CLASS, LABOR, AND COLOR HIERARCHIES:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF MEXICAN YARDEROS/AS IN SOUTH CHICAGO

BY
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In 1916, the first wave of Mexican immigrants arrived in South Chicago. Despite shortage of housing, food, and work, the South Chicago colony grew in size to become one of the key destinations of thousands of Mexican immigrants in the twentieth century. In the late 1980s, triggered by a neoliberal restructuring in Mexico and the United States, many more Mexicans migrated to Chicago, Illinois. With the decreasing of industrial work in the City of Chicago, Mexicans were forced to enter a growing service sector that gave rise to the lawn maintenance and landscaping service industry. But more importantly, this yard work—las yardas—gave rise to a new working class population that is proud of their work, culture, and form of life—los yareros/as.

This dissertation, entitled Class, Labor, and Color Hierarchies: An Ethnographic Study of Mexican Yarderos/as in South Chicago, documents the everyday lives of Mexican, working class immigrants who despite leaving their land behind, struggling to find work, and facing class and color discrimination for being from a working class background, ---found a home in Mexican Chicago. This study is based on sixteen months of ethnographic research performing participant observation with two lawn care service companies. I utilize Border Theory as a critical framework to guide the collection of ethnographic materials, my interpretation of events, and my
cultural analysis of the intersections between class, labor and color among this working class population.

More notably, this doctoral investigation of Mexican immigrant working class life is the first to examine ethnographically the long unacknowledged issue of “color” among Mexicans in the United States in order to understand how Mexicans make sense of, produce, and regulate their “color subjectivities” under late capitalism at the beginning of the twenty first century. This ethnographic inquiry on the relations between class, labor, and color is a sustained effort to move deeper into the texture of everyday life to document the centrality of these seemingly unrelated hierarchies in the making of what it means to be Mexican in Mexican Chicago.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Juan Rulfo, jaliciense writer and novelist said that “social problems can be portrayed from an artistic standpoint,” and continues, “[i]t is difficult to evade from a work a social problem, given that it produces conflictive states that force the writer to develop them.” Similar to Juan Rulfo, my decision to write about a conflictive, difficult and emerging social problem had to do with my interest in giving, in my case, ethnographic expression to the way Mexicans understand themselves as Mexicans in the United States. I did it by ethnographically documenting the conflictive states and borders that Mexicans encountered as they travel north to northern cities as working class immigrants. My own border travels north from a small town in the state of Jalisco to Chicago, were only possible with the help of many. My journey, a product of crossings and inspections through the colored borderlands echoed in this dissertation would not been possible without the help of many fellow border travelers as well.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Colored Borderlands and the Making of the Mexican Working Class

The Story

On June 2013, at eight o’clock on a hot summer evening, in the City of Chicago, I sat down in front of my computer to write my ethnographic observations about the day. I spent about ten hours mowing lawns for a small lawn care company owned by a Mexican immigrant. In the following ethnographic jotting, I captured the conditions Mexican, immigrant men and women in the South Chicago neighborhood performed lawn care through my subjective experience.

On a hot, humid, and exhausting June afternoon in mid-June (Chicago, IL)

Sweat drops slowly slide down my brown face as I mow lawns—yardas—for residential clients while the temperature nearly approaches unbearable temperatures in the three digits. I have thick dark eyebrows and sometimes the sweat settles there until I wipe my hand over. My green button-down shirt is wet of the saline elements that the body expels. Sticky grass clippings and dirt texture my pants. The weather report on my mobile device says that the temperature is eighty-two degrees Fahrenheit, but adding humidity, and given the typical summers in the City of Chicago, we are feeling ninety-five degrees. We are in the middle of June, and as we approach the Fourth of July celebration, we are putting in extra hours of work so the lawn of our clients looks pretty for that day. I wear brown work-boots and my left foot has started to hurt from the eight hours of walking and mowing, with very short breaks. During this summer, I usually work for ten hours, and on the way home, I regularly see lawn care workers or maintenance workers—yarderos—still mowing grass around seven or eight, and into the late evening.\(^1\)

\(^1\) In this dissertation, I use multiple terms to describe the Mexican working class population that performs lawn care services in the city of Chicago, Illinois. The term “yardero/a” will be the preferred term, given it is the one my participants use, and it is the most appropriate cultural term to describe my research population. However, I will, at times use “landscaper” or “lawn care service worker” to refer to a working class population that also performs this work activity. In addition, throughout the dissertation, I use italics to designate words in Spanish. When needed, translations which are noted in parenthesis.
Like many of the immigrant workers who arrive in the United States of America (USA) from Mexico, I arrived at a young age in the middle decade of the 1990s by having migrated and crossed borders through inspection stations at the Nuevo Laredo/Laredo, TX border. I never expected that I would be writing a dissertation on the lives of Mexican immigrants in the United States. Not because I am not familiar with my own community, but in a simple answer, this was not and it does not continue to be the typical route that Mexican working class people would end up doing in El Norte. As such, the focus of this dissertation is on documenting the multiplicity of experiences that Mexicans endure in South Chicago. Additionally, this writing describes how immigration allows and limits people in structuring a meaningful life while working hard. Thus, for me and for this ethnographic study, class, labor and color are critical aspects of immigrant lives that will help me understand the relations between capitalism, culture, work and borders.

This introduction to my doctoral dissertation serves to demarcate those borders, which is critical to explain how the ethnographic project began and what purpose I gave it as it transformed into a doctoral dissertation about Mexican yarderos/as in the United States. In this introduction, I describe how I became interested in the project, and discuss why the dissertation topic is of research significance. Then, I offer a theoretical overview that guides this ethnography about a Mexican working class population in Chicago, Illinois at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century. I will also provide the methodology utilized and the activities performed while doing ethnographic
research (from July 2012 and November 2013) in South Chicago and its neighboring spaces.

Let me produce, elaborate, and talk about a very personal border in order to explain how it influenced my ethnography. Before this doctoral project began, I was at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) in 2000 majoring to teach physics. Very early in my undergraduate career, I wanted to become a teacher. For the first two years, I took courses in the “hard” sciences (chemistry, biology, calculus…etc.). By the end of my sophomore year, I took courses in Latin American history. It was then that a spark lit up, and the intellectual piston began to move as I stumbled upon discussions about hemispheric relations between Latin American nation-states and the United States. I also began to understand the very same processes that had brought me to the United States as a migrant from Mexico, early in 1995. While taking cultural studies and history courses, I deeply felt that I wanted to learn more how people dominate entire populations and more importantly, why people accept it. Upon visiting the Urbana-Champaign campus of the University of Illinois in 2002—as many college students from Chicago do—I was so

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2 Anthropologists have, for too long, decided not to include personal life events within their narrative analysis, however, my proposition and intention is to suggest that events are central in the crafting of research objectives, and how life events influence our research agendas. In other words, as Renato Rosaldo (1989) comments, in his narrative analysis (ethnography being one), “the sequence of episodes cannot be separated beforehand but makes sense only after the fact” (32), and by relation, the ethnographer cannot be separated from the ethnography itself. Thus, I will say that only the naïve anthropologist will actually think that objective reality is out there ready to be grasped and ignore its constructive and subjective construction. Thus, the narrative analysis is a construction, but one based in actual and factual events. A more poetic vision of documenting events also comes from Rosaldo (2013) as he tell us that “the material of poetry is not so much the event as the traces it leaves…The ambition of poetry [and ethnography] is indeed “to be the event itself”” (Rosaldo 2013: 102; last quoted phrase taken from Lecercle 2002:108-30)

3 Presently, this dichotomy is highly debated within our community of scholars. For example, the well-known debate between the “humanists” and “scientists” is elaborated by C.P. Snow’s Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution (1959) in which the author argues that our educational system is split between the arts and the humanities on one side and the “hard” sciences on the other. Later in my academic training, I learned that this distinction is rather blurred and sometimes “crossed” with its respective disciplinary “inspections” (see Lugo 2008 on “border theory” and “border inspections” within anthropology).
impressed by it, and felt so intellectually at home that I transferred the next year in the fall of 2003.

My first semester at the University of Illinois as a junior was very demanding, as I expected it to be. By the spring of 2004, I took a course in the Department of Anthropology titled Latina/o Cultures. I arrived five minutes late after looking for the room number at Bevier Hall. I remember looking through the glass window of the assigned room to see a male professor in glasses directing the class. I went in hoping that I was in the correct classroom. The professor introduced us to his teaching assistant, Aidé Acosta. I recall the smiles of both instructors from that day. At the end of the class, I learned that the professor’s name was Alejandro Lugo, now my dissertation chair. This course was central to my academic thinking and allowed me reflect critically upon the anthropological lens that can be useful to uncover the intimate relations between power, capitalism and culture. Dr. Alejandro Lugo introduced me to the writings of and about Latina/o scholars and Latina/o cultures, but more importantly, it was the first time in my four years of college life that I saw a teacher who genuinely cared for the material taught, and taught from the heart while intellectually demanding the best of his students. This dissertation project is in many ways a product of that long intellectual conversation about culture, borders, color and capitalism that began in the autumn of 2004.

At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, I completed an undergraduate honor’s thesis where I engaged with the literature of mestizaje, blackness, and nationalism in Mexico. Upon graduating from Illinois, I went to the University of California at Riverside to continue this intellectual project. By the fall of 2007, I returned to Illinois after finishing my master’s degree at UCR in 2006. I was back in my alma
mater with a different project. This change in focus, from a critical analysis of *mestizaje* in Mexico, turned into a critical look at Mexican identity within the context of the United States by examining color hierarchies within the Mexican community in the City of Chicago. The shift in focus occurred because I felt an urgent necessity to examine events taking place in the United States within the immigrant, Mexican and Latino populations. The following year, the ethnography *Fragmented Lives, Assembled Parts (2008)* authored by Prof. Alejandro Lugo was published. The publication of this ethnography solidified my theoretical and methodological approach towards producing this dissertation. While I now trace my own anthropological path, *Fragmented Lives, Assembled Parts (2008)* continues to be a very influential text in the way I think, theorize, and write about the lives of working class Mexicans and Latinas/os in the United States.

This doctoral dissertation produced in the second decade of the twenty-first century when color has become a heightened category utilized to manage state subjects. Quite literally, a person’s life and death is often times measured by the perceived pigmentation of their skin tone. As I recall my early years living in Mexico, I do not remember being called names because of my skin color; perhaps I was too young to notice. However, I do recall seeing that all the *campesinos* (peasants), including my brothers and myself who were harvesting *maize* (corn) were of darker skin tone, and we were often treated very different from the lighter skinned *Mexicanos*. While living in Chicago and mowing lawns for a living, I could not help to notice that those that perform the hard labor are of light

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4 This is a very important ethnographic intervention within literature about the U.S-Mexico border. In this book, Lugo compares the social and human consequences of recent globalism with the region of Cuidad Juarez/El Paso, Texas. Lugo demonstrates the ways in which class mobilization is “unmade” and attempts to provide a critical understanding of the effect of transnational corporations have on contemporary Mexico. The ethnography won the Southwest Book Award in 2008 and the Book Award by the Association of Latina and Latino Anthropologist in 2009. Other scholars have utilized Lugo’s ethnography in English, Spanish and Portuguese (Ibarra 2011).
brown to dark brown complexions, and the boss is often of a lighter skin tone, with various exceptions of course.

I am a border crosser. I crossed it at night when I was eleven years of age. I recall the awkward inspecting looks of the immigration officers when my father took my mom, his seven children including me (five sons and three daughters) to request our social security numbers in Laredo, Texas after getting our papeles (permanent resident visas). The trip from Laredo, Texas to Chicago seems fuzzy, but I remember waking up in the Ford conversion van the family was traveling in, looking out the window, and hearing my older brother, Chemo, telling us that we were in Tejas (Texas). Many hours passed until we reached the state of Illinois, and again, my older brother told us that we were crossing the Mississippi River. As soon as we entered Illinois, a police officer pulled my father over, whom was driving ten miles above the speed limit. My dad had to go all the way down to the local court in Cairo, Illinois after we arrived in Chicago. After twenty-two hours of driving since we crossed pal norte (to the north), I recollect asking how far we were from Chicago. My father said that we were about two hours away, but we would stop for gas and grab something to eat at a gas station in a place called Champaign (Champaign, IL). Today, when I arrive or leave the University of Illinois, I always take the Market Street exit on interstate I-57. I guess one can interpret it as a symbolic gesture

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5 For a discussion of the cultural production around “papers” and “papeles” see the work of Susan Biblier Coutin (1995, 2006) who documents how Salvadorian immigrants in Los Angeles dealt with their immigration status within the court system in the United States. In her analysis, work permits or any kind of paper leaves a trail that can later become documented when applying for legal status (see specifically her chapter titled “Papeles, Permisos, and Permancene” in Coutin 2006).

6 The “border Inspections” that anthropologist Alejandro Lugo (2008) has documented ethnographically at the U.S.-Mexico border in Juarez, Mexico does not stop when a Mexican immigrant crosses the international bridge. It is my argument here that they follow and are incorporated in the bodies of those that cross. However, as I argue in chapter six of this dissertation, once we cross the U.S.-Mexico border, they acquire additional layers of meaning and are transformed to take notice of the U.S. racial order, operating in different geographic locations.
to remind myself of my past. We arrived at Chicago close to midnight in mid-July of 1995, which I later learned was one of the hottest summers on record in the city. Mom, dad, brothers, and sisters, all finally arrived and slept in my father’s two-bedroom apartment on Baltimore Ave. in South Chicago.

Growing up in South Chicago proved to be a big challenge. I went to public schools in the second half of the 1990s. I had counselors advising me not to go to college, but instead study a practical, job-oriented, education. I had a moreno (African American) point a gun at me and ask me for money. I did not know English when the last event occurred, I simply put my hands into my pockets, pulled them out to show that they were empty, and said in Spanish, “no, nada,” (No, I do not have money) and went to play soccer with friends after el moreno left. At least in part, my personal immigration history, and narrative give form and texture to this dissertation, which focuses on working class Mexicans who work as yarderos in the City of Chicago. As such, throughout the chapters of the dissertation, directly or indirectly, I attempt to provide answers to three main research queries that guide this project: (1) in what ways does the Mexican working class of yarderos in the City of Chicago experience racial discrimination for being a working class population? (2) What role do class and color hierarchies of colonial, national, and post-colonial characters play in producing color prejudices within and against the Mexican population itself? and (3) how do class, labor and color hierarchies intersect with capitalism in the borderlands of modernity?

7 For a cultural analysis of the term “moreno,” see chapter 6. In the early years of having migrated to Chicago, in the initial early encounters across the brown-black color line, I only knew them as “morenos/as.” It was rather with schooling that I heard the term, “African-American.” Of interest, I later learned that my participants, who may not have attended U.S. schools here in the United States will refer to them the same way, “morenos/as” and often times will say, “negros/as” which in Spanish means essentially the color black, not necessarily the “n-word” that carries racial weight and emotion.
The focus on Mexican, lawn care and maintenance service workers—yarderos/as—emerges out of concrete historical circumstances and intellectual necessities. First, anthropologists have not studied this working class population. Second, by focusing on an emerging working class, we have the ability to trace how the recent neoliberal changes in the mode of production in the United States has radically changed the culture of populations, in this case, that of Mexicans who began to perform this activity in vast numbers since the early 1980s. Third, by examining how Mexicans understand themselves in terms of skin color, we can document the dialectical but uneven production and reproduction of color hierarchies under capitalism, and possibly provide answers to a critical theoretical question: what does class have to do with color and what does color have to do with class? Lastly, focusing on yarderos/as is specific enough to enable me to utilize this population as a case study and examine the descriptive and theoretical weight that Border Theory is able to have in order to describe everyday life based from a grounded cultural analysis.

**Dissertation Subject**

This dissertation on Mexican immigrants examines ethnographically the long unacknowledged issue of “color” in order to understand how Mexicans make sense of, produce, and police their “color subjectivities” under specific class and labor relations across multiple physical and more invisible borders. While we as anthropologists do not hold a monopoly on the concept of culture, this dissertation does not stir away from it; nor does it stir away from theorizing it, and from weaving it throughout the chapters as I attempt to do justice and utilize Franz Boas’s description of culture when he suggested:
Culture may be defined as the totality of the mental and physical reactions and activities that characterize the behavior of individuals composing a social group collectively and individually in relation to their natural environment, to other groups, to members of the group itself and of each individual to himself [or herself]. It also included products of these activities and their role in the life of the groups (Boas 1963, 149).

Likewise, similarly to the concept of culture, the category of “color” produced through racialized social action should not be regarded separately from other spheres of culture either, analytically, nor in practice, and concentrating on the question of skin color does not reduce other forms of racism. In this dissertation, I understand color not a separate analytical category but always in tension with class and the labor process. Thus, by examining the meanings of class and color, I believe it answers questions concentrated on the processes of race-production usually glances over, which is the actual practices of racism, and its gender dimensions. All of these processes are culturally mediated and while hard to dismiss, they are emphatically in need of emphasis through a class and labor analysis. Within the Mexican population, skin color and the production of meanings on and about this lived experience cannot be easily overlooked—they are part of what we would call Mexican culture.

In my research period (July 2012-November 2013), I encountered discussions of class, labor and color in almost every aspect of a Mexican’s everyday life. This dissertation foregrounds a call for thorough discussions about class, labor and color hierarchies, both at the level of categories and at the practical lived experience within the Mexican working class and the immigrant population before we even begin to compare

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8 To elaborate on the question of culture and its location, for example, Renato Rosaldo (1989) accurately argues that, “[f]rom the pirouettes of classical ballet to the most brute of brute facts, all human conduct is culturally mediated. Culture encompasses the everyday and the esoteric, the mundane and the elevated, the ridiculous and the sublime. Neither high nor low, culture is all-pervasive” (26).
Mexicans with other ethnic or racial groups. Within the context of the United States, skin color hierarchies have to be addressed first.

In Mexico, the prevalent ideas about nationality rely on the belief that Mexican culture is produced through the mixture of two populations: “Spanish” and “indigenous,” however, as I argue beyond these conceptions of race and culture, there is a discursive, ideological and lived experience of and about color and color hierarchies. For example, Spanish culture tends to be associated with whiteness while indigenous culture is associated with a dark brown, skin pigmentation. The combination of those produced the mestizo, which in color terms, is the common “brown” subject stereotypically portrayed in film, media, and popular culture both in Mexico and in the United States (See Paredes 1958, Chavez 2001). Fragmentation, divisions, and heterogeneity, at least from the view of those who perceived Mexico as an “imagined [mestizo] community,” (Anderson 1983) erased meaningful differences based on skin color within the context of nation-state building projects emerging at the end of the colonial period. In the post-independence period, and more intensely during post-revolutionary Mexico, all Mexicans became “mestizo” as the nation-state formed, thus ignoring three previous centuries of miscegenation and complex mixing. However, the emergence of the nation-state is not always an all encompassing mestizaje project, state formation is also culturally mediated, rejected and modified as folks refuse its effects.

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9 The historical disengagement with the realities of racial and color mixing early in the colonial period, is part of how nationalism operates (for exceptions see Lugo 2008). As discussed by Benedict Anderson (1983), nations are imagined political communities because “the members of even the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in their minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 1983: 6). Indeed, while in the case of Mexico, the sense that Mexico was a mestizo nation, and in color terms, may have been portrayed as stereotypically “brown,” or “bronze” it was because, as Anderson (1983) continues, “[c]ommunities are to be distinguished [and powerful], not by their falsity/genuiness, but the style in which they are imagined” (6).
Likewise, within the Mexican context, Alejandro Lugo (2008), who understands that racism is embedded in color hierarchies, anthropologically analyzes an alternative to the mestizaje framework. In his own words about the postcolonial situation in Mexico, Lugo argues that to better understand Mexican society “the prevalent, though hardly acknowledged, hierarchies of color that pervasively characterize Mexican society question in a definitive manner not only the ideology of mestizaje but more specifically the viability of the concept of mestizaje used…to describe postindependence or postrevolucionary Mexico” (Lugo 2008: 50). For Lugo, the problem of color “has remained a constant site of social and political struggle since the time of the conquest” (Lugo 2008: 50-51, emphasis on original). Lugo’s argument forces us to understand discrimination by paying attention to color hierarchies within the mestizo community itself, and allows one to see color and race as constituted differently. Thus, Lugo’s (2008) work is a very important theoretical and methodological intervention in the discussion of Mexican identity whether in Mexico or in the United States.

In this doctoral study I further answer through my ethnographic materials these questions: if color hierarchies have remained present since the time of the conquest, why have these been seemingly concealed, even in the twenty-first century, among Mexican immigrants in the United States (either by Mexicans themselves or by academics)? What makes uncovering these class, labor and color differences relevant to the study of and racism? Perhaps, one tentatively argues that the uncovering them—class, labor and color—suggests a direct challenge, to the “imagined community,” even beyond Mexico’s own territorial borders at the same time that Mexicans strive to label themselves as Mexicans despite the increasing nativist and anti-immigration sentiment (see Chavez 2001, 2008;
De Genova 2005; Rosas 2012; Davila et al 2013). From these inquiries, politically relevant questions are also in need of attention: what are the real social, economic, and cultural consequences of engaging with the examination of working class life? If we speak about color, in what ways does producing knowledge about it challenges the hegemonic structures that have historically landscaped, sustained, and reproduced capitalism and the political organized subjection of populations based on visual differentiations?

In this dissertation, I specifically show that even “Mexicaness” and “Mexicana/o” in the context of the United States necessitates a theory of color, capitalism and racism (see chapter six) if we want to better understand the lived experiences of the Mexican working class in South Chicago.10 Moreover, to what extent do color and ethnic hierarchies from Mexico coexist with the U.S. ethnic and racial classifications, and even more fundamentally, how do they transform each other along the way? To give a definite answer, I use ethnography as a crucial method to qualitatively commensurate class and color experiences for Mexicans in South Chicago.

An emergent body of ethnographic investigations, labeled here as Latina/o Ethnography, provides answers and offers helpful ways to better investigate the experiences of racism, discrimination, and color among the U.S. Latino populations. For example, an ethnography that uses insights from critical studies of race is Nicholas De Genova’s (2005) as he argues that race and the production of space are central

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10 In the United States, as pointed out, “Mexicans” as racialized subjects have been stereotypically portrayed as brown-skinned, peasant-like, prone to crime, and at best, moochers of American jobs within the liminal space of illegality (Chavez 2001; Marez 2004; De Genova 2005). Thus, the questions that I raise in this ethnographic monograph are central to understand the experiences of migration of Mexicans north of Mexico.
mechanisms in the construction of the Mexican identity within the context of the manufacturing industry in Chicago. In distinction, other fruitful theoretical interventions on color have been done by Lynn Stephen (2007) who focuses on the experiences and memories of indigenous agricultural workers of Mixtec origin in the United States. Stephen’s documents not only shows how indigenous migrants in the U.S. are produced as racial subjects, but also how structures of ethnic and racial classifications overlap with historically and regionally situated racial hierarchies of California, western Oregon, and Mexico. Furthermore, Ana Aparicio’s (2009) ethnography among Dominican-Americans documents that color hierarchies travel from the Dominican Republic to New York City in the context of contemporary attempts to collectively organize themselves within a transnational setting. Susan Greenbaum (2002) analyzes the Afro-Cuban identity in Tampa, Florida, examining blacks in Cuba and in the United States. Greenbaum’s (2002) study shows that multiracial schemes continue to allocate rewards on the basis of color, particularly by idealizing whiteness and despising blackness. These studies clearly document the complex ways in which the lives of the Latinas/os are organized in the context of the United States and take the issue of color as an important analytical category in the examination of how racism operates within and beyond the Latina/o population.

To be more precise about my ethnographic case study, this dissertation is an original anthropological study about South Chicago that ethnographically uncovers the cultural weight and meaning of present-day color, class, gender, and racial experiences among Mexicans in Chicago, and their neoliberal and post-colonial expressions. In addition, this

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dissertation unearths a new working class subjectivity, that of the yarderos, which is a very specific cultural production within the context of the City of Chicago. Beyond the scholarly specificity of my project, this ethnographic study allows us to see how structural conditions and human agency, as limited as it sometimes is, can be found in the everyday life of those “Other Mexicans.” In particular within the darkest, less privileged working classes that have migrated from their homes, travelled, crossed borders and rivers, and historically have been intensely inspected based on the color of their skin.  

The stakes of ethnographic representation are very high and have overarching ramifications for the people that we study. My ethnographic monograph does not shy away from talking about my participants in color terms. I emphatically emphasize that we need and we have to talk about color. The nest of racism and discrimination lies in the work that visual images do. For example, if you simply look at TV, movies, anthropological classics, national geographic photographs, magazines, electronic devices, family albums, questions about color and the meanings they carry and sometimes perform cannot be dismissed. Now, does this dissertation seeks to get at a true “objective” reality in inspecting Mexican, lawn care service workers in terms of color? Emphatically the answer is no. In mobilizing color hierarchies rather than the category of

\[\text{12} \text{ For a discussion of the production of the “Other,” anthropology has a long history of documenting how the ethnographic enterprise produces a clear difference between, “other” and “Other” (Spivak 1988, Said 2006 [1978]). In this context of the production of the “Other,” one can point to how the state apparatus in modernity also produces “Others,” (see Foucault 1978, 1979), but if one focuses on those “Others” within the Mexican community, an interesting critique of nationalism and culture can be found in Anzaldua (1987).} \]

\[\text{13} \text{ For example, in an excellent discussion of color hierarchies produce “racial spaces.” Lutz and Collins argue that national geographic photographs produces knowledge and represent it through the photographic image. In other words, meaning is created selectively while destroying original context (23). The point here is that photographs serve as strategic way to describe human differences and reproduce social, economic, and political hierarchies (3). From our understanding of “colorismo” (see Lugo 2008), one can easily make the argument that Latin American soap operas also have the ability to reproduce social hierarchies where “white” looking actors are often time portrayed as rich and wealthy, while poor, “brown,” “piel canela” (cinnamon like color) as poor and subservient to the rich, white Mexicans.} \]
color itself, I am alluding to the continuous, historical shifting terrains from which these hierarchies of class, labor and color emerge. What I am more interested in is in documenting the cultural work that color does in relation to class, labor, gender, nationality, racism, discrimination, cultural practices and how the former categories dialectically reproduce meanings about color. Color itself, let me emphasize, does not carried any meaning, color acquired as the “structure of the conjuncture” is mobilized, and from this dissertation’s perspective, across borders, both physical and invisible.

**Theoretical Framework: Border Theory**

The post-1960s decade brought radical, social, political and economic transformations across the world. In the United States, we began to see a shift in the relations between the state and its populations as well as challenges from civil rights groups, and the increasing demands for social justice within the context of neoliberal and post-colonial experiences. In order to explain the shifting contours of late twentieth century everyday life and how these were experienced across multiple borders, anthropologists produced a new theoretical language to talk about these social, political, cultural and economic changes (see Paredes 1958; Rosaldo 1989; Limon 1994; Michaelsen et al 1997; Stephen 2007; Lugo 1997, 2008; Rosas 2006, 2007, 2012). In the context of Latin America and Europe, *Border Theory (Teoria de la Frontera)* (see Lugo 2003 [1997]) has been utilized to help shape the discussion that takes Lugo’s engagement with borders, the nation, and the state as central concepts to theorize how theory and culture shifts the terrains to describe social life (see Barraza 2004, Soprano 2006, Pizzaro 2013, Sanchez 2014, Lindisfarne *et al* 2013).
In this dissertation, I rely on foundational texts in anthropology to examine the experiences of Mexican working class immigrants in South Chicago, and offer a cultural analysis of their everyday lives as yarderos and their skin color experiences. Anthropologist America Paredes was an early precursor to study of borders and borderlands. Paredes’s work was influenced by the post-1848 colonial expansion by the American Empire and the subsequent unequal distributions of power in south Texas between Anglo-saxons and Mexican and Mexican American populations. Américo Paredes’ *With His Pistol in His Hand*: A Border Ballad and Its Hero (1958) documents the social and cultural relations between the colonizer and the colonized populations after the incorporation of vast land and people into the United States. Because of this colonial relation in Texas, the stratification of Mexicans based on racial differences lead to a criminalization discourse and was reproduced as the Empire expanded and penetrated every aspect of people’s everyday life including their folklore. In short, the U.S. government, with the help of intense racial divisions throughout the borderland region, positioned Mexicans in south Texas, post-1848, as racially inferior to the (Anglo) white population. For example, after the 1870s, when most Native American were eradicated or

14 To describe the social and cultural relations that emerged in South Texas, the concept of the “American Empire” is useful to establish how domination can take place beyond the historical demarcations of the colonial imperial forms and the emergence of the nation-state. For a discussion of what the Empire means as a concept, a useful “decentered” and “deterritorializing” view can be found in Hardt and Negri (2000: xi-xvii).

15 For example, José R. López Morín (2006) argues that the work he documented under folklore studies represented one of the earliest interventions in trying to understand just what kind of Mexican American culture was emerging in South Texas. José R. López Morín (2006) argues that the ballad of Gregorio Cortez, that was utilized by Paredes effectively, “challenged both the stereotypical views of Mexicans and the official versions of events in history of the border...he made it a lifelong quest to celebrate the spirit, wisdom, and dignity of his people” (2006:4). Similarly, José E. Limón (2012) argues that Américo Paredes says that his work concentrated largely on the culture and peoples of what he called “Greater Mexico.” Paredes suggested to be “all of the area inhabited by people of Mexican culture—not only within the present limits of the Republic of Mexico but in the United States as well—in a cultural rather than a political sense” (Paredes 1976:xiv in Limon 2012: 1).
placed on reservation camps, it was possible to idealize the native savages, but the “Mexican problem” remained. As Américo Paredes (1958) discussed, the legend of the Mexican, criminal character was expressed in various folk venues, but a more pervasive racial hierarchy was constructed that placed Mexicans at the bottom and Americans on the top in almost every aspect of the life of South Texas. This criminalization, entangled with a racial discourse around Mexican inferiority, established the status quo and power relations after 1848. Paredes summarized the Anglo-Texan about Mexicans was: Mexicans were cruel by nature, cowardly, and thieves. While on the other hand, the Mexican recognized the Texan as superior—the Texan had no equal (Paredes 1958: 15-16).

The anthropological work of Américo Paredes is an important study about Anglo and Mexican race relations in South Texas. Paredes’ framework of these relations within a post-colonial borderland’s context is a relevant re-imagining of the connections, tensions, and continuities that the original relations of conquest have left, almost engraved, in the social texture of the lives of both Mexican/Mexican American and American populations in South Texas.

By the late 1980s, Renato Rosaldo’s *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of the Social Analysis* (1989) provided a definitive shift in anthropology and culture theory, and intellectually, it is of central importance for border theorists.16 Renato Rosaldo argued for the centrality of the cultural borderlands that had appeared in the past as annoying

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16 On the importance of Renato Rosaldo’s theoretical contributions, Alejandro Lugo (2012) productively assesses the relevance *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of the Social analysis* for the influence in a whole generation of scholars in the United States. Lugo (2012) contends that *Culture and Truth* (1989) “has enriched our understanding of contemporary, postcolonial, multiracial societies within the United States and beyond, as well as our theoretical, methodological, and analytical frameworks for interpreting culture and power and their manifestations as pervasive border zones in human social life” (119).
exceptions. For Renato Rosaldo (1989), this conceptual shift in anthropology was the coming together however unevenly of two main processes, “the potential historical conjuncture of decolonization, and the intensification of American imperialism [and as consequence]…[t]he shift in social thought has made questions of conflict, change and inequality increasingly urgent” (28). For Rosaldo (1989), social life is crisscrossed by borders, borders that are social and physical, and where “border crossings” are part of the history of the present.17

Documenting working class life at the U.S.-Mexico border, Alejandro Lugo’s Fragmented Lives, Assembled Parts (2008) examined the numerous ways in which class, capitalism, and culture produce and reproduce working class life. In his ethnographic monograph of factory workers in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, Alejandro Lugo argues that borders are also saturated with “inspections” to which color hierarchies are an unacknowledged axis that commensurate it ethnographically. Moreover, Lugo (2008) provides a new analytical tool, “border inspections,” to the current metaphor of “border crossings.” Central to Lugo’s work is the ethnographic analysis of working class populations in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, and shows that “border inspections are more pervasive among failed border crossings of the working classes, who too often experience border exclusions; whereas successful border crossings are more characteristic of relatively privileged sectors” (117; italics on original). Thus, for Lugo, borders are conceptualized as ethnographic objects that “are mainly characterized by

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17 See chapter six in this dissertation for a thorough discussion of Rosaldo’s border crossings, Lugo’s border inspection and border theory analysis of “color” to explore class and color hierarchies among Mexicans in Chicago.
supervision and scrutiny; after all, too many borders in social life are products of crossroads with “inspection stations” (118).

By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, border theory has become a paradigm that is useful to explore other processes that are not bound to nation-state, but happen across borders, “crossings” and “inspections”. Utilizing the insights gained from studying the problem of color among Mexicans in Mexico by Lugo (2008), Lynn Stephen’s Transborder Lives: Indigenous Oaxacans in Mexico, California and Oregon (2007) looks at how ethnic and racial classifications used by indigenous people are cognizant of the issue of color. Further, an important ethnography that uses border theory to document the recent neoliberal changes in both Mexico and the United States, is Gilberto Rosas’s Barrio Libre: Criminalizing States and Delinquent Refusals of the New Frontier (2012). Rosas emphasizes how race, governance and neoliberalism affects the lives of youth populations by exploring the lives of the Mexican youth in the city of Nogales (Sonora) who called themselves Barrio Libre (Free ‘Hood). These youth employ violence, theft, and bribery to survive, often preying on undocumented migrants. Rosas offers a critical theoretical shift in Border Theory to highlight and contest, as the author explains, “the utopian hybrid spaces so celebrated in border theory and postcolonial theory” (Rosas 2012: 18). More specifically, for Gilberto Rosas, border theorists should emphasize the questioning of state control of territory and population, neoliberal productions of criminality, diffused racial governance, and the thickening of the borderlands and the new frontiers of race and crime (Rosas 2006, 2007, 2012).

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18 For exception on uncelebrated accounts on Border Theory, see Lugo 1997, 2003, 2008.
Concomitant with the work on border theory, this dissertation grounds the analysis of the formation of a new working class, the production of a particular cultural work ethic, the disciplining of the body and the mobilization of class and color hierarchies in the City of Chicago through contributions that scholarship on borders and the borderlands have produced within anthropology. The Border Theory I now spin is one that attempts to understand how people’s lives on borders, both visible and invisible, form a central element of how their subjectivities are constituted in late capitalism. Moreover, the necessity and urgency of examining skin color hierarchies as a bordered space in this monograph emerged because of the ethnographic data I collected to understand a process that can explain how specific economic, cultural and political formations are saturated with power. Even more importantly, here I argue that color continues to be utilized as an organizational and regulatory mechanism to further reproduce capitalist expansion and which is often masked through the discourse of modernity.

I utilize a border theory framework without leaving behind the question of capitalism and power. I ethnographically argue that we are currently experiencing a diffused and sometimes a strategic “colored governance.” Colored governance is expressed through a working class domination that operates within and on the bodies of the working classes. While historically and geographically, color hierarchies vary and shift in meaning, from the colonial, national and post-colonial context, this ethnography documents that color hierarchies still remain present, and organize people’s everyday lives to a significant degree. By examining the lives of working class men and women, in this case of Mexican immigrant residents in a specific geographic space in the City of Chicago, I provide a very specific ethnographic case study that qualitatively examines
these intricate cultural formations, as “color inspections” become a central cultural and controlling mechanism in the reproduction of working class subjects.

The use of border theory to provide an ethnographic description of Mexican immigrants in the City of Chicago is not an arbitrary undertaking. For example, border theorist Gilberto Rosas has examined the current neoliberal condition and has documented what he calls the thickening of the borderlands condition or the “coupling of ‘exceptionality’ with political imaginaries” (Rosas 2006) that extends beyond the U.S.-Mexico border. Further, Renato Rosaldo (1989) provides the use of cultural borderlands as a framework to give attention to a better understating of culture. Rosaldo’s work also allows to see that borders travel (see Rosaldo 1989; Lugo 2008, 2012); and “border inspections” are not just occurring within the context of the U.S.-Mexico border (see Lugo 2008 especially; see also chapter six in this dissertation). Inspecting stations are, as I understand them, as nodes of power experienced by working class folks beyond, and in the depths of the U.S. nation-state. In the context of the City of Chicago, “borders” are traced ethnographically through class, labor and color hierarchies in the lived experiences of Mexican immigrants.

