. This applies not only to safety, hour, or wage regulations, but to the very capacity workers have to create institutions that can represent them. Today, in the U.S. workers do not have a right to organize collectively. Despite this right being written into the National Labor Relations Act almost a hundred years ago, changes in the institutional structure meant to support this right and employers concerted efforts to bust any attempt by workers to exercise it, have rendered this fundamental right void (Lafer and Loustanaou 2020; McNicholas et al. 2020).

Second, we must question whether labor law can remedy the effects of migratory regulations. Migrant workers appear to be in a paradoxical position: allegedly protected as workers with rights, they are simultaneously criminalized (Gleeson 2009). However, under further inspection their condition does not appear to be a paradox after all. Whether or not workers, and to what extent, migrant workers are covered by employment law is constantly under debate (Costello and Freedland 2014; Coutin 2011; Dineen 2020). The current prevalent interpretation that migrant workers are, in fact, covered under some aspects of employment law rests on the lack of a clear exclusion and not on an explicit assertion of inclusion. While migrant workers are presently not explicitly excluded from all labor regulations, the legal arguments under which this rests have already been found to have limits (U.S. Supreme Court 2002).

In fact, migratory status limits the remedies workers might pursue in court, hinders their ability to file complaints which are the base of the enforcement of workplace regulations, and significantly limits their ability to demand better working conditions through direct action. Additionally, migrant workers are ‘entitled to nothing,’ as Lisa Park (2011) puts it, in terms of social benefits, either because they are legally excluded or because using those benefits could hinder their ability to pursue a path to citizenship in the future. Without any access to a safety net, workers' ability to make use of their ‘labor rights’ is further limited.

Arguing that this situation is paradoxical misses how this is by design. As I write these pages in the summer of 2022, elected officials have been once more discussing the expansion of the guest worker programs. The fact that migratory law *is* employment law appeared transparently in the employers’ lobbying efforts. Employers argued for a

migratory reform that allows them to get ‘labor’ when they need it and discarded when they don’t. The use of migration law to create particularly disposable workers becomes evident. This is further illustrated by the fact that a key discussion point has been whether migrant workers would be covered by the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act, allowing them to file a lawsuit against employers if they broke employment regulations. Employers expressed that this should not be included in the bill, as it would subject them to ‘frivolous litigation.’ As a result, elected officials are presently seriously considering passing a migratory reform that would increase the number of migrant workers explicitly excluded from any protections (Downs 2022). There is nothing paradoxical here, but the construction of a subservient, unfree, labor force for the purposes of, in this case, ‘keeping food costs down.’ What we need to consider then is that continuing to pass employment regulations without attending to migration reform will continue producing unenforceable and limited solutions to a complex structural problem.

Essential workers, migratory reform, and the politics of sacrifice

Throughout this dissertation I argued that the discourse of ‘essential work’ functioned as a legitimizing framework for the uneven distribution of risk and death that took place during the pandemic. As ‘essential’ workers came to the spotlight, suddenly valued for their roles in ‘keeping society functioning,’ advocates, organizations, and even migrant workers, used the opportunity to juxtapose their essential condition to the disposability they faced. In some cases, organizations advocated for paths to citizenship for migrant essential workers, even leading to the ‘The Citizenship for Essential Workers Act’, introduced in the Senate in March 2021 (Farmworker Justice 2021; Warren 2021).

These efforts tried to mobilize a framework that was meant to justify disposability, to create rights.

This is not an innovative strategy; the last major migratory amnesty in the U.S. happened under similar premises, providing a path to citizenship to those that could prove they had been employed in the ‘essential’ agricultural industry. Given the fact that since then there has been no political will to enact a migratory reform that would provide rights and a path to citizenship to millions living in the U.S. –and on the contrary, the country has moved not only to more violent repression but to the persecution of the so-called ‘legal’ migration– it would be hard to oppose this seemingly noble attempt to leverage essentiality to access rights. Yet, in so doing, advocates and workers are claiming that self-sacrifice is needed to have a legitimate claim to becoming a subject of rights (Isaac and Elrick 2021).

In a situation that can only be described as the ultimate form of *cruel optimism*, if, and only if, migrant workers are willing, and able to sacrifice themselves– to literally die to do their ‘essential’ jobs– then, they would be able to access the possibility of becoming citizens someday, or at least have the right to not be persecuted by the state. If you are unable, because you have been already injured, because you are employed in jobs that are not considered essential, because you do not have the bodily capacity to engage in this sacrifice, if you are too young to be a worker, if you do not want to sacrifice yourself, if you want to protect yourself from harm and death, then you are excluded from the path to rights.

Proposals such as this one also build on the other common trope of some allegedly ‘pro-migrant’ discourses -namely, that migrant workers are willing to do jobs

no one wants, and therefore, should be welcomed. What is clear behind these claims is that migrant workers are essential *because* they are made disposable by the border, not despite it. Their essentiality and disposability are not a contradiction, one is the extension of the other. What this society ‘essentially’ needs is the capacity to exploit some workers to death or through debilitating harm, and mobilize the border as a racial and gender making regime to do this. Thus, when white people say they welcome migrants because the ‘economy needs them,’ what they are saying is that they welcome the creation of subservient, rightless, vulnerable, disposable workers. They are sanctioning the endemic precarity migrant workers face, their ongoing debilitation, the disregard for their bodily and emotional integrity, their premature disability, and their premature death. Being able to exercise the right to move spatially in this world cannot be predicated on ableist notions of productivity, as it has nothing, and should have nothing to do with your willingness and/or capacity to work yourself to death.

From Endemic Precarity to Communities of Care

The production of cheap food in the United States has been historically predicated on violence against racialized populations. Today, cheap food continues to have a high cost on those who produce it. As we try to think from precarity towards new forms of sociality, I propose that instead of attempting melancholic returns to standard forms of labor that were always predicated on racialized and gendered exclusions, we follow workers’ lead in pursuing concrete and immediate ways of collectively caring for each other.

Because I continued to be involved with workers and their organizations throughout, I witnessed different moments of their struggles, how the urgency of the first

months of 2020 quickly dissolved, and workers –along with the rest of us– became accustomed to the new normal. The online groups and WhatsApp chats that had been active went silent, organizers and activists turned their attention elsewhere, workers went back into the plants, once more hidden from sight. While the outcomes of the organizing projects that sprouted during 2020 varied, and many workers were unable to secure more permanent changes to their working conditions or build longer lasting organizations, I have no doubt that these organizing processes generated a memorable transformation in the actors who lead it, the communities it involved, and the spaces in which it unfolded.

I hope this dissertation can serve as a document and *testimonio* not only of the systematic harm the current food system relies on, but of these ways in which workers struggled against endemic precarity, and were able to build, even if only temporarily, communities based on forms of care and inclusion that actively challenged violent notions of productivity and sacrifice.

