

## Chicken Doctors and the Trials of Transcendence

### *Unveiling Gallinera/o Illness Narratives*

**ABSTRACT** This autoethnographic, multidisciplinary illness narrative describes the working conditions of a crew of Latina/o chicken workers (*gallineras/os*) in North Carolina and explores how these laborers respond to and make meaning of their brutal and dehumanizing work. Transporting us back to a pre-pandemic era, this project seeks to demonstrate how systemic conditions, exacerbating health disparities among poultry workers during COVID-19, are, in fact, endemic and will persist after a post-pandemic US society. Engaging with medical anthropological scholarship that investigates the intersections between Latina/o labor, legislation, and health, this project employs structural violence and structural vulnerability frameworks to investigate the network of structures that contribute to poor health outcomes among Latina/o immigrant workers. “Chicken Doctors” explores how disabling working conditions and their attending legislative and occupational policies debilitate Latina/o immigrant workers, and it argues that gallinera/o labor must be understood as a form of illness, as their toil leaves them with daily pains and lasting impairments. The project draws from an interview with the author’s father, who worked as a gallinera/o laborer and manager for over two decades, as well as from the author’s own observations and journal entries written during his work as a gallinera/o. The piece details the incapacitating gallinera/o labor required to move and vaccinate chickens, describes the toxic working environments, and reflects upon the collective strategies for transcendence that gallineras/os employ to survive their conditions. While this project unveils the spirited resilience of gallineras/os, who make up an essential link in the poultry industry chain but are less conspicuous than their meatpacking counterparts, it especially seeks to expose the network of injustices surrounding their labor. **KEYWORDS** disability studies, illness narratives, immigrant labor and labor reform, Latina/o studies, Latinx environmentalisms

### **PREFACE: (PRE-)COVID ILLNESSES & THINKING BEYOND A PANACEA**

The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us of our universal mortality as humans, but it has simultaneously exacerbated pre-existing racial and ethnic inequalities that have impacted minoritized communities prior to COVID-19, especially in relation to health equity and job security. Notably, because they comprise a great part of the essential workforce, Black and Latina/o people’s chances of exposure to the COVID-19 virus have been higher than other populations.<sup>1</sup> Among those hospitalized for COVID-19, Fatima Rodriguez et al. found that Black and Latina/o people comprised over half of patients<sup>2</sup>

1. Fatima Rodriguez et al., “Racial and Ethnic Differences in Presentation and Outcomes for Patients Hospitalized with COVID-19: Findings from the American Heart Association’s COVID-19 Cardiovascular Disease Registry,” *Circulation AHA*, (November 2020): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1161/CIRCULATIONAHA.120.052278>.

2. Rodriguez et al., “Racial and Ethnic Differences,” 12.

and furthermore observed that of the total 1,447 patient deaths in their study, 53.1% occurred among Black and Latina/o populations.<sup>3</sup> These groups, especially Latinas/os, represent a substantial portion of the essential workforce in the meatpacking industry,<sup>4</sup> which is the largest agricultural sector in the US, employing approximately 525,000 workers in an estimated 3,500 US facilities. Tracing COVID-19 infections and related deaths among meatpacking workers in 23 states from April 2020 to May 31, 2020, Michelle A. Waltenburg et al. found that at least 17,358 meat and poultry processing workers contracted the virus and 91 of them died from complications related to COVID-19.<sup>5</sup>

In North Carolina, the site of my Latina/o immigrant labor narrative, essential workers in the meatpacking industry have been particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 transmission. Victoria Boulabasis reports that by May 28, 2020, North Carolina ranked third in the US for number of COVID-19 cases among meatpacking workers. By that point, there had been 28 COVID-19 outbreaks at meat-processing plants across eighteen counties, totaling approximately 2,146 confirmed cases among this workforce composed of large numbers of Latina/o immigrants.<sup>6</sup> When as recently as February 9, 2021, Samantha Kummerer reported that more than 8,000 COVID-19 cases had been confirmed in North Carolina, Kummerer also revealed that more than half of those cases were traced to meat and poultry processing facilities.<sup>7</sup>

Some corporations were criticized for failing to adopt proper protocols to protect their workers and for not informing employees about COVID-19 infections among their fellow co-workers. Siler City's Mountaire Farms waited 4–6 weeks before disclosing to its employees that three of their fellow workers had tested positive for the virus.<sup>8</sup> Employees of Mount Olive's Butterball plant similarly complained that Butterball failed to inform them when their fellow employees were sick with COVID-19. One worker disclosed that even when Butterball knew about his virus infection, the company waited for almost two weeks before providing employees with masks.<sup>9</sup>

Meatpacking companies' lack of transparency reveals the role legislation and government institutions have played in protecting production over workers', and the public's,

3. Rodriguez et al., "Racial and Ethnic Differences," 11.

4. Charles A. Taylor, Christopher Boulos, and Douglas Almond, "Livestock Plants and COVID-19 Transmission," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the US* 117, no. 50 (December 2020): 31707, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2010115117>. Among meat-processing workers, people of color comprise 80% of the labor force; and 42% of all livestock processing laborers are immigrants.

5. Michelle A. Waltenburg et al., "Update: COVID-19 Among Workers in Meat and Poultry Processing Facilities—United States, April–May 2020," *US Department of Health and Human Services/Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 69, no. 27 (July 2020): 888, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32644986/>.

6. Victoria Boulabasis, "As COVID Races Through Mountaire Farms Poultry Plant, Workers Deemed Vital Feel Dispensable," *North Carolina Health News*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.northcarolinahealthnews.org/2020/05/28/as-covid-races-through-mountaire-farms-poultry-plant-workers-deemed-vital-feel-dispensable/>.

7. Samantha Kummerer, "Advocates Push for Worker Safety Rules as COVID-19 Complaints Increase," *ABC*, February 9, 2021, <https://abct1.com/covid-19-coronavirus-nc-workplace-safety-i-team-investigation/10323973/>.

8. Boulabasis, "COVID Races Through Mountaire Farms."

9. Victoria Boulabasis, "North Carolina Poultry Plant Workers Say Butterball Isn't Protecting Them from COVID-19," *Civil Eats*, May 3, 2020, <https://civileats.com/2020/05/03/north-carolina-poultry-plant-workers-say-butterball-isnt-protecting-them-from-covid-19/>.

health. NC State law, as of June 15, 2020, only required a limited number of businesses (schools, day care centers, and congregate living facilities) to report outbreaks to local health offices while only encouraging others to report them. This approach, then, relied on a self-reporting that undermined tracing efforts and served the economic and production interests of companies and the federal government under then President Donald J. Trump.<sup>10</sup>

In response to what he cited as a threat to the US “economy and critical infrastructure,” on April 28, 2020, Trump signed an executive order demanding that meat and poultry processing facilities remain in operation during the pandemic.<sup>11</sup> The rhetoric Trump employs in this executive order flirts with presenting the continuation of meat processing as a patriotic endeavor. In his critique of “unnecessary closures” of processing plants, he observes that they “threaten the continued functioning of the national meat and poultry supply chain, undermining critical infrastructure during the national emergency.” The order reflects a primary concern in economics, production, and consumption at the cost of, though under the guise of concern for, human health. These profit-driven policies have had wide impacts on human health beyond meatpacking plants. One study found that meat-processing plants not only increased the rate of COVID-19 transmission among employees but, in fact, impacted communities as far as 93 miles (150 kilometers) from plants.<sup>12</sup>

Wilkesboro’s town manager, Ken Noland, provides some insight into the rippling effects of Trump’s executive order on local NC governments and institutions. In regard to the outbreak of 570 cases of the virus among one Tyson plant’s employees, Noland admits to competing interests. “The hard part is it’s a balancing act,” he states. “We’re trying to protect the community. We’re trying to protect the Tyson team members. But we are also under the mandate for the federal government to do everything we can to keep that Tyson plant operating to provide food for the nation.”<sup>13</sup> According to Noland’s institutional perspective, or at least rhetoric, the logics of the executive order present food production as both a patriotic and moral concern, so that making choices between ensuring the continuation of food production on a large scale and protecting workers’ health are evenly measured ethical concerns. Such logics have led to the calculated exposure of these “essential workers” and the rapid spread of COVID-19 among them in order to, as Trump suggests in the executive order, “ensure a continued supply of protein for Americans” during our pandemic.

10. Lynn Bonner, Chip Alexander, and Adam Wagner, “Most NC Businesses Don’t Have to Report Outbreaks as COVID-19 Cases Rise,” *The News & Observer*, June 14, 2020, <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/article243546057.html>.

11. See Donald J. Trump, “Executive Order on Delegating Authority Under the DPA with Respect to Food Supply Chain Resources During the National Emergency Caused by the Outbreak of COVID-19,” *WhiteHouse.gov*, accessed November 20, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-delegating-authority-dpa-respect-food-supply-chain-resources-national-emergency-caused-outbreak-covid-19/>.

12. Taylor, Boulos, and Almond, “Livestock Plants,” 31711.

13. Keri Brown, “570 Workers Test Positive for Coronavirus at North Carolina Poultry Plant,” *NPR*, May 21, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/21/860545442/570-workers-have-coronavirus-at-north-carolina-poultry-plant>.

Economically driven legislative approaches to COVID-19 have contributed to the wide suppression of information related to COVID-19 contraction among meat-processing workers. These policies have created an environment that nurtures the discrimination and exploitation of undocumented, Latina/o immigrants for whom containment is but one of many intersecting structural inequalities they are having to navigate under pandemic conditions.<sup>14</sup> Latina/o poultry processing workers in NC have reported issues related to paid sick leave and job security.

Although some companies such as Tyson have declared they provide sick leave for workers who contract the COVID-19 virus,<sup>15</sup> what that paid leave looks like varies, and immigrant workers are particularly vulnerable to unjust company policies.<sup>16</sup> One Butterball employee reports having received paid leave for only five days when recovering from the COVID-19 virus.<sup>17</sup> Another claims Mountaire Farms only offered 16 hours of paid leave though the company had promised to pay her a full week's sum (40 hours) after a doctor recommended she convalesce for two weeks.<sup>18</sup>

The incompatibility between reasonable accommodations for these Latina/o employees and companies' lack of support for their convalescence reveal how employers' violations of Latina/o immigrant laborers' rights transcribe themselves onto Latina/o bodies as disease or disability. As medical anthropological research on Latina/o immigrant workers has shown, however, the life-threatening conditions that Latina/o immigrants have experienced during our pandemic are not unique to a COVID-19 era.

In "Chicken Doctors," the autoethnographic piece that follows, I examine practices and systems that disable gallineras/os to demonstrate how health disparities impacting Latina/o immigrants during our pandemic are not just immediately relevant but endemic. In "Chicken Doctors," I trace the constant assaults on Latina/o poultry workers' rights and health by focusing on poultry workers, whom I refer to as gallineras/os, who vaccinate and move chickens in farmhouses throughout North Carolina and southern parts of

14. See Bouloubasis, "COVID Races Through Mountaire Farms." According to Bouloubasis, the Department of Health and Human Services, as well as Mountaire Farms, is unwilling to disclose the number of Mountaire plant workers who have tested positive for COVID-19; See also Lewis Kendall, "Revealed: Covid-19 Outbreaks at Meat-Processing Plants in US Being Kept Quiet: Testing Has Found Positive Cases at North Carolina Facilities, but Officials Refuse to Release the Information," *The Guardian*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/jul/01/revealed-covid-19-outbreaks-meat-processing-plants-north-carolina>. Kendall reveals that likewise, in Burke County, a home to Case Farms, the Burke County Health Department has refused to share information about where people with COVID-19 infections work, despite having data on the topic.

