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“ITS OWN LITTLE CITY”: CUSTOMER SERVICE IN TRUCK STOPS

By

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Thesis

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“Its Own Little City”: Customer Service in Truck Stops

Chairperson: Daisy Rooks

Montana truck stops act as a meeting place for long-haul truckers, vacationers, local commuters, and the workers simply trying to earn a living. The employees at such truck stops must navigate working-class customer service norms while interacting with a unique and diverse set of customers. The ethnographic and interview data that I collected during the 2020 offers a unique view of how customer service employees fared during political unrest, global health concerns, and financial struggle. Additionally, this study highlights the power dynamics that exist in the service industry by examining how such dynamics manifest in the interactions surrounding face masks, sexual harassment, and unhappy customers. My findings also suggest that interacting with customers can be the source of both connection and frustration, depending on the customers' moods and behaviors. The qualitative nature of this study allows me to tell the stories of those who are often overlooked in academia and beyond. Although truck stops occupy little space in most people's day-to-day experiences, the interactions that occur in these workplaces are dynamic, interesting, and sometimes contradictory. My research offers a glimpse not only into the microcosm of truck stops, but also provides valuable insight about society as a whole.

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It is about 7:00 p.m. and you are halfway through your shift at the Blue Collar Truck Stop on the outskirts of town. When you arrived, you noticed the parking lot was full of boats and trailers. It was hot and the sky was clear today, so everyone must have gone to the lake. The crowd of vacationers and truck drivers has slowed down, and your coworker is away from the desk cleaning the bathrooms. A white man wearing a flannel shirt with the sleeves cut off enters the store. He is not wearing a mask, and barely blinks when he walks past the sign reminding customers to wear masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19. He approaches your register and greets you: "How's it going tonight, baby girl?" You ignore the nickname and perform the transaction (he is paying for truck fuel) as usual. When you ask if you can get him anything else, he responds, "How about your number?" (8/28/2020)

Most people who drive have patronized truck stops, and they tend to experience these locations as transitional. For these drivers, truck stops are part of a commute or a road trip and are given little thought. However, truck stops inhabit a more permanent and more substantial place in the lives of their employees and of truckers. Traditionally, truck stops have primarily served truck drivers, offering them a place to shower, eat, sleep, and fuel up before continuing their route (Kozak 2012). Although truck stops have pivoted to serve a wider customer base that includes travelers and commuters, they are still the only places truckers can go to fuel up (Kozak 2012). Thus, truck stops have a unique customer base, a unique set of services, and most importantly, unique social interactions that differ from those in other service workplaces.

The literature on the service industry has largely overlooked the role of truck stop employees and the kinds of customer service they provide. This literature has much to say about customer service norms (Korczynski 2003; Yagil 2008), emotional labor (Erickson and Wharton 1997; Hochschild 2012; Korczynski 2003; Tracy 2000), and gendered institutions (Acker 1990; Hall 1993). Researchers have also focused on flight attendants (Hochschild 2012), call center representatives (Korczynski 2003; Raz 2007), and waitstaff (Giuffre and Williams 1994; Hall 1993), to name just a few occupations. Research on truck stop employment is sorely lacking though. It tends to come from fields outside of sociology, such as nursing and geography, and emphasizes the experiences of truckers over the employees at the truck stops (Apostolopoulos et al. 2012; Kozak 2012). However, studying the experiences of truck stop employees can provide valuable insight into the relational nature of customer service in working-class service occupations.

Working-class service occupations are different from other service industry jobs in a few important ways. First, they are working class, not just by having working-class customers and employees, but also by institutionalizing working-class norms and values themselves. One way these occupations accomplish this is by training employees to interact with customers in a certain way. In truck stops, service norms are tailored to the kinds of customers they have, particularly truck drivers (Kozak 2012). Truck drivers see truck stops as a kind of “home away from home” where they can shower, eat, chat, and relax after a day of driving (Kozak 2012). Kozak (2012:301) argues that this notion of home is related to the informality of the interactions within truck stops. It seems likely

that truck stop employees, anticipating truckers' desire for such interactions, structure their customer service to be casual and familiar.

To examine how customer service operates in such settings, I conducted approximately five weeks of full-time participant observation at a truck stop near Missoula, Montana and interviewed four employees of other truck stops in Montana. I found that the employees that I worked and spoke with navigated social interactions within the existing framework of truck stop customer service work described above. In this thesis, I explore customer service norms in truck stops, which generally mirror working class customer service norms. I emphasize the ways that working class and customer service norms work together to shape employees' interactions with customers.

SOCIAL INTERACTIONS IN WORKING-CLASS CUSTOMER SERVICE

Truck stops exist at the intersection of working-class culture and customer service norms. A primary goal of this literature review is to examine our current understanding of social norms in customer service, including employees' performance of emotional labor, the ways that they cope with performing emotional labor, and how these things appear in different kinds of workplaces. I also examine the limited research on social interactions in truck stops.

Within service workplaces, interactions happen between and among two main groups of people: employees and customers. Interactions among coworkers are important to consider since employees often spend the most time with their coworkers, chatting during downtime and working together to complete tasks. The literature on

service workers details the many ways coworkers interact with each other: they develop playful banter (Giuffre and Williams 1994), share humor (Tracy et al. 2006), and empathize with each other (Korczynski 2003; Yagil 2008). Humor is an especially important mechanism, since it allows individuals to test what is acceptable in their workplace (Bolton et al. 2009:586), to gently correct their coworkers when they overstep (Bolton et al. 2009:593), or to make fun of customers to distance themselves from them (Tracy et al. 2006:292).

Not all interactions among coworkers are positive. Some employees use humor to denigrate their coworkers, often relying on gendered power hierarchies to do so (Plester 2013). Other literature indicates that coworkers themselves are sometimes the perpetrators of sexual harassment (Giuffre and Williams 1994). Additionally, psychological empathy responses can cause negative moods to spread through a workplace, even unintentionally (Hatfield et al. 2011). Because coworkers must interact with each other, often during long shifts and in stressful situations, they have the power to positively affect each other, but they also may cause each other emotional harm.

Emotional Labor

In service workplaces, customers can heavily impact employees' experiences. These interactions are largely characterized by emotional labor, which Hochschild (2012:7) defined as "management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display...[which is] sold for a wage." In Hochschild's study, flight attendants performed emotional labor by conjuring up positive feelings toward customers, suppressing anger when confronted by rudeness, and otherwise adjusting their

emotions to produce the visage of genuine warmth that is expected of them in their work role. A training instructor that Hochschild (2012) observed encouraged flight attendants not to get angry when confronted by rude passengers, but to look at them as childlike or potentially afraid of flying. This is one example of flight attendants being told to manage their feelings (in this case, anger) to create an observable display (pleasant calmness) while on the job.

Some employees in the service industry find emotional labor to be a positive part of working (Wharton 1993). Wharton (1993) speculated that emotional labor could be emotionally rewarding for some people. She also found that workers who perform emotional labor and either have low job autonomy (little control over how their work is done) or are very involved in their job have a higher risk of emotional exhaustion (Wharton 1993). Essentially, the conditions of the job are as important to job satisfaction as emotional labor was.

Psychology researchers traditionally thought of physical emotional expressions as indicators of a person's feelings. However, emotional expression can also be used strategically in social situations. For example, Rafaeli and Sutton (1987) argue that in the work role, displays of emotion can be used as "control moves." Employees do this by intentionally expressing an emotion in a way that will improve their situation. For example, if a customer thinks their waiter was very friendly, they might be more inclined to leave a generous tip (Rafaeli and Sutton 1987). For employees in untipped service jobs, using control moves provides more abstract benefits; perhaps a regular who stops in on his weekly route will remember a cashier's friendliness and be less inclined to be rude when they are having a bad day. It is also important to note that control moves and

emotional labor are gendered. Women and men are expected to perform emotional labor in different ways, and the expectations for women performing emotional labor are usually higher than they are for men (Hall 1993).

Gendered institutions.

In service work, employees are required not just to be skillful, but also to have an attractive appearance and demeanor. For example, Hall (1993) found that many waitpersons in restaurants consider flirting to be as much a part of their job as serving was. Despite Hall's (1993) finding that workers who flirt on the job do not consider this to be "real flirting," customers often misinterpret this. Yagil (2008) found that the imbalance of power between a customer and employee, the pervasiveness of "work flirting," and the emphasis on deference can result in customers sexually harassing workers. Since sexual harassment in service work is so pervasive, many employees, especially women, consider it to be a "normal or inevitable" part of their jobs (Giuffre and Williams 1994; Yagil 2008). An informal work culture, which is a part of many service-oriented workplaces, can result in customers crossing the boundary between what is appropriate in another person's workplace and what is appropriate in a social interaction (Yagil 2008).

Organizations are often considered to be gender-neutral. Acker (1990) writes that in capitalist organizations, the ideal worker is disembodied: they have no physical needs on or off the job. Since this is not possible, the next best thing is "the male worker whose life centers on his full-time, life-long job, while his wife or another woman takes care of his personal needs and his children" (Acker 1990:149) On the other hand,

women and their physical bodies and needs, including pregnancy and childcare, menstruation, and their “mythic ‘emotionality’” are “suspect, stigmatized, and used as grounds for control and exclusion” (Acker 1990:152).

Because the idea of gender-neutral organizations emphasizes men and masculinity, Acker (1990) calls for a gendered theory of organizations. Men and women are encouraged and expected to do different kinds of work, which results in income and status inequality between the genders. Additionally, gender norms and some parts of individuals’ gender identity are produced through organizational processes. Acker argues that these are all reasons why a gendered theory of organizations is necessary.

Acker’s theory involves several processes of gender in organizations. First, men and women are divided in terms of “labor, of allowed behaviors, of locations in physical space, of power” (Acker 1990:146). Second, organizations create “symbols and images that explain, express, reinforce, or sometimes oppose those divisions” (Acker 1990:146). Third, the interactions between people of similar and different genders “enact dominance and submission” (Acker 1990:147). Fourth, “these processes help to produce gendered components of individual identity... [including] choice of appropriate work, language use, clothing, and presentation of self” (Acker 1990:147). Taken together, Acker’s description of gendered organizations indicates that such organizations are part of a cycle in which workers’ gender expression and identity are influenced by workplace processes, and their gender then influences which kinds of work society encourages them to do or to avoid.