APPENDIX A: LIST OF ACRONYMS

- BOLI – Oregon Bureau of Labor & Industries
- CARES Act – Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act
- CDC – Centers for Disease Control
- COVID-19 – Coronavirus Disease of 2019
- DACA – Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals
- DOSH – Division of Occupational Health and Safety
- EAD – Employment Authorization Document
- FOIA – Freedom of Information Act
- IBP – Iowa Beef Processors
- ICE – Immigration and Customs Enforcement
- IIRIRA – Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996
- LNI – Labor and Industries
- NLRA – National Labor Relations Act
- OSHA – Occupational Safety and Health Administration
- PNW – Pacific Northwest
- PPE – Personal Protective Equipment
- TPS – Temporary Protected Status
- USCIS – United States Citizen and Immigration Services

VISA DEFINITIONS:

All definitions have been extracted from the United States Citizen and Immigration Services website.

“T nonimmigrant status is a temporary immigration benefit that enables certain victims of a severe form of trafficking in persons) to remain in the United States for an initial period of up to 4 years if they have complied with any reasonable request for assistance from law enforcement in the detection, investigation, or prosecution of human trafficking or qualify for an exemption or exception. T nonimmigrant status is also available to certain qualifying family members of trafficking victims. T nonimmigrants are eligible for employment authorization and certain federal and state benefits and services.”

“The U nonimmigrant status (U visa) is set aside for victims of certain crimes who have suffered mental or physical abuse and are helpful to law enforcement or government officials in the investigation or prosecution of criminal activity. Congress created the U nonimmigrant visa with the passage of the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (including the Battered Immigrant Women’s Protection Act) in October 2000. The legislation was intended to strengthen the ability of law enforcement agencies to investigate and prosecute cases of domestic violence, sexual assault, trafficking of noncitizens and other crimes, while also protecting victims of crimes who have suffered substantial mental or physical abuse due to the crime and are willing to help law enforcement authorities in the investigation or prosecution of the criminal activity. The legislation also helps law enforcement agencies to better serve victims of crimes.”

Temporary Protected Status:

“The Secretary of Homeland Security may designate a foreign country for TPS due to conditions in the country that temporarily prevent the country's nationals from returning safely, or in certain circumstances, where the country is unable to handle the return of its nationals adequately. USCIS may grant TPS to eligible nationals of certain countries (or parts of countries), who are already in the United States. Eligible individuals without nationality who last resided in the designated country may also be granted TPS.”

“The Secretary may designate a country for TPS due to the following temporary conditions in the country:

- Ongoing armed conflict (such as civil war)
- An environmental disaster (such as earthquake or hurricane), or an epidemic
- Other extraordinary and temporary conditions

During a designated period, individuals who are TPS beneficiaries or who are found preliminarily eligible for TPS upon initial review of their cases (prima facie eligible):

-
- Are not removable from the United States
- Can obtain an employment authorization document (EAD)
- May be granted travel authorization”

APPENDIX B: SPANISH QUOTES IN ORIGINAL LANGUAGE

Introduction

Page 2:

“El miedo, el miedo a contagiarse, a contagiar a sus familias, como quiera, ¿Qué peor nos podían tratar ya? ¿Qué era lo peor que nos podía pasar ya? nos tratan mal, nos tratan como animales, ni siquiera...cuando una máquina se descompone en el trabajo de volada la arreglan, traen a todos los mecánicos a arreglarla porque ocupa ¿Y nosotros? Nos cansabamos y le daban más recio, nosotros nos quebramos y mira cómo nos tratan, ¿eh? So es más importante una máquina que un ser humano dime si no es triste eso”

Chapter 2

Page 47:

“Ellos habían estado yendo y viniendo por años y luego decidieron que era mejor que todos, mis hermanos y yo, nos fuéramos con ellos. Yo estaba chica, era adolescente y fue difícil despedirme de mis amistades, como era menor no tuve opción de quedarme en México.”

“Pues me imaginaba Estados Unidos como uno lo ve en la tele, en las películas, solo lo más bonito, las ciudades grandes, los malles. Pero Yakima en ese momento no era una ciudad muy grande, no como imaginaba y a parte que no era una ciudad muy grande era frío, no me gusto al principio. Yo vivía en Puerto Vallarta, que era diferente, un lugar turístico de playa, y yo tenía mucha autonomía para salir, moverme, y acá pues no me dejaban salir, fue difícil acostumbrarme.”

Page 53:

“Pues la pobreza y que no tenía para vivir”

Page 54:

“Pues yo vengo más que nada pidiendo asilo, huyendo de la violencia que hay en mi ciudad...en Guerrero”

“Era una alegría porque quería convivir con mi padre, porque no estaba con él, de verlo, de tener una relación más cercana, que mis padres estuvieran juntos”

“Mi papá tenía 5 años acá en Estados Unidos y nosotros teníamos cinco años sin verlo y te imaginas, lo extrañábamos muchísimo y por eso fue que nos vinimos para acá”

Page 55:

“La verdad no quería venir, yo nunca tuve esa ilusión de conocer Estados Unidos, de saber lo que es Estados Unidos, yo nunca, se puede decir que yo vine obligada porque él era mi marido y pues, como decía mi mamá 'hay que seguir al marido donde él va'...”

“Nunca en mi mente o en mi vida yo había pensado de decir, ya ve que cuando uno esta joven dice 'Ay me quisiera ir para Estados Unidos', no, nunca fueron mis pensamientos, de toda mi familia yo era la única que no quería venir. Pero un día mi hermano que ya estaba aquí me habla y me dice que nuestro otro hermano iba a cruzar y me preguntó si quería ir con él, y yo le dije 'no' y me insistió 'piensa, es para que podamos ayudar a mamá' y me dice 'te doy 15 días.' Sentí que tenía que venir, así que me alisté y salí con mi hermano, el mayor.”

“Uno se imagina que vas a tener una vida bien bonita y llena de muchas comodidades, pero en realidad vives tu vida presa del trabajo, de sol a sol trabajando. Solo vives para los trabajos, para trabajar es para lo único que vives”

“Yo pensaba 'No hombre, pues Estados Unidos, el primer mundo, ha de ser lo más hermoso' y cuando llego acá dije ‘Aquí estoy peor que en mi rancho.’”

Page 56:

“Cuando llegas aquí a Estados Unidos te das cuenta de que en realidad trabajas más, es más agotador, incluso a veces tienes que aguantar malos tratos por tal de que no te corran.”

“Uno de niño escucha que es Estados Unidos, es grande, algo diferente, una vida diferente y pues uno trae esa mentalidad, era una aventura para mí. Pero era algo muy distinto a lo que escuchábamos, fueron muchos días de tristeza, más que todo de tristeza porque te cambia tu vida por completo, un país nuevo, gente nueva, no conoces, el idioma es otro, empezar a la escuela, y que no sepas el idioma, la gente se ríe de ti, cuando empiezas a aprender inglés no pronuncias bien las palabras, es duro, es difícil. Mi mamá en México pues era ama de casa, y aquí empezó a trabajar, y yo era la mayor, mi hermana la más pequeña y yo asumí la responsabilidad de llevarla a la escuela y de recogerla, aprender a mantener la casa limpia, a cocinar, todo.”

