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ECONOMY OF FAVORS: Tiered Labor Systems on Mexico's Car Assembly Lines

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Every forty minutes, Lupita receives a new batch of auto parts. She is one of hundreds of logistics workers who, across three daily shifts, distribute auto parts inside Volkswagen Mexico (VWM), the German transnational car corporation headquartered in Puebla, 106 kilometers south of Mexico City.[1] Lupita is employed by Servimsa, one of the three companies subcontracted to handle the distribution of auto parts inside the car factory.[2] With a handheld scanner, Lupita first registers the auto parts' arrival at her line, scanning barcode after barcode printed on stickers on Styrofoam boxes, metal containers, and plastic crates. Next she opens the packages and quickly removes the bubble wrap covering the pieces that make up fuel tanks. Then she ensures the auto parts are neither damaged nor defective and verifies that they are arranged in the sequence corresponding to cars already moving on the line, a task known in logistics parlance as *el secuenciado* (sequencing). For the final step, Lupita delivers the auto parts in an organizational cart to a team of autoworkers.[3]

To unpack the hundreds of auto parts that pass through her hands daily, Lupita needs gloves. Gloves protect her hands from wear and tear caused by the repetitive task of unwrapping and also shield auto parts from her fingerprints. Gloves, however, are a scarce item for logistics workers. Whenever they ask supervisors for

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gloves, the usual response is "Sí, ahorita te los traigo [Yes, I'll bring them in a bit]." Yet gloves never arrive. Lupita instead frequently obtains gloves from Adrian, a male autoworker directly employed by the car factory. The shortage or abundance of gloves is a subtle manifestation of how autoworkers and logistics workers experience a tiered labor system in their day-to-day. Uneven working conditions have opened a sphere in which items such as gloves are exchanged. Focusing on these exchanges reveals how the hierarchies and inequalities intrinsic to and constituting global car production become reconfigured on the assembly lines by means of an economy of favors.

Through an ethnographic analysis of the economy of favors, this article attends to the sociality among workers situated in a tiered labor system. Inequalities in segmented labor markets inside factories are nothing new (Cross 2015; De Genova 2010; De Neve 2016; Lugo 2008; Mollona 2009; Rothstein and Blim 1992; Safa 1995; Strümpell 2008; Yelvington 1995). Yet, as anthropologists have shown, supply-chain production—organized through subcontracting, outsourcing, and knitting together varying forms of social difference (Tsing 2009)—has created conditions under which workers situated in uneven labor regimes toil side by side (González-Polledo and Sabaté Muriel 2019; Kasmir 2014; Parry 2013). In Mexico's car factories, supply-chain car production has brought together senior autoworkers who are almost always male and unionized with subcontracted logistics workers who are almost always young and female.

To explore the interplay between proximity and unevenness on Mexico's car assembly lines, I analyze the economy of favors at VWM.[4] Favors (*favores*) constitute asymmetrical exchanges of material and nonmaterial assistance between autoworkers and logistics workers. The circulation of favors illuminates a distributive field of complex relationships among unevenly situated workers. Similar to Marcel Mauss's (2016) gift, a favor has the potential to foster, sustain, and disrupt social relations—or to create unwanted relationalities. On Mexico's car assembly lines, favors exchanged between logistics workers and autoworkers also make for instrumental exchanges: they serve to help people obtain something needed immediately. The objects of exchange range from essential, job-related items (such as protective gear) to acts of assistance that help workforces cope with the exhaustion and stress of their fast-paced workdays.

Autoworkers and logistics workers do not actively seek out favors. Rather, the economy of favors arises as an unintended—yet unavoidable—consequence of a tiered labor system that intersects with accelerated automobile production. Just-in-time production (JIT), which revolutionized Fordist production, is characterized

by structuring production with no temporal buffers between processes and a fast-paced line.[5] Here, I show how JIT has engendered interdependences between unevenly situated workforces on the assembly lines. Supply-chain production, JIT, and labor flexibilization all interrelate in constituting the structure of global production. Close ethnographic attention illuminates their nuances, revealing the conjuncture and the ways in which each impinges on the sociality among tenured and subcontracted workers.

While ample research has shown how gender, age, and status interplay to form a segmented labor market (Benería and Roldán 1987; Fernández-Kelly 1983; Mills 1999; Ngai 2005; Ong 1987; Safa 1981, 1995), this article sheds light on how gender and age reconfigure a tiered labor system. Although in Mexico gendered, uneven labor regimes have long coexisted within the same household (Benería and Roldán 1987; Rothstein 2007), the division of labor inside car factories created by supply-chain car production has blurred this spatial separation. The economy of favors provides a lens through which to examine how social differences and sexual discourses intersect with the structure of global production. Favors reveal the ways in which a constellation of power relations among unevenly located workforces are engendered on the lines. I show how the inequalities and hierarchies inherent in a tiered labor system are naturalized by how gender and age intersect with factory hierarchies.

In what follows, I lay out social differences between workforces by historically situating logistics workers and autoworkers. I then ethnographically center the analysis on the economy of favors to illuminate how workforces enact, reinforce, and interrupt a tiered labor system. In any of their renditions, I argue, favors ultimately reproduce and further entrench modes of subjection that characterize but also transcend uneven labor regimes. An ethnographic analysis of the economy of favors provides insights into the ways in which workforces experience the precariousness of flexibility and how inequalities and hierarchies become recast in the service of capital.

KNITTING INEQUALITIES

The reorganization of automobile production into supply chains segmented the Fordist production model into three clearly defined processes: the manufacture of auto parts, the distribution of those parts, and car assembly (Cowen 2014). Inside car factories, supply-chain production created a new division of labor in which autoworkers assemble cars from the auto parts that logistics workers prepare for them. Although neither autoworkers nor logistics workers own the means

of production (Marx 1993), the restructuring of global production over the past five decades has situated Mexican workforces differently in relation to capitalism, the nation-state project, factory structures, and each other. Both workforces enter the shop floor as historical subjects that represent, embody, and are made to embody the histories and processes that have reconstituted them as industrial workforces, as instruments of labor, and as gendered subjects.