15. See "Nearly 600 Workers from North Carolina Tyson Chicken Processing Plant Test Positive for COVID-19," *CBS News*, May 21, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/tyson-chicken-processing-plant-north-carolina-coronavirus-test-positive/>; See also Brown, "570 Workers Test Positive for Coronavirus."

16. "I Aimed for the Public's Heart, and . . . Hit It in the Stomach," *Chicago Tribune*, May 21, 2006, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2006-05-21-0605210414-story.html>. It seems prudent and necessary to verify Tyson Foods' claims surrounding work leave and other related workers' rights. According to this article, by the early twenty-first century, "Tyson Foods has led the way in cutting wages, reducing benefits and breaking labor unions. As the industry leader, it sets the standard that other companies must follow." An outcome of this is that a "typical meatpacking worker now earns wages that are 24 percent lower than that of the typical factory worker."

17. Bouloubasis, "Workers Say Butterball Isn't Protecting Them."

18. Bouloubasis, "COVID Races Through Mountaire Farms."

Virginia.<sup>19</sup> These laborers make up an essential but less conspicuous sub-group within the poultry workforce and reveal related but distinct issues of health and workers' rights from their processing counterparts.

Paul Farmer's use of structural violence to study health disparities offers a useful framework for understanding the conditions that impact Latina/o immigrant workers' health. Building on Johan Galtung's use of structural violence, which exposes the ways systems create inequality,<sup>20</sup> Farmer uses structural violence to show how such "inequalities are embodied as differential risk for infection and, among those already infected, for adverse outcomes including death."<sup>21</sup> Indeed, a focus on immigrant workers' rights cannot be separated from their embodied experiences of the structural violence they endure as working-class, mostly undocumented, people of color in the US.

In "Chicken Doctors," gallineras/os' bodies, especially in relation to the hazardous working conditions and routine labor they perform, and their discursive and embodied responses to such environments, play a primary role in helping offer a sustained critique of the working conditions, employer practices, and medico-legal systems that threaten gallineras/os' health. By exploring how disabling working conditions and their attending legislative and occupational policies, in conjunction with discriminatory biomedical practices, debilitate Latina/o immigrant workers, "Chicken Doctors" builds on the research that critical medical anthropologists have conducted on the relationships between Latina/o immigrant work, oppressive systems, and health disparities.<sup>22</sup>

I supplement my use of structural violence and draw from critical medical anthropologists to employ a structural vulnerability framework to understand the location of gallineras/os in their work, socio-political, and medical environments. While structural violence as a concept in medical anthropology is invested in materiality rooted in "class

19. These workers call themselves "galliner[as/]os, which literally means "chickens" and can be roughly translated into "chicken workers." I use the term *gallineras/os* with the feminine "a" in front of the "o" to acknowledge that women too have worked in this industry, though during the time range I focus on my mother was the only woman on the crew. I acknowledge that a fuller picture of gallinera/o experiences would include a strong focus on my Mom's experiences, and that of other women, as a gallinera. Such a project would help complicate the collage of glimpses I have represented here and would perhaps even challenge us to critique some of the approaches of gallineras/os toward labor as well as my interpretation of it. Women's gallinera/o narratives would push us to consider, for instance, women's views toward the lack of bathrooms at most chicken houses and their thoughts of working among primarily cisgender men. I plan to help construct my Mom's gallinera narrative in a future project.

20. Paul Farmer, "An Anthropology of Structural Violence," *Current Anthropology* 45, no. 3 (June 2004): 307, <https://www-journals-uchicagoedu.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/doi/10.1086/382250>.

21. Farmer, "Structural Violence," 305.

22. See James Quesada, Laurie Kain Hart, and Philippe Bourgois, "Structural Vulnerability and Health: Latino Migrant Laborers in the United States," *Medical Anthropology* 30, no. 4 (2011): 339–362, <https://doi.org/libproxy.lib.unc.edu/10.1080/01459740.2011.576725>; See Carla G. Castillo, "What the Doctors Don't See: Physicians as Gatekeepers, Injured Latino Immigrants, and Workers' Compensation System," *Anthropology of Work Review* 39, no. 2 (2018): 94–104, <https://anthrosource-onlinelibrary-wiley-com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/doi/abs/10.1111/awr.12149>; See Angela Stuesse, "When They're Done with You: Legal Violence and Structural Vulnerability among Injured Immigrant Poultry Workers," *Anthropology of Work Review* 39, no. 2 (2018): 79–93, <https://anthrosource-onlinelibrary-wileycom.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/doi/full/10.1111/awr.12148>; See also Alayne Unterberger, "'No One Cares if You Can't Work': Injured and Disabled Mexican-Origin Workers in Transnational Life Course Perspective," *Anthropology of Work Review* 39, no. 2 (2018): 105–115, <https://anthrosource-onlinelibrary-wiley-com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/doi/abs/10.1111/awr.12150>.

oppression and economic injustice” to identify “socially structured patterns of distress and disease across population groups,” a structural vulnerability framework privileges subjects’ positionalities in relation to a web of structural violence.<sup>23</sup> James Quesada, Laurie Kain Hart, and Philippe Bourgois explain that “the vulnerability of an individual is produced by his or her location in a hierarchical social order and its diverse networks of power relationships and effects,” including “the interface of their personal attributes—such as appearance, affect, and cognitive status—with cultural values and institutional structures.”<sup>24</sup> An emphasis on structural vulnerability allows for the critique of notions surrounding agency that fail to account for the constraints on people’s life options.<sup>25</sup> In the context of Latina/o immigrants, structural vulnerability rejects ideas that would blame Latina/o people for their inequalities.<sup>26</sup> Thus, by identifying the “sources and effects of social inequality,” structural vulnerability seeks to place the onus on society at large to use available resources and political power to intervene in mitigating structural violence against Latinas/os.<sup>27</sup> Quesada, Kain Hart, and Bourgois call attention to how structural vulnerability within clinical settings, in particular, can help “counteract the rhetoric of blame that legitimizes the punitive retraction of access to health care and promotes the further criminalization of undocumented Latin[a/]o immigrants.”<sup>28</sup> “Chicken Doctors” employs a structural vulnerability framework to illuminate the ways that gallineras/os, as Latina/o working-class, undocumented immigrant workers, experience violence in their working environments at the hands of their employers, physicians, and legislators. This violence routinizes injuries (and denies their right to proper recoveries) and disease as facts of gallinera/o life.

As a project invested in reducing the structural vulnerability of gallineras/os, “Chicken Doctors” locates gallineras/os both in their work places and in medical settings to unveil the network of structures that threaten gallineras/os’ health. In addition to contributing to existing literature on Latina/o laborers and structural vulnerability, the attention to the various spaces gallineras/os inhabit, as well as to gallineras/os’ strategic responses to those spaces, offers labor advocates and biomedical actors opportunities for making concrete interventions that could improve the quality of gallineras/os’ work life and health.

I was compelled to publish “Chicken Doctors” as COVID-19 spread in the US and threatened to exacerbate the structural violence gallineras/os endure *en las gallinas*.<sup>29</sup>

While North Carolina law allows for undocumented workers to receive COVID-19 vaccines, and many have been encouraged to do so after being deemed “essential workers,” vaccine rates for Latinas/os are troublingly low, with NC Latinas/os receiving vaccines at

23. Quesada, Kain Hart, and Bourgois, “Structural Vulnerability,” 341.

24. Quesada, Kain Hart, and Bourgois, “Structural Vulnerability,” 341.

25. Quesada, Kain Hart, and Bourgois, “Structural Vulnerability,” 342.

26. Quesada, Kain Hart, and Bourgois, “Structural Vulnerability,” 345.

27. Quesada, Kain Hart, and Bourgois, “Structural Vulnerability,” 350.

28. Quesada, Kain Hart, and Bourgois, “Structural Vulnerability,” 352.

29. Throughout “Chicken Doctors” I use the phrase “en las gallinas,” roughly translated to “in the chicken houses,” to borrow from and honor gallineras/os’ description for their work in chicken farms. Stated differently, “en las gallinas” simply refers to *work in the chicken houses* and/or the conditions in such spaces.

approximately 2.5 percent.<sup>30</sup> As Heidi Larson points out, this vaccine hesitancy stems, in part, from a distrust of authorities and the biomedical institutions that disseminate them.<sup>31</sup> This trend seems particularly relevant for Latina/o communities, who throughout the past four years have been targeted by Trump’s anti-immigrant campaign and have felt, more than ever, the threat of deportation. Latinas/os’ apprehension to receive a potentially life-saving vaccine for fear of deportation offers yet another example of how anti-immigrant laws and discourses are detrimental to Latina/o health with potentially deadly consequences.<sup>32</sup>

As the pandemic continues, I wonder what gallineras/os, who lack access to unemployment benefits and stimulus checks and are among this group less likely to vaccinate for fear of deportation, will do should they contract the virus? What kind of medical care will they receive, and what accommodations, if any, might their employer offer? What happens to them and/or their families should the virus debilitate them? This latter question is especially important when we consider that immigrant workers are dispensable once they are unable to ensure the chain of production as required by profits.<sup>33</sup>

The content of “Chicken Doctors” comes from a synthesis of an interview with my Dad, memories from personal experiences, and excerpts from my summer 2012 journal. In the narrative, I include passages from my journal in which I note observations about the job conditions of gallineras/os and express my concerns for these laborers as well as my admiration for them. I italicize the excerpts to distinguish them from the rest of the narrative, and though they are only slightly different in some regards from other content, I wish to highlight them with italics because they display the emotional aspect of my experience among gallineras/os. In their urgency and chaos, the excerpts reveal not what I now think but what I then felt.

In form, my essay is indebted to Gloria Anzaldúa’s hybridized *Borderlands/La Frontera*. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa interweaves diverse forms (e.g., essays and poetry) and employs several methods (autobiographical, theoretical third-world feminist frameworks, and literary devices) to embody the very *mestizaje*—the ethno-racial, gendered, cultural, and linguistic hybridity—on which her work theorizes.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, “Chicken Doctors” utilizes varied genres and methods to offer multiple dimensions of gallinera/o experiences. The hybridity and genre-crossing of this text helps me conceptualize and present gallinera/o illness in its various mosaic forms. At times, though

30. Christian Green, “Low COVID-19 Vaccination Rates for Hispanic North Carolinians: Cultural and Linguistic Barriers Hinder Vaccination Access for Hispanic Individuals,” *Carolina Public Press*, March 4, 2021, <https://carolinapublicpress.org/43064/low-covid-19-vaccination-rates-for-hispanic-north-carolinians/>.

31. Heidi Larson, “Politics and Public Shape Vaccine Risk Perceptions,” *Nature Human Behavior* 2, no. 5 (May 2018): 316–316, <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/docview/2370465400?pq-origsite=summon>.

32. Quesada, Kain Hart, and Bourgois, “Structural Vulnerability,” 340. Quesada, Kain Hart, and Bourgois, observe that health care legislation in 2010 “founded on a rhetoric of ‘health care for all,’ expressly barred undocumented immigrants from accessing coverage, officially reaffirming their exclusion from public services and basic legal rights.”