“Llegar a este país acá con tanta discriminación fue muy difícil porque te metes a la escuela y primero no tienes el idioma, y tu color de piel le grita a los demás de donde eres, y de ahí se agarran para discriminarte, para no dejarte sentar en sus mesas, para mirarte menos. Y luego mis papás trabajan en la agricultura, todo el día trabajaban, mi hermano también se tuvo que salir de la escuela para ayudar a mis papás con los billes y con la renta y fue difícil, muy difícil. Yo tenía que cuidar de mi hermanita... pero pues, el sueño americano que le llaman”

“Mi hijo, él soñaba con ser un rapero, un influencer, y entonces yo lo llevaba a competencias y todo eso. Pero cuando cumplió dieciséis entró a la empacadora a trabajar. Le dije que no lo hiciera, que no hiciera ese trabajo, pero ya tiene dieciocho y es su decisión.”

Page 59:

“Yo me quería quedar allá con mi abuelita, ya no quería venirme, pero pues, ya estaba formando yo una familia con mi esposo, pues, no podíamos estar separados, y él estaba en California.”

Page 60:

“Aquí lo que tienen las escuelas no te dejan, bueno en aquel tiempo no se ahorita, no te dejan hablar español dentro de la escuela no te dejaban hablar español...no se ahorita como sea...antes no te dejaban español dentro de las clases...entonces en México yo no sabía ni escribir ni leer español, y me reprobaron porque no sabía así que de ahí puro trabajar. Pero me sentía fuera de lugar, y volví a Estados Unidos el año pasado. Cuando llegue mi suegro me ayudó a conseguir el trabajo en la planta en la que él trabaja”

Page 63:

“Mi prima me dijo que donde trabajaba no pedían papeles, ahí solo ocupaba mi número de seguro de memoria, y bueno fui con ella. Mientras conseguía mis nuevos papeles no podía quedarme sin trabajar. Tengo dos niños, y bueno, no es lo que había imaginado, pero gracias a Dios tengo trabajo”

Page 66:

“Al principio fue muy deprimente porque vine en diciembre y casi no hay nada. Me acuerdo que llegue el día primero de diciembre y al segundo día cayó nieve, se llenó de nieve y estábamos encerradas, y por la tarde lloraba porque pensaba, ¿Que vine a hacer acá? Había nieve que nunca había visto pero no tenía trabajo, no tenía dinero. En esos días mis hermanos recogían de los botes de basura para sobrevivir. Fue muy terrible para mí. Fue muy, muy feo.”

“La primera vez que vinimos, fue a un pueblito que se llama Warden...ya paro el bus y yo le dije a mi esposo, yo creo que ya llegamos aquí a descansar y mañana vamos al Warden y el chofer dijo ‘No, aquí es Warden, aquí es donde van a vivir.’ No hombre, no había tiendas grandes ni McDonalds ni Burger King ni nada, era un pueblito super chico.”

“En California ganaba muy poquito y pagaba mucha renta y no me alcanzaba mucho el dinero, entonces me venía las temporadas aquí a Washington, a la cherry, en Mayo y me regresaba a California en Octubre, y ya después me decidí a venirme definitivamente para acá.”

Page 80:

“Yo vivo aquí todo el año, no solo en verano, y tengo que pagar renta, más aparte calefacción, electricidad, internet que mis hijas ocupan ahora para la escuela online, y pues pensé que la empaedora ofrecía trabajo de todo el año.”

“Las últimas temporadas la temperatura era muy alta, muy caliente, y sentí que ya no podía hacerlo, no podía estar tanto al sol”

“En el field me empecé a trabajar pizcando peras, luego manzanas, y luego no me gusto porque me hice muy alérgica pues al veneno que echan y ya no quise trabajar ahí y me fui a trabajar a los empaques.”

Page 81:

“Ya con cuarenta y tantos años me canse mucho, me canse mucho porque el campo es caminar bastante tal vez una vuelta, muchas veces llevamos la bolsa para cargar la pizca, la bolsa, la escalera, los terrenos no son parejos, este pues hubo muchas cosas verdad que me cansaron y dije ‘No, sabes que yo ya estoy haciéndome vieja pues prefiero ir a una bodega donde dicen que el trabajo, es más, es mejor...verdad? porque no estas a la intemperie”

“Pues la verdad yo ya no quería trabajar en el field. El field es muy pesado y difícil para una mujer, yo quería mejorar, quería buscar un trabajo en una fábrica, en producción”

Page 82:

“Para mí la empacadora es más frustrante, entonces cuando viene la temporada de verano me salgo y me voy al field, y cuando termina y viene el invierno vuelvo a la fábrica”

“Me salgo durante la temporada y me voy a field porque me sale un poquito más de dinero, pero el trabajo es más duro y más sucio, y si, para cuando termina estoy agotada”

Page 83:

“Mi mama, mi papa, y mi hermano estaban ahí de trabajadores regulares ya, y yo primero fui a la temporada de la cherry, tú sabes, porque ahí contratan a cualquiera que quiera trabajar”

Chapter 3

Page 91:

“Como ya dije una vez a un reportero porque estaba cansada de las mismas preguntas una y otra vez, 'deja del COVID...aquí mucha gente está enferma de antes, hay muchas de mis compañeras que se la pasan tomando pastillas porque la ansiedad que te dan veces de cómo está de rápido el trabajo, para dolores de coyunturas, depresión por cómo nos tratan los mayordomos...no es algo que se concentra mucho en COVID, pero nosotros no podemos seguir así”

Page 95:

“No es solo yo, puedo darte los números si quieres de mis compañeros que se fueron, para que veas como todos están, que mal quedaron.”

Page 97:

“Después de trabajar en la línea de cherry por esos meses sentía un dolor constante en la espalda, así bien duro. Es que yo mido como 5' 10” y tenía que estar agachada así en la línea todo el tiempo, y llegó un momento que el dolor era terrible”

Page 98:

“Nos hacían agarrar productos que estaban a 400 grados de temperatura con unos guantes de tela y había que despedazar el producto porque eran piezas grandes, todas mis uñas se hicieron negras de lo caliente”

“El agua que tomamos no esta buena, sabe a podrido, nos da dolor de estómago”

Page 99:

“Hizo el trabajo bien difícil, no funcionó para mí (ruido de frustración) y bien pronto me comenzó a doler el hombro, entonces pedí para quedarme con mi chaira y mi lija, pero a los nuevos ya no les dan esta herramienta, les dan esa y si no está bien filudo el cuchillo en seguida empiezas a sentir dolor en los hombros”

Page 100:

“Mis botas estaban muy viejas, muy lisas y le dije a la supervisora, ocupo unas botas, porque esas nos la daban ellos porque no podíamos llevar otras, y les dije, estas ya no funcionan, el piso está muy resbaloso, a cada rato me caigo y me dijeron 'es un par por trabajador no hay más botas' y el día que me caí, había una supervisora y le dije, me caí porque las botas están muy resbalosas y quien sabe pero en ese momento aparecieron unas botas y me las dieron, pero eran varios talles más grandes”

“Sinceramente la mayoría de los accidentes pasan por el piso que está bien resbaladizo, y luego como es un piso de concreto plano, se pone muy resbaloso cuando se caen verduras ahí y como la línea está bien rápida y no tenemos suficiente gente que ande limpiando pues, se queda mucho la verdura ahí y al descongelarse se pone bien resbaloso y es donde pasan los accidentes”

Page 101:

“Es que hay días que no puedes ni respirar, a mí me ha tocado días que no puedes ni respirar del dolor de espalda de lo cansado, que tu brazo al días siguiente, tus brazos están inflamados, hinchados de lo cansado, no puedes con tu alma pero pues así es el trabajo, verdad?”