Among the critical ethnographic contributions that border theory has allow me to make in this dissertation is the theoretical, metaphorical and practical phrase of “color inspections,” which I take to be the best explanatory mechanism to describe what Mexican immigrant of working class background experience in their everyday lives while making a living mowing grass for clients. “Color inspections” as an analytical tool can be very useful, and I hope scholars see its applicability in other contexts such as documenting the color inspections that black, white, and other ethnic populations in the
United States for example. Moreover, “color inspections” can be mobilized to document and problematize the erasure of color of other Latin American populations as well.

**Organization of Ethnographic Materials**

The ethnographic materials presented in this dissertation are organized in an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion. Chapter two, entitled “*El Norte y Las Yardas: Looking for a Better Life in Mexican South Chicago,*” is divided into two parts. Part one provides a historical account of Mexican migration to the Midwest region, Chicago, and the South Chicago neighborhood from the early twentieth century up to late 1990s. Part two traces the historical emergence of the *yardero*, where I begin to unearth how it is that Mexicans began working as lawn care service workers in the City of Chicago in the 1980s. More specifically, in this chapter I uncover a *yardera/o* history by tracing the economic, political and cultural factors that have led to the production of this new working class of *yarderos*. Using interviews from *yarderos* that perform lawn service work in Chicago between the early 1980s-2010s, this chapter links structural forces to individual decisions, and examines the stories of migration to provide a description of why they came to the United States and how they end up working as *yarderos/as*.

Chapter three, entitled, “*The Anatomy of the Yardero Work Week: An Ethnographic Description of the Capitalist Structure of Yardero Work Landscape*” offers an ethnographic anatomy of the workday of the *yardero/a*. I describe the structure and form of the landscaping season in the City of Chicago and provide a weighty ethnographic

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19 For reasons of structure and form, in this dissertation the introduction and conclusion are labeled as chapters and numbered accordingly. The bibliography is composed similarly as well.
interpretation of the work itself as I performed it with two lawn care service companies—
Hernandez Lawn Care, and Flores Lawn Care—during my research period. I also
document the daily struggles of being a working class Mexican while doing lawn services
in middle and upper class neighborhoods of Chicago and its suburbs.

Chapter four, entitled “Becoming Yardero: Neoliberal Entrepreneurs from Below,
Work Ethic, and the Class” provides a cultural analysis of the yardero work ethic. Here, I
argue that among Mexican populations of working class backgrounds, work ethic takes a
very specific cultural form, and Mexican’s sense of self as working class subjects are
intimately tied to an ideological domination that directs class behavior in favor of capital
extraction. In this chapter, I document how the Mexican work ethic is what paradoxically
enables yarderos—as they become small company owners—to become entrepreneurs and
document how this work ethic is instilled among entry-level lawn service workers or
chalanes. Theoretically, the ethnographic materials presented here challenge the taken-
for-granted notions that under neoliberalism as a historical stage in the mode of
production, subjectivity is constructed through “freedom” and “choice.” The argument
follows, that rather than yarderos seeing work itself as a “choice” and as a way to gain
“freedom” economically, when examining the labor hierarchy diachronically, working
class life is saturated with “unfreedom,” class domination, and organized along gender.

Chapter five, entitled “On Shit, Capitalism, and the Body: The Hidden Stories of the
Exposed Mexican Yardero,” examines the relations between capitalism, the body and
discipline. Specifically, I document how Mexican, lawn service workers are disciplined
to take control of their bodily movements, feelings, and functional necessities in order to
make efficient use of their bodies as they perform lawn services. Here I examined how
the yardero body is central in the production process, the management of workers and their bodies while performing lawn service in order to maximize profit. The chapter concludes that at those moments of unpleasant experiences that disrupt the production process, laughing is as a way to humanize an activity that is in itself dehumanizing.

Chapter six, entitled “El Color de Las Yardas: The Mexican Working Class and Encounter with Color Hierarchies in Mexican South Chicago” ethnographically and theoretically utilizes border theory to examine how “color” can be theoretically central for scholars documenting the everyday lives of Mexicanos/as in the United States. Coining the phrase, “Color Inspections,” I argue that this theoretical phrase—a twenty first century theoretical and practical metaphor birthed by Renato Rosaldo’s “border crossings” and later a transformation of Alejandro Lugo’s “border inspections”—is helpful to uncover and excavate forms of subjectivity as well as documenting the use and misuse of color hierarchies in the everyday life of the working class Mexican population in Chicago, Illinois. The chapter is organized in three parts. The first looks at a material and discursive production of colorismo (Lugo 2008) within the context of colonial and post-colonial Mexico. The second part theorizes how my participants encounter and made sense of color hierarchies by working as Mexican lawn care service workers in the City of Chicago. The third and last part provides a theoretical discussion about how color hierarchies allow us to think as scholars about the Mexican working class as one part of the human condition in the United States.

In the conclusion, entitled “Colored Governance as Premature Death and the Future of the Mexican Working Class.” I critically reflect through a border theory lens, on the lived experiences of the Mexican, working class immigrants I interviewed for this
dissertation’s research. Specifically, I foreground the concept of “color governance” and “premature death” in order to explain the struggles, sufferings, and subjection of Mexican working class men and women in the city of Chicago and beyond. Colored governance’s product is an orchestrated political organized subjection that produces a “premature death” on the Mexican working class subjects, especially to those that are inspected as they travel borders, both physical and invisible.

**On Methods**

In order to call Chicago “home” for so many Mexicans, there were certain structural forces that prompted the migration of Mexicans to the City of Chicago, and from a local perspective, the shifting economic activities within the city lay the ground work to channel Mexicans toward de-skilled, service sector jobs. For example, as evidence and in regards to manufacturing work in the City of Chicago, notes Betancur et al. (1993), that these “had peaked in 1947 at 668,000 began a strong decline in the city (614,897 in 1954, 508, 797 in 1963, 430, 100 in 1972, 366,000 in 1977, and 295, 992 in 1982” (124). Moreover, within the City of Chicago, other economic sectors slowly replaced manufacturing jobs, led by high corporate jobs (banking, research, real estate, marketing, trade), “brought a long a highly polarized labor market with a large group of highly skilled, highly paid position in one pole and the vast number of low paying, support occupations at the other” (Betancur et al 1993: 124). The restructuring of the labor force occurred in the slow but constant movement away from the old liberalism of the post-war to effectively managing entire populations through new forms of labor management. This
became especially clear in the late 1970s, and early 1980s, a period which is often suggested to be the genesis of a new liberalism.  

A general glance at the industrial distribution of Latinos in the Chicago metropolitan area tells us about some of the changes that were occurring in the early late 1970s and 1980s. For example, there were sectors such as in agriculture were not much has changed, as Latinos accounted for only one percent in both decades. In manufacturing, in the 1970s, Latinos accounted for 61.6% while by the 1980s, that number declined to about 48.3%. Quite clearly, other jobs that registered an increase in these decades were precisely service jobs. For example, in the 1970s, Latinas/os performed clerical or administrative work at 11.7%, but by 1980, that percent increased to about 17.2%. In that same time period, service work in the year 1970 accounted for 8.1% of Latinas/os, while in 1980, that number grew to about 14%. John Betancur et al. (1993) makes a very critical observation regarding the overall changes and restructuring of work and incorporation of Latinas/os in Chicago’s economy. Clearly, while manufacturing work declined in the decades of 1970s and 1980s, “many Latinos have been absorbed into low-paying jobs as busboys and dishwashers in restaurants, as maids and cleaners in hotels, as security guards, messengers, maintenance workers, gardeners,

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20 One of the major claims given by neoliberal scholars is that we are living a fundamentally “new social order” in which the power and income of the upper fractions of the ruling classes—the wealthiest persons—was re-established in the wake of a setback.” In relation to capitalism, Gerad Dumenil and Dominique Levy (2007), neoliberalism refers to new rules of the functioning of capitalism which center, periphery and the relation between the two. Its main characteristics include: “a new discipline of labour and management to the benefit of lender and shareholders; the diminished intervention of the state concerning development and welfare; the dramatic growth of financial institutions; the implementation of new relationships between the financial and non-financial sectors.”(2007:10). See also Harvey 2007; Rosas 2012.

21 See Betancur et al (1993: 126), Table 5.1. & Table 5.2.
and similar low-end jobs in the service industry” (Betancur et al 1993: 127; emphasis added). 22

22 See recent ethnographic studies such as Ruth Gomberg-Munoz 2012; Zolinski 1994, 2006; Walley 2013.
Chapter 2

*El Norte y Las Yardas: Looking for a Better Life in Mexican South Chicago*

“Whether employed in Mexico or in the United States, Mexican workers experienced unequal conditions as they produced and serviced an international market based in the United States”


This chapter discusses the social, economic and political dynamics that produced one of the major migration movements from Mexico to the United States. The chapter is divided into two parts. Part one provides a historical account of Mexican migration to the Midwest region, Chicago, and the South Chicago neighborhood from the early twentieth century up to the 1970s, followed by a concise introduction to my ethnographic site, and participants. Part two ethnographically uncovers for what particular reasons and under what circumstances Mexicans began working as lawn care service workers in the City of Chicago by briefly looking at the lives and experiences of migration of three Mexican *yarderos*. In the chapter, I specifically situate the emergence of *yarderos/as* as a new working class in the City of Chicago during the decade of the early 1980s, as revealed by the ethnographic information, and by the analysis of the neoliberal changes in the city of Chicago since the early 1980s. The analysis of the historiography and ethnographic data of Mexican immigration in this chapter is cognizant in that it offers only partial views, schematic portraits, but very informative views about Mexican migration to the Mexican Midwest and to Mexican Chicago. Throughout the chapter, I emphasize that these Mexican immigrants come to Chicago by a compulsory
migration and at other times by individual decisions, but all immigrants in one way or another are seeking a “better life,” both, in el norte y en las yardas (The North and in the Yards).

Part I: Capitalism, War and Forced Migration

People of Mexican-origin have been on the borderlands between Mexico and the United States for a long time, even before the production of the current geopolitical borderlands that separates these nation-states. If we begin by chronicling history and events, the first historical claim is that the contours of present day U.S.-Mexico borders were produced through war and violence. As Europeans, Indigenous, Anglo, and other populations encountered themselves in the borderlands of present day northern Mexico and the American southwest, conflicts for natural resources often lead to war and clashes among individuals, groups, and classes.

In the early nineteenth century, the desire of possessing land and resources eventually lead to a military conflict between Mexico and the United States from 1846 until 1848. Mexico lost one-half of its national territory, including what are now the southwestern and western states of the United States: Arizona, California, New Mexico,

23 For example, Chicano/a scholars and scholarship on Chicanos/as have documented, historically and ethnographically, the presence of Mexicans in what would later become the American Southwest before the current international boundaries between Mexico and the United States were established by the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo by the two nation-states in 1848. See for example, Acuna 1972, 1996; Nuevo Kerr 1975, 1977; Cardenas 1976, Elizondo 1991, Limon 1973, 1994, Paredes 1978, Montejano 1987, Lugo 2008, Rosas 2012.

24 War, violence and conquest remain central even at the turn of the twenty-first century. For example, French philosopher Michel Foucault asked a very simple set of questions in his lectures of 1975-1976 in France, regarding violence, politics, and war: can the phenomenon of war be regarded as primary with respect to other relations (relations of inequality, disymetries, divisions of labor, relations of exploitation, etc cetera)?” The answer provided was in the form of another question, which follows, “It is quite possible that war is the continuation of politics by other means, but isn’t politics itself a continuation of war by other means?” (Foucault 2003 [1975-1976], 47-48).
Texas, and parts of Colorado, Nevada, Oklahoma, Oregon, Utah, and Wyoming. The loss of territory was solidified in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1848. In May of the same year, the Mexican Congress ratified it. Regarding this event, historian Mark Wasserman (2000) writes that the cost of the war was enormous and both sides suffered. The United States “lost more than 12,000 dead, eighty-seven percent of whom died from disease and exposure… Perhaps 10,000 Mexicans died in the war, with 4,000 to 5,000 of the total killed in battle. Countless more civilians perished. The economic damage to Mexico was immense” (87-88). Citing the horror experienced by American soldiers, Wasserman (2000) specifically documents what an American soldier described about one battle:

'It was] such a sight as I had never seen before, and which I would have been satisfied never seen again. The ground was covered with gore from the wounds of the dying and dead…The sight was horrible…Some had a leg, a foot, an arm or hand mangled to pieces and were lying upon the cold, muddy ground, shivering with cold, begging…[for a] drink of water. (84).

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Mexican state was not successful in producing the conditions for its people to strive economically, culturally or politically. With internal wars and wars against European nations and the United States, and a rampant centralization of wealth and land, the capitalist classes (both from Mexico and the United States) took advantage of the United States military, economic and political position.25

At the end of the nineteenth century, capitalist domination intensified as interactions between these two nation-states, or, more specifically, between the Mexican

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and North American elite and wealthy classes, accelerated.\textsuperscript{26} For instance, anthropologist Daniel Nugent (1998) mentions that “[t]he transformation of Mexico…was realized in part as a latent or indirect consequence of North American capitalization of land, agricultural production, and the production process generally” (16), as similar view is expressed in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter by Midwestern historian Dionicion Nodin Valdez (2000). Expansionist desires are also captured by historian John Mason Hart (2002) who writes that at the end of the American Civil War, the expanding American population began to move west in search of land and opportunity.

Elite American investors were already paving the way for an increasing privatization and exploitation of Mexican natural resources, and left much of the general population without means of subsistence. As noted by historian Hart (2002), John S. Kennedy, one of the earliest investors in northern Mexico and a banker for the firm J.P Morgan and Company, “participated in the 1860s sale and purchase of Mexican government bonds. During the Porfiriato he acquired Mexican railroad bonds” (2002: 76). Mason Hart (2002) further documents that Charles Stillman, owner of the Brownsville Ferry Company, led the development of the Texas-Mexican borderlands and the American trade in northern Mexico by committing “the National City Bank, the largest financial institution in the United States by the 1890s, to the Mexican railroad system” (Hart 2002: 78). By 1906, James Stillman, William Rockefeller, and Henry Rogers, the heads of the Amalgamated Copper Company, took over the Cananea copper

\textsuperscript{26} Daniel Nugent (1998) also makes a similar argument. For Nugent, North American capitalist, colonist, and military forces have intervened in Mexico for more than a century up to the 1900s, and that many rebellions in Mexico have directly opposed them. See also, John H. Coastworth (1998) which argues that U.S intervention in Mexico influenced the revolution in a number of ways as well as Ruben Osorio (1990) as he concludes that Pancho Villa’s attacks on the United States were partly guided by an anti-imperial ideology.
mines in Sonora. In concert, these investors agreed and saw in their southern neighbor, Mexico’s potential for profits in shipping, railroads, telegraphs, and resource development. However, they perhaps miscalculated the capitalist consequences or accepted it as a given that the United States will, at the turn of the twentieth century, experience increasing waves of Mexican immigrants crossing towards the United States in search of a better life.27

This rampant capitalist intervention and domination by North Americans, in conjunction with Mexican entrepreneurs and aided by a political class on both sides of the spectrum, had rippling detrimental effects on Mexico’s populations, and laid the foundation of later neoliberal forms of domination and exploitation in the second part of the twentieth century. But let us first address the consequences that the Mexican Revolution had on the Mexican working classes. Historians have spent their time debating the consequences that led to one of the major social movements of the twentieth century in Mexico, the Mexican Revolution of 1910, which for the most part, its human and political consequences were felt on the shoulders of the Mexican population. For example, Mark Wasserman (2000) writes that the Mexican Revolution resulted as confluence of four crises: “succession, economic repression, the resurgence of dissident regional elites, and growing oppression of country people and working class” (223, emphasis added). The economic and state project carried at the end of the nineteenth

27 The latest push for a neoliberalization of Mexico’s natural resources has been accomplished by the Mexican congress ability to open oil reservoirs to foreign private investors. The set of energy reforms and laws enacted in 2014 promise to bring the price of gasoline and natural gas down, but the long-term effects of these reforms are not clearly articulated by the reformist. For a detailed explanation of what the Mexican government intends with this so called “Reforma Energetica” see: http://www.presidencia.gob.mx/reformaenergetica/en/#!landing
century by Mexico’s political class, which by no means was a cohesive project, conflicted in very crude ways with the reality of everyday life.

Commenting on the main reason why a social upheaval emerged in the first decade of the twentieth century, John Mason Hart (2002) says that “[Porfirio] Diaz’s policies had produced an unstable economy that benefited relatively few. It had failed to sustain the economic expansion that characterized its first twenty-two years. Along with that, it had shifted the burden of that failure to the working class and the lead affluent though the devaluation of the peso, government-endorsed in salary, and longer working hours” (265, emphasis added). A latent aspect in how these two historians analyze the reasons as to why the Mexican Revolution of 1910 took place is their attention to provide a theory of political transformation that is cognizant of the role played by the working class populations. That is, while political leaders have a say in the direction of a modernist, state formation project, working class populations do react, and in many ways challenge, in their limited means, that direction itself.

Described as one of the great migratory movements in the history of the United States, Mexican migration has captured the ink of scholars interested in this social, political, economic and cultural phenomenon (see Gamio 1971; Sepulveda 1976; Ano Nuevo Kerr 1977; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Davis 1990; Meier and Ribera 1972; Montejano 1987; Garcia 1981, 1982, 1996; Chavez 1992, 2001, 2008, 2014; Alvarez 1995; Valdez 2002; De Genova 1998, 2005; Massey et al 2002; Arredondo 2008; Acosta 2012; Innis-Jimenez 2013). Since the early 1900s, distinct migrations from Mexico have given way to present day populations in the United States. In broad strokes, the effects of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and wealth disparities brought to the United States about
100,000 Mexican nationals in the second decade of the twentieth century. According to census data, “the Mexico-born population of the United States grew from 103,000 to 1,400,000 between 1900 and 1930” (Meir and Ribera: 120; see also Garcia 1996). During the 1920s, historian Vargas-Zargoza (1993) estimates that about “20,000 or more Mexican workers passed through San Antonio each year on their way north. Texas cities became recruiting centers for the labor needs of the North, Northwest, and Northeast” (1-2). Thus, the Mexican Revolution of 1910 had enduring effects in Mexican society, but the decades that followed ended up affecting the texture of places far away, such as in the Midwestern cities of the United States. These radical changes in the texture of neighborhoods such as South Chicago call for an anthropological analysis that opens and entertains rigorous historical awareness of how events transform, shape, and structure the options as more Mexicans arrive at the northern cities such as Chicago, Illinois.

**Mexican Midwest**

Mexican migration to the Midwest political and economic borderlands varied geographically and settlements sprang in rural and emerging urban centers at the turn of the twentieth century. Midwest historian Juan Garcia (1996: 26) notes that urbanization of Mexicans to this region began in the early 1900s, and by the 1920s, 70 percent of Midwestern Mexicans lived in urban centers. Moreover, historian Dionicio Nodin Valdez (2000) suggests that the influx of Mexicans to the Midwest in the early twentieth century, as well as today, was triggered as a consequence of the labor necessities in the United States, and I would add, as a consequence of labor scarcity back in Mexico. Such was the

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increase of Mexican migration to the Midwest region that in 1916, railroad companies brought hundreds of Mexicans to the Near West Side of Chicago, South Chicago, and South Bend, Indiana. Nodin Valdez (2000: 25-26) argues that each of the aforementioned Mexican colonies have several features in common. First, Mexican colony formations appeared, as already suggested, in a direct response to employment necessities of the Mexican worker and U.S. capitalists alike; second, most Mexican migrants came from the central states of Mexico; and third, there was a greater homogeneity in the Midwestern colonies than in the barrios of the Southwest.

The Mexicanos and Chicanos who arrived in the Midwest were not naïve to the labor demands of the Anglo American capitalist. By the time Mexicanos and Chicanos arrived in the Midwest, notes historian Zaragoza Vargas (1993: 14), they had already “put Texas on the map agriculturally.” For example, in the earlier decades of the 1900s, in Texas, Mexicanos and Chicanos

“laboriously cleared cactus, dense thickens of chaparral, and mesquite trees from hundreds of acres of land. The arduous of clearing mesquites was called grubbing, a ‘Mexican job’ …The root system of mesquites sometimes went down fifty feet into the ground; the men either cut the roots or pulled them out by hand and then burned the cactus and chaparral” (Vargas 1993: 14).

Vargas Zaragoza’s incisive documentation of labor recruitment among Mexican and Chicano workers (in states like Texas) notes that the kinds of jobs that Mexicans were recruited for oftentimes signaled a change in employment patterns, but also, as later chapters of this dissertation ethnographically clarify, work patterns can also signal change in the structural hierarchies of color differences and formations of working class racism. Furthermore, after clearing the land in Texas, Mexicans were then recruited to harvest it. As notes, Vargas Zaragoza (1993) that while at first the cotton industry attracted Mexicans to Texas, “the repressive conditions and low
wages characteristic of this industry eventually motivated tens of thousand to seek alternative work in the Midwest” (15).

News of employment travel borders within families (see chapter three). In the case of the Mexican experience of migration in the Midwest, the previous proposition holds true even in present day Mexican populations. For example, at the beginning of the twentieth century, lured by the promise of greater job opportunities and fueled with the desire to seek a better life, many Mexicans bypassed work in Texas and sought work in rural and urban Midwestern states. By bypassing the state of Texas, for instance, Mexican workers could seek better labor opportunities, especially after the 1920-1921 depression when Midwest steel, manufacturing, and agricultural capitalists necessitated an ever increasing labor power. Dionicio Nodin Valdez (2000) notes that after World War I, the massive wave of immigration during this period, “permitted Chicago, already the second most populous city in the nation, to gain distinction for the largest concentration of Mexicans beyond the border states” (34). Indeed, he further explains Valdez (2000) that by 1927, Mexican officials reported: more than 45,000 Mexicans residing in the zone extending from northern to western suburbs of Chicago into northwestern Indiana. An additional, 25,000 were reported in Lower Michigan and Ohio, 3,000 in Upper Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, and about 12, 000 in Missouri, Iowa, and Western Illinois…[a]t least 25,000 more Mexicans resided in Kansas and Nebraska at the time, for a total of about 110,000 in the Great Plains and Great Lakes region” (35).

In the early twentieth century, the story of Mexican and Chicano migration to the Midwest was driven by a multiplicity of factors, wills, desires and the real needs of workers both in Mexico and in industries in the United States. At first, as it has already
being documented, Mexican immigrants were for the most part young unmarried males. In tandem with these gendered experiences, an aspect that is often ignored by studies of migration is the border crossings that are already experienced by Mexicans even before crossing the actual US-Mexico border line from inside Mexico while seeking job opportunities. An interview by historian Vargas Zaragoza (1993:23) done in Detroit, Michigan in the middle 1980s is worth revisiting. Zaragoza tells the story of the migration of Pedro Escobar, a Mexican migrant who left his farm outside of Guadalajara, Jalisco, and travelled to Tampico, Tamaulipas. From Tampico, he was hired by the American-owned Eagle Oil Refinery. Pedro went back to Mexico, but having experienced work in the United States, he migrated to El Paso, Texas where he signed a labor contract to harvest beets in Wyoming. From Wyoming, Pedro took a bachelor journey to Chicago and Pedro then found employment in one of the packaging houses of the city.

The experience of migration was overwhelmingly driven by labor demands; however, as soon as Mexicanos and Chicanos from the Southwest settled in Midwestern colonies, (of both of rural and urban characteristics), vibrant communities of men, women and children became pillars for further migration north from the American southwest and Mexico.\textsuperscript{29} By the late 1920s, several clusters of Mexican, urban settlements appeared throughout the Midwest. For example, in Kansas City a “Mexican neighborhood had appeared by the 1920’s, Mexicans formed a boxcar camp in the north

\textsuperscript{29} The work of anthropologist Guillermina Núñez (2009, 2010, 2012) richly documents and recaptures the concept of the term “colony” in order to understand present day immigrant communities in the U.S. Border region. For example, Núñez writes about space and the transformation of rural identities, how taxpayers prepares charge high fees to low income border residents, about agricultural workers and the perils that they experience.
east section of Argentine, a company town of the Santa Fe railroad...[t]hey have begun to settle around 1905, and the barrio reached several hundred by 1907” (Valdez 2000: 31). At first, the importance of railroad companies literally drove the migration of Mexicans to the Midwest. As argued by Vargas Zaragoza, as soon as “Mexicans established beachheads in the various railroad industries in the Midwest, networks of family and friends supported and sustained the influx into this sector” (41). Thus, by 1925, “over half the 8,000 to 10,000 Mexican steelworkers in the Midwest held jobs in Chicago mills, and they constituted 14 percent of the total local workforce in steel” (Vargas Zaragoza 1993: 47; Valdez 2002: 32).

Mexicans occupied the South Chicago landscape since as early as 1916, but in 1919, in combination with various social, economic and political processes taking place both in Mexico and in the United States, these concomitant processes fueled the arrival of Mexicans in large numbers to this steel producing area of the Midwest. As documented in his historical analysis of South Chicago, historian Michael Innis-Jimenez (2013) tells us that according to the United States census, early in the twentieth century “Mexicans comprised 1,141 of the 808,558 foreign-born residents in the entire city of Chicago...the official 1930 Mexican and Mexican-American population of Chicago had grown to 19,632. By the 1940s, the post-Great Depression Mexican community had shrunk to around 16,000” (Inns-Jimenez 2013: 21). Although the first Mexicans that came to Chicago worked as railroad workers (traqueros), this early migration of Mexicans to
South Chicago found work in the steel mills that started operating in last decade of the 1880s (Innis-Jimenez 2013: 32-33).

**Postwar Migration and Neoliberalism in Mexican Chicago**

As explored in the first half of this chapter, the economies and political projects of and between Mexico and United States are so intimately intertwined that we need to look at the processes that took place on both nation-states, both synchronically and diachronically in order to get a better sense of how and why the movement of people occurs. For example, the advent of World War II brought an increasing demand for labor. The closest labor pool to draw from was and continues to be the Mexican population. To fix the problem of labor shortage before and during the war, the U.S. government turned towards binational agreements to bring Mexican workers to farms in the United States and other production sites. Under Public Law 45 (PL-45), “Mexican workers were contracted in their homeland…[although] national in scope, local federal, and state officials tailored the federal farm labor system to meet the regional labor market demands” (Gamboa 2000: xix).

After the war, in the postwar period, the increasing demand for Mexican labor decreased and Mexicans had to find alternatives for work. Focusing on the critical period since WWII and until the middle decade of the 1960s, Mae M. Ngai (2004) examines immigration policy based on immigration restrictions that began right after WWI and which dramatically increased until 1965. In the case of the Midwest political and

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30 Marco Garcilazo’s *Traqueros: Mexican Railroad Workers in the United States, 1870 to 1930* (2012) is the most recent study that begins to document the social history of this large wave of Mexican migrants to the United States who specifically worked for railroad companies.

31 See also, see also Valdez 1991: 91-82
economic borderlands, the shifting from manufacturing work, especially in urban centers, and an agro-food restructuring of the labor market had changed the availability of jobs and thus migration patterns. However, these changes in the structure of the labor industry or incoming of Mexican and Central American immigrants “had resulted in weakened union, relocation to nonmetropolitan counties in the Great Plains, lower wage structures, further de-skilling of labor force, more limited career paths, and production line speeds that tripled” (Hackneber et al. 1993; Scholoser 2001 in Zuniga 2006:30).

By the early 1960s, under the brutal effects of global capital, both Mexican and the United States, again, shift in the ways they dealt with human beings crossing their borders. In order to understand why so many Mexicans decided to travel north to Chicago, a swift look at the structural, political and economic climate in Mexico rapidly provides a picture of the conditions, which Mexicans had to endure in the early 1960s, and the following decades. Anthropologist Gilberto Rosas (2012) comments that between 1964 and 1965, Mexican officials allowed the introduction of U.S. and other foreign-owned assembly plants in the border region. Thus by the late 1970s, “Mexico’s capitulation to the realities of the global market signaled the end of its experiment with what has been as relatively successful state-directed capitalism” (42). The aim of becoming and seeking modernity in the engagement with global markets, led Mexican political classes and capitalists to a dynamic, and volatile interaction that will eventually leave sectors of the population without means to subsist and work. Suffering another political and economic crisis in the early 1980s, as further elaborated by Rosas (2012), a consequence of economic policies and demands by the International Monetary Fund for austerity programs, the Mexican peso was devaluated, and a “large number of small
business and farms shut down, and more than a million workers were laid off. Hunger stalked the land” (Rosas 2012: 43).

The United States was also going through a post-war period that affected and textured everyday life and structured the opportunities given the shifting economic and political changes. To be more precise, Mexicans arriving in the Midwest, and more specifically to Chicago, found a space of shifting migration patterns within the city and availability of work (see Innis-Jimenez 2013, Fernandez 2012). Up until the Second World War, Mexicans remained employed in low-wage manufacturing. For instance, a 1944 survey “of employers of Mexicans in Chicago, established that most Mexicans at that time were still employed in the steel, railroad, and meat-packaging industries” (Ano Nuevo Kerr 1976: 143 in Betancur et al 1993: 118). Ethnic studies and historian scholar Lilia Fernandez (2012) notes that by 1970, “Chicago reported nearly a quarter of a million ‘Spanish speaking’ or “Spanish-surname’ people, as they were referred to collectively during these years…By 1980, over 42,000 Hispanic or ‘Spanish-origin’ people called Chicago home, constituting a remarkable 14 percent of all Chicagoans” (2012:5). In regards to the Mexican population specifically, by 1970, “Chicago had the fourth largest urban Mexican population in the United States with 106,000 people. This figure increased to 255,770, or 60.6% of the Latino population in Chicago in 1980 and to 325,560, or 64.6%, in 1990” (Betancur et al 1993: 119).

In order to call Chicago “home” for so many Mexicans, there were certain structural forces that prompted the migration of Mexicans to the City of Chicago, and from a local perspective, the shifting economic activities within the city lay the ground work to

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32 Rosas (2012) pointing to other sources such as Cockcroft (1986:212) and Escobar (1995:90).
channel Mexicans toward de-skilled, service sector jobs. For example, as evidence and in
regards to manufacturing work in the City of Chicago, notes Betancur et al. (1993), that
these “had peaked in 1947 at 668,000 began a strong decline in the city (614,897 in 1954,
Moreover, within the City of Chicago, other economic sectors slowly replaced
manufacturing jobs, led by high corporate jobs (banking, research, real estate, marketing,
trade), “brought a long a highly polarized labor market with a large group of highly
skilled, highly paid position in one pole and the vast number of low paying, support
occupations at the other” (Betancur et al 1993: 124). The restructuring of the labor force
occurred in the slow but constant movement away from the old liberalism of the post-war
to effectively managing entire populations through new forms of labor management. This
became especially clear in the late 1970s, and early 1980s, a period which is often
suggested to be the genesis of a new liberalism.33

A general glance at the industrial distribution of Latinos in the Chicago
metropolitan area tells us about some of the changes that were occurring in the early late
1970s and 1980s. For example, there were sectors such as in agriculture were not much
has changed, as Latinos accounted for only one percent in both decades. In
manufacturing, in the 1970s, Latinos accounted for 61.6% while by the 1980s, that
number declined to about 48.3%. Quite clearly, other jobs that registered an increase in

33 One of the major claims given by neoliberal scholars is that we are living a fundamentally “new social
order” in which the power and income of the upper fractions of the ruling classes—the wealthiest persons--
was re-established in the wake of a setback.” In relation to capitalism, Gerard Dumenil and Dominique Levy
(2007), neoliberalism refers to new rules of the functioning of capitalism which center, periphery and the
relation between the two. Its main characteristics include: “a new discipline of labour and management to
the benefit of lender and shareholders; the diminished intervention of the state concerning development and
welfare; the dramatic growth of financial institutions; the implementation of new relationships between the
financial and non-financial sectors.”(2007:10). See also Harvey 2007; Rosas 2012.
these decades were precisely service jobs. For example, in the 1970s, Latinas/os performed clerical or administrative work at 11.7%, but by 1980, that percent increased to about 17.2%. In that same time period, service work in the year 1970 accounted for 8.1% of Latinas/os, while in 1980, that number grew to about 14%. John Betancur et al. (1993) makes a very critical observation regarding the overall changes and restructuring of work and incorporation of Latinas/os in Chicago’s economy. Clearly, while manufacturing work declined in the decades of 1970s and 1980s, “many Latinos have been absorbed into low-paying jobs as busboys and dishwashers in restaurants, as maids and cleaners in hotels, as security guards, messengers, maintenance workers, gardeners, and similar low-end jobs in the service industry” (Betancur et al 993: 127; emphasis added). 

Perhaps, it is time that we hear the voices of men and women, those that, with their labor in the recent three decades have carried, silently, sin respiar (without complaining), the City of Chicago on the back of their shoulders.

**Borders and Ethnographic Site**

We now know that by the year 2000, Mexicans reached more than 700,000 within the metropolitan boundaries of the city of Chicago. Mexicans in Chicago and their patterns of settlement continue to remain confined to specific areas of the city, especially for those who are of low-wage working class status. In 2010, the city of Chicago was home to 2.7 million inhabitants; 45% identify themselves as white, 33% as black or

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34 See Betancur et al (1993: 126), Table 5.1. & Table 5.2.
35 See recent ethnographic studies such as Ruth Gomberg-Munoz 2012; Zolinski 1994, 2006; Walley 2013.
36 There is a necessity to examine Mexican migration outside of the metropolitan boundaries of the city of Chicago. Small suburbs and cities presently have experienced demographic changes as Mexicans leave the city of Chicago in search of more employment opportunities, better living condition, and continue the struggle to make a better life.
African American, 30% as Hispanic or Latino, and 5% as Asian (2010 U.S. Census). Today, the census numbers signal the vibrant, lively, Mexican community in Chicago of about 800,000. Just as it was in the early twentieth century, the South Chicago neighborhood remains the third major Mexican district of the city and here is where my story of revealing the yardero/a dream for a better life in the City of Chicago begins.

Map. 2.1 The City of Chicago’s municipal boundaries. South Chicago is located in the Southeast Side of the city bordering Lake Michigan
Map. 2.2. South Chicago streets and major borderlines

South Chicago consists primarily of working class populations of White (23%), African American (56%), and Mexican and Chicano residents (32%) (US Census)
Within the City of Chicago, South Chicago is located south of downtown Chicago, and near the border of the state of Indiana and Lake Michigan. Sometimes residents in the City of Chicago find it difficult to locate South Chicago spatially, since the city is divided along class and racial lines that obstruct north to south interaction of residents. For example, recently, a local media outlet described South Chicago as “the far South Side” in order to specifically locate this neighborhood within the boundaries of the city.

However, to be more precise, to the north of the South Chicago neighborhood, we find a middle class African American neighborhood named South Shore with 79th Street as the border separating these two neighborhoods. To the west, South Chicago borders Avalon Park, Stony Island Park and Calumet Heights. South Chicago and these last two neighborhoods are clearly separated by the Chicago Skyway which runs alongside South Chicago Avenue. For example, between 79th Street and 95th Street, along the South

38 On January 26, 2012, CBS News ran the story with the following title: “Woman Killed in the Far South Side Hit-And-Run.” For our purposes, South Chicago is located geographically in a very specific place, but its spatial and demarcations are often fluid. However, during fieldwork after an evening’s work would end, I would sit down and watch the nightly news. When the news reports dealt with the South Side of Chicago or a place south of Hyde Park, the news reports would add the word, “far” to denote the south side neighborhood. In terms of meaning, it seems that “far” had a distancing effect given that the nightly news are seen throughout the city. In terms of a racial and ethnic reading, news report of criminality seem to be associated with blackness and latinidad by these and other news outlets also.

When I performed fieldwork, I worked within very specific neighborhood and the participants of this study also worked within this area. For example, when talking with the previous chalan of Don Vicente, Ramiro from the state of Jalisco, Mexico, I would ask him where he would go on the weekends. Ramiro would tell me that he did not travel much. He never went to downtown Chicago and mostly stayed around Commercial Ave in South Chicago. I recall a day late in August in which his shoes were worn out because of so much walking during the season and I ask him why he did not go to River Oaks Mall to buy a new pair (located about twenty minutes from South Chicago). Ramiro quickly replied that he did not know where that was. He had been in Chicago for six months already. Don Vicente actually took him to buy a new pair soon after.

