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In search of dignified work:

Gender and the work ethic in the crucible of fair trade production

ABSTRACT

After building the first worker-owned free trade zone in the world, the women of the Fair Trade Zone in Ciudad Sandino, Nicaragua, rejected fair trade and elected to go their own way. The small cooperative's decision, as well as their claim to be seeking "dignified work" (*trabajo digno*), does not express the existing norms and conventions of a local moral economy. Rather, it stems from an alternative work ethic that was formed through their particular experiences of fair trade production—one that rejected the logic of reproducing capital at the expense of social life and sought to preserve their workplace as a forum for dignity. Here, alternative work ethics unleash the inventive play of ethical labor and give rise to unruly subjects. [*gender*, *labor*, *the work ethic*, *cooperatives*, *development*, *fair trade*, *Nicaragua*]

Después de iniciar la primera zona franca del mundo que pertenece a sus propios trabajadores, las mujeres de la Zona de Comercio Justo en Ciudad Sandino, Nicaragua, rechazaron el comercio justo y eligieron su propio camino. La decisión de la pequeña cooperativa, así como su reclamo de buscar «trabajo digno», no expresa las normas y convenciones actuales de una economía moral. Más bien proviene de una ética laboral alternativa que se formó a través de sus experiencias particulares de la producción de comercio justo —una ética que rechazó la lógica de la reproducción del capital a costa de la vida social y buscó preservar la cooperativa como un foro para la dignidad—. Aquí, las éticas laborales alternativas desencadenan el ingenioso juego del trabajo ético y generan sujetos ingobernables. [*género*, *trabajo*, *ética laboral*, *cooperativas*, *desarrollo*, *comercio justo*, *Nicaragua*]

In 2004, a group of poor women from Ciudad Sandino, Nicaragua, accomplished an improbable feat. Alongside a transnational network comprising a development NGO, a clothing retailer, and a network of donors in the United States, they transformed their small sewing cooperative into the world's first worker-owned free trade zone (*zona franca*). Although these special enclaves are usually associated around the world with corporate globalization, their Fair Trade Zone, as they called it, heralded a new model of community development. By 2010 the small cooperative was also positioned to become a member of the world's first fair trade–certified clothing-production network, enticing a speculative deal with Whole Foods Market.

The project then abruptly fell apart. The cooperative cut ties with their sponsor, the US-based Center for Sustainable Development (CSD).[1] They rejected a new production contract with Clean Clothes, a retailer that once accounted for three-quarters of their annual revenue. They dropped out of the certification project, including the potential deal with Whole Foods. And they decried the whole business of fair trade as exploitative. Only by asserting their autonomy, members said, could they achieve what they really wanted: "dignified work" (*trabajo digno*).

The staffs of CSD and Clean Clothes were bewildered: Why would these poor and working-class Nicaraguan women turn away from such a life-changing opportunity? Clean Clothes pointed the finger at the women's lack of business savvy. CSD, meanwhile, drew on the authority of sustainable development, reporting in a newsletter:

> We wish the best for them as they go through this hard time and hope they will learn and come out much wiser on the other end.... The most difficult handicaps the women in the Fair Trade Zone have: 1) they came into the cooperative with very little formal work experience; 2) they assumed very little community organizing; and 3) they lacked social consciousness. They were literally dirt-poor and their whole lives revolved around mere survival.[2]

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Purportedly, fault lay not with the business model, fair trade, or CSD's approach to sustainable development. Instead, these women lacked the social consciousness and work ethic necessary to run a fair trade cooperative. Consumed as they were with mere survival, their habits and attitudes were their greatest handicap, predisposing them to guard their self-interests and to mistrust those who might offer help. CSD's statement thus concluded with a lesson: "The main challenge for poor people is to believe that people and organizations exist who do not have to help, but want to help."

The NGO's newsletter was the most recent installment of a tale, told over a decade, about the forces of transnational solidarity that brought the Fair Trade Zone into being. In that chronicling, the above may be read as a fraught attempt to account for what happened, to contain the cascading failures produced when these women uncoupled their own ambitions from the ambitions of the project. On the cooperative's factory lines, however, another story was unfolding that received far less attention but is no less important for understanding these events. This story concerns the complex ethical considerations that led these women to reject fair trade and to go their own way. From their perspective, the final outcome was not a failure but a breakthrough in their search for dignified work.

In the Fair Trade Zone, dignified work is both a shared objective and an alternative work ethic, an inventive play of work values and practices that prefigures the goal and gives rise to diverse ethical-political subjects. That is, by pursuing dignified work, these women produced fair trade garments but also produced themselves as cooperative members, community leaders, mothers, and dignified beings. Likewise, by deciding to drop out of that production network, they rejected the logic of economic productivity—reproducing capital at the expense of social life—and elected to preserve their workplace as a forum for realizing their intrinsic worth.

Work not only serves to reproduce social life, as recent feminist critiques of capitalism have observed, but also may create the conditions under which new subject-worlds emerge (Bear et al. 2015; Gibson-Graham 2006; Narotzky and Besnier 2014; Weeks 2011). So too with employment-generating projects like fair trade. The impacts of such projects regularly overflow the plans that precede them. Moreover, when plans touch down in particular times and places, those projects are also transformed by contexts that invariably exceed them. Alternative work ethics add yet another important dimension to the conversation: in the crucible of lived experiences of work, producers may also forge themselves anew. In so doing, these subjects may also subvert dominant discourses of fair trade—guided as they are by (neo)liberal conceptions of social justice as a fair distribution—and break ground on many other life projects.

While the logic of dignified work may be illegible to many fair trade retailers, NGOs, consumers, advocates, or even critics, it makes sense when one considers those life projects that took root and played out through the Fair Trade Zone's rise and fall. Indeed, in 46 months of ethnographic research from 2004 to 2013, I saw workers on the shop floor openly dispute seemingly incontrovertible concepts of what it means to have an ethical workplace. I also saw a pioneering project come apart at the seams, not because of wages but because work should not be boring or mechanical, because a workplace demands mutual respect, and because profit should not come at the cost of one's dignity. To gain purchase on these events, we must take a page from recent feminist scholarship and acknowledge how, even in the midst of capitalist production, people assert a stubborn attachment to work as purposeful activity.