Hall (1993) applied Acker’s gendered organizations framework to service workplaces to explore waitpersons’ gendered experiences at work. She illustrated that

gender is embedded in service organizations on both macro- and micro-levels; it is present in both individual interactions and in training and scripts that employees are expected to follow (Hall 1993:467). This is consistent with Acker's (1990:146) conceptualization of gendered institutions, in which "exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through... a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine."

Emotional labor is clearly a fact of life for customer service workers, who must manage the emotions of customers while disguising their true emotions on the job. In order to do this, many service employees develop coping mechanisms to mediate the negative effects of performing emotional labor. The following sections examine the literature on these coping mechanisms, including negotiating one's own identity, constructing boundary regions, and forming communities of coping.

Negotiating identity.

According to Erickson and Wharton's (1997) study of hospital and bank service employees, performing emotional labor can negatively affect employees' perceptions of themselves. Although employees in this study were not negatively affected by high levels of customer interaction, if employees *felt* like their job depended on having good people skills, they had more feelings of inauthenticity. They also found that feelings of inauthenticity were correlated with depressed mood among the workers that they surveyed (Erickson and Wharton 1997). Their findings suggest that performing emotional labor under duress, i.e. in order to keep one's job, is more harmful than simply spending large amounts of time working with people.

Some service employees cope with performing emotional labor by negotiating their own identity. Tracy (2000) studied employees on cruise ships to examine this process. She found that those employees who do differentiate between their “real and fake selves” at work found this to be alienating (Tracy 2000:116). On the other hand, employees whose “real selves” were consistent with the self they were expected to present on the job did not struggle with alienation. This echoes Erickson and Wharton’s (1997) finding that emotional labor can be a positive part of performing emotional labor and Korczynski’s (2003) finding that many people who go into the service industry do so because they enjoy providing customer service. Taken together, these studies indicate that employees who go into service work because they enjoy it might find emotional labor easier to perform, while employees who do not particularly enjoy customer service may struggle more with alienation.

Boundary regions.

Stein (2007) examines how employees and customers construct boundary regions between each other. These regions are shared spaces that should be “governed by implicitly agreed norms” between the employee and customer (Stein 2007:1227). However, these regions are often characterized by “excessive permeability,” in which one entity, usually the employee, may feel their (physical or social) space is being invaded by the other (Stein 2007:1227). This happens when customers become aggressive or verbally abusive. Stein (2007:1227-1228) uses the metaphor of toxicity to explain how the “toxins” of negativity can pass from the customer to the employee when boundary regions are too permeable.

The employees in the studies Stein cites are unable to “digest” toxins, or, in other words, they cannot simply ignore certain toxins and go about their day. Stein (2007:1229) cites studies in which employees endured repeated abuses or harassment from customers; these repeated occurrences seem to be more difficult to “digest” than single instances. Stein (2007:1234) rejects the idea that employees are “emotionally autonomous.” Many people, including managers, offer employees platitudes such as “We own our own emotions” (Korczynski 2003:68; quoted in Stein 2007:1234). However, the toxicity perspective suggests that this is not the case; customers can and do affect employees’ emotional well-being.

Since employees cannot process these abuses, they respond by reflecting them back at the customer, transferring it to their coworkers, or carrying them beyond the end of their shift (Stein 2007). Sometimes, employees engage in revenge against toxic customers, as in the case of a waitress dumping an entire salt shaker onto the head of an obnoxious bar patron wanting to do “body shots” (Stein 2007:1232). Other times, resistance may take a subtler form, such as making fun of clients behind their backs (Korczynski 2003; Tracy et al. 2006) or even simply not smiling at customers (Hall 1993:460). Regardless of how employees resist toxins, Stein (2007:1235) specifies that these actions are done to “unburden” themselves of the negative feelings associated with repeated abuse and harassment.

Communities of coping.

While Stein emphasizes employees’ aggressive, vengeful responses to abusive customers, Korczynski (2003) focuses on employees’ less direct response of forming

“communities of coping.” These communities, which Korczynski (2003) observed in US and Australian call centers, provided solidarity and emotional support for workers. Workers could tell each other about rude, abusive customers, offer each other “a shoulder to cry on,” and even “[make] fun of customers communally” (Korczynski 2003:68-69). Managers did not want employees to respond this way. One manager insisted that workers should show empathy to rude customers, while another described going to one’s coworkers to tell them about a bad call as “[gossiping] about customers” (Korczynski 2003:68). The author argues that these “communities of coping” often exist in “off-stage areas,” away from supervisors and customers. It is within these communities that employees can express emotions that managers might not approve of, such as frustration or annoyance. In a busy truck stop in the middle of the day, community coping might take the form of coworkers “blowing off steam” by talking about customers on a smoke break or chatting in a break room. Late-night conversations during a graveyard shift in an otherwise-empty store could also become a “community of coping.” In these cases, off-stage areas are constructed temporarily. They occur only when the employees are present for their smoke breaks or when the store is empty, and when customers or supervisors join them, they are no longer “off-stage.”

Raz (2007) expanded on Korczynski’s study to example Israeli call centers. He found that customer service representatives (CSRs) developed community in three steps. First, CSRs had to learn the contradictions present in their jobs, such as the dual priorities of cost-efficiency and service quality. Second, they had to recognize the limits of their workplaces, such as how team leaders failed to solve these problems. Finally, CSRs learned how to “[channel] their growing frustration and criticism into acts of

subversion” such as telling customers to call local service centers instead of offering solutions themselves. These acts were often learned through informal socialization with other coworkers.

The literature on emotional labor indicates that its performance can take a heavy mental toll on service employees. This literature is broadly focused on the service industry, and does not differentiate between different kinds of workplaces within this industry. One way of differentiating these workplaces is by class. The following section examines the answers to questions such as how workplaces are stratified by class, how this influences the kind of customer service the workplaces provide, and what this means for the employees.

Working Class Norms in Service Occupations

The literature on class indicates that workplaces, like individuals, are stratified by class (Gray and Kish-Gephart 2013; Hall 1993). For example, luxury hotels and cruise ships are middle- or upper-class service workplaces since the businesses are associated with middle- and upper-class values of higher education, leisure, and financial achievement (Sherman 2005; Tracy 2000; Gorman 2000). On the other hand, working-class service businesses like truck stops, fast-food restaurants, or corner stores are associated with working-class values like hard work and down-to-earth attitudes (Gorman 2000). Additionally, many working-class service jobs offer low wages and little opportunity for upward mobility (Berg and Frost 2005; Raz 2007). Employees may struggle to secure reliable childcare or transportation to work (Berg and Frost 2005), and turnover is often quite high (Berg and Frost 2005; Raz, 2007; Yagil 2008). The

consequences of class-stratified workplaces are all-encompassing, affecting how employees do their jobs as well as how they live when they are not at work.

Truck stops are working-class workplaces. Their customers and employees are largely working-class. Trucking is low-status, blue-collar employment (alongside “construction, production, and transportation and material moving occupations”; Burks and Monaco 2019). Truck stop workers are also blue collar workers, since they are employed in the service industry and earn low wages (about \$12.54 per hour in non-supervisory roles) (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020). In addition, truck stops themselves are viewed as low-status and sometimes stigmatized locations (Kozak 2012). High-profile stories of murders committed at truck stops, like those of Robert Ben Rhoades, surely have cemented truck stops as unsafe locations in the public view. Additionally, sex work and drugs are an everyday reality at truck stops (Apostolopoulos et al. 2012).

Research on the service industry has much to say about workers in low-wage jobs, working-class workers, and customer service. These workplaces require employees to perform emotional labor, often in a gendered way. This emotional labor can have negative effects on employees and can affect how they perform emotional labor. Additionally, workplaces themselves can be stratified by class, which may affect the kinds of service they provide. However, little research has been dedicated to finding out how these dynamics interact in workplaces with all of these elements: low wages, working-class characteristics, and customer service.

METHODS

Truck stops are one kind of workplace where low wages, working-class characteristics, and customer service intersect. To study the kinds of interactions employees have in such environments, I used mixed qualitative methods. First, I conducted ethnographic observations at a truck stop near Missoula, Montana. After completing my ethnography, I interviewed workers at different truck stops across Montana to deepen my understanding of truck stop workers' experiences. Below, I describe the two methods of data collection that I used during this study, as well as the settings of each of the truck stops featured in this research.

Ethnography

I collected the first part of my research using ethnographic observations. The ethnographic method involves "observing, listening, asking questions, and indeed gathering any and all information you can lay your hands on" in a research setting (Coffey 2018:16). To do this, I spent approximately seven weeks (July 15-September 9) working full-time at the Blue Collar Truck Stop, where I participated in and observed the workplace. With approval from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Montana, I decided not to reveal my status as a researcher to my coworkers or seek permission from the truck stop owner to conduct my research. In "covert studies," researchers may choose not to disclose their researcher status for several reasons, including integrating into the site more easily and preventing the "Hawthorne effect" in which people act differently when they know they are being observed (Zickar and Carter 2010:310). Calvey (2008:914) summarizes his view on such covert studies: "the analytic understanding gained from the membership that a covert role can bring to the setting

outweighs its ethical disadvantages.” In the context of this work, I was conducting research, yes, but my role as a worker trying to make rent and pay for groceries (a real role, not one contrived for the setting) was more important to my relationships with the other workers at the Blue Collar Truck Stop.

At the Blue Collar Truck Stop, I worked five eight-hour shifts each week as a cashier and recorded my field notes orally while driving home each evening. When I began collecting observational data, I was primarily interested in the kinds of interactions that happen in truck stops. I focused both on the everyday, ordinary exchanges like cash transactions and chatting with regulars, as well as unexpected or unusual occurrences, such as the large proportion of queer employees and the occasional angry outbursts from customers. I also described the research setting in my initial fieldnotes: the job duties, the layout of the store, the regulars, and my coworkers’ appearances and demeanors. Due to the demands of the job, as well as the covert nature of my research, I could not record field notes while working, but my commute provided me the opportunity to record information from the day’s work while it was fresh in my mind. During my data collection period, I generated 28 sets of field notes. The ethnographic dataset that I produced consisted of approximately 60 pages of typed, single-space data.

The research setting.

