

Can we get a Mexican waiter up in here?

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I have recently returned to New York from Los Angeles. The multiple differences between these two great metropolises on opposite coasts are so well documented that we take them for granted. New York is an extremely international city of intense population density and overwhelming verticality stacked compactly on a series of Atlantic Ocean islands undergirded by a warren of tunnels that is one of the best public transportation systems in the world. Los Angeles, on the other hand, pays tribute to the private automobile with its network of sun-heated highways overarching the strip mall suburban sprawl that vies with the desert, the Pacific Ocean and the mountains for dominance.

The urban landscape of each city dictates the parameters of daily life for their denizens but across the great plains that separate the East from the West coast, there are other, less visible structures at play that determine everyday existence. In my own small life - and all lives are lived in the details - I am happy that New York shops still provide one with plastic bags (Cali is trying to ban them as part of a green initiative). I am thrilled to find amazing books all over Brooklyn put out on the street for any passerby to make off with because, unlike LA, these are streets where people are always passing by. Most importantly, I am ecstatic about jaywalking because no self-respecting NYPD officer will ticket me here where pedestrians own the roads. In La La Land, per contra, you must wait for the walk signal to flash before even setting foot on the crosswalk or you could be fined because zooming cars own the roads and every morning as I would trudge to work this would irk me, this car-centric universe.

Yet as soon as I crossed Wilshire Boulevard, my irritation would dissipate in the face of so much exuberant beauty. In my early morning walk to my office through wealthy Westwood, I would marvel at the diverse architecture of each opulent American dream home that lined my route but even more stunning were their exquisite gardens. The fragrant magnolia trees, the violet bougainvillea, bird of paradise flowers, up the hill and around the bend, humming birds sucking nectar, snails sliming their way out of moist flower beds, the Beverly Hills Courier lying at the end of the drive, not yet collected by the residents ensconced inside, still sleeping perhaps or breakfasting or travelling the world.

In this still and secret early morning world, the only movement came from the Specters, almost invisible because of how they move, cautiously, tentatively, clinging to the shadows, all too aware that they are occupying a space they do not own. Once you see them, you suddenly discover they are everywhere: tending the trees, watering the drought-stricken lawns, making the flowers bloom.

Last week, I encountered one of these Specters in New York. They move differently here because they can blend in with the crowds, flow through the democratic subway, inhabit the public spaces like the public at large. But that is really just an illusion because even though us New Yorkers do not like to think so, there is one pivotal way in which New York and Los Angeles are all too similar, structurally similar. They both rely on a glitzy façade to blind us to an ugly reality. Ironically, that glitz is made possible by the almost invisible omnipresence of the Specters. But if you look, if you really look at what you see every single day hence its invisibility, you will see them and you will see that they are the load-bearing walls without which these cities would collapse.

I made the mistake of trying to talk to one such Specter when attempting to obtain a table at a New York hotspot called Eataly. This place to “eat Italy” is a combination of a humongous, noisy supermarket/super chic mall/subway station at rush hour/the indoors-version of a piazza in Roma. It has four different restaurants where you can place your name on a waiting list for the next available table but in the meantime, you can browse the aisles interspersed between the restaurants to purchase deluxe dishware or gourmet cheeses at outlandish prices. It’s Old World Europe meets New World New York mates with consumerist capitalism with the convenience of fine dining all rolled up in one. However, you should not go there when you’re actually hungry because the average wait time for a table is forty-five minutes even on a Wednesday evening. This was our fatal mistake.

Utterly famished, we loitered hungrily by the wine-guzzlers at the stand-up tables of the “piazza,” hoping a seat at the Il Pesce bar would open up. When one finally did, we lunged at it and then stealthily stole another stool from down the way. We smiled charmingly at the people to the left and right of us so they would scooch over and magically make room for us. Out of nowhere, a Specter quickly removed the soiled plates and lipsticked glasses from the last patron and wiped the counter clean.

“Thank you,” I said to him and he jumped. It seems he thought he was wearing Harry Potter’s invisible cloak and would thus elude detection. “Listen, we’re starving to death. Please can you take our order.” He looked utterly horrified. Specters are supposed to remain invisible. He shook his head, “Oh no, I can’t do that but I’ll call the waiter to come and take your order.” Fifteen minutes later, a harassed-looking hipster appeared. “Hi,” he said through his perfectly-clipped red beard, his voice an octave higher than normal because of his tight skinny jeans, “What can I get for you?” We quickly ordered and when the Specter pushed through the crowds with our plates, we ravenously descended on our food. He turned to clear the counter space next to us and I tapped him on the shoulder, impolitely talking whilst eating, “Sir, may I please order a drink?” He said courteously, “I’ll call the waiter,” but he must have been thinking irritably, “Lady, do you not know the difference between a busboy and a waiter?”