From fair trade to dignified work

Like development itself, fair trade is at once a global project, made coherent by its own rules and norms, and an assemblage of historically and socioculturally distinct ideas, heterogeneous interests, and other destabilizing elements. Focusing on this tension between policy and practice has served as a corrective to lofty claims that fair trade integrates principles of democracy, transparency, equity, and justice into market logics. At the same time, an implicit concern with the successes or shortcomings of the fair trade model—how particular projects measure up to the ideal type, "social justice through the market" (Lyon and Moberg 2010, 5)—have inadvertently mirrored the concerns of advocates, critics, and other experts in the Global North. Consequently, a much wider spectrum of claims has fallen off the radar.

The figure of the fair trade consumer provides a useful foil to the comparatively flat image of fair trade production. Ethical consumers, as they are called, are driven by complex motivations that often defy microeconomic models. They desire, among other things, a "simulated relationship" with distant partners in exchange (Doane 2010), a taste of the "acceptably indigenous" (P. Wilson 2010), or a fleeting encounter with the "imagined primitive" (West 2012). As fair trade consumer-activists in Philadelphia develop a taste for supporting strangers in Kenya, for instance, the act of consumption slips between practical (almost cynical) acts of accumulation and status-building, on the one hand, and symbolic acts of meaning-making and ethical self-exploration, on the other (Brown 2013).

What drives fair trade producers—and how work becomes meaningful because of that—is less clear when the focus is the success and shortcomings of the fair trade model. As redistribution, fair trade struggles to provide a limited number of producers a leg up in the marketplace vis-à-vis conventional approaches (Bacon 2010; Fridell

2006). As a community development, fair trade often falls short of its goals and even damages communities by fracturing historic solidarities, exacerbating existing inequalities, or even sparking new divisions along the lines of gender, ethnicity, class, and religion (Lyon 2008, 2010; Reichman 2008). As neoliberal governance, too, decision-making and expertise are monopolized by actors in the Global North, and rules are applied across the Global South in invasive and inappropriate ways (Lyon 2006; Mutersbaugh and Lyon 2010; B. Wilson 2013). Meanwhile, as consumers' sympathies and convictions are translated into new technologies of regulation and surveillance, producers often appear as "virtual" figures motivated by the incentive structures around them (West 2012, 65). Complex ethical negotiations appear to be straightforward matters of cost-benefit (Dolan 2010; Moberg 2014).

If production is as ethically complex as consumption, a promising path forward is the moral economy, which calls attention to local economic moralities and political-ethical responses prompted by the violation of existing moral relations. When fair trade encounters the historic plantation system of Darjeeling, India, for instance, it also converges with a "tripartite moral economy" linking workers, managers, and the agro-environment in moral and affective relation (Besky 2013). In this context, fair trade appears to Indian producers as less a transformative political movement than another capital-driven *bisnis* strategy. Similarly, when export markets for fair trade bananas in St. Lucia and Dominica collapsed, the fair trade system itself came into question as a viable source of community development as well as freedom and hope in the postcolonial period, symbolized above all by autonomous agricultural production (Moberg 2014). In other words, focusing on moral economies requires serious ethnographic consideration of those events that transpire when global projects like fair trade and development touch down in other moral worlds (Arce 2009). The ethical perspectives of producers, from Mexico to India to Papua New Guinea, are not the same as consumers' (Carrier 2010). Moreover, while fair trade may appear grounded in a universal morality, it actually exports a *particular* morality—one that mixes a Christian ethic of care with a liberal humanist social ideology and a neoliberal economic agenda—on a global scale (Besky 2015; West 2012, 240).

In CSD's reckoning, not much sense can be made of the Fair Trade Zone's bewildering decision to depart from the network. Instead, the NGO asks its readers to understand the failure as resulting from an unfortunate gap between policy and practice. For ethnographers, however, the more demanding task involves exploring the formation and complex interplay of ethical positions. The moral economy gets us part of the way. Still missing, however, is how producers may forge new experiences and meanings within the crucible of fair trade production.

Dignified work, as an alternative work ethic, is one mechanism by which such ethical positions are formed. In socialist humanist traditions, including feminist, Marxist, and other philosophical varieties, pay is not simply a matter of distribution and work a matter of pay. Just work is self-realization. That is, much as being paid adequately may signal recognition and respect, lived experiences of working also matter, including whether they are empowering or disempowering, meaningful or boring, fulfilling or draining, purposeful or pointless (Folbre 1982; Okin 1991; Young 1990). At stake in the experience of workers in many capitalist workplaces—the extensive profiteering *and* the profound tedium—is nothing less than one's essential human capacities for self-realization, namely, to conceptualize something and to realize it in the world (cf. Marx 1982, 284).

For anthropologists, however, the question of just work is not so clear cut, in part because work's various qualities and conditions are always contingent. For Max Weber (1958), the Calvinist compulsion to work became a question of prefiguring one's spiritual status among the elect while generating "primitive capitalist subjectivities" (Weeks 2011, 40). The work ethic was the historical coincidence of rational practices of self-discipline and worldly asceticism, on the one hand, and theologically motivated desires for otherworldly salvation, on the other. Though drained of its theological content, contemporary work ethics such as the industrial notion of "disciplined effort" (Rodgers 1978) and postindustrial ideas about "career-mindedness" and "self-development" (Rose 1985; Zuboff 1983) are no less formative of worker subjectivities. With Weber, these work ethics illustrate that judgments about the enjoyable, meaningful, purposeful, or just character of work—including the purportedly essential human capacities at stake in working—are historically particular formations, not human universals with different labels attached.

In its narrowest formulation, the work ethic may serve the perennial ideological purpose of individualizing responsibility, rationalizing exploitation, and legitimizing inequality (Burawoy 1979; Berk 1985, 201; Foucault 1979, 26). But it is not always a technology of pure subjectification. In the plural form of the term, work ethics emerge from a diversity of sociohistorical contexts and may produce a wide range of political-ethical subjects who do not always reproduce the status quo. For instance, marginalized groups in the United States have long claimed economic citizenship and contested their political disenfranchisement by calling on their work ethic and by resignifying the relationship between economic value and social worth (Brodkin 2014). Likewise, the labor movement has called on an alternative "laborist work ethic" to celebrate the dignity of waged work in contrast to the activities of the idle rich (Tyler 1983). These and other alternative work ethics are animated by a range of noncapitalist values and practices

that may engender noncapitalist and sometimes unruly subjects. Such practices often fall short of "great refusal" of work in favor of playful enjoyment, as in the vision nurtured by an antiwork politics (Trullinger 2016). They may instead thrive on the many minor refusals that engage the inventive play of labor to fashion new and potentially subversive subject-worlds *within* spaces otherwise controlled by capitalist interests.