Page 104:

“Las líneas andan bien rápidas, te caen cien manzanas por minuto”

“A los mayordomos les dan bonos dependiendo cuánto producen y ahí si nos friegan. Terminamos bien golpeados, muchas veces me voy de la planta sintiendo que no puedo ni caminar”

“Si la máquina está corriendo a 60 bolsas por minuto, quieren que nosotros le preguntamos al operador a cuanto, si está corriendo bien y si dice que si, pedirle si puede aumentarle otra bolsa, ahora quieren que nosotros hagamos eso...y si ahí saliendo bien, si puede ir más rápido aún”

Page 107:

“Una vez limpiando la máquina como siempre, algo pasó, y se activó y me lo agarro al dedo la máquina y quedó todo aplastado. Y se tardaron mucho en desconectar la banda porque grité pero no había nadie cerca. Y fui a la enfermera que me dio una band aid nomas. Seguí trabajando y el aguante por dentro estaba todo lleno de sangre. Le dije a mi supervisora, ¿sabe qué? no siento mis dedos, a mí me gustaría que me mandaran al doctor, y me dice, quiero que vengas a la oficina, y dice sabes que, no quería, pero te tengo que dar un warning. Y sentí mucho coraje porque no era mi culpa que la máquina no se lockeara.”

“Nos venden Advil, pero como lo que tengo es un nervio así tocado en la columna necesito más que un eso para poder tolerarlo”

Page 109:

“En el tiempo de la cereza se trabajan todos los días, desde que empieza la cereza hasta que se termina. Ahí no tienes domingos, no tienen, ahí pierdes la noción del tiempo que no sabes ni en el día que estas porque se trabaja todos los días por como diez semanas. El verano pasado como lead tenía que entrar una hora antes y salir una hora después de todos los trabajadores y los horarios son de doce horas, los turnos, así que yo trabajaba catorce horas todos los días. Al final estaba tan cansada que pensé que no podría trabajar nunca más. Pues ya ves, al siguiente lunes, ahí estaba, en la línea de la manzana.”

Page 110:

“Y nos obligaban, teníamos que ir. El supervisor decía 'quiero voluntarios para quedarse, pero si no quieren voluntariamente me van a poner en la situación de ir por fuerza' y nosotros decíamos que no era justo porque salíamos cansadas y no queríamos quedarnos y el decía que eso era lo que él mandaba”

“Uno trabaja 12 horas al día, todos los días y uno se siente tan cansado, tu cuerpo te duele tanto, pero desgraciadamente estamos tan pobres que nos enojamos cuando no nos dan overtime, o cuando no nos dan todos los días de trabajo porque nos pagan tan poquito que el overtime para nosotros es lo que nos aliviana. Si a nosotros nos pagaran un sueldo justo, nos estuviéramos peleando por overtime, pero eso a ellos no les conviene, ¿eh? por eso nos quieren tener así con sueldos bajitos para tenernos de esclavos toda la vida...para que la gente este de las 6 am a 7 de la tarde todos los días”

Page 111:

“En ese tiempo estaba joven, ahorita mi cuerpo ya no da para más. Ahí era cortar cabeza y sacar tripa, cada charola tenía que ser 21 libras, si su charola pesaba menos de 21 no se la contaban, entonces ahí íbamos bien rápido, nosotros le poníamos de más, siempre teníamos que hacer que fueran arriba de 22 para que contaran, y nos aventamos cincuenta o más charolas entre break y break, ni para respirar parábamos...era la única manera de sacar buen dinero.”

Page 112:

“He visto compañeras en la línea haciéndose encima porque no las dejaron irse de la línea para usar el baño”

“Empezaron a contarme el tiempo en el baño, que me tardaba mucho decían, pero yo tengo un problema de estreñimiento y por eso tarde un poquito y tuve que pedirle a la doctora que me haga una carta, pero seguían diciendo que no podía usarlo cuando necesitaba porque me tardaba.”

Page 113:

“Le dije yo que me sentía muy mal y que no podía trabajar y que tenía que ir porque si no me daban un warning o no se qué hacían pero yo tenía una gripa muy fuerte pero no tenía dinero para ir al médico a conseguir una nota, me escurría la nariz bien feo, era algo insoportable y le rogué si me podía venir a mi casa porque no me sentía bien para estar así y no, no me dejó”

“Les dije que me disculpen, les dije lo que me había pasado pero dijeron que fui irresponsable y yo ¿cómo vas a creer que fue irresponsable? Yo estuve hospitalizada aquí tengo los documentos del doctor, no pude llamar obviamente y dijeron que tendría que haber pedido a alguien que llamara pero yo digo ¿a quién? yo no tengo familia aquí, yo no tengo a nadie, mi única familia es mi hija de 8 años”

“El supervisor se quería deshacer de mí. Yo si siento que son así con la gente enferma, ahí no quieren gente enferma”

Page 114:

“Cuando se baja el azúcar yo quedo muy débil y pues toda la noche sin dormir, yendo al baño y cosas así...es que necesito reposo entonces y luego vas a trabajar y ahí te hacen rotación, no estas nomas inspeccionando, tienes que ir a un lugar que se llama la cold, a un lugar donde mandas cajas, tienes que ir a stackear y stackear es super pesado entonces si tu no haces algo luego luego 'pues te vamos a correr, o si no puedes hacer este trabajo vuelve pa tu casa, o a que vienes?’”

“Aquí no tienen eso, no les importa si la gente no está bien o está enferma. Hay compañeros que uno ve que no deberían estar trabajando, pero van a trabajar por necesidad y porque pues los obligan, y no les importa”

“Una vez que te accidentas ellos no te quieren pagar por estar ahí haciendo nada, pues por ejemplo si te tienen en light duty, ellos te tratan tan mal, psicológicamente te tratan de una manera tan tan mal y como se llama, te tratan muy mal hasta el punto que pues revientas y te vas.”

Page 115:

“Cuando salí embarazada el manager ese me quiso poner a hacer trabajos bien feos, el ya sabía que tenía que tener más cuidado porque estaba embarazada pero me exigía más trabajo y yo tenía que tener cuidado y le dije ‘Oye tú sabes que estoy embarazada y tú sabes que, como decimos nosotros los mexicanos, no me rajo al hacer ese trabajo, pero quiero que tengas un poco de compasión ahorita, que seas más comprensible de que estoy

embarazada y no me siento para hacer este trabajo, tenme paciencia que lo voy a hacer, nunca te he dejado mal, nomás ahorita que estoy embarazada no voy a estar toda la vida, es un tiempo' y me dijo que si no me gustaba podía irme a mi casa.”