Missoula, Montana is located on Interstate 90, which runs from Seattle to Boston. The Flathead Reservation is about an hour north of Missoula, and further north lay Glacier National Park and the town of Kalispell. If one travels west from Missoula, they

could reach Seattle in about seven hours. Traveling east, a person could visit Bozeman in three hours and Billings (Montana's largest city) in five. Missoula is the home of the second-largest university in Montana as well as many historical sites, which draw tourists and students from across the Northwest. Missoula is often considered the most liberal city in Montana, which as a state leans Republican (Pew Research Center 2014). The Blue Collar Truck Stop, located just outside of Missoula, acts as a meeting place for truckers, travelers, and Missoulians trying to earn a living. Here, this contrast between the many different kinds of people in Missoula came into sharp relief.

When a traveler arrives at the Blue Collar Truck Stop, they might first notice that several other truck stops surround it. The Blue Collar Truck Stop is an ideal place to stop for beers before an afternoon of boating, to buy lottery tickets on the commute from work in Missoula to home in Arlee, or to fuel up a semi-truck full of paper products before returning to Seattle. While I worked there, I encountered folks from the far-right, far-left, and everything in between, including people who chose not to share their political stance during our brief interactions. Political unrest was often a source of discussion with customers, with topics including COVID-19 relief stimulus bills, city- and county-wide mask mandates, the latest news about Donald Trump's tweets, and Black Lives Matter protests at the Missoula Courthouse and in Seattle (where many truckers began or ended their routes). Blue Collar Truck Stop employees encountered board shorts and flip flops, fake IDs, MAGA face masks, old denim over cowboy boots, motorcycle rally t-shirts, purple hair paired with piercings, and the occasional squatter in the back lot.

Customers included truck drivers, local commuters, and other travelers. Truckers might drive long-haul routes and only visit the business once, or they could be short-distance drivers who visited multiple times per week. The Blue Collar Truck Stop also had contracts with several local businesses; my coworkers and I knew these businesses' employees by name since they visited so frequently. Local commuters also varied in familiarity. Some, like Abel and Kieran, knew employees by name and stopped by as much to visit as they did to make purchases. Others were less familiar; I saw many people regularly but never quite got to know them. Finally, the Blue Collar Truck Stop saw many travelers on their way to outdoor recreation sites, stopping to fuel up and buy snacks before moving along.

Working at the Blue Collar Truck Stop was fairly routine. During a shift, service attendants acted as janitors and maintenance workers, emptying outdoor trash cans, refilling windshield cleaning fluid, and restocking the large selection of bottled sodas, energy drinks, and water. Cashiers completed transactions with truck drivers and other customers and performed cleaning duties. Usually, two cashiers and one service attendant were on each shift; the exception was overnight shifts, where only one cashier and one service attendant worked. Our work weeks were fairly consistent; I usually worked the evening (3-11 p.m.) shift with Asher and either Daphne or Wes. This shift was unique for several reasons. First, managers usually left around 4 p.m., leaving the employees without much supervision. Second, this shift was much quieter than the day shift; as the evening went on, fewer customers came into the store. These factors allowed evening shift employees to chat and joke freely during their downtime.

The Blue Collar Truck Stop employees were a widely varied group. I worked most of my shifts with Wes, a White man in his mid-forties. Wes had a salt-and-pepper beard and usually wore a biker bandana with his plastic face shield, which he wore in lieu of a cloth face mask. Wes was a cashier, and he had been working at the Blue Collar Truck Stop for about a year. He was known for telling “dad jokes” and was almost always in a good mood, but he did not shy away from political discussions. When he did discuss politics, it was usually with Asher, who often worked with Wes and I. Asher was in his mid-thirties and had been at the truck stop for a little longer than Wes had. Asher presented as a fan of metal music; he had a shaved head, long beard, and wore baggy jeans with a wallet chain hanging to one side. He was very respectful to customers, and he, Wes, and I often spent our downtime joking with each other.

The other employees I interacted with the most were Daphne, Sam, and Andi. Daphne and I usually worked together one night per week. Daphne was twenty years old at the time of the study, making her the youngest employee. She was short, thin, and pale, but she was also feisty and liked to playfully tease her coworkers. I only saw Sam when I was leaving my evening shift and she was starting her overnight shift. I often joined her outside during her start-of-shift smoke break, though, and she would tell me about the latest roleplaying game she was planning. Similarly, I only saw Andi when she was leaving her day shift and I was starting my evening shift, but the conversations we had during the small overlap were pleasant. Andi took her job very seriously and followed rules carefully. She was a fan of K-pop music and often told me about the anime she was watching at the time.

The Blue Collar Truck Stop employees' looks were as diverse as their personalities. They donned combinations of paramilitary tattoos, multicolored hair, K-pop branded wallets, and leather jackets with confederate flag patches. Our appearances were not heavily regulated¹; our uniform consisted of jeans or khakis, closed-toe shoes, and a work shirt. We were issued two work shirts each and were allowed to pick from a boxy, traditional "men's cut" polo or a "women's cut" polo that had a slightly more open neckline and tapered above the hips. Beyond that, though, we were given a great deal of freedom. Employees displayed their personal style easily within the uniform guidelines. For example, Asher wore baggy jeans or khakis with a wallet chain, and Daphne wore chunky black Goth-style boots.

Our grooming choices were not regulated either. Daphne had long hair that was dyed blue and pink, and Andi had a bright tattoo about six inches in length on her forearm. Asher's ears were gauged, and I wore dark nail polish during almost every shift that I worked. I was pleasantly surprised to find that this freedom extended to grooming choices that did not conform to gender norms as well. We were permitted to wear shorts, and I often did during the hot summer days. Shaving is not a part of my personal grooming routine, and the hair on my legs is fairly noticeable; I worried that a manager might not permit me to wear shorts or require that I shave to be allowed to wear shorts. When I approached one of my female coworkers with this concern, she assured me that

¹ Based on my previous experience working at a truck stop, this laissez-faire attitude about appearances was rather uncommon. My previous truck stop job, which was at a large corporate-owned truck stop, required employees to wear plain pants, closed-toe shoes, and a collared shirt with a branded vest, not unlike the Blue Collar Truck Stop. On day shifts at my previous workplace, this was strictly enforced, but on night shifts we had more flexibility, most likely because no managers were around to enforce the dress code. However, I frequently heard one coworker say that he would probably get written up for not following the dress code, and we were often reminded about uniform regulations at meetings. At the Blue Collar Truck Stop, though, I never heard managers reminding, reprimanding, or even mentioning the dress code, even if someone forgot a name tag or wore a sweater over their work polo.

this would not happen, and I was pleased to find that she was right. I wore shorts several times each week and no manager, coworker, or even customer made any comment on my personal grooming choices.

Intersectionality and the researcher.

In ethnographic research, the research instrument is not a questionnaire or set of interview questions, but the researcher themselves (Coffey 2018:29). When the researcher chooses to conduct full participation ethnography, they do not simply absorb information, but instead must become an active part of the setting they are studying. For this reason, understanding my own appearance, speech, and behavior will help the reader understand my findings.

Some of my characteristics, such as my race, my age, and my perceived gender, were immutable and undoubtedly shaped the observations I was able to make. I say perceived gender because the gender my customers and coworkers presumed me to be did not always match up with my gender identity. Those around me often took the shape of my body and face, the tone of my voice, and even the way I moved through space as indicators of “womanness.” These characteristics heavily influenced how I was treated in the field. Lumsden (2009:504) argues that women (or, I would add, those perceived to be women) “may trigger off specific behaviours in research” such as gendered interactions and sexually suggestive comments.

At the time of this research, my hair was long, and I often wore it in a braid or bun with colorful accessories and skinny jeans. In this setting, people interacted with me in a way that suggested they perceived me as a heterosexual woman. This was very

different from my experience working at another truck stop several years prior, when I had a short, faded hairstyle that I wore with loose jeans and a flannel jacket. In that context, customers occasionally mistook me for a man or asked me about my sexual orientation. Had I decided to cut my hair and wear different clothes at the Blue Collar Truck Stop, customers may have interacted with me more similarly to the way the customers at my previous workplace had.

I made choices regarding my appearance and behavior to preserve both my ability to relate to my coworkers, and my personal safety and comfort. The first such choice came only a few weeks into my tenure at the Blue Collar Truck Stop, when I had to decide how open I should be regarding my sexual orientation. One day at work, Andi made a joke that a customer who had been flirting with her would be disappointed, since she was not attracted to men. I laughed, and said, "Same." Andi asked if I was gay, and I told her I was. She then warned me, in a sarcastically upbeat voice, not to tell one particular coworker about that. If I did, she warned me, he would call me a "man-hater" for weeks afterwards, like he had done to her.

This presented me with a challenge: to be out in the field and risk alienating some coworkers, or to keep my sexual orientation hidden and risk losing closeness with others, specifically queer coworkers. I had had a similar experience a few weeks previously with Daphne, who told me that she was bisexual and that several of our coworkers were queer. This made me feel eager to "join the club." As Rooke (2010:13) wrote, being openly "queer in the field" can allow a researcher to develop rapport with queer participants in a way that a cisgender, heterosexual researcher could not. In the end, I decided to only reveal my sexuality to certain people: all of my nonbinary and

women coworkers, and only one man, Wes, whom I worked and talked with frequently enough to feel safe doing so. I chose not to reveal my sexual orientation to the other men that I worked with to avoid being stigmatized or sexualized.

This decision process was similar to experiences I have had at other workplaces. I typically withhold most information about myself, sexuality included, until I get a feeling for the nature of the workplace and my coworkers. For example, at a hotel I worked at previously, management required us to always play Fox News on the lobby television. I inferred that the managers were strongly conservative, and so decided to never reveal my sexual orientation at work. On the other hand, at the truck stop I worked at before coming to the Blue Collar Truck Stop, the employees were mostly libertarian-left and liberal and discussed their relationships and sexual partners of all genders freely. I felt comfortable being more open with my sexuality at that workplace. My decision process at the Blue Collar Truck Stop had one important difference from the two above, though: in addition to being concerned for my safety and comfort, I also recognized the need to establish rapport in order to be able to collect data at the Blue Collar Truck Stop. I carefully considered all of these factors when determining when and how to reveal my sexual orientation at work.

Interviews

I conducted the second portion of my data collection via interviews with people who worked at truck stops across Montana. I chose to recruit from other truck stops for two reasons: first, recruiting workers from the Blue Collar Truck Stop would have revealed my position as a researcher, and second, I wanted to broaden my

understanding of truck stops to include more than one. Although this work is qualitative and therefore not generalizable to a larger group of truck stops, interviewing workers from other truck stops helped me recognize what themes were not universal to all truck stops and what themes were more widespread.