Media portrayals of South Chicago, as I said above are often problematic. When criminality is the discussion in media outlets, they often describe South Chicago. I did not document in more detail how my participants imagined space specifically, but the image that emerges is one of a vision of space that is constrained by borders that demarcate spaces that these workers are able to navigate. If they venture outside of their “normal” working activities, they will often be subjected to the neoliberal forces of both state and civil society.

39 Refer to Fig. 1.0 labeled as “South Chicago Borders.”
Chicago Avenue, streets do not cross each neighborhood, rather you will find about only six tunnels and two major streets that connect South Chicago with Calumet Heights. To the south of South Chicago, we find a working class to middle class, Mexican and Mexican American neighborhood named East Chicago or commonly referred to as East Side. South Chicago and East Side are clearly marked by another geographic border, the Calumet River. In the southwest tip of South Chicago, between the Calumet River and 95th Street, lies the neighborhood of South Deering. To the east of South Chicago lies Lake Michigan which has recently added a 64 million Lake Shore Drive extension where Steel Mill factories were located before closing in the early 1980s. While borders and boundaries may at first be perceived as arbitrary, what I continually demonstrate is that the emergence of neighborhoods is not arbitrary. The incorporation and reproduction of neighboring areas is part of a state formation process and capital expansion that has given rise to the present spatial demarcations of the City of Chicago, which are clearly drawn by class and race. Today, the South Chicago borders, whether physical or invisible, are saturated with meaning, power, and inequality.

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40 In this dissertation, when I refer to South Chicago, I am referring to a very specific place in the city of Chicago, meaning, the one described above. South Chicago is clearly demarcated by geographical boundaries, race, ethnic, and class configurations. There is often a common misconception, usually when you speak with people that are not from the south of Chicago, when you tell them that you are from South Chicago, they often think of Hyde Park or the South Shore neighborhood. This erasure of geographic presence within the spatial imagination of city residents can be interpreted as an erasure of working class life in general.  

40 Also, the City of Chicago plans to develop the infrastructure in this area and in 2013 inaugurated what is referred to as the Lake Shore Drive extension. The Chicago Sun Times’ Rosalind Rossin describes it as “[a] new, two-mile extension of South Lake Shore Drive opened Sunday, relocating U.S. Route 41 several blocks east and extending from South Shore Drive and 79th to Ewing, near 92nd” (2013, October 27, online version). Furthermore, the project represents “in a year on the adjoining land, the last massive parcel of privately owned lakefront in Chicago. Planed [sic] for the site: more than 30 million square feet of commercial and residential space, including 14,000 housing units” (2013). As I write this dissertation, I closely look at the development of areas that could potentially bring economic change and with that resident displacement and other major social dislocations in the near future.  

41 An example of this new transformation of South Chicago is how city planners, investors, politicians and public interest are coming together to radically transform this neighborhood. The goal is to have four new
South Chicago was chosen as a research site for its rich history and serves as a testing ground to examine how borders impact the everyday lives of Mexicans in Chicago. The official date of Mexicans arriving in Chicago is often placed around 1916, thus making South Chicago one of the oldest Mexican neighborhoods in the Midwest. South Chicago currently enjoys almost a century of rich history and layers of meaning by each generation within the landscape and specific cultural spaces of this neighborhood.

Without falling into compartmentalized visions of space and geography, it is true that South Chicago is clearly demarcated by borders. These borders are geographical, but also culturally drawn by class, gender, color, race, and residence that fragment and facture the perceived homogenous demarcated space. In terms of cultural production, evidently, a neighborhood with almost a century of history, it is not a discovery at all that each generation of Mexican immigrants in South Chicago has left a trace, meanings, and products. The task for the ethnographer is to connect them through thick description and unearth the hidden stories stitched together in the historical formation of everyday life.

neighborhoods within South Chicago in three decades and have this area become the next major development area in the City of Chicago. See: Rossi (2013).
Fig. 2.1. Intersection of 89th Street and Commercial Ave. looking north. September 16, 2012.

**Part II: Yarderos/as as a New Mexican Working Class**

The story of how Mexicans in South Chicago became central in the lawn care industry is intimately tied to a shift from industrial work to a service oriented economy in South Chicago and speaks to larger globalization processes of the rapid implementation
of neoliberal rationality at local, state and national spaces as described in the last section.\textsuperscript{42} Of course, there is still factory work in this neighborhood. But the overwhelming majority of the labor force partakes in an economy emphasizing service outside the factory setting, as experienced by the \textit{yarderas/os} who came to the United States in the early 1980s, and lawn care or landscaping work is an activity that I found Mexicans performing to survive in order to live decent lives in the present.

From the context of state agencies, we are able to capture evidence of the magnitude of this economic activity. The United States Department of Labor collects workforce occupation profiles in the United States. The work that \textit{yarderos} perform falls under the major group of building and grounds cleaning and maintenance occupations (labeled as 37-0000), and lawn care service and landscaping activities fall under a subset data of Landscaping and Grounds keeping Workers (labeled 37-3011).\textsuperscript{43} More directly, the Bureau of Labor Statistics defines landscaping and groundskeeping as workers that landscape or maintain “grounds of property using hand or power tools or equipment. Workers typically perform a variety of tasks, which may include any combination of the following: sod laying, mowing, trimming, planting, watering, fertilizing, digging, raking, sprinkler installation, and installation of mortar segmental concrete masonry wall units”\textsuperscript{44} Nationally, it is estimated that the workforce is about 830,000 workers with a mean hourly wage of $12.44.\textsuperscript{45} The majority of the workforce provides services to buildings

\textsuperscript{43} See “Occupational Employment Statistics” (2012). \url{http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes373011.htm}
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., “Occupational Employment and Wages,” (2012).
\textsuperscript{45} In the discussion that follows keep in mind that the estimate by the Department of Labor does not include self-employed workers, meaning \textit{yarderos}. Still, it is very important to get a sense of the range of the landscaping and maintenance of economic activity since it is the economic space from which many \textit{yarderos} operate.
and dwellings which account for about 25% in total. About 9% provides service to recreation industries, and the rest provides services to local government, elementary and secondary schools, and lessors of real estate. In the state of Illinois, it is estimated that the landscaping and maintenance workforce ranges from 19,770 to 100,820 workers. More specifically, the top five states with the highest number of workers performing this work activity are California, Florida, Texas, New York, and Illinois, in that order. The Department of Labor's data also confirms that the metropolitan area of Chicago has one of the highest concentrations of workers performing this activity. There is a registered number of about 20,060 occupations, 5 out of 1,000 workers performs lawn care or landscaping work, which carries an hourly wage of $12.32 and an annual mean wage of $25,620. The next largest metropolitan concentration of landscaping and maintenance workers aside from Chicago is Los Angeles, followed by New York, Dallas, Santa Ana, and Houston in that order.

Studies of and about gardening work in the United States have recently provided well-balanced descriptions of Mexican immigrants as they become active economic actors in this occupation (Cameron 2000; Pisani and Yoskowitz 2002, 2005, 2006; Steinberg 2006, Huerta 2006, 2006, 2007; Mahler 2003). These sociological studies in concert have highlighted the informal aspects of gardening work, structural and occupational components, and internal configuration across gender and class divisions. In their findings of Laredo, Texas (Pisani and Yoskowitz 2005) found that in this borderland city, Mexican gardeners were for the most part male, Mexican, and Spanish speaking. In addition to this, they tend to “work full-time as a gardener (through a large portion, 45

percent, part time), middle aged, and possess middle school education. Three quarters are able to work year around in the trade and have been doing so on average for more than 12 years” (235-6).

In the context of Los Angeles, sociologist Alvaro Huerta provides another window into gardening work among Mexican immigrants (see Huerta 2006, 2006, and 2011). Through personal interviews conducted in Los Angeles, Huerta (2011) found that Mexican gardeners benefit from social and kinship ties as they look for work or start their own business. In the context of Los Angeles, gardening work or maintenance is organized into “small crews… usually consist of the owner and several workers, who are often nuclear family members or from the extended family, hometown associates, temporary day laborers, and/or hired from the available immigrant pool” (Huerta 2007, 11-12). The success of Huerta’s research is his analysis of the structure of the gardening work at the macro level.

Further scholarly work on gardening work in Los Angeles provides a deeper look into the advantages and shortcomings of performing this economic activity. For example, Ramirez and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2009) conducted interviews and examined the occupational structure of the “informal sector job in order to assess the contemporary possibilities of socioeconomic mobility,” thus asking “are these men exploited workers, toiling in a low-wage, dead-end, dirty, dangerous informal sector job, or are they acting more autonomously as small business owners who employ co-ethnics, strategizing risk and opportunity, and thereby enabling socioeconomic mobility?” (71). Locating the historical presence of Mexican gardening work in Los Angeles, Ramirez and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2009) with ever increasing immigration from Mexico in the 1960s, began to see
an increasing concentration of Mexican immigrants performing gardening activities for a living. Performing interviews only, and not participant-observation, Ramirez and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2009) argued that Mexican garden work is of “affluent households increasingly employing immigrant service workers” and rightly point that the economic sociology of immigration “has not yet grapple[d] with this more general development, the incorporation of immigrants men’s labor into the households of post-industrial societies” (85). Overall, the research done among Mexican gardeners in Laredo and Los Angeles respectively is quite remarkable and indeed informs my own ethnographic investigation of lawn care service workers in the City of Chicago. However, as I explain in the next two chapters, the structure and form of the lawn service activities in Chicago are to history, economy and ethnography. Moreover, I will emphasize how the body, work ethic, and color hierarchies bring a new discussion of uncharted areas of Mexican immigrants as a working class.

While a sociological analysis of gardening work has begun to trace perspectives at the structural and organizational nature of this economic activity at the macro level, anthropological studies on Mexican immigration have not yet fully uncovered this working class population ethnographically. For example, we still do not know what specific cultural transformations do to immigrant men and women that perform this work activity as they structure their lives or way of making a living. Furthermore, we do not yet uncover, for example, what fate do the children of yarderos/os endure or face in the context of the United States.

Fruitful ethnographic interventions on documenting the lives that yarderos face in the context of the United States, is offered in Lynn Stephen’s (2007) ethnography of
indigenous Mixtec agricultural workers in California and Oregon. Stephen (2007: 96-99) documents the economic changes in Southern California in the late 1980s. She states that while many indigenous groups still continue to work in the agricultural industry, “by the late 1970s and early 1980s they had moved out of agriculture into the service sector, primarily in Los Angeles area” (96). In her ethnography, Stephen mentions Emiliano, a Mixtec indigenous migrant who returned to the United States in 1989 in order to pay for costs involved in a formal wedding in Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca. Stephen tells us that “[Emiliano] returned and worked in a factory and then as a gardener in San Bernardino” (2007: 102, emphasis added). The following is an excerpt from the dialogue the anthropologist Lynn Stephen had with Emiliano in which she describes gardening work, as it is, to some extent, currently produced in Chicago or in “Las Yardas”—performing yard-work—instead of merely gardening (my own analysis of yard work is given in the next two chapters).

EMILIANO: I worked in the factory with my brothers for a little while and then I decided to change jobs. I met some guys who worked as gardeners in what they called “yardas”. They worked outside taking care of people’s yards. I thought maybe I could make more money going that work that I made at the factory. They were going to pay me $300 per week in cash. I had a driver’s license and I knew how to drive. They put me in charge of a truck and a few workers. I went all around the Los Angeles area. We went to Long Beach, Corona, from Corona up to Anaheim, from Anaheim to Santa Ana to Orange and then from Orange I would go to Costa Mesa, Newport, and then I would return to San Bernardino. I worked from six in the morning and sometimes on Sunday...I liked this work much more because I was traveling around. I had more freedom. I enjoyed it and was able to make money (emphasis added).

Lynn Stephen elaborates that Emiliano’s trajectory from factory to gardening is “fairly typical” but given that gardening work, or in our case, “las yardas” was not her focus, she moves on to describe how indigenous migrants use the skills gained in the
United States to startup businesses back in Mexico. Of interest in the case of Emiliano is the way in which he describes a typical day of work while performing gardening work in the Los Angeles borderlands. Here, as in the case of Mexican yarderos in Chicago, the intensity and complexity of gardening work activities are expressed through the idiom of freedom of movement, but unfortunately we do not get a deeper look into how the work itself was carried out. The following three interviews serve to provide us with an introduction to yard-work in the City of Chicago and diversity of work experiences.

**Stories: Andres, Cesar and Don Vicente**

*Andres*

It’s a hot August evening, and I sit at a kitchen table with Andres Mota, a 28 year old Mexican immigrant from the state of Zacatecas, Mexico. He has a broad back (ancho de espalda, moreno de tez canela oscura), muscular arms and hands from having done physical labor all of his adult life. He has a square face with a serious expression until

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48 Describing participants in color terms in this dissertation was a complex ethnographic task for various analytical, methodological and theoretical reasons. Throughout the dissertation, when introducing my participants, I intentionally described them in color terms. I also examined at scholars that described subjects in color terms without they actually being aware of it as my literature review documented (see chapter 6). Theoretically, I wanted to map out my most important contribution to a theory of color that is the phrase, “color inspections.” In order to find an alternative discourse to talk about racism among and against the Mexican immigrants in the City of Chicago, I have at various moments, strategically distanced myself and refused to engage with a black/white dichotomy so problematic when attempting to explore other forms of racism within the context of the United States (see Delgado and Stefanic 1993). Also, I refused to engage with the discourse of “brownness” as many U.S. Latina/o scholars utilize this color metaphor to describe the experience of migration (Rodriguez 1982, Chavez 2001, Fernandez 2012). Lastly, given the long history of Chicana/o scholarship engagement with mestizaje, I also strategically and methodologically refused to document whether the mestizo subjectivity was important to them (see Perez-Torres 2006; Turner 2014). In fact, once fieldwork began, mestizaje was not a relevant discursive, ideological, or practical framework in the ways that Mexican yarderos/as understood their subjective experience about racism and color while in Chicago. As the reader can see from the ethnographic description of Andres, describing him as having “piel canela” does not necessarily carries a racial connotation, but as ethnographers know, it can depending on the ethnographic context. Indeed, ethnographic descriptions of racism are often done as a way to describe the inequality structured and
he laughs. At his South Chicago apartment, Andres welcomed me, and while we talk, he prepares *ceviche* because his boss really liked “Mexican” food, and would give his boss a taste of this food the next day. Andres gave him some to taste a week ago. He arrived in the United States in 2005 and he tells me about his current job situation of working in a factory, welding the inside of railroad tanks in South Chicago. But, from the day Andres arrived in Chicago in late July in 2005, he started working in *las yardas* with a friend he knew since childhood from his hometown of Jalpa, Zacatecas. As the evening unfolds, Andres begins to recall how and why he came to *El Norte*, and how it was that he ended up mowing grass (or *en las yardas*) for a living during the first couple of years upon arriving.

**SERGIO:** Why did you decide to come to the United States?

**ANDRES:** You know, ever since you are little, you hear about the North. I only wanted to help my family. In Mexico, I was studying but could not earn enough.

**SERGIO:** How did you cross the border? (U.S.-Mexico border).  

**ANDRES:** It took me about two weeks to arrive to Chicago. I took a bus from Jalpa, Zacatecas to Laredo, Texas. Once in Laredo, since I was traveling with my cousin, we got in touch with a man he knew that was going to cross us through the river. I recall that we stayed in a room with other people for the three nights, until one day at night; they told us that we were going to cross. We arrived at the riverbed, and I had bought a tire of a farm tractor. All the other guys did not want to help me fill the tire with air and they decided to cross swimming without any *salvavidas*. It took me about two hours to inflate the tire.
and I cross. When we were crossing, the other guys struggled in the water and rapidly got onto my tire. After we crossed, we went to a nearby hotel and stayed there for other two days.

SERGIO: How did you travel then to Chicago?

ANDRES: I did not have any money by then, only to take a bus to Dallas, Texas where my cousin said that he had another cousin that will be willing to help us out and ride with us all the way to Chicago. When we got to Dallas, his cousin did not even want to open the door. I felt that that I did not need him but we finally stayed there for another day. My cousin then found another friend of his that said that he will be traveling to Omaha, Nebraska. I told my cousin, “Well, I am going with him. I do not know what you are going to be doing, but I am going to Nebraska.” I thought that Nebraska sounded close to Chicago, but now I realize that it is very far!

SERGIO: How long has it been since you had crossed?

ANDRES: About ten days.

SERGIO: So how did you then arrive in Chicago?

ANDRES: Well, I received food from the friend of my cousin and he gave us a ride to Chicago.

SERGIO: So your friend gave you a ride to Chicago from Omaha?

ANDRES: Yes, I remember arriving through the [Intestate] 80 –now I know its name—and he parked in a Walmart parking lot and we waited from Rodrigo. Rodrigo arrived and my cousin wanted to go with a friend of his to la 47 so Rodrigo took him there and I went with Rodrigo to his house. There, Don Vicente and his wife were waiting for us and for the first time in two weeks I ate a home meal. The next morning I went with Rodrigo to work mowing grass.

It has already been almost a decade since Andres arrived in the United States, but when he recalled how he arrived to Chicago, it seems as if it just happened yesterday.

Andres occasionally still works en las yardas, but for the most part, he has worked from factory to factory until he found a stable job a year and a half ago welding the inside of railroad tracks. Towards the end of our conversation that night, I asked him why he does not just go ahead and start mowing his own “houses.” Andres immediately replied that it is not possible. First, given that he lives in an apartment, he does not have space to store his landscaping equipment. Second, he would have to buy a truck or van to start mowing lawns. Third, and most important, what if he gets stopped by the police, what would he do without a driver’s license?
Immigrants such as Andres come all the way to Chicago because of pre-established kinship or immigrant networks that spread throughout the Mexican borderlands both northern and southern. Once in the United States, their own specific experiences of migration channels them through specific work, in this case, that of mowing lawns for middle and upper class residents of the City of Chicago. Andres has remained single and has not been able to return to Jalpa, Zacatecas to see his parents for almost a decade. He is afraid that if he goes back, he will not be able to cross again, nor apply for an adjusted status. I will come back to Andres’ experiences in the following chapters as I explore his specific work experience, but for now, let me share the experiences of migration of two other yarderos.

*Cesar*

Cesar Sanchez is a 34-year-old Mexican, male immigrant from Jalpa, Zacatecas and has been in Chicago since 2002. Cesar tells me that back in Mexico people used to say that he was from the family of los guerros, because of his family’s white skin tone. Now in Chicago, he is still white, especially during the winter, but while working during the summer months, his skin looks white with a touch of light brown. Before coming to Chicago, Cesar traveled during the summers to California to work at a family friend’s carwash in Los Angeles. Cesar is a bit taller than I am, at five feet seven inches, squared frame, quick and outspoken about life, he is always in a good mood to talk about politics and culture of Mexico given that he graduated as an elementary school teacher from a university in the state of Zacatecas. Presently, he owns a small lawn service business where I performed participant observations during my fieldwork period from September...
to November, two to three days a week as I will explain in the next chapter in detail.

While performing lawn service, working for him, there were short periods that we would travel around residential neighborhoods mowing lawns from client to client, and during those moments, Cesar offered details about how he decided to migrate and why he became a *yardero*.

Cesar explains that after graduating from the university in Zacatecas as a teacher, he recalls that his mother did not want him to migrate because they had heard many bad stories of those who crossed *la frontera* (the border). Cesar recalls that he wanted to come to Chicago for a short period of time, just like Lynn Stephen’s participant Emiliano, to earn money to get married to his girlfriend, now wife, who had migrated with her family a year earlier in 2001 to Chicago. Cesar recalls arriving at an apartment in a house in the East Side neighborhood of Chicago on 103rd Street and Ave D. He arrived there with his cousins who had already been living in Chicago for more than a decade. Cesar found a part-time job hauling cars for a local auto repair shop, and barely made ends meet to pay rent and food. As soon as the landscaping season began in 2002, Cesar started working with the father of his girlfriend, an older *yardero* named Don Vicente Flores.

From early March until the end of November in 2002, Cesar worked six days a week from eight in the morning to about seven in the evening mowing lawns, trimming bushes, installing brick retaining walls and performing other landscaping activities. Cesar often told me how he earned enough money to then return to Mexico and get married (back in Mexico with) to his wife Beatriz. Both of them now live in Chicago. The details of how Cesar was able to become the small-scale entrepreneur he has become is depicted in the next chapter, but in short, it has not been easy. Cesar often recalls how hard it was to
work all day mowing lawns when this was not his original goal. In Mexico, he struggled to graduate with a degree in education, was ready to obtain a tenured position as an elementary school teacher, but as he says, “las vueltas de la vida” (twist and turns of life), he ended up migrating to the United States.

I met Cesar back in 2005 when I was starting my graduate training at the University of California at Riverside. At that time my project was not to study Mexican immigrants that worked as landscapers, but to study blackness in Mexico. Five years later, in 2010, while performing a preliminary ethnographic investigation in Chicago, he became a regular participant in my ethnographic work. In comparison with Andres, Cesar has had a quite radical and different migration outcome. Much of Cesar’s success in emerging as a yardero is attributed to the help he received from Don Vicente, Cesar’s father-in-law. Thus, we begin to see that kinship plays a tremendous role in opening the opportunities for economic development, as the trajectory of Cesar depicts.

**Don Vicente**

The story of how Don Vicente Flores ended up as one of the oldest yarderos of South Chicago and its neighboring areas begins more than three decades ago when he first migrated to the Midwest in 1978. Don Vicente is a 68 year old immigrant from the state of Zacatecas, with gray hair, bent posture, and a canela dark skin tone, but he has the vitality of a 28 year old. I first met Don Vicente through an acquaintance that told me that he was in need of some extra help for the summer in 2006. It was through the experience of working for him during that year that allowed me to craft the initial idea to study landscapers. We have had countless conversations which have allowed me to
construct his personality, way of life, and particular ways of thinking about the world. Often a respectful and respected landscaper, Don Vicente is well-known for helping other Mexicans who have just arrived to Chicago by giving them work, sometime even shelter at his home, as well as training his sons and son-in-laws to become yarderos themselves.

Don Vicente first migrated to the Midwest in 1978 to South Bend, Indiana. He explained that he had already travelled inside the state borders of Mexico from the state of Zacatecas to the states of Sinaloa and Sonora, years before migrating to the United States. I first heard his story of how he first arrived in South Bend, Indiana in August 2012. It was a Saturday and most of the work of the week had already been done, so we stopped, at a parking lot of a local store near 87th Street and Crandon Ave. in the neighborhood of Calumet Heights.

SERGIO: So, when did usted first migrate to Chicago?
DON VICENTE: I did not arrive to Chicago directly. I first arrived to South Bend, Indiana.
SERGIO: Why South Bend, Indiana. I thought that usted came directly to Chicago.
DON VICENTE: No.. no… I first arrived in South Bend, with Nena (short for Elena). She is not related to me, but we all call her aunt Nena. She had a house in South Bend, and she received many others and other families. It was like a guest house so you can understand me…I stayed with my wife and three children for almost three years until someone called la migra on us.
SERGIO: So, someone called la migra to report that you were undocumented?
DON VICENTE: Yes. We went back to Mexico because of a letter that I received. I returned a year later again to South Bend, Indiana again. By that time, my brother Pablo and Rogelio which were also living with me in Indiana had moved to Sur Chicago, and began working with a man, also from our hometown that had a business of cutting grass. So, I began working cutting grass with Don Ricardo Gutierrez in 1979.
SERGIO: But, did you work by yourself from the beginning?
DON VICENTE: The first two years my brothers and I worked for Don Ricardo Gutierrez. But he retired and he gave us la ruta (the route) for the three of us. We first began working together cutting the grass of each other houses, but then we split and every one began doing his own houses.
SERGIO: So, have you been working in las yardas since that time?
DON VICENTE: Yes, every year. I began with only about fifty houses. My son, Julio came to Chicago to help me. He was born in South Bend. By the end of the year, I had about eighty houses. Then, by the end of the second year that I was working by myself, I end up the year with one hundred and twenty.

SERGIO: And why did you continue coming every year to Chicago?

DON VICENTE: …[confused pause]…a trabajar, que mas?...(to work what else?)

This short passage tells the story of Don Vicente’s life as a Mexican immigrant, first, though briefly within the Mexican territory in the decade of the 1970s when he was in his twenties, but by the time he was in his thirties, the Midwest ended up being his preferred choice to migrate during the landscaping season which runs from early March until the end of November. As we continued to talk, a half an hour had passed by. We were still in the parking lot of the grocery store, and I knew there were about ten houses left to mow that Saturday. I heard that Doña Elena, the lady that first gave shelter to Don Vicente died two months after our conversation. I attended the funeral of Doña Nena in South Bend, Indiana which was full of people from the Mexicano community, confirming her important role in many people's lives, such as Don Vicente had described her.

Conclusion

This chapter traced the presence of yarderos/as in South Chicago. I sketched some of the major social, economic, and political consequences that lead to an ever increasing migration of Mexicans to Chicago at the beginning of the twentieth century. Increasing steel production in urban areas of the United States was the major economic factor that lead to the first colonies to emerge in Chicago and its neighboring areas.

While many of my participants live in South Chicago, when they are working, they are able to travel to other neighboring areas. Perhaps, if they travel outside of the
normal hours of work, they could be targeted as outsiders, thus while at work, yarderos/as eventually become part of the urban landscape.

The last part of this chapter looks at the reasons and experiences of migration of three yarderos. Andres arrived in the middle of the 2000s, and while he began mowing grass to sustain himself, after a couple of years he moved to other low-skill jobs such as factory work. Andres still remains in the United States and has not returned to Mexico, because as he says, “y si me voy, que” (If I go back, then what), meaning that he is afraid that he will not be able to cross the U.S-Mexico border again. The case of Cesar is different. Cesar arrived in 2001 and within two years, he became a small landscaping owner. However, accomplishing economic independence was not easy, and a major factor of who he is today was because of the support of family and kinship he received from Don Vicente. This chapter also depicts the story of Don Vicente himself, the patriarch of the Flores family. Don Vicente is one of the first Mexican immigrants who upscaled his landscaping and maintenance business in South Chicago. Don Vicente has literally helped produce four to five different lawn care companies headed by his sons and sons-in-law.

In the following chapter, I provide a detailed ethnographic portrait of yarderos’s experiences working in lawn care services, and of my own experience working for them. While Don Vicente originally helped Cesar become a small lawn company owner, today, there are two distinct lawn service companies owned by these male members of the family. The lived experiences of yarderos such as Don Vicente, Andres, and Cesar speak on the ways work and subsistence as immigrant workers are obtained, secured, and
reproduced, and ethnography is the method to uncover how they organize and find a better life.
Chapter 3

The Anatomy of the Yardero Work Week: An Ethnographic Description of the Capitalist Structure of the Yardero Work Landscape

“The creation of a normal working day is, therefore the product of a protracted civil war, more or less dissembled, between the capitalist class and the working class… Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black [and brown] it is branded.”

“But what is a working day?”

Karl Marx, Capital Vol. I

To Yardear

From July 2012 to November 2013, I carried out ethnographic fieldwork among Mexican yarderos in South Chicago. While I was acquainted with yarderos through family networks and friends, given that I grew up in South Chicago in the mid-1990s, and I had provided lawn services sporadically during the summers in Chicago, I had not carried out a detailed, participant-observation while performing this work.\(^{49}\) This chapter offers an ethnographic anatomy of the workweek of yarderos and as I ethnographically describe the structure and form of the landscaping season in the City of Chicago.\(^{50}\) I offer a weighty cultural interpretation of the work itself as I performed it with two lawn care service companies during my research period. I also document the daily struggles of

\(^{49}\) There is a difference between everyday living and “participant-observation”; during fieldwork, while I have known the field site, I certainly did not know it in an intimate way as explained by Emerson et al. (1995). Secondly, when actively thinking of the subject, as a researcher, he or she “enters into a social setting and gets to know the people involved in it; usually, the setting is not previously known in an intimate way. The ethnographer participates in the daily routines of this setting; develops ongoing relations with people in it, and observers all the while what is going on” (Emerson et al, 1995).

\(^{50}\) The “landscaping season” is shorthand to describe the period where many Mexican immigrants in the City of Chicago are involved in providing lawn care services to residents. This “landscaping season” normally runs from March 15 to the end of November.
being a working class Mexican myself while doing lawn service in middle to upper class neighborhoods of Chicago and the South Suburbs.\textsuperscript{51}

The data presented in the previous chapter about lawn services in Chicago as captured by state agencies offer a biopolitical view of who they are, their lives and forms of organizing of \textit{yarderos} require an ethnographic investigation because there is no other holistic method of capturing how they are able to make a living and reproduce their culture.\textsuperscript{52} Ethnography has the quality of allowing the researcher to examine cultural processes and illuminate on processes hidden from history. For my dissertation project, I began with a month of ethnographic investigation in the summer of 2009 where I performed participant-observation with a lawn care service company in Chicago. As a way of introduction, here are a few observations I jotted down in late July 2009.

\textbf{Friday, July 31, 2009}

I woke up at 7:15 a.m., it was very difficult to get up and get ready to go to work. My hands are swollen from handling the \textit{wiro} (line trimmer) all day on Thursday. I notice that it takes about half an hour for that pain in my hand to disappear and to feel that I am able to make a grip. Don Vicente is a bit late today, but only 5 min after 8 a.m. and I see the van turning onto Baltimore Ave. We are at 92\textsuperscript{nd} Street and Yates Ave. where we left last evening by 8:15 a.m. and begin cutting grass. We finish the houses located within two blocks, about six, and moved to 89\textsuperscript{th} and Phillips to mow other houses. We finish fifteen houses within two hours. Today, I am not \textit{wireando}, I am cutting grass with the 21” Toro lawnmower only. I am annoyed because the blower does not start. Since the mowing equipment is gasoline driven, and since the blower does not

\textsuperscript{51} In this research, I interacted with landscapers, yarderos, or lawn care service workers south of the city of Chicago for most of the time. Given that I decided to locate my research in South Chicago, I immediately found out that small lawn care companies from South Chicago did not necessarily go to the far north of Chicago to provide lawn services, but rather, they often tended to stay in a circumscribed area within a ten mile radius.

\textsuperscript{52} For example, in the ways anthropologists study other cultures, anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1989) comments that “anthropology invites us to expand our sense of human possibilities through the study of other forms of life” and that, “not unlike learning another language, such inquiries requires time and patience. There are no shortcuts” (25). Similarly, the study of Latinas/os requires a particular ethnographic work ethic, which Rosaldo gestures towards above and which I have attempted to carry out in my research on working class lives in a community tied to my own personal history. See Lemus (2014).
want to start at the first try, I have to pull its cord for about ten times until it
starts.
My right arm is hurting by this time. We have been working with the
malfuctioning blower for about four days and it gets frustrating just thinking of
the amount of extra work that is necessary to do the work properly and as fast as
our current boss wants us to do the job. However, he is very patient with us,
especially when our equipment and tools are not working properly.

By Friday my feet also feel the amount of work done from the four days. Ever
since I started working this morning, my left foot near the front toes hurts when
I walk. As I mow the first four houses in a slow rhythm, then, the pain
diminishes. I guess it is because the feet warm up a bit. We have advanced to the
Friday houses, and we finish them by 2 p.m. Thus, we started the Saturday
houses. This does not happen often, but on Thursday and Friday of this week we
have pushed ourselves a bit more. We went and did a house and then got on the
Stevenson Expressway and traveled north towards 79th street. Stevenson
expressway is located a bit west of South Chicago, and since the Saturday
houses are separated a bit farther, five to ten blocks, we moved from West to
East doing the lawn care service of the houses. Don Vicente does a couple of
churches on Saturday. I assume it is because people go to church on Sunday,
thus, they want the church to look nice for mass.

Monday, August 03, 2009

Last week I worked almost every day with the crew I am working with during
this summer. Today, I was given a “voluntary” break because on Mondays, Don
Vicente does not have many houses, thus, less work is available for a crew of
three guys. I decided to begin formally contacting Mexican men and women to
see whether they have time available to sit down with me to do an interview. To
my surprise, the cell phone has become a useful instrument to gain and maintain
contact with potential informants. For example, I sent a text message to a
landscaping worker I had known for the past two years but have not discussed
my project with him until last week when I asked him if he would be willing to
be interviewed. I sent him a message last Saturday evening, and he said that it
was fine if I interview him on Sunday. I know that Sunday is the day that most
yarderos/as do not work and often times, enjoy the day with their family, thus, I
decided not to interrupt his weekend and told him if we could re-schedule for
Monday or Tuesday. Andres told me that it was fine if we held the interview on
Tuesday evening after work.

Thursday, August 06, 2009

I woke up at 7:10 a.m. and ten minutes before 8 a.m., I was waiting for the van
to pull up in front of my house, which it did. Apparently, it was fixed yesterday.
We did too many houses to count them. I got home at 6:50 p.m. I was not able to
concentrate on fieldwork since I spent all day cutting grass. Today, I had to
drive the van the entire day while Don Vicente was doing other landscaping
jobs. I did not write much from the day before, I was tired and went to sleep at 9 p.m. after taking a shower.

**Friday, August 07, 2009**

I was not sure how much it would rain today, but The Weather Channel said that there was a fifty percent chance of rain. This usually means that at a certain hour during the day it is going to rain, it would last for an hour or so and then it would not rain again. I waited for my boss who is fifteen minutes late. He picks me up at exactly 8:15 a.m. and it took only ten minutes to get to the houses we left yesterday. There were only about ten houses but it took us about three hours to finish them. It was 11 a.m. and a small breeze began to develop. When the rain is constant and the sky is full of gray clouds, it means that rain is not going to stop once it begins to fall. We finish the Friday houses by 12 p.m., and began the Saturday route.

Churches are done on Saturday so when mass is held on Sunday people find their church looking very nice, appealing, and sharp. After finishing a house, we took Stony Island Ave. heading south and got on to the expressway to travel north to 76th street and Michigan Ave. to begin the Saturday route and head east performing lawn care to residences further away from the normal area of work. I had the unfortunate luck of the blower breaking while I was using it. Bosses do not like it when equipment is broken because it slows down the work and they get behind on finishing the route for that day. Similarly, workers do not like equipment failures because, one, working hours get extended to compensate for the time lost and because the boss gets mad at whoever was using the equipment at that time.

We finished the church and rain began to fall a bit heavier. By the time we finished cutting the grass on that church, Don Vicente arrived with lunch. He brought us a double stack cheeseburger from Burger King. We usually bring our lunches made at home, but Fridays are different, we usually eat good food that the boss pays for. Don Vicente said that if the rain did not stop within the following hour we may end up going home. I was excited to think of getting out of work early since we usually work from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. with half an hour of lunch time. We went and did a house that is usually done only two times a month in a very poor neighborhood west of Chicago. As soon as we got there, Don Vicente asked us to be very careful and watchful of our surroundings because young *morenos*—African Americans—have a history of stealing equipment from landscapers, blowers are their favorite target. Since the blower broke while I was using it, I felt a feeling of uneasiness and felt the need to explain in detail what happened to Don Vicente and tell him through that confession that I did not do anything wrong to break it. It just happened. The rain is heavy by this time. We had to take garbage bags and make holes in them to stick our hands and head through them so we could work using a plastic garbage bag.
Don Vicente had no choice but to call the day off, but before that, we went and did a house that cannot be done on Saturdays because the owner, a priest, does not like to see people working over the weekend. We worked until 3 p.m.

The previous ethnographic field notes offer us a glimpse of my experiences in las yardas during July and August of 2009 when I worked anywhere from thirty to forty hours per week as a chalan—lawn service worker or helper—which meant that I only mowed lawns for the yardero. With time, consistency, and diligence, a worker can increase his or her level skills to be able to handle bigger lawnmowers and perform many other complicated tasks. When I performed the bulk of my dissertation data collection beginning in August 2012, the skills that I learned in 2009 proved helpful to seek out a position within a lawn care company. The following descriptions of my participant-observation experiences portray the nature, structure and form of the lawn care service work as experienced in South Chicago while working as a chalan.

Hernandez Lawn Care

I spent two months carrying out participant-observations in South Chicago from September 2012 to November 2012 after having done two months of preliminary ethnographic immersion in South Chicago. In early September, 2012, I began looking for a lawn service company where I could work with for the remainder of the landscaping season. The lawn care service season in South Chicago usually lasts from mid-March until the end of November. I knew that Cesar Hernandez had scaled up since I originally met him in 2006, so I asked him whether he needed any help. Cesar confirmed that he

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53 For ethical reasons, and for methodological purposes, I did not disclose in its entirety that I will be documenting my experiences while working for Cesar. But, it took about a month until I finally told him in its entirety what my project entailed and how the work I did fitted into the research design of my project.
was in fact looking for help because he was having difficulties with the current *chalan* (helper) he had, thus, I started working with Cesar from early September until the end of the landscaping season in late November 2012. Not all *yarderos* work all the way until the end of November when the weather averages 35 to 49 degrees Fahrenheit, and an average precipitation of 3.3 inches in Chicago. Many actually finish the season at the end of October. Usually, the older *yarderos*, those with many years mowing grass are the workers that have work at the end of November.