“Cuando salí embarazada de mi hijo, ya venía trabajando en la compañía hacía cinco años. Pedí dos semanas sin pago cuando nació para, dos semanas antes de aliviarme para tener a mi niño y dos semanas después. Cuando regrese me dijeron que 'oh no que no había lugar más para mí, que no había avisado ni nada entonces que no sabían dónde había estado y ya no tenía trabajo, que ya no estaba trabajando ahí'...según ellos la carta que yo les lleve del doctor, no la recibieron y por eso dijeron que no había llevado nada, que ellos no tenían nada de esa información y prácticamente lo tomaron como que había quiteado. Pensé que era absurdo que dijeran que no sabían dónde estaba, porque trabajé hasta casi dar a luz. Me sentí muy mal, pero no había nada que pudiera hacer.”

Page 118:

“Todas las empacadoras son iguales. Llamas y dices que tu hijo está enfermo y te responden 'oh veo que no quieres trabajar.' A los managers no les importa si tu estás enfermo, si tu hijo está enfermo. Solo quieren que vayas y les saques el trabajo.”

“Solo teníamos 8 puntos al año, si en 8 meses, porque contaba si llego tarde un minuto, un punto malo, si un día tengo una emergencia con un hijo, a ellos no les importa, si te llaman de la escuela 'mira tu hijo se enfermó, tienes que venir, porque lo llevamos la hospital o al doctor, o se cayó o se golpeó y tienes que venir' y tú le dices al supervisor 'pasó esto en la escuela con mi hijo tengo que ir' a ellos no les importaba, y te daban puntos. Si tenías una cita tenías que llenar un papel 48 Hs. antes, si es una emergencia te puedes ir pero te cuenta un punto malo...y cuando llegas a los 8 puntos te dan un warning y ponen en un proceso que por 90 días no puedes faltar ningún día, no puedes llegar tarde ningún día, no puedes irte temprano ningún día, no puedes pedir ningún permiso y si pides un permiso te dan un segundo warning, o sea si en esos 90 días tienes una emergencia te corren. Es asfixiante, si te cancela la babysitter, si tu hijo se enferma de noche, no hay nada que puedas hacer.”

Page 119

“Para trabajar de supervisor en esas bodegas se necesita tener mucha maldad, se necesita tener un corazón bien frío, o se necesita no tener corazón, ¿sí? Porque te exigen demasiado, los de arriba te exigen demasiado entonces te estresas, tienes que exigirle a la gente y tú sabes que la gente no puede más, que se van a lastimar, pero uno tiene que hacerlo. No me gustó. Te digo ya de por sí la cara de maldita la tengo, pero no lo soy. No pude hacerlo.”

“Ahí tú tienes que ser malo, ese es su lema de ellos, ahí tú le tienes que gritar al empleado, si el empleado es una anciana, un anciano y no puede, y está cansada, lo que ellos le dicen 'si no sirves vete a tu casa, aquí no queremos gente floja”

Page 120:

“El mayordomo me gritaba y me hacía sentir bien mal. He visto a mis compañeras llorando de cómo les gritaban, de la vergüenza de que les hablen así”

“Estás pensando ‘Ay, Dios mío, no quiero ni regresar a trabajar de cómo me están tratando, o sea, no más entro y me duele la panza estoy como nervios, ahora que me va a pasar?’. Entonces eso va ahí viene la depresión. De porque la gente está pasando por tantas cosas y luego los tratan mal.”

“Estaba en la línea y había una señora más anciana empacando manzanas. Y estaba atrasada, nada serio, pero de pronto veo que el supervisor viene, agarra una charola y la golpea en la cara bien duro”

Page 121:

“Trabajando en la línea el supervisor me agarraba, me rozaba. Nunca hable de esto antes, pero hay mucho acoso sexual en las plantas de procesamiento. Yo sé que no era solo yo, que él y otros hicieron lo mismo con otras compañeras. Y una se siente tan impotente, siente tanto coraje, pero tiene que seguir trabajando como si nada”

“El la invitó a salir, quería una relación con ella, y ella no quería una relación con él. Y en una de esas, estábamos en la línea, vino y le pegó con un cartón, con una caja en la frente. y la hizo sangrar. Muchos empleados vieron eso, y ninguna dijo nada. Al día siguiente ella pide ponerse en otra línea, pero le dicen que no. El vino y ella le dijo ‘por favor déjame trabajar tranquila.’ Él se enoja y viene y le da una patada en la pierna. Pero patadón yo pensé que le había quebrado la pierna. Yo miré el incidente. Esta mujer es bien tímida, nomás, se limpió y se tapó con un gorrito y terminó su shift, así temblando de miedo y ya no volvió. Desafortunadamente, no puedo decir que es poco común.”

Page 129:

“Pues mira ahí uno se golpea, uno se raspa, uno se, pero accidentes así, haz de cuenta te resbalas, te caes, te pasan miles de cosas y no vas a estar haciendo reporte, reporte cada vez que tienes uno. Yo no pensé que iba a pasar a mayores pero ya cuando no pude caminar, dije de hacer un reporte, y luego yo pedí ir al doctor, quería ir al doctor y era un viernes, me acuerdo bien, y fui a la oficina porque tienen una clínica ahí que está abierta nomas Miércoles y Viernes y la doctora no me atienden porque no tenía citas. Entonces fui con el manager y le dije 'yo quiero ir al E.R. porque me está doliendo demasiado' y tenía miedo que fuera a estar quebrado y me dijo que si yo iba al doctor, yo iba a tener que pagar, que desafortunadamente si yo iba al doctor yo tenía que pagar de mi bolsillo...te imaginas, una visita al doctor, ganando uno eso y cuándo? no se puede. Ahorita uno se da cuenta que eso es nomas para aparentar con la gente, para decirle 'oh no todo está bien, regrésate a trabajar' es para eso esa clínica”

Page 131:

“Cuando finalmente pude ir, el médico me trató terrible. Me tocó un americano bien racista, hijo de la chingada, me trato uff...de lo peor...me dijo que ya tenía 5 semanas, que ya tenía que estar bien. Que el dedo estaba un poquito estirado el dedo de la base, pero que arriba era una lastimadura vieja que no tenía nada que ver. Y le dije ‘Me duele mucho y no puedo doblarlo, no puedo usar mi mano.’ Y el médico, dijo, eso no es mi

problema, bien grosero. Se supone que el doctor está ahí para ayudarte, no para que te esté insultando y no fue solo el ortopedista, todos te tratan así.”

“Sinceramente los médicos no me ayudaron. Me dieron una medicina para el dolor, pero no se iba. El doctor insistía que vuelva a trabajar sin restricciones. Solo hablaba inglés y pues no había traducción. Al tiempo dejé mi caso porque sentía que perdía el tiempo y el dinero. Solo sé que tuve que seguir trabajando como si nada y el dolor nunca se fue del todo.”