Autoworkers are a residual, predominantly male, industrial workforce whose labor regime was initially shaped by the social contract among organized labor, companies, and the state under state-led industrialization, which promised stable employment and social mobility (Bachelor 2001; Bennett and Sharpe 1985; Lenti 2017). Although in the 1990s the full-force labor flexibilization (Harvey 1989) via the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) (Healy 2008; Juárez Nuñez and Babson 1998) shattered this promise, certain elements of the triadic social contract remain observable in the working conditions experienced by autoworkers today (Babson 2000; Middlebrook 1995). In Mexico's social imaginaries, autoworkers are still considered among the crème de la crème of the working classes. VWM continues to directly employ its autoworkers, whose union, Sindicato Independiente de Trabajadores Volkswagen de México (SITIAVW), is fifty years old and one of three independent unions among the twenty-seven car factories in Mexico.[6] On the lines, autoworkers hold a high status within the factory's hierarchy and are endowed with the prestige of belonging to a labor union with a record of successful labor struggles.[7] They command power based on seniority (they are generally older than logistics workers) and knowledge: the know-how of car production, knowledge about how the VWM factory works and how unions should work, and life experience. Autoworkers continue to signify and embody the promise of social mobility that has infused projects of industrial development.

Logistics workers, on the other hand, constitute a casual flexible workforce (Cowen 2014; Bonacich 2005; De Lara 2018; Graham 1995; Sowers 2017). As a workforce inside Mexico's car factories, logistics workers emerged during the 1990s as part of the entangled transformations to implement supply-chain production to align Mexico with NAFTA (Bueno 1998; Carrillo 1990; Juárez Nuñez 1998). Media and government often highlight logistics jobs as an example of the employment opportunities generated by free trade. Although logistics work in the automotive sector has indeed contributed to the younger generation's labor participation in the formal economy, it has also given rise to one of the most precarious workforces among those formally employed in Mexico's export economy. At VWM, three different companies handle the distribution process. The logistics

workers they employ are notably younger, and though they are unionized, their unions are company unions.[8]

To convey the hierarchal distinctions and privileges between directly employed and subcontracted workforces, logistics workers refer to autoworkers, tongue-in-cheek, as "los intocables [the untouchables]." This moniker reveals how class and status hierarchies inherent to supply-chain production are experienced daily on the assembly lines. But the name also conceals the ways in which gender and age intersect in reinscribing class and status hierarchies and inequalities beyond the factory shopfloor.

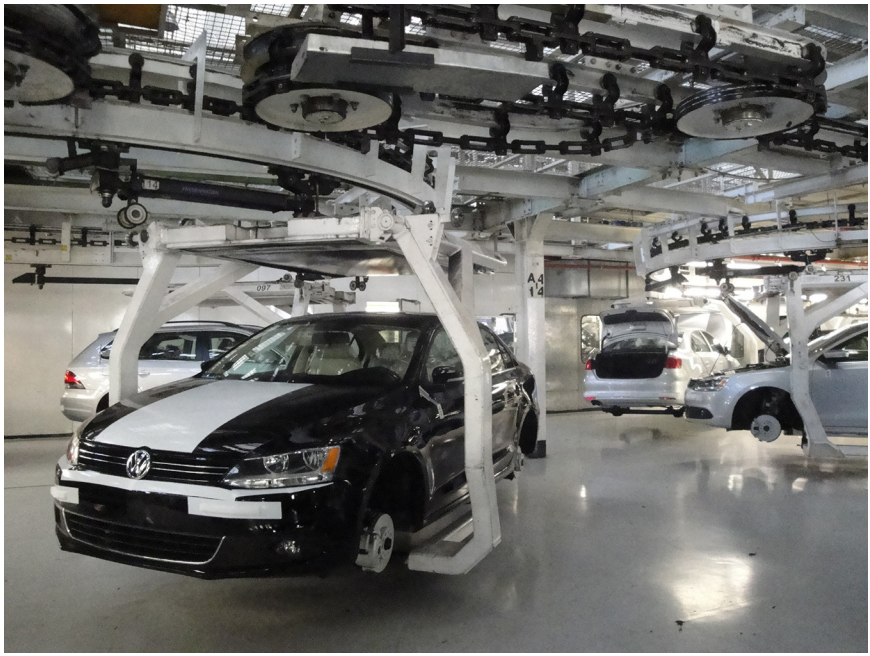

Figure 1. Almost-finished cars moving on the assembly line. Photo by Alejandra González Jiménez.

UNEVENNESS ON THE SHOP FLOOR

In logistics work inside car factories, female labor continues to drive the circuits of commodity production (Fernández-Kelly 1983; Iglesias Prieto 1985; Mills 1999; Ngai 2005; Ong 1987; Safa 1981; Salzinger 2003). Although no explicit gender and age policy exists, both logistics workers and autoworkers concur that the three logistics companies operating inside VWM predominantly hire young women for the role of general helpers to deliver auto parts to autoworkers. The Mexican economist Huberto Juárez Nuñez (2006, 15) suggests that supplier

companies prefer hiring "young women and single mothers . . . without any union background or any connection to VWM assembly workers." During my fieldwork at the factory, I observed this myself: predominantly female workers (in red, green, or yellow polo shirts) unpacked auto parts on tables located a few meters from the lines, whereas mostly male workers (in white overalls embroidered with the blue VW logo) assembled cars. The car corporation's publicly available data also shows an uneven gender distribution: in 2021 the factory directly employed 4,775 women, a number that includes nonunionized positions (*empleados de confianza*), autoworkers (*trabajadores/obreros del automóvil*), and administrative and marketing staff.[9] Women constituted 20 percent of the approximately 7,000 unionized autoworkers.

Unevenness is also discernible in the age composition of these groups. The majority of logistics workers belong to a younger cohort, ranging in age from sixteen to forty-five; autoworkers range from twenty to sixty-five. Dispararities are also evident in educational levels: logistics workers typically have completed junior high school, whereas autoworkers have completed high school, technical vocational schooling, and (in some cases) college.

Young single mothers and older men implicitly constitute the preferred labor forces for logistics companies and car factories respectively. My interlocutors explain this preference by assuming that single mothers are less likely to quit their jobs—a significant factor, because logistics work is characterized by high turnover. Young people graduating from high school are imagined as not having any dependents and thus likely to continue looking for less precarious jobs. The preference for young single mothers as the labor force suggests a shift in the gendered and age-based ideologies guiding global commodity production. In the early years of export production young women were the preferred labor force because they were imagined as daughters, wives, or sisters with no dependents and therefore no need for higher wages (Fernández-Kelly 1983; Iglesias Prieto 1985; Mills 1999; Ngai 2005; Ong 1987; Safa 1981). In the era where export production is one of the main gateways to employment, young women are interpellated as mothers and breadwinners who would work regardless of low wages (see also Zuñiga 2013).