If we recall Cesar’s immigration experience from chapter two, he came to the United States in 2002 to earn money to be able to eventually marry his girlfriend that had migrated the year before to Chicago in 2001. The second year upon arriving in 2003, Cesar began performing lawn service independently as a *yardero*. Cesar began with only twenty eight houses. He would mow his houses in three days, and for the other two days, he worked with Don Vicente as a *chalan*. In conversations with Cesar, he often told me that he would mow about fifteen houses each day which translates into mowing a house for every 35 to 40 min. Cesar would work from early March until November.

When not working mowing grass, Cesar would do side jobs with friends and family members in order to make ends meet. Today, Cesar provides lawn and landscaping services.

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My full disclosure affected neither the way we worked nor the intensity of how I performed the work, nor did I receive any special treatment after the fact. For me, it was very important to be treated just like any other worker even though he knew me sporadically. In documenting the lives of working class populations, it is critical to start where many workers start, asking around to find out who may be hiring. A similar strategy was performed by anthropologist Alejandro Lugo (2008) as he looked for work at *maquila* assembly plants in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. There also are other ways to study working class populations, for example, Christian Zlopniski (2006:15; see also Zlopniski 1994) would help his participants with “immigration-related paperwork; job applications; government, school, and other official forms…which contributed to [his] visibility in the neighborhood.” Another important working class ethnography—De Genova (2005)—studied Mexicans in Chicago while providing English as a Second Language courses at the factory. Both approaches are productive, but only working alongside the workers themselves one gets to experience the perils of work itself and the dramatic effect that work has in structuring immigrant life.

54 Through the dissertation, when I refer the total number of houses, it means the number of houses of clients to which a *yardero* provides lawn service.
services to more than one hundred and fifty houses, and he is now able to provide a job to an additional worker, a *chalan* during the landscaping season.

In the two months that I worked for Cesar Hernandez, I learned of the different and differing practices of structuring the lawn service or *las yardas*. In the case of Cesar Hernandez’s small lawn service company, one of the first elements to take notice was the name he gives his company. Cesar often told me that part of why he has been successful is because when clients see the name of his company, Hernandez Lawn Care, they believe that he will provide better service than other non-Hispanic companies. In other words, he believes that by placing his Hispanic last name next to the service he provides, they will request his service rather than well established companies. Moreover, Cesar thinks that clients believe that he will charge them a cheaper rate and that clients know that Mexicans will do a better job.

Cesar’s suggestion is concomitant with what I saw while I mowed lawns during fieldwork. I often saw other *yarderos* passing by with banners and names such as Gonzalez Landscaping, Jimenez Lawn Service, Hector’s Lawn Care, or Mendez Lawn Care. Through the years of laboring *en las yardas*, Cesar Hernandez has been able to organize his *yardas* in such a way that he is able to work all week except Sundays. One

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55 Anthropologist Arlene Davila (2001) writes about the “hotness” of Latina/o or Hispanic names in marketing and advertising. Examining the reconstitution of individuals into consumers and population’s into markets are central fields of cultural analysis, Davila further argues that, looking at “Hispanic marketing is therefore particularly revealing of the relationship between culture, corporate sponsorship, and politics, and moreover can illuminate how commercial representations may shape people’s cultural identities as well as affect notion of belonging and cultural citizenship in public life” (2001:2). From this take on the increasing marketing strategies of Latinos/as in the U.S., I learned that for lawn care companies such as Cesar Hernandez, the idea of marketing himself with a latent Latina/o last name, is to transmit the idea that his company would actually do the work better than other racially marketed companies within the City of Chicago.
of the characteristics of becoming a *yardero* is in fact having the ability to work at least for five days of the week.

On Mondays, in *la ruta*, we would start mowing grass in the neighborhood of South Deering.\(^{56}\) South Deering is a working class neighborhood with a substantial Mexican and African American population. Most of the clients to whom Cesar provides lawn service are usually older African Americans men and women. Wisconsin Steel was located in this area, but now if you pass by 103rd Street and Torrence Ave., you only see run down walls of what in the past was one of the major metal producing mills of the world.\(^{57}\) Reporter Terry Brown from the Chicago Tribune commented in 1980 that its closing was “a decision as cold as the steel bars that rolled out of the mills at Wisconsin Steel.”\(^ {58}\) Moreover, Brown comments that the closing represented “a symbol of America's shift from making things out of natural resources and human sweat to providing services dependent solely of ingenuity and brainpower.”\(^ {59}\) While lawn services demonstrates that Mexican immigrants shifted to a service based economy, in this

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\(^{56}\) South Deering is a community area on the far southeast side of Chicago. The boundaries of South Deering are very "natural" in the sense that the community is largely defined by the Calumet River on the east and Lake Calumet on the west. South Deering has a great deal of vacant land much of it being shallow swamps and marshes. It has the largest area of any of the 77 Chicago communities. South Deering was originally used mostly by the wealthy Chicagoans as a recreational area, providing both hunting and fishing. Today, South Deering, is composed of mostly Mexican and African American residents.

\(^{57}\) Anthropologist Christine J. Walley (2013) writes about a very personal experience that occurred with the demise of the Steel industry in South Deering near Wisconsin Steel Company. In *Exit Zero* (2013), Walley brings her anthropological perspective home, examining the fate of her family and that of blue-collar America at large. Interweaving personal narratives and family photos with a nuanced assessment of the social impacts of deindustrialization form the central ethnographic elements of this text. During my ethnographic fieldwork, there seemed to be a disconnection between the history described by Walley in regards to the steel industry and the experiences of the workers that I encountered in my fieldwork. For them, steel work is alien to their yard work. Thus, I conclude that most of the population of yarderos/as is in fact a recent wave of immigrants which does not necessarily have a connection with the history of deindustrialization of the steel factories in South Chicago and East Chicago, Indiana.


\(^{59}\) Inbd., Brown (1980).
ethnography, I continually demonstrate that sweat, tears and blood are often readily found in service oriented work.

Once we are done with mowing the lawns of these houses, we travel about fifteen minutes towards the East Side neighborhood, still in the Southeast Side of Chicago. The East Side neighborhood consists of middle or middle upper class Mexican and Mexican Americans and a smaller percentage of white, ethnically identified populations. It is commonly known among my participants that second generation Mexicans often relocate to the East Side. The East Side neighborhood is divided spatially by 106th Street. North of 106th Street, the houses in this area are from the turn of the twentieth century while many of the houses south of 106th Street are from the 1960s onward. Most of the houses that we mowed on Mondays were located south of 106th Street. Cesar Hernandez and I would often joke as soon as we crossed 106th Street that we were entering “el megabarrio” (massive neighborhood, not in scale, but in prettiness, and upper class mobility). By midday, Cesar and I would have mowed about fifteen residential houses and then would travel toward Hammond, Indiana to continue cutting grass in that township.60 After cutting grass in Hammond, we would then travel to a white, upper class township called Munster, Indiana.61 Every Monday, as we arrived in Munster, we were very cautious not to disturb other people’s yards while we mowed a lawn. Cesar often remembers the time he had to obtain business insurance, a license, and permits just to mow because a resident

60 Hammond, Indiana is a township located between the borders of Illinois and Indiana. It is composed of 54% white, 1.2% Asian, and 35.5% Hispanic, with Mexicans being 30.2%. (US Census 2008-2012). Typically, it is common knowledge that once you acquire a certain social standing in South Chicago, families will look for a home either in the East Side neighborhood or in Hammond, Indiana or East Chicago, Indiana.

61 Munster, Indiana is a township located next to the city of Hammond. It has a population estimated at 23,000 residents, with 86.5% white, 3.5% Black or African Americans, and 10.2% Hispanic or Latino. It is a relatively well-off neighborhood with a per capita income of $34,735 dollars, compared with $24,000 to the average state income (US Census 2012, Munster (town), Indiana).
once called the town’s inspectional services. Cesar recalls that he was just parked in front of a resident’s home, and apparently that triggered the resident to call the city to inspect and scrutinize Cesar’s business legality. After mowing a few houses in Munster, Indiana, we would head out to other houses and end the day near Hammond, Indiana where Cesar has his home.

Tuesdays involve more traveling than mowing, but it does not mean that the work is less intense.⁶² For example, we would begin mowing grass around 74th Street and Halsted Ave. Then we would continue mowing through the neighborhood of Englewood near 63rd Street and Martin Luther King Drive, or la King Drive as yarderos often call this major avenue west of South Chicago. As I mentioned earlier, the houses that we serviced were separated about five or six blocks from each other, therefore we would intensify the labor on those houses so we could quickly get out from that neighborhood.

Cesar always tells stories of muggings and of yarderos that had their equipment stolen in the area.⁶³ Cesar always told me that he did not enjoy working on Tuesdays because the houses were too far apart. In distinction, he often talked about the advantages of having all of the clients next to each other, an arrangement in which the work becomes easier. At midday, when working for Cesar, we would finish mowing the lawns of about twenty

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⁶² On this issue, Karl Marx suggested that in fact, a working day “is not a constant, but a variable quantity. One of its parts, certainly, is determined by the working time required for the reproduction of the labour-power of the labourer itself. But is total amount varies with duration of the surplus-labour. The working day is, therefore, determinable, but is, per se, indeterminate” (Marx 1906:256). Translated ethnographically, it essentially means that even when the houses where separated geographically, when that happened, we had to accelerate the time we spend performing the work itself to compensate for the time lost while traveling from property to property.

⁶³ Mugging stories have been documented as a process of racial formations. For example, Wortham et al., (2011) mentions that in one East Coast suburb relevant models of identity are sometimes communicated through “payday mugging” stories about African American criminals mugging undocumented Mexican victims. These narratives racialize African Americans and Mexicans in different ways. As payday mugging stories move across narrators from different communities, the racialized characterizations shift.
houses and Cesar would head west on 87th Street towards Kedzie Ave. Cesar recalls that he was not planning on coming all the way west to mow lawns, but through client recommendations, he has been able to expand his route of clients in this area of the City of Chicago. Tuesdays would end in the Blue Island neighborhood near Vincennes Ave. and 119th Street.

On Wednesdays we do not travel much. We would mow lawns within South Chicago, Calumet Heights, Stony Island Park and the South Shore area. We would start the day at eight in the morning and on Wednesdays the workday began near Cottage Grove Ave. and 87th Street. We would mow the lawns of three or four houses each block, drive for about eight blocks and again mow the lawns of two or three houses. Towards the middle of the day, we pass 83rd Street and other streets near Martin Luther King Drive which is an area with many department buildings. Coincidentally, these buildings usually do not have big yards. The front yards typically measure twenty feet long by eight feet wide and it usually takes me about three minutes to mow the front yard with the 21” wide Toro lawnmower. After mowing the front yard, I would go to the backyard and mow there. The backyards of these buildings are usually twenty feet by fifteen feet. Mowing a yard with the Toro (21 inch mower), will take me about five minutes or less if possible. At the pace we work, a job is normally done in less than ten minutes, otherwise, moving along the route slows our work down and jeopardizes the service to our clients. After midday, we would travel west mowing the grass of houses located near Michigan Ave. and 83rd Street until we finish the day around 87th Street and Stony Island Ave. Wednesdays were hard because whether or not we edged around the lawn (discussed in detail in chapter
four), I was often left in charge of mowing the backyards while my boss, Cesar mowed the front yards.

The end of the week is generally the busiest for yarderos in South Chicago. During the summer months between June and August, there is a great demand for lawn care or landscaping services. Toward the end of the week, especially on Thursdays and Fridays, the amount of labor intensifies so much that we would often mow until seven in the evening. In the case of Cesar Hernandez, he changed this pattern somewhat, and during these months, we would start the route earlier than usual, at seven in the morning, and tried not to mow after six in the evening or after. 64

On Thursdays, we would begin mowing lawns in South Chicago, near 92nd Street and Colfax Ave. Thursdays were the hardest days because we would mow the lawn of about forty-two to forty-eight houses, both front and back. The process of mowing is not just cutting grass. For example, Cesar learned to provide lawn care services from Don Vicente, one of the oldest yarderos of South Chicago. In this lawn care system done by many yarderos in South Chicago, the lawn is mowed every week and edged every other week. Edging grass involves taking a line trimmer that usually weighs fifteen pounds, turning it sideways, and with the plastic line, trim or cut the tips of the grass that has

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64 While the working day is conditioned by a “minimum” and a maximum limit, for Marx the capitalist, in this case the yardero/a, “has bought the labor-power at its day-rate” and continues by suggesting that the inevitably demand of capital is to extract surplus value from the working day, and “to make its constant factor, the means of production, absorb the greatest possible amount of surplus labor” (Marx 1905: 257). In a quite remarkable passage from Marx, he also remarks as to the reason why we see a worker late in the evening mowing grass in South Chicago, “[w]herever a part of society possesses the monopoly of the means of production, the labourer free or not free, must add to the working time necessary for its own maintenance and extra working time in order to produce the means of subsistence for the owner of the means of production,” (Marx 1905: 259; idea taken from Edmund Burke quote which says, “Those who labour….in reality feed both the pensioners…[called the rich] and themselves.”
fallen over the sidewalk or cement areas. The idea with this process is to make the grass area appealing by having it stand geometrically.

On Thursdays, when we had to wirear (line trim) all the lawn areas, the work intensity was such that there was no time to relax much less converse. Thursdays and Fridays is all business, to some extent. For example, as soon as we would get to a client’s house, we would immediately get out, open the door of the 14’ by 6’ foot trailer that carries the lawnmowers, and start up the gas driven equipment. As soon as a lawn was mowed, we would collect the garbage, if any, blow along the cemented areas, and quickly load the equipment into the trailer. I recall the hard, deep breaths I felt after I would mow a house and got on the pickup truck to move to the next house nearby. After we finished those houses, we would continue mowing by moving east within Calumet Heights towards Lake Michigan. The day would end near a big hospital located on 92\textsuperscript{nd} Street and Phillips Ave.

Cesar does not like to have too much work on Fridays like he usually does on Thursdays. Thus, Friday’s route in not as intense, but it takes us all day to finish half of the houses mowed on Thursdays. I like Fridays because if we just mow grass and blow the sidewalks, the work is easier. Blowing has its particular technique. For instance, early in the season, when we start to power rake the lawn of clients, a lot of dead grass from the previous season comes out. Instead of raking it by hand, we power blow the dead grass until we form piles of debris and bag the dead-brownish looking grass into black plastic, twenty-eight gallon bags. During the autumn season, around November when many leaves from the trees fall down, we have to use the blower to clean up the leaves, form piles and collect them from the lawn areas. In order to do this properly, one has to
almost hover like a bee, pointing the blower in the right direction, and let the wind do the work itself. A blower usually weighs thirty-five pounds. During the months between September and November where the working season slows down a bit, we would often get off work around five in the afternoon, but between June and August, we would have to work on Saturdays to finish mowing, or do a landscaping job.

Working for Hernandez Lawn Care, I learned the basic skills that a *chalan* does, which required me to mow lawns with a 21” Toro lawnmower, edge, and blow grass debris. Cesar gave me work until the end of November in 2012. I recall the day that we finished the work for the season, and Cesar was very excited, especially because in a week he would travel to Jalpa, Zacatecas to spend a month visiting his family.

**Vicente Flores Lawn Services**

Just like Cesar Hernandez, Don Vicente Flores also travels to Mexico during the winter season. However, in the case of Don Vicente, he spends more time in Zacatecas and comes back to Chicago two or three weeks before the season starts in mid-March. My participant-observation with Hernandez Lawn Care ended the last day of November and just like many other *chalanes*, I was left without any work offers or future work agreements, meaning that when Cesar came back from Mexico, he would give me work again. During the first part of my fieldwork phase in July to September 2012, I also became a *yardero* myself (discussed in detail in chapter four). However, having my own *ruta* was not enough to make ends meet for myself, given that I was literally without research funds while performing ethnographic research. Thus, early in the spring, I relied on my previous contacts to start working again in *las yardas* with the hope that I could actually become a *yardero* myself.
In the middle of March 2013, I began contacting and forming a list of clients from having had mowed their lawns sporadically in the past, so I provided them with weekly lawn services. Typically, yarberos like Cesar Hernandez and Don Vicente provide regular, weekly service to clients, and enter into individual and informal agreements with homeowners in which yarberos provide mowing services and clients pay a flat fee at the end of the month. For the most part, this is the standard work practice and there is no paper contract to sign. Cesar and Don Vicente do not like to work with formal contracts; after all, they believe that their word (su palabra) has more value than a piece of paper. This cultural and work practice also applies to labor recruitment. As I previously mentioned, Don Vicente contacted me early in the season and asked me if I wanted to “help” him as much as I could, mostly with trimming bushes. While I began mowing lawns on my own, around the end of April, I also began working on a part-time basis with Don Vicente. I saw this as a good opportunity to better understand the structure, form and history of landscaping, and lawn care work among Mexicans in Chicago.

Don Vicente has been mowing lawns since the early 1980s in South Chicago, South Shore, Calumet Heights and neighboring areas of Chicago. While the number of clients

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65 The form and structure of the yardera/o workday and week in Chicago differs but also has similarities as to how it is structured in other parts of the country. For example, Huerta (2007) documents that in Los Angeles, Mexican gardeners, “can be seen working the lawns of middle income to affluent communities…[they] are independent contractors who negotiate lawn maintenance agreement with homeowners or renters on individual basis” (10). However, one key difference from Los Angeles is in regards to the intensity of the work itself, while in Los Angeles, a route of clients can range from 50-80 properties per week, in Chicago, I saw and known a crew of three works that would be able to mow the lawn of close to about 350 properties per week.

66 Normally one thinks that part-time basis would mean less than forty hours per week, but in reality, within the context of the lawn care service, part-time would mean anywhere between forty to fifty hours. Working full-time within this work activity usually means working close to sixty hours per week if not more.
that he provided service to has shifted from year to year, since the 1980s, cutting grass provided the means to sustain his family. I agreed “to help” with cutting grass on Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays. On Mondays and Tuesdays, I would mow the lawns of my own ruta, which in early March there were only about twenty-five clients. I have known Don Vicente since early 2005, but it was in 2009 that I worked for him while I performed ethnographic fieldwork. Don Vicente also starts the season power raking (raqueando) the front and back yards of his clients and it was because of this time consuming and backbreaking task that he needed extra help. Besides power raking, the start of the landscaping season also involves a “deep” cleaning of the lawn areas of his client’s lawns as well as fertilizing it. For example, we would clear the bedding areas of debris, cut near the root the plants that died as a consequence of the long winter, and we would trim branches that may obstruct any sidewalk areas.

**Raquear (Power Raking)**

*Raquear* as defined by Don Vicente and the other Mexican *yarderos* in the South Chicago involves various labor activities. Most *yarderos* start the season in the middle of March and while some begin mowing right away, the majority power rake the front and backyards of their clients. This activity involves using a power rake machine and passing it over the lawn areas of the client’s residence. A power raker is about 26 inches wide, 33-39 inches in height, and weighs about 160 pounds. These machines usually cost

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67 Among *yarderas/os*, the company owner when looking for additional labor, does not ask the question: do you want to work for me? Instead, they would ask: do you want to help me out en las yardas? The discourse on “help” can be interpreted as a way to diminish the exploitative nature of the labor relation. The connotation of the phrase “help” in this context would imply that the worker is “additional” to the process rather than central to the production itself.
anywhere between $1,000.00 to $1,500.00 dollars. The power rake machine has a rough blade system on the bottom, called free-swinging flail blades which efficiently remove matted thatch with centrifugal force and removes the old grass of lawns. This removal of grass does two essential tasks: first, it allows for the grass to change slightly in color from light brown, to packets of greenish color; second, it allows for the grass that is barely beginning to grow in early spring to have space to “breathe.” The way in which *raquear* is done is elemental, but time consuming and hard to do. Given that the power raker weighs about 160 pounds and it does not have a self-profiling mechanism, one has to push it in order for it to move forward. The centrifugal force of the blades helps to move the power raker. However, one has to be careful with it because if it is pushed too fast, essentially, a worker may end up just moving the machine over the grass without doing any work on the lawn. On the other hand, if it is pushed too slow, the end result is essentially the reaping of all the grass from the spot where no movement occurred. Power raking a client’s house usually takes about half an hour to forty minutes or even more depending on the square area of the property. When the client’s home is located in a corner, we often ended up working on the corner house for almost an hour and a half (see picture).

A substantial amount of dead grass emerges from the performance of power raking a client’s yard. In the past, Don Vicente told me that when power blowers were not available, they would have to collect the dead grass with a regular garden rake. Today, Don Vicente still uses a regular hand held rake, especially after we have produced small piles of dead grass and we are about to fill trash bags with it, but power blowers are now readily used. There are different kinds of blowers, for instance, backpack, electric
handheld, gas handled, and walk behind. Among yarderos, backpack blowers are probably the only ones used, but sometimes, you see gas handled blowers. Don Vicente likes to use the backpack gas powered blower because with it, you can blow into the grass and get all the small debris out of it. A gas propelled, backpack blower typically weighs about twenty-one pounds, has a fuel capacity of forty-seven ounces, and costs on average $360.00 dollars. The wind velocity can reach close to two hundred miles per hour. It is a rather powerful machine and very useful for Don Vicente’s work. As you may expect, el soplador (blower), is quite noisy, because its noise level can reach to seventy-five decibel units. For example, in perspective, a blower of this type is four times as loud as a vacuum cleaner or electric dryer. Now, imagine carrying this noise with you rather than seventy-five feet away as it is usually measured by the scale of the whole day.

After the power rake has passed over the lawn areas, Don Vicente begins to use the blower to create small piles of dead grass. I would sometimes help him with this, but most of the time, I did the first part of the task, that of pushing the power rake over the entire lawn area. When I was done with my task, I would immediately help Don Vicente collect the dead grass, and finally we would fertilize the lawn. The fertilization of the lawn has two purposes. First, it encourages strong root development and healthier grass. Also, in very practical terms, yarderos find this as an opportunity to add services to the existing work activities, thus yielding extra income. Don Vicente rarely charges for fertilization, rather, for him, it is an investment given that if the grass grows adequately, then, he would have work the rest of the season. The amount and quantity utilized for a house depends in great measure on the size of the lawn, but typically, a twenty pound bag of fertilizer can be used for two properties at the cost of $15.00 to $22.00. When
fertilization would be done, we would then blow the debris off the sidewalks, place the 38 gallon bags of dead grass into trash cans, and move on to the next house.

Fig. 3.1. Power raking in a South Chicago lawn near 92\textsuperscript{nd} Street and Stony Island Ave. March, 28 2013. Photo taken by the author.

**Don Vicente’s Ruta**

Once *la raqueada* (power raking) is done at the beginning of the landscaping season, *yarderas/os* provide other lawn services that start either on the first or second week of April. I already knew Don Vicente’s lawn service route after having had worked for him in 2009 and it facilitated knowing how to do the work as I began working for him.
On Mondays, the work begins around 92\textsuperscript{nd} Street and Crandon Ave. in Calumet Heights, or as yarderos know this area simply as South Chicago. Mondays are usually not as intense in the amount of houses to which we provide lawn service, but the day’s work usually involves doing other lawn care or landscaping work tasks such as bush trimming, fertilizing, cutting a small tree or building a retaining wall. Working for Don Vicente is not easy for a couple of reasons. To start with, his client’s houses are very close together, thus, in the morning when we start mowing, it is almost certain that we are not going to load the lawnmowers back to the white Chevy cargo van until the evening when we finish work. In addition to this, given that the clients are relatively close, one often does not get a break due to traveling five to six blocks to the next client’s house. Also, Don Vicente is very specific about how he wants the work to be done. For example, he does not like to see his workers taking too much time mowing a lawn, or just relaxing more than necessary. I learned that very early on, thus, whether the task was light or heavy, I had to be active doing a work task that ranged from mowing, fixing equipment, cleaning garbage from the cargo van or filling the lawnmowers with gasoline. I would often finish mowing, and if he was busy with a client, it was expected of me to continue either blowing or finish edging if he could not finish.

On Tuesdays, the level of intensity increases substantially compared to Mondays. On Tuesdays, we would usually start mowing near Yates Ave. and 92\textsuperscript{nd} Street in South Chicago. After this, we would move within this area and mow the lawns of clients located within one or two blocks from each other. Before noon, we would get to a block where we would mow the lawn of about thirty houses all located within a three to four block radius. Don Vicente’s route is not structured necessarily as a pattern across the
particular neighborhoods for yarderos in South Chicago. However, few yarderos are able to stay within a neighborhood mowing a lawn; usually, it is the older yarderos who are able to have this work pattern.

On Wednesdays, the houses to which we provide lawn service were scattered through the South Side of the City. For instance, in the mornings, we would start mowing lawns in Avalon Park, which is mostly an African American neighborhood located around 87th Street and Stony Island Ave. In Avalon Park, we would mow for about two hours, and then we would move towards the well-known Chatham and West Chatham neighborhoods. We would finish the day’s work near the Burnside neighborhood doing a couple of Baptist churches. This year I decided to try out the 32 inch walk behind—the mower that Don Vicente bought a year ago. Knowing how to handle this bigger lawnmower in comparison with the 21 inch lawnmower helps accelerate the time in which the work gets done. There is a great variety of big lawnmowers. For example, there are the lawnmowers in which a person stands on, rides or walks behind.

In the last three years, many yarderos have turned to standing on mowers because it saves them time in doing the lawn service, but many other yarderos such as Don Vicente do not like standing on mowers because the tires leave marks in the grass. Don Vicente prefers the “walk-behind” models. The lawnmower that I began to use early in the landscaping season was a 32 inch, walk-behind Bobcat mower. Of course, these are heavy duty machines that can reach speeds of up to six miles per hour. They have a fuel capacity of five gallons of gasoline, and up to sixteen in horsepower. This machine’s starting price is about $3,500.00, but for an increase in product specifications, the price is usually higher. The hard part for me was not necessarily directing the lawnmower to do
what I wanted it to do, but getting the machine out of the Chevy van that Don Vicente uses for work and there is also difficulty riding the lawnmower up to the cargo van’s deck. Don Vicente, just like many other *yarderos* uses a Chevy 2500 cargo van. While the new generation of *yarderos* such as Cesar Hernandez progressively incorporates a hauling trailer to carry most of the landscaping equipment, Don Vicente still relies on his method of carrying all his equipment in the van. In order to unload the almost 400 pound, 32” lawnmower down from the van, Don Vicente uses two ten foot wooden boards to slide the mower down. On this step, I had to be careful, otherwise if I would drag the mower down instead of slowly riding it backwards. A wooden board can fall down and leave one side of the mower tilted. If one is not careful the whole 400 pound mower can fall to the pavement from about four feet. I know that it can happen because it occurred to me about three times early on in the season. Of the three times, I only hit myself once when I actually tried to lift it myself. After the second time, I knew that there is really nothing one can do but wait and hope that it does not get damaged on the fall.

I do not like to work on Fridays because it is the most difficult day of the week. I recall this feeling from when I first started to work for Don Vicente back in 2009 and is described in the following field note:

**Friday, August 14 2009**
I worked all day from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. I was not able to record notes on my notepad. It had become very difficult to think of anything else other than cutting grass. I am glad the week is over. I got home took a shower and fell asleep around 8 p.m. I have started to dream of mowing grass.

Now, in 2013, while I still feel the intensity of the work we do on Fridays, I learned to manage my work rhythm in such a way that I do not overuse my energy throughout the day and by four or five in the afternoon, I am still able to feel the will to continue
laboring. As I began suggesting, most of the landscaping and lawn service work done by yarderos is done on Thursdays and Fridays, and Don Vicente and Cesar Hernandez are no exception. Don Vicente’s clients are older African Americans and they really like to have their lawns looking nice for the weekend. Typically, during the summer months from June to August, we would often get special calls to make sure the lawn gets done because of family gatherings or special occasions.

On Fridays we would begin around 89th Street and Phillips Ave. Within just one block, we would mow the lawns of about ten houses, then walk about two blocks with the lawnmowers and continue doing the lawns of clients on the next blocks. When we were not wiereando, the service to a client’s home was done pretty fast (5-10 min for each home), often within a few minutes, and then if there was time he would do additional lawn care service tasks such as bush trimming (described in Chapter four) and or small landscaping tasks. There were times when someone else would help Don Vicente in addition of myself. When that happened, we could easily end up mowing at least sixty houses on Fridays.

Don Vicente is very meticulous and specific of how he wants the work to get done. For example, Don Vicente likes to leave a client’s house very clean, thus, we make sure we blow all debris from the curb side and into the lawn areas so then, the mower can suck in the debris at the same time that the grass is being cut. Not all yarderos provide this very clean service, many just blow the grass clippings onto the street or back to the grass again after mowing. Don Vicente believes that the clean job he does is partly one reason he is well known for and is part of the success he has had at maintaining the loyalty of clients for almost thirty years. If the day went well on Fridays, meaning that he did not
have an equipment malfunction, we would end the day exactly on the same spot as the previous week.

In regards to Saturdays, Don Vicente always works on this day, even if it is just to collect payment from clients. On Saturdays we would mow whatever work was left from the day before and finish the service to clients in South Chicago near 83rd Street and Yates Ave. Differing from Calumet Heights, the residents of this area are a younger generation. The house yards are also bigger in this neighborhood. While using the 32” Bobcat lawnmower to mow the lawns faster, a person still ends up walking a lot more. For example, along Yates Ave. within just one block, Don Vicente would mow about twenty houses on Saturday. We would then finish the week’s work at 83rd Street and Exchange Ave., mowing a funeral home and a couple of houses nearby.

In order to get a sense of how much walking was involved while performing lawn service, I made use of cell phone technology as a global positioning device. Utilizing a mobile device that allowed me to run an application that detected and numerically commensurate my physical activity and my movement as I walk while working. This application, as stated on their company website, enables the user to use a built-in GPS to track fitness activities. While I utilized it, it recorded details such as duration, distance, pace, speed, elevation and calories burned. It also provided me with an interactive map of my workout. Thus, when I would arrive at the worksite, I will start the application and let it run as I performed the different landscaping and lawn care activities. Here are two sample data collections out of ten days that I collected data through this mobile phone application. On Tuesday, August 3, 2013 I started the application at 8:21a.m., even

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68 MapMyWalk: https://www.mapmywalk.com/auth/login/
thought it was a Saturday, there were houses that we did not finish for Friday. Thus, we were in Calumet Heights mowing lawn there. The data collected said that in a period of 6 hrs and 5 minutes I walked 13.29 miles, and burned 1,272 calories. On average, while mowing, I walked a mile for every twenty seven minutes. On Friday, August 16, 2013, I also recorded my work performance given that it is one of those days that we barely get on the van to move from house to house. On that day, in a period of 5 hrs and 46 min, I walked mowing grass for 10.42 miles, at a pace of 33 minutes per mile. The following map figures are from the data collected from my activities on August 16.
I continued working with Don Vicente until the end of August. The weeks in July were especially hard given that the heat in the City of Chicago is relatively high during this period. During the time I worked for him, I learned how to handle a bigger lawnmower, and I was able to make ends meet and sustain myself through this work and my own entrepreneurial activities (discussed in Chapter 4).

**Leisure Beyond Work**

The small company owners for the most part are documented, and travel back to their hometown to Zacatecas, Mexico and stay there for the winter. Many of them, especially those that have small children cannot take them out of school here in Chicago, and often return after the winter holidays. While Cesar, Don Vicente and Don Raul worked hard all the days of the season, during the normal working day and week, time for
leisure was also present. For example, a popular leisure activity is soccer. However, since yarderos work all day, the only time available to play is after work. In South Chicago and the East Side neighborhood this is done at the East Side Soccer Dome located near 118th Street and Ave. O, and on Sundays at Calumet Park. If you passed anytime between 7 p.m. and 11 p.m. by the East Side Soccer Dome, you will see males going in and out of the soccer dome to play amateur soccer games. I attended a few times during fieldwork and played a couple of games with a team composed of Mexican immigrants from the state of Zacatecas, Jalisco and Guanajuato. Part of the workers activities is to stay after the game and have a few beers with friends since this is the time of the day that they can engage in leisure. Sharing a beer with fellow soccer teammates is another way of seeking out resources given that through this social behavior, workers learn of work opportunities or events happening around the neighborhood.

A troubling component of this same leisure behavior is the fact that now and then, a worker would drink alcohol above the limit and become impaired to drive a motor vehicle. However, now wanting to diminish his masculinity, he will say that he is fine and will drive home intoxicated. Many workers would not reach their home that day and often times would be stopped and charged with a misdemeanor of driving under the influence.

As mentioned in the method’s section, other activities done on Saturdays is to visit ballrooms where nortena or banda music would be played. On Sundays, two main activities are a must do for these workers. One, attending mass, and go to a local Mexican restaurant to eat or attend the area flea market, commonly known as la garra. The two
main flea markets located south of downtown Chicago are on the following locations:
47th Street and Ashland Ave., and 127th Street and Pulaski Ave.

Fig. 3.2. La Garra, photo taken by the author. April, 2013.
Fig. 3.3. East Side Soccer Dome dance flyer, May 2013
As discussed earlier, while my dissertation centers on mapping labor relations, workers, despite their limited time, will find time recapture their humanity or in other words, enjoy life. Additionally, this is a large area that is still under investigated. 69

**Conclusion**

Participant-observation is quite different when one studies working classes than when one studies some other cultural formation. I knew from the beginning of my fieldwork that I would be able to talk to *yarderos/as* if I met them in the places that they are found most of the day, weeks, and months of the year, that is at work. Moreover, working alongside *yarderos* was very critical for this project. Most of my most insightful understandings of the form of life that they inhabit were clarified while being with them in the everyday spaces that they move in and out of South Chicago (see Lemus 2013).

In this chapter I have presented the structure and form of the *yardero* activity as I encountered it, during my fieldwork. I worked for two months with Hernandez Lawn Care, a small independently owned company headed by Cesar Hernandez, an immigrant from the state of Zacatecas who came to the United States in the early 2000s. From this first experience, I learned that *yarderos* provide lawn service to a range of clients located throughout the city of Chicago. When Cesar and I would talk about the differences between living in Mexico and the United States, I often asked him if he was willing to return to Mexico. The quick answer would be, of course, that is his plan. However, he is now in the process of validating his professional degree in education here in the United

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69 For exceptions see Limon 1994; Lugo 2008.
States and plans to apply to get certified in education. His third son was born as I concluded this research.

Don Vicente’s lawn care company has been built upon twenty eight years of constant, dedicated, hard labor. He is now sixty-seven years of age and still mows the lawns of many clients each and every week of the eight months of the landscaping season. The structure and form of the service Don Vicente provides, just like Cesar Hernandez, when examined diachronically over a long period of time shows that yarderos adjust their service according to the demands of the clients, and clients adapt themselves to the social and cultural condition of yarderos. For example, during the time I worked with Don Vicente, your “word” (tu palabra) had the value of gold, sometimes even more. If I said that I was going to work for him, I made sure I never missed a day. I knew that if I was absent a day, that it would be unacceptable. Don Vicente’s trust on punctual labor can sometimes become a burden for many that do not know how to handle the pressure of having to be on time to work each day until the boss decides it is time to go home, and maintain the intensity of lawn care work activities.

While the yardero/a workweek as I ethnographically documented it here does portray a “normal” working day, the elasticity of the working day is a product of the class relation between the yardero/a and its chalan/a. If we only examine this class relation, we can see that the capitalist, in this case the yardero, benefits from the labor of the chalan. Marx made a metaphor of this class relation on the protraction of the civil war that accurately describes what at many times I saw taking place as a yardero demanded more and more from his workers in order to be able to complete la ruta in a workweek. While the two companies I worked with did not necessarily force me to work, nor did I
witness them force their workers to stay longer hours in a workday; but on the way home however, I constantly saw *chalan*es mowing lawns late at night. In a way, among working class subjects, forcing someone to work is a much more complex process than a dogmatic understanding of capitalism.

In response to the second query that Marx asks, “but what is a working day?” if we actually would follow the *chalan* beyond the “normal” working hours, we would inevitably get to the conclusion that the working day is actually composed of the entire day. For instance, Marx asks, “How far may the working day be extended beyond the working time necessary for the reproduction of labour-power itself?” According to Marx, a capitalist would reply in this way: “the working day contains the full 24 hrs, with the deduction of the few hours of repose without which labour-power absolutely refuses its service again…all of his [her] disposable time is by nature the law of labour-power…even the rest time of Sunday” (Marx 1906 [1867] 291).