Page 132:

“Ellos tienen una compañía que se llama X, tú no puedes ir al LNI porque ellos tienen su propio LNI. Si llamas a LNI no te puede ayudar porque ellos son una empresa privada. Yo estaba teniendo problemas porque el médico me trataba mal, y llamé a la aseguradora y dije que estaba pasando y que no me pagaron tiempo perdido, que me hicieron presentarme al trabajo cuando la nota de doctor decía que yo tenía que descansar y el terapeuta me tenía en light duty que me ponían a hacer todo el trabajo. Y de la compañía nunca me respondieron para atrás”

“Primero hay varias enfermeras, y hay una aseguradora privada que es la que cubre las lastimaduras pero de todos modos tienen que abrir el caso con LNI pero las personas no conocen exactamente el proceso de como iniciar su caso o los derechos o lo que sea, y cuando estaba la unión al menos uno de los representantes hablaba contigo y te decía, estos pasos tienes que seguir, ahora pues el que haya ido por ahí si lo conoces más o menos te orientas, pero ahorita, está cada uno por su cuenta.”

Page 133:

“Tenía pues una caja en una mano y con la otra abrí una puerta y me resbale y se me hizo el pie hacia un lado y sonó horrible, y no pude usar mis manos para protegerme. Mi esposo me recogió y me llevó a la emergencia y ahí empezó todo el proceso. Ya tuve dos cirugías y ahorita estoy esperando la tercera. Estoy frustrada con el sistema de aseguradora. Cada vez que me retrasa mucho la aceptación de cirugías, o que me han estado mandando con diferentes opiniones de especialistas, todo eso me tiene frustrada. Esta última, ya tiene casi más de cuatro meses que están en eso, porque me mandaron con segundas, terceras opiniones. Pero ya están todos de acuerdo que necesito la cirugía, y ahorita lo han retrasado y estoy esperando. Ya son dos años del accidente, ya pasó mucho tiempo, y me siento frustrada porque no puedo hacer lo mínimo, que es caminar distancia. Tuve que vender mi carro para pagar billes, estoy básicamente inmóvil, mi vida está paralizada. Pero yo ya quisiera salir de todo esto, quiero ser positiva, pero me siento bien frustrada.”

“Entonces ya fue cuando me di cuenta de que quizás nadie me había preguntado cómo estaba emocionalmente. Y pues ya el hizo el reporte, que él consideraba que yo necesitaba ayuda. Pero pues más de lo mismo, me mandaron con una psicóloga para hacer una entrevista, y fueron cuestionarios, uno de 320 preguntas para la aseguradora asegurar que realmente yo necesitaba ayuda. Finalmente si lo aceptaron, y he estado en pláticas con una terapeuta, terapia psicológica. Antes de hablar con la psicóloga, no me

sentía con derecho a decir, me siento mal, compartir como esto me ha afectado más allá de la pierna.”

Page 136:

“Me sentí como que me querían sacar. Primero porque estaba vieja y segundo porque ya no servía yo para nada. Ellos buscaban la manera de cómo deshacerse de uno porque estamos viejas. Entonces en vez de yo estando trabajando y decir ver la calidad de uno, decir ‘esa señora está mayor, pero le echa ganas al trabajo, si está viniendo a trabajar es porque necesita, es porque ocupa...’ entonces si tiene un lugar que no es pesado, y de todos modos lo está haciendo bien no había necesidad de mandarme a la casa. Si hubiera estado ahí sentada en una silla y me pagan por no hacer nada ahí yo les daba la razón, pero yo estaba trabajando, bien duro, limpiando la jaiba sin parar. Solo porque no podía levantar las cajas perdí mi trabajo sin ningún aviso, después de tantos años.”

Page 138:

“Tenía aseguranza por parte de la compañía y la aseguranza de la compañía peor pues haga de cuenta que la aseguranza quiere que rápido vuelvas a trabajar, a ellos no les importa, dicen ya regrésate a trabajar y si veo muchas injusticias de parte de la aseguranza. Muchos compañeros que se lastimaron y no quieren pagar una cirugía porque ellos se quieren ahorrar el dinero, dicen no, que se inyecte para que les duela menos y vuelvan a la línea”

Page 145:

“Las mujeres no quieren este trabajo, piensan que es muy duro”

“Es el trabajo más duro de la planta, es intenso, es un trabajo de hombre, no deberían pedirle a las mujeres que lo hagan”

“Si es un trabajo que lo hace una mujer, a pesar de que se esfuerza, a pesar de que se llena de lastimaduras, no reconocen para que suba de grado y ganen mejor. Las mujeres han estado peleando por muchos años que se le reconozca un trabajo y allá a veces hay mujeres que dices ‘esta es como hombre’, ¿sabes lo pesado que es una pieza? y mujeres lo hacen, y conozco muchas que hasta las han tenido que operar del hombro. Pero basta que una mujer haga el trabajo para que deje el trabajo en grado bajo.”

“Pues la verdad no tenía tiempo, no tenía tiempo entre mis niños, y su escuela, y el trabajo, y volvía bien cansada de tanto trabajar y solo quería irme a la casa”

Page 149:

“Yo traigo dos pares de zapatos y me los cambio en el lonche- a veces eso ayuda”

“La mayoría traemos nuestra medicina. Yo traigo más que nada para soportar el dolor, eso hacemos la mayoría, es difícil el trabajo y la compañía no te da nada”

“No voy a hablar en general por todos, pero muchos de nosotros tratamos de levantarnos, el ánimo cuando nos vemos tristes, nos damos un abrazo. Cuando vemos a alguien

llorando en la línea preguntamos: ¿Qué pasó? ¿Cómo estás? Porque, tenemos, como le dije a una vieja un día: ‘Mira hija, te voy a decir algo: Una, no vengo a hacer amistad, pero si hago amistad ya es un plus, mil veces mejor.’ Porque estamos mil horas metidas aquí adentro, haciendo este trabajo, es insoportable”

Page 150:

“Créeme que en este tipo de trabajo todas tratamos de darnos ánimos, porque al aguantar diez horas ahí adentro está duro, está duro. Hay días que estoy viendo la manzana, estoy yo ‘What the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck am I doing here?’ ¿porque estoy haciendo algo que no me gusta? ¿Verdad? Por necesidad. Así están muchas de mis compañeras. Y ya que no tenemos opción, tratamos de ayudarnos, no de hacerla peor.”