I conducted three stages of recruitment for my interviews. First, I visited fourteen truck stops across Montana and left flyers with the managers, asking them to leave them in places employees would see them². This yielded my first three interviews. I then attempted to contact coworkers from my previous truck stop job in Billings, but unfortunately, due to high turnover in such workplaces, I was unable to secure any interviews this way³. After this, I made phone calls to each truck stop I had previously visited and sent follow-up messages to several people who had contacted me but had not yet completed an interview. This yielded an additional interview.

This three-step recruitment process yielded four interviews. There are several possible reasons that I had difficulty recruiting interviewees: I was recruiting around the holiday season, and I was conducting my interviews via Zoom, which may have acted as a barrier to people who had never used Zoom. The nature of truck stop work schedules, especially for potential participants who worked overnight shifts, may have also contributed to the low response rate. Finally, other issues may have prevented more employees from contacting me. Childcare responsibilities, suspicion of my

² A copy of my flyer can be found in Appendix A.

³ My sample frame required employees to have worked at a truck stop for at least 30 days since March 1, 2020, since I wanted to ensure I was interviewing people who worked during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since many of my former coworkers from my first truck stop job had left the job long before then, they were not eligible to be interviewed.

intentions, concerns about anonymity, or simply not having a chance to see the fliers all may have influenced the employees at the truck stops I visited.

I conducted these four interviews during the winter of 2020-2021. Each interviewee contacted me after I visited their truck stop and left fliers advertising my research and requesting interviews with employees. I conducted all interviews via Zoom and thanked each interviewee for their time with sixty dollars⁴. After completing the interviews, the videos were transcribed by a professional transcription service and returned to me for analysis.

Josie, my first interviewee, works at an independent truck stop near a small urban cluster of less than 10,000 people. The truck stop is connected to both a diner and a casino; in her sixteen years working there, Josie has worked at both the diner and the casino. In addition to keeping the casino's books and managing the casino's machines, she will "quite often...engage a lot of the customers" by chatting with them. Josie told me she empathized with truckers who struggled with loneliness on the road: "There's a lot of tourists that come through... but... my heart's with the truck drivers."

Morgan, my second interviewee, works at the deli of a chain truck stop location in a small rural town of just under 2,000 residents. Most of the regulars at her truck stop are locals who work at a nearby mine. Morgan lives in another small town about fifteen minutes from the truck stop she works at, and she emphasized how different the two places were in our interview. She told me, "Working at a truck stop, it's like its own little city." Morgan said she was more careful going outside at night around the truck stop

⁴ I initially planned to compensate interviewees with \$30. After conducting three interviews and struggling to obtain more, I decided to increase this amount to \$60. When I made this decision, I contacted the previous three interviewees and gave them an additional \$30 to ensure that all interviewees were given the same compensation.

and described the homeless people who visited the truck stop as they passed through the town; She said these were issues that she did not encounter in her hometown.

Blake, my third interviewee, works at an independent truck stop in a small urban cluster with a population of around 3,500 people situated near a Native American reservation. Blake was the only person to identify his own race (Native American) in our interview. He did so while describing the racial tensions between White truckers and the Native American residents of the town. Blake is a cashier who typically works evening or overnight shifts, and his girlfriend works at the adjoining casino. His interactions are mostly with truckers, or with elders who tell him “about how I can be better with myself; that I shouldn't settle on where I'm at right now; that I can do better.”

Jacob, my final interviewee, works as a cashier at a chain truck stop location in a large city of over 100,000 residents. When I interviewed him, Jacob had only been working at this location for about a month. He told me that he liked talking with customers and tried to make their day better when interacting with them.

Data Analysis

Analyzing qualitative data is an unpredictable, nonlinear process in which, “confronted with a mountain of impressions, documents, transcribed interviews, and field notes, the qualitative researcher faces the difficult task of making sense of what has been learned” (Anfara et al. 2002:31). The researcher must first identify themes into which they categorize and organize their data. Developing themes is a challenging process, since the themes must involve logical groupings of data, so researchers often use trial and error to find the ones that fit the best (Anfara et al. 2002). I began the

analysis of my field notes using four themes: COVID-19, gender, politics, and race. I picked these categories because I noticed that employees and customers often discussed these topics or seemed to be motivated by them. However, I quickly found that these themes were both overlapping and incomplete. For example, COVID-19 was often discussed in the context of political events or governmental powers. Additionally, certain incidents, like customers acting aggressively toward employees, did not fit into any of the four themes but were still significant in the workplace. For this reason, I decided to recode my findings using a new set of codes: coworker conversations, customer conversations, masks and COVID-19, politics, and sexual harassment. This iteration of my themes was not without issue either: they were still not exhaustive or mutually exclusive, and the theme of sexual harassment was particularly troublesome. Some of the incidents that I wanted to include were not sexual, but did seem to be informed by gender hierarchies and customers' sexism.

At this point in my analysis, I realized that I was not coding inductively. Sexual and gendered harassment are two things I expected to find in truck stops, and while they certainly did occur, I was trying too hard to force certain incidents into these categories. I decided to start fresh with completely new themes and decided instead to differentiate interactions between employees and customers, and interactions among coworkers. From there, I was able to differentiate within each category whether the participants agreed with each other or not. These themes became my final categories of analysis, which I use to organize the findings section of this paper.

This process was done after I completed my ethnographic observations and before I began conducting interviews. One major benefit of this was that I used the final

set of themes to develop the questions I used in interviews. These questions explored the interactions employees had with each other and with customers⁵. After conducting my interviews, I used a professional transcription service to obtain written transcriptions and then coded the data as I had with the field notes. Using themes from my observations to determine how I would develop interview questions was particularly useful. It allowed me to use interviews to fill in gaps in my observational data, and also allowed me to probe deeper into the themes that I had already uncovered.

FINDINGS

In this section, I explore the kinds of interactions that happen in truck stops. I found that, aside from everyday conversations that surrounded transactions and products, truck stop employees also regularly participated in conversations about identity, current political events, and the COVID-19 pandemic. I will refer to these kinds of conversations as *value-laden interactions*. These conversations were complex and often emotional for the participants due to personal experiences and strong opinions. For employees, concerns about getting in trouble on the job also shaded these interactions. For example, Daphne was usually polite to customers, even if they were being rude or talking about something contrary to her values, but would tell me that she disagreed with the customer once they left the store.

In some cases, the participants in value-laden interactions were all employees, and in some cases they involved a mixture of employees and customers. Such interactions probably also occurred on the truck stop premises between customers as

⁵ A copy of my interview schedule can be found in Appendix B.

well, but those fall outside the scope of this project. Value-laden interactions also varied depending on whether the participants agreed about the topic or not. I will refer to value-laden interactions where all the participants agreed with each other as *participants in agreement*, and for cases where at least two participants disagreed with each other, I will refer to those involved as *participants in disagreement*.

I divide these interactions into four subtypes, based on who was involved and how whether they agreed or not about the topic of conversation. The first subtype, which involved *coworkers in agreement*, happened often at the Blue Collar Truck Stop⁶. Here, these conversations flowed freely during downtime and were punctuated with smiles and laughter.

The second subtype, which involved *customers and employees in agreement*, also happened more often at the Blue Collar Truck Stop than at the other truck stops. Usually, customers initiated these interactions and if employees responded in agreement, the conversation would continue amiably. Participants in these conversations usually expressed conservative viewpoints; common topics involved the Trump administration, Black Lives Matter protests, and mask mandates.

The third subtype involved *coworkers in disagreement*. These discussions were quite uncommon, possibly because coworkers intentionally avoided difficult topics at their workplaces. In fact, this kind of interaction only appeared at the Blue Collar Truck Stop during shifts that Asher, Wes, and I worked together. Wes and Asher usually represented their libertarian-right perspectives, while I listened and only rarely

⁶ Interestingly, none of my interviewees mentioned this kind of interaction in their interviews. They described casually chatting with their coworkers, but these conversations usually focused on light topics like the previous weekend's activities.

interjected with my more left-leaning opinions. Despite the charged nature of these topics, participants in these interactions were usually polite and subtly indicated respect for the other participants' different opinions.

The fourth subtype involved *customers and employees in disagreement*. These interactions, which were usually initiated by customers, could be tense and frustrating for employees. The most interesting thing about these interactions was how employees responded to these interactions. I discovered two kinds of responses; passive responses, characterized by an employee's lack of open disagreement or resistance to the customer, and active responses, characterized by an employee's open disagreement with the customer.

It is important to note that these interactions involved varying degrees of consent; this was especially true of interactions that involved customers. The pervasive "customer is always right" mentality creates a power hierarchy in customer service relations (Yagil 2008:143). Gender norms also affect consent in customer service; women are socialized to be feminine and deferent toward customers, especially men (Hall 1993:463). This can result in interactions where customers are acting inappropriately or disrespectfully, but the employee is virtually powerless to respond. They may not be allowed to leave their register, for example, or may not be able to ask the customer to leave unless the customer is being inordinately inappropriate since customer service norms require employees to act friendly, regardless of how they feel (Hall 1993;Hochschild 2012).

Participants in interaction	Alignment of values	Characteristics of interactions
Coworkers	In agreement	Casual, fun, easy

Employees and customers	In agreement	Casual, joking; employees validated customers' views
Coworkers	In disagreement	Cautious, respectful of boundaries
Employees and customers	In disagreement	Tense, sometimes aggressive

Coworkers in Agreement

My research suggests that conversations among *coworkers in agreement* were fairly common. This theme appeared in both my interviews and observations. Political and social conflicts, public health matters, and Constitutional freedoms were especially common among topics of conversation for the workers discussed in this section. The coworkers who discussed these topics usually held similar political views.

At the Blue Collar Truck Stop, several groups of employees existed: those who were liberal, those who were right-leaning libertarians, and those who were not forthcoming about their political perspectives. There were several other employees whom I did not work with enough to get a sense of their political perspectives. Most of the conversations that I observed involved either Daphne and myself, or Wes and Asher. These conversations provided relief from the boredom that crept in during slow periods. During silent gaps between transactions, late in the evening, I found that I worked hard to think of conversational topics that Wes or Daphne would want to discuss, and it seemed that my coworkers did the same. A common interaction involved a long period of silence, then a coworker hopefully saying, "So did you hear about [a current political event or local news story]?"