33. Stuesse, “When They’re Done,” 79.

34. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Second Edition (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999).

technically an autoethnographic piece, “Chicken Doctors” resembles muckraking journalism, drawing inspiration from Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, as it details the dehumanizing conditions that define chicken workers’ toil.<sup>35</sup>

At other moments, borrowing from my disciplinary background in Latina/o literary studies, “Chicken Doctors” takes on the form of creative nonfiction in order to offer a gallinera/o illness narrative that allows for the exploration of rhetoric and performance in describing gallinera/o lives. When it morphs into a creative nonfiction piece, “Chicken Doctors” begs readers to become witnesses in a violent drama of labor and pain. It thrusts witnesses into gallinera/o work spaces so that they may experience the suffocating air and dust as the drama of Latina/o work and life unfolds before their eyes. It attempts to draw out the symbolic meanings of gallinera/o labor and voices in the process of representing the extraordinary lives of seemingly ordinary, and even socially invisible, Latina/o immigrants.

### CONCEIVING OF CHICKEN DOCTORS

My parents worked for Fowler Poultry, a subcontractor in North Carolina, for more than two decades, and my father was a crew manager during most of that time until December of 2012, when my parents established their own egg-laying chicken farms. While working with Fowler, Dad coined the phrase “chicken doctors” to describe himself and fellow gallineras/os because their primary duties involved vaccinating chickens.<sup>36</sup> On the one hand, this sobriquet captures the humor with which Dad and his co-workers coped with their difficult labor conditions. On the other hand, the connotation of “doctors” casts gallineras/os as experts and emphasizes the value of and pride they take in their hard work.

“Chicken doctors” also exposes the paths from the chicken houses to medical spaces by drawing links between gallinera/o labor and its implications on human health. Like medical doctors, gallineras/os perform an essential role in protecting public health. Wearing masks and white suits, they skillfully inoculate thousands of chickens per day, which the US public consumes.<sup>37</sup> As importantly, chicken doctors’ roles, much like medical doctors, place them in vulnerable positions where they are exposed to on-site health hazards daily that threaten to transform them from chicken doctors to acute and chronic patients.

35. Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985). In this novel, Sinclair illustrates how the capitalist socioeconomic structure ruling the US at the beginning of the twentieth century contributes to the dehumanization of laborers; production of unsanitary and unhealthy food; and, moral corruption of society. Among the novel’s primary concerns are the dangers of the meatpacking houses for the workers, which range from exposure to chemicals to unventilated and dark rooms that may cause various diseases, among them tuberculosis.

36. A couple of things to note: Firstly, when I say chickens, I also mean to include roosters. Secondly, I have changed the name of the company in order to protect the workers.

37. “USDA Poultry Production DATA: May 2015,” National Agricultural Statistics Service, United States Department of Agriculture, accessed November 20, 2020, <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/nass-poultry-stats-factsheet.pdf>. There were as many as 233,700 poultry farms in the US according to a 2012 Census of Agriculture, and in 2014, the poultry industry in the US produced 238 million turkeys, 8.54 billion broilers (chickens raised for meat production), and 99.8 billion eggs for combined sales of \$48.3 billion.



As validating and clever as Dad’s label for gallineras/os may be, however, “chicken doctors” is merely a euphemism. The brutal work gallineras/os carry out is neither glamorous nor lucrative. Gallineras/os routinely vaccinate or load onto and unload from eighteen-wheeler trucks 20,000 to 25,000 chickens on any given work day. They work five days a week, but during some periods they work consecutive six-day weeks for months. Most of the gallineras/os are undocumented immigrants from Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala. They are paid low wages—averaging approximately \$21,000 per year before taxes. Though taxes are deducted from their paychecks, they will not receive social security benefits when they retire. They have no health insurance.

By thirteen years old, I worked among gallineras/os in the summers, and more recently, I spent the summers of 2011 and 2012 working alongside them. I have experienced the difficult working conditions to which gallineras/os are exposed, and I have seen the acute and chronic illnesses they experience from the routine bodily traumas they endure. I understand gallinera/o work as contributive to and as a state of inhabiting chronic illness because it submits gallineras/os to constant pain, observable in the bruises, deep cuts, or swollen and disfigured joints of gallineras/os.<sup>38</sup> I suspect, however, that gallineras/os have not seen the full spectrum of their work’s consequences on their overall health. Anthropologists have noted the relationship between people’s immigrant status and workplace hazards and poor health.<sup>39</sup>

Alayne Unterberger’s 20-year-plus longitudinal study of Mexican-heritage immigrant workers in Florida offers a useful model for appreciating the lasting and disabling impacts of gallinera/o labor. Unterberger illustrates how systemic inequalities—e.g., no workers’ compensation, no health insurance, anti-immigrant policies, poor oversight and enforcement of work safety conditions—leave immigrant workers vulnerable to hazardous conditions and disempower them from accessing the medical care that would help them alleviate their morbidities.<sup>40</sup> Thus, many immigrant laborers, some as early as their 30s and 40s, are unable to continue working after sustaining multiple disabling injuries over the span of their working lives.<sup>41</sup> Gallineras/os endure constant musculoskeletal traumas that remain untreated and set them on a course toward physical disability. Additionally, their ongoing exposure to harmful matter and chemicals makes them vulnerable to future epidemiological concerns.

## DAD TELLS ME

When I inform Dad I am completing a project that considers how people experience illness, he is quiet on the other side of the phone, and in that silence, I can sense his hesitation to participate in my interview. When he asks, uncomfortably, “one’s personal

38. Dad suffers from arthritis and Mom from carpal tunnel syndrome; one of my brother’s fingers is permanently bent.

39. Unterberger, “No One Cares,” 106.

40. Unterberger, “No One Cares,” 109–110.

41. Unterberger, “No One Cares,” 111.

illness?" he confirms it. I wonder what type of illness in particular he feels uneasy talking about, but for fear of losing him, I move on.

Although quite loquacious most of the time, Dad is rather private in some ways, especially surrounding health. When he was recently diagnosed with colon cancer, he refrained from sharing news until he learned he had been misdiagnosed and was, in fact, cancer-free. "I don't have cancer," he announced with great relief and to my surprise. This is one of numerous instances in which my parents have remained silent about medical concerns. I think Dad in particular uses silence to deny and cope with illness.

After spending minutes persuading Dad he, not my younger brother, is the right person with whom to discuss gallinera/o labor, I commence the interview with a broad question I hope will enable Dad to speak freely on the subject.

"Tell me about your experience working in the chicken houses," I say to him.

"What do you mean?" he asks.

"What comes to your mind? What do you think of when you consider your work with the chickens?"

"Just chickens? You mean what I think about my work with chickens?" he asks unsure.

"Yes."

"When I think about the chickens—much gratitude at the opportunity to get the job," he responds more confidently. "The chickens helped me live and take care of you kids. I was able to educate you from that money. I am grateful to have gotten the opportunity to do that job and to have been able to perform it."

Part of me wants to validate Dad's response. Having benefited from and witnessed his and Mom's incessant labor, I respect his point of view. I also believe him to be an authority on his work, not only because he worked en las gallinas for decades but because he is a remarkable manager and extraordinary laborer. In fact, I would say he is a leading expert in his line of work. Despite this, however, Dad's positive response to a question that for me is charged with a great deal of emotion over the pain and suffering of gallineras/os grates at my sensibilities. In that and other moments in our conversation, I realize the tension between the disabling systemic gallinera/o labor processes and gallinera/o structural vulnerabilities I wish to investigate and Dad's need to create a story of triumph that helps him preserve a narrative of health.

Dad's response to my question about the pains of gallinera/o work follows his pattern for coping with illness. He wants to emphasize success rooted in ability and will over debilitating structures and working conditions:

It is not easy work. It is not difficult to know how to do it, but it is very strenuous. But for people who have a lot of heart and love for what they do, it is possible. One has the necessity. Unfortunately, we are not educated. Not everyone can do it. Many people cannot do it. But one had the luck of wanting, wanting, wanting. It is a job of much sacrifice. The job times are not stable. . . . Sometimes you get up really early and then

have to work really late. But the sacrifice is worth it. Right now I am looking at my chicken houses. This is why I believe the sacrifice is worth it. I sacrificed myself, and I achieved it.<sup>42</sup>

Dad briefly mentions the circumstances that relegated him to a blue-collar job, that he is among the “uneducated,” but he ultimately treats socioeconomic constraints as obstacles that can be overcome by sheer will and talent. When he speaks of his “luck of wanting, wanting, wanting,” and asserts that “not everyone can do it,” he wishes to celebrate his physical strength and ability to persevere in the face of adversity. The son in me wants to shake Dad’s hand firmly and congratulate him for his efforts. That version of myself wants to tell the world that my parents and other gallineras/os like them are, indeed, amazing people. I also want to offer my Dad space to celebrate himself when I know that structural violence has given him and other gallineras/os little choice but to struggle for survival. What is more, structural vulnerability breeds symbolic violence that leaves marginalized people to perceive their “depreciated status” and any associated “scarcity” or “insecurity” in their lives as “natural and deserved.”<sup>43</sup> Dad’s incessant optimism has enabled him to resist symbolic violence and flourish in whatever limited ways he has. During my work alongside him, Dad, at his more than fifty years of age, faced brutal work with cheer. In moments when I felt as though I wanted to cry from exhaustion and agony, he boasted and performed impromptu pushups to motivate the crew. He never showed the pain I know he felt.

Conscious of structural vulnerability, however, I tend to resist discourses that promote exceptionalism because they blame “failures” on vulnerable populations without critically accounting for the disabling systems that prevent people from thriving in their environments.<sup>44</sup> This other me sees how Dad’s assessment of his conditions plays into the worn-out, frayed American Dream story he and Mom, alongside many other immigrants, have embraced. My parents even named their egg-laying houses the “American Dream Farm” and paid extra to have the ends of both houses painted red and blue in honor of the US flag, which has become for them the symbol of their prosperity. I value my parents’ work ethic and celebrate their individual successes, but I also know that as US citizens, they have been immune to deportation (and to some degree immune to anti-immigrant harassment policies). Moreover, with the significantly higher salary Dad received as crew manager, my parents were able to build wealth in ways that are unfeasible for other equally hard working and resourceful gallineras/os.

## I AM HEALTHY

In medical terms, Dad’s story falls within accounts of what Arthur Frank refers to as “restitution” narratives.<sup>45</sup> According to Frank, such accounts respond to society’s

42. Bruno Ramírez, “Working en las Gallinas,” interview by Geovani Ramírez, May 3, 2013.

43. Quesada, Kain Hart, and Bourgois, “Structural Vulnerability,” 342.

44. Quesada, Kain Hart, and Bourgois, “Structural Vulnerability,” 342–350.

45. Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 77.

demands for stories about recovery by reassuring narrators and readers that though (once) sick, ill people will recover their health.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, ableist insistence on health as the only acceptable form of human existence suppresses ill and/or impaired people and governs the logics by which we live our lives or plan for the future. Alison Kafer critiques ableist utopian visions that unproblematically imagine a future without illness and impairment and therefore erase ill and impaired people from existence.<sup>47</sup> Frank and Kafer's assertions may be useful in helping us reflect on and check our own roles in promoting ableist narratives about human hopes, and, to some degree, they capture Dad's experience. Dad's insistence on the reality of the American Dream through his restitution narrative underscores his socioeconomic and physical "survival" of his life en las gallinas and offers hope for his future economic prosperity and health.