“Una tiene que sacrificarse, es mucho trabajo, pero una tiene que sacrificarse por su familia”

Chapter 4:

Page 154:

“COVID en esa compañía fue la gota que rebalsó el vaso, solamente fue la gota que derramó el vaso porque si de hecho nosotros la gente ya había pensado en salir en huelga. A mí me toco una vez que yo y otros compañeros tuvimos una plática con el supervisor, el supervisor de nosotros, del área de producción, este el mero supervisor, el patrón de todos nosotros, le pedimos, le hicimos una pregunta, la primera fue ‘Cuando empezaron a hablar del COVID Ud. dijo que la compañía iba a cerrar por catorce días para desinfectar y limpiar todo, ya tenemos muchos enfermos y hasta la fecha no han cerrado ni un día, ¿porque no ha cumplido su palabra?’ Ahí fue cuando él respondió que no era una opción cerrar qué porque el gobierno les dijo que produzcan. Entonces luego le preguntamos, ‘Sabemos que otras compañías están dando un pago de riesgo, un aumento de dos dólares, tres dólares, ¿aquí porque no nos da nada?’ Entonces dijo porque no es una obligación pagar más mientras estemos pagando el sueldo mínimo legal, nada nos obliga a que paguemos más. Entonces volvimos a hacer la pregunta ‘¿Porque no están implementando los seis pies de distanciamiento, no tenemos gel antibacterial, no tenemos máscaras, vamos a seguir enfermándonos, este porque no cierran, verdad, y nos dejan en casa? Ahí dijo ‘No es una opción’, sus palabras fueron no es una opción ‘Si no se enferman aquí se van a enfermar en la calle porque igual Uds. tienen que salir a comprar comida.’ Le pregunto a una compañera, ‘¿Cada cuanto Ud. va a comprar comida a la Walmart?’, y dijo ‘Ya pues una vez por semana’, este y dijo pues ‘Yo no, yo voy cada tres semanas para evitar el virus, mi refrigerador está lleno.’ Para todos fue un insulto que el dijera eso porque obviamente, dime tu ya quisiera yo poder decir que mi refrigerador siempre está lleno, pero con un sueldo mínimo eso es imposible porque para entre renta, pagar cuentas, pagar aseguranza, pagar todo lo que se necesita pues lo que te queda para llenar tu refrigerador es muy poco. Entonces eso fue, para mí en lo personal eso fue una ofensa, que le dijera eso que su refrigerador siempre estaba lleno, y que como nosotros no podíamos tenerlo así estaba bien que siguiéramos trabajando sin protecciones”

Page 157:

“Ay (suspira), pues dicen que somos esenciales como si ayudará, pero en realidad lo que significa es que no tenemos opción, tenemos que hacerlo aunque tengamos miedo”

Page 164:

“No les importo, Lola—les valió, como decimos nosotros, un cacahuete,”

Page 165:

“Es solo un pequeño pedazo de plástico disque de persona en persona. Nosotros en las líneas, el espacio de línea a línea son 6 pies, en medio son 6 pies, pero en esos 6 pies debemos de caber dos personas, y supuestamente según ya estábamos cubierto porque en medio de eso donde íbamos dos personas pusieron un pequeño plástico que supuestamente era el separador para que no tuviéramos contacto con la otra persona, pero si nos movemos tantito si tocábamos un ratito al rato no estábamos tocando la espalda porque cada movimiento estábamos en la misma dirección. supuestamente llegaron las protecciones que había puesto para lo del COVID. Digo, ¿quién fue el que dijo que era suficiente? ¿cómo supervisaron esto si estaba bien o qué?”

“Hay un plástico que divide pero la gente lo empuja para hacer más espacio cuando trabajo. Y son bien débiles, se rompen, y cuando se rompen, pues seguimos trabajando igual”

Page 166: .

“Ahí fue como yo agarre COVID, y porque también en ese tiempo no estaban dando mascarillas nada de eso, nosotros queríamos llevar mascarillas de nuestra cuenta y en el trabajo decía 'no, no tiene porqué traer mascarilla eso no tiene por qué traerlo' pero las personas ya sabíamos de ese problema y queríamos protegernos pero no nos daban ni una mascarilla”

Page 167:

“Cuando la gente se empezó a enfermar, y después nos dieron una mascarilla y una lead le dijo a una trabajadora 'no puedes tirar tu mascarilla porque esa la vas a rehusar mañana y yo estaba ahí y le dije 'disculpe, una mascarilla desechable no se puede usar por más de 8 horas y más de un día, estas mascarillas son desechables no se pueden rehusar uno tiene que usar una nueva' y la supervisora dice 'a nosotros nos dijeron que hagan eso, esto es todo lo que hay.’”

Page 168:

“Ni bien empieza el break tú puedes ver toda la gente amontonada, como ovejas, tratando de pasar, o igual cuando tiene que clock out, se congestiona y la gente no puede mantener la distancia”

Page 169:

“Nos dijeron que iba a haber reuniones semanales de seguridad y de limpieza y procedimientos que había que seguir pero en seguida a las dos semanas se volvieron menos frecuentes, cada dos semanas, luego una por mes, y luego ya ni hubo, pero nosotros sentíamos que las necesitábamos más seguido”

Page 172:

“Tuve que usar mis días de enfermedad el año pasado cuando estuve expuesto y tuve que hacer cuarentena. Recién testie positivo esta semana, pero no tengo más días para usar, y no se que hacer.”

Page 173:

“Pues decían que nos estaban dando pago de COVID, pero para que te lo dieran no podías faltar ni un día, y estábamos haciendo overtime, entonces había que estar seis días a la semana sin faltar, y la gente pues quería el bono, y se presentaban a trabajar sin importar sus síntomas o cómo se sentían”

“La compañía no se hacía cargo de nada, no decían nada, solo sabíamos porque la gente habla y por las noticias...ellos nunca dijeron ‘Esto es lo que está sucediendo y esto es lo que estamos haciendo.’ Nada.”

“Querían que fuera secreto, pero lo vimos por todas las noticias”

“Uno escuchaba, esta persona está enferma, o esta otra, y estábamos ahí juntos, mirándonos sin saber qué hacer, y

“Y se oía, que tal esta enfermo y tal está enfermo y nosotros todos juntos y nomas nos mirábamos unos a otros, sabes cómo me imaginaba yo? como si fuéramos un montón de pollos que estábamos en una jaula. oíamos los casos y como con ganas de salir corriendo de la bodega, pero no podíamos.”

Page 174:

“Y yo me vi al borde de la muerte, para mí, yo baje 20 libras, yo me vi muy grave, muy mala a mí el virus se me fue al pulmón, y me dio neumonía, y estoy muy pero muy mala como dos meses, era una tos que no me dejaba hablar, ni respirar y yo le echaba ganas, yo no quise ir al hospital porque yo sabía que si entraba ahí ya no iba a salir porque sufro de la presión, tengo que cuidarme de mi salud. Yo me vi muy grave y no podía ni levantar un vaso con agua. No pude estar lista para trabajar, tenía que empezar en agosto y no pude. Ya pasaron dos meses, pero no tenía la capacidad. Estaba demasiado débil”

Page 176:

“Les dije que mi marido había testeado positivo, pero que yo no tenía síntomas, y no estaban testeando gente sin síntomas en ese momento entonces yo no sabía si lo tenía, y

además no tenía quien cuidara de Bella, pero me dijeron que tenía que presentarme a trabajar de todas maneras.”