Single-mother logistics workers are constructed as "having an economic need" (*tienen una necesidad económica*) that assumes that any single-mother logistics worker—unlike single-father logistics workers or any other logistics worker—will look to male autoworkers for economic protection even if they are married. Autoworkers, factory managers, and other logistics workers imagine single-mother logistics workers as *ofrecidas*, a word that derives from the verb "to offer" yet has a

double meaning in Mexico. *Ofrecida* refers to 1) a person who offers to do a favor in a subservient manner, and 2) a person who easily agrees to have sexual relations. Adding an extra layer to this sexualized construction and assumption of "loose morals," female logistics workers are often described as "fresh meat" (*carne fresca*) when they first arrive at the assembly lines. Male autoworkers, on the other hand, are constructed as womanizers who, when given the opportunity, will prey on young female logistics workers. This hypersexualized construction is in tandem with, and reinforced by, autoworkers' status within the factory hierarchy.

On the factory shop floors, young female logistics workers (whether single mothers or not) are cheap *and* devalued labor yet also hypersexualized subjects because of their assumed needs and loose morals.[10] Discursive practices show the ways in which factory workers are simultaneously constituted as instruments of labor and sexualized subjects (Ong 1987; Salzinger 2003; Yelvington 1995).[11] Variegated and polyvalent power relations emerge from the intersection of gendered and aged relationships with levels of education and work experience.

In spite of how workforces are interpellated, the sociality between autoworkers and logistics workers on the lines is multivalent and complex. Some autoworkers are indeed harassers and womanizers who try to take advantage of young female logistics workers. As the economy of favors illuminates, however, the relationships between logistics workers and autoworkers cannot be reduced to those of male predator and female victim. On the lines, workforces disrupt such discursive constructions, thus illuminating the constitution of masculine and feminine subjectivities within and outside of production relations (Salzinger 2003). The polyvalent relationships between logistics workers and autoworkers are crisscrossed by other existing social differences *and* by the tiered labor system that brought these workforces shoulder to shoulder in the first place. Thus, even when the constructions of "male predator autoworker" and "female *ofrecida* logistics worker" become disrupted, other forms of gendered dynamics are reproduced. I suggest that tiered labor systems build in and legitimate labor consent through gendered and age relationships.

WORKING UNDER A TIERED LABOR SYSTEM

Inequalities between autoworkers and logistics workers are evident from the moment workforces are recruited to the daily working conditions. In contrast to autoworkers, aspiring logistics workers must present proof of no criminal record to be considered for hire. For unemployed individuals, the process of acquiring a *carta de antecedentes no penales* (letter of no criminal record) is both cumbersome

and costly, as it entails a fee of 260 pesos (US$12.46) and requires a visit to a government office. Aspiring workers must submit original and copied documents of identification, proof of address, and a birth certificate, and the process can consume an entire morning. Most aspiring workers accept the logistics companies' offer to cover the cost of the criminal record check, and once someone is hired the company deducts that cost from their weekly wages over four weeks. Precarity has created a dual entangled transformation: people are recruited as workers-debtors, and companies serve as employers-financiers.[12]

On the lines, the tiered labor system manifests in subtle ways. Autoworkers regularly receive gloves, boots, protective eyewear, earplugs, back-support belts, a bag with tools necessary for assembling auto parts, and several uniforms (which a laundry service washes at the end of the work day), as well as subsidized meals in the factory's cafeterias. By contrast, logistics workers receive only one pair of gloves, two polo shirts, a pair of boots, and a pair of arm-socks to protect their upper limbs from cardboard and metal scratches; after one year, they receive an apron and a third polo shirt (and another shirt after each additional year). They pay three times more than autoworkers do for meals in VWM cafeterias.

Mistakes that could interrupt production and their handling further signal the experience of tiered labor systems in the day-to-day. An autoworker who finds a damaged, defective, or wrongly sequenced auto part takes that piece to a facilitator (another autoworker who is responsible for assisting autoworkers' teams on the line). The facilitator removes the auto part from the production process (*dar de baja el material*) by placing it on a table (located on the lines) whose sole purpose is to hold damaged, defective, or wrongly sequenced auto parts. Finally, the facilitator delegates the task of finding the right piece and alerts autoworker teams further along the line that a specific car is missing a part. Meanwhile, the autoworker who identified the problem promptly resumes their work.

For logistics workers, by contrast, encountering a damaged, defective, or wrongly sequenced auto part initiates a lengthy and burdensome bureaucratic process. The worker who identifies the issue must first locate the direct logistics supervisor—not an easy task given that supervisors are always on the move within large areas of operation. The easiest way to reach a supervisor is via a phone call, but because there are no phones on the assembly lines, both logistics workers and logistics floor supervisors must use their personal cellphones at their own expense (and most logistics employees rely on prepaid cards).[13] The use of personal cellphones for work-related matters is one example of how companies subtly shift the associated daily expenses of business operations onto workers.[14]

Both logistics supervisors and logistics workers collaborate on completing several forms to be submitted to the production coordinator, a non-unionized worker who is directly employed by the car factory. Reporting and recording problems with auto parts serves multiple purposes. It is the initial step toward rapidly finding a replacement. In cases of damaged auto parts, it also creates a way for logistics companies handling the final phase of the distribution process to deflect responsibility for the damage—an important step, because a stopped line incurs fines.

Logistics floor supervisors and logistics workers also collaborate on retracing the damaged part's trajectory in the supply chain to try to locate the origin of the problem. This is not an easy task: before reaching their final destination, auto parts undergo an extensive journey, during which they are handled, loaded, and unloaded multiple times by workers employed by various logistics companies. Mishaps can occur at the manufacturing site before the parts are packed for delivery; during handling by forklift operators responsible for the boxes or containers in which they are packed; or after arriving at warehouse 29A—VWM's distribution center. Througout the auto-parts' journey, logistics workers can accidentally drop the packages.