Now that he works for himself, he tells me, "I am very happy. I work comfortably. . . . I used to take medicine for cholesterol and high blood pressure because of the stress from that job. Now, nothing. I am healthy. I feel great." Dad likes to relegate his previous medical issues to the past and imagines his fulfilled American Dream, manifested in those blue and red painted chicken houses, as concrete evidence of his cure. Perhaps he feels better in small ways, but when he tells me, "I feel younger than when I was young," I hear the coughing fits that shadow his laughter, and I think with trepidation, as I laugh along with him, of the hazardous conditions to which Dad *and* Mom exposed their bodies for over twenty years.

Dad has to tell his restitution narrative in order to cope with the past and its lingering effects, and he suppresses mysterious illnesses I distinctly remember him having. He used to get unexplained headaches and dizziness, but when I ask him about them, he responds, "Me? No. I did not get sick."

"Yes, Dad. You used to get headaches and dizziness all of the time. Remember?" I insist.

"No. I never got sick. My hands hurt, but that wasn't because of the chicken houses." Dad here refers to his arthritis, a topic that he is slightly more comfortable discussing.

"Did you get arthritis before or after you began working en las gallinas?"

"I don't know. My hands hurt a lot when I banged them on the cages and grabbed the chickens sometimes, but it was not the chickens that did it."

I am struck by Dad's belief in two distinct explanations for the cause of his arthritis. In one theory, he attributes his arthritis to genetics. "It is just that my family has arthritis. My Apa (pop) had arthritis, and so did all of his sisters. Two of them died from arthritis. It runs in my family," he says convinced. But with the same conviction he proposes an alternative explanation grounded in his culture's folklore.

46. Frank, *Wounded Storyteller*, 77–78.

47. Alison Kafer, "Debating Feminist Futures: Slippery Slopes, Cultural Anxiety, and the Case of the Deaf Lesbians," in *Feminist Disability Studies*, ed. by Kim Q. Hall (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2011), 222.

“It is just that I used to wash my hands. I should not have washed my hands,” he declares.

“Your hands, Dad?” I ask gently, so as not to give him any impression that I doubt his explanation.

Nevertheless, he hesitates and says with apprehension, “Well. That’s what they told us when we were kids.”

“Aha, please tell me about that,” I say, expressing my genuine curiosity.

He believes me and with more conviction continues, “You’re not supposed to wash your hands. My Apa taught me that it is dangerous to wash oneself when one is hot because our bones are hot at that time.” I do not understand this and want to know more, but I know inquiring further will either distract Dad from his point or reveal my skepticism.

“After work we used to wash our hands, arms, and face to clean the dust off of ourselves to look more presentable. Especially on Fridays when we went to cash our checks. I was young then. I used to be so strong. I felt that not even bullets could go through me,” he laughs with a cough. “I didn’t listen,” he adds.

Perhaps Dad finds comfort in thinking we are responsible for the health of our bodies rather than helplessly vulnerable to diseases or the hazards of *gallinera/o* labor. I wonder, too, whether in the absence of definite answers for an illness, a multiplicity of explanations helps make the illness or condition seem less mysterious?

“Okay, Dad. I don’t know why, but I remember you having dizziness and headaches. Do you really not remember?”

“Na-uh.”

I remember.

Dad sought advice from multiple doctors, but when they could not diagnose his conditions, he sought answers in the folk medicine of his culture and solicited my maternal grandmother, Abuelita Carmela’s, help. A self-proclaimed *curandera* (healer), Abuelita Carmela expertly performed *limpias*, cleansing rituals, on Dad by rubbing mint leaves on his face and arms, as if wiping away filth with a wet cloth. “Buuuoh. Buuoh,” Abuelita dramatically exhaled as she worked to expel the disease from Dad’s body. She would then rub an egg, as if taking a bar of soap to kill off any bacteria, over his face, arms, and hands.<sup>48</sup> “If the egg cracks, it is because you were harmed by bad spirits,” she would say. Other times, the diagnosis was that “you were sick because someone is very envious of you.”<sup>49</sup>

48. I remember this process vividly because Abuelita continues to perform these same rituals for “*mal de aire*,” or “bad air.” Though this concept, sometimes referred to as *mal de viento*, can be understood as the outcome of exposure to wet and cold nights, for my family, “mal de aire” has signified a contact with bad spirits.

49. David Hoskins and Elena Padrón, “The Practice of Curanderismo: A Qualitative Study from the Perspectives of Curandera/os,” *Journal of Latina/o Psychology* 6, no. 2 (2018): 79–86, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/lat0000081>. Curanderismo is a holistic syncretic healing practice, inherited from the blending of Aztec and Spanish cultures (80), that “heals individuals with respect to physical and psychological needs through the

“No. Your *mother* did get sick sometimes, but that had nothing to do with the chicken houses,” Dad assures me. “I took her to the doctors a lot of times. They told her it was nothing.” And then an all-to-familiar narrative begins to unfold. “You were too young to remember, but I took your mother to Maryland, and a *curandera* cured her. There are people who become envious of those who are blessed by God with a good job and a happy marriage. She was being bewitched. But that was not because of the gallinas. *Brujas* (witches) hurt her, but that has nothing to do with the gallinas,” he says reassuringly, more so to himself.

I understand why Dad wants to maintain an illusion of health. He experienced decades of physical trauma, chemical exposure, and dust inhalation.<sup>50</sup> Yet, I realize that Dad’s healthy denial of illness ignores the chronic illness of the larger gallinera/o community. His restitution narrative is more easily possible because while he feels the lingering effects of gallinera/o work, he no longer experiences the intense acute pains of the gallineras/os in the same way; however, gallinera/o illness continues to affect gallineras/os who currently work and will work for Fowler Poultry and other similar companies.

#### I HAVE SEEN FOR MYSELF

I want to expand the scope of focus beyond Dad’s illness experience because this story is not only his or mine but more appropriately that of the hundreds of gallineras/os who have, continue to, or will work for Fowler Poultry and other companies like it. The trajectory of gallineras/os’ “careers” undermine any notions of the “American Dream.” Most of the gallineras/os who worked under Dad’s management, and now under my brother, have worked for Fowler Poultry for over a decade, and almost all of them have done so for at least five years.<sup>51</sup> Though like Dad these people “sacrifice” themselves and uniformly demonstrate “a lot of heart and love” for what they do, their structural vulnerability prevents them from improving their socioeconomic circumstances. These gallineras/os are uneducated immigrants with few occupational choices in an increasingly hostile US environment. In North Carolina, state law prevents immigrants like them from acquiring even driver’s licenses much less a loan to start a business. While Fowler

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integration of rituals, religion and spirituality, and the natural and supernatural” (79). Its strong focus on spirituality rather than primarily on clients’ symptoms starkly distinguishes it from traditional Western medical practices (86). According to Hoskins and Padrón, many Latinas/os in the US rely on non-Western medicine to treat their physical and psychiatric health concerns, with Mexican-heritage people in particular relying on Curanderismo (79–80). These curandera/os are able to address the spirituality of many Latina/o clients and understand their world views in ways that those practicing strictly traditional Western medicine are unable to. In doing so, Curandera/os make much-needed health interventions in the lives of Mexican-heritage and other Latina/o people.

50. I am aware of my own exposure en las gallinas during my formative years, but it does not compare to the decades of working hazards many lifetime gallineras/os face.

51. Some of these workers are around my age, and we grew up together. I remember that while I was in high school, they were sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years old working in the gallinas. I went off to college, and they remain there.

Poultry pays low wages, it is nevertheless one of the best job options gallineras/os have because it offers them stable work. My cousin Che is now in his forties and began working en las gallinas when he was about eighteen years old.<sup>52</sup> He has been an underpaid laborer for longer than Dad worked for Fowler Poultry. Che represents the gallinera/o experience more accurately than Dad. He symbolizes the past, present, and future gallineras/os who, mostly undocumented, have very little choice but to remain en las gallinas at the cost of their health.

Che and I are close. We pick up where we left off every time we see each other. Without exception, we greet one another with a cheerful “are you alright?” When we say it, the “are you” becomes “youuuuure,” and we drop the “al” from “alright” so that the phrase sounds like, “youuuuure right.” Che coined this phrase when he once noticed my fatigue at work and inquired if I was okay. I laughed and said, “Shit. No.” Che laughed too, and after that we used “youuuuure right” to communicate many thoughts and feelings. “Youuuuure right” has come to mean “hello,” but it more importantly (depending on the context) says, “are you okay?” “let me help you,” “we’re gonna be alright,” “we’re almost done,” “we’re doing really well,” “let’s kick some ass. This is nothing.” These moments are necessary to keep up the morale en las gallinas.

Elaine Scarry notes the difficulty of communicating pain and the limitations of language to express it, but despite these linguistic obstacles I intend for the descriptions I provide about the nature of work en las gallinas to illuminate the severity of the suffering gallineras/os chronically feel and prompt us to consider the lasting repercussions they may experience as a result of their routine exposure to multiple health hazards.<sup>53</sup> I understand gallinera/o work as conducive to and a state of inhabiting chronic illness. The pain los gallineras/os experience at work every day is torture that often times begins as early as 3 a.m. and lasts, on some occasions, as late as 6 p.m. from five to six days of the week. The physical trauma they endure during work permeates their muscles and joints in the ways the chicken smell penetrates their skin, so that once gallineras/os complete their work, they carry their lingering pains with them.

I recognize the limitations of my experiences as well as my tangential membership within the crew of gallineras/os. They work year-round en las gallinas for years, when I have worked there only summers. The gallineras/os have multiple nicknames, which they have earned through years of hard service. Some of them decorate their coveralls with artistic depictions of their nicknames. I am documented Geo, with the borrowed coveralls who reads and writes for a living and who, come August, gets to wave goodbye to them, so that each time I come back, despite knowing me, their faces seem to ask, “will he be any good?” Yet regardless of my limited experience as a gallinera/o, I have suffered along with these people. We have sweat and hurt and laughed together, and I speak about their labor through our shared experiences.

52. To protect gallineras/os, I have changed their names.

53. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.



FIGURE 1. Geovani in Mask in North Carolina, circa 2003. Photo courtesy of Kyra Ramirez.

#### BLUE STAINS SHINING THROUGH

The stench is nauseating, like drinking coffee on an empty stomach. Decades of dirt, feathers, feces, ammonia, and decayed wood shavings permeate the air. The dust and heat make it difficult to breathe, and every breath of this miasma stings the lungs. Dust rises like smoke and feathers fall like snow or float like vultures in the sky. Thousands of feathers move in a frenzy. The chickens flap their wings uncontrollably and emit shrill cries. Some make desperate attempts to fly out of this hell, but they only travel a few feet in the air before they are back on the ground. All are on watch, shifty-eyed, ready to take flight at a moment's notice. On either side of this long, narrow tunnel there are cages inside of which chickens make desperate attempts to escape. They all try to climb up at the same time, stumbling over each other, landing on one another—they look like they are drowning. The scene is like a stampede gone wrong. Some of these white cotton balls lie at the bottom, helpless, suffocating. Suddenly a determined, lucky one reaches the apex of the cage. It sits atop the bar of the cage, confused, wondering how it got this far and fearful of going back down there where the others scream for help. Gaining its balance it poises itself to take flight when suddenly a quick brown hand grabs it in the air. The chicken kicks its legs, scratching at the arm of the captor. It flaps its strong wings with vigor against the hand but in vain as it speedily disappears through an assembly line. The machine is made of flesh, six moving parts dressed in white. They wear thick, loose coveralls, hair nets, and face masks. You can see their eyes if you look hard enough. Two are bent over picking up chickens and passing them to the one standing up in the middle between them. He vaccinates the right wing and passes it to another located in front of him who then vaccinates the left side of the chicken's wing. This one lifts the chicken for yet two others, each of whom tags the chicken's front—one on the leg and



the other on the breast. They drop the chicken where they are standing, on the other side of the net.