That line of argument dovetails with a second set of conversations about the relationship between work and social life. Feminist scholarship on capitalism has long challenged productivist ideologies that value people, things, relationships, and activities in narrow terms of their capacity to produce goods and services in ever-growing numbers (Gibson-Graham 1996; Weeks 2011). It has instead called attention to the central role of economic activity in provisioning social life (Gibson-Graham 2006; Ho 2006; Narotzky and Besnier 2014; Roelvink, St. Martin, and Gibson-Graham 2015). Labor thus emerges as a broad array of generative powers: productive, reproductive, material, immaterial, communicative, affective, and the like (Bear et al. 2015; see also Tsing 2015; Yanagisako 2012). At the same time, it also becomes a key site for political-ethical reflection. Hence, social reproduction is not merely about reproducing life under capitalism but also about particular "lives worth living" (Narotzky and Besnier 2014) as they are negotiated across various temporal and spatial scales.

The key epistemological thread that connects both conversations is *value*. In thinking about how people invest in different aspects of social existence, value refers to "how productive activities get divided up within societies, activities—labor, in the very broadest sense—that yield the assemblages of humans and non-humans that are necessary to sustain life, as well as spark new life" (Henderson 2011, xii). Value alone, however, is insufficient to make a life worth living, because doing so entails cultivating not only the external resources necessary for life but also the internal qualities and conditions of living subjects. Karl Marx signals this difference by distinguishing between "value" and "worth" in their respective "fitness to supply the necessities, or serve the conveniences of human life" (1982, 126n4). In English, he says, the Germanic term (*worth*) refers to the actual thing and its immediate use-value, whereas the Romance term (*value*) refers to its reflection in exchange. Hence, "nothing can have an intrinsic value," nor can worth refer to "the money it will bring." Illustrative though this distinction may be, however, it is less useful in understanding dignified work than the relationship among value, worth, and life (however the latter is defined). Indeed, questions of dignity are thought provoking precisely because they simultaneously confound distinctions between worth and value, span the subjective and intersubjective, and thus signal "the need for continual reproduction of our fragile wellbeing under conditions that link the two" (Sayer 2011, 195).

In what follows, I pose this theoretical provocation as an ethnographic question: What is the role of work in building lives worth living, and how can alternative work ethics generate other subject-worlds that affirm a subject's worth? As illustrated by the emergence of the Fair Trade Zone's claim for dignified work, people might forge themselves anew as dignified subjects by embracing alternative work values, even as they discover new realities of injustice in work.

Sweating together

The English term *fair trade* was introduced to Nicaragua in the 1980s by the international solidarity movement, which sought to interrupt the Reagan administration's aggressions against the fledgling socialist government of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). A small consumer cooperative in New England, called Equal Exchange, was among the first in Nicaragua to cut its teeth on the project with their Café Nica, called "the forbidden coffee" because importing it to the United States violated the economic embargo that the US government had imposed on Nicaragua. In the 1990s, with the lifting of the embargo and the opening of markets, fair trade had become commonplace but had also splintered into different manifestations. The language of current debates about fair trade encode its diverse conceptualizations over time. In my research, Nicaraguans who remember international efforts to defend the revolution called it *comercio solidario* (solidary trade). Others termed it *comercio limpio* (clean trade) or *la cadena limpia* (the clean [production] chain), which conflates fair trade and the organics labeling movement (which originally aimed to label organic produce as such but now also seeks to label a broader range of consumables like clothing). Still others came to perceive fair trade through the lens of *sociedad* (partnership), an important relationship within a larger working-class moral economy in which participants split risk and reward. By the 21st century, even the direct translation of *fair trade* used by insiders—*comercio justo*—was inflected with Nicaragua's historic struggles for democracy, pluralism, anti-imperialism, and social justice, including the plea for poverty with dignity as the cooperative model became a fulcrum for a broader transformation of political subjectivity.

The story of the Fair Trade Zone and their claim for dignified work begins when Hurricane Mitch made landfall in October 1998. Nicaragua suffered more than $300 million worth of infrastructural damage, and thousands lost their homes to rising floodwaters along Lake Xolotlán, north of Managua. Tens of thousands were relocated to Nueva Vida, a resettlement site on the outskirts of Ciudad Sandino, where they set up new homes in muddy pastureland using government allotments of black tarps and wooden posts. International aid organizations rushed to help Nueva

Vida residents but quickly moved on. More permanent development organizations were left to address emerging systemic problems: the lack of basic infrastructure like clean water, sewage, and electricity; unemployment above 80 percent; and scarce work opportunities aside from the 18 low-wage free trade zones dotting the perimeter of the city.

Those displaced by the hurricane felt their precarity in depths that cannot be easily charted. Petronila, who would become a cooperative member, lived with her husband and three children on the northeastern part of the lake when the hurricane hit. Floodwaters swept away her family's modest home and material possessions. "When we arrived in Nueva Vida," she recalls, "the only possessions we had were the clothes that we were wearing." They also lost their livelihood selling fish in the local market. Adilia, another member, was in Costa Rica working undocumented as a cook while her six children were living with their grandmother in the northern part of Managua. Mitch destroyed their house and belongings; one of her sons nearly lost a leg to an infection; her mother almost succumbed to complications from cholera; and she claims she nearly died trying to get back to Nicaragua. For Zulema, the disaster was also a blow on many levels. She was studying to be an executive assistant, and her husband owned and ran a repair shop near the lakefront. Floodwaters rose so high that they overtook both their home and their business, and her ability to plan for the future was among the first casualties: "There we were thinking that we had built a good life," she says, "and it changed overnight." As with Petronila, rampant unemployment eventually forced her husband to leave in search of work. Despondency set in: "There was no work, no hope, no way out."

Ciudad Sandino was thus confronted with a multipronged crisis, at the center of which was unemployment. The initial designs for the Fair Trade Zone grew out of this realization and initially took the form of a partnership between a Michigan-based ethical apparel retailer called Clean Clothes and an ecumenical nonprofit from North Carolina called CSD.