Supply-chain production did not create production delays; these are historically intrinsic to industrial capitalism. Yet the reorganization of production reconfigured how interrupted production is managed. During Fordist production, car manufacturing was managed as a unitary production process handled by a single workforce employed by a car corporation. The car factory itself absorbed costs associated with interrupted production. Heavy workloads created by backlogs, along with their accompanying tensions and animosities, were dealt with by a single (though internally divided) workforce that was unionized and mostly male. Although temporary autoworkers were often blamed for any problems on the assembly lines, they and tenured autoworkers were ultimately employed by the same corporation and belonged to the same union.[15]

Under supply-chain JIT production, production delays are handled differently among workers and corporations. Companies responsible for disruptions face heavy fines. In the early days of JIT production at VWM, the fine was US$500 per each minute the line remained inactive (Juárez Nuñez 1998). In 2008 fines ranged from US$600 to US$1,000 per minute (Martínez Muñoz 2008). In 2019 an autoworker and a close interlocutor of mine told me that the fine had been raised to US$5,000 per minute. In addition to the monetary penalty, the error also affects

the company's standing in VW's supplier ranking system, which can hinder the supplier's prospects in future bids.

Animosities arising from bottleneck production now manifest between tenured and subcontracted workforces. Supply-chain JIT production has increased the possibility of tensions, because no matter how fast workers labor, they are "always on the verge of falling behind" (Graham 1995, 78). Along with speed, tight schedules, and the lack of temporal buffers, heavy fines exert an extra pressure on logistics workers. Pressure comes from supervisors and managers employed by either the car factory or the logistics companies, who in turn face pressure from their own superiors, both German and Mexican. The tense ambiance is evident in their urgent movements, loud commands, and frequent glances at their watches while writing on whiteboards that juxtapose JIT's ideal production time with real production time.

In logistics work inside car factories, the most important rule is to avoid any delay or, worse, to halt production. This rule is reiterated during training sessions and at the beginning of each workday. Logistics workers must proactively anticipate and address any potential issues that could affect production. A logistics worker deemed responsible for interrupted production may face suspension from work for a few days, leading to a loss of wages that in turn leads to a loss of the monthly bonus, which is based on attendance, responsibility, and punctuality. Suspension can result in a loss of US$40 per month in wages.

If the problem creates a chain of disruptions, causing the line to stand still for an extended period, the logistics worker(s) held responsible face(s) the car factory's security guard instead of the logistics company supervisor. The penalty for a major disruption, aside from suspension from work, involves the perforation of the swipe card, known as *CAET*, used by workers to enter the factory. A hole punched in the card indicates a worker's probation; with the third hole, a worker is fired from their position without any input from logistics companies. Fired workers also find themselves blacklisted, preventing them from entering the car factory through a different supplier in a period of five years.

A severe punitive action, suspension from work is now part of the repertoire of harsh disciplinary techniques constituting the histories of global commodity production. Such techniques include limiting access to the factory clinic and bathrooms, meticulously monitoring prayer rooms, and prohibiting talking among workers (Fernández-Kelly 1983; Graham 1995; Ngai 2005; Ong 1987; Wright 2006; Yelvington 1995). To drive them to keep up with the demanding JIT schedules, logistics workers are subjected to similarly strict regulations imagined to

achieve 100 percent worker efficiency. Yet suspension from work, which heavily impacts logistics workers' household economies, obscures the fact that their lack of control over the production process has itself resulted from the extreme fragmentation of work on the assembly lines. Ironically, removing control of the labor process from workers is the stated aim of Taylorist fragmentation (Braverman 1974).

Figure 2. Warehouse in which one of the logistics companies operates. Photo by Alejandra González Jiménez.

ACCOMMODATING HIERARCHIES

The tiered labor system has opened a sphere of exchange between autoworkers and logistics workers. In this sphere, material and nonmaterial assistance circulate in the form of favors. In exchange of a favor, reciprocity is often expected. Take the case of Lina, a twenty-five-year-old logistics worker who needs a back-support belt to move containers. When she requested one, her supervisor told her to ask an autoworker, because the logistics company had not provided them in a while. After receiving a belt from an autoworker, Lina knew that she eventually would have to repay the favor: "Once you start asking for favors, you know that, when they [autoworkers] send you to get a Coke, you have to do it."

Getting protective gear and fetching drinks or snacks make for the most common favors, yet these two types of favors differ significantly. Fetching drinks

for autoworkers doesn't replicate the transactional logic expected when logistics workers ask for protective gear. Even in the cases where a logistics worker repays a favor to an autoworker, the autoworker still pays for the drinks. In such an exchange, the logistics worker repays with the action, time, and labor it takes to fetch something. Neither workforce is allowed to leave production lines, but logistics workers enjoy a bit more flexibility. Logistics workers return the favor to autoworkers by walking for ten to twenty minutes round-trip, often under a scorching sun, to the convenience stores or food stands located within the sprawling three hundred–hectare factory (equivalent to about 741 American football fields). Autoworkers are not obligated to reciprocate logistics workers' favors, as they remain in the position of giver by paying for their own drinks and snacks as well as for those for the logistics workers who fetch them. In such an exchange, the gifts of time and labor reinforce logistics workers' subservient position.

Figure 3. The factory grounds are 300 hectares. Photo by Alejandra González Jiménez.

Favors extend beyond merely differentiating the haves from the have-nots. Much like gifts, favors act as vehicles for engendering, maintaining, and reproducing the tiered labor system. Favors play a crucial role in shaping and reinforcing

the complex web of social interactions and power dynamics within the factory. A closer look at the grammar of favors reveals how hierarchies implicitly play out within exchanges between workforces. When logistics workers ask for industrial protective gear, they present their query as an open-ended question. The expressions "¿Oye, podrías hacerme un favor? ¿Puedes conseguirme un cinturón? [Hey, could you do me a favor? Can you get me a belt?]" or "¿Un favor, podrías darme unos guantes? [A favor, could you get me some gloves?]" are properly formulated questions that do not assume that the favor will be granted. *Podrías* is a conditional form (*pospretérito*) of the verb *poder* (can) and indicates the possibility of something happening under the condition that something else happens prior to it. To acquire gloves or belts, logistics workers must first seek the agreement of an autoworker to perform the favor. The way the request is formulated implicitly reflects deference toward autoworkers. In this way, the act of requesting favors becomes a means through which logistics workers reaffirm and reinforce their position of subordination in the factory hierarchy.

Autoworkers asking logistics workers to fetch drinks or snacks don't give an explicit order, but neither do they present their query as a choice. Autoworkers might say, "Oye, por favor hazme el favor de ir por las cocas [Hey, please do me the favor of getting the Cokes]." They are rhetorically asking for a favor and simultaneously issuing a command. "Hey, please do me the favor of getting the Cokes," is an illocutionary act that, even before the action is done, already performs the action in speech (Austin 1975). The phrasing assumes the action will indeed get done.