Around their waists, the wingers wear belts that have wooden boards at the front with holders for the medicine they are using to vaccinate these chickens. They dip the needles and their fingers into the blue medicine before each inoculation. Their hands have blue stains that run from the index finger to the thumb.

The heat is worsening. The machine is slowing down. Time to refuel it. “*Vamos. Vamos,*” says one of the mysterious masked workers. He urges them to hustle. “*Amonos. Amonos*”—“*amos amos*” echo some of the others. One cries a war yell as a challenge to the other assembly line. And they are off. The machine moves at dangerous speeds—enough to break it. Amidst the screams and jokes, the laughter, the fast movement of parts, the human conveyor belt mistracks, and a winger spears himself with the two-pronged needle. Maybe he winces at the initial shock or lets out a sound that indicates the subtle pain of the sting. Maybe someone hears him and asks, “*te picaste?*” and he might either say “*si*” matter-of-factly or just nod. But this is the extent to which the others or the winger himself will discuss or acknowledge the incident. “*Vamos. Vamos, que nos ganen,*” someone says, urging for more speed, begging for more adrenaline to kick in, hoping to boost morale. The immediate concern is getting out of this heat box as fast as they can.

Except for the handful of newer farmhouses, the chicken houses we work in lack proper ventilation, which means that on summer days the temperature reaches above 100 degrees Fahrenheit inside the houses. The layers of dust, chicken feces, ammonia, and feathers accumulated over decades in these houses rise like smoke in a fire when the thousands of chickens stir violently. At these moments we have to squint to reduce the amount of particles that enter our eyes, and yet, inevitably, some goey clumps of mud still attach to them, and some hardened ones remain there when we wake up the next day. Our eyes are itchy and red. The dust finds its way around the thin, flimsy facemasks we wear so that we can spend several minutes blowing out black, soot-like residue from our noses. I fold a hair net inside the mask to filter out more particles, but when my sweat accumulates in the hair net, the soaked hairnet clings to my nostrils with every breath I take, making breathing hard as I suck in some of my sweat. It . . . is . . . suffocating. I learn to breathe out of the corner of my mouth or between my teeth, but even that is not enough to make breathing comfortable. My journal relates how I learned to breathe in the least toxins while taking in as much air as possible:

*You have to breathe with your mouth wide enough to get more air but not so wide that you can swallow the millions of dust particles (dirt, feathers, chicken shit, feed, wood shavings, chemicals, ammonia).*

Ironically, at times, some gallineras/os temporarily remove their masks to breathe better. I have tried that myself. The relief is immediate, but after each time, I pay for my relief with a sore throat and chest congestion. I wonder about the health effects of breathing in this particulate matter with or without masks.

## DAILY LABOR & HAZARDS: LOADING/UNLOADING

Moving entails loading chickens onto coops in eighteen-wheeler trucks. The coops are formed partly by the trucks and also by removable steel mesh boxes. The mesh boxes have three sides and are open at the front and top, while the trucks have metal swinging doors that make up the front of the coops. The door opens from the bottom. The job requires us to load four chickens (two pairs) at one time. As we pick up the first chicken by one wing, we do so with our thumb and index finger. Then, with a twist of the wrist, we use the remaining three fingers to swoop up the second chicken and then press those fingers hard against the bottom of our palms to hold the second chicken in place. We repeat the same process for the other hand. If we count each movement required to pick up a chicken, assuming that there are 20,000 chickens to move rather than 25,000, the gallineras/os repeat this process an average of 1,666 times in a single day. This is a conservative number because after we load the first truck, two gallineras/os depart to unload the chickens at the other end. When we load our pairs, we inevitably bang our knuckles,



FIGURE 2. Geovani and Moving Truck in North Carolina, circa 2003. Photo courtesy of Kyra Ramírez.

fingers, and forearms against the metal doors. The pain is shocking. By the end of the first house of 10,000 chickens, my hands and arms are stiff and swollen. My hands lack the same dexterity as when we began. We end with cuts, bruises, and ripped nails. My wrists, shoulders, lower back, and knees ache. The soles of my feet throb by the end of the day from the hours of standing. My hips also hurt from the many abrupt movements I have made while working.

Unloading has its own risks, and it requires a different kind of strength and set of skills from those of loading. Che and Machiel have been the unloaders for thirteen years. Che, at 5'6", is 180 pounds of muscle, and Machiel, no more than 5'4" and 140 pounds, prides



FIGURE 3. Geovani and Che Loading Chickens onto Truck in North Carolina, circa 2003. Photo courtesy of Kyra Ramirez.

himself on being like a “machine,” as the gallineras/os call him. They make unloading seem easy as they pull out the bottomless mesh boxes just enough to let out the majority of the chickens while taking care not to pull the mesh boxes all of the way out. I, however, am not used to unloading, so when I try it myself, I realize how dangerous of a process it is. The mesh boxes are approximately four feet long, three feet wide, and fourteen inches high. These metal boxes weigh over twenty pounds on their own, not counting the forty or so chickens that are in the coops. As I pull out these unwieldy boxes, I feel an uncomfortable pull in my shoulder sockets and my elbows and wrists, as well as my lower back. Unlike the swift movements of Che and Machiel, I jerk out the boxes piecemeal, despite my efforts not to be outworked. The scariest part of unloading for me is the possibility of pulling out the whole metal box and dropping it on some part of my body. Even when I perform the task very deliberately, I still drop the boxes a few times over the course of the summer.

I am concerned for Che and Machiel because although they are skilled and take precautions to prevent injuries, they are nevertheless human and liable to make errors that could cause them debilitating, if not fatal, injuries. The coops are stacked in columns of four, the top one of which measures upwards of 7 feet in height. Che or Machiel crawls up on the top of the truck, sets up so that he is facing the chicken coop and holding onto the truck with one hand. With his other hand he grabs a handle at one end of the box, pushes off with his legs (while he lets go from the truck his other hand), pulls at the metal box now with both hands, and finally lets go. His no more than 5 1/2-foot frame lands on the ground, the chickens pour down like falling marbles, and the metal box sits more than two and a half feet above threatening to fall directly on his head, staying in place by only a couple of inches. In the following journal entry, I reveal more observations about the hazards of unloading and note some minor injuries I sustained:

*Moving is dangerous. One could probably break a finger or hand when pushing the chickens through the metal swinging door of each chicken coop. . . . There is definitely a lot of bruising while loading, especially around the forearms on which the metal door falls. I have multiple bruises on my arms. My little war scars. I've cut myself various times . . . there was dirt and chicken feces on my cut. . . . My scratches come from things I hit (cages, coops). . . . I got caught on various things today at work. Sometimes it's the wood planks. Other times it's the random nails on the wood planks or the sides of doors. In some houses, the points of the nails stick out of the wood planks about an inch or more so that it is very easy for one's overall to get caught on it or for one to get a sharp cut on one's shins or knees when walking between the wood planks and the truck when running the chickens.*

## VACCINATING AND PICKING UP CHICKENS

The gallineras/os perform multiple functions on vaccinating days. I am a chicken picker, which means that I spend the majority of two and a half hours (or more per house) bent over, working on a human assembly line. I pick up chickens and hand them to the “right-winger” who then has to pass them to the “left-winger” to vaccinate; the left-winger passes



FIGURE 4. Picking up Chickens for Loading onto Truck in North Carolina, circa 2003. Photo Courtesy of Kyra Ramírez.

the chickens to the “breaster” and the “legger.”<sup>54</sup> To begin, we first corral all of the chickens to one end of the house by waving sheets of plastic. This leads to what the gallineras/os like to call “snowing” because among the dark dust that rises, thousands of white feathers twirl, dance, and float in the air around us, tickling and sticking to our sweaty, grimy faces and dusty eyelashes.

Once we corral the chickens, we set up two nets that span across the width of the chicken house. The larger net covers the height of the house as well as its width and only has openings at each end. We set up a metal cage (not a box but foldable square segments

54. These are not technical terms but rather translations of the labels the gallineras/os use to identify the various positions. Vaccinating gallineras/os are identified by the part on the chicken’s body that they are responsible for vaccinating. The pickers are the exception to the rule. Though their title, like the vaccinators, also comes from their relationship to the chickens’ bodies, they are named by their specific actions: that of picking up the chickens for vaccinating.

attached by rope) at each of the openings that we use to corral the chickens for closer proximity and efficiency. The crew divides into two groups of six members each and works on each side. The breasters and leggers, who are the last in the assembly line to receive the chickens, stand on the other side of the net where they simply let inoculated chickens drop on the vaccinated side. We place the other smaller net between the larger net and the end of the house to control the number of chickens that we corral in one area in order to prevent them from piling up and suffocating one another.

As picker, my job is to maintain a fast and smooth flow of chickens for the right-winger. That means that as I hand the right-winger a chicken, I must already have one in my other hand to replace the one that I hand off to him and so on. This is easier to do toward the beginning, but after an hour and a half of mostly bending over, my body, despite my determination, begins to give up on me. I feel like I am suffocating. The heat and wet mask are stifling, and we have worked with an intensity that, as Dad describes it, makes us feel like “one’s heart is going to stop.” I hear and feel the violent pulses of that intensity in my temple, and the torturous pain that keeps pulling and grinding my back exacerbates my sense of suffocation. As my lower back pain intensifies, I feel as if I have suffered blows to the chest that have forced the air out of my lungs. My torso also feels like it is separating from the rest of my body.

I relish those couple of minutes when I get to stand up because we are done with a batch of chickens and must corral some more into the cage. In the immediate moment that I stand after bending over for a while, I feel something like a cool liquid released in the affected area of my back. The liquid sensation relieves my pain for a few seconds. Then it evaporates, and the sharp pain returns to my lower back. But although it is fleeting, I look forward to those drips of cool relief, and I revel in their pleasure for the seconds they alleviate my pain. It is hard to make sense of the interesting paradox, but my lower back feels numb even as I feel excruciating pain. “Youuuuure right?” Che asks me as he massages and karate chops my lower back, temporarily healing my aching body and flagging spirit with his affection despite his own suffering. I look forward to that too.

Che is a left-winger. He can do all the jobs, but he and Rigo, who is our only natural left-hander, are our left-wing specialists. Both the left and right wingers use two-pronged needles to inoculate the chickens in the center of the wing web, a thin, triangular fleshy area located toward the front underside of the chicken’s wing. You can identify the wingers by finding the blue stains that run from their index fingers to their thumbs. I have stung myself with these blue-tipped two-pronged needles, but except for an annoying itch, my body never showed any symptoms of their impacts. And yet I wonder, what are these blue droplets doing beneath the skin of the wingers over time? Where do they travel to? Che’s hands are always stained with this pretty blue medicine, which moves along like an ever-morphing tattoo.