These conversations allowed coworkers to explore each other's perspectives. They also may have helped employees to build rapport; my own experiences of chatting with coworkers about such topics made me feel closer to, and more trusting of, those coworkers. About once per week, Daphne and I worked the evening shift together. This shift had two distinctive characteristics: it was relatively unsupervised, since managers typically only worked day shifts, and it allowed for large swathes of uninterrupted time as the five o'clock after-work rush slowed down. This freedom allowed Daphne and I to spend much of our time making jokes and critiquing current events together. She and I were chatting once shortly after I began working at the Blue Collar Truck Stop, and I made an offhand joke about getting spam emails that said, "Michelle, Russian single women want to date you!" Daphne asked eagerly if I was gay, and when I told her I was, she shared excitedly that she was bisexual. After this incident, Daphne, perhaps assuming that we shared left-leaning political perspectives, began initiating conversations with me about current political events during slow periods on our shifts. We frequently discussed our mutual dislike for the Trump administration and our appreciation for people who respected mask mandates (7/21/2020). During these conversations, we became quite animated, using big hand gestures and altering our voices while we quoted TikToks about mask usage and imitated customers who made sexist jokes.

Daphne's and my shared values became more visible after July 9, 2020, the day Missoula County passed a mask mandate (Evans 2020). About a week after the mask mandate passed, Daphne and I were stocking candy and chips when Bridget, a teenage employee at the restaurant next door, stopped by to get some change for her till.

Making conversation, I asked Bridget how she was. She told me that the restaurant had been flagged by the health department for not enforcing the mask mandate, so their manager had told them they needed to begin enforcing the rule. Sounding tired and frustrated, she added, "People are being horrible about [being asked to wear masks]."

After Bridget left, Daphne told me (in a hushed tone, even though we were the only two in the store), "Three people have actually called in and reported to the health department" including herself and two of our coworkers (7/21/2020). She did not tell me who the other two coworkers were, and I did not ask. I did not want to suggest that I would share this information with others, especially our managers, since her conspiratorial tone indicated to me that she trusted me to keep this a secret. I assumed Daphne was worried she would get into trouble with management if they found out she had called the health department. Our managers had told us explicitly not to enforce the mandate, so this concern would be reasonable in that context.

During the rest of the work week, I worked the evening shift with Wes and Asher. They were both right-leaning libertarians who frequently chatted about current events. To pass the time, they spent many hours casually discussing their shared opinions about the Black Lives Matter protests (which they characterized as riots), mask mandates (which they considered to be governmental overreach), and Second Amendment rights (which they were fiercely protective of). Whenever discussions of COVID-19 relief stimulus checks came up, Asher talked excitedly about how he was going to use his check to grow his already-extensive gun collection. I heard Wes and

Asher discussing the “Three Percenters⁷” occasionally; for example, Wes once told Asher that he had seen a car in the parking lot with a Three Percenter sticker on it that looked like the one Asher had on his car. Wes and Asher seemed comfortable chatting with each other; they rarely landed on a topic they disagreed on, and if they did, Wes would crack a joke and Asher would laugh wheezily in response. These conversations were never tense or aggressive; they were always cheerful and casual.

Only one of my four interviewees, Blake, mentioned having value-laden interactions with his coworkers; he indicated that he and his coworkers were always in agreement in these interactions. Unlike many of the interviewees, Blake did not indicate or even suggest his or his coworkers’ political perspectives; but the employees at his workplace did not seem to discuss politics often. Instead, when I asked Blake what kinds of conversations he has with his coworkers, he told me that they were “mostly kind of depressing this past year” because “this virus is pretty much the main topic of every day.” Blake explained that “usually every other day,” someone close to him or his coworkers contracted the virus. Blake described the virus as a real health risk that had caused death and serious illness among his family and friends, and he indicated that his coworkers felt similarly. When I asked Blake to describe the most memorable conversation about COVID-19 that he had with his coworkers, he told me about going to work after his grandfather had died because of the virus.

[When] I first showed up to work, I didn't even want to go to work because... I didn't want to deal with all that pain, but I knew if I shut it all out it would've hurt even more so I knew I had to go talk to someone about it. I went in to talk to one of my coworkers... they lost their grandma... So we were going through the same

⁷ The Southern Poverty Law Center categorizes Three Percenters as an extremist anti-government militia group. Whenever I heard Asher discussing the group, it was usually in connection with his dislike for the government or his affinity for firearms.

battle. It was helpful... Kind of sad in a way, but it helped me knowing that I wasn't going through that alone.

Blake described his experience with COVID-19 very differently than any of the other people that I interviewed or observed. He was one of only two people I encountered during my data collection who said that he had contracted COVID-19 (the other was Morgan), and he was the only one who mentioned knowing someone personally who had died due to COVID-19. This likely shaped his perspective on the disease.

Customers and Employees in Agreement

Customers and employees in agreement also had value-laden interactions. The customers who initiated these conversations tended to express conservative perspectives and tended to be men. They seemed comfortable bringing up current political topics to discuss and also seemed to appreciate employees who agreed with them and validated their opinions. Their conversations usually took a casual, joking tone, and these customers often poked fun at stances opposite theirs.

When customers initiated value-laden interactions with Wes by expressing opinions that he agreed with, he typically nodded along and interjected with his own jokes. For example, one night Wes had a conversation with Red, a short, middle-aged, White trucker who worked locally. Red had told Wes that he had refused to wear a mask into Costco. When a Costco employee asked if Red had a health condition that prevented him from wearing one, he smirked and said proudly that he told them, "Yeah, I can't be breathing in my own Co2!" Wes chuckled along with Red. Red became more serious, then, and said, "It's from the Democrats, because they're trying to get the whole country under control." It was not clear whether he was referring to COVID-19 itself or to

mask mandates. Red lowered his voice further then, making it difficult for me to hear what happened next, but I did catch him referring to “5-G” wireless technology, which some conspiracy theorists believe makes people more susceptible to the virus or indeed causes the virus (8/1/2020; Meese et al. 2020).

Wes was a part of another value-laden interaction with a trucker a few weeks later. He was chatting with Jim, another White, middle-aged long-haul trucker who was taller and rounder than Red and stopped at the Blue Collar Truck Stop several times a week. Wes and Jim had been making conversation for about fifteen minutes while I counted the cash in my till to close my shift. With my back turned as I counted money, I could not hear the full conversation, but I caught segments as Jim jumped from topic to topic:

We should round up all the BLM people and antifa, put them in a bus, and drop them in the middle of nowhere... I was done paying attention to the NBA back with Dennis Rodman; that guy was a total freak show. I predicted that people would be looking like that now all the time, and I was right! And now we've got Colin Kaepernick, and that was when I decided to be done with the NFL. Now I'll wait and see how the NHL ruins itself...

Wes nodded along, chuckling when Jim did and joining in enthusiastically with his own jokes, such as, “The problem with communism is eventually you run out of other people's money!”

Jacob, a nineteen-year-old who had only been working at his job for a month at the time of our interview, was skeptical of the legitimacy of COVID-19 and the necessity for masks. He said that one customer had told him enthusiastically about a documentary “about how this whole [COVID-19] thing was planned from the start.” Jacob told me that he “can agree with that” and found the conversation to be “pretty interesting.”

Jacob also told me that “these stupid masks are kind of a pain” because he has asthma. When customers complained to him about “this whole lockdown thing,” Jacob would tell them, “You know what? I don't disagree with you man, but at the same time, I just follow what I'm told.” When describing this, Jacob seemed defensive about wearing a mask, doing “what [he was] told” rather than actually wanting to wear a mask. Jacob told me he enjoyed talking with customers, and it seems like he particularly enjoyed chatting with customers like those mentioned above, who had similar opinions to him about COVID-19 and masks.

Most customers who made comments to me about political topics held very different opinions from me. However, two customers stand out as outliers. The first involved an elderly Black man who came in every week or so to fill up his car. He wore a white dust mask every time he came in, long before the mask mandate was enacted, and always playfully asked Wes, “Are you paying for my gas today?” One day, after the mask mandate had been put in place and employees had been instructed not to enforce it, this man watched as we helped customers without masks. When he came up to my register to pay for his fuel, he gently asked why we did not tell customers to wear a mask. The man did not sound angry, but he did seem concerned about customers not wearing masks. I told him simply, “I'm not supposed to.” The man responded disappointedly, “Everyone's gotta wear a mask, you can always tell them to,” before leaving (7/19/2020).

The other interaction I had was similar: a customer wearing a mask who wanted other customers to wear masks as well. However, unlike the first customer, he seemed to consider it the responsibility of the customers to wear a mask, not for employees to

demand it. This customer was a White man in his late twenties, wearing a baseball cap, basketball shorts, and t-shirt. As he was waiting in line, another customer, a middle-aged White man who was probably a trucker, came through the diesel doors and headed toward the bathrooms. The young man saw this and called out, "Hey, man, you gotta wear a mask in here." The trucker looked annoyed as he turned around wordlessly and left the store. The young man approached my register and, after asking for his preferred type of cigarettes, exclaimed, "Wow, do you get a lot of people that don't wear masks?" I told him we did and thanked him for asking the trucker to wear one. He responded nonchalantly, "Yeah, it'll be a social norm soon enough, and then we won't have to worry about it." The trucker did return not long after that, this time wearing a mask.

The next day, the same young man came into the store for more cigarettes. He inquired if we had any more issues with customers not wearing masks. I told him that it did happen sometimes, but not too often (7/19/2020).

Coworkers in Disagreement

Although conversations between politically similar people were fairly common, conversations between politically different people were much less common. The tone of these conversations tended to be more tense and sometimes aggressive, with the exception of the conversations that Wes and Asher had while the three of us were working together. One possible reason that these interactions were more pleasant than those with customers might be that the stakes were higher in conversations among employees. Blake said about his coworkers, "I'm stuck with these guys and I have no

choice but to like them.” Since coworkers are “stuck” with each other, it behooves them to avoid creating tension whenever possible.

When Wes and Asher discussed politics, they occasionally huddled in a corner and whispered while showing each other memes about communism or photos from news stories about vandalism connected to Black Lives Matter protests. I could usually overhear these discussions, but their body language indicated that the conversations were private, so I would focus on organizing my side of the fuel desk or cleaning the glass on the front doors. Many times, though, Wes and Asher had these conversations in a way that suggested I was welcome to join if I wanted to. Asher would lean over the counter at Wes’ till, far enough forward that he could make eye contact with me from around the display of herbal pain relief products in the middle of the counter, or he would stand by the cigarette wall behind the fuel desk, forming a triangle between him, Wes, and myself. Although I rarely interjected to share my own opinion, I appreciated that they seemed to be making space for me to engage with them at a level that I was comfortable with.