Repaying a favor doesn't seek to nullify the first favor, nor does it aim to cultivate a relationship. Instead, repaying a favor to autoworkers serves to prevent souring relationships among coworkers. Desire, a twenty-five-year-old woman responsible for unwrapping side-view mirrors, explains the position that logistics workers often find themselves in when confronted with requests from autoworkers: "You can't say no because then you are going to have a bad relationship with autoworkers; I see them every day!"

Autoworkers' requests for favors elicit diverse personal responses and reactions from logistics workers. Mariana and Pedro, both in their early twenties, have no objections to this arrangement. "It is OK to get *las cocas* [Coke]," Pedro points out, "because it is very hot on the assembly lines; we get *las cocas,* and they [autoworkers] pay for them." In contrast, Desire resents being sent to run an errand: "They think that because you are young and working in logistics services, you have to serve them." Reactions to autoworkers' requests depend on various factors such as mood, level of fatigue on a particular day, rapport, whether production

is moving seamlessly, and other contextual elements. Consequently, the logistics workers' responses vary daily.

Despite the individual perceptions of fairness or resentment, the act of asking through an implicit command or through an open-ended question renders visible, reiterates, reinforces, and reproduces the hierarchical positions in which logistics workers and autoworkers are located. The ways both workforces ask for, respond to, and enact favors illuminate the process of subjectification induced by their positionality within the tiered labor system. It also reveals the cultural construction associated with types of work. Assembling cars requires know-how, schooling, and experience; logistics work is unskilled labor that requires only a high school degree. Assembling produces the ultimate commodity, a car. Logistics work, on the other hand, lies between and connects two processes that produce material commodities. Although it is a site of accumulation, and the labor involved in the distribution process is essential to keep the supply chain of car production moving, logistics work is described as a service, because it doesn't produce a tangible commodity. In Mexico, where manufacturing has been historically heralded as the path of social mobility, service constitutes devalued work in the eyes of autoworkers and logistics workers alike. Ironically, reciprocating favors produces more service on the part of logistics workers, thus reinforcing the assumption that logistics workers are at the service of autoworkers.

GREASING THE WHEELS OF PRODUCTION

Favors are a by-product of the conjuncture of sociohistorical processes playing out on the assembly lines. A tiered labor system that exists within the same workplace and structures labor relations and working conditions also shapes the field in which both groups find themselves working next to each other. Favors also illuminate the ways in which corporations reduce the costs of production by not providing equipment. But requests for drinks or snacks also result from how a tiered labor system coalesces with the fast-paced assembly line, tightly scheduled production, and restrictions on workers' movements within the factory grounds.[16] Among unevenly located workforces, this conjuncture has engendered interdependences revealed through favors. Although incidental rather than intentionally constructed, the economy of favors mutually benefits autoworkers and logistics workers.

Favors also benefit car production and, by extension, corporations. Since the onset of industrial capitalism, the assembly line has been designed to remain in constant movement. JIT is the latest version of how such movement is put into

effect via the acceleration of production. At VWM the line is designed to have cars roll out every minute and twelve seconds (equivalent to 1,500 cars in twenty-four hours). To meet production quotas, autoworkers assemble pieces on moving cars within minutes or seconds—a manifestation of how JIT is a "new, faster-paced, more intensive labor process [that basically] pumps work out of workers" (Kenney and Florida 1993, 264; cited in Smith 1997, 321). Double shifts and increasing the line's speed are mechanisms pumping work out of workers. But how do workers pump work out of themselves? Earning double for extending their shifts may motivate them, but doubling the work shift is not done by choice.[17]

I suggest that the economy of favors enables workers to fuel their bodies so they can pump work out of themselves and meet grueling production demands. Workers sustain their bodies and minds with drinks such as Coke, Sprite, Fanta, coffee, energy drinks, and *atole* (a corn-based drink); snacks such as Lay's potato chips, Gansitos, Galletas Principes, Conchas Mantecadas, and Bimbuñuelos Bimbo; or meals such as tamales (salsas, cheese, or meat surrounded by corn dough and wrapped in a banana leaf or corn husk), *tortas* (sandwiches), *memelas* (fried or toasted cakes made of corn dough topped with salsas), and Maruchan Instant Lunch soups. Sugary drinks and foods with high caloric content—cheaply available since the advent of NAFTA and contributing to the rise of diabetes in Mexico (Gálvez 2018)—help workers deal with the exhaustion, hunger, and stress caused by the demands of high speed, pressure from supervisors and management, and time constraints. For workers in the first shift (6:30 AM to 3:30 PM), such drinks, snacks, and meals might be their first bite of the day, because factory shuttles pick them up from their homes between 4:30 AM and 5:30 AM.

In this light, the economy of favors is akin to the gift-like sociality that the anthropologist Jamie Cross (2015) traces on the shopfloors of a Belgian diamond-processing factory in India, where the exchange of gifts (homemade food, sweets, and handcrafts) among workers proves crucial for achieving high rates of productivity by helping workers cope both with intense labor control to prevent slowdowns and with the enormous pressure that they experience when working with diamonds. Even when a shop floor worker gives a gift to a manager in hopes of obtaining promotions or accessing the best stones to work with, this gift-like sociality, Cross argues, shows the centrality of mutual interdependence for the operation of global commodity production. Interdependence among workers also plays a significant role in a more basic sense: gift exchange lightens moods and pressures, thus minimizing labor turnover despite the working conditions.

Similarly, favors among autoworkers and logistics workers support and sustain workers' bodies under the extenuating conditions of global car production. Like gifts in the diamond factory, favors on the car assembly lines help workers navigate their exhausting work day and the accelerated tempo of global commodity production. Indirectly, both gift-like economies benefit corporations.

Yet the two economies of exchange also differ. Whereas workers in the diamond factory actively foster a gift economy, autoworkers and logistics workers don't seek the economy of favors. Favors are not exchanged to cultivate and enhance relationships but instead serve as instrumental exchanges to meet immediate needs: protective industrial gear or sustenance for tired bodies. Reinforcing a friendly relationship between autoworker and logistics worker constitutes a possible outcome of favors, rather than their logic. Regardless of the outcome, asking for and doing favors shows the ways in which logistics workers and autoworkers actively seek to maneuver and navigate their day-to-day labor and working conditions.