Clean Clothes knew little about Nicaragua but was driven to join the arrangement because of new free trade agreements, called Super 807s (or Tariff Schedule 807A), which were initially drafted in the 1980s to punish socialist governments in El Salvador and Nicaragua, and which matured in the 1990s as an incentive structure for tax-free garment production in the Caribbean Basin and Central America. From the perspective of Emilia, the owner and founder of Clean Clothes, those agreements also made US-based production costly. She connected with CSD because she wanted to pursue new labor markets, yet she was unwilling to outsource labor to emerging sweatshops. As a woman from a working-class family who had built her own successful business, she was invested in workers' rights and was interested in developing new models of worker ownership.

CSD emerged in the 1980s in North Carolina, where they were running homeless and women's shelters and became radicalized by Reagan's foreign and domestic policies. As individuals, the NGO's founding members also traveled to Nicaragua to serve as election witnesses and to protest the US-sponsored Contras with the activist organization Witness For Peace. It was in that political context, and by later joining the international solidarity movement through the Carolina Interfaith Task Force on Central America, that CSD made connections with Father Miguel D'Escoto Brockmann, a Maryknoll priest and diplomat who had served as the FSLN's foreign minister. D'Escoto invited CSD to have a permanent presence in Nicaragua in partnership with FUNDESI, an organization formed in the 1990s with the purpose of continuing the revolution from below. The two organizations shared a vision of development as transnational solidarity, built on principles of cooperation, sustainability, participation, and community. They also collaborated to build a network of organic farmers across Nicaragua that, to this day, produces peanuts and sesame for brands found in high-end grocers like Whole Foods.

When Mitch hit Nicaragua, CSD's identity as an intentional community was cemented by the formation of the quite unintentional Nueva Vida. To deal with the lack of infrastructure, health care, and employment, from 1999 to 2001, CSD built an expansive solidarity network across the United States and in Nicaragua, consisting of universities, church groups, and civic organizations. It funded Nueva Vida's first health clinic and eventually funded the fair trade sewing cooperative enterprise in partnership with Clean Clothes, whom Roger, director of CSD, met during an industry conference in upstate New York. Clean Clothes would provide industry connections, market access, and technical support. CSD would continue financial and local organizational support. Potential Nicaraguan participants—still virtual figures in this model—would provide the labor power for its social and physical infrastructure. CSD and Clean Clothes referred to this tripartite division of labor as the "three-legged stool."

In principle and spirit, CSD's methods were quite democratic and open ended. In practice, however, Clean Clothes and CSD always took the lead. Donations trickled into the project from the international network that first funded the health clinic and other projects, and the NGO eventually established the cooperative as a legal entity. They drew on the model of the Mongradón cooperative system in Spain wherein, upon admittance, workers would contribute a buy-in that served two purposes: to capitalize the venture and to formalize membership (Kasmir 1996). In Nicaragua, however, potential applicants lacked capital, so CSD developed a model of sweat equity that treated in-kind

contributions of labor as investments. Thus, for two years between 1999 and 2001, the women built the cooperative from its foundations without pay, with only the promise that they would become owners. CSD pegged the value of their labor at 50 cents per hour, a typical rate for manual labor, making their total capital investment—which would be required of all future members—$320. From CSD's perspective, the setup was *fair* in all senses of the word. Only by ensuring that all contributed equally could they be said to merit equal membership and voting rights, according to Nicaraguan cooperative law. Likewise, only by enforcing an open membership structure in which future members enter as equals could the project become an engine for sustainable community development.

Of course, the accounting fails to do justice to the full scope of these women's travails—their physical, affective, social, and intellectual "sweat"—which is one of the reasons it did not work out in practice. The women were the primary caregivers and social, emotional, and economic support in their households, and they also served as their families' hope givers, tasked with building a future. As women, members argue, they came well equipped to deal with the duality of that role. "The thing is, we are more entrepreneurial than men," explains Andrea. "If someone says, 'Look, this has to be done,' then we do it. You have to do anything for your children."

Perhaps the first consequence of their work, of exercising their generative powers within the Fair Trade Zone, was its embodied physicality. They mixed concrete by hand to pour a three-foot-deep foundation and lifted 200-pound concrete slabs called *losetas* to build walls. Day after day, they lunched on mangoes on their return trip home for their second shift in the household. "The hardest part was not actually building the cooperative," remembers María. "It was working without a salary, because any time that we were working [on this project], we were not feeding our children."

The work was also inseparable from the interpersonal and affective demands of social life. Disruptions of domestic routines caused frictions at home, leading in some cases to the breakups of unions or escalating to violence. Those were amplified by the immense social distance between the women and CSD, whose motivations were suspect because employees of a foreign NGOs are relatively wealthy. Skeptical family members said that the women were fools to work for no pay and that they should find real work. Aware of the irony of unpaid domestic work, Dora remembers her husband saying, "Where have you ever seen someone who goes to work and doesn't get paid?" Interactions with visiting volunteers, delegations, advocates, tourists, and other stakeholders from the United States were similarly exhausting, as fledging cooperative members perceived the outcomes of cross-cultural interactions to be matters of immense consequence.

That international audiences were eager to listen to their tale was of course affirming. But it was instead because of their *embodied labor*—a term that I mean in both the Marxist and phenomenological senses of how labor congeals in physical form and lived experience—that work became a focus of ethical reflection and a meaningful expression of their collective struggle.

Coping mechanisms and survival strategies, which are common descriptors of self-sacrifice, fail to convey the multidimensionality of this work. They also fail to account for the many small-scale, transformative, and life-giving projects that members of the Fair Trade Zone engaged in collectively: for example, they cleared the grounds and planted gardens of herbs, vegetables, and decorative flowers to supplement household budgets and to carve out a symbolic space for themselves. Meanwhile, close working relationships turned into friendships and mutual support, driven by an ethic of solidarity and mutual care. "When *compañeras* came home to their families without any food at all," recalled María, "we would share, even if we had just a small bite." Support extended well beyond the cooperative. Dora remembers that her fellow cooperative members supported her decision to leave her husband when he said it was either him or the cooperative. She chose her children's well-being:

> My husband said to me, "Look, this is never going to amount to anything. You're crazy." He said we should be trying to bring some money into the household instead. [. . .] In my case, I left because I said that I'm going to see about a future for my children. A man can be with one woman today, and tomorrow it might occur to him to leave. But as a mother, your children are always with you. Someone has to look to the future, and this is what I was trying to do with the cooperative, make a future for my children.