#### ALTERNATING PAINS AND FINDING THE SWEET SPOT

I only perform the right-wing task a few times because I lack the coordination to keep pace with the pickers. At my speed, we are set back hours in a day, and I realize after

a handful of attempts that those hours will add up as I learn to navigate the position and build the muscle to perform my task efficiently. When I apologize for my clumsiness as a right-winger (and what could be perceived as laziness), my team reassures me that I will “get it”; that is, that at some point my body will become one with the flow of the pickers, the right-winger, and the chickens as I go through the process of dabbing the needle in the blue ink, receiving the chicken from the picker, lifting it and vaccinating it in that small triangle of its wing as my hand moves to pass it off to the left-winger smoothly and in the “sweet spot.”<sup>55</sup>

During my brief stint as, arguably, the most incompetent right-winger in the history of Fowler Poultry, I learn, contrary to what I had assumed, that vaccinating wings is not easier than bending over for hours; it simply redistributes the greatest intensity of pain to other parts of my body. As a winger, I feel piercing burning and tightening that runs from my hands to my shoulders. My neck stiffens and aches more severely than when I work twelve-hour days hunched over a computer. The lateral movements and odd but necessary spreading of my legs in order to receive chickens from two pickers takes a toll on my hips. In the case of the left-wingers, having to raise chickens for the breasters and leggers tears at their shoulders. Although I have never been a breaster or legger, Dad reminds me that their shoulders, arms, hands, and wrists ache after the thousand repetitive motions of reaching for and grabbing chickens and lifting a heavy vaccine gun to inoculate them. These motions are carried out 20,000–25,000 times per workday by this twelve-person group.

#### FROM CHICKEN DOCTORS TO PATIENTS

I hesitate to admit I have never been a breaster or legger because of my instinct for self-preservation. These positions have proven most dangerous to the gallineras/os because when they accidentally inoculate themselves, they do so with medicine, for salmonella or bursal disease, that as Dad puts it, “is made for animals, not people.” Growing up, I witnessed and heard about the severity of accidental inoculations with these specific vaccines.<sup>56</sup> There was the time when Nino waited twenty-four hours to seek medical care

55. The gallineras/os rely on the collective movement of their bodies to avoid pauses during these complex processes. They also rely on all members’ precision, not simply when vaccinating but also in how they deliver chickens to one another. The handoffs of the chickens (from the pickers to the right-winger, the right winger to the left-winger, the left-winger to the breaster and legger who vaccinate simultaneously) require a great deal of cognitive and physical energy because each member relies on receiving chickens in as stable and appropriate a position as possible. There is a sweet spot for where each type of position (how high/low and in what direction) should receive the chickens, and there is also the expectation that the handoff will be smooth, defined not only by delivering the chicken in the sweet spot but also ensuring that the chicken be still and facing in a particular direction, and that the area by which the receiver will grab the chicken be unobstructed. Despite my best efforts, after hours of working as a picker (and in my limited experience as a right-winger), I had difficulty placing the chickens in the sweet spot as my muscles ached and my shoulders felt they were splitting. What is more, I had difficulty keeping the chickens still as they struggled to free themselves with every part of their bodies while I worked to control my intractable trembling hands and twitching fingers.

56. According to my father, who continues to receive updates on gallinera/o lives through my brother, the current crew manager, and his conversations with other gallineras/os, the same vaccination system exists as of March 2021.

and then required an emergency operation on his hand. He felt intense pain when working for a long time after his surgery. In this case, surgeons saved Nino's life, but other gallineras/os have experienced inadequate treatment that reflects the lacuna in medical intervention for gallinera/o-related injuries.

I remember Deme and I waiting in the lobby of our small, local hospital. Deme cups his left hand with his right as if partaking in communion. He does not complain, but I can see by the gravity of his expression—when he is usually smiling from some joke or mischievous thought—the severity of his pain. “*Duele?*” I ask him, already knowing the answer. “*Sí.*” He injected himself with either the salmonella or bursal vaccine. We wait . . . for too long . . . first in the emergency room lobby and then on stiff chairs outside a row of “patient rooms” partitioned by curtains where a sheriff—or police officer—harasses us in nearly perfect Spanish. The wait is not worth the brief visit with the doctor. He inspects Deme's hand and asks him to return should his condition worsen. This marks the general pattern of treatment for cases when the gallineras/os run to the emergency room after inoculating themselves.

Like Deme, Mom and another gallinero, Chewy, sought medical care after vaccinating themselves, but they were sent back home only to return later in the evening with infections. Both were hospitalized for three days.

As we discuss these incidents, Dad's illness narrative gives way to his critique of the local biomedical community's failure to respond appropriately to gallineras/os' job-related injuries. “They did not do their jobs right,” Dad says. “One takes the bottle and shows it to them and tells them how much of the medicine was released into one's hand. They sent Chewy home and then his arm got infected,” he continues. Dad reminds us not all people have the opportunity to tell their illness narratives, even in hospitals, and he helps show the dangerous consequences of local health providers' suppression of gallinera/o patient narratives in particular.

Rita Charon urges medical providers to become more attuned to what patients leave unsaid.<sup>57</sup> She suggests that “clinicians who develop this habit will, through their resultant curiosities, learn medically salient facts about the lives and health of their patients.”<sup>58</sup> Why must doctors, to whom gallineras/os give the essential context for their illness, wait until these gallineras/os undergo infections before they are able to treat them? What would chicken doctor–medical doctor interactions look like if medical providers asked gallineras/os about their own knowledge surrounding the evolution of these sorts of conditions? What do gallineras/os need (to say or hear) most in these moments?<sup>59</sup>

57. Rita Charon, *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness* (Oxford: Oxford Up, 2006), 115–116.

58. Charon, *Narrative Medicine*, 116.

59. Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good et al., “The Culture of Medicine and Racial, Ethnic, and Class Disparities in Healthcare,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Inequalities*, ed. Mary Romero and Eric Margolis (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 397–399. DelVecchio Good et al. attribute medical health care providers' tendencies to ignore patients' narratives to “the culture of medicine,” which is “exemplified in the medical gaze and its underlying ideologies and political economy of what constitutes legitimate medical knowledge, bioscience, and appropriate medical decision making” (399). According to DelVecchio et al., “the medical gaze . . . becomes the dominant knowledge frame through medical school,” instilling in medical students “that time and efficiency are highly prized” and that patients most worthy of medical health care providers' care are those “who are willing to become part of the



Granted, this inadequate response to gallinera/o inoculations could indicate the biomedical community's relative unfamiliarity with this kind of acute sickness, but to what degree might Dad be right in his view that the local biomedical community is apathetic toward the working conditions of poor immigrant people? If this is the case, we might ask, in what ways might biomedical policies or even individual health care practices be complicit in racialized and class-based forms of structural violence against gallineras/os and immigrants more generally?<sup>60</sup>

Dad has his hunches. He blames the local medical community for their complicity with “the insurance” (I assume workers’ compensation) in mistreating gallinera/o patients. With saddened irritation, he charts out the structural vulnerabilities of gallineras/os in the biomedical sphere:

They [Mom, Chewy, any injured gallinera/o] have to return to work after eight days. You don’t recuperate by those eight days. The insurance people make it only eight days. The doctors say that you can go back to work. They don’t know about the work. One wants to tell them that it hurts and that you don’t want to go back, but they don’t listen. They don’t care. They don’t know what it is like. . . . We’re also Mexican. If you don’t return in eight days (unless the doctor says you are not fit to work yet), you don’t get paid. The doctor doesn’t know the magnitude of the work that we have to do. Imagine, when I once injected myself, I felt a discomfort in my finger for three years.<sup>61</sup>

Dad’s critique gestures toward a network of medical and legal agents and structures that promote, create, and exacerbate gallineras/os’ structural vulnerabilities. In his tirade, he exposes how medical recommendations can serve the economic interests of business owners over the well-being of working-class immigrant patients. Indeed, he identifies doctors’ roles in suppressing injured workers’ illness narratives through indifference, skepticism, or gaslighting. In so doing, he places biomedicine in a web of legal violence,

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medical story they wish to tell and the therapeutic activities they hope to pursue” (397). Where does this place gallineras/os? In what ways might they be “problem” patients? What about their conditions and positionality might disturb—or challenge—the medical culture as described by DelVecchio Good et al.?

60. DelVecchio Good et al., “The Culture of Medicine,” 398. Since the 1970s, many medical schools in the US have strived to teach medical health providers “cultural competence” and “social medicine,” and they have encouraged their students to participate in programs that serve working-class and underserved minority patients. Despite these efforts, however, racial and ethnic disparities in medical treatment in the US continue. DelVecchio Good et al. suggest that part of what is missing from medical training toward cultural competence is a lack of self-reflection on the “culture of medicine.” They observe that students are rarely offered the opportunity “to critically analyze the profession and institutions of care to examine how treatment choices, quality of care, and research practices are shaped; or how medical culture may produce processes that evolve into institutional racism or aversive racism in clinical practice.” We could infer from DelVecchio Good et al.’s suggestion that doctors are always already working within a system that has the potential to produce or enforce institutional racism. Thus, a culturally and racially sensitive approach toward working with patients would involve a genuine interest in learning about patients’ views toward and questions about their conditions *and* concerted efforts at avoiding discriminating practices toward and assumptions about patients. These practices would further require committed medical health providers to reflect honestly about the nature of their interactions with patients and the motivations that drove the care they provided patients.

61. I also remember Dad experiencing debilitating chills and fever for days after his accidental inoculation, and he has expressed having felt tenderness in that area for over a year.

immigration law's enactment of "physical, structural, and symbolic violence that constrains the life prospects of immigrants,"<sup>62</sup> against undocumented gallinera/o workers.

Dad's experiential observations of medical personnel's dismissal of gallineras/os' injuries and pains reflects a wider pattern of physicians' disregard for injured Latina/o laborers' experiences. In her investigation of workers' compensation as a medico-legal system that heavily relies on doctors to assess the validity of patients' workers' compensation claims, Carla Castillo has found that biomedicine works to undermine workers' claims.<sup>63</sup> Castillo discusses how such a medico-legal system conditions physicians to suspect those seeking workers' compensation as "malingerers"<sup>64</sup> and "relies on physicians to interrogate injured bodies of low-wage immigrant workers" rather than focus on treatment.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, Castillo reports that "medical literature has historically characterized migrant workers as somatizers or hypochondriacs"<sup>66</sup> and some physicians believe Latina/o workers are likely to exaggerate their sense of pain.<sup>67</sup> These stereotypes of Latina/o immigrant workers, coupled with doctors' suspicious needs to prove that injured laborers are feigning illness, are detrimental to the health of already vulnerable immigrant workers whose injuries, in some cases, can be debilitating.