Customers and Employees in Disagreement

Most interactions between customers and employees were short and pleasant; for example, many of them followed a service script in which the employee greeted the customer, the customer purchased their items, and they bid each other a good day. Even in longer interactions, when customers would strike up conversations, these interactions were usually bound by customer service norms of friendliness. However, a small number of interactions between customers and employees did involve

disagreement. Almost universally, these interactions were initiated by conservative customers who openly expressed their opinions. For example, Morgan told me that “every day... one or two people” would initiate these conversations with her or her coworkers at her workplace. She described them:

You know how you get on your Facebook or your Instagram, and there's all those political posts?... Well, what I've noticed is that some of those people are like that in real life... if it's not the presidency, it's about the masks, and if it's not about the masks, it's about how COVID isn't real.

These conversations were usually tense, and my interviewees told me they did not care for such interactions. On the other hand, customers usually seemed to be at ease throughout such interactions.

This section is divided into two subsections based on how employees responded to these interactions. First, I describe employees' passive responses, which tended to be withholding a response altogether, or laughing off value-laden comments. Next, I describe employees' active responses. These could involve employees firmly but politely shutting down conversations, openly disagreeing with customers, or even swearing or threatening to call the police on customers.

Passive responses.

When customers initiated value-laden interactions with employees who did not agree with them, employees usually responded passively. This could involve not verbally acknowledging customer comments at all, or verbally affirming customers' views even if the employee did not actually agree with them. I include verbal agreement in this section because although it does involve a kind of response, employees seemed

to be motivated by a desire to not create conflict or to end the interaction as quickly as possible.

Josie responded to customers who initiated this kind of interaction by withholding her opinions. She said that when customers bring up political conversations, “I tend to just remove myself. I tend to hold my opinion to myself⁸.” Notably, Josie worked a tipped position, which influenced her responses:

I do make tips for a living, so therefore I can't piss off a customer... I don't want to make a customer mad and have them not come back because that's part of my livelihood. In this day and age when we make minimum wage... That's where I make my money, and I can't be offending anybody.

The tipped nature of Josie’s work compelled her to use control moves (Rafaeli and Sutton 1987), using a neutral or agreeable demeanor to stay in customers’ good graces.

In contrast, Morgan tended to respond to these interactions by verbally agreeing with customers, even if she did not hold similar opinions. She told me that during these interactions, “I just try to agree with [the customer] no matter what they're saying because it will turn into a fight if you don't.” She explained that when people called her a “sheep,” or her coworkers “dumbasses,” for wearing masks, she would tell them, “I need my job. I have to work to pay my bills. My job requires that I wear a mask to do that.”

She explained to me,

I'm going to wear my mask whether I'm at work or not at work, but that's just the answer that I give them. A lot of these people seem to think that it's our choice and that because we're wearing a mask that they can just start harassing us... They keep coming into our [truck stop] where I'm forced to be everyday working without their mask.

⁸She also noted, though, that this extended beyond political topics; Josie did not even discuss sports with customers at her workplace since this could create disagreements. This was in stark contrast to my observations at the Blue Collar Truck Stop, where employees like Wes would playfully rib customers wearing merchandise from the Bozeman Bobcats, the historic rivals of the local university’s team, the Missoula Grizzlies.

This quote suggests that Morgan wanted customers to think that her primary motivation was to avoid losing her job, perhaps assuming that the customers would be more sympathetic to that concern than to a concern about contracting COVID-19.

Sometimes, interactions between customers and employees in disagreement took the form of sexualized comments from customers. Although sexual harassment is not typically described as an interaction, I have included it in this section for several reasons. First, it is a value-laden interaction. These values may include sexuality, gender, consent, and boundaries. If a customer makes a gendered, sexualized comment to an employee, the employee may feel that their boundaries have been violated, or they may blame themselves for the comment and question whether they are embodying their sexuality “appropriately” or not. Second, sexual harassment is an interaction that typically involves customers and employees in disagreement. The disagreement tends to be about what appropriate boundaries look like or whether a joke is funny or offensive. Like other interactions in this section, the employee may not voice their disagreement, but these interactions can still negatively affect the employee.

Although I was sometimes the target of sexualized comments, I rarely observed such comments being directed at other employees. There are a few possible reasons for this. First, men are rarely the target of sexual harassment, and I worked with men far more often than I worked with women. Second, when customers made sexualized comments toward me it was usually during very busy times, when others were too busy to notice, or during very slow times, when the other cashier was on a break or away from the till cleaning. Customers seemed to take advantage of these times to make sexualized comments to me. It seems likely that my women coworkers were also the

subjects of sexual harassment, but that customers chose to only make sexualized comments when the employees were alone. For this reason, most of my understanding about sexual harassment comes from my own experiences.

I tended to laugh off inappropriate interactions, even when I was offended. For example, I asked one customer if he wanted a bag for his purchases, and he smiled coyly and said, "Only if you come with it." When these incidents happened I usually tried to ignore the suggestive nature of the comments, since I assumed confronting the customer would only prolong or intensify an already-uncomfortable interaction. My passive responses were motivated both by a desire to avoid being further objectified and to avoid bruising male customers' egos, since I worried this could make them more aggressive. In the above instance, I laughed and said, "Oh, I don't think my boss would like it very much if I left my shift!" (8/14/2020). I hoped this response would validate the customer's attempt at humor without directly rejecting his joke. This response seemed to work; the customer did not become upset, and he left after the transaction was complete.

The interactions above suggested that employees' responses were intentionally passive to avoid certain types of conflict. However, passive responses could also reflect fear or discomfort. One such incident occurred late one evening as I was counting down my till, one of the last steps before clocking out. Wes was at his till beside me, completing a transaction with Roy, a middle-aged white truck driver who came in every few days. Wes was telling Roy how he likes to collect rare coins, and that if he finds a rare penny at work, he'll switch it out with an ordinary one and keep it. Roy responded, "with his voice on the edge of laughter that comes when a person is about to tell a joke,

‘Are you married?’” (7/28/2020). After Wes responded that he was not, Roy turned to me and exclaimed in his booming southern accent, “You should hook up with him! I don’t see a ring on your finger!” I recorded in my field notes that night,

without a word, I stopped counting, crossed my arms to hide my hands, and took an involuntary step back. As so many people do when they’re being harassed, I froze. I couldn’t speak or move, because every answer I could’ve given would have been the wrong one. Wes noncommittally mumbled, ‘I don’t think she’d want that,’ and chuckled awkwardly, as if he were trying to diffuse the situation. (7/28/2020)

At this point, the tension was thick in the store, and neither Wes nor I knew how to respond to it. Wes attempted to cut the tension by responding with humor, but the tension remained. Both Wes and I became silent after this interaction, which was uncharacteristic for both of us⁹.

Not half an hour later, the service attendant for the next shift, Sam, arrived. She greeted me and invited me to join her outside for a cigarette. I eagerly accepted this invitation; I was desperate to share my frustration about the interaction with Roy after silently enduring his comments. After perching on the railing outside the side door, I burst out, “So I got sexually harassed tonight!... Well, I’m not sure if it counts as sexual harassment.” After I described the incident, Sam assured me that it was harassment, and I said, “I wish men perceived me as a jar, with some sort of teal vapor suspended inside.” Sam answered, “Yes, if men could just look at me as a jar of mayonnaise, that would be great!” (7/28/2020).

⁹ Although I cannot know exactly why this interaction made Wes uncomfortable, I can explain the reasons it made me uncomfortable. First, the comment was very heteronormative, and being mistaken for heterosexual is personally distressing for me. Second, the comment seemed sexualized to me, since Roy referred to “hooking up,” which can be a specifically sexual term. Finally, I was deeply aware of the power differential and felt outnumbered among the two men who were both at least twenty years older than me.

Here, Sam and I constructed a community of coping together. Sam also offered me the opportunity to negotiate my own identity in response to the gendered nature of our work. We used humor to do this, joking about mayonnaise jars. Additionally, when I burst out, "So I got sexually harassed tonight," I said it in a sing-song way as I tried to determine whether the incident was actually harassment worth being upset about.

Research on service work has demonstrated that these workplaces' norms encourage employees to respond passively to uncomfortable interactions. For example, passivity and friendliness are often championed as ways of doing customer service, especially for women employees (Hall 1993). Employees normalize uncomfortable interactions with customers as "everyday inconveniences" to try to minimize their effect on them (Yagil 2008:148). This is consistent with my findings; Josie, Morgan, and I tended to respond indirectly or not at all during such interactions. This strategy made it possible to end these interactions quickly.

Active responses.

Emotional labor was embedded in most of the interactions described above. For example, when a customer would initiate a conversation with an employee who held opposing opinions, the employee often had to strategically agree with the customer to prevent conflict from arising. However, this section will demonstrate that not all value-laden interactions involved emotional labor. If employees did not respond passively to customers they were in disagreement with, they responded actively. These interactions were less common and could involve employees either being polite but firm or being more aggressive by raising their voices or openly disagreeing with customers.

Most employees tended to maintain calm composites and polite demeanors when responding to rude or inappropriate customers. For example, Jacob told me that he only engaged in conversations about politics if others brought up the topic first and he only responded to these customers to end the conversation. If a customer involved Jacob in such an interaction, he would say something like, "Well, I have different views on that, but [I'm] not saying I disrespect your views." If the customer tried to pursue the topic, he would "diffuse it before it gets any more aggressive" by saying, "Well, we can drop this conversation. Let's just finish this up, let's get this taken care of so you get to be on your way."

Jacob hinted that customers in these conversations could become "aggressive." These aggressive customers appeared in my data rarely, but their impacts were substantial for the employee involved. For example, Daphne and I were working a slow evening shift together, passing the time by deep-cleaning two large chest freezers. Daphne was sitting on the floor behind the counter wiping down a freezer shelf when Steve, a White, middle-aged trucker that I did not recognize, entered through the diesel doors on the far side of the building. When I called him over to my register, he muttered to himself, "Can't you do it over here?" presumably referring to the register closer to him (in fact, I was not allowed to complete transactions at any register other than the one I was signed in on) (8/11/2020). Daphne hopped up from behind the closer register then, and offered to help Steve instead. She began the transaction, cheerfully telling him, "You can just cancel that!" when the pinpad asked for his signature (8/11/2020). She stretched to one side as she said it, her hands on her hips as she waited for him to press the red "X" button. Instead, though,

Steve looked at her for a second, then leaned forward, squinting angrily, and snarled, "You know what, I'm fucking sick and tired of the attitude that I get around here. I've been coming here for 25 fucking years!" (8/11/2020)

Daphne went silent for a moment, possibly deciding how to respond. She answered him firmly, enunciating each word, "I didn't mean for there to be any attitude, but you assumed that about me and I didn't mean that. So let's just not make any more assumptions about each other and we can finish this transaction" (8/11/2020).