Figure 4. View of a car body during the Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe when the factory opens its doors to workers' families. The celebration of the Virgin is a few days before Christmas, which is why there are piñatas in the background. Photo by Alejandra González Jiménez.

TIERED LABOR SYSTEM INTERRUPTED

Adrian frequently gave Lupita one of the eight pairs of the gloves he (like all autoworkers) received at the beginning of his shift and offered her the convenience of using his personal locker to store her handbag and jacket, sparing her from using the collective locker designated for all logistics workers on her line. From time to time, he also invited her to join him for meals in the factory's cafeteria—a gesture that helped her save both time and money. If she had brought a lunch to work that day, she could save it for the following day, thus eliminating the need to allocate time that night or at 4 AM to prepare a meal. If she had not brought a lunch, she saved money by not having to spend 30 pesos (US$1.50 US)—a third of her daily wage—for a meal in the cafeteria. For Lupita, who shares her wages with her brother to support their household, such savings are significant.

For Adrian, however, the cost of covering his meal and Lupita's was relatively inconsequential. Thanks to the subsidy for autoworkers, Adrian pays only 8 pesos (US$0.40) for his meal. The combined expense of his meal and the 30 pesos for Lupita's made up about one percent of his wages.[18] Over months of working together, Lupita (who was twenty-eight) and Adrian (who was sixty) developed an *amistad*, defined among workforces as an ambiguous relationship between an older man and a younger woman. *Amistad* can imply friendly relations, relations of solidarity, or romantic relations and is thus suggestive of more intimate relationships beyond the factory shop floor.

Occasionally, Adrian also shielded Lupita from experiencing one of the harshest aspects of being a subcontracted worker: the exhausting, stressful, and occasionally punitive process that logistics workers undergo when seamless production comes to a halt: whenever Lupita found a damaged, defective, or wrongly sequenced auto part, Adrian reported the problem to the facilitator in her stead, which spared Lupita from getting embroiled in the frantic, lengthy, onerous, and weary bureaucratic process that logistics workers endure in the case of problems with auto parts. Remarkably, Adrian wasn't questioned a single time. His action also protected her from autoworkers' animosities caused by disruptions in the production process, because a missing piece can lead to production delays or even a complete halt in production, forcing the extension of work shifts to address contingencies and thus increasing the pressure and stress on autoworkers. To the degree that favors can be measured, this kind of favor is enormous. Therefore, it cannot simply be repaid by sending someone to fetch sodas or food. A favor of this magnitude, Lupita explained to me, makes a male autoworker feel entitled to demand that female logistics workers "go out for drinks with him or let him hug you

[salir a tomar o dejar que te abrace]" or "he can turn you into his *mandadera* [errand person]." Adrian, however, never asked Lupita—or any other logistics worker for whom he has done favors—for anything in return for the numerous gloves, meals, and avoided disruptions.

To an extent, their special friendship explains Adrian's protection of Lupita. Yet understanding Adrian's favors as only the result of their close relationship misses the fact that some of the 7,000 autoworkers work toward creating solidarity with subcontracted workers. Such relationships are articulated through *amistad* and, paradoxically, often include favors—the medium through which the intrinsic hierarchies of a tiered labor system are enacted and accommodated on the assembly lines. Shielding a logistics worker from the harsh consequences of a tiered labor system is possible only because of the hierarchies that exist between the two types of workers in the first place. Simultaneously, this kind of favor interrupts the tiered labor system as its outcome alleviates a harsh aspect of labor flexibility: being the scapegoat for delays in production.

The favor that shields a logistics worker signals an *amistad* with an autoworker. For those outside such relationships, that favor reinforces the sexualized construction of female logistics workers as *ofrecidas*, as *amistad* is often cultivated with married autoworkers. Workforces consider *amistad* an advantageous relationship only for female logistics workers. According to Amelia, a forty-five-year-old logistics worker living with Antonio, a sixty-year-old autoworker, *amistad* gives logistics workers "certain privileges" in the form of protective gear, meal invitations, and protection from conflicts with autoworkers. Her comment rings true with how favors impact logistics workers: what is given directly affects the logistics workers' ability to work without causing too much strain on their bodies or enables them to save money. Yet this description obscures how favors also impact the autoworkers' ability to keep up with the speed of the line. The perception that favors help only subcontracted workers conceals how these exchanges mutually benefit autoworkers and logistics workers alike.

Amistad suggests polyvalent relationships. It exceeds the strategic and instrumental. Autoworkers' generosity cannot be explained only as the result of romantic, intimate relations (or the desire for them). Such explanations would not capture the complexities and nuances of the relationships between autoworkers and logistics workers. They would conceal how their relationships—created, cultivated, forged, and sustained through heavy workloads, stressful moments, and a work system that inherently antagonizes both workforces while creating almost

immeasurable pressure to not fall behind—can also constitute relations of trust and support between unevenly located workforces.

Favors can be acts that, for a fleeting moment, interrupt a tiered labor system. During brief occasions, favors shield logistics workers from a labor system that penalizes those at the lowest echelons of the supply chain of car production. These transient moments reveal a "moral economy" (Scott 1976) forged under extenuating work conditions. Paradoxically, a favor that interrupts the tiered labor system simultaneously reproduces its hierarchies, stressing autoworkers' status as "the untouchables." This affirmation of autoworkers' position serves as a reminder that the economy of favors is inherently the product of, and shaped by, uneven labor regimes.

UNDESIRABLE RELATIONS

Lupita experienced a significant shift in her work routine when she was transferred to Warehouse 4. Relocations are common in logistics work because they offer a quick fix to high turnover rates caused by the mechanisms implementing flexibility and productivity. For logistics workers, sudden transfers entail adapting rapidly to new work areas, tasks, and auto parts. Transfers also create wage delays: despite the use of facial and index fingerprint recognition for clocking in and out of shifts, the payroll office still relies on manual attendance records provided by supervisors. Even though she had worked at Warehouse 4 for two weeks, Lupita's name didn't appear on the attendance list of this warehouse while in Warehouse 27, she appeared as an absent worker.

As she had done in the past, Lupita endured the implications and hassles of yet another transfer. She had already begun the exhausting process of reclaiming her delayed wages by talking repeatedly with her supervisor and her supervisor's supervisor. A couple of times, right after the end of her shift, she walked to the logistics company's office, situated in an industrial park about a kilometer from her warehouse. To reach this office, Lupita had to navigate a heavily trafficked road whose only designated crossing point, a narrow tunnel, was used as a dumpster and restroom—and had nearly zero visibility. Lupita chose instead to cross the road by skillfully dodging fast-moving (and honking) shipping trucks, passenger buses, and cars, pausing in the middle while enveloped in a swirl of dust and exhaust fumes.