While Marx clearly articulated the intricacies of the exploitation of capital in the lives of the working class, for the *yardero/a* and to the *chalan/a* within the working day, week, and season, they do not necessarily experience it an exploitative regime of domination all the time. Sometimes, working harder every day and week is a way to get ahead in life, to get closer to a better life in the north, and to reproduce their way of life in the United States. Those are the contradictions unresolved in a capitalist system that is full of traps and tell us that in order to get ahead in life is to work even harder. The next chapter documents the daily struggles of getting ahead and describes the process of becoming *yardero/a* in Mexican South Chicago.
Chapter 4

Becoming Yadero/a: Neoliberal Entrepreneurs from Below, Work Ethic, and Class

"The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making...I do not see class as a "structure," not even as a "category," but as something which in fact happens (and it can be shown to have happened) in human relationships"


“But the new liberalism is far more than the institution of the market principle throughout a given society. It is far more that a bundle of economic principles that return a nation-state to the tenets of laissez-faire capitalism, the gutting of the welfare state, and the accompanying new forms of cultural governance. Neoliberals are not neo-Adam Smithians. Rather, neoliberalism warrants a social analysis”


The phrase “sí deja la hierbita” (wild weed gives) is a common metaphorical and linguistic expression I often heard expressed among yarderos in South Chicago while performing ethnographic research. This phrase represents the merging of two cultural domains: one, the often exalted discourse of the drug industry portrayed by the media, and two, a very different domain in which most of the working class Mexicans I interviewed participate in, that of lawn care service. This phrase was expressed, for instance, when a yardero would see another yardero buying a new truck, a new lawnmower, or moving to a better home. In other words, “sí deja la hierbita” signifies that working as a yardero has benefited one in such a way that this person now has spare
income which at first glance appears to be spent on luxury items. Sometimes, depending on the inflection, it can be taken as a low key insult and create discomfort between the one that is speaking and the one that is receiving the phrase. Often, when a yardero expresses this phrase, the one receiving it will come back with a phrase such as, “de que te admiras, andamos en lo mismo” (what are you surprised of, we do the same job). In effect, in playful linguistic fashion, both yarderos will recognize the non-aggressive tone of the phrases and the discussion would turn friendly. However, as it is often the case, a yardero needs to carefully judge the context of the expression in order to diffuse any tension that would be created if one acknowledges those class and burlesque references.

During my dissertation fieldwork, I rarely heard women tell one another this same phrase. It was often the case that women would say phrases such as “que vende tu marido” (what is your husband sells?) to denote a similar meaning in reference to class mobility.

This chapter argues that among Mexican populations of working class background, and especially among lawn care service workers, work ethic is central to a worker’s sense of self a Mexican and as working class subject. Ethnographically, I document how work ethic is instilled among the working class of lawn service workers—los chalanes—and how it is culturally cultivated by yarderos. I argue that consciously cultivating a work ethic in specific gendered, cultural, and class terms is necessary in order to become successful capitalist entrepreneurs. The ethnographic material challenges neoliberalism’s simplistic understanding that our human condition is constructed through “freedom” and “choice.” Thus, I argue working class life is more accurately described as saturated by a diffused “unfreedom,” class domination, and engendered in quite specific ways.
Ultimately, the discourse on neoliberalism and entrepreneurialism obscures the reality of social life, which I argue is one that is much more pragmatic and that emerges out of necessity rather than personal choice. This chapter offers an illustration of how ethnography can contribute to a more complex analysis of neoliberal theory and provides a cultural analysis of “neoliberalism from below,” which can only be examined through those who actually do the work at the grass level.\textsuperscript{70}

**Neoliberalism at the Grass Level**

Anthropologist David Harvey (2007) suggested that future historians might look upon the years 1978-80 as revolutionary turning points in the world’s socioeconomic history.\textsuperscript{71} For example, in May 1979, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher put an end to an inflationary economy by pushing for what was termed as neoliberal reforms. In the United States in 1980, Ronald Regan supported Paul Volcker’s economic policies and the immediate outcome was to curb the power of labor, deregulation of industry, and liberation of financial powers within the U.S. and abroad. During this period, as David Harvey describes it, we can define “[n]eoliberalism…in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes the human well-being can best be advanced by liberating entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” (Harvey 2007:2). In relation to the state, one of the basic tenets of neoliberalism has been the

\textsuperscript{70} A similar analogy is by “social history” scholars who think in terms of lower-case terms, from “Politics” to “politics” from “War” to “war” and in this case, from “Neoliberalism” to “neoliberalism” The point is to see processes that happen in everyday life that are nor the highlight of what most scholars think or write about.

\textsuperscript{71} Harvey, David (2007:1)
systematic use of state power to impose market imperatives. According to David Harvey, the neoliberal state seeks “out internal organizations and new institutional arrangements that improve its competitive position as an entity vis-à-vis other states in the global market” (Harvey 2007:64). According to neoliberal theory, the state should favor individual “private property, the rule of law, and the institutional arrangements considered essential to guarantee individual freedoms” (Harvey 2007:64). However, and this is amply noted, behind these major shifts in social policy lie important structural changes in the nature of governance toward the working class populations. Indeed, the restructuring of neoliberal reforms essentially gave more advantage to corporations and private capital to disengage the state apparatus from certain regulatory mechanisms that had been advanced by working class populations, especially since the post-World War II period in the United States. In other words, labor power had to be disintegrated, dispersed, fragmented and kept at bay from individual private interests and its respective rewards.

The state under neoliberalism shifted on how power is exercised from a liberal government to a governance marked by emphasizing personal responsibility and care of the self. For example, French philosopher Michel Foucault elaborates a form in which modern states exercise power over individuals as part of a population in the late 1970s. In the Lectures of 1978-1979, Michel Foucault focused on the genealogy of the modern state. Michel Foucault (1997:67) coined the term “governmentality” as a guideline of historical reconstructions embracing the period from ancient Greece though modern

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72 Other scholars have described neoliberal theory as an ideology which suggests that individuals and corporations believe in “open, competitive, and unregulated markets.”

neoliberalism (Foucault 1997: 67). Foucault specifically uses the notion of government in a general sense that went well into the eighteenth century, and the problem of government not only encompassed technologies of domination, but also the political rationality behind them. Foucault further defines government, more precisely, “as ‘the conduct to conduct’ and thus a term that ranges from ‘governing the self’ to ‘governing others’” To understand neoliberalism, the concept of governmentality is useful because it makes us see how power operates in a multiplicity of modes, not so much in a consent and coercion schema. In terms of ethnography, governmentality when focused from a class analysis then allows us to critically examine how capitalism as a form of governmentality or a governmentality as a technique of capitalism influences and directs the conduct of individuals to follow the logic of capitalist production. In other words, the way I see it, “the conduct of conduct” becomes the ultimate device of capital to exert its own reproduction.

Moreover, a diagnosis from above would argue that in and through governmentality, we are seeing a paradox on politics and society. This means that we seek “freedoms,” but in our search for them we produce “unfreedoms.”74 The classic example is the fear of criminality that produces more police, then, police reproduces its own existence by producing more statistics that are then evaluated by knowledge experts who further on reproduce action upon actions.75 Offering a diagnostic evaluation of the present, Wendy Brown (2005) explains the current mode of governance as one which encompasses, “but [is] not limited to the state, and one that produces subjects, forms of

74 See for example the work of Cruikshank (1999) on how democratic subjects are produced and instruments of a political rationality in relation to government.
75 For an excellent anthropological analysis of the production of criminality under neoliberalism, see Rosas 2012.
citizenship and behavior, and a new organization of the social” (37). For Brown, the “neo” in neoliberalism signals a social analysis of how economic and political doctrines are based on the free market and the subject has “reached the soul of the citizen-subject education policy to practices of empire” (39). Here, I cite extensively because of Brown’s incisive description of subject formation vis-à-vis neoliberal rationality:

“[I]t involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action, even as the market itself remains a distinctive player… [neoliberal governmentality] convenes a ‘free’ subject who rationally deliberates about alternative courses of action, makes choices, and bears responsibility for the consequences of these choices” (43).

However, a theoretical problem rises for neoliberalism when it deals with subjects that may not necessarily be the ideal image of the modern citizen and rather that are located on the borderlands of the state or hidden under the optic of the state. More often, anthropologists have noted that immigrant populations do not take advantage of all the benefits that this new liberalism brings, but rather, they suffer the punitive hand of the state as it has historically taken place in order to govern immigrant populations in the United States and beyond. For example, Aihwa Ong’s work (2006) has been a seminal theoretical and ethnographic contribution to how neoliberalism operates towards unprivileged sectors of society which are often those of immigrant status and foreign to

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76 Moreover, neoliberal rationality or logic by its very deployment, according to governmentality scholars, makes use of every available means to manage individuals and populations. For instance, Barbara Cruikshank (1999) neatly documents how democratic subjects are often times self-created, likewise, as explored by Nikolas Rose (2008), there is a sense that citizenship also comes to be dominated by the neoliberal logic. In other words, citizenship becomes not so much a legal and political status, but rather through “the energetic pursuit of personal fulfillment and incessant calculations that are to enable this to be achieved.”

77 As it will become clear later on the chapter, working classes tend to remain within the optic of the state because, as I argue, they are a necessity to its everyday functioning and legitimacy, which in a Marxian way, working classes often time do the labor that a class within a state does not want to do. Thus, once they become visible through the optic of the state, then governing mechanism further reproduces its working class relations to the governing class. Thus, this is one of the main reasons why an analysis of neoliberalism should not remain within a “Political” context but rather a “politics” of everyday life.
the host nation. On the other hand, but in similar ways to Brown, Ong argues that “neoliberal governmentality results from the infiltration of market-driven truths and calculations into the domain of politics” (Ong 2006: 4), and I would add that these truths, whether theorized through “freedom” or “truths” frequently hide the capitalist agenda of exploiting entire working class populations. Moreover, Ong argues that states around the world are employing governmental programs which render some populations expendable and others under state protection, which in turn creates, “open markets [that] articulate new arrangements and territorialization of capital, knowledge, and labor across national borders” (Ong 2006: 8).

The attractive aspect of Aihwa Ong’s formulations is her conception of sovereignty within neoliberalism and its exceptions. First, Ong criticizes Giorgio Agamben (1998), as well as other scholars, for taking the “state of exception” too literally, which in turn creates the effect that there is a “universal division of humanity into those with rights and those without would miss the rich complexity and the possibilities of multiple ethical systems at play.” (Ong 2003 in Ong 2006: 23) Ong proposes the concept of “graduated

78 Giorgio Agamben in Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (1998 [1995]) sets out to expand Foucault’s concept of biopolitics by investigating the underside of biopower in contemporary biopolitical projects of state formation. In this work, Agamben uses the paradox of modernity to explain the intersection where the process of state formation and the processes of power over life have been established in history. Agamben tells us that in the classical world, natural life is excluded from the polis in a strict sense, it remains confined as reproductive life—the sphere of the eikos, “home.” Generally, Agamben sees zoë, meaning life (the simple fact of living common to all beings), slowly enters the realms of “the polis—the politicization of bare life as such—constitutes the decisive event of modernity and signals a radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of classical thought” (Agamben 1998: 3-4). By criticizing Foucault for his imprecise theoretical formulation in regards to the question of the sovereign, Agamben sets out to analyze precisely “the hidden point of intersection between juridico-institutional and the biopolitical models of power” (Agamben 1998:6). The protagonist in his work is the bare life, “that is, the life of homo sacer (sacred man), who may be killed and yet not be sacrificed, and whose essential function in the modern politics we intend to assert. An obscure figure in archaic Roman law, in which human life is included in the juridical order [ordinamiento] solely in the form of its exclusion” (Agamben 1998: 8). See also Agamben 1998 for an attempt to historicize the “state of exception” as state operating in other contexts beyond life and the modern state.
sovereignty,” which can be depicted as a citizenship formation in conjunction with neoliberal governmentality and technologies of state power. Moreover, graduated sovereignty is described, again, as “market driven logic [which] induces the coordination of political policies with the corporate interests, so that developmental decisions favor the fragmentation of the national space into various contiguous zones, and promote the differential regulation of populations who can be connected to, or disconnected from, global circuits of capital.” (Ong 2006: 77). Ong’s formulation most clearly depicts how the lawn care economy and its participants operate in everyday life.

In spite of the theoretical disagreements between neoliberal scholars on how the logic of neoliberalism operates, this chapter attempts to ethnographically ground neoliberalism from the perspective of my participants. I attempt to provide a more complex argument of how capitalism functions on the ground level versus the one often experienced by wealthy, “connected” or “disconnected” sectors of society. As I argue in this chapter, working class subjectivity, in spite of the historical period under examination, is not constructed through “freedom” and “choice” at all; that logic seems to contradict capitalism itself, and I refuse to call it “freedom,” even when discursively is theorized as such. As I show in my ethnography, at the grass level, where yarderas/os work, domination is achieved and reproduced within the working class subject’s self-cultivation of a work ethic that favors capital and produces a working class—that of a racialized Mexican—through a series of historically specific processes where individuals continually make limited “choices” in the making and unmaking of their class identity based on kinship, immigrant status, employer needs, and individual desires to seek a better life.
Working as a chalan: “sí, patron”

When a Mexican immigrant starts working en la yardas as a chalan, it usually means that person is a beginner in a particular work activity. At the beginning of the last chapter, the ethnographic field notes accurately describe the type of work activity that a chalan (or helper) would do. In 2012, when I worked for two months with Cesar Hernandez (see chapter three as well), I worked as a chalan or helper. The following ethnographic field note describes the work with Hernandez Lawn Care during my latest fieldwork period.

Monday, November 12, 2012

On Monday, I got up at 6:30 a.m. to get ready to work with my current boss that I am working with as a landscaper. It is November already and the type of work that we are doing now is basically to collect the leaves from the client’s front and backyards. We started the day in South Chicago and we did about fifteen houses there. We then moved to South Deering, a neighborhood located near 106th and Torrence Ave. We then continue mowing in South Hammond, Indiana, then to Calumet City, Illinois and finally we ended the day in a poor working class neighborhood of Harvey, Illinois.

My job shifts between working with the 21” mower and when the house’s yard is big, I usually blow the leaves into the grass area and my boss picks them up with a bigger mower, a 32” standing lawnmower. We are a crew of two. While working, there is not much time to chat with him. However, the opportunity I often have is when we are traveling in the pickup truck from one residence to the next.

As described in my field note entry, a chalan is usually hired to perform a very specific work activity. Such as in my case, mowing with the 21” Toro lawnmower, or with the 32 inch walk behind mower. At other times, a chalan will just perform bush trimming (podar), or work in temporary job positions such as when a yardero has acquired a good landscaping contract that will yield profit and needs to get the job done quickly. Cesar Hernandez has specifically dedicated himself to mowing lawns, as in the
case of Don Vicente, but other *yarderos* often perform small landscaping work such as building retaining walls, planting trees, or installing decorative rocks.

If we recall from chapter two, I described the life of Andres Mota, a Mexican immigrant from the state of Zacatecas. Andres told us about the structural constraints he has experienced which have not allowed him to become the owner of his labor, or to start a small lawn care service company. However, upon talking with Andres, I learned that his fear emerges not because he is afraid of being successful, but because of legal constraints and subsequent criminalization that comes with not having *papeles* (proper documents). He does not have the proper documented status.

At other times, legal status is not always indicative of their hierarchical position within the *yardero* work activity. For example, Guillermo Solis is the nephew of Don Vicente Flores. Guillermo is a United States citizen having been born in the States and his father, Jose Flores, was born in Mexico and migrated to Chicago in the late 1970s. Guillermo is currently married and has a young daughter. Guillermo worked with Don Vicente helping him mow lawns since the early 1990s, but Guillermo has not become an independent small company owner. Instead, he works as a full-time *chalan* to one of the sons of Don Vicente that has a separate landscaping business. Guillermo was channeled into yard work since he was in middle school. However, while we find exceptions such as that of Guillermo, the great majority of *chalanes* are often *sin papeles* (without proper documentation).

Not many *chalanes* become small company owners, and not all company owners are documented. *Chalanes* or lawn care service workers would often struggle anywhere between one, two, or even three years before they are indeed full-time *yarderos* or small
company owners. In the first phase of participant-observation, I worked as a *chalan* with Cesar Hernandez. During the second phase of participant-observation, I worked with Don Vicente who more closely resembles a mixed category in the labor hierarchy between *chalan* and full time *yardero*. While I most intensely worked during the second phase with Don Vicente performing mixed activities, meaning working on my own route and doing additional labor for a *yardero*, however, at the beginning of the fieldwork phase I also worked on mowing my own client’s lawns that I had acquired during the previous months when fieldwork became official (July 2012).

When a *chalan* decides to become an independent *yardero*, often, he has two options and these options are structured through kinship ties. For example, if a *chalan* works for his father or uncle, there is a great chance he will start simply helping with the mowing equipment before mowing by himself. Referring back to chapter three, a small twenty-one inch mower usually costs about $1500.00, a blower is about $350.00, and a line trimmer is about $180.00. If you add the numbers, you need to invest at least two thousand dollars to start anew. However, what often happens, many *chalanes* who start their service as an independent small company owner and entrepreneur will buy used equipment from their father or uncle in order to conserve money as opposed to buying brand new equipment. Others will save up income, and go to flea markets on Sundays to buy used equipment.

An additional means of production to add here is the pickup truck or cargo van that one needs to have in order to travel around the city providing the service. If the *chalan* works for a family owned company, the owner may pass on a small number of clients so the new would-be *yardero* can start providing services as well as gaining additional
clients while starting his own lawn care company. If the soon-to-be *yardero* is not related to the owner of the lawn care company as it often happens, a *chalan* has to start literally from having nothing to gaining clients one by one by one. For instance, while Cesar Hernandez did not start from scratch, the following field notes written from a day of work with him describe how Cesar remembers how his lawn care service company began back in the early 2000s.

As I mentioned early on during the fieldwork period, I attempted to become a small scale company owner performing lawn care services to clients in South Chicago. I performed this work from August 2012 to September 2012, and began again at the start of the landscaping season in early March of 2013. While I was a bit successful from time to time, mowing grass on my own proved to be an arduous task. In short, if one decides to become a small company owner, one is literally forsaking a stable income because a person does not know how well one will do as an independent contractor. The following field notes tell of my experiences and frustration right after one month of starting my official dissertation fieldwork.

**Wednesday, August 1, 2012**

I continue to mow lawns in Hammond, Indiana. I am also collecting payments from July. I need money; I need to make about $2000.00 in two weeks. I am not sure if I will be able to do it. I still feel tired, but do not want to show it. These past two months have been difficult. It has been humid and hot and somehow clients have not paid in time after the fourth of July. Today is about 87 to 90 degrees outside, currently, it is 87 degrees at 5 p.m. Today it was the first time that I saw a “white” *yardero*. I saw him in Hammond, Indiana. I have not seen them in Chicago, Illinois, not even among those big landscaping companies that get city contracts to maintain the lawn areas by Stony Island and 79th street (ex. Christy Weber).
**Tuesday, August 13, 2012**

Getting ready to start the week. It rained all day here in Chicago, thus, no work was done.

**Wednesday, August 15, 2012**

No money, how to make it. Fucking life—is more difficult than expected. Why no one calls me to do lawn service? May need to request a family loan if things continue as such.

**Thursday, August 16, 2012**

Raining and not working today. Hopefully it goes away around noon. 92nd and Phillips: 1st African American Lawn Care Company I see in South Chicago.

The field notes describe the experiences that many **yarderos** do not want to talk about, that is, the beginnings when work did not actually come about and the **yarderos** struggle to become small company owners. In my own case, the frustration was very central to my understanding of the struggles that Mexican working class populations experience while working as **yarderas/os**, and it was until early October when I started working for Cesar Hernandez on a regular basis that I became economically stable.

**Between Working as a Chalan and Being a Yardero**

Gaining the status of a **yardero** does not come easily, a would-be **yardero** has to invest energy, money, time and effort if he or she wants to become a full-time **yardero** and earn enough to live a better life by working en **las yardas**. There is often a difference between working as a **yardero** and actually accepting the working class identification as part of your own everyday life. The cultural commensuration occurs often given that the latter emerges as lawn care service workers become full-time **yarderos**, such as Cesar.
Hernandez or Don Vicente. In other words, work activity has a direct effect on how one identifies him or herself as belonging to a particular group of individuals who also perform the same work activity.

Don Raul Mendez is a seasoned *yardero* in the East Side neighborhood of Chicago. Don Raul came to Chicago from Huitzila, Zacatecas in 1992. He is a tall man, in his late forties, broad shoulders, wears glasses, has a thick mustache, and brown skin tone. The town of Huitzila, Zacatecas is well known for having a strong immigrant presence in the city of Chicago and one of the biggest Mexican, family-owned, lawn care companies in South Chicago. However, in the case of Don Raul, he often does not want to be associated directly as part of the Mendez family; thus, he has a different logo on his truck. The following conversation took place at his home in the East Side early November of 2012 when I asked him to tell me how he ended up as a *yardero*.

SERGIO: How did you begin working as a *yardero, en la yardas*?
DON RAUL: Well, I first arrived in 1992. Let me tell you Sergio, I arrived here…without a pair of shoes. A cousin gave me a pair when I arrived, and as soon as my cousin gave me money after having worked for a week cutting grass, I went to buy a pair of boots. I then continued working with my cousin, the Mendez, for almost three years.
SERGIO: Where did you arrive first? At this house in East Side?
DON RAUL: I first arrived to an apartment building near Ewing Ave. and the park [Calumet Park]. We stayed there, my wife and kids, for almost eight years. Then, we moved to this house.
SERGIO: And, have you worked all the time *en las yardas*?
DON RAUL: I worked with my cousin for the first three years, until one day I decided to go on my own. I began doing the lawn of only ten houses, and went up to about thirty for the next three years or so. It was in the fourth year that I started going up, but only like ten houses per year. Now, I have about one hundred clients, but the number varies during the year.
SERGIO: How did you make ends meet with thirty houses to mow a month?
DON RAUL: Well, I could do it. I will work during the week with another guy from Hutzila, Don Salvador and then do my houses during the weekend. I will
also do deliveries for a Chinese restaurant located by 106th Street whenever I had a chance.
SERGIO: And, what about winters?
DON RAUL: Well, the snow. I worked shoveling snow.

As recounted by Don Raul, he had a difficult start as a yardero. Sitting in his kitchen, drinking coffee and holding a piece of pan dulce (Mexican pastry), Don Raul continued conversing on the struggles he endured while starting his lawn service company. For example, there were days when he did not receive any phone calls from clients so he could go out and mow their lawn. Don Raul was very active promoting himself and his company. One of the most common activities that a “would-be yardero” does is to print flyers, a one page document with their most basic services and contact information which he would distribute in the neighborhood were he would like to provide services. For instance, soon-to-be yarderos would request a flyer to be made from a small printing business, and then walk door to door distributing their information. Don Raul tells me that he is constantly engaged in this marketing strategy in order to increase the size of his business. He would often take his two sons, Rogelio and Enrique, with him so the distribution of flyers would not take much time. Today, similarly to other yarderos, Don Raul returns to Zacatecas each year, for a short period, a month at the most. I asked Don Raul when he knew that he had made it, or when it was that he began to see that more people were calling him and requesting his lawn service. Quite simply, he did not know. Don Raul said that he began noticing a stable list of eighty clients or so which began to develop about five or six year ago. He said that with that amount of clientele, he was able to take care of the necessities of his family and have
some income left for the winter season where he does not work mowing lawns, but instead provides snow shoveling to his clients.

Thus, while being a yardero is a working class identity that is gained through and upon attaining a certain level and work complexity or income, or by doing certain kind of work activities, it is rather characterized by experiencing the everyday struggles of becoming a yardero that my participants acquired and embodied this working class identification. I knew of few landscapers who sought a route of houses and began performing this work activity, but they are not accepted or seen as yarderos. They prefer to call themselves “landscapers” even though they are Mexican immigrants, and perform this work activity itself. In this context, the word “landscaper” denotes a higher status within the hierarchy of the work activity, and often times, it is seen as more prestigious than only mowing lawns for clients as most of the companies that I saw and participants I talked with did.

**A Yardero’s Income**

A good yardero also knows another yardero’s standing within the work hierarchy, just by asking the simple question: how many houses do you have? Normally, in the City of Chicago, mowing the grass of a typical residential house would cost the client anywhere from $55.00 dollars per month to $80.00. This involves the typical lawn service which consists of mowing grass each week, edging every other week, and blowing all the debris that accumulates during the week so the house lawn areas are left clean. Now, by simple math calculations, if a yardero tells you that he or she provides lawn services to about thirty houses, such as in the case
of Cesar Hernandez when he began mowing on his own and in the case of Don Raul Mendez when he also began entering the lawn service, or in my own case as I attempted to become a small lawn care service company owner, the monthly income would average $1,900.00 dollars per month.

However, this figure is not at all the net income, doing the lawn service myself of about twenty-eight houses a week during the early phase of my research in 2012. I learned that I would spend about $50.00 per week on gasoline for the Ford Cargo van and for the lawnmower, blower and line trimmer. Thus, that comes to about $200.00, just on gas expenses. Also, I would often do the lawns of these houses in two days, and as many yarderos do, eat at a fast food restaurant such as McDonalds, one then ends up spending $56.00 per month just on food. There are additional expenses such as water and insurance for the van at $65.00. Thus, at the end on the month, the income of about $1900.00 will end up being an average $1500.00 per month for about thirty clients. But, I always felt short of getting this entire amount in a lump sum at the end of the month. Since we are dealing with monthly payments, not all clients pay exactly at the end of the month. Some clients would send their lawn service payment at the end of the month via regular mail, and that often took the payment one week to arrive to the postal service station. Thus, the true monthly income of a yardero doing lawn service to thirty houses per month will end up being on average $1200.00. Whether it is a small company owner of thirty, eighty or one hundred clients, in any given month, a yardero will end up with 25% of clients that will end up paying for the service two or three weeks behind. This adds an additional
level of frustration to the *yardero* that solely depends on this income to sustain his or her family.

**From Yardero to Patron**

Don Raul Mendez reached the point where he actually began to consider himself a full-time *yardero*, that is, when he was able to provide lawn services to about eighty clients. The eighty clients in terms of income means, that on average, a *yardero* will make on average of $5,200.00 dollars per month. Again, this figure is elusive given that about 25% of the clients do not pay on time or end up not paying at all given that there are no written contracts between the Mexican landscaper or *yardero* and the individual that hires them. Thus, the true net income obtained at the end of each month will be approximately, $3,900.00. Likewise, as a *yardero* scales up, additional expenses also rise. While working for Don Vicente, I learned that at the end of the week, he would fill the tank of his Cargo Van with $120.00 dollars, which will cover the costs of traveling around the South Chicago neighborhoods in order to provide lawn services to clients. Additionally, Don Vicente will spend about $15.00 dollars on food and about $10.00 dollars on water each day. A week of expenses will be on average an additional $125.00. Thus, the monthly costs for gas, food and water will come to about $225.00 dollars per week, and monthly expenses will be on average around $900.00 dollars.

Just like a *yardero* that only provides lawn services to thirty or so clients, Don Vicente will pay for car insurance costs. In total, the expenses of running the small lawn care service company will run to about $950.00 a month. Thus, on average, a
yardero providing lawn service to about eighty properties could in theory, make about $3,000.00 dollars a month. From this figure, we need to keep in mind that very few yarderos are able to mow the grass of the clients just by themselves. Most of the time, when a yardero reaches this threshold, they begin to hire someone else or a chalan (as I was with Don Vicente and with Cesar Hernandez) in order to provide the service to the clientele. In effect, if we know that the average hourly rate for a chalan is about $8.00 an hour, and if he works for forty hours per week, then monthly, the yardero has to pay for labor costs an average of $1,200.00. Thus, at the end of each month, after expenses are paid, a yardero with eighty houses will make around $2,000. If we know that the landscaping season is only of eight months, then, the yearly salary of a yardero will end up being at a net take home income of $16,000.00. Then, we have to actually divide this amount for a twelve month period, and the final theoretical figure then goes down to about $1,300.00 per month or a salary of $325.00 per week. If you recall, in theory, the yardero is making almost the same amount of money as the chalan that is helping him do the work. However, in order to really make money out of the service provided, the yardero needs to add additional charges to his service, otherwise, if they depend solely on the income received from only mowing, the season can come to an end in November, and many will find themselves without any income accumulated on savings for the winter season. Thus, what often happens, the yardero attempts to provide additional services to the clients whenever possible, this includes, charging for fertilizing, bush trimming, getting small landscaping contracts, planting flowers or trees or simply cleaning gutters.
Not many yarderos stay or want to stay with only eighty clients. This first major profit threshold enables the yardero to scale up. Typically, a crew of two workers, the boss and a chalan working the entire week, except on Sundays, could actually provide the lawn service to two hundred clients. If a yardero increases his number of clients more than two hundred, there is a risk of not increasing profit, and if the work does not get done with a crew of two workers, then hiring another worker can potentially hinder the net profit after means of production are covered. For example, as I finish writing this dissertation, Hernandez Lawn Care, Cesar Hernandez’s company currently provides lawn services to about two hundred clients. Cesar was able to provide the service to all of his clients, but there were times during the period I worked for him that he actually had to hire extra help to be able to effectively do the work. By doing the simple calculations of total income, minus means of production and labor involved in running the everyday activities of his company, two hundred clients will leave Cesar an income amount of $13,000.00 per month.

When a yardero/a scales up, he has to also scale up in the equipment, the insurance cost for the pickup truck and hauling trailer would come to about $150.00 dollars per month. Gas expenses add up to about $500.00 per month, plus food and water consumption while at work, which will come out to something near $400.00 a month. Here, you have to add the additional cost in terms of labor. A permanent worker’s salary will come to about $2,000.00 per month, plus extra help for two days will be about $160.00. Thus, adding the means of production and labor cost, the net profit of the Patron (boss) will come to about $6,590.00 dollars a month. If we multiply for eight months, that comes to $52,700.00 dollars for the season. Keep in
mind that this in only for eight months of the year. Since many yarderos do not have work during the winter season, you actually have to divide this amount by twelve months, thus, the approximate salary of a yardo that has scaled up to about two hundred clients comes to about $40,391.00. That will factor to about $1647.00 per week of his or her salary. However, let us consider that el patron starts work well before he picks up the workers and arrives to his home well after he leaves them at their homes, in a typical week the now owner will work for about sixty hours a week. Thus, a real value income calculation will be on average for the small company owner of about $30.00 per hour. In comparison with other professions, a small company owner makes the same amount as a post-doctoral fellow at a major research university, or a similar amount as an entry level position without the benefits of health insurance or a retirement plan.

**Laziness, Work and Masculinity**

Much will be lost in translation if the previous account of a rather hierarchical presentation of the yardo development will leave as it stands. In fact, becoming a large scale yardo takes time, effort, and a work ethic not easily found in segments even within the Mexican population. For example, in the case of Cesar Hernandez, he spent about two years working for Don Vicente as a chalan. After getting married in 2003, he decided to become a mixed category between chalan and yardo. During this period of about a year or so, he would mow the lawns of his own clients, and work part-time with Don Vicente. Moreover, between 2004 and 2006, it was very hard for him to become a yardo on a full-time basis. When I worked for him
in October of 2012, he would always recall how he had to endure a lot of difficulties because of not being able to barely earn enough to pay for rent or utilities. While we worked, I would often ask how he managed to increase his clientele from twenty-eight houses to the many that he currently has. Cesar would say that no matter how he feels, he has to make sure he mows the lawn of the clients every week, no matter what is going on in his life. In fact, according to Cesar, if the client sees that his landscaper provides service on a constant basis, without missing a week of mowing grass, then the client will recommend his services to his friends and family members. In the case of Cesar, he will often say that most of his clients are, for example, the daughters, sons, uncles, or friends of clients that he began to work with early in 2001.

Cesar’s work ethic was very specific because he had learned the trade for two years under Don Vicente. Based on the time I performed participant-observation while working for Don Vicente, I personally learned the work ethic instilled onto the worker and the work ethic Don Vicente himself performed. Obviously, Don Vicente does not call it “work ethic” in the way academics understands it, but for Don Vicente it was the way he performed the work itself that produced a specific way of understanding life and his own existence as a Mexican immigrant. For example, the issue of time was very central for Don Vicente. During the landscaping season, there was not a day that we would wake up late to get ready to go work. He expected the same kind of commitment from his workers. For instance, if it rained, many yarderos would wait until the rain would stop and then afterwards pick up his workers. In the case of Don Vicente, this was not an option; if he had work he would expect you to
be there ready whenever he came to pick you up. This kind of approach towards work relates to time management; however, it is not always instilled this intensely on other landscape business workers. For example, the South Chicago lawn care company in which Guillermo Solis worked with (see chapter three), Flores Landscaping, would often wait until the rain stopped, and then they will start loading the lawn care equipment after eight in the morning.

A key to becoming a well-known yardero among my participants is also measured by the seriousness from which they approach work itself. For example, the system utilized by Cesar Hernandez and Don Vicente is to mow the lawn every week and wirear (edge) every other week. There were weeks when the grass would not grow at all; this was especially the case in the months of April and October, and perhaps in late July. Sometimes when we would pass by a house that seemed as if the grass had just been mowed, even though it was done a week ago, some yarderas/os are tempted to just go ahead and skip the house and move on to the next. Don Vicente does not like to do that. Every week, no matter if it rained or not, if he got behind because of equipment malfunction, or a personal problem he had during the week, he made sure he provided consistent services to all of his clients. This work ethic contrasts a bit with Don Raul Mendez’s approach. For example, if it rained, he would skip all of the clients he was going to mow the lawn for on that day, and will not mow their lawn until the next week.

While starting on time meant that chalanes have to be ready and be punctual to work with the yardero, getting off work early also carried specific meaning and one had to maneuver carefully in order not be seen as lazy. For example, when I worked
with Cesar Hernandez, while he always made sure to start working on time early at seven-thirty in the morning, but whenever we would end up working late, he would just go home. Cesar did not like to stay looking for additional work. Contrary to Cesar Hernandez, Don Vicente was very strict in the way he approached ending the workday. While doing fieldwork and working for Don Vicente, I quickly learned that the end of the day came when he would tell us to load the lawnmower in the cargo van; otherwise, we would continue mowing. There were days, for instance, during June when we stayed after six in the afternoon and would do additional jobs such as bush trimming. We all knew that we worked passed the normal working hours, but we also knew that if we were to say anything or question why we were working past six in the evening, \textit{el patron} (the boss) would not say anything, rather, he would probably let you go and in effect hire someone else that would work and follow his uncommon schedule.

Expecting not be seen as lazy was intimately connected to masculinity or behaving as a male. During my fieldwork experience, the two lawn care service companies that I worked with and when I did participant-observations were composed of only males. In very few occasions, we encountered mowing crews that were composed of females only. Most of the time, when a crew had a female, she would often do the same tasks as males which include utilizing the 21 inch Toro lawnmower, blowing or driving the Cargo Van, and pickup truck. An activity that I rarely saw women doing was \textit{wirear} (line trimming), that is because you literally have to carry the line trimmer and do the work very fast.
There are a few cases that a *chalan*, who has worked for a number of years mowing lawns, is able to transfer to another work activity. But there were a few cases of lawn care service workers. One of the sons of Raul Mendez is Enrique. He is tall and skinny with thick eyebrows and pale skin. Enrique began working as a *yardero* with his father’s lawn care company where he learned the basic of mowing, edging and trimming bushes. I met Enrique in the summer of 2009. He was younger at that time and was attending one of the City Colleges of Chicago and in that year he transferred to the University of Illinois at Chicago to study architecture. Even when he was a college student, as soon as his studies ended in the middle of May, he would start working with a lawn care company that his father had contacts with. Enrique worked all summer mowing grass and in the last year before graduating, he became the driver on the route of the boss he was working for. I caught up with him at a nearby fast food restaurant in an East Side neighborhood and talked to him about graduating from college.

SERGIO: Are you still working with the boss from last year?
ENRIQUE: Simon (literally yes of course)
SERGIO: How is it going?
ENRIQUE: It is fine; he has me driving the route. He has two routes, and I take care of one.
SERGIO: Who do you have working with you?
ENRIQUE: This week the daughter of the owner is helping me mow the houses.
SERGIO: How, you mean you have a *chalana*?
ENRIQUE: I guess so.
SERGIO: Well, as long as she helps you? Does she?79
ENRIQUE: Well, she only mows with the stander lawnmower. You know, the one that you mow while standing. She also uses the blower when I have not finished edging the houses.
SERGIO: Do you find it difficult to work alongside her?