Angela Stuesse's own investigation of the medico-legal workers' compensation system helps offer some context for Dad's attention to the systematic ("they") discrimination against immigrant gallineras/os ("We're also Mexican").<sup>68</sup> Relying on the concept of legal violence, Angela Stuesse investigates how workers' compensation "produces multiple vulnerabilities that intersect in ways that limit immigrant workers' return to wellness."<sup>69</sup> In her study, Stuesse uncovers the myriad of tactics and systems—including threatening injured workers with deportation, reporting them to authorities on counts of fraud and identity theft, and dismissing them from work—unscrupulous employers use to deter injured immigrants from claiming workers' compensation or to squash the efforts of those who nevertheless pursue workers' compensation.<sup>70</sup> More immediately, such exploitation of legal violence exacerbates injured workers' pain and silences them. In the long term, these inequities and forms of structural violence manifest in the disabilities injured workers embody, which, as Castillo shows, later prevents them from being able to effectively work, if at all.

Gallineras/os do not get sick leave for anything outside of these more serious work-related injuries. They commonly work through colds and flus or even after serious car accidents. The latter was Che's experience at one point when someone crashed into his car and broke his hand. Dad's critiques stem from his knowledge that doctors, in such

62. Stuesse, "When They're Done," 83.

63. Castillo, "Doctors Don't See," 94.

64. Castillo, "Doctors Don't See," 97.

65. Castillo, "Doctors Don't See," 95–97.

66. Castillo, "Doctors Don't See," 99.

67. Castillo, "Doctors Don't See," 99–101.

68. In this moment, Dad is overgeneralizing over the ethnic makeup of gallineras/os who include not only people of Mexican-heritage descent but also people from Central America.

69. Stuesse, "When They're Done," 84.

70. Stuesse, "When They're Done," 84–87.

cases, are the only people with the clout to protect gallineras/os from aggravating their injuries or at least spare gallineras/os from excruciating pain soon after serious accidents.

What recommendations for convalescence might doctors develop if they set aside their ethno-racial and class prejudices to focus primarily on the health and recuperation of injured gallineras/os? What if physicians took seriously gallineras/os' descriptions of their pains after accidental inoculations and sought to collaborate with gallineras/os for a plan to recovery? As importantly, in this case, how might doctors work to prevent long-term and debilitating illnesses by helping gallineras/os understand their workers' rights?<sup>71</sup> I pose this rhetorical question to (and make this request from) physicians even while I acknowledge that, as Castillo and Stuesse show, the workers' compensation system allows for the discrimination of immigrant workers.<sup>72</sup> To my knowledge, gallineras/os do not consider claiming workers' compensation or even know that such a claim would, technically, be an option for them. How might doctors improve the health outcome of gallineras/os, and other immigrant workers, and impact the medico-legal system if they worked to advocate for injured patients rather than interrogate or dismiss them?

#### A SPOONFUL OF SUGAR

I write with urgency in my journal about the cruel nature of gallineras/os' work and express feeling troubled over their seemingly inadequate response to their conditions:

*They experience all kinds of hazards and appear oblivious to them. They take nails and hammer from the bucket that at one point contained rat poison. The hazards of the wood planks when unloading, the pull of the coops when unloading! Being exposed to chemicals when cleaning the boots and washing the nets (cancer); being exposed to the dust and feathers and shit. Eating with all of the grime from working because there is only water provided but no soap. Working in the chicken houses has its fun parts and camaraderie, but there are many hazards!!! Most to which the boys seem oblivious.*

Along with my intended sympathy, my notes reveal an underlying frustration at what I perceive as gallineras/os' obliviousness to their circumstances.

I was gravely mistaken.

In my unreflective and theoretical search for justice during this journal entry, I inadvertently and implicitly disregarded gallineras/os' structural vulnerability as undocumented Latina/o laborers.<sup>73</sup> I now realize gallineras/os understand full well—better than I—the injustices of their circumstances, but they also know from experience that,

71. "Rivera v. Trapp 519 S.E.2d 777: N.C. Ct. App. 1999," Casetext, accessed March 19, 2021. [https://casetext.com/case/rivera-v-trapp-1/case-summaries?PHONE\\_NUMBER\\_GROUP=P](https://casetext.com/case/rivera-v-trapp-1/case-summaries?PHONE_NUMBER_GROUP=P). In *Rivera v. Trapp*, the N.C. Court of Appeals ruled that undocumented employees who are injured while performing their work are entitled to workers' compensation benefits.

72. See Stuesse, "When They're Done," 84–86; See also Castillo, "Doctors Don't Sec," 99–101.

73. I acknowledge that minoritized ethno-racial, gendered, and disabled communities (and others) have been marginalized regardless of their citizenship in the US. However, by pointing out gallineras/os' lack of citizenship, I wish to emphasize that they have very little recourse, including saying anything on the matter, especially when we consider the threat of deportation.

as I came to find, pleading for help from or making demands of those in positions of authority may prove futile.

Working en las gallinas involves fixing things within the houses, nailing a board here or there in order to prevent an injury or adding a nail so that we can hang a net. At an unloading site I notice Machiel pulling out nails from a bucket. The container reads in all caps, “KILLS NORWAY RATS, ROOF RATS & HOUSE MICE” and has an accompanying image of a mouse standing over the “BAIT CHUNX” poisoning itself with the very thing with which it hopes to sustain its life. I am alarmed because of the potential immediate threat it could pose and because I fear this owner may develop other potentially dangerous habits.

*Fortunately, the supervisor is here*, I think with relief, but when I express my concerns to Butch, he looks at me with a rather annoyed smirk as he slowly closes and opens his eyes, languidly opens his mouth, shrugs, and says, “They’ve been washed.” He finds a pretense to walk away.

I want to stop him, but I only watch him in silence, feeling betrayed by this man who is ostensibly responsible for ensuring a healthy environment in the chicken houses. Then it dawns on me. Butch cares about the chickens’ health (and only because of the bottom line), not the gallineras/os’. Had they known about my feeble attempt to demand “justice” in that moment, perhaps one of the gallineras/os may have dissuaded me from “speaking out” by offering some humorous nonsense and flashing that knowing smile that seems perennially secured beneath those masks.

Other distinct but related experiences have shown gallineras/os the structural vulnerabilities that deprive them of the power to improve the conditions under which they labor. When some gallineras/os request a salary raise, citing their family needs as a reason for their requests, the owner of Fowler Poultry forcefully denies them the raise. He commands Dad from that point forward to “only hire single men.”

“I don’t want a bunch of greedy wives demanding more money,” he continues. “If they don’t want to work, fire them!”

Working without contracts, without legal protections, and often without legal status to stay in the country, gallineras/os are vulnerable to, among other debilitating social structures, the arbitrary whims of a miserly boss.

Angela Stuesse’s work on Tyson Poultry’s systematic dismissal of unionized immigrant poultry processing workers underscores the correlation between neoliberal US immigration policies and unethical labor practices. Moreover, her account of the failed “Justice and Dignity” campaign that the Mississippi Workers’ Poultry Center launched to protect immigrant workers from firings speaks to the State’s role in suppressing undocumented workers’ rights, even when such workers have the support of politically savvy and vocal advocates.<sup>74</sup> Not only are migrant workers easily replaceable and face threats of deportation, but those without legal documents are especially vulnerable and, to use Sarah

74. Angela C. Stuesse, “What’s ‘Justice and Dignity’ Got to Do with It?: Migrant Vulnerability, Corporate Complicity, and the State,” *Human Organization* 69, no.1 (Spring 2010): 19–20, <https://doi.org/10.17730/humo.69.1.886106412v421152>. The Mississippi Workers’ Poultry Center was composed of poultry workers, immigrant rights advocates, attorneys, union leaders, and concerned community members (20). Even with this amount of

Horton's term, "denounce-able," since they may face criminal charges and imprisonment for "inventing or borrowing a Social Security number" to work.<sup>75</sup> While immigrant workers often hesitate to use others' documents, they have no other choice, and hiring supervisors use this to their advantage. Horton describes various instances where supervisors encouraged prospective workers, under the guise of friendship, to use falsified documents. However, when these same laborers were injured, their employers denied them medical treatment or workers' compensation and sometimes fired them because they were working without proper documentation.<sup>76</sup> Although in California unauthorized laborers are legally entitled to medical treatment for injuries they sustained on the job as well as rehabilitation and workers' compensation for lost wages, all of the workers in Horton's study assumed that, as "identity recipient[s]," they were ineligible for workers' rights.<sup>77</sup> In an increasingly hostile environment where migrant workers are criminalized and forced to work under the paw of exploitative supervisors, and similarly unaware of any existing laws in place to protect them, gallineras/os are forced to toil for low wages and often forego medical treatment for fear of the legal repercussions associated with receiving care and potentially exposing themselves to authorities. As a result, they continuously work through illnesses, hidden away in chicken houses.

Thus, I come to see gallineras/os' responses to their working environments—their levity, their lack of expectations for improvement, and at some level even an acceptance of these deplorable conditions—as understandable coping strategies in the face of unrelenting injustice. Gallineras/os prioritize, then, survival within those chicken houses, and most of that depends on their continued alacrity, cooperation, and finesse; their shared speed, strength, and sweat; and, their communal effort to complete the work as quickly as possible. All of these requirements and goals leave little time for complaints of any sorts. To dwell on their health risks would be useless or, worse, demoralizing.

With all of the adverse social factors defining their working environment, gallineras/os look to create alternative realities that help them transcend their difficult experiences. They tell stories, gossip, and play-fight with one another, and no one is spared from playful derision. Val regales us with his story about having witnessed the incredible dancing performance of fellow gallinero José. "But he dances beautifully! What a gorgeous body," Val says as he outlines an invisible figure eight with his hands. "My wife had to stop me from getting out there and dancing with him. She got very jealous. He moved so sexily. Just like a worm. But what a body!" he says as we set up for work.

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human resources and expertise, the center was unable to prevent Tyson from unjustly firing its targeted immigrant workers.

75. Sarah B. Horton, "From Deportability to Denounce-ability: New Forms of Labor Subordination in an Era of Governing Immigration through Crime," *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 39, no. 2 (November 2016): 314. <https://doi.org/libproxy.lib.unc.edu/10.1111/plar.12196>.

76. Horton, "From Deportability to Denounce-ability," 319, 322.

77. Horton, "From Deportability to Denounce-ability," 319.

“Azucar” (sugar), Chewy calls out as he shovels putrid mud.<sup>78</sup> The mud smells strongly of what it is: shit. But Chewy keeps laughing. “Who wants a little bit of brown sugar?” he asks this time.

“Over here. For my coffee,” says another who is shoveling dirt into a different black puddle.

“Here you go, my love,” he says as he pours dry dirt onto the other’s coffee.

“How delicious. That’s why I love you,” responds the other playfully. A medley of laughter breaks out among the gallineras/os.

The jokes gallineras/os tell follow common cultural practices among working-class Mexican-heritage and Central American people who infuse their stories or conversations with *chingaderas* or *pendejadas*, “humor, expletives, subtle forms of irony, and self-deprecation,” to mitigate the painful circumstances they experience and remain positive about the outlook of their bleak situations. Discursively, talking *chingaderas* enable these otherwise vulnerable subjects to resist the systems that marginalize them.<sup>79</sup> By speaking *chingaderas* incessantly, these gallineras/os are able to transform their strenuous and hazardous laboring environments into social spaces where they can become boisterous story tellers or comedians, where they can laugh as well as groan and ache from laughter, not just physical trauma.