Of course, cooperative work was never a simple matter of fellow feeling or shared experience, free from everyday politics. Frictions flared up over personal differences, competing interests, and other power dynamics—what Kamala Visweswaran calls "politics by women among women" (1994, 76). One cooperative member, citing her accounting background, attempted to regulate her coworkers' flexible work schedules by recording their arrival and departure times. Although rational in spirit, her coworkers saw the effort as a challenge to their autonomy and collectivity. "She was always making sure that we didn't arrive late or leave early," Adilia remembers, "and she didn't understand that this is a cooperative. She is not our boss, and we are not her employees." The conflict escalated to the point that the offending member, believing her prospects to be better elsewhere, left the project.

By 2001, owing to the difficulty of their work, only 12 of the 40 founding members were still involved. For them, the

term *sweat* (*sudor*), first introduced in the concept of sweat equity, became an early semiotic anchor for their struggle. Sweat indexed the intense physicality as well as the intellectual and emotional hardship of dealing with household finances and avoiding conflict through self-sacrifice. As more-than-labor, then, sweating also became an early idiom for their work ethic, the process by which they also catalyzed transformations of the social self. Dora describes the process by which some women took on new leadership roles in the cooperative, the family, and the community:

> At first we thought all that talk about the cooperative, the training sessions and things, were just hot air [*palabrería*]. It was very frustrating because we would come to listen and say, "Whatever everyone else thinks is fine." This has changed. Through our sweat, the struggle we have gone through as poor women, at our meetings today the people who were the weakest are now the strongest. We all talk and participate, and we make ourselves heard, even if some people don't want to listen.

For others, the shift was less seismic but still significant. Rosario, for example, considered herself a political actor before coming to the cooperative: as a teenager, she had joined the Sandinista revolutionary army, later ascended to a leadership position in an antiaircraft artillery brigade, and in the 1980s, pressed for the inclusion of women in Nicaragua's standing army. When she started working in the cooperative, she found that the *lucha* (struggle) there drew on her past experiences, but she also strived to learn English to communicate with clients. "The *lucha* is a different one today," she says. "It's a different one every day. But I like to think that I exchanged my rifle for a notebook and a sewing machine."

As sweat, then, work in the Fair Trade Zone emerged as meaningful practice—one that simultaneously gave material form to the cooperative and allowed members to interpret their struggles as shared (thus constructing a "we" in place of the "I"). By sweating, likewise, members would also transform themselves in ways that would defy narrow logics of self-interest, generate a new basis for membership, and plant the seeds for another ethical life project for dignified work.

Of course, the project of converting those manifold creative capacities into categories of social capital or sweat equity is significant in its own right. Thinking about labor as a substance or commodity, rather than a set of ethical relationships or meaningful practices, has a long history in capitalist market integration that dates back to the earliest renditions of a labor theory of value (Dumont 1971, 84; Polanyi 1944, 76). Less obvious is how such concepts operate in the social field as "conversion projects" (Bear et al. 2015). Frameworks like social capital are among the worst offenders because, in converting particular forms of social investment into numerical objects, they decontextualize complex social processes (Narotzky 2007). And yet, in the Fair Trade Zone, the model of sweat equity never perfectly replicated itself. Meaningful practices of sweating together eventually crept back into the contextless field, and an emerging work ethic led cooperative members down an unexpected path.

The idea of dignified work

Although the Fair Trade Zone was built on the model of the Mondragón cooperative system in Spain, that system was not a static economic structure but rather a dynamic and indeterminate space for ethical discussion and debate (Gibson-Graham 2006). When business is slow, members debate how to meet minimum cultural requirements for survival while keeping the cooperative afloat. When business is thriving, discussions instead turn to the allocation of surplus: Should the worker-owners reinvest in the cooperative or divide the spoils among themselves? Survival and flourishing, consequently, are not set limits but ongoing cultural and political-ethical conversations that span questions of distribution, social organization, the pace of work, and life itself. By participating in those conversations, moreover, people may develop "new practices of the self and intersubjective relation . . . in everyday life" (Gibson-Graham 2006, xxiii).

For workers in capitalist workplaces, particularly, dignity is a recurring issue. In "diverse economies"—Gibson-Graham's (2006, 59) term for those indeterminate spaces of ethical-economic discussion and debate—work is not merely drudgery but an important site for negotiating dignity within the broader context of social, political, and ethical life. Dignity is at stake when a boss takes a product out of workers' hand without acknowledging them, or when they refuse to hold a swinging door for their subordinate (Cavendish 2009). It is also at stake when employees surrender their privacy to random drug tests or property searches in the name of theft prevention (Bolton 2007; Ehrenreich 2001). Yet, delicate though it is, dignity may also be reclaimed in unexpected ways. Among Puerto Rican men in East Harlem, demands for respect resonate with their undignified treatment in waged work as well as their degrading encounters with social workers who question their work ethic. Thus, illegal drug economies may provide "an alternative forum for autonomous personal dignity" (Bourgois 2003, 8) and shield these men from the public humiliation of forced submission, even as they wreak havoc on the community. In Barbados, work among pink-collar informatics office employees is atomized, routinized, and regulated, as in industrial factories, yet the trade-off is that one may claim the status, self-image, and respectability by working in a modern professional environment (Freeman 2000). So profoundly did female workers in a Malaysian

electronics factory feel the moral disorder wrought by the workplace's multiple assaults to their basic dignity and integrity—the symbolic-cum-physical alienation and violation of their gendered bodies—that, in a spiritual language of protest, they were "seized by vengeful spirits and would explode into demonic screaming and rage on the shop floor" (Ong 1988, 28).

In Nicaragua ordinary exchanges between food safety inspectors (*hygienistas*, as the word is spelled locally) and food service workers that could otherwise be read as signs of corruption, like gifting small amounts of food and drink, are actually forms of "orientation." That is, these gestures are attempts to curb the encroachment of government bureaucracy and serve to reaffirm the dignity of both parties after potentially embarrassing bureaucratic encounters over such things as the presence of literal and figurative "shit" in the workplace (Nading 2017). Such efforts may also coalesce into full-fledged movements. The slogan of Nicaragua's Working and Unemployed Women's Movement María Elena Cuadra—"Jobs, Yes ... but with Dignity!"—signals that the fight for women's dignity in the workplace must take place everywhere the status of women is degraded (Bickham-Méndez 2005). That debate unfolds in the workplace, in the household, on the street corner, in schools, in the doctor's office, as well as in the globalized free trade zones.