Steve continued to swear at Daphne as she hurriedly completed his transaction. As he walked out the doors, he called back, "Your manager is going to hear a complaint about this!" (8/11/2020). The moments after he left were silent; Daphne and I were dumbfounded. Although aggressive comments like this happened occasionally, I was surprised by how quickly the man had gotten angry. I was also confused about the things he had said; I had not interpreted anything Daphne had done as "having attitude," and I had never seen the man, so I was skeptical if he actually had been coming to the truck stop for 25 years.

After helping some customers who had approached my register, I told Daphne, "You know, he was already getting grumbly with me when I was trying to call him over to my till. I know you know this, but I'm going to tell you anyways that that wasn't about you; he probably was just having a bad day and wanted to take it out on someone."

This incident represented a pattern in my dataset: when employees tried to assert their boundaries by responding to customers in neutral or negative ways, the customers sometimes tested their boundaries even more aggressively. For example, I once asked a trucker, "Can I get you anything else tonight?" and he responded, "How about your number?" I laughed and told him sarcastically, "I don't think you can afford

that.” The trucker leaned forward and answered in a low voice, “I bet I can” (7/28/2020). I did not expect that response, and actually felt much more uncomfortable after that interaction than I did when I laughed off customer advances. I did not challenge sexually suggestive comments after that interaction.

Interactions between customers and employees in disagreement could be uncomfortable for employees even when the customers used calm tones and refrained from profanity. For example, one evening a maskless customer entered the store, saw that I was wearing a mask, and asked me if I was “still worried about this [COVID-19] thing.” I told him I wanted to avoid getting anyone sick if I could. “Masks really aren’t going to help you because the particles can get through the fabric. It’s like trying to keep a virus out through something like that,” he told me assuredly, gesturing to the lattice gate that separated the convenience store from the restaurant next door. The customer seemed confident in his response; his measured tone almost seemed like he had rehearsed this discussion. I tried to close the conversation, telling him I preferred to follow CDC guidelines. When I brought up the CDC, his face lit up, and he leaned forward, asking, “What, so you’re not going to do any research for yourself?” I worried that the customer was trying to provoke me, so I told him, “You know what? I don’t think that this conversation is very productive. So I’m going to get your receipt, and then you’ll be good to go!” The customer did not respond after that and left after I gave him his receipt. I was relieved that he left without arguing further, since I was worried that the customer could become more aggressive.

As soon as the customer was gone, I let out the breath that I had been holding and turned to Sam, who had arrived for her evening shift during the interaction. She

looked at me, eyebrows raised, and waited for my reaction. “Excuse me while I bang my head on the counter!” I exclaimed, laughing to try to relieve the tension I was feeling. Sam laughed along with me and said, “I actually applaud you for how well you handled that. I would not have done that well.” This interaction represented a pattern within my dataset. After dealing with a rude or confrontational customer, employees often turned to each other for support and validation, much like the employees in Korczynski’s (2003) study of communities of coping.

Occasionally, employees responded aggressively to interactions with customers they disagreed with. At the Blue Collar Truck Stop, Daphne was unique from the other employees. Most employees withheld their opinions or nodded noncommittally when customers tried to engage with them about topics they disagreed on. Daphne, on the other hand, openly expressed her opinions in these situations, particularly when they concerned masks. She expressed strong support for the mask mandate and abhorred customers who refused to wear them. Once, a customer was talking to me as I was scanning his purchases. At one point, he said, “It’s not like these masks are doing a damn thing anyways!” Daphne interjected vehemently from her side of the fuel desk, “They’re doing plenty!” The customer did not respond, but I felt surprised and a little impressed by Daphne’s willingness to so openly contradict a customer, especially considering how aggressive customers had been toward her in the past. For example, Wes once told me that a customer had called Daphne a “fucking bitch” when she asked him to wear a mask. As he left, she ran to the door and shouted out to him, “Don’t ever come back here!” (7/28/2020).

Blake also often willingly engaged in interactions with truckers about the COVID-19 pandemic. In his experience, the customers most opposed to mask mandates were truckers:

Some of these people out here don't even believe in COVID. I remember this one trucker was telling me... this is all just a myth, that the government is just trying to make us believe in all this. He did not believe in COVID whatsoever.

This trucker's denial of the reality of the pandemic was frustrating for Blake, who had lost his grandfather to COVID-19, nearly lost a friend to it, and had contracted the virus himself. He explained,

These people around the world ain't just dying for no reason. This virus is legit. When it first came around, I first heard about it when it was in China, I used to joke about it... until I actually... went through it, because I actually got it myself in October.

Blake told me that he was "always having to fight with truckers" (presumably referring to verbal disagreements) about masks and COVID-19. When they denied the existence or severity of the virus, he told them to "keep their opinions to themselves." For Blake and his coworkers, debating whether COVID-19 was real or not was insulting since they had "actually lost people and people still, to this day, are losing people."

The above examples illustrate some of the interactions that employees responded strongly to, like verbal aggression and conversations about masks and COVID-19. Blake also responded aggressively, or at least wanted to, when truckers solicited information from him about sex workers. Once, a truck driver asked him if he knew where to find sex workers. Blake told me, "I actually told him off. I was like, 'You're lucky I don't fucking call the cops on your ass.'" After that, the trucker apologized and left quickly. Another time, a customer told Blake's girlfriend, who worked at the casino

connected to the truck stop, that he would pay her \$500 for sex. Blake's girlfriend told the trucker to leave, and warned him that her boyfriend was on his way over. The trucker left without further comment. Incidents like this upset Blake, not just because of his personal involvement, but also because these incidents involved White truckers soliciting (directly or indirectly) Native Americans for sex. He told me,

People from my reservation are going missing every day because of that stuff, stealing them [indigenous women]... we're just losing too many people out here. And I just really got mad after that, because I'm for the MMIW [Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women].

Blake's comments indicated that his frustration was not just related to his personal involvement with COVID-19 or with his girlfriend. He was also frustrated with the power and privilege inherent in White truckers soliciting Native American women or denying the existence of a virus that had harmed Blake's community so severely.

Although Blake responded to value-laden interactions differently than most of the employees in my dataset, his experiences point to a broader pattern: most of the employees in this study had some freedom in how they interacted with each other and with customers. If they wanted to chat about Black Lives Matter protests with a trucker from Seattle, they could. If they were uncomfortable with a trucker's sexual advances, they could shut down the interaction. However, these employees' actions were also constrained by their workplaces' norms about customer service. For example, many employees used passive responses when customers initiated conversations with them that they did not agree with. In the discussion section, I explore how these interactions were shaped, limited, or unrestricted according to the working-class service norms of truck stops. I also examine how truck stop service norms differ from norms in other service industry workplaces.

DISCUSSION

In this thesis, I explored customer service interactions in Montana truck stops. My results suggest that these interactions are embedded within the geographic and demographic contexts of the workplace, the degree to which truck stops are gendered institutions, and the social class of the workplace. I argue that truck stop employees' ways of interacting with customers are constrained and/or shaped by these interlocking systems of norms. For example, employees had to balance their workplaces' casual working-class culture and the expectation that they provide emotional labor to customers. This balance typically resulted in employees chatting and joking with customers. Gender, then, added another layer of complexity; if a female employee was too friendly with a male customer, he might assume her to be flirting.

I argue that these systems shape truck stops very differently than they do other service workplaces. The degree of rurality, the local population's demographics, and the formality of interactions make the truck stops in this study very different from other service workplaces such as urban truck stops or retail clothing stores. In this section, I explore the implications of these differences for the truck stops and their workers in this study.

Geographic and demographic contexts affect the kinds of workers, customers, and interactions that took place in the truck stops in this study. This study took place in Montana, which is a largely rural state containing several urbanized areas¹⁰. Missoula

¹⁰ Urbanized areas consist of 50,000 people or more (US Census, 2019a).

County, where the Blue Collar Truck Stop is located, is a metropolitan county¹¹. One of the four interviewees worked at a truck stop in a metropolitan county, but the other three worked in nonmetropolitan (rural) counties. Interviewees in rural areas enjoyed the regular customers who came in, but not the truckers. They seemed to see them as bringing big-city social problems to their workplaces. Additionally, Montana contains seven Native American reservations, and both the Blue Collar Truck Stop and the truck stop where Blake worked were located next to reservations. The workers at these two truck stops had very different experiences despite their geographic similarities. At the Blue Collar Truck Stop, all of the employees and most of the customers were White. On the other hand, Blake's workplace was located in a county with a very high percentage of Native American residents (66.4%, compared to 6.7% in Montana and 1.3% nationally; U.S. Census Bureau 2019b).

I find strong evidence that the geographic context of these particular truck stops shaped employees' experiences. For example, the Blue Collar Truck Stop was located next to a reservation, and two of the employees lived on the reservation. They had developed connections with the many regular customers who also lived on the reservation by visiting the same stores, casinos, and outdoor recreation sites. Blake's truck stop was also located next to a reservation, but his town had a much larger Native American population than Missoula does. There seemed to be both positive and negative aspects to this for Blake: on one hand, he told me he enjoyed interacting with elders who came into his store. On the other hand, White truckers often made racist comments about the town's Native American population, which angered Blake. In these

¹¹ A metropolitan area has "at least one urbanized area of 50,000 or more inhabitants" (US Census, 2020).

two examples, the racial makeup of the town and the level of interaction among people in the town affected employees in very different ways.