Just as they use humor to sweeten the bitter aspects of their labor and social conditions, gallineras/os also compete with one another in order to focus their energy on the strength of their bodies and shared goal of finishing sooner rather than on the agony of the experience. They are energized by each other’s enthusiasm and hard work. “*Vamos, vAMos, VAMOS!*” we yell. “We don’t want to get left behind. *VAMOS!*” When we compete, we enter into an agreement that says, “*I will sacrifice myself for us. You do the same. It will hurt more to go that fast. But it will hurt for a shorter time.*”

“Youuuuu’re right?” Che asks to refuel me when he sees that I am picking up chickens more intensely than usual. “Ooooooooooh yeeeeeeeeaaaaaaah!” I say, boasting loudly as I suffocate from the pain. What he hears in my words, despite what I feel, is “let’s do this!” We laugh, pick up speed, and keep on rolling.

This united effort seems key to gallineras/os’ success in achieving their transcendence of different forms of gallinera/o pain and illness. I did not know that when I was a boy working alongside them in the summers. Then, my concern was for my own pain. Work hurt *me*. The smells were nauseating. The heat and dust were suffocating. The mixture of sweat, dust, and feathers was disgusting and sticky. And so when Dad would relieve me of my duties, I stepped out of the chicken houses with exponentially more cheer than when I entered them, doffed the obnoxious soiled mask, and forgot about the gallineras/os instantly. However, as I matured, I learned over time from the gallineras/os that we, the crew, are one body. We work hard for one another and endure more pain in order to

78. Water leaks in chicken houses can cause muddy areas or puddles in which chickens can sometimes get stuck and drown, so we have to dig up some of the water and then pour over dry dirt to protect the chickens.

79. Jason de Leon, *Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Oakland: U of California Press, 2015), 92, <https://ebookcentral-proquestcom.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/lib/unc/reader.action?docID=2025610&ppg=104>.

reduce that of others. That is how the gallineras/os work. When Franky gets on his knees to pick up chickens because he can no longer endure the back pain of bending over, Machiel, Enrique, Leo—one of them takes his place. With a pat on Franky’s back, he will say, “Take a break,” an acknowledgment of Franky’s pain, a recognition that Franky has been working hard, and an assurance that he is there to relieve some of Franky’s *dolor*.

I greatly admire the gallineras/os, and I recognize why they live by the principles that guide their transcendence. However, I am also distanced enough from them to recognize that while their methods for coping with illness work for them, the structural violence that defines their strenuous and hazardous work (and that affected their predecessors) remains fully intact to brutalize them and other future gallineras/os. As such, I cannot fully embrace the gallinas in the way they do. Rigo says to me, “It’s beautiful to work, right Geo? To be able to work is beautiful.” As I struggle to make sense of their situation, to capture the ironies of their joys, to protest against their suffering, I think to myself, *No, Rigo. You deserve better than this. Run!*

But where would he go?

I smile and nod and say, “Yes, Rigo. It’s beautiful,” and ironically enough, to be able to work is “beautiful” because gallineras/os like Rigo are, for the time being, able to sustain themselves and, in some cases, their families. They derive pleasure from that knowledge.<sup>80</sup>

But how long, I wonder, will these gallineras/os be able to work? They survive their illness(es) through sheer will, but when will their bodies and minds give way to the nagging pains in their hands, feet, backs, legs, hips, arms, shoulders; or, the headaches, dizziness, and chest constriction? At what point do *chingaderas* and boasting lose their power to invigorate them in work and life?

What will the cancer rates be for the gallineras/os? Will any epidemiologists ever study them, track their shifting incidences and prevalence, and create interventions to decrease them? Would these data matter, if not used to create legal reforms, even transformations, in worker rights? Or will it take a different kind of medical research to figure out new diagnoses for the dozens of gallineras/os who routinely dip their open sores into chemicals and breathe in ammonia and particles from decades old chicken feces?

#### CODA: DRAMA DROWNED IN TRICKLES OF POISON

I do not pretend that writing this illness narrative will save the gallineras/os. At best, this story is akin to the small gesture I make when I take over Machiel’s net-washing responsibilities to spare him from exposing himself to chemicals yet again. I fill a large plastic bucket with water and disinfectant, and then, as if washing clothes by hand, I repeatedly dip the nets into the cleaning solution and rub them together.

80. Unterberger, “No One Cares,” 108, 111–112. Though not the focus in this piece, an important long-term concern for gallineras/os could very well be the psychiatric impacts that accompany physical trauma. Unterberger discusses how immigrant working-class men’s inability to work (or to work with the same stamina and ability they used to) leads to financial burdens on their families and leaves these disabled men feeling depressed and ashamed from their inability to provide for their families. When gallineras/os declare that working is beautiful, they are, understandably, celebrating their hard work and ability to do so.

I wonder, *What are the trickles of poison in my blood compared to the gallons that Machiel has poured on his open sores over the years?*

I dip the net vigorously with fists down, but the wet, glossy sheet neither resists nor shatters. It gives way to my thrusts and envelops my limbs, pulling me in up to my elbows. Part of me wonders whether sudden death might transform us, like Cherríe Moraga's Cerezita, into martyrs and catalysts for a collective response to our cause, but as I look around, I see no more drama beyond the one in my mind or the frightened stirs of chickens inside the houses.<sup>81</sup>

Death here is drawn-out. Degenerative.

I notice, groggily, the itchy burn of the disinfectant in my cuts and understand that I am just working. Just cleaning the dirty nets the way gallineras/os have cleaned them thousands of times before and will after me.<sup>82</sup>

### EPILOGUE: NOT MACHINES, AFTER ALL, BUT FLESH AND BONE

To employers and supervisors like Butch, gallineras/os such as Che and Machiel seem indefatigable—machines. But they are not machines. They are comedians, story tellers, and survivors, whose structural vulnerability as working-class, undocumented immigrants makes them perennially vulnerable to exploitation, chronic pain, illness, and, as I have intimated, premature death.

Through employing structural violence and structural vulnerability frameworks, this project seeks to contribute to current medical anthropological work that investigates the

81. Cherríe Moraga, *Heroes and Saints* (Albuquerque: West End Press, 1994), 149. Cerezita is the physically impaired and partially disembodied protagonist of *Heroes and Saints*. She is solely embodied as a head because of her mother's exposure to agricultural pesticides while Cerezita was in utero. As a Mexican-heritage, working-class, disabled, young woman, Cerezita experiences layers of marginalization that awaken her to injustices outside of and within her Mexican-heritage community. Because of her partial disembodiedness and awakened political consciousness, Cerezita represents both her community's devastation by environmental racism and their potential for helping transform their social conditions. She hopes to ignite her relatively silenced community into political activism by publicly exposing her body, and risking her life, in protest of the growers' use of pesticides near her community. When growers' gunmen murder Cerezita before her community, her "pueblo" responds by burning the fields, a gesture that while socially and environmentally dangerous, figuratively represents the possibility of transforming the land and the socioeconomic relations and agricultural practices shaping it.

82. In its initial drafts, my autoethnography concluded differently. In that conclusion, I took a nineteenth-century narrative approach in addressing the reader and used metaphors that I hoped would prompt readers to action. Such an ending now strikes me as mildly naïve, and I cannot help but think of the dissonance between Upton Sinclair's purpose for writing *The Jungle* (to help meatpacking immigrant workers) and the book's actual impact on regulating food production (the passing of the Pure Foods and Drugs Act and the Meat Inspection Act). "I Aimed for the Public's Heart, and . . . Hit It in the Stomach," an article the *Chicago Tribune* published in 2006, discusses how Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, a lengthy muckraker book that describes the health hazards in meatpacking working environments, failed to directly improve the conditions of the poor immigrants Sinclair sought to help. Instead, the descriptions of unsanitary working conditions provoked the public's outrage about the safety and quality of the food they consumed rather than eliciting public support for workers' rights. Sinclair expressed his disappointment by observing, "I aimed for the public's heart and hit it in the stomach." As the article reminds us about the meatpacking industry, worker exploitation and exposure to hazards continues, and "we now find ourselves back in the jungle, with an odd feeling of déjà [sic] vu," with "some contemporary version of Jurgis Rudkus [the protagonist of *The Jungle*] . . . illegally crossing the border between Mexico and Arizona with dreams of a better life." These realities, then, drove me to conclude by pushing readers to ask, as they witness this déjà vu, what now?



intersections of Latina/o immigrant labor and health. Additionally, it hopes to illicit labor and biomedical advocacy for gallineras/os. Such advocacy would involve a focus on improving the work and biomedical experiences of gallineras/os. Improving working conditions would entail a reduction in work load (with increased pay), and it would also target the poor conditions of chicken houses by requiring improved ventilation, regulated temperatures, and the removal of old waste. It would require that bathrooms for workers be installed at all poultry farms and that workers be provided with proper gear (e.g., safer masks and gloves) to help reduce exposure to toxic particles and/or chemicals. Paid sick leave would also need to accompany these changes. Biomedical advocacy calls for health insurance and programs that invite gallineras/os to regular check-ups, without fear of legal repercussions or deportation. This would require medical providers to build trust and work to create an environment in which gallineras/os and other immigrant laborers feel they are safe and cared for.

### YOUUUUURE RIGHT?

It is now March 2021, and I am meeting my parents outdoors at a park. As I arrive, I do not see my parents' old work truck. The only vehicle in the parking lot is a vibrant red truck adorned with American flags. Though I cannot make out the masked figures at a distance, I intuit the truck is my parents', and their waves confirm my assumption. After an elbow tap greeting, I ask Dad how things are going, and he tells me their chickens are producing more eggs than ever. The American Dream Farm now boasts three houses, and every day the chickens produce tens of thousands of eggs, but he admits he is slowing down and complains of pains in his legs. He also finds himself feeling so tired, some days, that he sometimes naps immediately after work and has to motivate himself to get up.

"Good thing you kids are all grown up, he says," with a hesitant laugh.

Dad also discloses that Che is ill.

He tells me that Che is extremely thin and, reenacting Che's painfully slow movements, explains that he is struggling to keep up with the crew in his position at winger.

Dad senses my shock, and he hesitates before explaining that Che's sickness "is in his blood."

"Meaning?" I ask.

"I don't know," Dad concludes. "Che won't share more than that with anyone." As if hoping to find a root cause that might separate them from the branches of their shared structural vulnerability as gallineras/os, Dad mentions that when Che was only 16, he imbibed very strong liquor from their home state.

"I don't know. One never knows," he says somewhat subconsciously when I remain silent as I think about Che's hands, chronically painted blue, and the heavy aura of las gallinas.

Dad does not want to vocalize it, but I sense he suspects, or knows, Che has cancer.<sup>83</sup> He tells me that during his time off from work, Che now spends his days speaking very little, mostly sitting and thinking about dying.

83. Over the years, since my last summer with the gallineras/os, I have heard of the passing of "Tío Jesus" and "El Compadrito," both of whom died of cancer in their sixties. I wonder what caused their deaths and Che's illness, and what role did their labor en las gallinas have in their health outcomes?

“But we’re all dying. One has to keep going. I did not want to get up this morning after not feeling well yesterday. I didn’t feel good,” Dad continues. “I tell him to keep positive and take care of himself. ‘Yes, Uncle,’ he tells me. One has to have *ganas*, or we won’t make it.”

As Dad talks, I attempt to picture this new Che, but my memory keeps returning to the powerful cousin who never stops laughing and who helped me get through the grueling days en las gallinas. I recall his gentle massages on my lower back, and I can hear his voice echoing, “Youuuuure right . . .” I know the next time I see him, however, our special greeting will sound hollow. ■

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