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79 I understand that the line of questioning may not be appropriate in this case, but I wanted to investigate how male *yarderos* perceive female workers and how gender becomes a heightened category to investigate. Moreover, my insistence on asking Enrique in this case about the female worker is that the demand of capital are not easily accommodate across gender lines.
ENRIQUE: Not really.
SERGIO: What are your plans? I know that you just graduated from UIC.
ENRIQUE: I do not know. I thought that it would have been easier to find a job. *Tu sabes* (you know), *no seguro, no trabajo* (not social security, not job)…I am applying for the temporary work permit so I can get a driver’s license, but I am not sure for how long.

Not long after I had this conversation with Enrique, he applied for the Deferred Action for immigrants that are undocumented in the United States. He was able to get his permit, social security, and a driver’s license by the end of July 2013. Later, he had texted me in the middle of June and told me that he had an interview with a company from Lombard, Illinois that wanted him to perform some kind of architectural related work. Enrique got the job in the last week of August and started working full-time with health insurance benefits.

**Conclusion**

As elaborated ethnographically, neoliberalism, as Rosas (2012) comments, is far more than an institution of the market principle, and I add it is more than just the concepts of “freedom” and “choice” which is most clearly exposed through the a priori ideological concepts behind the illusions of the American Dream. In my participants’ context, it translates in *El Norte*, and for Rosas (2012) and as for this ethnographic study, “neoliberalism warrants a social analysis.” In this chapter, I have carried this social analysis of the application of neoliberal logics in the lives of working class Mexicans and the overwhelming evidence suggest that “freedom” of the market and the individual is not to be seen.
My theoretical discussion at the beginning of this chapter has vast implications toward documenting on the ground how living under neoliberal times, as many scholars tend to think, is experienced differently for different populations. E. P. Thompson (1963) articulated in quite simple and profound ways how a working class population is made. For the author, the working class does not emerge at the appointed time, but becomes present in its own making. In fact, the emergence of a working class it is said to emerge in human relationships. Similarly, I see the emergence of the yardero working class as workers attempt to become entrepreneurs or small lawn care company owners, embedded in the human relationships of everyday interaction. In this attempt to become yarderos/as, work ethic is a central mechanism that has to be cultivated by the yardero, instilled in the chalan, and disciplined when necessary. This cultivation of work ethic or rather disciplining of the worker’s time is crucial to become a successful small scale capitalist.

Among scholars documenting the neoliberalism as a historical process, they have clearly identified and attempted to diagnose the recent economic and political changes (see Harvey 2007). Much of their discussion however stays at the macro-structural level and refuses to engage with the day to day life happening of the working class population they so dearly talk about in their writings. Other neoliberal scholars have turned to the realm of experts and to governmentality to provide a diagnosis of the present historical moment. For example, following Michel Foucault, governmentality scholars argue that neoliberal rationality has permeated every aspect of society and its operating modes are experienced in a multiplicity of forms (see Foucault 1997, Brown 2005, Rose 2008). However, as we saw in my ethnographic
materials, when governmentality rationality is applied within the context of the working class, it brings neoliberal governance and capitalist domination closer as to see an expression of the other. Governmentality scholars have clearly documented what I call the “freedom paradox,” that is, that as we seek for freedoms, we reproduce disciplinary mechanism to curtail those freedoms. In the context of the working class as examined here, from the perspective of the Mexican working class, it is not a paradox at all, but the ways they have been dominated for a long, long time.

A rather more critical scholarship of neoliberalism does see the infiltration of talk about freedom of the market as a way to hide the dominant agenda of the few, that is, in the words of anthropologist Aihwa Ong, to “articulate territorialization of capital across national borders.” (2006:8). As suggested earlier in this chapter, it is the coordination of corporate interests that promotes the differential regulation of populations. For *yarderos/as* neoliberalism does not make sense, it is even a rather alien term. However, the lived realities of being Mexican immigrants under neoliberal times, enables certain opportunities presented before them because of having crossed a political border indeed favors those to which they first sell their labor, and then, to the client to which the service is provided. When a Mexican immigrant locates himself or herself in certain “non-working class” circuits of capital, such as on a Sunday at a suburb on near higher class neighborhood, it is then, that neoliberalism punitive experts emerge to govern and criminalize the Mexican subject.
In this chapter, I ethnographically showed that neoliberalism is the ideological production that propels the mode of production, which is capitalism. Under this so-called neoliberal moment or the intensification of capitalist exploitation in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the working class population---in this case los yarderos/as---continue to make limited choices as they seek a better life in el norte, and that these choices are culturally specific and relevant to the way they see themselves as Mexicans in the City of Chicago. But for many, as I show here, modernity is still a far distant dream, and el norte, is a “mask” that sometimes Mexican immigrants themselves put on to perform the death, like phantom of the American Dream.

Leaving work hierarchies at bay, the next chapter more closely examines how the capitalist uses the Mexican body to extract value from it, and it investigates how workers themselves master their own bodies to reproduce capital.
Chapter 5

On Shit, Capitalism, and the Body:
The Hidden Stories of the Exposed Mexican Yardero/a

“The workers must still eat, they must still go to the restrooms, and they must still try to find themselves: they still joke, they still complain, and they still strategize to keep their human agency—all of this in the context of their dehumanization”


This chapter looks at the intersections between capitalism, discipline, and the body. Specifically, I document how yarderos are disciplined to take control of their bodily functions, feelings, and functional necessities in order to make efficient and optimized use of their bodies as they perform lawn services in the City of Chicago.

In one of the most celebrated accounts of capitalism, Karl Marx (1867) writes how capitalism structured the workday in the production process. Marx also wrote about the limits of the workday and the worker’s capacity to perform the work. For Marx, the workday had two limits, a minimum and a maximum. On the basis of capitalist production, while the minimum does not have a limit, the maximum is said to be conditioned by two things: first, by the “physical bounds of labor-power… [and second] moral ones,” which Marx more accurately describes as “social bounds” (Marx 1867 [1906]: 256). In other words, within a natural 24 hour day, a worker can only expend a definite quantity of his vital force.

Moreover, during certain parts of the day, a worker must satisfy needs such as resting, sleeping, eating, washing and clothing him or herself. From this perspective then, a basic problem with production emerges when the worker has and needs to perform a “physical” or “social” need that disrupts the utilization of the worker’s “sold” time to the
producer. In other words, within capitalist logic, the time purchased from the worker has to be utilized to seek out profit in order to create value “to make its constant factor, the means of production, absorb the greatest possible amount of surplus-labour” (257). This “constant factor,” it is my claim that it leaves very little room for the capitalist to see workers as constrained or limited by their physical needs, much less by their social desires.

Marx’s diagnosis of the centrality of the body stated in his theory of capitalism, while often disregarded, points the border theorist who is doing research among working class populations to pay close attention to how the worker’s “physical” and “social” bonds and borders play out in the lived experiences of these subjects. Before I present you with the ethnographic evidence on the centrality of the body in the lives of Mexican working class individuals in Chicago, and rather than simply taking what Marx suggested about the workings of capitalism, we still need to provide an answer as to how domination and control of a worker’s vitality and energy has been formed within capitalist logic. At first, an unlikely theorist provides answers that Marx, perhaps, found difficult to illuminate. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), French philosopher Michel Foucault offer us with an excellent discussion of specific mechanisms, techniques, and technologies of power, which also took the body as its center of focus. For Foucault, the disappearance of the spectacle of public execution at the beginning of the nineteenth century, marked spatially and temporally in a reduced, “but instantaneous event. Contact between the law, or those who carry it out, and the body of the criminal, is reduced to a split second” (Foucault 1977: 13).
The type of transformation Foucault outlined was a punitive apparatus distributing power that is invested in knowledge, not from the body alone, but deeply embedded in the soul of an individual. However, Foucault also tells us that there is a “trace” spectacle in the modern mechanism of criminal justice which has not disappeared, but “enveloped, increasingly, by the non-corporeal nature of the penal system” (16). Foucault’s work was intended to discuss, in a rather non-linear fashion, the terrains from which new power mechanisms operated. This regarded the punitive mechanism as not only being “repressive,” but regarded punishment as a complex social function, and as a political tactic to gain knowledge of and from man, and to look at the body itself as it is invested by power relations (23-24). Discipline and Punish (1977) offers an extraordinary connection between investments in the body as a knowledge production site, but also how an investment in the body was definitely related and connected to capitalism. For Foucault, the body is central in writing a diagnosis of the present and how it is “the very materiality [of the body] as an instrument and vector of power; it is this whole technology of power over the body that the technology of the ‘soul’—that of the educationalist, psychologist and psychiatrist—fails either to conceal or to compensate, for the simple reason that is one of its tools” (1977: 30).

In The History of Sexuality (1978), Michel Foucault describes how biopower was exercised over populations, a project to which Marx was clearly invested in and where he outlines the workings of capitalism upon working classes. Foucault argues that beginning in the seventeenth century, power over life evolved into two basic forms: “the first to be formed, it seems—centered on the body as a machine…[the second] focused on the species as body, the body imbued with the mechanism of life and serving as the
basis of the biological processes” (Foucault 1990: 139). The second mechanism of power, for Foucault, can be located with the emergence of modern nation-states through Europe at the end of the eighteenth century and the second half of the eighteenth century when a different kind of logic towards the well-being of the general population began to emerge. Indeed, states, being one actor upon the stage of history that increasingly began to utilize biopower as a means to an end, and exercised its authority and the promotion of regulatory control of biopolitics at the level of the population or man as species. The power to decide who should live or die, which, for Foucault, often meant sovereign power was now at the end of the eighteenth century, “carefully supplanted by the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life…Hence there was an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies” (Foucault 1990: 140). In other words, disciplining techniques from the state and non-state apparatuses now want “to rule a multiplicity of men to the extent that their multiplicity can and must be dissolved into individual bodies that can be kept under surveillance, trained, used, if need be, punished” (2003 [1976], 242).

Working within the Marx-Foucault borderlands, meaning, between techniques of subjection and subjectivity under capitalist domination, we can provide the following general theory of power and ethnographically interrogate the centrality of the body as it is experienced by working class yarderos in the City of Chicago. First, Marx clearly recognizes that the emergence of capitalism and the need to extract value from surplus-value pushed the owners to regulate, manage, and direct the actions of workers while working within the confines of the factory system. In my ethnographic examples, I choose not a factory setting, but rather a work activity that is unbounded by the walls of
factories as borders and more spatially circumscribed by neighborhood borders. As I argue here, an increasing specialization or capitalist development in the “management” of the working class, as described by Foucault, would not have been possible without the diagnosis of the role of experts in the mechanism of power, both at the level of the individual (dealing with a worker) or as a species by state and by non-state actors (dealing with an entire working class population). As my examples highlight, there is a micro-managed working class at the level of and by the worker. This managing of the body and its energy is central in the reproduction of capitalism, as well as its “experts” who also belong to the working class and gain knowledgeable experience while working.

Ultimately, I show that the governing of the working class is not fully achieved through a freedom of labor exchange between the capitalist and the worker, which is a flawed ideological proposition of neoliberalism or simplistic theories of capitalism and more than often creates confusion that scholars take analytically. I demonstrate through ethnographic research that the control of the worker’s body and working class governance is achieved through the careful administration of “life” by experts, and the workers themselves as experts, even at the intimate level of their bodily elimination systems. In the end of my analysis, I argue that capital and its reproduction involves orchestrated efforts of both workers and owners to accelerate a premature death of a population rather than to “let live” through work.

La Poda

Between May and the first two weeks of July, yarderos reach the peak of the landscaping season in the City of Chicago. During this time in the South Side emerges a heightened demand for the yarderos’ services, which typically ranges from bush
trimming, construction of retaining walls, fertilizing, and wild weed control. While working for Don Vicente during the summer of 2013, one work task that Vicente needed help with was trimming evergreens. Trimming evergreens is a common and very important service that lawn care companies provide to clients. Many of the Mexican yarderos work in the neighborhoods of South Chicago and Calumet Heights, and the necessity of trimming evergreens is relatively higher in these areas. The differences between these two neighborhoods are clearly demarcated even in the structural aspects of the houses. For example, most of the houses in South Chicago, one of the oldest neighborhoods in Chicago, are at least one hundred years old and very few new houses have been constructed in this working class space. Most of the lawn areas of the houses located in South Chicago are about 15 x 6 feet (for the front yard) and the backyards are on average 15 x 15 feet. Most front yard spaces in South Chicago are not adorned with landscapes such as retaining walls, ornamental trees or plants. Usually, having a front landscape is considered a symbol of higher class within the context of South Chicago, though this is not often the case in the Calumet Heights neighborhood. Likewise, the backyards in South Chicago typically lack luxurious landscapes, while Calumet Heights, which is newer, has almost all of its houses adorned with front and back landscapes. A prime characteristic of these homes is that clients like to have their front and backyards adorned with ornamental, evergreen trees. These four to ten-foot trees need to be trimmed every year in order to maintain the attractiveness of the landscape space. The trimming of these trees is what yarderos call la poda.

Bush-trimming is not an easy work activity. For example, evergreens are trimmed using hedge trimmers. The blades of the trimmers used to cut the tips of these branches
are about two-feet long. Most of the time, hedge trimmers are gas propelled, and cost anywhere between $260.00 to $350.00 dollars, and depending on the durability of the brand name, the price of this equipment can reach almost five hundred dollars. Subject to contractual arrangements that the yardero/a has with the client, the cost of doing a poda (trimming of front and back evergreens) can range anywhere between twenty-five to eighty dollars. In the case of Don Vicente, he usually does not charge his regular clients for la poda given that he has clients that go back to the early 1980s. However, in the last couple of years, he has begun to charge some clients who have a good number of trees or bushes for la poda. The trimming of evergreen trees or bushes is not a task assigned to any of the chalanes, but rather to a worker who has proven to know how to do the job and does it well. The reason is simply monetary. Depending on the species, a three-foot evergreen costs on average between forty-five and one hundred fifty dollars. Moreover, if the trees have grown for many years, the sentimental value that clients have towards them grows as well. A worker who does not know how to trim one could end up damaging the tree (often called "burning it"), causing the tree to die within a month.
When I worked for Don Vicente early in the season until late in August, we often both trimmed most of the evergreen bushes and big trees for his clients. Trimming evergreens involves several processes or tasks. If the tree have not been trimmed the year before, then it is a very difficult task to give it a nice shape, but if it was, then the task is simpler. In the case of Don Vicente’s clients, every year he makes sure he trims most of the clients trees and bushes, thus when the next season comes he does not have to spend a great amount of time doing this assignment. When one trims evergreens, a worker takes the hedge trimmers and holds them at waist height, and slowly brushes over the
evergreen shape, cutting only the greener tips that have emerged from the spring-time. Next, one shakes the evergreen tree or bush so all the debris falls down to the ground. It is important to take debris from the body of the tree, otherwise they will wither within a day or two, and the tree will look as if it was sprinkled with brownish debris. Upon performing the first cutting of evergreen tips, a worker then begins to give it a shape. Giving a pretty shape to the evergreen bushes is also a skilled process where one has to be very careful to not cut the tips too low because one can end up severing growth points on the crown. After doing the first cutting, one takes the garden rake and literally hits the evergreen bush so that all the cut tips fall to the ground. Debris is collected in various ways. For example, Don Vicente likes to place plastic covers under the evergreen bush, so after it is trimmed he does not have to spend a lot of time collecting fallen debris. I hated to trim evergreens that were located under garden areas that had wooden mulch under the bedding area. It was very hard to get the green, fallen evergreen tips from the bedding areas and separate them from the mulch. Finally, the evergreen is shaped a final time. During this last process, the worker is usually standing, holding the hedge trimmers, and using the force of his arms to cut the evergreen tips as if brushing the tree as to finalize its shape. If a person actually performs this activity for a long time, one ends up doing a web-like movement, moving, circling, and shaping, in a rhythmic fashion, thus operating the hedge trimmers as another extension of their body.

Evergreen-trimming is not, in reality, very hard work, unless one does it for more than one hour. For example, when performing work for Don Vicente in June 2012, we had to work the last three Sundays before the Fourth of July. We would finish la ruta——the houses to which we provide lawn services for——on Saturday morning and then trim
the evergreens for two or three houses. Then, again on Sunday morning, we would go out to South Chicago to trim the evergreens of all the properties we could. On Sunday when we dedicated all our effort to trim bushes, we would generally do about ten properties.

When I would trim for more than an hour, my body began to feel the effects of the work. This was expressed through a continuous and persistent pain in my lower back. The pain felt as if two knives had been pushed into each side of my body. There were times that I had to bend down to trim evergreens from three-feet off the ground or shorter, and just standing straight caused an even sharper pain in my lower back. Moreover, the lawnmower's motor creates vibrations which transfers to the worker’s body. All gas driven equipment produces vibrations and these vibrations would later add to discomfort. For example, during the summer months between May and August when there was substantial mowing or bush trimming to be done, I would wake up to start work and my hands would be so swollen that making and even grabbing a cup of coffee while having breakfast would bring pain to the joints of my hands. Likewise, evergreen-trimming also creates a significant additional vibration in a worker’s hands to the point that by the end of the day, while driving home, he may feel as if he were still holding the hedge trimmers even though he stopped work half an hour ago.

**Edging**

While doing lawn service with Cesar Hernandez, and Don Vicente, I learned to wireear (line trim) the lawn areas of a client’s residence. Just like hedge trimming, edging is a skill that is not easily acquired; it takes considerable practice in order to manage it. As I discussed earlier, normally lawn care service companies in Chicago provide edging as part of their lawn care service or maintenance. For example, Cesar Hernandez has
utilized Don Vicente’s system of mowing grass every week and edging every other week. In the case of Don Raul Mendez, he also edges every other week, but sometimes, especially when the grass grows rapidly in the early months of the season (generally May and June), Don Raul edges every week. Other lawn care companies, such as that of another Mexican immigrant, Ricardo Garcia from the state of Zacatecas, edges every week. The idea of edging every week according to most yarderos is to diminish the time spent providing lawn services at each residence. For example, while working for Don Vicente, a company that edged every other week, I noticed that in the weeks of the month in which we edged, the work became very time consuming because edging lawn areas creates additional grass clippings on the client’s sidewalks and driveways, and substantially more debris to collect.

The necessity of edging the lawn areas of clients is a very specific work and a cultural practice within the context of the City of Chicago. For example, while edging is relatively a new work activity done very rapidly through gas-powered equipment, Don Vicente’s story shows of how yarderos/as in the early 1980s began performing this task. His story shows the cultural development of how this work activity creates a cultural taste which is concomitantly produced. In the case of Don Vicente, as recalled in chapter two, he began in the late 1970s working as a chalan himself with Mr. Ramirez,80 an earlier immigrant than Don Vicente to the city of Chicago. Don Vicente told me that Mr. Ramirez was probably the first Mexican to own a lawn care company in South Chicago. Mr. Ramirez was the man who originally gave work to Don Vicente, and his two

80 Most of what I know about this immigrant, also from the Jalpa, Zacatecas, comes from the oral history provided by Don Vicente about Mr. Ramirez who died in the early 2000s. This is another layer of history that needs to be recovered and uncovered, but given the constraints of fieldwork, I was not able to dedicate time to investigate further on the historical figure of Mr. Ramirez.
brothers, Alberto and Jose Flores. In those days, recalls Don Vicente, the three brothers worked together as chalanes. Mr. Ramirez retired in the early 1980s, and in 1982 he handed down la ruta (the list of clients) to the three brothers. Don Vicente discussed that during that time edging was not done as fast as it is today. Today, I would use a gas-powered edger or line trimmer, and I edge several houses in the Calumet Heights neighborhood. Given that all of Don Vicente’s clients were within a one to two block radius, the work is finished quite fast, usually within an hour or less. In the early 1980s, as told by Don Vicente, edging involved using a sharp knife to actually cut the grass, creating clippings that would make their way onto the sidewalks. Don Vicente told me that it would take him about fifteen minutes to half an hour or even an hour just to edge with a handheld knife the edges around the lawn areas. Then, a crew of about four workers would clean, not with a high wind-powered blower, but rather with a simple house broom. During a normal workday, a crew of two or three workers would do about five to eight houses, now some lawn care companies such as Rick’s Landscaping mow the lawns of close to one hundred houses per day.

While conversing with Don Raul at his home in the East Side, I asked him why he edged (wireaba) each week. He told me that it was because his clients do not like it when the grass tips fall on the sidewalk. Don Raul commented that he learned to edge while working with his cousin who works by the company name of Mendez Lawn Care. Don Raul shared the story of how edging began within his family. According to Don Raul, it was his older cousin, Carlos Mendez from the Mendez family who started this practice. Don Raul said that before edging started to be provided as a service regularly, the wiro—line trimmer—was only used to clear up large and tall weed areas on people’s
yards. Then, in one month the grass grew a lot, and Carlos Mendez began using the *wiro* to cut the grass tips that fell onto the sidewalk, thus, leaving a clear distinction between the grass and the concrete areas. They said, according to Don Raul Mendez, that edging with the line trimmer looked so nice that more and more clients began to request that their lawn areas to be edged on a regular basis.

Edge-trimming is in itself a product of cultural preference, a necessity of the labor process, but it is also a way for company owners to offer additional services. Once this work activity was brought into the labor process, it was normalized as part of the process itself, but at the end of the day, the worker’s body is the one that suffers consequences of this taste for better-looking grass in the City of Chicago. For example, presently edging or *wiar*, is done with a gas powered line trimmer (see chapters 3 and 4), given that its weight on average is thirteen pounds, a worker has to carry it all around the perimeter of the lawn throughout the day while performing the edging work task. The front end of the line trimmer consists of a head with two plastic lines emerging from the “edger head” which at high speed can easily cut weeds up to three or four feet tall. The *wiro* or *wira* is set horizontally to cut tall weeds. If a worker wants to cut vertically as in edging between the concrete area and the lawn areas, the line trimmer is turned on a ninety-degree angle in order for the line trimmer to cut vertically. Then, a worker needs to be careful in order not to cut too much inside the lawn area or not cut it at all. The size of a line trimmer, on average, is fifty-nine to sixty inches from the shaft length from where the worker holds it. Given the length, the worker needs to hold the line trimmer in a very specific bodily position so as to make it cut vertically between the concrete and the lawn areas. In order to properly do this task, if one is right handed, he or she places the
right hand in the accelerator in order to have control of the speed of the head. Normally, at the beginning, a worker uses this accelerator control frequently, but an experienced worker usually uses the accelerator at full speed while he is edging. The left hand is placed on the handle of the line trimmer. The function of the shaft handle is to essentially turn the line trimmer and hold it up in order for the line trimmer not to cut too close or it would end up ripping off the grass from the root. In short, in order to edge around the lawn area and the perimeter, a worker has to bend sideways, as if looking vertically and walking in a straight line, placing one side of the body in a bent position to modify the axis of his body, so that the upper body is bent while the lower body walks forward in a line. It is a very uncomfortable position that takes time to get used to. If one is line trimming for the entire day on a regular ten hour schedule, typically a worker’s right hand, which is the one that both holds the weight and controls the line trimmer’s acceleration of speed, can hurt to the point that it can become numb for hours after work.  

As observed, working as a chalan or yardero is much more than a simple activity of walking behind the lawnmower to cut grass. Mowing and other related activities require substantial skill levels of understanding, not only with how the nature and the environment operates and grows, but how certain activities will end up providing cultural preferences on the part of the clients. Yarderos are well aware of these preferences and sometimes, they may even create work activities to instill other taste preferences on their

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81 I was not able to collect information on the long-term effects of performing lawn care services while doing this activity, however, Don Vicente would always complain about his right hand and said that usually, when autumn would arrive, the pain on his right shoulder would not go away for days. This ethnographic evidence calls for a medically based (and most likely long-term) anthropological research to examine the effects of work on the bodies of workers in the near future.
clients. However, at the end of the day, the individual who has to do these painful work tasks is the *chalan* who works for the *yardero*. Ultimately, the worker has to radically train and modify his or her body in order to be able to perform these work activities as the *patron* (boss) demands, and in turn is demanded by the patron’s client.

**Waiting to Shit**

While working as a *chalan*, and as a *yardero* myself, I learned that one has to train, not only the body to do certain work activities, but also on the inner, sometimes involuntary bodily functions. For example, when I began working for Cesar Hernandez from October to November 2012, sometimes right after lunch, I would have the necessity to go the bathroom. Working as a *yardero/a* implies that one is mowing different neighborhoods through most of the workday and a restroom is rarely available since workers mow residential areas most of that time. Given the way work is organized, around noon, what often happens is that *el patron*—the boss—will often search for a nearby fast-food restaurant to bring the workers something to eat for lunch. The fast-food establishments are often McDonalds, Burger King, Subway, Wendy’s, or nearby Mexican food places. Given that this kind of food is barely nutritious, sometimes it does not digest well and one has to find a place to eliminate waste after eating. The following narration depicts an event I experienced while performing fieldwork as a *chalan* for Don Vicente in late July 2013.

**Saturday July 13, 2013**

*La Poda* has slowed down quite a bit. However, we still had many clients request that we trim their evergreens. It was Saturday and we were almost done mowing the houses under Don Vicente. Someone helped us mow today, his
nickname is *el Gallito*, but his name may have really been Gilberto or Julio. I only saw him for a couple of minutes in the morning just before Don Vicente sent me to trim some houses near 92\(^{nd}\) Street and Phillips Ave. I have a Ford F250, gray cargo van which I also use to mow my own lawns on Mondays and Tuesdays. After speaking with Don Vicente the day before, I was able to bring my vehicle. Thus, I could carry all the equipment that I needed in my own van.

Later, Don Vicente called me around 11 a.m. where I was mowing and told me to pick up tacos from a place located in South Chicago, on Commercial Ave. called *El Guero*. I went to *El Guero* and picked up nine tacos and took the lunch to Don Vicente at 83\(^{rd}\) and Colfax Ave. We had lunch and I headed back to 92\(^{nd}\) and Phillips to continue trimming evergreens on a client’s property. After about half an hour from returning to the client’s house, I began to feel cramps in my stomach. Something had made me sick. I tried to continue to trim the evergreen hedges, but the cramps and the desire to go to the bathroom increased every minute. Every other moment, I stopped trimming and held my hand over my stomach for about a minute so that the urge to empty my bowels would diminish. I thought about going to a nearby McDonalds, and decided to collect the evergreen tips I had previously cut and placed them in a black plastic bag.

For fifteen minutes the urge and cramps went away, but suddenly I began to feel that I could not wait any longer. I had to go. I quickly thought of my options: I could go in the alley, take three garbage cans to build a cover and do it there, but I thought, what if a police car passed by the alley, I would be arrested; next, I thought about going to a nearby McDonalds located ten blocks from where I was bush trimming, but I would not be able to get to it on time; and finally, I could perhaps knock on the client’s door and ask to use the bathroom, but in all my years I had never seen a *chalan* use a client’s bathroom.

I took the last and only option and decided to use my van. I grabbed the half full bag of grass clippings and... It was not at all pleasurable, but I did not think much about it. After I finished, I went ahead to finish trimming bushes.

The experience above is miserable, even as I write about it here, but in no way was it an exception to the lived experiences that other *chalanes* or *yarderos* experience while working *en las yardas*. As I previously mentioned in my field notes, Don Vicente hired a worker named Julio. At first, I did not talk much with Julio, partly because when he came to help us out it was on Fridays and Saturdays and we were typically very busy during those summer days. When there was extra help, I changed tasks within our crew and I would grab the 32” walk-behind mower. Given that this lawnmower uses gasoline
at a faster rate, the person using this tool is pushed to be the worker that leads the crew, and the successful completion of the lawn service in great measure depends on how well that person performs the work with the 32” mower. The only moments when I had a chance to talk to Julio was during our lunch time. I learned that he was a student at Benedict University and came from a family that had originally migrated to Chicago from the state of Michoacán. Julio was born in the United States and lived in the East Side neighborhood, near 108th Street and Ave. C. I asked him why he decided to mow grass for work. He answered, “Just to pay for my car payment.” I further asked whether he liked the work, and he said, “I do not know, *esta bien.*” I further pushed and asked if he liked working all day en *las yardas,* in which Julio answered, “It is fine, I guess.”

When conversation fails to work, observation can be ethnographically useful. Thus, when Julio worked with us, I carefully began paying attention to the activities he performed. I quickly learned that he did not have previous experience mowing grass because he did not know how to operate a lawn mower. By the time Julio arrived to work with us I had already worked with Cesar Hernandez for two months, and had been working with Don Vicente on a part-time basis since April 2013. In other words, I had been a *chalan* for a total of five months already. Just as when I began working as a *chalan,* I noticed that Julio would often request the cargo van from the owner to go the bathroom. For example, on one day, Julio came a bit late to work and drove his own car from the East Side to South Chicago. Upon arriving on 89th Street and Phillips Ave. where we started on Fridays, it had just been an hour when Julio asked the boss if he could use the bathroom. The next day on Saturday, we continued mowing grass in this area near 89th Street and Anthony Ave. Near this location runs the Chicago Skyway, and
right on the top of the Skyway at the pay station of 87th Street is a McDonalds that is only accessible by car if you are driving on the Skyway. Again, the second week, within a couple of minutes of having lunch, Julio suddenly disappeared. He came back to where we were mowing after half an hour later. Don Vicente and I knew as soon as he disappeared that he probably went to look for a place to use the restroom. We asked him where he went and he pointed towards the Chicago Skyway, which was near street level, and we both began to laugh. We asked Julio, “How did you went up there if there is a ten feet wall and the McDonalds is on the Skyway runway?” Julio said that he walked two blocks to one of the tunnels that connects South Chicago and Calumet Heights, and there is a ramp towards the pay booth where McDonalds is located. From then on, when he would come to help us, we would continually make jokes about this incident. For example, when we picked up Julio from his East Side home, right after he climbed into the van, we immediately asked him, “Did you went to the bathroom?” or simply, “Did you bring toilet paper with you?”

Given that there are no public restrooms when one is out mowing residential neighborhoods, the closest place is often McDonalds located on 92nd Street and Commercial Ave. Thus, from the perspective of the yardero, the owner of the small lawn care company, given the pressures of the work itself, if a worker decides to use a “proper” space to eliminate human waste creates production problems for the owner. In other words, the houses would not be mowed at the rate that they are supposed be done, and work slows down. Slowing down the phase of the work creates problems for the boss because of a recalculation of labor expenses anytime a worker slows down because of an involuntary action or bodily necessity while at work. For example, deciding to eliminate
in “proper” spaces would take a worker at least half an hour of loss time as the closest restroom would be anywhere between five to ten blocks depending on the location where the crew worked. Julio left to find a restroom three times in the first week. The second week Julio helped us work, he decided to bring his car so the boss would not get annoyed when he requested the cargo van to go and find a place to use a restroom.

Not all yarderos drive around in cargo vans as I have emphasized. Others drive around the city providing lawn care services in pickup trucks and hauling trailers where they keep their landscaping and mowing equipment. This is the case for Cesar Hernandez and Don Raul Mendez. The vehicles commonly utilized are Fords and Chevy trucks. For example, Cesar Hernandez drives a 2010 Chevy Silverado and Don Raul a 2005 Ford F150. The closed hauling trailers are often black, red or white. I rarely found hauling trailers different from these three colors. In one of the interviews with Don Raul and in subsequent participant observations while working with Cesar Hernandez, I learned how a basic human need such as eliminating human waste gets done. Don Raul speaks to the common experiences that many yarderos and chalanes have to endure while working as lawn care service workers.

SERGIO: Is it hard to work outside for almost the entire day?
DON RAUL: Well, you know Sergio, you get used to it. Sometimes, especially on Fridays you just want to end the day around 4 p.m. and go home. I almost did that this year when the temperature went up to one hundred degrees, if you recall. It was around the second week of June.
SERGIO: When you are at work, do you take lunch from home or do you eat outside?
DON RAUL: Almost every day I eat outside. You know, because of the work, we drive all the time and there is not really time, in the morning, to prepare something for lunch. I usually eat a couple of tacos and just eat outside. We grab whatever we find, like McDonald’s, Wendy’s or Subway.
SERGIO: Sometime the food makes me sick, and how do you handle that (como le hacen)?
DON RAUL: (small laugh)... *En la tráila, ya que* (at the hauling trailer, what else).

Don Raul’s statement done in a laughing tone defies the often difficult experience of having to shit inside a hauling trailer, or as in my experience, inside the cargo van. However, even at those “exposed moments” where the worker needs to find a way to fulfill a physical need, almost instantly, after the elimination takes place, one starts to laugh at the event itself or the traces left behind.

While shit is a bigger problem for lawn care services workers, urinating is rather easy to process, at least for men. For example, if a worker needs to pee, there are various practices one does. For example, when workers have to throw out the grass clippings that are often placed inside trash cans in the City of Chicago and using those. Thus, if a worker needs to urinate, he often volunteers to throw the garbage, and as it usually happens, when we wait longer than usual for someone to come back to the front of the house we know that he was probably peeing in the back. When this happens, we watch out for the owner does not come out of the house; otherwise, the worker may get into trouble. During fieldwork, it was common that a couple of times Cesar or Don Vicente would pee in an alley, or a backyard, hidden in a corner. If I saw the owner of the house coming out, I would simply shout, “*Aguas!*” which means literally “watch out!” At other times, if one wants to pee, one simply stands near the cargo van, waits until there is no one around, and pees without looking down. If one looks down, surprisingly, this bodily posture indicates the elimination activity one is performing. If the owner of the company drives a closed hauling trailer, this last task gets accomplished quite easily. For example, when I needed to pee while working for Cesar Hernandez in the first part of my fieldwork, I used a Gatorade bottle.
Conclusion

This chapter has theoretically and methodologically engaged with the Marx-Foucault borderlands, a space that not many scholars want to venture or entertain. My ethnographic materials expose three main aspects of the development of modern forms of domination. First, I have examined how the yardero body is central in the production process and the worker has to learn how to manage not only the machines but also his own bodily functions, an orchestrated like performance in order to fulfill the needs of capitalist production. Second, at the level of populations, the owner of the landscaping or lawn care service companies is aware of the need to manage the crew of workers and carefully manages their bodies and their movements while performing lawn service in order to maximize profit. Third, I show that even at those moments of unpleasant experiences that disrupt the production process, laughing is part in parcel as a way to humanize an activity that is dehumanizing. In other words, laughing is the stimulant that keeps workers away from losing what little control they have of their soul, given that accumulated labor is sediment on their bodies, “letting” and “leading” towards premature death.82

The next chapter looks at the problem of color as it is lived by the Mexican, working class populations in the City of Chicago. To this I now turn.

82 Ruth Gilmore (2007:28) writes that “Racism, specifically, is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.” Likewise, I will even suggest that “premature death” as a concept can easily be theorized to see capitalism and the working classes through this fragmented lens.
Chapter 6

_El Color de Las Yardas:
The Mexican Working Class and Encounters with Color Hierarchies in Mexican South Chicago_

“Anatomy is not destiny....
[a]s human beings we divide this world up into socially relevant continua.
_The shading of colors of human beings is one such continuum_”

- Nancy Lindisfarne and Jonathan Neale (2013)

“What happens when you stay long in the sun?
To what degree do you turn brown?”

- Questionnaire from a gym membership in Mexican South Chicago (2014)

This chapter ethnographically and theoretically utilizes border theory to examine how the category of “color” can be central for scholars documenting the everyday lives of Mexican working class communities in the United States. In this chapter, I argue that “Color Inspections”—a twenty first century theoretical and practical metaphor to Alejandro Lugo’s “border inspections”—is helpful to excavate forms of color subjectivities as well as to document the use and misuse of color hierarchies in the everyday lives of the working class Mexican populations in Chicago, Illinois. Partly hidden by the material and discursive production of the nation-state, color has remained a site of cultural production which has not been given the proper ethnographic description. This chapter represents the first attempt at tackling the mountainous landscapes of color
hierarchies as they are currently applied to Mexicans as a working class population in the context of the United States and as expressed in the South Chicago neighborhood.\footnote{This chapter represents a theoretical development and to apply Lugo’s (2008) theory of “colorismo” ethnographically within the context of the United States, but it also serves as a sincere gift for all of his teachings and underscoring advice throughout my graduate training in anthropology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.}

This chapter is organized in three parts. The first looks at a material and discursive production of colorismo (Lugo 2008) within the context of Mexican history, emphasizing its unmistakable presence in the lives of Mexicans since the time of conquest and as these people moved all the way north to Chicago as well as how it is currently being transformed while borders are crossed. Here, I also theorize how border theory is useful to document the shifting landscapes of color hierarchies. The second part theorizes how my participants encountered color hierarchies in South Chicago through those moments that I call “color inspections” and as they worked as Mexican lawn care service workers. The third part provides a critical look at how color hierarchies allows for serious thinking about the Mexican, human condition within the United States. In all, the chapter in effect grounds “color inspections” as the current framework to explain how color emerges as a structuring force in the lives of working class people in the new colored era dressed in old garments, and transformed in its practice.