In the Fair Trade Zone, the call for dignified work emerged from experiences of work as a gendered struggle. Adilia theorizes that, in Nueva Vida, as in Ciudad Sandino more generally, men and women have different investments in work, so they respond to challenges in different ways:

> [Unemployed] men sit around all day, watching television, feeling bad. They drink whatever money they have. They say, "I'm a painter, and there's no work painting," so they stay out of work. [...] Then they get depressed and angry because they are not contributing, they feel worthless, and they take it out on the rest of us. We women are more entrepreneurial. We say, "Oh, there's work doing something else, I'll do that." [...] We always find a way to contribute. We stay strong as women because we have to, because our children depend on us.

For Adilia, as a question of contributing (*aportando*), effecting positive change and being acknowledged for having done so, dignified work is gendered because it necessarily depends on a social context. For men, the concept is tied to activities in the public sphere, or *calle* (street). Thus, if a man is out of work, then his dignity *and* masculinity are compromised. For many Nicaraguan women, in contrast, dignity is distributed more broadly in various networks of social life, including the household, family, workplace, or public sphere. Consequently, for women, dignity may be more tenuous but also more resilient in the face of crisis.

In that light, dignified work is similar to "motherwork" (*la obra madre*), or "the cluster of activities that encompass women's unpaid and paid reproductive labor within families, communities, kin networks, and informal and formal local economies" (Collins 2006, 131; cf. Mulinari 1995). The difference is that dignified work is explicitly more than surviving (*sobreviviendo*) through entrepreneurial ventures, self-denial, or belt-tightening. Indeed, cultivating one's dignity as a woman or mother—often conflated in the Fair Trade Zone—is also about safeguarding oneself, including one's moral authority, and creating conditions under which future generations might do the same. Andrea explains: "You have to do anything for your children ... You have to take care of them, make sure they eat and go to school, but you also have to give them hope and make sure they are loved and that they grow up to be good people who will take care of their own children." It is no wonder that, as the central social, emotional, and financial supports of the family, female heads of household in Ciudad Sandino are called *la roca* (the rock).

By the same token, formal employment is no guarantee of dignified work, which is absent from the city's most capital-intensive enterprises. Indeed, Ciudad Sandino is known for its 18 free trade zones, including a massive 600,000-square-foot facility adjacent to the cooperative. I interviewed workers there as part of a 2008 survey. To them, the central contradiction is that, while these places provide a source of income, they also carry the significant human costs of what is known locally as "savage capitalism" (*capitalismo salvaje*). Workers earn about $42 a month. They work 12-hour shifts and have one day off a week. Forced overtime is common, and locked gates complicate childcare and other domestic responsibilities. Managers thus prefer to hire young, unmarried women whom they imagine to be relatively docile and to have none of the social responsibilities or other entanglements that might hinder their efficiency and productivity. While some women are victims of rampant sexual harassment, or may be fired for refusing sexual favors to supervisors, their status as "perfect" workers is further threatened by monthly pregnancy tests, and they are promptly dismissed if they become pregnant or take time for family (Bickham-Méndez 2005, 28).

In the Fair Trade Zone, members say, the dignity of the worker is prioritized over efficiency, productivity, and even profit. Pay is not substantially different from the free trade zones—about $2 a day—but pay is not the primary concern. "We are not trying to make ourselves rich, God knows," says Petronila. "We are just trying to build a future for our children." Policies give weight to that claim. A normal shift is nine hours and includes a generous hour for lunch. All workers receive benefits including health insurance, disability and retirement benefits, 13 paid holidays a year, one paid vacation day a month, and weekends off,

although exceptions are inevitable and justified by saying the cooperative's success is also the worker's success. Moreover, recognizing that work has a purpose outside the workplace, future mothers receive six months of paid maternity leave, and all employees receive on-site day care and full wages for work missed because of family illness.

Dignified work is also an important principle in the cooperative's organization. Zulema describes the debate cooperative members had:

> One of the things that we debated when we first started . . . was who should do what work. At first, when we were building the cooperative, we were all doing the same work every day. But when we started making clothes, we had to decide who should do what. It was logical that each member would do the job they were best at. But we also wanted to make sure that, when we got up every morning to go to work, it was not going to be boring. We wanted work, but we also wanted dignified work for ourselves.

They did not want to perform the same task every day, so they voted for a system in which each could experience a wider variety of work activities—one that James Murphy calls a "technical division of labor" (1993, 23), organized as rotations between tasks, rather than a "social division of labor," organized by role. In this model, workers were exposed to a diversity of workplace experiences. They also received training in all areas of production and were eligible for election to leadership positions. Zulema reveals the logic of their system: "It means that work is never boring. [. . .] There's always something new to learn. A person should not have to do the same thing every day, they should not be treated like a machine. They should be allowed to learn and to grow and to fulfill their God-given abilities."

In crafting these policies, cooperative members observed a connection between the practice of work as a *form of* personal conduct and the workplace as a *forum for* social conduct. For Weber, there is similar interface between the pursuit of work as a "calling" and the capitalist division of labor as if it were "the divine scheme of things" (1958, 160–61). In Antonio Gramsci's vision of worker democracy, likewise, the relationship is between the attitudes of "the collective worker" and factory councils as "the unity of the industrial process" (1990, 110), namely the proletarian state. In the Fair Trade Zone, dignified work entails the practices of self and intersubjective relation that are vital to an ethical workplace. In this workplace, no member may have a disproportionate say in collective decision-making, and no individual or group may monopolize the most esteemed or rewarding activities while others are stuck with the most tedious or mundane. Consequently, the ethical workplace becomes an alternative forum for discussing and debating a wide range of issues, including how certain kinds of work may enable a dignified life.

Dignity is gendered, and dignified work doubly so. Its presence has long been demonstrated through its absence, such as in the many indignities of mechanistic labor that reduce workers to the status of instrument. Yet dignified work can also emerge as an ethical life project that aspires to bring about other subject-worlds. In these projects, guarding the ethical workplace against the onslaught of efficiency, productivity, and profitability becomes a political-ethical act.