Page 177:

“They ghosted me, ándale, estuvieron bien fríos, they didn’t help me at all. O sea, no me dieron instrucciones de nada, aplica para este programa porque este programa está abierto para tus beneficios. Haz esto, haz esto otro, o sea nada. Aunque había riesgo yo tuve que trabajar pero cuando me enfermé, no me ayudaron para nada.”

Page 186:

“Fue cuando empezaron a salir enfermos de COVID este la gente empezó a decir verdad, 'no puede ser, no nos están dando protección, no nos avisan, no nos dicen si hay gente enferma o si estás expuesto, no nos están pagando más, no puede ser así.' Entonces la gente empezó a organizarse y salir a la huelga...y me avisan y me dicen 'oye esta la gente del turno de la mañana en huelga' y yo dije bueno pues vamos, ¿verdad? Porque yo estaba afectada, a mí me estaba afectando toda esa situación... yo tenía miedo a enfermarme, a traer la enfermedad a mi casa que yo podía enfermar a mis hijas, yo soy diabética, y aparte este pues tú sabes que con riesgo, ya condiciones médicas el virus puede ser más fuerte, y soy madre sola, tengo que poder mantener a mi familia. Sentimos que había sido suficiente. Salimos en huelga ese día con mis compañeros, el turno de noche el 99% se quedó en huelga....”

Page 188:

“Todos estábamos siguiendo la misma cosa, hablando con compañeros de ahí, trabajadores de ahí, están sufriendo las mismas cosas que nosotros, o sea eso es un patrón que se repite en cada compañía, en cada empacadora de manzana, la explotación, salarios de miseria, no les estaban dando la protección, a todos no les respetaban el distanciamiento, no les querían dar reconocer el riesgo que asumimos, darnos el pago de riesgo como esenciales, nada. Todos salíamos huelga y todos queríamos lo mismo.”

“Hemos vivido con miedo tanto tiempo, soportando el maltrato, el abuso, la humillación, el dolor, los salarios de pobreza, y estábamos agotados. Y si bien antes teníamos miedo, cuando la gente empezó a testear positiva de COVID, y no teníamos máscaras, y la compañía no estaba diciendo nada, haciendo nada, y no sabíamos si estábamos expuestos, empezamos a hablar de salirnos en huelga”

Page 189:

“Todos pensamos eso verdad, que podíamos contagiar a nuestra familia, y estábamos pues todos yendo a trabajar pero con miedo, con peligro ¿verdad? Y creo que eso, más que no reconocieran el riesgo que estábamos asumiendo, que uno también está sufriendo, eso hizo que la gente saliera.”

Page 190:

“La gente venía diciendo por días que tenían miedo, había outbreaks en otras plantas de la compañía, y mucha gente se estaba enfermando, y vieron que la compañía no hacía nada para pararlo. La gente se dio cuenta que la compañía no iba a prevenir un outbreak. Los managers no nos hacían caso, no nos escuchaban y pues tuvimos que buscar otra manera de hacernos escuchar, que se dieran cuenta. Cuando comenzó la pandemia, no nos daban el equipo de protección adecuado que la CDC había puesto, como uso de máscara obligatoria y distancia, y todo eso, ellos no nos ayudaban. Les dijimos que teníamos miedo por nuestras familias en casa y que no queríamos infectar a nuestros hijos, abuelos, y gente de riesgo o con discapacidad. Le pedimos ayuda al manager y no hizo nada. Y pues nosotros pensamos que teníamos que hacer algo e hicimos un walk-out, paramos toda la compañía del empaque y todos salimos para afuera. Todo el turno de producción, 100 somos, salimos juntos.

Page 192:

“Es lo que le digo a la gente, en sus casas ustedes son esencial, aquí somos reemplazables”

Page 194:

“No nos gustaba como nos estaban tratando, nos decían esenciales, pero no nos sentíamos así...durante todo esta pandemia, COVID nos pegó duro, especialmente a mi familia. Mi primo falleció de COVID, y ahora mi mama está muy enferma. Personas en mi departamento se estaban enfermando a cada lado, y los managers en vez de decir que estaban enfermos, decían que habían tomado vacaciones. Ahí fue cuando me di cuenta que a la compañía solo le interesa su bottom line, no los trabajadores. Nos trataron como basura, no les importa.”

“Es igual de compañía, no le importa. Se murió el señor David Cruz. Nunca fueron pa decirnos ‘Oh, compañeros! El que guste ir al velorio, tal día va a ser el velorio del señor David Cruz.’ Nada, cero. O sea, se hicieron como que no pasó nada. ¿Aquí se quebró una taza? No pasa nada.”

Page 196:

“Fue un antes y un después, yo digo, que vas a saber tú de valentía si nunca has estado en una huelga. Cuando nosotros salimos, tenía tantos nervios, tanto miedo, tanta ansiedad de que al día siguiente íbamos a salir a huelga.... Era un revuelo aquí en Yakima de tantas huelgas que había, todos estuvimos unidos, nos apoyamos. Fue una cosa hermosa”

“Se sintió tan bien hacerlo, se sintió bien ver a la gente apoyándose, teniendo las mismas metas. Nosotros hacemos dinero para los managers y las compañías todo el tiempo y ellos no hacen nada por nosotros, por ayudarnos, y nosotros lo hicimos, nosotros mismo. Se sintió muy bien.”

“Sentía tanto desgano, depresión antes...pero ahora me siento fuerte, nunca me sentí así de fuerte, te lo digo. Es una cosa hermosa realmente, porque uno cree en lo que está haciendo y te sientes fuerte”

Page 198:

Angie explained: “We realized we could help each other when someone was sick, or if they had suffered an injury, that we could bring each other food, help each other with childcare, and collect money to help each other buy medicine.”

Page 199:

“Yo hable con una tía mía que ella fue una de las mayores activistas de la unión en ese tiempo, y me dijo ‘No, hija, el manager te mintió, por dos votos perdió la unión,’ y me explico que ellos quisieron deshacerse de la mayor gente que pudieron para impedir la posibilidad de otra votación ajustada. Y todo tuvo sentido de repente.”

“Cuando yo estuve en la huelga yo empecé a leer, y empecé a saber que era un bracero. Y de chica sabía que mi abuelito lo había hecho pero no sabía que significaba bien. Y me di cuenta que no era lo que yo pensaba (empieza a llorar). Me empezó a dar mucho coraje, mucha frustración, mucha impotencia y yo un día le hable a mi papá y le dije 'pa, porque ud no me dijo que era un bracero?' y me dijo ‘no quería pues que Uds. se sintieran mal’ Y así fue que aprendí lo que mi abuelo, y mi papá también habían vivido, y me duele mucho. Por eso estoy en esta lucha, porque tengo que hacer un cambio...si no lo pude hacer por mi papá, lo voy a hacer por las generaciones que vienen, no quiero que mi hijo viva algo así”

Page 200:

“Gracias a la huelga ya no soy la misma mensa que antes (se ríe). Ya no soy la misma tonta, ahora están fregados. Ahora se un poquito más, me eduque un poquito. Antes podían hacer la suya, yo tenía más miedo, pero ya no.”

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