\textbf{Border Theory in the Midwest}

The post-1960s brought radical social, political and economic transformations across the world. In the United States, we began to see a shift in the relations between the state and the population. Challenges from civil rights groups pushed and demanded social justice from within a neoliberal and post-colonial context that sought to challenge racism,
class inequality, and other forms of oppression. In order to explain the shifting contours of everyday life, theorists saw the “border” as a remarkably, productive, practical, and theoretical metaphor to advance a new language and paradigm to talk about these social, political, cultural, and economic consequences of the historical production of physical and social borders.\(^{84}\)

In her pioneering work on “borders,” Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa challenged stereotypical portrayals of Chicano homonationalistic claims in her critique of anthropological understandings of Mexican American history and culture. Anzaldúa drew attention to the centrality of borders and borderlands.\(^{85}\) In her well renowned book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Anzaldúa describes what she means by “borders” and “borderlands.” Anzaldúa writes, “[T]he actual physical borderlands that I’m dealing with in this book is the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borders are not particular to the Southwest” (18). Anzaldúa makes a first key distinction here; for her, the “border” is an actual geographical space while “the borderlands” deal with aspects of less material productions of everyday life. Moreover, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) distinguishes between the physical borderlands and how individuals within them experience the area and the actual border line. She writes,

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a


\(^{85}\) For example, anthropologist Gilberto Rosas (2012) further notes that Anzaldúa’s work critiques Chicano scholars because of anthropology’s “structural functionalist residues and its search for autonomously developed, deep, coherent patterns of an uniformly shared culture that are unaffected by hierarchical division and quotidian patterns” (18-19). In regards to the legacies of structural functional approaches in anthropology the early work of many major British anthropologists are worthy of note here (see Kroeber 1958; Malinowski 1926, 1930; Parsons 1951; Evans-Pritchard 1940; Mauss 1954; Radcliffe-Brown 1922).
From Anzaldua’s analysis on border distinctions emerges a query, do the “borderlands” necessitate an actual, “physical” border? In other words, does a border subject need to be, as in our case study, close to the U.S.-Mexico border in order to be a subject of its effects? Anzaldua also reminds us that those that pass the check points of the Border Patrol “find themselves in the midst of 150 years of racism in Chicano barrios in the Southwest and in big northern cities. Living in a no-man’s-borderland, caught between being treated as criminals and being able to eat, between resistance and deportation” (1987: 34). For Mexicans in Chicago, to be more precise, it is a century of racism given that the first Mexicans who arrived to the Steel Mills in South Chicago came in the second decade of the twentieth century.

In anthropology, Renato Rosaldo’s Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis (1989) uncovers the centrality of borders in culture theory. Rosaldo (1989) writes that in the classical period, an anthropologist would “emphasize patterns at the expense of processes of change and internal inconsistencies, conflicts, and contradictions” (28). Thus, from this perspective, Rosaldo comments, “cultural borderlands appear to be annoying exceptions rather than central areas of inquiry” (28). In fact, in regards to the urban space, Rosaldo explains that in certain cases, “such

86 On this particular line of questioning a central theoretical answer has been provided by anthropologist Gilberto Rosas (2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2007, 2012) as he has been exploring the expansion of what he calls the “borderlands condition” or “coupling of ‘exceptionality’ with political imaginaries. The former term represents an iteration of the diffused governance of race” (2006: 335).

87 Renato Rosaldo comments on the “classic period” roughly between 1921-1971 as a time when “the discipline’s dominant objectivist view held that social life was fixed and constraining” (332). Rosaldo further notes, that anthropologist Sally Falk Moore writes with clarity about this period as a time when “society was a system. Culture had a pattern. The postulation of a coherent whole discoverable bit by bit server to expand the significance of each observed particularity” (Moore 1986:4, in Rosaldo 1989: 32).
borders are literal…[c]ities throughout the world today increasingly include minorities defined by race, ethnicity, language, class, religion, and sexual orientation. Encounters with ‘difference’ now pervade modern everyday life in urban settings” (28). More specifically, Rosaldo calls for a remaking of an anthropological analysis that is also attentive to the workings of culture and power. Going against, but not without disregarding the exemplary work done by classic anthropologists, Rosaldo prefers to give theoretical attention to the borderlands, those areas that should be regarded “not as analytical empty transitional zones but as sites of creative cultural production that require investigation” (208). Under this perspective, for a social analyst, as for the border theorist, the borderlands have moved from the margins to the center of research. Moreover, for Renato Rosaldo, scholars need to think more critically about the concept of culture in the remaking of a social analysis given that “‘Our’ [cultural] inquiry now seeks meanings that are more pragmatic than formal; it models itself more on semantics than syntax and grammar. Ethnographers look less for homogenous communities than for the border zones within and between them. Such cultural border zones are always in motion, not frozen for inspection” (217).

Anthropologist Alejandro Lugo writes in Fragmented Lives, Assembled Parts: Culture, Capitalism, and Conquest at the U.S-Mexico Border (2008), about maquiladora workers in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico where he explores Anzaldúa’s discussion of the border, and Rosaldo’s theorization of borders and borderlands. Lugo observes within the context of the U.S.-Mexico border that:

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88 Yet, if borders and borderlands are saturated with power and inequality, then in fact, they do require inspection. Therefore, Renato Rosaldo (1997) suggests that social analysts should rigorously consider both the symbolic and the material aspects of the violence currently being exercised against Mexican people at border crossings (Rosaldo, 1997; in Lugo, 2008).
While borders are to be crossed, they are also designed to mark safe and unsafe places... Yet we must still ask more specific, ethnographically grounded questions. Who crosses the border from south to north? At what time—de madrugada—at dawn? How much does it cost? Who can afford it? How many people make it alive... There is no 'third element,' no tolerance for ambiguity: you either have papers or you do not; you either convince the INS officer that you are ‘American’ or you do not. At the border inspection station, there is not much room for the ambiguity of the borderlands—cultural or otherwise. (Lugo, 2008; 358)

For anthropologists such as Lugo, border crossings need to be theorized from those less privileged subjects as they experience passing through inspecting stations in their everyday life, which, as discussed “are pervasive and, therefore, more common than border crossings in the lives of such unprivileged subjects as factory workers and other working class people” (355, emphasis added).89 One example is given by Lugo as he analyzes Chicano novelist Benjamin Saenz’s experience of being inspected at the border station and a moment where Lugo explores how color is inspected at the international bridge in Juarez, Mexico. Saenz’s experience is manifested in the following description of his crossing of the international bridge, named Paso del Norte:

In early January I went with Michael to Juárez. Michael was from New York . . . We weren’t in Juárez very long—just looking around and getting gas. Gas was cheap in Juárez. On the way back, the customs officer asked us to declare our citizenship. ‘U.S. citizen,’ I said. ‘U.S. citizen,’ Michael followed. The customs officer lowered his head and poked it in the car. ‘What are you bringing over?’ ‘Nothing.’ He looked at me. ‘Where in the United States were you born?’ ‘In Las Cruces, New Mexico.’ He looked at me a while longer. ‘Go ahead,’ he signaled. I noticed that he didn’t ask Michael where he was from. But Michael had blue eyes; Michael had white skin. Michael didn’t have to tell the man in the uniform where he was from. (Saenz, 1992: xvi in Lugo 2008)

Clearly, ethnographic attention to an everyday event of people crossing the border through inspection stations highlights, at the very least in this case, one vector of power (ability to inspect based on physiognomy) among those travelling from Mexico to the

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89 See the introduction on this dissertation where I recall my own experience of inspection, first, at the actual physical border of U.S.-Mexico border in Laredo, TX and then all the way north as we crossed the Mississippi River upon entering the state of Illinois.
United States. Thus, drawing from theoretical texts of border theorists as well as ethnographic accounts, Lugo provides a “new analytical tool, border inspections, to the current metaphor of ‘border crossings’” (117). Lugo adds and shows that “border inspections are more pervasive among failed border crossings of the working classes, who too often experience border exclusions; whereas successful border crossings are more characteristic of relatively privileged sectors” (117; emphasis on original).

Furthermore, for Lugo, borders need to be conceptualized as ethnographic objects that “are mainly characterized by supervision and scrutiny; after all, too many borders in social life are products of crossroads with “inspection stations” (118).

The ethnographic case study of Cuidad Juarez, Mexico is quite revealing and allowed me to think how colorismo and color hierarchies can be theoretically relevant. In the context of the United States, Lugo’s (2008) “border inspections” do not disappear as Mexicans travel north from the U.S.-Mexican border; the border follows us as we move within the space of the U.S.; however, “border inspections” loses analytical descriptive accuracy in the process of migration, but retains its ethnographic centrality as Mexicans in Chicago experience color as another border to be “crossed” or “inspected” by themselves, and other “colored” subjects as we interact more intensely. Hence, in my own ethnographic description of color hierarchies in Mexican Chicago, I draw on Alejandro Lugo’s theoretical metaphor, “border inspections” to argue that far, far away from the U.S.-Mexico border the diagnostic tool “color inspections” can be mobilized to better understand how Mexican yarderos/as experience racism through color hierarchies in the city of Chicago, Illinois.
The “color inspections” theorized and found among yarderos in South Chicago are produced through the uneven interaction of U.S. based ethnic, racial, and skin color hierarchies and Mexican, ethnic and skin color hierarchies as these are being creatively mobilized within the Mexican, working class population in Chicago. These skin color hierarchies are neither static, nor rigid, but the enactment and mobilization of them produces drastic effects on the subjective understanding of the world from the point of view of social participants and in what it means to be Mexican in a radically transformed process. After all, it was also Anzaldúa who suggested that those who are pushed out of the tribe for being different are likely to become sensitized, attain a certain facultad (faculty)—the capacity to see on the surface the meaning of deeper realities—in a quick list, those include “the females, the homosexuals of all races, the darkskinned, the outcast, the persecuted, the marginalized, the foreign” (60).

In the Americas the material and discursive traces of skin color hierarchies have a deeper gendered history. This color history goes back to the formation of colonial society, and then ripples and partakes in structuring forms of life all the way to the present. For example, while enjoying a family reunion among Mexican yarderos in South Chicago on a Sunday evening, the following banda style song, by the famous Mexican singer, Pepe Aguilar, played in the background:

Soy de la raza de bronce
soy poeta y campesino
por mis venas corre sangre
sangre noble sangre de indio
soy puro zacatecano
mexicano por herencia
tienda de mis abuelos mis padres
mi sangre es de raza azteca
y la mujer
Pepe Aguilar’s song talks about the Mexican identity and it is often played in Mexican radio stations in Chicago, Illinois. It begins by describing a Mexican male that is said to come from a bronze race and who is a poet and a peasant. The first two lines allure us to the known folkloric relevance that peasant populations have in producing popular cultural and poetic expressions. The protagonist in the song then tells us that through his veins runs Indian blood. Within the context of Mexican identity, “indio”; depending on the context, can be a derogatory term to refer to someone of indigenous descent, but in this case, the protagonist of the song praises himself for having this heritage. The following lines in the song discuss nationalism, first by suggesting that the protagonist identifies fully with being from the regional state of Zacatecas, and the next line tells us that he is Mexican through heredity and utilizes biologized metaphors to talk about national identity. The next lines of the song recalls a distant past where the Aztec empire reigned in what is today Mexico City. Here, then, skin color becomes gendered as the protagonist describes how he wants and desires a woman to be like in terms of color. The hero specifically says that he wants a woman to be “morena” as his homeland and he wants to adore her as he worships the Virgen de Guadalupe (the Virgin of Guadalupe), which is also depicted as dark-brown skin. Why does he specifically want his woman to

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90 Within the context of Mexican American poetic expression, and in the context of the United States folklorist Americo Paredes (1958) and the later Jose Limon (1994) have documented these genres in the lives of South Texans.
be “morena” and not light skinned or “blanca?” The quick answer is that within the context of nationalism and nationalist discourse, first “Indianness” is presented but desired only in the distant past. Moreover, in this song, “whiteness” or the light-skin Mexican population have been hidden from the discourse on Mexican nationalism in preference of the *mestizaje* ideology. This preference at the level of discourse does not easily place the map on the ground, of course, anyone can be a Mexican. However, few can actually claim to represent a *mestizo* subject, and those that do, do not erase their skin color differences.

The ethnographic task in this dissertation is then to find ways to trace a genealogy of color in the United States, despite its transformations over time. Quickly, I learned during fieldwork that, while the past is the past, and it has already occurred, for the everyday Mexican immigrant worker, *Aztecas* still weigh heavily on the way they think about themselves even in Chicago, Illinois. Along with this, *la conquista* is often pushed by other means within both the state of Mexico and the United States alike. In order to unearth the colonial ripples expressed by other means in present day Mexican South Chicago, one can examine the process that gave rise to a colonial society in New Spain and point to moments of rupture where color hierarchies produced a history of skin color identification in the Mexican borderlands. Then, by closely examining events in the history of Mexican immigration as skin color inspections materialized color hierarchies in South Chicago from the beginning of the twentieth century and all the way until the present, we can begin to find and trace a transborder genealogy of color hierarchies and to what I am referring as “color inspections” historically, ethnographically, and theoretically.
Currently, the increasing attention paid to skin color racialization towards the Mexican community can easily be captured through the post-911 and neoliberal optic for the common student of Mexican immigration, but as this dissertation argues, skin color meanings and hierarchies have a deeper history that continually emerges in the contours of the everyday life of the Mexican working class. The problem of why so many of us stop examining the legacies of colonialism all the way to the present is in part a methodological problem. In part is a theoretical, and in part is a task too broad for disciplinary approaches. Thus, that is why I am utilizing border theory framework from an anthropological perspective, the task of tracing color hierarchies across time and space is done by emphasizing the ways in which capitalism sustains and supports skin color differences across borders, both invisible and physical. This approach is what could perhaps allow us to see the importance of skin color in the making of the Mexican working class lives and their culture.\(^9\)

Alejandro Lugo (2008) has argued that the problem of color in Mexican society is so ubiquitous and rather “naturalized” to many that color hierarchies are intertwined with national, class, and gender prejudice. Moreover, Lugo adds, “the problem of color in Mexico has also constituted, culturally and politically, a shifting social matrix of power relations in which indigenous and mestizo Mexicans have to cope with European Mexicans and with the hierarchy of color that history has forged on the psychology and culture of state citizenry; this particular power field is specially deleterious to those—the

\(^9\) See first chapter on how we think about the concept of culture, which is Boasian in nature. Moreover, my approach is very different in some ways from the way transnational literature approaches the study of transborder processes. Transnationalism often time lack the historical depth to deal with cross border processes, but in is fruitfully problematizes nation bounded understanding of subjectivity.
lower classes—who are far from enjoying ‘the power of white-skin privilege’ (Behar 1993, 8), unlike the upper or more privileged classes of Mexico” (Lugo 2008: 59).

While Mexicans in the United States cannot refuse the material and discursive effects of *mestizaje* or the idea that Mexicans have mixed backgrounds of Spanish and Indigenous roots, an alternative understanding of racism embedded in skin color hierarchies is possible though the notion of *colorismo* (see Lugo 2008). For this ethnography, *colorismo* is a necessary condition for the materialization of “*color inspections*” in the context of the United States for Mexican immigrants. In his own reading of the post-colonial situation in continental Mexico, Lugo comments that in order to better understand Mexican society in Mexico, we have to analyze “the prevalent, though hardly acknowledged, hierarchies of color that pervasively characterize Mexican society and question in a definitive manner not only the ideology of mestizaje but more specifically the viability of the concept of mestizaje used…to describe postindependence or postrevolutionary Mexico” (2008, 50). For Lugo, in short, the problem of color (in spite of the distinct meaning given to it in different times and places) has remained a constant site of *social and political struggle since the time of the conquest*” (50-51; emphasis added).

The question to ask is, to what extent do Mexican working class immigrants in the City of Chicago experience discrimination through the enactment of color preferences (which I have argued, are entrenched with “color inspections”)? Further, is color a description used by the people themselves or is the category of color present only in the imagination of the ethnographer? A careful revision of historical and ethnographic accounts suggests that both questions are inseparable because the ethnographer is
inseparable from the production of culture and the reproduction of the relations between culture and power.

Thus, the problem of skin color found among populations of Mexican origin in the United States, as already mentioned, is a problem that can no longer be ignored either by Mexicans themselves or by academics that write and theorize about their identities. The ethnographic task is not just to look for colorismo in Chicago, but rather, to see how color hierarchies of distinctive imperial formations (that of Spanish and American) are presently being mobilized within the territorial boundaries of the U.S. nation-state, or within the colored borderlands of the working class populations.

**Colored Lives: Mexicans in the United States**

Academic writings have not been able to refuse in their writings from talking about skin color when theorizing the lives of Mexicans in the United States, to which begs the analytical question: is the production of knowledge about our human condition inherently tied to discussions of racism and colorismo (see Lugo 2008)? Moreover, what are the meaningful and less relevant cultural productions when we look at skin color and its production of meaning as Mexicans immigrate to the United States? The answer lies in a thick description.

For example, the first major anthropological work about Mexican immigrants in the United States is an the ethnographic study by Manuel Gamio, a Mexican anthropologist trained under Franz Boas at Columbia University, and who writes about Mexican immigration in the United States. In Gamio’s *The Life Story of the Mexican Immigrant: Autobiographic Documents* (1931), he sought to understand the multiple factors that
helped sustain the migration of Mexicans to the United States. In this particular study, Gamio utilized postal records to get a precise number of incoming and returning immigrants. Gamio made extensive use of interviews to examine the problems Mexican immigrants experienced while traveling north and the influence they had when many of them returned to Mexico. This study published in 1931, with the help of research assistants, interviewed about 130 Mexican men and women. From this original and path breaking research project lies the increasing attention paid to discussions of the racial climate of the late 1920s and how Mexicans experienced it. The issue of color and its inspections surfaced from the beginning of Gamio’s biographical accounts of people’s lives. As mentioned before, Gamio’s approach towards understanding the immigration experience offer us a closer, color inspection on the lives of immigrants, their fears, desires, and difficulties of traveling to the United States.

In his ethnographic descriptions, Manuel Gamio tells the reader the reasons why Mexicans migrated to the United States. Gamio begins by providing the story of Pablo Mares, a native from the state of Jalisco and who is mestizo. Gamio had just barely presented the life of the first interviewee when skin color classifications emerged while describing the second, Luis Tenorio, also from the state of Jalisco. Tenorio is classified as “white.” Here I raise the first query, to what hierarchies of skin color is Gamio referring to when these two immigrants come from Jalisco, which one is described as “mestizo” and the other as “white?” Could Manuel Gamio be making racial identifications based on skin color from a Mexican ethnic and racial classificatory hierarchy from a U.S. based ethnic and racial hierarchy? We do not know with certainty.
As Gamio continues describing the reasons why Luis Tenorio came to the United States, Gamio says that in August 1920, Tenorio crossed the bridge at Laredo, Texas. Then, Tenorio contracted himself to go to Kansas. By going to the immigration office, a “guero” registered Tenorio and his family of five, and told them that they could pass on. By now, we have two skin color descriptions. First, Gamio describes Luis Tenorio as “white,” then he describes the American as “guero” or “blonde.” At a glance, both Gamio as the author of the ethnography study and Tenorio as a participant are making descriptions about skin color, in specific reference to “white” skin. Tenorio, having had little experience in the United States, perhaps is using what he knows about whiteness from living in Mexico, where the term “guero” is usually associated with light skin people, but upon crossing the U.S-Mexico border it acquired the “blond” distinctive additive quality. As for the case of Gamio, he happened to live for some time in the United States, perhaps, he was more aware that there are many other people that are white and of different nationalities. In the case of Tenorio, he called the immigration officer a “guero” (blonde), to which Gamio acknowledged this description as culturally valid by not changing Tenorio’s description to “white” when that is how Gamio described Tenorio himself.

However, the complexity of the skin color landscape and color inspections of Mexicans in the United States is further seen as Manuel Gamio continues to make sense of the immigration experience and his preoccupations with physical appearance of these participants. For example, Gamio provides a woman’s experience of migration. Elisa Recinos had lived in Torreon, Coahuila and migrated to El Paso, Texas. In the short ethnographic description provided by Gamio, Elisa is described as a woman of twenty-
eight years of age and as dressing “very poorly and her hair uncombed. She is of a distinctly Indian type with a flat nose, and her face is pitted with smallpox” (10). Next, the following interviewee Carlos Morales, is described by Gamio as “mestizo, markedly Indian, a native from Sonora” (11). Then, Gamio continues describing the experience of Jesus Garza, a native from the state of Aguascalientes, as “mestizo, markedly Indian, twenty-four years of age,” as well as, Bonifacio Ortega, a native of Jalisco as “white” (25). In chapter two, Manuel Gamio describes Manuel Ibanez, a native from the state of San Francisco, Zacatecas as “mestizo, markedly Indian” (45). The questions to raise is why the phrase “markedly Indian” is not attached to whiteness?

Through these descriptions, it seems that Gamio perceives his participants through the lens of what I call “color inspections,” from a Mexican and U.S. perspective simultaneously by labeling them respectively as “mestizo,” “Indian type” and “white”; and then utilizing the Spanish term, “guero” in reference to the American official. From colonial classificatory systems, we know that a “mestizo” was invented from the supposed union between a “Spaniard” and “Indian” [indigenous], however this was not necessarily a marriage. Within these discursive and material traces, a mestizo often appears to be darker in skin tone than a white European, but lighter than an indigenous individual. In another example, when Gamio describes Bonifacio Ortega as “white”, an explicit skin color hierarchy referent is not added here; but when describing Carlos Morales, he is labeled as “mestizo” but “markedly Indian.”

The second discursive and material term that Gamio utilizes to describe Mexicans, as I also began documenting above, is their apparent “Indians.” Quite literally, while at first they are referenced through color, when they are labeled as “mestizos” at the same time,
they are also marked through physical characteristics of being “Indian.” This again begs the question, if a mestizo emerges from a Spaniard and Indigenous, ideologically and in terms of physiognomy, why mestizos are described in Indigenous terms? Let me draw on a few more examples. For instance, as I said earlier, Gamio describes Elisa Recinos as of Indian type, “with a flat nose, and her face pitted with smallpox” (10) in order to make sense of who she is, but also to attest to the fact that sometimes skin color or inspection on color does not always provides a cohesive description of Mexicans in the United States. In other words, color hierarchies are not static fossilized categories, but rather they become perceivable in the act of using them culturally. In this case, the cultural inspection of research, In short, one could tentatively argue that in the relations between culture and practice lies the production and reproduction of meaning about skin color categories.

To summarize Gamio’s discussion about skin color and Mexican identity, we can begin to see that he does not leave behind the legacy of colonialism in regards to the human classificatory system, even in the United States. For Gamio, the problem of skin color among Mexicans, could not be ignored, nor the problem of mestizaje, nor the indigenous question. Thus, what we see in the work of Gamio is that cultural categories and skin color hierarchies both from Mexico and from the United States provide him with material and discursive fragments to make sense of who these Mexicans were that decided to migrate. The task of Gamio’s distinctive inspections through colorismo and further through color inspections in reference to a known skin color hierarchy of African
Americans and the general white population in the United States forms a subtle but present component in his ethnography.92

A closer inspection to the early formation period of the Mexican community in South Chicago pushes the genealogy of color inspections further back, although perhaps with scholars not actually thinking fully of the implications of their writings in depicting Mexicans in color terms. Historian Michael Innis-Jimenez (2013) carefully documented the geography and environment that the first Mexicans found in South Chicago when U.S. Steel “imported” the first large group of Mexicans to work in South Chicago. According to Innis-Jimenez (2013), managers turned to Mexicans because of the belief that there was less antagonism between Mexicans and Whites and because they did not want to hire African Americans. Thus, from the start of the Mexican immigrant experience in South Chicago, Mexicans had to navigate two major color hierarchies. The first, the material and discursive formations in regards to colorismo in Mexico, which they brought with them to Chicago, and then, they had to learn the skin color hierarchy present in the United States of a seemingly white and black dichotomy—which I argue, is intimately tied with class and gender. From the perspective of factory managers, or in other words, from the perspective of capital, Mexicans presented a “color and work ethnic paradox.” They were considered “less-than-white” by their employers, they believed that “darker skin Mexicans [were]…ignorant, and at times lawless, peons” (53).

92 The post 9/11 era has radically brought drastic changes to the governing of populations in the United States. Immigrant groups, for obvious reasons, have become the target of increasing legislations that many times has produced the criminalization of immigrants, and many times this is through the optics of skin color. In other words, “brownness” or having a “Mexican” look—understood here at “color inspections”—has become a way to regulate, manage and discard unwanted non-citizens. However, while activists and scholars in the northern borderlands increasingly point to “color” or “skin” and citizenship as the material and discursive elements from which state and non-state institutions alike discriminate against Mexicans in the United States.
However, at the same time, industrialists believed that the Mexican worker was “cheaper, more dependable, and easier to deal with” (35). Despite the ways white, American factory workers thought about Mexicans, Mexicans were not naïve to the new space they inhabited in the second decade of the twentieth century and skin color differentiation formed an integral part of their everyday lives in South Chicago.

Aware that Mexicans come in all colors, historian Michael Innis-Jimenez provides an insightful event that allows us to see how people managed to deal with light-skinned Mexicans or those “whites”—more specifically blancos de piel (white in skin tone)—that we also encountered in Manuel Gamio’s description of Mexican immigrants. Innis-Jimenez points out that in the United States, Mexicans were also racialized through the idea that they were as a group, dirty. Moreover, the discourse around “dirtiness” also carried “racial connotations of being darker-skinned and therefore inferior to whites” (112). The following example gives a sense of how business people dealt with and privileged light-skinned Mexicans. Innis-Jimenez comments that the boss of the Cracker Jack Company in Chicago refused to hire dark-skinned Mexicans because he thought that they were dirty. However, on closer inspection in regards to color, an employment manager at a large steel plant was more explicit why he hired “light-skinned” Mexicans. According to Innis-Jimenez (2013), this manager said, “It isn’t that the lighter-colored ones are any better workers,” in which he further explained that the owner, “noticed the attitude of our men when they ate in the cafeteria” thus, he hired only “light-skinned” Mexicans “in order to minimize feelings of race friction and keep away from the color line as far as possible” (112). In short, color hierarchies are mobilized by different actors, meaning that skin color—even within this colorized group—mattered. In fact as it is
today in South Chicago, Mexicans with darker skin encountered greater hostility and job discrimination than those with lighter skin tone.

In the previous historical analysis by Michael Innis-Jiménez (2013), in subtle ways, there are two skin color hierarchies at play. On one level, we see Innis-Jimenez suggesting that Mexicans were racialized as to belong to a “less-than-white” category. However, this racial formation emerges only if one theorizes Mexican identity in the United States from a white and black continuum, or rather if one only considers the ethnic and racial hierarchies from the context of the United States. On the other hand, if one acknowledges the diversity of skin tone, we can see that ethnic and racial descriptions become more nuanced and complex as in the case of a factory manager trying to make sense of “darker” versus “lighter” skinned Mexicans. What is crucial to understand, is that those of working class and darker skin tones as subjects of “color inspections” seem to be more pervasive and invasive. In the lives of those “other” darker Mexicans, and less on those “white” (blancos) Mexicans once in the context of the United States, this principle continues to be ethnographically found.

Documenting color hierarchies is a very intricate process, especially given that the meanings attached to color in South Chicago, perhaps, shift and vary historically, and geographically depending on the environment Mexicans experienced as well as for other areas of the City of Chicago. For example, historian Gabriela Arredondo (2008) is another scholar that is aware that the Mexican problem of color is a rather complex one, than it is often theorized. Arredondo comments that Mexican racial positioning in Chicago worked for them in curious ways, and I add emphatically that it was the perceived skin color and where they fit within the color hierarchies at play that dictated
their life chances in the city. Arredondo curiously documents that, for example, Dr. Ellis of the Sherwin-Williams Paint Company preferred “to hire Mexican because their ‘pigmentation’ made them ‘not so liable to skin disease induces by working with paint’” (64). Interestingly, Arredondo quite nicely captures a poignant difference between the eugenics discourse and the actual practice as she argues that, “Ellis believed that the skin color of Mexicans ‘hid’ the toxicity of paint…Ellis appeared to conflate Mexican and dark skin—though in his actual hiring practice, he must have favored dark-skinned Mexicans over light-skinned ones. Again, Mexicans were ideal—dark enough but not black and not as expensive as whites. Ellis was not alone” (64).

Arredondo perhaps best captures that third space from which many Mexicans locate themselves, which can be thought to be a space where the “colored borderlands” materialize, but which is emphatically grounded in the labor process itself. Indeed, both Mexicans and other color subjects alike, produce the “colored borderlands” through “color inspections.” To finalize Arredondo’s elaborative analysis, she concludes, by examining the hiring practices of Marshal Fields Mattress Company, for example, “employed no colored” though as Arredondo comments, “through the firm increasingly hired more Mexican workers…Mexicans were not deemed ‘colored,’ but neither were they white” (64). Arredondo cleverly tries to find a label within the white and black continuum. However, Arredondo is also aware of the uniqueness of Mexicans in Chicago as she says, “[t]he Mexican situation is fundamentally different, however, from that of the European. Differences lay in issues of citizenship, looks, racial prejudice, and whiteness—or rather, Mexican’s nonwhiteness” (106; emphasis added).
In order to uncover a different space from which Mexicans think of themselves in terms of color lies my ethnographic work. As I argued throughout, Mexican immigrants, upon arriving in the United States are already under the colonial, national, and postcolonial influence of color hierarchies through the mechanism of *colorismo* (see Lugo 2008). Within the context of Chicago, Arredondo comments that “Chicago’s Mexicans became Mexicans not while in Mexico but rather once outside of the bounds of the nation-state of Mexico” (172). Quite possibly, but we still need to ask more specific ethnographic questions about how this process or “racial” transformation emerges. This juncture is where ethnography is helpful to document how present day Mexicans in Chicago think of themselves as Mexicans. Thus, and even more importantly, how are “color inspections” being mobilized, produced, and culturally validated for and by Mexicans in Chicago? Indeed, Arredondo’s introduction tells us of her own experience at being “color inspected” in Texas at her schoolyard due to her light skin, a classmate told her, “You’re not Mexican, You can’t be—you’re not dark enough.” “Yeah, we should know. Our gardener is Mexican,” (1, emphasis added).

**The Mexican Gorra, Gloves and El Color en Las Yardas**

While doing fieldwork and working as a *yardero*, clients would be very happy when they saw me arrive to power rake their lawn in early April when the landscaping season formally began. Thus, while performing a participant-observation and working side by side with *yarderos*, I quickly learned that many of them came from the state of Zacatecas, Mexico (see chapter three). I also learned that many of them came to Chicago in the 1980s and increasingly in the two decades that followed many of them came from small
townships and others from rural areas or *ranchos*. While the work activity is very
important to document in detail as expressed in the previous chapters, dress and *looks*
(see Arredondo 2008; emphasis added) are also important features which are culturally
saturated with meaning and color inspections.

In the context of the U.S.-Mexico border of Nogales, Sonora and Nogales, Arizona,
anthropologist Gilberto Rosas (2012) offers a cultural analysis of the *chuntaro*, who is
described as “struggling to fit in the new frontiers between Mexico and the United States
or, further south, between Guatemala and Mexico. He (or she) has replaced his sombrero
with a baseball cap and put on tight jeans. His weathered skin, clothing, and indigenous
accent—if he speaks Spanish at all—betray his unsuccessful efforts to fit in at a place
designed to officially reveal nations—biologized as racial—differences.” *Yarderos* are
not *chuntaros*. However, the ethnographic details that Rosas provides us with are specific
clothing items; for example, the baseball cap (*una gorra*) serves as a marker of class and
racialized status.

Concomitant with Rosas’ description of skin color is “weathered skin” of the
*chuntaro* is another way to speak about the “color inspections” that I now investigate
through the examination of the way *yarderos* in Chicago dress at work. Usually, *yarderos*
do not wear a uniform to work, but from my observations, the way they dress depicts
aspects of cultural and personal preferences and environmental necessities.  

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93 While many *yarderos* do not wear a uniform to work, in the last months of fieldwork I began to see lawn
care service crews wearing either a “dark green” or “dark blue” uniform. I never saw lawn care service
women wearing any type of uniform to work. However, in more established companies which are usually
not owned by Mexicans but by a corporation, a uniform is a standard feature. For example, during the
summer months, if you visit park district areas such as Millennium Park in Chicago, you will often see
crews of landscapers caring and giving maintenance to the City of Chicago lawn areas. While they “look”
Mexican, it often happens that the man driving the crew is not. Among the few Mexicans that wore a
uniform, it happens to be owned by second generation lawn care service workers, usually, these were the
sons of the 1980s generation.
example, since I started working in lawn services under Cesar Hernandez in September, when the weather in Chicago starts to cool down, I had to dress very warm in order to not feel cold. Keep in mind that given the organization of lawn care service, a *yardero* is almost all day outside mowing grass. Thus, walking and mowing while performing work keeps the body warm, if one stops for a few minutes, that person will cool down and immediately feel colder, especially in the feet and face. Even when the fall season is approaching and there is very little sun during the day, there is still need to cover one’s head because it often rains during the month of October in Chicago.

However, during the summer, one cannot go around working without wearing a baseball cap or a hat. For women the story is a bit different. When I performed lawn service with Don Vicente, on Thursdays, near Crandon Ave. and 89th Street, we would always encounter a lawn care service crew that was mostly composed of women. The boss was an older landscaper that also began mowing grass about the same time as Don Vicente in the early 1980s. Don Vicente would tell us that since that time, Don Jose (as he is commonly known by other *yarderos/as*) began bringing his wife and daughter to work. The story goes that with time, he became used to working with women and that became known Don Jose, “the man with the women.” The ways in which *yarderas* dress also speak to specific cultural preoccupations of respectability. For example, I would always see *yarderas* wearing long sleeve shirts, baggy pants or slacks, and round straw hats. Rarely women would wear a baseball cap.

The act of wearing a baseball cap is a practical necessity during the hot grueling summer months in Chicago, and the issue of skin color emerges within this context. For instance, early in April 2013, I met Guillermo, the nephew of Don Vicente Flores.
Guillermo is the son of Jose Flores, and while he was born in Mexico, he was brought to the United States at an early age. Even with a thin figure and a “white” (blanco) skin tone, he does not cover his head while mowing grass. During the summer of 2013, I only saw him once wearing a fisherman’s hat that covered his face and that was because it was very hot. Guillermo came to work with Don Vicente on a day just before the Fourth of July. We started mowing near 89th Street and Yates Avenue. Memo was not wearing a hat and I asked him whether he wanted an extra baseball cap that was in the cargo van. He said that he did not want it. I asked why. Memo said, “What for? Either way, I always get dark during the summer.” I took his refusal to wear a hat adequate. Upon further reflection on the use of a baseball cap, I recall that the time I worked with Cesar Hernandez from September to November 2012, and he told me that he also did not wear a cap at the beginning when he started working in las yardas. He believed that when people saw him working and wearing a baseball cap, clients would imagine that he does not know English or that people will look down upon him. Later, in 2012, I worked for Cesar, he wore a baseball cap all the time even when he had pale skin. Additionally, I noticed that the hat he always wore was a baseball cap with his company logo on it, not unlike the majority of lawn care service workers I met.

The baseball cap has become a marker of identity for many working class Mexicans, and especially those working by mowing grass in the City of Chicago to the point that many do not leave their houses without a hat. A baseball cap varies in style, but many of them have the White Sox logo, New York Yankees, or any other baseball or football team on them. However, one exception in my observations was that I never saw a Mexican yardero wearing a Cubs baseball cap, probably because this baseball team is
associated with whiteness within the context of the City of Chicago. Don Vicente, the owner of the second small lawn care company in which I performed a participant-observation, would hardly leave his house without a baseball cap on, and he would rarely wear anything other than that item. Don Vicente has dark skin, and his face has deep wrinkled lines of both age and of working all of his life. I recall seeing him when he first arrived from vacationing in Mexico for the start of the season and his skin tone was almost similar to mine which is a light brown canela or bleached brown, but by the time we arrived to the Fourth of July, the peak of the landscaping season, we both had a darker skin complexion, almost dark brown. Despite his darkening element, some yardero peers often joked after work that I was also getting darker from working, to which they would then say, that is fine, you will get whiter during the winter season.