Safeguarding the ethical workplace

In the early years, staff members of CSD and Clean Clothes liked to blur the established division of labor by volunteering in the cooperative's production line or offering encouragement, assistance, and advice. They wanted to express solidarity with their Nicaraguan partners, and photographic testimonials of the different groups working side by side, in both newsletters and advertisements, furthered the project's moral narrative. As success mounted, however, these activities changed. From 2000 to 2004, Clean Clothes doubled the size of its business in the United States. The transformation placed a significant strain on the fledgling Fair Trade Zone cooperative. Accustomed to orders of a few hundred T-shirts at a time, the company was suddenly asked to produce as much as 10,000 units for their *patrón* (benefactor, boss).

Jumping scale like that meant degrading the workplace they had built. So in 2003 the Fair Trade Zone started hiring men and women from Ciudad Sandino as contracted laborers. These nonmembers received the same benefits and wage as members but were denied voting rights. Meanwhile, with more capital on the line, Clean Clothes ramped up scrutiny of the production line from afar. Quality control became Emilia's mantra. Upon discovering an error, her tactic was to show up unannounced in Nicaragua, with efficiency experts in tow. Having worked in conventional maquilas, these experts identified deficiencies and slowdowns in the production process. I translated for Clean Clothes' inspection team during one of their visits. While their final report noted that workers in certain production stations exhibited "extraneous arm moments"—implying the possibility and desirability of a perfect capitalist habitus—their biggest concern was organization, namely the cooperative's purportedly inefficient technical division of labor. Because workers lost time transitioning between stations and rarely mastered a single operation, they recommended a social division of labor that developed specific skill sets. The cooperative heeded this advice for little more than a week before voting to return to their old system.

Upscaling production had a similar effect on relations with CSD. At first, CSD's policy was one of noninterference. Only by letting them make their own mistakes,

they thought, could members learn cooperativism and self-governance. And only in extreme circumstances did they step in to help mediate internal conflicts. Otherwise, their role was to facilitate communication between the cooperative and the broader international network. Calls from clients rang first in the NGO's offices, where staff members worked as both literal and figurative translators. As the size of orders and the cooperative's international exposure grew, so too did the NGO's role as the primary financiers of the project. CSD turned its attention to matters of cooperative governance, particularly the cooperative's practice of contracting nonmembers. Having a core group of members supported by leagues of contracted workers, they claimed, violated not only Nicaraguan law (however lax the enforcement) but also the project's driving principles of sustainable community development. One consequence was that CSD became Clean Clothes' "eyes and ears" in Nicaragua, charged with reporting on problems they perceived.

Tensions grew in 2004 when CSD, working with the Inter-American Development Bank, initiated a process in which the Fair Trade Zone would become an official free trade zone. The legal transition permitted the small cooperative the same benefits offered to multinational competitors in conventional free trade zones, including exemption from taxes and tariffs. Although it made for a compelling story in CSD's newsletters—how grassroots actors might turn the rules of global capitalism against itself—for cooperative members, the special designation proved to be a double-edged sword. The cooperative was subject to even more bureaucratic scrutiny and was forbidden from doing business in local markets or with other Nicaraguan enterprises. Moreover, the additional income allowed the cooperative to flexibly source raw materials, and thus to expand production by hiring more workers, but to their great chagrin, they also had to hire a guard to perform personal property checks at the facility's new gate. Meanwhile, as the spectacle of the world's first worker-owned maquila reached ever wider audiences, members started to feel as if they were losing control of their own story. In 2005, Clean Clothes produced a short documentary that highlighted the importance of international solidarity as well as their own key role in the cooperative's struggle for justice. CSD arranged for a segment to air on CNN International, which energized their own donation drive—much to the distaste of cooperative members, who saw little of the donations. Government officials also starting bringing visitors to tour their administration's achievement, which was an odd claim given that free trade zones are mostly exempted from state control. Before long, members were compelled to hire their own public relations representative to coordinate the steady flow of tour groups.

Growing international exposure only strained their North American partnerships. In addition to their labor practices, Clean Clothes became concerned about the project's marketability as "100% Employee-Owned." It is true, members conceded, that cooperatives are formed by the contributions of equals. But they disagreed with the proposition that membership could be purchased. A buy-in of $320 may be fair in the abstract or may be appropriate for other cooperatives. But in the Fair Trade Zone, no such sum of money could substitute for the experience of having built the cooperative under conditions of precarity. Although everyone deserves dignified work, they argued, membership was reserved for those who had sweated and thus struggled to make themselves members.

A meeting in November 2007 was a watershed moment. The purpose was to discuss the cooperative's participation in an integrated, fair trade–certified production chain located in Nicaragua, including a fledgling cotton-spinning plant called Génesis and a federation of cotton-growers called COPROEXNIC. Delayed by another appointment and arriving late to the meeting, I slunk into a chair near the back as things were heating up. Jacinta was protesting the foreign dictatorship that loomed over the cooperative, denying them sovereignty (*autogestión*) over their own future. Why should CSD decide where they sourced fabric? What was the point of pursuing fair trade certification if the cooperative was doing well? Across from her, a silver-bearded man named Roger, CSD's spokesperson, was growing impatient. He explained that to say something is fair trade, it must be certified every step of the way, from cotton seed to factory floor. Moreover, the value of fair trade certification, he said, is that it will allow the cooperative to survive in an increasingly saturated market. Immediately, the focus ricocheted back to questions of autonomy and control: Why was CSD telling them how to run their cooperative? Why couldn't they just let them be? Now visibly irritated, Roger replied, "Because this is a project for the community, not for your profit . . . and because what I see here is 50 workers and a handful of women running a maquiladora." Jacinta rose from her chair amid a chorus of grumblings. "This is not *your* cooperative," she said. "This is *our* cooperative. Our sweat and blood is in this."

The exchange was the beginning of the end of their partnership. CSD suspended the Fair Trade Zone's revolving loan program, inadvertently setting in motion events that would culminate with contracted workers picketing the cooperative because they had not been paid. The following year, Clean Clothes issued a new production contract with many new conditions, including full financial transparency and admittance of all new workers as members. During an interview with Emilia on our way to a resort in San Juan del Sur, she and her husband joked that it was their very own "structural adjustment plan."