The standard operating procedure for the restaurant business is strictly hierarchical, much like the military. A busboy is there to clean the table and the waiter is there to serve the clientele but why, in this most diverse, cosmopolitan city do we continually turn a blind eye to the Specters who inevitably must be/always are/have to be...Mexicans? Why are all the busboys Mexican whilst the waiters come in a plethora of ethnicities? Why are the Mexicans only allowed to bus tables and never to wait on them? Why are they hidden in the back, in the kitchen, washing dishes, preparing food, cleaning up but never up front? In an Indian, Ethiopian, Greek, Japanese restaurant, you will hear strains of bachata, salsa, merengue emanating from the kitchen because the kitchen is filled with Spanish-speaking Specters, whether Mexican, Salvadorean, Ecuadorean, Guatemalan. They are preparing the Indian, Ethiopian, Greek, Japanese, Italian, Korean food we love to eat but they can never be promoted to waiter even when they speak fluent English, even when they are “legal,” even when they do not have to dwell in the shadows for lack of documents.

Why is that?

How do American gardens grow and American restaurants run? On the backs of Mexicans and other Spanish-speaking migrants. From east to west, north to south, the United States relies on the continual exploitation of these Specters who form the underclass that keeps the cogs of capitalism chugging along by working for pitiful wages that keep our food prices “reasonable.” The standard operating procedure of the US economy relies on an hierarchy of racialized/ethnicized labor. In an economy structured by the codes of invisibility/visibility, undocumented/documentated, the more invisible the worker is, the fewer documents she has to protect her, the more vulnerable she becomes.

Who stands to gain?

Employers benefit from hiring exploited and exploitable labor at appallingly low wages which beefs up their profits. How can insecure, vulnerable employees complain when they are underpaid? Can they unionize to press for a living wage? Do they have any rights at all?

They are not only preparing our food, they are growing it. In *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States*, the physician-anthropologist Seth Holmes demonstrates the racism and ethnic hierarchy that keep Spanish-speaking and indigenous Mexicans in the worst paid and most difficult and dangerous jobs, picking our fruit, breaking their bodies. Even worse, their banishment to the most unpleasant work is justified by a form of racism that naturalizes segregation in the labor market by claiming that Mexicans are “hard-working,” they are short and thus “closer to the ground” so therefore more suited to certain types of work etc. These are ugly justifications of a status quo that benefits some people – citizens, employers, restaurant owners, farmers etc. – while disenfranchising others.

Ironically, the willfully blind who are advocates of draconian migration laws that make this caste of Spanish-speaking Specters “illegal” (hence more vulnerable, more exploitable, more underpaid and overworked) moan about the “invasion” of “illegal” migrants “ruining” America whilst touting American-style capitalism as the best economic system for individual freedom and social mobility. It is currently estimated that there are 11.4 million “unauthorized” workers in the US and xenophobic politicians love to bait their nativist electorates with tales of how they should be deported. Significantly, the Obama administration has deported more undocumented workers than the right-wing Republican Bush regime, an obscene number somewhere upwards of two million (depending on how you categorize the migrant’s return journey). Yet, this is all tree branches and not the forest.

The hardest thing to see is the obvious. The US proclaims itself the world’s oldest democracy which allows each individual to ascend the social ladder unimpeded by her gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, religion etc. etc. But if that is true, why can’t the (documented) Mexican busboy ever be promoted to waiter?

Whilst the migration debate gets stuck on deportations, building walls, keeping immigrants out etc. the truth is that the American labor market is ethnically stratified with better-paying jobs reserved for those with the “right look” and more menial, difficult jobs reserved for those who don’t have the right looks and/or the right papers. Like apartheid South Africa, the US economy relies on a segregated labor market – segregated by race/ethnicity/citizenship/legal status etc.

Just as cities are structured by their highways and subways, so the economy is structurally racist. In the restaurant and agricultural sectors, it is like a modern-day caste system. Opposing comprehensive immigration reform means continuing to tacitly support this economy of exploitation. Ignoring the relations between race/ethnicity and the labor market allows us to turn a blind eye to institutionalized injustice. We see it every day. That’s why we don’t even notice it.

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