Among yarderos/as in South Chicago, given that the work itself involves the use of their hands all the time, they need to be able to get a grip on the lawnmower, blower or weed whacker. During the end of the landscaping season, it is common to wear gloves because of the cold temperatures that the month of November brings. However, there were times that I saw yarderos wearing gloves during the hot summer months. While working for Don Vicente, on Tuesdays, we would always encounter a lawn care crew of Mexicans also from the state of Zacatecas near 92nd Street and Crandon Ave. in South Chicago. I did not talk with them, but I would only raise my hand to say hello. I noticed that the chalanes, meaning those that help the lawn care owner with work, would wear gloves while mowing.

Upon reflecting on it, I recorded a discussion on this issue with my boss, Don Vicente, in my journal, sometime in late July. I asked him why the lawn care workers we
always encountered on Tuesdays would wear gloves while mowing. Don Vicente smiled and said, “Well, they do not want to get their hands dirty. They want to keep their hands soft.” In Don Vicente’s view, not wanting to get one’s hands “dirty” while working as a yardero meant a different work ethic which he associated with the new generation or younger Mexicans that just began to do this kind of work. Don Vicente would often say that if you do not want to get your hands dirty, then do not work as a yardero at all since you are always dirtying your hands while mowing, handling garbage, or just being outside. The other element in discussing wearing gloves while mowing has a feminizing component, to which Don Vicente also alluded to in his statement. As described above, Don Vicente said that the chalanes who wore gloves wanted to keep their hands “soft” specifically, “suavecitas” in Spanish—and that is why they wore gloves. In other words, utilizing the words such as “dirty” which meant masculine, and “soft” as in this case feminine, was a way for Don Vicente to express a work-ethic differentiation in gender terms, and at the same time, construct his own work activity as masculine and respectable.

A layer of explanation on the simple act of wearing gloves while mowing can be tied to perceptions of color and beauty from a masculine and feminine perspective. Given that a light or bleached skin tone is preferred and often associated with beauty, it is fascinating that chalanes take care of their hands and cover them with gloves during the summer. During the time that I spent performing work and carrying out participant observations, I noticed that my hands and arms would gradually get darker in tone, to resemble a cinnamon like color. This would most often happen during the months of July
and August where the sun hits the hardest and when the sunset does not take place until nearly eight o’clock in the evening.

**Mexican Moreno, and American Moreno**

In his ethnographic work on *maquila* workers in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico anthropologist Alejandro Lugo skillfully connected metaphorical domains to explain the use of the term “*barra*” as a metaphor to call someone “lazy” within the context of factory work (see Lugo 2008). Within the working class context of Mexicans in the city of Chicago, I also encountered a discourse of laziness, but with an emphatically added layer of U.S. ethnic, race and color hierarchies. Indeed, what I actually found was two color hierarchies operating. As the previous section exposed, there is already a color discourse operating within the Mexican population. Moreover, as Mexican lawn care service workers further navigate racial and ethnic borders of and within the neighborhoods of Chicago, there emerges another layer of meaning of skin “color inspections” that further reproduces a Mexican’s sense of subjectivity. Instead of understanding color differences from a nation-state framework, I argue that, once navigating the social space in the United States, understanding skin color shifts in terms of an intensified emphasis on skin color identifications. However, these skin color references do not emerge in the same form of all geographic and historical spaces, they shift and modify each other; regardless of what remains, it seems present in these sociocultural interactions as a constant preference for light skin pigmentation rather than the darker tonalities. During fieldwork, the interactions between lawn care service

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94 This is not to say that Mexicans in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico were not aware of color differences, in fact, Lugo (2008) documents precisely the connections between color preferences and working class life.
workers and clients showed a profound example of “color inspections” being reproduced in practice.

As it so happens, within the context of the City of Chicago, yarderos/as usually mow the lawns of middle to upper-class African Americans and the white populations in the neighborhoods of Calumet Heights, Avalon Park, and Stony Island Park. At times, yarderos/as mow lawns farther west by Kedzie Ave. and farther south at the city limits around 127th Street. On Tuesdays, when I mowed for Hernandez Lawn Care in the months of October and November of 2012, we would work in the neighborhood of Roseland, located near Cottage Grove Ave. and 115th Street. Today, the Roseland neighborhood suffers from many of the social, economic and political ills associated with neighborhoods with high poverty rates like South Chicago, and much of the southern part of the City of Chicago. In the Roseland neighborhood, there are few residents who have the economic means to hire a landscaper or a lawn care company, in comparison with Calumet Heights or Avalon Park, this area has less Mexicans performing lawn service work.

While mowing around the Roseland neighborhood, I documented the discourse of skin color and laziness in quite intense gender specific ways. In this area and in some other poor, working-class areas, we would often see African American males sitting on the stairs of their homes, walking in groups, or standing near a home where we would be mowing a lawn. When we would finish mowing and we would get in the pickup truck, Cesar would express his views on seeing the African American males just “hanging” around, as being “huevones,” an expression which denotes laziness. However, Cesar would bring the color domain through a common linguistic expression and would say,
“pinches negros huevones.” The phrase in Spanish is composed of an adjective, a noun and a qualifier. In this case, the adjective is “pinche” which literally means, “fuck or fuck up.” Moreover, the word “negro” in this case is not semantically associated with the English n-word, but it nonetheless captures the specific domain of skin “color” that is in reference to the color “black,” which in turn points to the perceived pigmentation of the skin of so-called morenos. If you also recall Andres from the first chapter, he tells us that upon arriving at a Kmart to wait for Rodrigo to pick him up after having traveled for two weeks from his town in the state of Zacatecas, he recalls feeling scared upon entering the store and seeing los morenos (African Americans). One can make the argument that in the case of Andres, he had to learn how to interpret this new experience of seeing “black” populations, now within the context of Chicago. In order to make sense of that initial “color inspection” Andres used the known available color hierarchies to make sense of what he was now encountering. Nonetheless, in his particular case it was not until he actually began encountering them while working as a yardero that Andres’ color knowledge added another layer of meaning, which is in reference to the Spanish double color identifier of “moreno.”

In the context from which many of my participants have migrated from, the term “moreno” in Zacatecas is not equated with “black” skin. For example, when I would ask yarderos/as what they thought a “moreno” person looked like, they would often say it was someone with dark brown skin, and then they would then associate “Indianess” as representing or referring to the specific skin color. I would push my questions further and ask them about the difference between “morenos” from Mexico and “morenos” from the United States. In those instances, the “moreno” identity acquired a different “color”
identification as it pointed to skin color and blackness, in reference to black color, and not necessarily the n-word within the black and white binary understanding of race in the United States. Thus, what we see with the example of the “moreno” identifier is a creative way of mobilizing color hierarchies from Mexico and the United States to make sense of the new space and place that Mexicans come to experience.

Critical to the understanding of how labels or color hierarchies are utilized to denote racial or biologizing features of an individual and then to generalize at the level of a population (as in the case of morenos hanging out on their front porches in the Roseland neighborhood) is the role that emotions play in the production of racial categories. When utilized to describe the perceived pigmentation of a “Mexican” in Chicago, linguistically, the word “moreno” associates two apparently separate domains, that of “brownness/mestizo” and “Indianess.” From the context of color categories from Zacatecas, there is substantial historical evidence to indicate that there is not a perception of “moreno”—“blackness” given that currently there is not a “black” community of Mexicans within the state boundaries. Thus, in the ideological perception of Zacatecans, “moreno” does not denote “blackness.” However, for Mexicans, once in the context of the City of Chicago, “moreno” is actually a “polite” form of referring to the generalized population of African Americans. For instance, during weekends or at social gatherings with yarderos during the summer months, I noticed that when they would talk about the relations between Mexicans and African Americans, they will say, “los morenos,” in its generalized plural version. Indeed, it signaled the specific population with a color connotation of “blackness.” However, it was in the everyday work interaction that the term “moreno”; and “negro” acquired a discriminatory emotional intensity. For example,
I documented instances such as the following event that brought the question of racism in a specific expression. At the end of the month, yarderos/as expect payment for the services provided to their clients. If we recall from the first couple of chapters, it often happens that clients intentionally skip a month and wait until another billing cycle arrives to pay for the service fees accumulated until that date. Thus, towards the end of the autumn season in November 2012, I visited Ernesto Morales, a landscaper that also lives in the East Side neighborhood near 112 Street and Ave O. Ernesto comes from a family of landscapers well known on the South Side. People often just know these landscapers simply as “Morales.” During the short visit at his home, Ernesto wanted me to buy one of his used lawnmowers and the days passed until he saw me mowing near 91\textsuperscript{st} Street and Phillips Ave. This is an excerpt from our short talk in late November:

\begin{verbatim}
ERNESTO: Hey, I have not seen you, what is up with you?  
SERGIO: Here, working.  
ERNESTO: How is your work in las yardas coming along?  
SERGIO: Good…so-so.  
ERNESTO: Why is that? What is going on?  
SERGIO: The clients do not want to pay. You know? (Tu sabes)  
ERNESTO: Make them pay! \textit{Pinches negros culeros.} (Fucken black folks!)  
SERGIO: (laugh) What can you do, nothing, just come again next week.  
ERNESTO: Hijos de puta, (mother fuckers). We need to make them pay, we need them to sign a contract. Pinches negros (fucken black folks), they spend their money in nice cars, and they do not have to pay us.  
SERGIO: It is what it is… (pause)...what else would it be done? Nothing… (que se le va hacer, nada).
\end{verbatim}

In this excerpt, we encounter a redefined “color inspection” being produced through practice in order to make sense of the behavior of clients. The difference lies in the emotion produced through practice between the yardero and his or her interaction with the client. In this instance, upon noticing that clients lag behind in payment, which is usually a practice on the part of the client, and highly despised on the part of the yardero.
Ernesto began to raise his voice in disgust, began using adjectives, and emotionally charged metaphors to generalize the behavior of certain clients to the overall population of African Americans that hire landscapers to mow their lawn. Quite literally, I documented Ernesto shifting his use of the word “moreno” which is often times used to describe the general population of African Americans, to call these populations by emphasizing their color, meaning “black” or “negro” in Spanish, in order to speak about the injustice being perceived. The second description after he told me that I should make them pay was that of “culeros” which in Spanish it means, “big assess.” Thus, this example effectively shows that racism is produced not just by saying a word, or calling someone a name, but it is in the generalizing and biologizing of certain perceived physical characteristics, all within a given context of capitalist production or uneven distribution of labor and value.

**Color Inspections Among and Against Mexicans**

Women who work performing lawn care service work have a significantly different experience that is marked in gender terms. While carrying out my ethnographic research, it was obvious that Mexican women also formed a central component of the labor force, often times, not necessarily working as lawn care workers or *yarderas*, but of course taking care of the labor at home. However, one would also see women working as *yarderas*. From a methodological perspective, it was difficult to speak directly to women that I saw in the streets mowing lawns and introduce myself while working or to request time from them to meet up and inform them about my research. Being a gender subject marked as male, I had to first to talk about my project with the males or company owners.
The reasons being that more than often the women working as lawn care service workers are the wife or daughter of the company owner or yardero. Thus, most of the interviews that I performed with women performing lawn care service work were often times in the presence of the husband, and I was not able to interview younger women. My ethnographic observation of the experiences of younger women is from the dialogue and discussion I had with yarderos, and with women that work alongside their husbands.

_Feliciano and Martina_

Aware that gender is another window that qualitatively provides and sometimes challenges theorizations about identity and nationhood, I used these conversational moments to engage with questions of race, identity, and perceptions of the family. In my ethnographic notes, I documented when and in what moments color emerged as an important category or subject of discussion. Feliciano Garcia is a migrant from the state of Zacatecas. He is short, stocky, has a bleached skin tone, and his eyes are a honey-like color.\(^95\) I knew him while working for Cesar Hernandez. Cesar would say that the crew that Feliciano has is one of the fastest to mow grass. On average, Feliciano’s crew can mow close to eighty houses a day. Feliciano’s wife, Martina Garcia, is also a migrant from the state of Zacatecas who came to the United States after they got married and lived seven years in Los Angeles. After that period, they migrated to Chicago, Illinois in early January 2000. Since the year, Feliciano has worked mowing lawns for a living in South Chicago. Martina is in her late to early forties, with a broad smile, and she is dark

\(^{95}\) See Rosas (2012) on how he utilized the concept of “bleached” skin reference to talk about racism based on color differentiations within the Mexican immigrant population that travel north to the United States.
in skin tone (*piel canela*), but with a gorgeous honey-like eye color. They have three boys
and a girl.

After the Fourth of July in 2012, I saw Feliciano near 88th Street and Anthony Ave. and I asked him if he would be willing to talk to me about how he began to work as a landscaper in Chicago. Later that day, I arrived at his home in their Hegewisch neighborhood near 135th Street and Ave. O. Feliciano began recalling when they first migrated to Los Angeles and then to the City of Chicago. Martina documented the struggles they had at the beginning of their marriage, especially in regards to her mother-in-law. With a sad look and breaking voice, Martina tells me that her mother-in-law did not like her from the beginning when she and Feliciano began to date. The main reason was because she was darker, in her words, “*muy morena*” and she was not worth enough for Feliciano. Following her statement, I asked her whether this has changed over the years, given that Feliciano and Martina have been married for over twenty years. Martina quickly responded that nothing had changed. For example, now that Feliciano and Martina have become better off economically, they have the ability to travel to Mexico at least once a year to visit Feliciano’s family in their hometown of Zacatecas. When they go back during the annual fiestas in the month of December, they always stay in the home of Martina’s mother and only visit Feliciano’s mother during the day. Martina recalls that even to this day, when they go back, she is not treated like the wives of Feliciano’s brothers because they are of a lighter skin tone.
Rodrigo and Julia

Color preferences and inspections of color among couples continues to take place in Chicago. For example, if you recall Rodrigo from the second chapter, he migrated to Chicago with his immediate family in 2001 and eventually married a woman from his hometown in Zacatecas, Julia. Rodrigo is in his middle twenties, tall, has a broad back, a round face, always cuts his hair in a short military style, and is of a brownish to dark skin tone. He had worked as a lawn care service worker since he arrived in Chicago in 2001, but in the past two years he has been driving sixteen wheel trailers carrying materials around the Chicagoland area. On the other hand, his wife differs, Julia who is also in her middle twenties, but shorter than Rodrigo, has curly black hair and a light brown skin tone. During the summer months, when I saw them, they both looked mildly brownish, and both of them looked pale white during the winter months. Julia worked as a receptionist at a public hospital back in Zacatecas before migrating to Chicago, Illinois in 2010, and now they have a four-year-old daughter.

Rodrigo and Julia invited me to their house for dinner two days after December 25, 2013. They live in a one story brick house on the East Side neighborhood. They acquired this house through Rodrigo’s brother, Jorge. These kinds of informal economic practices are more common than we often tend to imagine. In other words, Rodrigo did not have to apply for a bank loan to buy the house from Jorge. They simply sat down, discussed the deal and made it happen by the power of a word agreement. They both know that if they do not keep up with their word, it would damage the reputation of both and will result in shaking the foundation of their maleness and family honor upon which trust, loyalty and family bond is cemented. We ate tacos de cabeza (head tacos) and tacos de cecina (meat
tacos). As our conversation turned toward some of the recent events back in the state of Zacatecas, I began directing the conversation to talk about their experiences with color given that their only child is light, white skinned (guera), fair haired, and has blue eyes. They began to tell me two recent stories when people around them clearly made the color of their child an issue.

The first event took place when Julia was driving down Ave. O in the East Side neighborhood. She recalls that it was just after she arrived to Chicago with her daughter. As she retells the story her voice follows a rhythm as if the event had just happened yesterday. Julia recalls that a police officer stopped her for driving above the speed limit. At that time, Julia did not have a valid Illinois driver’s license, but she had her license from Mexico and her green card with her. When the officer approached the driver’s window, he immediately asked for her license, registration and car insurance. Julia was driving a 2010 Toyota Minivan. Julia recalls that before even checking the registration and driver’s license, the police officer asked her whether the minivan that she was driving was hers. Julia recalls that the officer slowly looked at the seat behind her and saw her child in the back. Upon seeing the child, Julia recalls that the officer looked at her, and then looked at the child again, and in a confused look, asked Julia if she was the nanny of the child that she had in the back. By this time, recalls Julia, she began to feel angry with the officer because he was not only thinking that Julia stole the vehicle, but even her child in the back seat. Of course, as Julia told me, the police officer was white (pinche guero, as Julia specifically said).

The other event took place at a major grocery store also located in the East Side neighborhood. Julia recalls that earlier in the month of November she had to go to the
grocery store because at that time, her husband Rodrigo was working full-time as a commercial driver and had little time to take care of household tasks. Julia told me that she took her daughter with her, and as she approached the cash register to pay for the items she was about to purchase, the cashier looked at her and then turned to Julia’s daughter and said, “Is she your daughter, she does not look like you?” Julia recalls that she did not know what to think at first. Julia said that she did not want to say anything rude to the middle aged Latina woman, but simply said, “Yes, she is my daughter.” However, not being happy with the answer Julia gave, the Latina woman, as Julia described her, further said, “She [the daughter] is guerita, and you are not. Is your husband also like you or is he white [blanquito] like your daughter.” Julia recalled feeling very angry with the lady. Not knowing how to respond anymore, Julia just took her daughter and without further response to the lady’s inquiries, she left the grocery store.

**Color Inspections and its Domains**

There is no logical basis to uphold color hierarchies unless they serve to support some other social relation, in my own understanding one that is based on class. In the context of this dissertation, color is explored and documented in the lived experiences of Mexicans in South Chicago, specifically among working class people. Within the context of the United States, color has been historically, metaphorically, and theoretically described through the binary of white and black, which if we simply look at the history of colonialism in the United States, it has emerged from the colonial dichotomy between owner and slave. Of course, history is much more complex. However, within the context of colonial Mexico, the exploitation of colonial differences through color does not
follows a dichotomy, but as the category of *mestizo* took hold, other color hierarchies continue to function in everyday life. In other words, while in the United States the skin color continuum has been marked drastically between white and black, in Mexico, the relatively absence of blackness within the national imagination has perhaps shifted the continuum of color within a narrower skin color spectrum analytically or ideologically perhaps, but not so much in practice. However, both of them, regardless of the space from which skin color designations are labeled as such, have historically privileged the lighter skin person from the darker tonalities. In a very schematic way, one can be lost in skin color labeling, only if one drops gender and class from the analysis. If class is maintained, gender is also central to the analysis, and skin color becomes as subtle cement that stratifies class differences, and in turn reproduce color imaginings. In other words, in a capitalist system, in the borderlands of both Mexico and the United States, gender and color have served to naturalize class exploitation, and further reproduce domination of those that have towards those that have less. Looking at skin color enables one to see the capitalist bare life as an unsubstantiated basis of the naturalization of capital. Race is not the same as color, but racism does clarify color hierarchies, dominations and productions. It is my main claim that race emerges when we examine human behavior within a narrower time frame but “color inspections” is the pervasive element that lives on, before or after the specific racial formation under investigation. To be more specific, theoretically, race is but the attempt to make sense of color, but there is no human essence to justify the production of racialized identities.

Capturing what happens to the Mexican immigrant in the process of migrating to the United States must deal with the problem of color, not because they are simply
incorporated within the black and white dichotomy, but because they are creatively shifting and changing how skin color is made meaningful. Borders are saturated with culture, power, and inequality as color is. As discussed earlier, Lugo (2008) suggested that color is deeply embedded in the texture of Mexican society. For him, color is the very product of a long colonial dialogue between capitalism and culture and has different political expressions at different periods in the production of the imagined community we now call Mexico. Concomitant with the expressions of skin color differences in the lives of Mexicans is the fact that we do not leave our color subjectivities as soon as we cross the U.S.-Mexican border; emphatically, passing through inspecting stations of all kinds, our color subjectivities acquire new layers of meaning and “color inspections” as a practical and theoretical metaphor help us to unravel its class formation, production, and reproduction.

The examination of skin color and attention paid to color hierarchies in relation to class inequality and processes of migration is such an embedded academic practice by U.S. trained anthropologists and historians that their writings expose and undeniably attempt to grapple the color expressions in the lives of Mexicans once in the United States. Beginning in the late 1920s, anthropologist Manuel Gamio described its participants in striking skin color imaginings. For Gamio, the hierarchy of color that he constructed is one in which the continuum starts with “Indianess” features, mestizo, and ending with white. Not surprisingly, his participant’s physical description and skin color classification neatly map with lower, middle, and upper class mobility within the Mexican population. For example, we find Gamio describing maladjusted Mexicans as “Indian-type” and sometimes as “mestizos”; but rarely did he mention a “white” (blanco)
Mexican as a lower class subject. Interestingly, and not surprisingly, a mestizo within the skin color hierarchy portrayed by Gamio, he or she is never described as “mestizo” and “white-type”; thus, we find a specific skin color racism, or in the words of Lugo (2008) a “colorismo” being documented all the way north on big northern cities, which do not map well within a white and black dichotomy, but can certainly interact at times, as I sometimes encountered in my fieldwork.

Within the historical context of South Chicago in the early twentieth century, color racism towards the Mexican population inevitably fractured a sense of group, this time by making them through skin color within the steel industry in Chicago. Given that Mexicans were specifically hired to work in factories, owners found ample cultural metaphors to sustain the class relations. For example, as recalled earlier, according to Innis-Jimenez (2013), the skin color hierarchy found being overlaid onto the Mexican population attempted to make sense of their skin color differences by placing them in the “less-than-white” category. Moreover, even though Mexicans are also “white” in skin color, within the Mexican population they are not “gueros” (meaning white Americans), but “blancos” within the historical context of colorismo. However, within the skin color hierarchies of Chicago, Illinois, their Mexicaness became a prime factor in defining their racial status within the skin-color hierarchy. A skin-color hierarchy that through class relations place them “less-than-white” but not “too-close-to blacks” because they were viewed as desirable workers within the steel industry.

In another case, we also clearly see that class is in very definitive ways marked by skin color designations. In the case of historian Arredondo herself, she experiences a “color inspection” even at a young age when she was playing in the school playground,
gardening was marked in color terms. The phrase, “you can’t—you’re not dark enough.” “Yeah, we should know. Our gardener is Mexican,” captures a racialization process in which class and color form an initiative relationship where at times can serve to support the other. When this process is reached, racism is naturalized.

**Conclusion**

In everyday life, the meanings produced through the discursive and material elements of skin color categories and lived experiences are captured in a color hierarchy. At the same time, color hierarchies capture the prevailing ways in which subjects are being designated through skin color definitions, which at the end of the day, is a very human thing to do. We do it all the time. Also, color hierarchies, in their definitions as mental and practical categories, mobilized people both in Mexico and in the United States. Within the context of Mexican society, skin color hierarchies are too easily mapped upon the bodies of blacks, indigenous, mestizos and white populations despite the fact that when we place all of these bodies together, they form a continuum rather than specific discrete categories. As it was pointed out, “colorismo” is another form of racism which has deep connections to capitalism. Within the context of Mexican society, Spanish whites conquered vast territories, they produced private property and they have never left Mexico since. Thus, this is why skin color has remained central, because it has served a purpose, and it has usually been that of naturalizing class relations and domination.

Within the context of the United States, Mexican immigrants dragged their skin color categories all the way north to the Midwest. Upon arriving in the early twentieth century, they have encountered another color hierarchy, the dichotomy between white and black.
As Mexicans arrived into the Midwest and were channeled to specific work activities, there were two processes at play. One, of the ruling class or the owners of production, meaning essentially those that hire them, attempted to fit them within the prevailing color hierarchy, which again it can also be, at time, a synonym for capitalist relations. Therefore, for example in South Chicago, Mexicans were placed in the “less-than-white” category in order to make sense of their class relation to “whites” and “African-Americans” in the city of Chicago. The historical and ethnographic evidence documents that Mexicans were not discrete mestizos either in Mexico or in the United States, but many were part of a continuum in terms of skin color. However, upon arriving, despite individual stories of success of some lighter skin color Mexicans, many Mexicans continue to struggle with attempts by capitalist to dominate them through color designations of a darker connotation.

A second process and one that is less discussed in the historical and ethnographic literature and one that is rarely acknowledged is the way in which Mexicans in the context of the United States discriminate against one another. There are two possible answers for this behavior. One, the reproduction of post-colonial Mexican culture that still does not allows Mexicans to disengage from differentiating skin colors and “colorismo” as it has been done in Mexican society (see Lugo 2008), and quite simply, Mexican culture is a historical product of colonialism and nationalism does not erase colonial heritages. Second, the intensification of discussions about skin color within the context of the United States long history of racial oppression seems to subjectively influence and trigger a sense of Mexican identity that in itself recaptures skin color to make sense of, and produce Mexicaness through what I call “color inspections.”
The novelty of the color transformation being documented in this ethnography within the context of the City of Chicago is the fact that skin color continues to be inspected to extract labor from its hierarchical organization especially and obviously among working class Mexicans. Producing and reproducing those uneven color hierarchies is, in its most simple terms, the labor of a political organized subjection made for the benefit of the lighter skin folks, and the few who continue to dominate the darker and less privileged others.
Chapter 7

Conclusion:
Colored Governance as Premature Death and the Future of the Mexican Working Class

“The capitalist mode of production…It produces also the premature exhaustion and death of this labour-power itself. It extends the labourer’s time of production during a given period by shortening his actual life-time”

-Marx, (1906 [1867], p. 292)

Post-Fieldwork Note

In May 2014, after six months of concluding my fieldwork that documented the everyday lives of Mexicans in Chicago, I entered a Mexican grocery store. This grocery store is in South Chicago and it goes with the name of El Guero (The white). I bought the ingredients to prepare enchiladas at home: tomatoes, chiles de mole, fresh Mexican cheese, and “white” tortillas. I approached the counter and on a sheet of paper on the left side, I found an ad that announces and invites people to call a number because the small lawn care company needs “help.” In Spanish, the ad I found asks for “gente para cortar zacate” [people to mow grass].

The ad strikes me given that I have not seen yarderos advertise in this kind of way for workers; apparently, it may be the case that yard-work is becoming an undesirable work activity for Mexican immigrants, or indeed, there is a shortage of hands to work en las yardas. The next week, I saw a similar ad in a grocery store in East Chicago, Indiana. In

96 If we recall from chapter four, asking for “help” is a cultural significant way of finding low, skill workers. In the English language, the closest linguistic expression is the phrase, “help wanted.”

97 My suggestion here is that the shortage of workers is directly related to the increasing deportation of Mexican immigrants either right after crossing the U.S.-Mexico border or inside removal from the U.S. territory. For example, according to official records, Mexico continued leading the number of deportation
talking with known participants at a birthday party in Hammond, Indiana towards the end of my fieldwork period, they suggested that perhaps, *chalanes* are finding more stable work in factories, and that they cannot cross the U.S.-Mexico border. As my participants suggested, factory work offers a more stable, year round work activity than *las yardas*, many are refusing to go back to Mexico because they may not be able to cross back again.

**Tracing the Ethnography of a Labor Process**

My ethnographic study about Mexicans in the City of Chicago documented the day to day life happenings, events, and struggles that this working class population experiences: a) while performing lawn care service, b) struggling through class, labor and color hierarchies and c) in attempting to reproduce their working class life. The ethnographic materials themselves represent my attempt to contribute towards a better understanding of a group of people under specific historical, economic, and cultural conditions as they seek a better life in the north: *yarderos/as* in South Chicago.

Three major queries guided the way in which I collected ethnographic materials and the form I gave it as I wrote about those events and happenings. First, I examined the ways in which the Mexican working class in Chicago is currently experiencing racial discrimination for being located within a specific class, labor and color hierarchies. Class, labor and color unevenly reproduce each other, and one experience does not substitute the other, but in intricate ways, these often reproduce themselves in the act of performing work in late capitalism. Second, I documented how in everyday life, color continues to

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to a total of 241, 493 in FY 2013. Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Dominican Republic followed Mexico’s lead. See https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/1312/131219washingtondc.htm
inform how Mexicans think of themselves as Mexicans within the context of the United States. Color prejudice does not only occur within a white and black dichotomy, but it comes in all color hierarchical formations, which, I argue, are specific to a class relation. While Mexicans discriminate among themselves and against others based on color, not all Mexicans discriminate against darken skin Mexicans, and not all light skinned Mexicans are treated better than dark skin Mexicans, but the majority who resemble Anglo or European physiognomic characteristics do in fact benefit culturally, economically and politically. Third, I theorized how color hierarchies intersect with capitalism in a very specific neighborhood of the City of Chicago. Thus I argue that within capitalist production, contradictions emerge as a way to cover the unnaturalness of a class relation. In other words, if one asks why class, labor and color hierarchies have remained present since the conquest at the same time that they have been seamlessly concealed difference in capitalism? A short explanation is simply the following; because they work, and more often than not, they work to benefit the reproduction of capital. Thus, it makes sense that when scholars start to document the hierarchies at play under the matrix of power in everyday life, one is also uncovering how natural relations of domination and control are in fact exercised in methodical and strategic ways by the “experts”, “managers” and even by the worker herself or himself.

In this dissertation, I linked the structural forces of migration that lead to an increasing influx of Mexicans to the City of Chicago after the decades of the 1980s when the lawn care and landscaping economic activities accelerated under neoliberal conditions. I ethnographically located the emergence of a new working class population—los yarderos/as—within the context of the City of Chicago. Today, this
working class population is commonly seen mowing the grass of residential homes south of the City of Chicago among middle to upper class African American and white neighborhoods. As immigrants, Mexican yarderos/as challenge and fight to find ways to live decent lives through their hard work, their culture, and their families.

After tracing this particular working class history, I documented in detail the anatomy of the work itself. In other words, how was it that mowing, blowing, edging and poweraking were performed by these men and women as they beautify Chicago’s yards, lawns and house landscapes. As the new season began in mid-March of 2014, I received calls from previous clients to go out and powerake their lawns. Leaving the fieldwork site in order to write about it, I was now distanced and refused to be pull in by el jale (by this work activity). I utilized my own privilege (especially in relation to the workers) to step out of the social, economic, and historical circumstances that otherwise would force me to gather the means of production and labor to start the season again.

As an anthropologist, I did not claim “inside” status, and in my work, I did not pretend to. However, I emphatically searched for a better understanding of who these yarderos/as were and the human conditions in which they continue to produce and reproduce their working class cultures by seriously acting as if I were yardero. The capitalist structure of the landscaping work continues to thrive despite discussions about economic recession in the United States. Every year, after a grueling, cold Chicago winter, the desire of homeowners to have a green, nicely cut lawn, offers the opportunity for Mexicans to capitalize on that desire and provide the service. The desire of the big businesses that sell landscaping equipment across the City of Chicago to landscapers in March also gets into the cyclical rhythms of the lawn care service and maintenance
economy. Moreover, large departmental stores such as Menards, Home Depot, Sam’s Club and Lowes stock their stores with lawn care and landscaping related products. Thus, there still more research to do in tracing the green, capitalist culture in the United States, but my ethnography offers the lowest layer, down at the grass level, where the hard work actually takes place, and one in which I found Mexican yardero/as making a living mowing grass.

Moreover, I dealt with three major themes that became central while I performed fieldwork. First, the labor structure that allows us to see how work, class, and culture are intimately owned and performed by those who manage the workers and by the workers themselves sometimes without them thinking of how, through work freedom becomes unfreedom, and how capital logics dominate their cultural understanding of who they are as a working class. Second, my ethnographic engagement with the body, intimacy, and capitalism highlights the intimacy of the labor process. I elaborated on the dual process of the worker’s domination of its bodily effects in order to adequately and rapidly produce value in the labor process. Third, I looked at the centrality of color hierarchies and its color inspections in the lives of Mexican, working class folks in the City of Chicago.

In sum, this dissertation contributes to a granular discussion of racism within the context of the Midwest and the United States. After Mexicans have travel all the way north to cities such as Chicago, color meanings still form an integral component of their worldviews in their understanding who they are as Mexicans. However, this colorismo (see Lugo 2008) which is re-materialized through what I call “color inspections” in the Midwest, does not operate strictly within a black and white dichotomy. It emerges, I
strongly argue, within a multiplicity of class, labor and color hierarchies which are constituted by both Mexican and U.S. based racial and ethnic classifications.

**Colored Governance as Premature Death**

Through these ethnographic materials, I am providing much needed answers to three central critical relations that allow me think about the concept of colored governance. In this ethnography, I saw this concept expressed ethnographically in the mutually constitutive elements that reproduce class and color, capitalism and culture, and power and its color dominant mechanisms in a politically organized society that utilizes skin pigmentation in order to produce and reproduce class relations.

Much of the recent anthropological literature on immigration has focused on the radical changes that neoliberalism has brought to the lives of immigrant populations. At other times, the focus has been on the racialized and criminalized aspects in which the homeland security state has enacted in order to govern noncitizens and those that may threaten the perceived social fabric of the United States (Rosas 2012; De Genova 2010).

My ethnography transcends and connects larger historical discussions about the role of capitalism and processes of domination through the theoretical and practical metaphor of “color inspections” as it affects the everyday lives of the working class populations. In a very schematic way, when we study the working class life, we inevitably have to address the ways in which domination within the capitalist system is accomplished. This domination has two interrelated and inseparable poles; one that is inflicted on the working class subject, and one inflicted by the working class subject himself or herself, both acting with the goal of producing surplus value from the labor process the worker
produces. More precisely, I argue, it is through “color inspections” (that unevenly fracture and segment populations based on perceived differences of skin pigmentation) that color subjectivities are then materialized on the working class subject. Much can be said about class, labor and color and its hierarchies, but for the worker, “color inspections” are very real, these are lived experiences for both men and women (see especially chapter 6). Feeling that one is governed by a more diffused power mechanism, by the colored governance of capital, or in the worker’s understanding, por el jale, as I show here, is for the worker even more difficult to figure out a way out and to refuse its effects.

From the colored governance of the Mexican working class, there is a short distance to a very real historical process characterized here in the middle of the second decade of the twenty first century as “premature death.” This life and death experience is central in order to underscore how under modernity, the working class still faces a premature death, paradoxically as they seek a better life pursuing the American dream, or in the yardero’s understanding, a better life (una mejor vida). For example, among Mexican yarderos/as, the long hours of work during the grueling summer months in Chicago inevitably affect the body’s capacity to recover its energy from one day to the next, from one week to the next, from one year to the next, and from one life to its eventual premature death. While examining the lives of yarderos/as, I clearly saw that Mexican yarderos/as suffered from illness such as hypertension, work injuries, cancer and diabetes. All of these, in less or greater measure are produced by the everyday life at and off work, and it is my concluding suggestion, sadly, all these dynamics and relations shorten the life of the one who work hard for a living in the colored borderlands of Mexican Chicago.
Conclusion

For many yarderos/as the hope for a better life lies in great measure in expecting the long waited immigration reform. The older yarderos I spoke with benefited from the mid-1980s IRCA reform (Immigration Reform and Control Act), and have made good use of it by becoming documented, thus, decriminalizing their work activities. The newer immigrants have had a very hard time documenting their status, which has stifled and criminalized their lives in the United States. From my participants’ perspective, their children are entering their adolescence years and even at that age, the politics of color inspections are present in their day to day lives as they are growing up in U.S. schools, while intersecting with a massive criminalization of Latina/o youth (see Rosas 2012).

The children of yarderos, even when they are American citizens, are encountering an increasingly anti-immigrant and nativist rhetoric from various factions of society. A rhetoric which, again, it is expressed and imagined in terms of borders and color of a brown invasion. What is the future for them? What do the following decades hold for the political mobilization of Mexican and Latina/o immigrants in the City of Chicago and beyond? Will the children of yarderos/as eventually assume leadership positions as they themselves seek a better life? More than anything, how will “color governance” and “color inspections” shift as many of these younger immigrants actively travel back and forth between Mexico and the United States? To conclude, it was one of the main goals of this ethnography to offer a better understanding of a fractured Mexican identity, consciousness, and way of living that cannot dissolve the legacies of colonial, national, class, and gender dominations expressed through color inspections--even as the worker
himself or herself refuses to leave the dream of modernity behind, often times, at the expense of life itself.
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