Like geographic and demographic context, social class also influenced the interactions in this study. I argue that workplaces are stratified by class; this is not just a reflection of the people who work at such businesses, but also of the status and values of the business itself. My findings indicate that this affects the *kind* of customer service being provided. Blue Collar Truck Stop employees valued good customer service, but it is important to note that they did not consider “good” to be equivalent to “formal.” Instead, they took a casual approach; chatting and joking with customers, using slang, and taking on a warm demeanor. Here, the working-class nature of the Blue Collar Truck Stop allowed employees to be more casual and sometimes more aggressive with customers than they could be at a formal, upper-class workplace. Norms about customer service shape how employees interact with customers. For example, one of the main tenets of customer service is that “the customer is always right” (Yagil 2008). Employees are expected to anticipate and meet customers’ needs, to be deferential toward customers, and to be polite even when dealing with rude customers (Hochschild 2012; Korczynski 2003; Yagil 2008). Studies of customer service indicate that emotional labor plays an important role in service interactions, especially those in which customers are rude or unhappy (Hochschild 2012). When customers act inappropriately, whether through aggression or sexual harassment, employees’ responses are constrained by norms of customer service (Hall 1993; Korczynski 2003; Stein 2005; Tracy 2000). If “the customer is always right,” then the employee cannot disagree with the customer; and if

the employee is supposed to be deferential and polite, they cannot reprove aggressive customers.

The literature on service work seems to assume that these norms are enacted the same way in all service work places. Some of these norms were present in my data; for example, when customers and employees were in disagreement with each other, the employees usually responded in accordance with customer service norms. They would conceal their disagreement, verbally affirm the customer's views, or politely close the interaction. This was true even when customers were aggressive or rude to them.

However, the truck stop employees in my study also demonstrated the ability to deviate from the customer service norms laid out in the literature without the fear of being sanctioned by managers. For example, they might drop their friendly demeanor, interrupt uncomfortable interactions, or even rebuke customers. It appears that the casual, working-class culture of these truck stops allowed employees to respond to rude or aggressive customers as they saw fit. The service norms at these truck stops also allowed (and, in fact, encouraged) employees to interact casually with customers by joking and chatting with them.

In the truck stops in this study, which were located in relatively small towns and were characterized by casual friendliness, it is especially difficult to differentiate between emotional labor and genuine warmth. Emotional labor, Hochschild (2012:7) specifies, is done "for a wage"; employees manage their emotion, rid themselves of it, and/or force themselves to conjure it up. The employees in this study did all of these things to maintain their performance of emotional labor with customers; however, this was made more complicated when customers also fit into the role of "friends" or

“acquaintances” of employees. Some customers came in frequently enough that the employees knew them well and enjoyed their company. Some knew employees from outside of the truck stop. In this context, where the workers are embedded in the community in which they work, it is difficult to tease apart which emotions were displayed for a wage and which involved genuine, spontaneous warmth.

Hochschild’s (2012:48) discussion of spontaneous emotion and sincerity further complicates this issue. She writes that

As we look back at the past, we may alternate between two understandings of “what really happened.” According to one, our feeling was genuine and spontaneous. According to the other, it seemed genuine and spontaneous, but in fact it was covertly managed. In doubt about which understanding will ultimately make sense, we are led to ask about our present feelings: “Am I acting now? How do I know?”

In the context of local workplaces where some customers visit regularly, untangling managed displays from genuine ones is even more difficult. It seemed that some interactions, like those between Daphne and Abel, were genuine. They happened away from the watchful eye of managers and without the niceties Daphne would offer to truckers or tourists she did not know. As Hochschild indicates above, when I look back at these interactions, I am led to ask, “Was Daphne acting then? How do I know? How would she know?”

In addition to performing emotional labor for customers, employees also performed emotion work¹² for each other through communities of coping. Two examples

¹² Here, I use Hochschild’s term “emotion work” instead of emotional labor. Emotion work is defined as “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display... in a private context” (Hochschild 2012:7). Although these interactions occurred in the workplace, I categorize them as private interactions since they were not done for customers or as part of the work role; they seemed to be genuine, spontaneous emotional displays.

of this that appear in my findings include the night Steve shouted at Daphne, and the night Roy made inappropriate comments toward me. In each incident, after the customer had left, another employee (me in the first incident, and Sam in the second) comforted the employee who had been on the receiving end of the customer's verbal abuse. Korczynski (2003:56) observed similar communities of coping in call centers, which he categorized as "collective emotional labor." Although the communities of coping that I observed were quite similar to those in Korczynski's study, it is important to note that this author may have miscategorized the communities. Since emotional labor only refers to emotional displays that are done "for a wage" (Hochschild 2012:7), communities of coping actually do not perform emotional labor. In both Korczynski's study and in the present research, community coping was not done for a wage, but altruistically, to provide emotional support.

Acker (1990) wrote that organizations must be understood as the locations of gender production and division. In service organizations, women employees are required to act in a gendered way, dressing and grooming themselves in a feminine way and enacting warmth and deference toward customers (Giuffre and Williams 1994; Hall 1993; Hochschild 2012). Some workplaces also sexualize women, requiring or encouraging them to flirt with customers, wear revealing uniforms, or to accept sexualized actions or comments from customers (Giuffre and Williams 1994; Hall 1993; Hochschild 2012; Yagil 2008).

The gendered organizations theory applies in many ways to the Blue Collar Truck Stop¹³. Dominance and submission did play out in interactions between people of

¹³ Because my interview data did not include information on organizational structures, this section is primarily concerned with the Blue Collar Truck Stop.

different genders in this workplace, and its employees displayed, defined, and reconceptualized their own gender through their interactions with each other and through their work roles (for example, the ways women and nonbinary employees discussed their gender identities and sexual orientations with each other). Additionally, with some exceptions, many employees presented their gender and sexuality in normative, binary ways through their appearance, language, and mannerisms.

Although the Blue Collar Truck Stop can be understood as a gendered organization, it was gendered in ways that contradicted Acker's theory. First, Acker (1990) argues that in the absence of the disembodied worker, managers prefer men with the assumption that the women in their lives will take care of their physical obligations. However, this did not seem to be the case at the Blue Collar Truck Stop. People of different genders were distributed fairly evenly across the organization's hierarchy, and I never observed or heard about employees--men or women--being sanctioned for having external obligations.

Acker (1990) also suggests that women's sexuality is sanctioned and othered in workplaces. However, many Blue Collar Truck Stop employees--all women and nonbinary people--were openly queer and were not sanctioned for this by management. Managers and coworkers were generally supportive of queer employees. Since heterosexuality itself is a part of normative gender expressions, this small queer community's existence suggests a fairly non-restrictive atmosphere around gender norms. Managers also did not require employees' appearances to conform to gender norms. Employees were free to groom, dress, and adorn themselves according to their own preference, as long as they wore the uniform polo shirt.

In gendered organizations, women are encouraged to act in gendered ways. Their emotions are sanctioned, and their allowed behaviors differ from men's. However, at the Blue Collar Truck Stop, employees were generally not required to act in gendered ways. While customer service norms of politeness and deference were encouraged, these norms were not unevenly applied to employees of different genders. In fact, the most assertive Blue Collar Truck Stop employee, Daphne, was a woman. I never observed or heard about managers sanctioning Daphne or other women employees for their attitude or demeanor or for rejecting male customers' advances, even if done so in a direct or aggressive manner.

One major blind spot in Acker's theory of gendered organizations is that it does not consider how interactions between employees and their managers or coworkers might be different from interactions between employees and customers. My findings suggest that these two kinds of interactions are gendered in different ways, since the customers at the truck stops in this study treated employees differently according to their ascribed gender. This was true for women employees and the two employees who were nonbinary, who customers and coworkers treated as women. Notably, while sexual harassment toward men never appeared in my dataset, it did happen to both women and nonbinary employees. This suggests that customers saw the nonbinary employees as women. When these customers ascribed gender to nonbinary employees, they also decided how to interact with them, sometimes referring to them in gendered ways and other times outright sexualizing them. This is a particularly valuable finding for two reasons. First, although significant research has been done on binary gender in the service industry, the experiences of service industry workers with other

gender identities and expressions have been largely unexplored. Second, it highlights the sexual harassment that men customers perpetrate toward employees that they assume to be women.

Qualitative research benefits the scholarly literature by humanizing populations under study and by offering deep descriptions of specific sites, rather than the more comprehensive descriptions of common phenomena that quantitative work offers. This thesis portrays the events of everyday life as a truck stop employee in certain parts of Montana, but its findings cannot be generalized to other truck stops across the country, or even to all truck stops in Montana. Additionally, the findings in this study are localized to the latter half of 2020, in which discussions about the upcoming presidential election, the COVID-19 pandemic, and protests against police brutality permeated the interactions in the dataset.

While this research generated new insights about a specific setting, it also introduced new questions and directions for future research. For example, the gender norms at the Blue Collar Truck Stop differed from those at other working-class workplaces. As such, future research should investigate how gender and sexuality are embodied in other kinds of truck stops (like urban truck stops) or in other kinds of working-class workplaces (like budget motels). Additionally, my data indicated that race and rurality, especially proximity to Native American reservations and/or large Native American populations, affects the ways customers and employees interact with each other; so future research should also examine working-class service workplaces near reservations or other majority-minority locations, with an emphasis on racial dynamics in the workplace.

In the literature about the service industry and working-class occupations, truck stops represent an often-overlooked workplace in which customer service, working-class values, and gender norms intersect. This thesis examined truck stops in Montana using ethnographic observations and interviews with employees. The findings of this research are consistent in many ways with the findings of other research on organizations, service workplaces, and the working class. However, truck stops differ from the workplaces in other studies in a few key ways. First, the working-class values of the truck stops allowed employees to enact customer service norms differently and even to drop these norms when necessary. Second, the findings about customers who are also friends of employees complicate Hochschild's description of emotional labor, which seems to assume customers will be strangers to the employees. Finally, while truck stops are gendered organizations, they are gendered differently than we might expect, given Acker's research on such organizations.

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***Are you willing to
speak to someone
about what it's like to
work at a truck stop?***

**Call or text Michelle Williams at
(406) 281-2021.**

**I am a University of Montana student researching
what it is like to work at a truck stop and I want to
interview you!**

**Interviews will last about 30 minutes.
Each interviewee will be compensated with \$30 for
their time.**

If you are interested in participating, please contact

**Michelle Williams:
(406) 281-2021 (call or text)**

or

michelle3.williams@umontana.edu

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. What does a typical shift look like for you?
2. What kinds of conversations do you have with your coworkers?
3. What was your most memorable conversation about COVID-19 at work with a customer? With a coworker?
4. What kinds of humor do you and your coworkers share with each other?
5. What kinds of conversations do you have with your customers?
6. Which kinds are conversations you enjoy having? Which are not?