I visited the Fair Trade Zone a few days later to hear the response to Emilia's offer. Members were huddled in the corner of the workshop, their voices muffled by the whir

of machines. I timidly asked what the deal would mean for their cooperative. Andrea answered first. "It's too late," she said. "Our blood and sweat are in this cooperative because of what we went through. It's like our child, it is here, and we are who we are, because of our *lucha*." For two hours, we talked about the project's humble beginnings, including the uncertainty that they felt about whether it would come to anything. And we talked about what it meant to them to have become owners of their own business. Adilia planned to buy a small pickup truck so that she could take her sons and daughters to the beach on the weekends. Dora wanted to see her youngest daughter, whom she had raised alone, be the first in her family to attend university. Rosario intended to see more of the world, specifically England and Spain, where she had read that the cooperative model began. And with her favorite refrain, Petronila summed up their collective hopes: "We are not trying to make ourselves rich, God knows. We are just trying to have dignified work." Once again, dignified work was front and center in their reasoning, so I pressed the issue: "What do you mean, dignified work?" My question appeared to open the floodgates, and answers came in a torrent, the significance of which I later struggled to capture in my field notes:

> It means being recognized as people, not used like machines. It's the autonomy to make decisions about one's own life, and to contribute to the well-being of others, especially one's children. And it's a way of working that makes you feel good about yourself and what you did with your day. It doesn't matter who you are—a cooperative member, a line worker, a mother, a father, or even an anthropologist[!]—everybody deserves dignified work. Dignified work can be eroded through everyday social exchanges, or through policies that systematically deny a person's intrinsic worth. But in the Fair Trade Zone, at least, the only way to achieve dignified work is to practice it.

The meetings about fair trade certification continued for a while, albeit in a subdued tone. In late 2008, the production was scheduled for an audit through Scientific Certification System's Fair Labor program, which lent their stamp of approval. When it came time for another audit in 2010—this time through Fair Trade USA, which was then called Trans-Fair USA—the cooperative voted to drop out of the project. They cut ties with CSD, although the NGO still retains title to the property. Meanwhile, Clean Clothes quickly replaced them in the production chain with another, Managua-based cooperative, which endured more than two dozen separate certifications. In 2013, Clean Clothes approached the Fair Trade Zone once again with the idea of reopening the conversation, but when the Fair Trade Zone turned the offer down, the company elected to drop out of the certification program themselves. In a public statement, Emilia pointed the finger at the excessive costs of its fair trade bureaucracy, including the demands of organizational restructuring: "If the very people who are the central beneficiaries of fair trade do not find these [certifications] to be justifiable, then is certification truly our best option?" The following year, Clean Clothes joined the Fair Trade Federation, a US-based nonprofit that certifies individual retailers. Their garments continue to be advertised as fair trade.

Meanwhile in Ciudad Sandino, the Fair Trade Zone scaled back production, owing to a reduced client base now consisting of church groups and university clubs. They released their contracted workers and, for a few years, became the "100% Worker-Owned" organization that CSD and Clean Clothes desired. But it proved more difficult to drop their free trade zone designation in order to sell to local markets, in part because the cooperative no longer had legal representation. In early 2017, before the procedures were finalized, the Fair Trade Zone shuttered its doors. When I spoke to Roger shortly after the cooperative cut ties, he conceded that the cooperative's decision was ethical, if not rational or fair. "They didn't become what I wanted," he said, "but apparently they became what they wanted." Since then, his attitude has changed. He regrets that he did not do more to help the Fair Trade Zone become what they envisioned for themselves.

Conclusion: Unsettling the work ethic

"We are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others," writes Anna Tsing. "As contamination changes world-making projects, mutual worlds—and new directions—may emerge" (2015, 17). In the ruined industrial forests of Oregon that Tsing explores, contamination is the spark for new life in the unlikely form of gourmet matsutake mushrooms and Mien refugees whose precarious livelihoods depend on their harvest and trade. In the Fair Trade Zone of Ciudad Sandino, Nicaragua, contamination began with the transformative mutualism of international collaboration, which eventually became unwieldy. When these women encountered models of cooperativism and sweat equity, they found new strategies for collective being, working, and co-becoming. When they were confronted with the liberal ethics of fair trade, they built within their workplace a new subject-world that affirmed their own worth and work. The project began with an earnest attempt at transnational solidarity, but it eventually overflowed its limits.

Anthropologists and scholars in allied fields have interpreted such events as examples of emergence, possibility, and—most optimistically—hope in economic life (Gibson-Graham 2006; Miyazaki 2006; Tsing 2005). For categories so broadly applicable as "the diverse economy" or "friction," the trade-off is that we may lose sight of the larger point because such terms merely describe the dynamic

indeterminacy of a given assemblage. They contribute less to understanding the actual conditions under which something new is produced.

Concepts like "dignified work" do something different. Though inherited from common parlance of economic life in Nicaragua, the term is also the product of a struggle to interpret and change one's circumstances. Moreover, by understanding dignified work as an alternative work ethic, the concept also works to unsettle an already established category—the work ethic—so that it might also overflow itself. These alternative work ethics do not merely reproduce capitalists or even protocapitalists. Rather, they unleash new practices of self-making and perform new subject-worlds. They also shape other aspects of moral economic life, including how people deal with ongoing efforts to reproduce capital at the expense of social life.

But the challenge also extends beyond anthropology, as it is increasingly important to understand the limits of liberal thought and render justice *otherwise*. Clearly, accounts of the current maldistribution of wealth in the world and the wholly unequal character of global exchange provide an incomplete picture of the wages of injustice under capitalism. Opportunities for meaningful work are also concentrated in a small number of jobs, and many workers are denied basic human dignities by having to spend their time doing things that are not worthwhile or in some cases destroy their well-being. "Contributive justice," to be contrasted with dominant theories of distributive justice (Gomberg 2007), provides a valuable counterpoint by showing how work is not merely the burden of exchange: the worth of what we *do* often rivals the value of what we *get*.

In July 2017 members of the now-defunct Fair Trade Zone illustrated the latter point one last time. Dora unexpectedly died from what her children suspected was undiagnosed cancer. Yet the spirit of the Fair Trade Zone lived on. Each of the 12 original members agreed to set aside money from their current work—including Rosario, who sent money from her job as an au pair in Spain—in order to pay not only for Dora's funeral but also for her daughter's tuition at the University of Central America. She intends to study medicine and become a doctor because she imagined that—as she told me in a Facebook message—"no other job could be as fulfilling."

Notes

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1. CSD, Clean Clothes, and the personal names of all individual research participants are pseudonyms.
2. Here and below, I have withheld the citation of this newsletter to protect CSD's anonymity.

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