Because visiting the HR office meant that Lupita missed the company shuttle bus, she had a prolonged commute home, riding on overcrowded buses and covering her fare while figuring out how to make ends meet until the company

paid her meager wages. Perhaps the only good thing about going to the company's office was that she was spared from working until 11:30 PM; a double shift would have left her just a few hours to sleep before catching the company shuttle bus at 5:15 AM for the next work day. Thankfully, Lupita's supervisor ranked among the few who empathized with the plight of logistics workers and understood that as supervisors they, too, grapple with the harsh conditions imposed by a system built on and perpetuating a chain of hyperexploitative labor relations.

Lupita endured numerous travails involved in the transfer to a new work area. However, there was one aspect of this transfer that she refused to put up with yet *again*: the hassle of establishing new work relationships with a different set of male autoworkers. As she told me, "You don't know what cunning tricks some of these workers have [*no sabes que mañas algunos de estos trabajadores tienen*]." After finding herself indebted to a male autoworker in Warehouse 4 for the favor of reporting a damaged auto-part, Lupita faced pressure to return the favor. The situation quickly turned uncomfortable when the autoworker pestered her to go out for drinks; made unwanted comments about her hair, eyes, and appearance; and kept bringing his body close to hers during the work day. Fed up with the situation—and with enduring this kind of unwanted relationality across various assembly lines for more than five years—Lupita quit her job.

Favors can be a double-edged sword. A favor granted to a young female logistics worker that directly intersects with production has the potential to create a significant debt. Such a favor may generate a form of negative reciprocity in which something is obtained in exchange for nothing—or a favor of greater value is expected in return (Lomnitz 2005; Sahlins 1972).[19] While negative reciprocity accounts for all the asymmetrical exchanges between logistics workers and autoworkers, the exchanges involving material and nonmaterial assistance frequently create a debt repaid along the same lines. However, favors directly intersecting with production are of a different caliber. They can potentially lead to asking for exchanges that go beyond immediate job-related actions. Although the logic of exchanges doesn't revolve around creating and cultivating relationships, favors can inadvertently create undesirable relations.

The harassment and subjection of young female logistics workers in the Mexican car factory is not as extreme as in an Indian steel factory (Parry 2013) or in maquiladoras located along the United States–Mexico border (Wright 2006): in both of those locations, female workers are regularly sexually assaulted or murdered. The female logistics workers I interacted with, on the other hand, are "only" subjected to unwelcome comments about their appearance, unwanted hugs,

invitations to go out for drinks, and conversations about imaginary intimate encounters. Together, the experience of young female workers in all of these settings show the multiplicity of ways in which gender and age intersect with precarious labor regimes on factory shop floors to rekindle gendered hierarchies in tandem with how modes of subjection act upon female workforces.

Not all female logistics workers who experience such forms of harassment have the option of quitting, though. Even Lupita didn't leave her job when she first found herself cornered by male autoworkers. She escaped unwanted relationalities by being transferred to different lines. This feature of flexible labor regimes can remove female logistics workers from undesirable relationships but can also, ironically, place them in new undesirable ones. Her decision to quit her job, on the other hand, removed Lupita from an undersirable relationship—and also liberated her from being the target of malicious gossip (from logistics workers and autoworkers alike) because of her relationship with Adrian. By engaging in *amistad* with a significantly older male autoworker, Lupita enacted the discursive constructions that constitute female logistics workers as devalued hypersexualized instruments of labor—namely, female logistics workers as *ofrecidas* and with *necesidad económica*. In this light, quitting as a tactic counters and refutes such discourses. Paradoxically, it also reproduces the cycle of disposability that characterizes female low-wage employment in the era of precarious labor regimes.

After resigning from her job, Lupita embarked once again on her own circulation on the supply chain of car production. She felt confident about finding another job, whether at Fujikura (a supplier of wire harnesses, sensors, and electronic products) or any other supplier. While she enthusiastically shared her plans with me, I felt a pang of curiosity and couldn't resist asking her a question, even though I knew it might sound silly. I asked Lupita if she had ever complained about being harassed by an autoworker. "*¿Y con quién?* [And to whom?]" she replied. "I told Adrian and other *compañeros*, but . . . to Servimsa? What is this company going to do? Autoworkers are untouchable!"

CONCLUSION

This article has shown how the inequalities and hierarchies constituting a tiered labor system on Mexico's car assembly lines are enacted and reconfigured through favors. By engaging with the sphere of exchange of favors, autoworkers and logistics workers reproduce their status in relation to each other, while simultaneously accommodating the hierarchies inherent to global car production. Unpacking the nuances of labor flexibility illuminates the ways in which gender and

age intersect with tiered labor systems along with the complex and multifaceted relationships between tenured and subcontracted workers. By shedding light on the polyvalent relationships among unevenly situated workers, I expand on Jonathan Parry's (2013) insight into the dynamics of worforces within factory structures. Servitude is inherent in asymmetrical exchanges, because favors enable autoworkers to assert their status within tiered labor systems. The possibility of gender-based subjection and coercion is also latent. Nevertheless, favors also illustrate the diverse forms and meanings the sociality between unevenly situated workforces can take. In extenuating working days, favors serve as a support system for all workforces regardless of their status. Significantly, favors reveal the ways in which workforces assert their agency to navigate and alleviate the working day. Autoworkers' agency also becomes visible in their manipulation of a tiered labor system without directly challenging it. The asymmetrical exchanges constituting the economy of favors benefit workforces, corporations, and, by extension, accumulation.

Focusing on the interactions between workforces within a labor system that inherently antagonizes workers inevitably raises the question of labor politics. In an era of labor precarity, class fragmentation, and the systematic dismantling of unions, labor politics remains a central question in recent labor studies (Kasmir and Carbonella 2014; Lazar 2017). Autoworkers' momentary interruption of a tiered labor system hints at the possibility of solidarity between unevenly located workforces. Although efforts are underway to overcome class fragmentation between autoworkers and logistics workers, the form of such labor politics and its potential remain open questions. Structurally, Mexico's labor code and company policies prevent logistics workers from joining autoworkers' unions and vice versa. Although autoworkers' unions have at times supported the auto-parts manufacturing workers' efforts to form independent unions, this support is heavily influenced by the politics of the union committee, rather than constituting a collective push from autoworkers to stand in solidarity with their fellow workers along the supply chain of car production. In most cases, solidarity with workers in the supply chain remains nonexistent. Autoworkers' union committees and individual autoworkers are more concerned about protecting their hard-won gains than about revamping union politics. As a result, the defense of gains often takes the form of attacking other workforces employed in the supply chain, even resorting to false accusations such as "subcontracted workers earn more than us."

Finally, interrupting logistics workers' harsh working conditions reinforces the status of autoworkers as the "untouchables." This may serve as a reminder that even when a favor intends to protect subcontracted workers, the economy of

favors is constituted by, and unfolds within, a field of power relations. Exchanges enact, reinforce, and further entrench hierarchies and inequalities among workforces. Much like gifts, favors act as vehicles for engendering, maintaining, and reproducing a tiered labor system. In any of their renditions, favors reify inequalities inherent to global car production while concealing how gender and age intersect in constituting labor consent within uneven labor regimes.

ABSTRACT

Inequalities are inherent to capitalism. However, supply-chain production has introduced new dynamics in which workers situated in uneven labor regimes increasingly find themselves working alongside one another. On Mexico's car assembly lines, autoworkers work next to logistics workers. The former belong to a residual workforce shaped by the historical triadic social contract between organized labor, the state, and companies; the latter are among the most precarious workers in the post-NAFTA era. This ethnographic study focuses on how a tiered labor system shapes the sociality between workforces and draws attention to the circulation of favors—asymmetrical exchanges of material and nonmaterial assistance that unintentionally arise from uneven working conditions. By delving into these exchanges, this article illuminates the ways in which gender and age intersect in reconfiguring a tiered labor system. It offers insights into the precariousness of labor flexibility by providing a glimpse into the dynamics on a factory shop floor. [supply-chain capitalism; uneven labor regimes; gender and age; gift-like economies; NAFTA; Mexico]

RESUMEN

Las desigualdades son integrales al capitalismo. Sin embargo, la producción organizada en cadena de suministros ha introducido dinámicas en donde trabajadores situados en regímenes laborales desiguales se encuentran cada vez más trabajando juntos. En las cadenas de montaje de automóviles de México, los trabajadores del automóvil trabajan codo con codo con los trabajadores de logística. Los primeros pertenecen a una mano de obra conformada por el histórico contrato social entre sindicatos, el Estado y las empresas; los segundos se encuentran entre los trabajadores eventuales más precarios empleados en la economía de exportación. Este estudio etnográfico examina como un sistema laboral estratificado le da forma a la socialidad entre los trabajadores. El artículo se centra en los favores—intercambios asimétricos de ayuda material e inmaterial que surgen involuntariamente de las condiciones de trabajo. Al enfocarse en estos intercambios, el artículo ilumina las formas en que el género y la edad se entrecruzan en la reconfiguración de un sistema laboral estratificado. Al ofrecer una examinación de la dinámica laboral en una fábrica, el artículo proporciona una perspectiva de como se vive la precariedad de la flexibilidad laboral. [capitalismo; producción en cadena; regímenes laborales desiguales; género y edad; economía del don; TLCAN; México]

NOTES

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1. This article draws on interviews with logistics workers and autoworkers, as well as on intermittent fieldwork in Puebla, Mexico (2011–2019), including a brief period of working as a logistics worker inside VWM. It is part of a larger project exploring car production in post-NAFTA Mexico.
2. Logistics workers inside car factories are often called "material handlers" (Graham 1995). The other two companies handling auto-part distribution inside VWM are DHL and Schnellecke Logistics.
3. Logistics workers also pick up auto parts from manufacturing sites, distribute them on the assembly lines, and transport finished cars on car carriers to concessionaries, freight trains, and shipping ports. On the lines, they unpack, unwrap, unload, and load materials on dollies, hand trucks, and moving carts. They operate trucks, liftgates, forklifts, and railcars; they also retrieve waste from the lines and sort it with their hands to separate recycling from landfill waste, as well as fold and break cardboard with their bodies.
4. I borrow Alena V. Ledeneva's (1998) term *economy of favors*. In the context of post-socialist economies, the economy of favors discusses ambiguous exchanges that lie between apparent acts of kindness and practices involving bribes, patronage, clientelism, and illicit exchanges (Heanig and Makovicky 2017).
5. Also known as the Toyota Production System. It is celebrated as increasing production and productivity while simultaneously minimizing waste, production costs, and downtime. It was first implemented in Japan (1970s), the United States (1980s), and then Mexico (1990s).
6. See IndustriAll Global Union, "Labour Reform: Mexico's Independent Unions Highlight Progress," May 16, 2019 (accessed December 31, 2021).
7. For SITIAVW labor struggles, see Bensusán and Tilly 2010; Juárez Nuñez 2006; Vanderbush 1998.
8. To be a supplier, a subcontractor must meet VWM's requirement that workforces be unionized. However, unionization doesn't mean compliance with Mexico's labor code.
9. Volkswagen Mexico, "La importante participación de las mujeres Volkswagen," March 8, 2021 (accessed June 6, 2021).
10. Ideas and meanings about female logistics workers' respectability on the lines lie beyond the scope of this paper.
11. "Desire" is also intrinsic to global production (Salzinger 2000).
12. Requesting a criminal record check is not particular to VWM. Rather, it forms part of the securitization of supply chains (Cowen 2014).
13. Logistics workers often ration their calls. In cases where their weekly wages are not paid and they lack credit to call their union represenatives, they borrow their coworkers' phones.
14. These are so-called operating costs. See Chris B. Murphy, "Operating Costs Definition: Formula, Types, and Real-World Examples," Investopedia (accessed March 10, 2022).
15. In 2015 VWM downsized its temporary workforce because of the VW diesel scandal.
16. Before JIT, VWM autoworkers' movements were less restricted (Juárez Nuñez 1998).
17. Unlike logistics workers, autoworkers receive doubled wages for extending a shift.
18. Autoworkers' wages differ based on productivity, efficiency, and attitude toward work. Adrian's wages rank among the highest within this scale.

19. Negative reciprocity captures asymmetrical exchanges driven primarily by self-interest, accounting for instances of intimidation and coercion in exchange relations (Lomnitz 2005; Sahlins 1972).

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